

# Representing Heroic Figures and/of Resistance: Reading Women's Bodies of Violence in Contemporary Dystopic Literatures

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UNIVERSITAT DE BARCELONA



# **Representing Heroic Figures and/of Resistance: Reading Women's Bodies of Violence in Contemporary Dystopic Literatures**

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## Abstract

The present thesis takes as its starting point the analysis of heroic women in contemporary popular culture, specifically within dystopic texts. Relying on the use of feminist theory to interrogate the texts of the corpus, in the introduction a clear distinction will be drawn between postfeminist discourse and rhetoric and Third Wave feminist intervention. The heroines of the novels *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009), *Sense and Sensibility and Sea Monsters* (2009), *Jane Slayre* (2010), *The Life and Times of Martha Washington in the Twenty-First Century* (1990-2007), and *The Hunger Games* trilogy (2008, 2009, 2010), will serve as the focus for an analysis of female heroism, violence, and posthumanity. Each of the three chapters dedicated to textual analysis considers the way in which the various heroines' violence is mobilised, and how its representation works to reinscribe or resist patriarchal discourse. My argument is that the discourse which constructs violent women works as a form of violence in and of itself, to which the heroic female body is subjected.

The focus on dystopic texts written between 1990 and 2010 serves as the basis for an analysis that seeks to consider not only how the heroine is a construction of the contemporary moment, but also how popular culture and media are driving forces in the way in which postfeminism has come to occupy a central role in the narrative surrounding strong, violent heroines. The range of sub-genres, contemporary Gothic, comic books, and young adult fiction, offer a broad field for interrogating this ubiquitous figure.

Chapter 1, 'Spectres of Feminism: Postfeminism and the Zombie Apocalypse' considers how the integration of posthuman monsters (zombies primarily but also vampires, sea monsters, and the she-wolf) manipulates the potential for agentic heroines such that their violence is reinscribed within heteronormative and Humanist frameworks. The matrimony plot so prevalent in the texts further highlights the way in which the active heroine's violence is only permissible within the bounds of heteronormative desire.

Chapter 2, 'Violent Heroines, Comic Books and Systemic Violence' considers the construction of the super heroine of the comic book genre and turns to consider the way in which a racialised female body disrupts the norm and yet is still subjected to patriarchal strategies for containing representations of heroic

women's bodies and violence. The introduction of the cyborg as the posthuman enemy further emphasises how violence is mobilised in the postfeminist heroine as a means of sustaining patriarchal culture and anthropocentric normativity.

The analysis in Chapter 3, 'Katniss Everdeen and *The Hunger Games*: Dystopia and Resistance to Neoliberal Demands,' brings to light the potential for a heroine that disrupts the postfeminist model seen in the previous two chapters. Through an interrogation of the way in which the novels are critical of spectator culture and the romance plot, a space for resistance is opened up. The representation of a heroine who eschews the individualist notions of postfeminist heroism by privileging the formation of affective bonds, as well as embracing the posthuman condition rather than fighting against it, offers the potential for a Third Wave feminist protagonist.

Considering, in the conclusion, the way in which heroines and viragos are represented in contemporary texts, whether they be fighting zombies, enemies of the state or the state itself, it is clear that the way in which women's violence is often offered as a postfeminist depiction of women's equality and power serves to reinscribe women within a patriarchal framework. For the late-capitalist, globalised culture, it is imperative to represent a postfeminist vision of women as powerful, independent and equal without actually challenging the socio-political structure. This dissertation identifies the ways in which postfeminist versions of heroic women are constructed and offer a possible alternative, one which coincides with a Third Wave feminist understanding of the heroine's role in contemporary society.

**Introduction.**  
**Feminist Discourse in the Contemporary Moment**



## 1. Is Feminism Dead? Feminism's Premature Passing

In 1998 *Time* magazine asked on its cover: "Is Feminism Dead?" (29 June). The cover image shows the faces of four women: Susan B. Anthony, Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinam and Callista Flockhart, who at the time was well-known for her role in the hit television show *Ally McBeal* (Kelly), broadcast on Fox from 1997 to 2002. The question is posed directly below Flockhart's face (symbolically, the only photograph in color), indicating that the postfeminist<sup>1</sup> heroine she played on television was, in some way, representative of a generation that was responsible for killing feminism and ending the line of feminist activists represented by Anthony, Friedan and Steinam (portrayed in black and white, clearly old-fashioned, from the past).

The question was not meant rhetorically. Riding on the wave of Susan Faludi's theoretical interrogation of the representation of feminist activism and theory, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (1991), as well as coming in the wake of such movements as Girl Power and Riot Grrrls,<sup>2</sup> the question of whether or not feminism had 'died' was asking more than just whether or not the movement had disbanded and the individuals moved on to other issues and/or pursuits. Indeed, what the headline is asking is not whether or not feminism is/was still necessary, but whether or not the impulse that had brought women (notably white, middle-class, heterosexual, Western women in the magazine's selection) to question the role society had doled out to them was still alive. The answer, of course, is both simple and far more complex than the magazine cover would suggest. One of the problems inherent in the very framing of the question, and in the all-white panel of photos that accompanied it, is the supposition that 'feminism' is a monolithic entity, one whose genesis and trajectory could be traced through four iconic women and could, as a result, 'die.' Even though the question demonstrates the media's (intentional?) blindness to the ways in which feminism is a hotly contested term that raises debate even among those who practice and

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<sup>1</sup>The labels post-feminist, postfeminist and *postfeminist* are contentious to say the least. An in-depth discussion on the usage and definition is taken up later in this introduction.

<sup>2</sup>The Girl Power movement is credited as having started with the popular girl band the Spice Girls, which in turn is recognised as a capitalist co-opting of the Riot Grrrl movement started by the punk band Bikini Kill and its singer Kathleen Hanna in the early 1990s. See Baumgardner and Richards (2000), and also Rosenberg and Garofalo (1998) for discussions of the Riot Grrrl movement and the link between postfeminism and the girl power movement.

champion it, the pairing of the television character Ally McBeal with the question of whether or not it is still alive unequivocally points to the role the media plays in the metamorphosis of 'feminism' as a movement. It is curious that the final portrait, on the right, the one that asks the question of whether or not feminism is still 'alive,' is not, as are the other three, that of a living woman who fought or espoused feminist ideology. Rather, the use of Callista Flockhart's image is not suggesting that the actor herself is a proponent (or opponent) of feminism but instead, for readers at the time, it is the character she plays in the eponymous television program who signals the supposed death.<sup>3</sup>



Fig. 1. *TIME* magazine Cover: Is Feminism Dead? (June 29, 1998).

The juxtaposition of this fictional character with three women who undeniably contributed to the garnering of women's rights in North America might seem bizarre, but it is actually quite on-point, suggesting as it does that what comes 'after' feminism, what, potentially, causes feminism's demise, is the rise of a postfeminist ideology that is inextricably linked to media discourses that are highly invested in writing feminism's eulogy so as to usher in the 'post.'

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<sup>3</sup>*Ally McBeal* was a popular North American comic television series that followed the goings-on in a well-to-do law firm. The title character, McBeal, is a young woman who, though she is professionally successful, is seen as a 'failure' in her personal life, as she has neither a steady boyfriend/husband nor children. Most of the episodes revolve around her preoccupation with aging and the difficulties she and other professional women face when they have put their careers before their personal lives, and who now feel unfulfilled by this choice.

*Ally McBeal* certainly depicted one form of media representation of women in the wake of second wave feminist's supposed demise, one that can likewise be frequently seen in television shows like HBO's *Sex and the City* (Star 1998–2004) or ABC's *Desperate Housewives* (Cherry 2004–2012). The lynchpin binding these representations of female protagonists is the common theme of dissatisfaction: while the women in these programs have all 'benefited' from the supposed gains of feminist struggle, they appear to argue that it has been at the cost of stable and fulfilling personal lives. While these white, middle-class, and heterosexual women enjoy relative economic security and professional satisfaction, they find themselves having to substitute marital gains with consumerist ones. Indeed, while all three series (and many others like them) appear to celebrate the relationships between women, there is a clear sensation that these female friendships are not enough, as the women portrayed are also keenly engaged in the pursuit of a heteronormative relationship that should end in marriage.

Though the relationships between women are, for the most part though not entirely, positive, depicting social bonds that offer comfort, support, and empowerment to the members, they are also seen not as viable alternatives to heterosexual marriage, but rather as parallel structures. As such, despite their apparent celebration of women's gains and autonomy, they do little to displace the love-plot as the engine driving these narratives, and serve rather to reinforce the idea that what feminism has apparently granted women is a set of public gains that sacrifice marital felicity. The way in which the media manipulate feminist rhetoric will be returned to shortly, in a more in-depth discussion of both second wave and 'post' feminisms and their discourses. Prior to that, however, it is worth turning to another representation of women in the media.

If the women discussed above are unhappy with the lot life has meted out to them, yearning as they do for heterosexual companionship, they are a clear representation of contemporary models for femininity as predicated by postfeminist rhetoric (a concept that will be engaged in depth in the present text). These characters are interesting for the way in which they exemplify how popular culture, and especially the media, is heavily invested in the images and narratives of postfeminism. What this thesis will consider is a more subtle example of this mutual dependency between postfeminist rhetoric and popular culture,



specifically in contemporary dystopic literature: the action heroine. As a character that, as will be explored, contests the ideas of femininity as passive, pacific, and weak, the action heroine is appears to contest the model of domesticity and traditional values. The action heroine, however, is very much an extension of the ambivalent figures of feminist and postfeminist rhetoric of popular television dramas. While Ally McBeal, Carrie Bradshaw (*Sex and the City's* Sarah Jessica Parker) and the women of Wysteria Lane, the fictional street that serves as the setting for the series, from *Desperate Housewives* were women who in their thirties were forced to brave the wilds of the dating world, the action heroine of the 1990s and 2000s was a different character all together. Still white, still (nominally) heterosexual, single and middle-class, these women were significantly younger (in some cases, like Buffy in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Whedon 1997 - 2003), still in high school) and they were warriors. Although relationships and sexuality still played a role in the televisual narratives, the focus shifted to the way in which, each week, these young women had to use their special fighting skills (whether supernatural or from extensive training) to battle whatever enemy came their way. Apart from the aforementioned Buffy, who, as the title of the television show suggests, primarily focused her skills on killing vampires, *Xena Warrior Princess* (Tapert 1995 - 2001), *La Femme Nikita* (Surnow 1997 - 2001), *Alias* (Abrams 2001 - 2006) and others all showcased young women saving their various worlds from whatever threatened them.

While the 1980s saw the likes of Linda Hamilton (as Sarah Connor in James Cameron's *Terminator* 1984, and *Terminator 2* 1991) and Sigourney Weaver (as Ellen Ripley in Ridley Scott's *Alien* franchise 1979, 1986, 1992) gracing movie screens with their representations of physically and mentally tough women whose 'hard' bodies fit in to the action movie genre previously reserved for white, male bodies, characters like Buffy were not only fit and fierce but also heteronormatively attractive. This transition from the heroine who embodies female masculinity (Halberstam, *Female*) toward a heroine who mobilises traditional aspects of femininity as a weapon is not merely a shift resulting from the need to exploit greater viewer demographics. The 'feminine' action heroine,

younger than her 1980s counterpart in the cinema,<sup>4</sup> also responds to the rise in discourses which rejected ideas of ‘victim feminism’ and sought to locate women’s oppression outside of social or structural systems and within women themselves. Both Camille Paglia, in *Vamps and Tramps: New Essays* (1994), and Katie Roiphe, in *The Morning After: Sex, Fear, and Feminism* (1994), advocate against what they term the ‘victim feminism’ of the Second Wave. Integral to their arguments is the notion that positioning women as victims of the patriarchy and suggesting that the system operates on them robs women of the potential for agency in their own lives. Both authors assert that feminism has done women more harm than good because it is rooted in an analysis of the way in which the system operates on women rather than in an affirmation of women’s individual potential to operate within the system. Whatever else might be said of Buffy and her ilk, it could hardly be argued that, physically at least, they are victims of male violence. Indeed, it is much easier to see them as perpetrators of it than as somehow oppressed by it.

The rise of the action heroine, both in the 1980s and in the 1990s, coincides with the rise in a discourse that downplayed feminist activism which sought to effect structural and systematic changes and focused instead on ways of better adapting women to the patriarchy. Rather than critiquing physical (and systemic) violence against women, this brand of feminism worked to teach women how to be stronger, how to defend themselves and how to fight back.

## 2. ‘I’m not a feminist but...’:<sup>5</sup> Feminism, Postfeminism and Contemporary Popular Culture

In her article “Sexism Reloaded, or, it’s Time to get Angry Again!” (2011) Rosalind Gill argues that the term sexism has been marginalised within cultural discourse; it has fallen out of use and become a “dirty word” (61). Its use has become aligned, Gill asserts, with an “uptight,” “frigid,” or “humourless” understanding of the women’s movement (61), and thus was easily relegated to a form of social critique that was seen as outmoded or *passé*, like the black and white photos in *Time*

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<sup>4</sup> It is worth pointing out that while I have referenced girl heroines in television programs, their correlate did and does exist on movie screens as well. The *Lara Croft* character and the *Kill Bill* heroines are just two examples of the heroic ‘girls’ depicted in films.

<sup>5</sup> See Alison Dahl Crossley (2009) for a cogent analysis of how and why young women choose or not to identify with the label ‘feminist’.

suggested. “Sexism had not disappeared,” she writes, “but it was taking on new forms” (63). And yet, to suggest that a behaviour, system, or representation is ‘sexist’ is to risk being classified as behind the times, as though the user is unaware that sexism has become a thing of the past, is clinging to an older set of gender relations that no longer describe the present. Sexism, like feminism, has become the “unspeakable within contemporary popular culture” (Tasker and Negra 3). Although identifying as a feminist has always been a political gesture, it would seem that in contemporary popular culture the trend is to deny feminist gains (and disassociate from the feminist label) while benefitting from them at the same time.<sup>6</sup>

As Gill works to reinstate ‘sexism’ as a valid category for social analysis, focusing on the ways in which discourse that privileges intersectionality as a framework can be reinforced by paying attention to the ways in which gender and sex continue to be entrenched within patriarchal structures, she gestures toward the way in which, like sexism, feminism is also a term that has suffered from being maligned in contemporary media culture. Although I will not overtly take up Gill’s call to reinvigorate discursive practices that name and critique sexism, by working through the metamorphoses and movements of feminist thought, theory and activism, and by linking them up to the present (discursively) postfeminist moment, I hope to follow the spirit, if not the letter, of her work by asserting the necessity of critical feminist thought within popular culture and dislodging a postfeminist ideology that all too easily capitulates to capitalist demands. In short, I aim to address the “evident erasure of feminist politics from the popular” (Tasker and Negra 5) through a critique which identifies the ways in which feminism is repackaged (at best) or entirely elided (at worst) from a subset of popular fiction, that which represents the contemporary female action heroine.

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<sup>6</sup> It would be naïve to think that rejection of the label ‘feminist’ has only emerged in recent years, when women and men have been denying the need for or their own identification with feminism since its inception as a social and political movement (though not the first such example, the late 19<sup>th</sup> century with the suffragette movement serves as a case in point). That said, in recent years the media coverage of celebrities who reject the feminist label (especially women) seems to have amplified. This is certainly not a new trend, and is not limited to celebrity culture. See “Ten Celebrities Who Say They Aren’t Feminist” (Huffington Post 2013) for a brief list of contemporary figures who do not identify with feminism. Disturbingly, many of the women on this list, who reject feminism or who claim that it is no longer necessary, are white, heterosexual women who are obviously economically privileged and who also benefit from some of the gains of feminist activism (which is not to say that they are not subject to some of the oppressions of patriarchal culture).

The discussion throughout this thesis relies heavily on feminist theory not only for its understandings of gender and sex relations and representations, but also for its attention to the ways in which identity is a multi-faceted construction in constant flux, one that is necessarily implicated in a series of lived social relations, that has real, material effects on the body. Certainly, this thesis is focused on representation, and speaks to the ways in which bodies are represented in texts, and yet it would be short-sighted to assume that there is no relationship between the 'textual' body, and its construction, representation, and reception, and the 'reading' body, that is the social body that experiences, however vicariously, the fictional character.

The terms, however, are slippery. Defining feminism, defining postfeminism, defining the way in which these two modes of textual and social interpretation inform my reading practices is an attempt to locate a point of departure (and a recognition of the impossibility of locating a *terminus*). I begin my definition of postfeminism with Stacy Gillis' (2007) mindful assertion that "postfeminism is not a political project and should thus not be semantically read as a noun. Rather than a methodology, it is a field of study which draws upon the long history of feminist work in the fields of literary, filmic and cultural analysis" (9). I take up this idea that postfeminism is not a methodology, and as such will define here the field of analysis that postfeminism has generated.

Though feminism and postfeminism are both highly contested terms, with widely disparate understandings and definitions, I in no way mean to suggest that their resulting heterogeneity of meanings should be understood as an invitation to engage in a willy-nilly, mix-and-match attempt to theorise them. Indeed, one the fundamental bases for critique of postfeminism is the way in which its "rhetoric tends to venerate choice-making itself" (Whitney np). I am deeply suspicious of the trend in postfeminist discourse that conflates 'choice' with agency, as it is necessarily bound up within a capitalist and neoliberal framework.

It is necessary to remember that "feminism itself is bound up in the discourse of choice; it is one of the factors involved in the contemporary discursive positivity. In other words, the logic of choice could not exist in its specific forms if feminism did not constitute part of the historical present of North American popular culture" (Probyn, 'Choice' 284). However, while the right to choose, in its

second wave feminist iteration, is intrinsically tied together with questions of political and social rights, such as reproductive control, sexuality and access to economic and educational spheres previously denied women, in postfeminist terms the use of 'choice' has been emptied of its political thrust and filled with consumerist ideals. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, in their seminal work *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture* (2007) assert that postfeminism is tied in with "consumption as a strategy for healing those dissatisfactions that might alternatively be understood in terms of social ills and discontents" (2). As such, it offers "a notional form of equality, concretised in education and employment, and through participation in consumer culture and civil society, in place of what a reinvented feminist politics might have to offer" (McRobbie, *Aftermath* 2). Indeed, for Sarah Gamble "[t]he term 'postfeminism' itself originated from within the media in the early 1980s, and has always tended to be used in this context as indicative of joyous liberation from the ideological shackles of a hopelessly outdated feminist movement" (44). 'Postfeminism' as an ideology is used here to refer to the media-manipulated message that the work of feminism proper has been accomplished. Further, the postfeminism rhetoric would suggest that women who continue to identify themselves with feminism are out of touch with the great 'advances' women have made (this is certainly a very Western-centric discourse). The postfeminist is someone who embraces the multiplicity of opportunities that contemporary society appears to offer her to fulfill her consumer driven desires (Gill, *Gender*). This rhetoric suggests that women's 'choice' is in large part reflected by a market economy that can fulfill her lifestyle choices (as the only ones she might have) and that her role in the social sphere is to make herself more heteronormatively attractive by earning the money necessary to engage in the correct consumerist behaviour, thereby having the purchasing power to buy products that will make her desirable. This ideology comes with a strict set of disciplinary behaviours, both for the body and the mind, which women are required to adopt. The postfeminist heroine becomes the embodiment of the woman who has so disciplined her body and her mind so as to be both physically powerful and extremely heteronormatively attractive. The basis for the critique of postfeminist discourse in my work, one that contends with Probyn's identification of its links to popular culture, Tasker and Negra's and

McRobbie's assertion of its inherently consumerist and apolitical leanings, as well as Gamble's insistence that it is media driven, is predicated on an interrogation of the 'post.'

In a 2010 issue of the *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, several authors attempt to answer the question: "What Is This "Post-" in Postracial, Postfeminist... (Fill in the Blank)?" Certainly, as they make clear throughout the issue, the number of 'posts' is multiple and variable, and its meaning shifts along with the signifier it is attached to. The authors included in the collection are critical of the use of 'post' as anything other than a temporal gesture. In her introduction to the postracial, Squires asserts that "[t]he siren song of the post- only leads us to deserted rest stops where we are targets for the undead savagery of White supremacy" (Squires *et al.* 213). Indeed, in her contribution "Unhitching From the 'Post' (of Postfeminism)" Mary Douglas Vavrus argues that:

the desire to "post" a social movement or a politics is at once a recognition of the significance of that to which it is appended; the problem that all the participants in this forum point to, however, is that the oppressive practices that necessitated the interventions of various social movements and politics—and that we hoped we had buried decades ago – continue to crawl out of their crypts and exert themselves in a surging, lurching, endless night of the living dead. (Vavrus 222-223)

Douglas Vavrus' interrogation of the 'post' is suggestive on several fronts. Firstly, she draws attention to the way in which the 'post' is necessarily bound up with a 'past,' that is, with whatever preceded it, with 'that to which it is appended.' It does not indicate a breakage or rupture, and certainly not the overcoming of that which necessitated the social movement in the first place. Rather, especially in the case of postfeminism, it gestures toward the desire to disengage from the past while at the same time gesturing toward the fact that this 'post' is necessarily built upon what came before. Secondly, Douglas Vavrus gestures toward what will be taken up in Chapter 1 in this thesis, 'Spectres of Feminism: Postfeminism and the Zombie Apocalypse,' namely, that postfeminism and the zombie apocalypse are discourses that conceptually overlap. The way in which 'oppressive practices' thought to be long buried become revenants and continue to rise and reassert their presence within the cultural landscape can describe both a postfeminist discourse that

heralds the coming of a 'new,' gender-equal age, as well as a lumbering, decomposing corpse whose bite is both infectious and potentially fatal.

What, then, is the 'post' dragging with it; with what signifiers is it burdened, and; what is it trying to shake off? A comprehensive history and interrogation of feminist theory and the women's rights movement is beyond the scope of the present text. Indeed, even an overview would require a greater engagement than the present work permits. Feminist thought and activism in the West goes back much further than the Second Wave of the 1960s or even the First Wave of the early twentieth century. What is critical to bear in mind is the way in which the *feminism* in the singular necessarily refers to multiple positions and iterations: liberal; cultural; media; radical; lesbian; Black; Marxist; of difference; materialist; French; eco-; etc.<sup>7</sup> Again, this does not mean that feminist based theory or activism is a smorgasbord of possibilities, where one can pick and choose at random the feminism they want to espouse. The need to critically and politically engage in social critique of the systems of oppression held in place by patriarchal culture is fundamental to feminism, as is the recognition that systems of oppression are intersectional and have different effects on people within a given culture. Postfeminism as a discourse ignores the intersectional and political work of feminism, and as such can assert that feminist goals have been obtained.

In "Eccentric Subjects: Feminist Theory and Historical Consciousness" (1990) Teresa de Lauretis argues that the present moment, the 'third' moment of feminism, recognises that feminist theory is "at once inside its own social and discursive determinations and yet also outside and excessive to them" (116). For T. de Lauretis, this recognition asserts the importance of the way in which feminism has developed, changed and understood itself, from the "first attempt at self-definition" by posing the question "[w]ho or what is a woman?" (115), and in so doing, discovered that *Woman* did not exist, but rather was "spoken of but itself inaudible or inexpressible" (115). As she attempts to trace the path which feminism has taken she looks to Simone de Beauvoir as a point of reference for the beginning of feminist theory. While not an ontological moment or an uncomplicated beginning, it is a point at which *woman* is recognized as Other. This

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<sup>7</sup> See Estelle B. Freedman (2003), Alice Echols (1989) and Patricia Hill Collins (1990) for works that offer analysis, critique, and application of different branches of feminist thought and engagement.

recognition of *woman* as Other is key to the way in which feminism and feminist theory developed in the 1960's and 1970's.

Within the 1980s, the term postfeminism was (and continues to be) used to indicate a rupture with certain aspects of feminism, not a wholesale rejection (what would be termed anti-feminism, misogyny or sexism). Rather it is mobilised as a way of celebrating the supposedly outdated aspects of feminism, heralding a more joyous acceptance of femininity as an expression of women's power to choose. In her reading of Germaine Greer's book *The Whole Woman* (1999), Gamble argues that the postfeminist assertion that

women can 'have it all' – a career, motherhood, beauty, and a great sex life – actually only resituates them as consumers of pills, paint, potions, cosmetic surgery, fashion, and convenience foods. Greer also argues that the adoption of a postfeminist stance is a luxury in which the affluent western world can indulge only by ignoring the possibility that the exercising of one person's freedom may be directly linked to another's oppression. (51)

Gamble's reading of Greer is especially important for understanding the way in which postfeminist discourse functions as it highlights the principle aspects at play: 'having it all,' consumption, and the necessarily classist dimension inherent in this discourse. These three characteristics are inextricably entwined, predicated as they are on the supposition that all women want the same things, are positioned to achieve them if only they try hard enough, and are economically positioned within the affluent. The 'all' that women can apparently 'have,' if the discourse is to be believed, is, however, inextricably linked to socially constructed ideas of what women should want. While I certainly do not wish it suggest that career, motherhood, even a great sex life or beauty are unimportant goals for women, it is worth investigating where these goals come from and how they are constructed.

Having a career, while undeniably a source of pleasure and achievement (and independence) for many women, is also a very middle-class goal. As an indicator of feminism having achieved its aims, it is inherently flawed, belying as it does the fact that working outside or inside the home is a necessity and has always been a reality for women of less affluent classes. The fact that the discourse does little to address economic disparity between individuals, and 'solves' the problem not by interrogating and overhauling the system but by adapting to the patriarchal



modes and mores is indicative of the way in which postfeminism is very much a purportedly apolitical discourse that elides systemic inequalities in favour of a superficial assertion that things have changed. Certainly, the apolitical nature of the discourse is highly debatable, given that non-action or non-engagement can be read as a political act that serves to support, however passively, the *status quo*.

Motherhood also comes under Greer/Gamble's analysis, and the use of this word is telling. Indeed, motherhood becomes yet another consumable lifestyle choice.<sup>8</sup> The 'choice' women are encouraged to make is less about whether or not to have children and more about what kind of mother to be: hippy, hipster, eco-friendly, satellite, hands-off, etc. Postfeminist discourse is focused on motherhood as a potential site for consumption, and not on reproductive rights, as a politically engaged position.

For Angela McRobbie, postfeminism is "a situation which is marked by a new kind of anti-feminist sentiment which is different from simply being a question of backlash against the seeming gains made by feminist activities and campaigns in an earlier period" (*Aftermath* 1). This term, or this political landscape, is marked by the appropriation of feminist rhetoric into the political and market ideologies, so as to re-emerge as a more 'individualistic' ideal. She argues that the "new and seemingly 'modern' ideas about women and especially young women are then disseminated more aggressively, so as to ensure that a new women's movement will not re-emerge. 'Feminism' is instrumentalised, it is brought forward and claimed by Western governments, as a signal to the rest of the world that this is a key part of what freedom now means" (1). Of especial note in McRobbie's argument here is the way in which postfeminist discourse is not only mobilised as a means of pacifying potential demands for systemic change within Western cultural frameworks, but that it is also used as justification for certain kinds of neocolonial and globalising violence. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's critique in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" that "white men are saving brown women from brown men" (93), is repeated here on a global scale. White men and women

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<sup>8</sup> A quick internet search using the terms 'motherhood' and 'famous women' reveals a number of women actors and other celebrities who have converted 'motherhood' into a business, selling the products *and* the lifestyle is increasingly high: Jessica Alba, Jessica Simpson, and Jennifer Garner are perhaps the most famous. The fashion house Dolce and Gabbana quite recently contributed as well by 'celebrating motherhood' at 2015 Milan fashion week.

espouse postfeminist ideals as a way of demonstrating cultural superiority over the Other, without pausing to consider the extent to which these ideals are in many ways still terribly oppressive and class-based. This is not to suggest that the institutionalisation of feminism has not had real, material gains and impacts on society and politics, nor deny that many women have benefited from the way in which certain forms of feminist ideology have entered into public discourse.

Within postfeminism, “[t]he young woman is offered a notional form of equality, concretised in education and employment, and through participation in consumer culture and civil society, in place of what a reinvented feminist politics might have to offer” (McRobbie, *Aftermath* 2). It is possible to recognise that while access to education and employment possibilities are fundamental aspects of feminist activism, when the end goal is ‘participation in consumer culture’ then it falls short of achieving the aims of a feminist politics of equity as “the idea of feminist content disappeared and was replaced by aggressive individualism, by a hedonistic female phallicism in the field of sexuality, and by obsession with consumer culture” (McRobbie, *Aftermath* 5).

The ‘aggressive individualism’ identified by McRobbie is a further example of the way in which postfeminist discourse turns its back on feminist ideology. While recognising that feminist activism has a long and problematic history of excluding women of colour, lesbian, disabled, and disadvantaged classes, the present moment, of Third Wave or contemporary feminism, is engaged in a politics that works to overcome the white, middle-class, heterosexist legacy in favour of an intersectional understanding of oppression. As such, stand-point theory which seeks to validate and make heard the individual voice is critical. And yet, postfeminist discourse appears to willfully ignore the ways in which the individual can be used to mobilise the collective, preferring instead to privilege acting and speaking for individualistic purposes. As McRobbie again notes, “[t]he kind of feminism which is taken into account in this context is liberal, equal opportunities feminism, where elsewhere what is invoked more negatively is the radical feminism concerned with social criticism rather than with progress or improvement in the position of women in an otherwise more or less unaltered social order” (*Aftermath* 14). As we will see, the heroine walks a fine line between the individual and the collective. As an exceptional person, one who often works or

acts alone, her individualism is often what enables her to act on behalf of others. And yet, it is the fact that she does not usually act for personal but rather communal gain which sets her apart from the more hedonistic aspects of postfeminism. Indeed, perhaps the heroine's greatest rebuttal of postfeminist discourse can be found when she is not merely seeking her own pleasure or gains, but rather looks to ensure the comfort or safety of others. This is not to suggest, however, that the heroine is a wholesale contestation of postfeminist rhetoric, but rather that she can exhibit the potential for such revisions.

According to Amber Kinser, in her article "Negotiating Spaces For/Through Third Wave Feminism," postfeminism "claims that any needed gender equity has been attained and that further feminist activity is contraindicated" (132). More disconcerting is how it "co-opts the motivating discourse of feminism but accepts a sense of empowerment as a substitutive for the work toward and evidence of authentic empowerment" (134). As she teases out an understanding of the differences between third wave and postfeminism, Kinser highlights the ways in which third wave feminism identifies itself with the feminist movements that preceded (and opened a space for) it, focussing on the necessity of actively working for change, and the role of resistance within that action. She is careful, however, to distinguish between the seductive resistance marketed by postfeminism and third wave feminism's more active resistance. For Kinser the resistance inherent in third wave feminism is of a much more effective kind than that offered by postfeminism, because it refuses to be yet another product on the market. It is necessary, she argues, to interrogate the act of resistance and the feminism motivating it. She argues that a false correlation emerges when feminism is confused with resistance in any form. That is, when what 'counts' as feminism is identified with anything that looks like one is casting off any cultural restriction whatsoever, and in particular if the one doing so is female. Part of the seductive nature of postfeminism is the ability to co-opt the language of feminism and then attach it to some kind of consumer behaviour that feeds young people's hunger for uniqueness, even if the uniqueness being sold looks just like everyone else's (144).

The strong relationship between postfeminist rhetoric and the media is interrogated by Susan J. Douglas in her seminal work *Where the Girls Are: Growing up Female with the Mass Media* (1994). In her analysis of media representations of

feminist activism she asserts that “the most important legacy of such media coverage was its carving up of the women’s movement into legitimate feminism and illegitimate feminism” (186). ‘Legitimate feminism’ is read as a kinder, gentler feminism, one that does not alienate men or women, but that is socially acceptable. The ‘story’ the media tell about feminism “also suggested that women had to be brainwashed in order to become part of the movement. This, too, was a common theme, that feminists, like the pods in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, cannibalized perfectly happy women and turned them into inhuman aliens” (169). Feminism is thus depicted as a social danger, and images of feminists “overflowed with anxieties about female anger, male castration, and the possible dissolution of amicable heterosexual relations, marked ‘militant feminism’ as a potentially deadly trend” (188). She further notes that “there was sexism in the relentless overemphasis on feminists’ appearance, but more than gender privilege was at stake. By ridiculing how feminists looked, the American media insisted that consumerism, especially by women, had to remain both a central pastime and a religion” (227). The emergent postfeminist discourse, even when the images presented are of women such as the heroine, with strong, capable bodies and minds, is so prevalent that containment strategies are set in place that realign the heroic body with acceptable femininity: she can be strong as long as she is beautiful; she can be sexy as long as it is mobilised for the (heterosexual male) viewer’s pleasure; she can be intelligent as long as it is only activated against the enemy.

Curiously, the image of the ‘acceptable’ feminist activist that Douglas describes shares several characteristics with the postfeminist action heroine:

These women were huge successes at managing the impressions they gave to others, coming across as distinctive, nonconformist women who nonetheless conform perfectly to dominant standards of beauty. They were self-satisfied and self-assured, yet their value came from male admiration and approval. The ads suggested that without inner confidence, and a core self that is assured and discriminating (made possible, one can infer, by feminism), these women would not be the charmers they are today. But without male approval and admiration, they would not have the acclaim on which narcissistic self-esteem rests. (249)

While I hesitate to apply the term narcissistic to the heroine, the rest of her definition is quite on point. The heroine is exceptional, that is, she is 'distinctive' and a 'non-conformist' in her role, and yet, as we will see, one of the reasons for which her difference is tolerated is due in large part to the way in which her heteronormative desirability remains intact.

In her work *Chicklit and Postfeminism* (2011), Stephanie Harzewski interrogates the way in which the literary genre of chicklit espouses postfeminist discourse, especially in the way in which consumption is touted as a harbinger of gender equality. She suggests that the protagonists of chicklit use shopping and sex (as primary sites of consumption) as a means of asserting their independence from traditional gender roles, even while the thrust of most of the novels is the search for the ideal (heteronormative) relationship. She asserts that shopping "is central to postfeminism as a strategy and to some degree [it maintains a] connection with liberal feminism's tenet of personal choice" (155). As previously noted, however, the message in these texts is somewhat contradictory as the motivation behind all the consumption cum independence is to craft an image that will attract the male gaze and ideally matrimony. Harzewski takes up Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra's assertion that postfeminists "commodify feminism via the figure of the woman as empowered consumer" (155). And that "*postfeminism* has been utilized to signify temporal economies suggesting the completion, suspension, or waning purpose of earlier feminism as well as a futuristic sense of going beyond it" (155; italics in original). While the heroine does not employ consumption as correlative to gender equality, and she certainly looks to 'heal' dissatisfaction by alternate means than through shopping, the reason for taking up Harzewski's text is that a similar substitution occurs in the action narrative. In this case, it is not the ability to buy designer goods or dress in the latest trends that becomes a false signifier of social equity, but rather the ability to take up arms and employ violence. In either case, the end result is often the same: as much as the activity is touted as a sign of independence and equality, it is only truly seen as effective and worthwhile when the end result is heteronormative felicity.

To further this line of analysis, consider how "an attribute of postfeminism, then, is a self-fashioning through participation in commodity culture, an inversion of radical feminism's goal of dismantling capitalist structures" (Harzewski 177).

This 'inversion' of goals is not only an indication of the way in which resistance is often co-opted and repurposed in the service of the dominant culture, but also directly addresses postfeminist discourse's use of only those aspects of feminism that serve its purposes. As Ann M. Cronin has noted, "the field of consumption is always already figured simultaneously as 'neutral' (although, in effect, masculine) *and* as the emblematic site and sign of femininity" (274; italics in original). Certainly, the participation in consumption as a leisure activity that is also instrumentalised in the production of an identity is not limited in any way to women alone. Cronin's assertion that the 'field of consumption' is a 'site and sign of femininity' speaks to the way in which conspicuous consumption is represented and not to the field of consumers. The rise in metrosexuality as a masculine identity marker, as well as the increase in lifestyle products for 'men,' is testament to the fact that consumption and consumerism are not women-only activities.

The "field of consumption" becomes feminised through its link to the "superficial and frivolous" (Cronin 274), and yet as we will see, discourses of (re)production and consumption become deadly serious when they are turned into the metaphor of the zombie. This is not to say that the zombie becomes feminised. Instead, the proletarian automaton of Fordism, the mass production model, is substituted here with the zombified automaton, the mass consumption model. If, as a postfeminist rhetoric would claim, individuality and independence are asserted through constant engagement with the sphere of consumption, the inverse is also true: the market becomes a site for reproducing sameness, and the constant need to consume creates slaves to capitalist greed.

There is much to be critical of in a discourse that celebrates commodity and consumer culture rather than striving to effect systemic change, though at the same time, it must be said that there is obviously an element of pleasure involved in consumption. Moreover, in the sphere of popular culture especially, "pleasurable readings of popular texts can mark out moments of audience empowerment and subversive identity formation" (McRobbie, 'Young' 534). The intersection of pleasure and consumption might be construed as productive, as Michelle M. Lazar suggests, when postfeminism, in the guise of 'popular feminism,' works to make "feminist ideas accessible to a wider popular audience" (373). The

heroine, then, will be interrogated as to the way in which feminist and postfeminist discourses are engaged in her representation.

Indeed, it is within the discourse of popular feminism that the action heroine is most easily recognisable. While seldom situated as a consumer, at least not within the capitalist framework, the heroine still embodies the ideals of neoliberal discourse which privileges independence and “emphatic individualism” (Tasker and Negra 2) over community and social change. Arguably, as we will see in Chapter 3 ‘Katniss Everdeen and the Hunger Games: Dystopia as Resistance to Neoliberal Demands,’ alternative forms of heroism are not only possible but also highly visible in contemporary popular culture. And yet, while the protagonist of *The Hunger Games* trilogy may push against the isolating and isolated tendencies of the postfeminist action heroine, the impact both the novels and the films have had on public consumption highlights the paradox of a heroine who fights against the dictates of consumerist culture in the texts, only to have the texts become fodder for mass consumption.<sup>9</sup> As will be interrogated in the discussion of Suzanne Collins’ trilogy, the novels are critical of the way in which spectacularised bodies and consumption come to replace political engagement, and yet the series and the protagonists of the films have served to feed the entertainment machine.

It is critical to ask, however, what is at stake in making feminism popular? Indeed, the question itself indicates the problematics at work in the popularisation of feminist discourse. ‘Popular feminism’ reduces feminist ideologies to a monolithic, user-friendly discourse that can easily be appropriated or rejected as “suits” (Dahl Crossley 2010). As it is rendered more ‘accessible’ or ‘palatable’ it is integrated within a discourse of neo-liberal capitalist consumerism that links it to an individual identity and distances it from the cultural critique that was part of ‘radical feminism.’ The result, as Lazar notes, is a postfeminist discourse that has been emptied of its political and critical impulse and is based instead on an individualistic, neutralised, and superficial expression (Kinser 2004). My primary

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<sup>9</sup> The consumerism is not limited to the books and films. Indeed, Covergirl has created the “Capitol Beauty” make-up line, so that consumers can emulate the body-decoration trends in the novel and China Glaze, a company that makes nail polish, has also produced a line of colours called “The Hunger Games Collection.”

concern with representations of postfeminism/postfemininity in the popular sphere is that they so often, as Tasker and Negra have noted, offer

such a limited vision of gender equality as both achieved and yet still unsatisfactory [and underline] the class, age, and racial exclusions that define postfeminism and its characteristic assumption that the themes, pleasures, values, and lifestyles with which it is associated are somehow universally shared and, perhaps more significant, universally accessible. (2)

While there is certainly something seductive in the notion that ‘feminism is for everybody,’<sup>10</sup> it is necessary to resist the facile interpretation of this phrase as the idea that feminism can be whatever one wants it to be. In her text *Feminism is For Everybody: Passionate Politics* (2000), bell hooks is adamant that feminism that “is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression” (1) is to the benefit of everybody, while an exclusionist project, such as postfeminism, which makes the neoliberal claim that it is for everybody and is based on ‘choice,’ is really a mere co-optation of feminist discourse.

Lazar’s reading of postfeminist discourse and the ‘choice’ model is more optimistic than my own. She argues that it “produces ‘new femininities’ that are neither ‘feminist’ nor are they ‘traditional’ forms of femininity, which goes towards breaking down the dichotomy between ‘feminist’ and ‘feminine’ identities” (373). While I am skeptical of the word ‘new’ in her suggestion of ‘new femininities,’<sup>11</sup> I

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<sup>10</sup> See bell hooks’ text *Feminism is For Everybody: Passionate Politics* (2000). Though hooks’ title may be read as a postfeminist assertion that feminism can be mobilised to suit whoever is speaking, it is in fact a defense of the way in which a radical revision of the patriarchal order which follows a feminist theory and politics will actually result in a more just society for all, and that feminism is not just for heterosexual, middle-class, white women.

<sup>11</sup> My skepticism is derived from two principle sources. The first is the qualitative value that ‘new’ as an adjective has come to connote, conveying as it does that these femininities will, because of their newness, necessarily be ‘better’ than the ‘old’ ones. Further, when not read critically ‘new’ can appear to be making a break from what came before, and I would argue that the femininities emerging in postfeminist discourse have more to do with pastiche and irony (if we are lucky) than with the emergence of femininities that seek to push the boundaries of embodiment and gender performance. Indeed, much of these ‘new’ femininities appear more geared toward embracing a model of femininity based on nostalgia for the 1950s, that privileges motherhood and domesticity (neither of which are ‘new’ femininities). The second problem derives from the first, from the qualitative value placed on the word. As capitalist ideology pushes a consumer based model, the need to be constantly engaged in seeking out and obtaining what is ‘new’ is no longer merely the search for alternative ways of performing the self, rather it becomes a consumerist necessity. As such, ‘new femininities’ may have potential for disrupting ‘old’ or ‘traditional’ models, but I am nevertheless wary of unconditionally celebrating them just because of their ‘newness,’ because of the possibility for reading them as another product on the market, another means of promoting capitalist and consumer culture.



am interested in the ways in which 'traditional' femininity is re-fashioned or re-purposed, especially as these new fusions purport to be instances or evidence of feminism's 'past': that these configurations and representations exist is, it is suggested, an indication that feminism has done its work, as they have broken the mould of the restrictive or monolithic female identity that is problematically constructed as pre-existing feminism's emergence. However, this discourse of 'new' identity manifestations depends on an idea of femininity or women's identity as previously monolithic and unvaried, and repeats the often criticised singular vision that accompanied much of the first and second wave's discourses, in which 'woman' was white, middle class, heterosexual and lived in the west, and that is repeated today in discussions of the Other woman. In fact, the discursive construction of women who are not white, Western, and middle class continues to be one that elides their presence. Often, these 'Others' are depicted as victims of outdated patriarchal cultures, they are infantilised and deprived of agency, through a discourse that problematically asserts that Western feminism has achieved its aims and the rest of the world must follow its example.

### **3. Recognising the Female Hero**

The action heroine is expected to be violent; it is part and parcel of the conventions of the genre. By this I mean that they are expected to engage in hand-to-hand combat, use weapons to subdue if not directly kill their enemies, and basically enact might as a way of enforcing right (Halberstam, "Imagined" 191). Dangerously, this capacity for physical violence has become, as Kelly Oliver (2008) has pointed out, linked to a postfeminist turn that equates women's access to violence with gender equity. What Oliver suggests is that the ability to use weapons, to physically defend the self and others, is represented and read as indicative of women's equality in the West. Much of this, she argues, is due to the link made between feminist practice and women's access to the previously held male sphere of violent action. Failing to analyse the way that female violence is represented, by assuming that it indicates equality, is to enact further, symbolic violence, on bodies that, as much as they may be perpetrators, also have violence enacted upon them.

### 0.2.1 Fighting Fair: Violence and the Desirable Heroine

In his work “Imagined Violence/ Queer Violence: Representation, Rage, and Resistance” (1993), Jack Halberstam (writing as Judith Halberstam) has argued for the revolutionary potential of representing violence by Others. He suggests that it “is the fantasy of unsanctioned eruptions of aggression from ‘the wrong people’, of the wrong skin, the wrong sexuality, the wrong gender” (199); it is the convergence of the ‘unsanctioned’ with the ‘wrong people’ that encodes the potential for the greatest disruptions. It isn’t difficult to understand the ways in which heroic female violence is ‘sanctioned’ and therefore non-disruptive. The question of how the very sexualisation of these women links their violence more to questions of sado-masochistic pornography than systematic disruptions of the patriarchy will be explored at length throughout this dissertation. Laura Sjoberg and Caron Gentry have articulated how there are further ways of representing female violence so that it is contained and sanctioned, rather than disruptive. They have identified the maternilising, that is, violence in the name of protecting the family or children. In “Con armas, como armas: la violencia de las mujeres” (2012), María Xosé Agra asserts that this violence is represented as filial, not affiliative – thereby robbing women of the possibility of agentively choosing to be violent in defense of an ideal. Instead, their violence is represented as reactionary, a violence that they will quickly give over should someone else step in to do the protecting. Given, then, the encoding of women’s violence, whether heroic or not, within a framework that is still contingent on essentialist female traits – sexiness, maternity, reproduction – it’s difficult to understand Halberstam’s assertion in favour of representing violent women. The argument becomes that

role reversal never simply replicates the terms of an equation. The depiction of women committing acts of violence against men does not simply use ‘male’ tactics of aggression for other ends; in fact, female violence transforms the symbolic function of the feminine within popular narratives and it simultaneously challenges the hegemonic insistence upon the linking of might and right under the sign of masculinity. (191)

The feminist activist and theorist Martha McCaughey has investigated the role of women’s violence in her article “The Fighting Spirit: Women’s Self-Defense Training and the Discourse of Sexed Embodiment” (1998). Her text is especially

useful as it positions the debates over women's violence within the context of how it is mobilised as both a tool for the disruption of the patriarchy (by redefining women's physicality) and at the same time one that reinforces patriarchal systems (as a reaction to gender violence rather than a means for challenging this systemic problem). She argues that the ability to take up violence as a means of self-defence is key to understanding and re-shaping women's gendered subject position. Initially "[d]oing self-defense felt like selling out, conceding that despite feminist efforts, men hadn't changed. Even worse, perhaps, it felt like resigning myself to use 'the master's tools'" (277). This admission of violence as a tool for women's self-defense and as a means of reconstructing the self within a patriarchal discourse is seen as an admission of defeat – that to truly protect the self and to render level the playing field between men and women, it is necessary to approach the question of violence as one in which women can participate as well as men.

McCaughey's investigation highlights the culturally constructed gender positions by asserting that the "set of cultural assumptions that positions aggression as a primary marker of sex difference fuels the frequency and ease with which men attack women and the cultural understanding that men's violence and women's vulnerability are inevitable, if unfortunate, biological facts" (279). She argues that 'men's violence' and 'women's vulnerability' are not natural results of biological differences, but rather the result of socially constructed gender norms. As she interrogates whether or not it is possible to counteract these constructions she asserts that through the techniques taught in self-defence classes it is possible for women to learn and embrace violence as a means of defending themselves both physically and psychologically. For McCaughey, "[a]ggression and femininity are not complementary. Femininity, as it is socially defined, is precisely what women must overcome when learning to fight" (281). Her argument is that in order to resist the patriarchal construction of female bodies, or to attempt to posit an alternative, it is necessary to learn how to be physically aggressive and to overcome prescribed gender roles that would deny women the potential to act violently. By affirming that 'aggression and femininity are not complementary' McCaughey inevitably signals the way in which femininity and aggression are not 'natural' categories, rather that they emerge as part of the discursive construction of the bodies that enact these two behaviours. Returning to Agra, it becomes

apparent to what extent this discourse is embedded in the way in which violent women are represented. She criticises the facile equation that “las mujeres son menos agresivas y violentas, son más pacíficas, debido a factores varios, desde los físicos al sentido maternal. Antes que nada, las mujeres son dadoras y protectoras de la vida, no pueden quitarla, destruirla” (58). By situating the violent woman as aberrant or unnatural, the gender binary is reinforced rather than disrupted. The alignment of traditional markers of femininity with aggressive action, while problematic for other reasons, such as the reinforcement of the adoption of stereotypically masculine attributes as signifying equality, does open up a space for the possibility that violence is a learned behaviour not tied to any one sex or gender.

The young female hero that emerges from this debate, however, does seem to combine femininity and aggression. Where the 1980s female action hero is flat-chested, muscular and eschews the traditional physical markers of femininity (as represented in the abovementioned *Alien* or *Terminator*), in the 1990s the heroine that emerges is not only typically younger, but also aligned more firmly with heteronormative desirability; she is somewhat curvier, has longer hair, her clothes become less functional and more revealing and make-up, while far from heavily applied, is in evidence.<sup>12</sup> When Buffy the Vampire Slayer tells one of her enemies that: “You can attack me; you can send assassins after me, that’s fine. But nobody messes with my boyfriend!” (Whedon “My Line”), what she indicates is that for herself and other young heroines the heterosexual contract is integral to the role of the action character. There is certainly something appealing in a character who can not only defend herself but who is also cast as the defender of her boyfriend (not to mention of her community and society) rather than being the damsel in distress of more traditional lore. The active, physically and mentally strong heroine is a figure who incites desire: desire to be like her and desire to be with her. The heroines discussed in the following chapters, as representative of contemporary young action heroines, interrogate the way in which heteronormativity – through the casting of heroic female violence and bodies as enmeshed within traditional

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<sup>12</sup> While it falls outside the scope of the present discussion, it would be remiss not to mention that what is considered ‘desirable’ and ‘attractive’ is not static, and part of the change in representations of heroic bodies can be attributed to shifting social trends for beauty.

models for femininity – becomes a central concern, one which is decidedly invoked as a safeguard against potentially disruptive women’s bodies. Indeed, they exhibit quite clearly what Kerry Fine terms “instrumental aggression” (157). For Fine, this form of violence is sanitised and condoned as it is enacted in the name of protecting someone – usually a person or group who is weaker or more vulnerable than the heroine. This type of violence is closely linked to heroism, indeed, it is part of the heroic morality: violence for the sake of violence is one of the distinguishing characteristics of the villainess or villain; the heroine, on the other hand, only engages in aggressive acts in order to mitigate other evils. This is not a trait only of the heroine but of heroism in general. However the chain of signifiers evoked when instrumental violence is utilised by a woman is altered by sex, race, able-bodiedness, and gender, as well as class and heteronormative desirability. Fina Birulés argues that violent behaviours in humans “*tienen que ver con el deseo de negar la libertad de los y las demás o de acabar con ella*” (19; italics in original). The desire to limit or negate the liberty of others as a defining characteristic of violent behaviour is an integral consideration for questions pertaining to heroic violence, especially female heroic violence. Indeed, while it would seem that the heroine (or hero) is engaged in the opposite, that is, that her violent action is used to defend the liberty of others, herein lies the importance of understanding violence and heroism: only within a defensive framework, in which violence action is used as a measure for countering an attack on an individual or community, does it become sanctioned, sanitised, and even desirable.

Laura Sjoberg and Caron Gentry have commented on the disproportionate representation of women’s violence in the media (compared to men’s violence), and ask: “Why is it that each woman’s violence is portrayed as singular and aberrant?” (6). They go on to answer this question in part by deconstructing the way in which the social construction of the female gender is disrupted by women acting violently. They argue that this destabilises the sex-gender system, and as a way of containing the possibly disruptive potential, patriarchal discourse asserts that “when women are violent, both political and academic reactions stereotype violent women as sexually deviant, robbing them of their agency” (6). While they recognise here the sexually deviant characterisation of violent women, often as sexual predators, the Black widow, lesbians or frigid women, they go on to identify

other containment methods for the threat of women's violence. One such discursive strategy is the representation of the monster, the woman who is not recognisably a woman at all, who does not fit in to the traditional categories for femininity or who is masculinised. There is also the women whose violence is framed as a correlative of their relationships to the men in their lives. María Xosé Agra asserts that their representation is filial – they are the sisters, widows, nieces, etc. of men who are brought to violence because of their relationships, not because of any social or political agency or belief. This is tied in with the figure of the Mother, who, again to use Agra's denominations, acts to protect her family or loved ones, who is violent out of defence (self or other), acting out of necessity, not out of a real need to change or alter the system through violent means. Arguably, these discursive containment structures are in themselves a sort of violence/violation, robbing women as it does of political motivations it relegates them to the position of an essentialised femininity or, conversely, suggesting that their violence is rooted in a flawed femininity. To quote Agra, violating the codes of femininity threatens the norm that would essentialise women as naturally pacific and “cuando no responden a, cuando transgreden, dicha normatividad se transforman en seres mucho más peligrosos y terribles, mucho más crueles, y en objeto de fascinación y de fantasías masculinas y de repugnancia y horror” (58). The characterisation as violent due to sexual aberration, filial relationships, or monstrosity work as a way of mitigating this horror and capitalising on the heterosexual male fantasies it might open up.

If violent women upset the stereotype of the patriarchal sex/gender system, we must ask ourselves to what extent these ruptures are producing measurable changes, and to what extent they are reabsorbed by a flexible patriarchal model that takes attempts at change and reconfigures them so that they continue to be of service to it. Halberstam has argued that there is potential for rupture in depictions of women's violence, suggesting that it “denotes a potentiality, a possible reality that may only ever exist in the realm of representation but one which creates an ‘imagined violence’ with real consequences and which corresponds only roughly to real violence and its imagined consequences” (‘Imagined’ 190). By opening up a space for imagined violence, he suggests that real change can come of it. While I am uncertain about the extent to which this is

true, I am interested in the way in which it at the very least opens up a space for representations that test the limits of traditional discourse surrounding women's bodies, and the notion that women are victims of violence and not perpetrators of it.

The heroines chosen for discussion in the following chapters are print-based heroines, that is, they were not originally conceived of as film or television figures, but rather are found in novels and comic books (though they may come to be represented cinematically after publication). As such, it may seem counter-intuitive to have opened this discussion by making recourse to television and film heroines. However, these figures are not only part of the cultural landscape that forms the site of production and reception for the more 'literary' heroines under scrutiny here. Rather, as characters who exemplify the postfeminist discourse that informs the conditions for the emergence of these figures, and considering the role and prominence of media in the manufacturing of postfeminist ideologies, they offer a clear entry point into considerations of heroic female bodies, active and agentic women's bodies, and the violence that they perform and are subjected to. Before proceeding to consider the texts themselves, it is necessary to consider this postfeminist landscape, to define it, to trace its ontology, and to recognise the way in which it manifests itself in contemporary modes of representation.

### **0.2.2 Postfeminist Viragos: Articulating the Postfeminist Heroine**

The figure of the (postfeminist) female action hero in dystopic literatures is not as easy to define as she may first appear. For consumers of popular culture, whether movies, television programs or popular fiction, she is an easily recognisable character, and yet it is still worth interrogating what makes an action heroine identifiable as such. More to the point: (how) is the heroine something other than merely a hero who is a woman? Certainly the hero and the heroine share some traits in common, have characteristics – both physical and intellectual – which mark them out as heroic, yet it would be short-sighted to assume that the only difference between them is one of reproductive organs. In defining the heroine, I want to steer clear of engaging in a comparative analysis of the hero/heroine binary. Indeed, it is important to define the heroine on her own terms, rather than engaging in a negative definition of 'not hero' which would only serve to reinforce

the binary structure of male/female. While it may seem suspect to invoke the hero only to dismiss him in favour of a definition that begins and ends with the heroine, I do so to avoid having the spectre of the hero hanging over us. In other words, while the hero has been thoroughly defined and analysed, western “culture has often been unable to recognise female heroism” (Pearson and Pope vii).<sup>13</sup> The task at hand is not only to recognise female heroism as such, but to recognise the female hero.

Throughout this dissertation I alternate between using the term ‘heroine’ and the term ‘female hero’ to denote the figure under discussion. Although the word ‘hero’ can arguably be read as gender neutral, much as the word ‘actor’ is slowly being accepted as such, and ‘actress’ is becoming less common, the term still carries heavy cultural baggage, and theorisations of heroism are still primarily rooted in the hero as male. However, as Martina Lipp notes in “Welcome to the Sexual Spectacle: The Female Heroes of the Franchise” (2004), the term ‘heroine’ “has rather negative and diminutive connotations attached to it” (17). Lipp, much like Carol Pearson and Katherine Pope in *The Female Hero in American and British Literature* (1981), opts to use the term ‘female hero’ as a way of pushing against the ‘negative and diminutive’ implications of the ‘ine’ suffix. In so doing, the authors reinforce that while there are aspects in common with the male hero, there are also fundamental defining characteristics of the female heroic journey. While I am sympathetic with their reservations of using the word heroine, I am also somewhat suspect of the implications of using ‘female hero’ as it implies that the hero is, by default, male and that it is necessary to add ‘female’ in order to distinguish between the two (at least until such a time as male hero and female hero become more popularly used to distinguish between the two). Further, using the word ‘female,’ a biological not a gender category, elides the fact that the heroine’s is unambiguously a result of a social construct. The heroine is a woman, not a just a female version of the hero. And yet, ‘woman hero’ is not employed by any of the authors consulted and ‘hero who is a woman’ is far too unwieldy to be taken seriously as a possibility. Given the linguistic limitations in place, I have

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<sup>13</sup> The most canonical work of this kind, of course, is Joseph Campbell’s *Hero With a Thousand Faces* (1949).



chosen to employ both 'heroine' and 'female hero' indiscriminately throughout this project, using both terms to refer to the characters analysed.

Call her what we will, who is the heroine? Jennifer K. Stuller has argued that there are four criteria, two of which must be met, for a character to be considered a female hero: "The narrative borrows from, or resonates with, classical themes and/or elements of world mythology" (5), it includes "an element of the fantastic" (6), the heroine must have both "a uniquely identifiable skill or power" (6) and "a mission or purpose that benefits the greater good" (7). Admittedly this list opens up the field for heroines to include a rather broad range of characters. It is, however, an excellent place to start. Combining Stuller's definition with Pearson and Pope's we also find that the heroic journey "offers the female hero the opportunity to develop qualities such as courage, skill, and independence, which would atrophy in a protected environment" (Stuller 8). Problematically, however, Stuller identifies the space of the home as a 'protected environment,' even though for many women the home is, in fact, the site of violence and abuse, and leaving the home increases the possibility that they will survive. For Stuller, the heroine comes into being, comes into her heroism, when she leaves the home. For many women, however, remaining in the home is an equally dangerous reality, and the act of leaving the home can be evidence of everyday heroism. Despite how obvious this may seem, moving out of the private sphere and into the public sphere is not a move to be taken for granted.

As all of the heroines chose for analysis in this thesis will show, it is precisely the tension between the public and private spheres, the extent to which even when the protagonists are operating outside of the domestic space the private exercises a pull on their actions, that they must negotiate. Indeed, postfeminist discourse aside, moving into the public sphere – whether that movement is out of necessity or by choice – is an inherently heroic act for many women.<sup>14</sup> For the heroine, not only must she constantly reaffirm her right to inhabit the public sphere, but she must also fight not to be pushed back into the

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<sup>14</sup> As previously mentioned, the home is not a *de facto* safe space for women (and children and even men, and even less so for homosexual and transgendered people, the elderly, and the differently abled and dependent). Moving into the public sphere can, in and of itself, be recognised as a highly risky and heroic act, especially when it is coupled with denouncing the abuse located in the domestic space.

private one. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra have criticised the facility with which the return to the domestic sphere is positioned as a 'choice' within contemporary discourses, and that despite the heroine's success, the 'happy ending' is always the same:

Assuming full economic freedom for women, postfeminist culture also (even insistently) enacts the possibility that women might choose to retreat from the public world of work. Postfeminist fictions frequently set aside both evident economic disparities and the fact that the majority of women approach paid labor as an economic necessity rather than a 'choice.' As this suggests, postfeminism is white and middle class by default, anchored in consumption as a strategy (and leisure as a site) for the production of the self. (2)

The correlation between postfeminist discourse and the heroine will be elaborated further on, but for the moment it is critical to recognise that to engage in either paid labour or the labour of the domestic space (as though the two were mutually exclusive categories) is a 'choice' only in so far as it is economically feasible. As will be discussed in the following chapters, in line with postfeminist rhetoric that often argues for a return to conservative feminine models, the heroine is often depicted as returning to the private sphere at the end of her heroic journey, as though this return were a prize for a job well done, and though this may be the case for some people, for whom unpaid labour in the private sphere is preferable to paid labour in the public realm, this is certainly not always the case.<sup>15</sup> Regardless, there the heroine's 'return' to the domestic sphere often symbolises the final stage of her heroic journey.

Certainly the heroic journey is relatively cyclical in that it is predicated upon "the departure, the initiation, [and] the return" (Pearson and Pope 3), and as such there is little choice in the matter. However, when the 'return' is predicated upon a re-domestication, a re-enclosure in the private sphere, the implication is that the heroines' actions are somehow aberrant and that once the heroic journey is complete, there will remain no desire to take up an active position in the public

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<sup>15</sup> Even though it may seem rather obvious, it is also worth pointing out that heroism, as an activity that usually correlates to action in the public sphere, is very rarely remunerated monetarily. As such, it is possible to argue that it correlates more with volunteer work, or unpaid social labour rather than monetised capitalist labour. In the third chapter of this thesis, in the discussion on Katniss Everdeen's heroism, the possibility that affect and community can be mobilised as part of heroic activity opens up ways of thinking about heroism outside of the division of labour.

sphere. For Pearsonn and Pope, this is reflected in the fact that “a woman learns early that it is her destiny to gain the treasures of financial support, love, and social acceptance by pleasing others rather than by heroically acting and changing the world” (23). For the heroine, the ‘prize’ for the successful completion of the heroic journey is relief from the necessity of continuing to engage in acts of heroism. She is returned to the domestic setting, and the rewards for her actions are the ‘treasures’ of traditional femininity. In part, this can be read as stemming from the fact that there is a “cultural assumption that strong women are deviant and should be punished” (Pearsonn and Pope 10). The ‘punishment’ is couched in terms of a reward, and is quite simply the restoration of the heroine to the domestic space (often through marriage and child-rearing). A double-function is revealed here, as the return to the domestic sphere both suggests that this is a desirable space for women, if even those who are strongest and most capable of occupying public space would ‘choose’ to return to the private, and “the reincorporation of the female action hero within traditional familial and domestic paradigms functions to mitigate the threat of her action” (Stasia 180). The question of choice – whether or not the heroine chooses her heroic role or has it forced upon her – is critical, as so often the heroic role is one that the heroine is ‘forced’ (by circumstance, destiny or innate ability) to adopt. And yet, as Buffy the Vampire Slayer argues (in a conversation with her mother): “Do-do you think I chose to be like this? Do you have any idea how lonely it is, how dangerous? I would *love* to be upstairs watching TV or gossiping about boys or ... God, even studying! But I have to save the world. Again” (Whedon ‘Becoming’). As this quotation makes clear, for the heroine it is a burden to be marked out as different, even when that difference brings with it exceptional physical and mental powers and the ability to kill vampires and other supernatural creatures. What the heroine longs for is to be like everyone else, to be ‘watching TV or gossiping about boys’, not saving the world. The suggestion is that ‘normal’ women *want* to occupy the private sphere, only those who are ‘unnatural’ or who have no choice would engage in heroic activities.

It is not, I would argue, a coincidence that the (action) heroine in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries is conspicuously younger than her counterpart of the sixties, seventies and eighties. As Dawn Heineken points out in *The Warrior Women of Television: A Feminist Cultural Analysis of the New Female*

*Body in Popular Media* (2003), the heroine shares many traits with the figure of the tomboy, not least of which is that the “desire to act aggressively is read as a stage of adolescence on route to accepting ‘true’ womanhood. As in romance novels, the narrative is a journey of discovery in which feminine sexuality is ultimately recuperated into the patriarchal order” (28). The heroism, or rather the capacity to act outside of traditional gender norms, is depicted as a ‘stage’ the young women pass through on their way to heteronormativity, and that “the threat of [their] agency” is further mitigated “by offering the hope that [they] will ‘settle down’” (Stasia 177).

Consider what Dawn Heineken identifies as “The Unruly Woman,” “a figure who turns traditional images of femininity upside down, most noticeably through ‘unfeminine’ behaviour. For example, the Unruly Woman takes up space through her large size, disruptive behavior like spitting, belching or farting, and outspoken humor” (22). While the heroine may be violent and aggressive, may speak out of turn or assert her will on others, she is, for the most part, still the bearer of other aspects of traditional femininity. Her body may be strong and muscled, but it is still normatively desirable; the need to be fit in order to combat her enemies means that her body is under her control – she does not suffer from gasses that escape through the ‘belching or farting’ Heineken identifies as socially disruptive. Curiously, even Heineken, in her recognition of the ways in which the body is somehow silenced by eliding representations of the scatological, the ‘bodily functions,’ leaves aside the question of menstruation. The bodily control the heroine must exercise inevitably extends to the control of her reproductive organs – or better yet, the complete omission thereof. As A.L. Evins has noted in “The Missing Period: Bodies and the Elision of Menstruation in Young Adult Literature,” while young adult fiction “hyper-sexualizes the adolescent, it simultaneously denies menstruation, one of the most significant markers of young adulthood for women” (4). Given the widespread cultural taboo around discussing menstruation, it is not surprising that it is not represented in conjunction with the heroic woman’s body. That said, violent loss of blood appears to be part of the, “‘acceptable’ forms of bloodshed that are so prevalent that they are practically banal” and yet the “blood that flows naturally: menstruation” is systematically omitted (Evins 35).

Even though the heroine may be described “as clearly different and set apart from other women” (Heineken 28), her differences are, firstly, temporary and will be eliminated once she returns to the private sphere and, secondly, do not disrupt the heteronormative gaze. Cristina Lucia Stasia cogently argues that the female “action hero is not threatening because she is an impossible ideal – super beautiful, super sexy and super hero” and that she “underscores woman-as-spectacle” (178). Her otherness, that which separates her from other women, is her impossibility, that is, she is what no one could ever hope to be, much like the Virgin Mary of Christian ideology.

Indeed, the heroine, as Elyce Rae Helford has noted, is not positioned as a disruptive force, but rather one that is more focused on maintaining the present order or recovering an idealised past. In her analysis of the television program *Zena Warrior Princess*, she notes that the series depicts problems solved “in isolation from the larger culture by an individual hero who proposes individualist solutions that never threaten the patriarchal and classist structure that is plainly evident in every episode” (Helford 294). Although Helford is here commenting on one specific example of heroic woman, her analysis rings true as a general observation as well. Heroines are rarely engaged in a fight to significantly alter the social order, rather they engage in battles against a specific foe who is seen as the cause of distress. Even when living in deeply flawed societies in which it is evident that the social order is oppressive and/or unjust, the heroine does not address systemic problems or issues, but instead focuses her energies on defeating one person or entity, who is seen to embody all that is wrong in the world. To return to Stasia, we find that the female action heroes are women who “spout feminist rhetoric and kick ass, but who neither acknowledge that oppression exists at an institutional level, nor that its forms are diverse” (181). In the comic book series *The Authority*, the protagonist, Jenny Sparks argues: “the traditional teams of superheroes always place the flag back on the top of the White House, right? They always dust off the statues and repair the highways and everything goes back to the way it was before” (Ellis np). Though Sparks’ assertion is gender neutral (she uses ‘heroes’ but her team is quite diverse), the assessment is equally applicable to both male and female action heroes. It is this necessity to return the world to ‘the way it was before,’ not to effect lasting or measurable changes to society that, for

me, both characterise the heroines of contemporary action narratives (and arguably the heroes also), as well as enacting a measure of symbolic violence on them, suggesting that their bodies, their actions, must always, inevitably, be in the service of the existing power structure. As we will see, this is primarily the case for Elizabeth Bennet, Jane Slayre (to be analysed in Chapter 2), and Martha Washington (in Chapter 2), though even for Katniss Everdeen (Chapter 3), whose fight eventually becomes allied with rebels who wish to destroy the existing power structure, little consideration is given to what will 'replace' the old system. Indeed, the action heroine "manifests the girl power mantra 'girls can do anything!' without acknowledging how this action is mitigated by race, class, sexuality and, yes, gender" (Stasia 181). In the present interrogation of the action heroine the goal is to bring to the fore these very questions, and to consider the way in which the race, class, sexuality and gender *are* relevant concerns. More concisely, the question becomes, how do we understand the action heroine when these very questions are taken into consideration?

#### **4. Corpus, Methodology, and Reading Practices: Why These Heroines?**

Having set the groundwork for a discussion of the action heroine as a figure representative of postfeminist discourse, the present work uses the framework of feminist cultural studies as the starting point for the interrogation of the selected texts. Each of the following three chapters will consider how the action heroine as a figure in contemporary dystopic literature is implicated within a postfeminist discourse that presupposes gender equality and substitutes feminist political engagement with violent combat against an enemy.

The subsequent interrogation of these novels is grounded in feminist and gender theory, and close-reading practises at their intersection with cultural studies. While the focus is certainly on literature, the inclusion of the comic book genre opens up interpretation to consider visual modes as well as textual. As much as contemporary feminist theory is concerned with the material reality of women's lived experience, it is necessary to bear in mind that the focus here is on representations of women. This is not to say that literature (or cinema or television or visual arts) do not impact upon the lived experience of women. Quite the opposite. I would assert that the representations of (women's) bodies and

experiences that form part of the cultural landscape have a very profound impact on the way in which (women) constitute and understand their own corporeality. As the documentary *Miss Representation* (Siebel Newsom 2011) makes clear, there is a dearth of positive, multi-faceted images of women in the cultural landscape, which is both a reflection of the same lack in society and is part of what perpetuates this absence. While using the term role-model is perhaps far too cliché and trite a description for the way in which we understand the relationship between readers/viewers and characters, representability is a key concept. Visibility is a double-edged sword, one which can expose bodies to scrutiny or a variety of 'gazes'<sup>16</sup> and that can appropriate the representation at the same time that it fights against invisibility and the elision of difference. As such, it is important to recognise that representations of active women who defend themselves and others, women who operate outside of traditional spheres and that push the boundaries of what is acceptable and desirable for women are of value. However, this does not mean that they should be uncritically heralded as examples of 'positive' representation. As this thesis will demonstrate most of the representations of heroic women, primarily in contemporary dystopic literatures, are problematically white, heteronormative, and adolescent.

The young women discussed must not only be physically and mentally capable, they must also conform to the strict norms for hetero-desirability. Certainly they are strong, responsible and agentic, and yet, as Dawn Heineken points out, they are also implicated in discourses that use "the language of female liberation and female power by stressing choice and strength to promote women's adherence to even more rigid standards of bodily maintenance" (22). Because of her physicality, the action heroine is a logical site for interrogating the ways in which 'strength' and 'bodily maintenance' are naturalised within disciplinary discourses. Given that the heroine is required to be strong and fit in order to fulfill

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<sup>16</sup> Laura Mulvey's interrogation of the male gaze and cinematic pleasure in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975) informs my understanding of the way in which women's bodies, (sexuality, agency, performance) can be appropriated by the (male, heterosexual, white) spectator. This does not mean that women (gender queer, homosexual, racialised) Others cannot engage in their own construction of narrative through spectatorship (and I would argue readership), but that often representations of women and Others' bodies position the spectator/reader in such a way that they must fight against dominant readings in order to generate their own. See "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectatorship" (1992) by bell hooks for an analysis of the way in which resistant readings/gazes can be configured and understood.

her heroic duties, this analysis will open up considerations of how her corporeality is constructed and the ramifications this has on the narrative arc. As we will see, the construction of the heroic female body is tied up with questions of her femininity and its deployment. The task at hand becomes the interrogation of the ways in which 'femininity' is inscribed on these bodies. "Third wave feminist perspectives" as Mimi Schippers and Erin Grayson Sapp (2012) argue, "view femininity not as an outward, bodily expression of subjugation, but instead as a corporeal performance of a discursively produced and contested set of criteria for being a woman within the structural conditions of gender inequality" (30).

While my reading of the heroic female within contemporary dystopic literatures is necessarily critical of the ways in which femininity comes to be used as a means of re-inscribing the potentially disruptive capabilities of the heroine within normative patriarchal modes of representation, it is also worth considering the possibility that "[r]eworking and/or deploying femininity rather than rejecting it is one effective strategy for undermining patriarchy" (Schippers and Grayson Sapp 32). Although the efficacy of this strategy as concerns the heroine remains to be seen, I am working within Joanne Hollows' affirmation that postfeminist representations cannot be discarded out of hand, rather they need to be recognised as potential methods for "how feminism can be made to mean differently for different generations of women" (197). Though she represents only one instantiation of postfeminist representation, the action heroine is an especially fruitful site for interrogation. The following chapters should not be read as an analysis of how the heroine has progressed or changed from one instantiation to another. Rather, the following is more of a case study of three different representations of female heroism, in three different literary genres, though all firmly located within the dystopic. The goal is to interrogate the different ways in which female heroism manifests itself within contemporary literature, and to formulate a coherent theory for the heroine, her body, her violence and her resistance. As only the texts in the final chapter have received critical academic attention, the following analysis is, in some ways, a patchwork attempt to bring together feminist and gender theories, cultural studies and literary analysis. The result, I hope, is the production of a cross-disciplinary analysis of the heroine.



In the first chapter, which focuses on *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009) by Jane Austen and Seth Grahame-Smith and *Jane Slayre* (2010) by Charlotte Brontë and Sherri Browning Erwin, the enemy the heroines must fight are preternatural creatures, vampires, zombies and even a she-werewolf. Recent years have seen the publication of many texts that re-write classic literature to incorporate monstrous creatures, from *Little Vampire Women* (2010) by Louisa May Alcott and Lynn Messina and *Romeo and Juliet and Vampires* (2010) by William Shakespeare and Claudia Gabel, to *Wuthering Bites* (2010) by Sarah Gray<sup>17</sup> and *Sense and Sensibility and Sea Monsters* (2009) by Jane Austen and Ben H. Winters. While this last text will be taken up for further discussion, principally as the politics of eating and consumption are interrogated in the chapter, it is only a corollary to the two texts chosen for analysis. From the plethora of contemporary gothic re-writings available, the criteria for selecting *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* and *Jane Slayre* were clear from the beginning: the heroine must be active and must remain alive at the end of text. Further, texts in which the heroine is a vampire, zombie or other preternatural creature were discarded. Even though they offer a rich and intriguing site for interrogation of the heroine's exceptional nature, the present work is concerned with the way in which the heroic body is an extension of the postfeminist representation of corporeal ideals as an attainable category, something that is complicated when the body represented is clearly not (or not only) human. I draw on Rosi Braidotti's work on the posthuman and understand it as a perspective that "rests on the assumption of the historical decline of Humanism but goes further in exploring alternatives, without sinking into the rhetoric of the crisis of Man. It works instead towards elaborating alternative ways of conceptualizing the human subject" (*Posthuman* 37). Indeed, in pitting the 'posthumans' against the heroine, I hope to draw attention to the way in which the heroic female body reinstates Cartesian ideals that subjugate the material, lived body to the control of the thinking subject. Primarily, the alternative to be explored relies on the construction of the heroic body as whole, controlled, and decidedly *closed*. In contrast, the bodies of the posthuman others she battles

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<sup>17</sup> While the other novels credit the author of the original text, Gray's novel does not credit Charlotte Brontë as an author.

push the limits of the contained body; they leak, they penetrate other bodies, they infect them and are infected by them, and they are *messy*.

The chapter looks at the way in which the zombie, specifically, and the vampire and she-werewolf to a lesser extent, are positioned as foils for the heroine. The zombie is more than just a decomposing body that contrasts with the heroine's highly stylised and in control form. Rather, by tracing the history of what can be recognised as a figure of rebellion and resistance but also capitalist cooptation, a parallel emerges between the fruitless yet interminable attempt to slay the undead and the postfeminist rhetoric that heralds the death of feminism. Reading through Freud, Munford and Waters assert that the contemporary postfeminist "Gothic is invested with a spectral quality; haunted by the 'repressed' spectre of feminism which has been turned away and kept 'at a distance' from the collective consciousness, it returns to popular culture that which postfeminism once appeared to have consigned to the past" (134). The question here becomes how to understand feminism as the spectre, the revenant, as that which is haunting the present and as that which, at least in the 'collective consciousness,' must necessarily be fought against. To this end, we will see how the heroines, Jane Slayre and Elizabeth Bennet, are highly trained fighters, who battle against their respective monsters, and yet, are problematically engaged in slaughtering the very conditions which enable them to become active agents in the public sphere. Just as postfeminism appears to be "gently chiding the feminist past" (McRobbie, *Aftermath* 12) by suggesting that the feminism's more radical goals are undesirable and the more liberal ones already obtained, the heroine's fight against the monstrous Other elides the fact that the very presence of the Other sets the conditions for the heroine's emergence into the sphere of public action.

A common thread running throughout my analysis of all of the heroines is the tension between the public and the private spheres, the way in which they must negotiate the terms of their presence in either, and the way in which the private sphere is problematically situated as both reward and punishment for their presence in the public sphere. While the modes of 'return' shift from heroine to heroine, there can be no doubt that, the postfeminist mystique privileges the return to the domestic sphere as an empowering move for women, despite the many problematics this move raises. Through the differing presentations of how

this 'choice' is enacted, the underlying message is clear: the action heroine occupies a position of agency and action only in so far as this position is tolerated and desired by the patriarchy.

In the next chapter, the comic book genre is taken up with its blend of text and images and the series *The Life and Times of Martha Washington in the Twenty-First Century* (1990-2007) by Frank Miller and Dave Gibbons shifts the focus to the young woman of colour as the heroine. The super-heroine in popular comic book culture may not be as ubiquitous as her male counter-part, but there is certainly an ample array of heroines to consider. Captain Marvel (as of 2012), Batwoman and Batgirl, and the team from *Birds of Prey*, are only a small sample of the potential candidates. However, I was especially interested in examining not only a heroine who headlined her own series, but also one who pushed the limits on the idea of what a heroine could look like and what she could do. To this end, I immediately discarded the 'super' heroines. Just as the heroines in the first chapter needed to be 'human,' so too did the heroine of this chapter.<sup>18</sup> Given the strong relationship between postfeminism and neoliberal discourse, the 'human' heroine was especially interesting as a site of interrogation as the super powered heroine is one-step farther from a 'realistic' model of femininity, and I am interested in the way in which the heroine becomes a model of what is both exceptional and possible. Further, as images of the 'sexy' heroine abound in popular culture,<sup>19</sup> I was interested in analysing a character who defied the stereotype of the buxom vixen who can also fight. Adding to these is the need to find a heroine who is the headliner of her own series, not somebody's sidekick.<sup>20</sup> Martha Washington was an ideal choice, as a young, Black, economically disadvantaged woman of colour who joins her failing country's military in order to survive; Washington is a play on the

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<sup>18</sup> Admittedly, there is one 'super' heroine that I reluctantly had to eliminate from the corpus. Kamala Kahn, or Ms Marvel as of March 2014, is the first young woman of colour (Pakistani-American of a Muslim family) to headline her own series. Unfortunately, at the time of deciding on the corpus, the number of issues published was not sufficient to comprise a corpus large enough for analysis.

<sup>19</sup> Wonder Woman, Batwoman, and almost every super heroine and quite a number of female villains in comic books, Lara Croft (West 2001), The Bride (played by Uma Thurman) in the *Kill Bill* film franchise (Tarantino 2003 and 2004), and Barbarella are just a few examples.

<sup>20</sup> The Invisible Woman, Silk Spectre and Super Girl are just three examples, though the earliest representations of young women in comic books, as will be discussed in Chapter 3 of this thesis, used woman as foils for the primary figure, and so 'the sidekick' abounds.

way in which the female Black body is represented in contemporary popular culture.

As with the heroines in the previous chapter, questions of who the enemy is are of primary interest for understanding the position and construction of the heroine, especially as concerns the representation of her violence. While Martha Washington faces a variety of enemies, the focus is on her nemesis during the latter part of the series. This monstrous Other is a different manifestation of the *posthuman*. If zombies, vampires and she were-wolves can be understood as an alteration in the human body, Washington's enemy is a technological kind of posthuman. Venus, the computer program that develops the capacity for independent thought and action and who threatens the autonomy of Earth's inhabitants, is positioned as ideologically opposed to Washington. As the heroine tries to save the world from domination the dystopic function comes to the fore, asking the question: what comes after the apocalypse? As the comic book tries to answer this question, it becomes apparent that Martha Washington, as well as Jane Slayre, Elizabeth Bennet and Katniss Everdeen, are engaged in a battle to reinstate the pre-apocalyptic regime. The potential for change represented by the "future girl," who has access to "power, opportunities and success" (Munford and Waters 107), is truncated as she works to reproduce existing power structures and systems. The postfeminist project is clearly represented in this figure who struggles for cosmetic and superficial alterations in lieu of profound, systemic modifications.

In the final chapter, Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* trilogy falls under scrutiny, with *The Hunger Games* (2008) as the primary focus but *Catching Fire* (2009), and *Mockingjay* (2010) also being considered. The heroine of the trilogy, Katniss Everdeen, becomes a site for possible resistance to postfeminist discourse and opens up the potential for alternative forms of action heroines. Though young adult dystopic fiction, especially that which features an adolescent heroine, is experiencing a veritable boom in contemporary culture, and thereby offering a wider selection of texts, Katniss Everdeen was a relatively clear choice. Collins' texts are engaged in a discourse of criticism toward a society whose concern for the image and the spectacle is increasingly potent. Although the possibility of using the films rather than the books (and thereby offering a different media for each

chapter) as the site of analysis was considered, there were two concerns that determined the choice of the novels over the films. Firstly, and most mundanely, at the time of writing, the third of four films was only just opening in theatres. Given that it is in the final book that the revolutionary arc of the storyline begins to mature, it would be impossible to analyse only the filmic material and still concentrate on the potential for rebellion in Katniss Everdeen. Secondly, and equally important though perhaps more of a personal concern than a methodological one, given that the books themselves are so highly critical of contemporary celebrity culture, the culture of the superficial image, the spectacle, and material culture, it seems somewhat problematic (and ironic) to concentrate my analysis on a film which, unabashedly, participates in the very cultural phenomena called-out by the texts.<sup>21</sup>

Again, posing questions about the enemies the protagonists face is important in the consideration of the heroine, though here of equal or perhaps greater import is the way in which the heroine is positioned to resist this enemy. As with the other heroines seen so far, the re-inscription of the violent body functions as a means of limiting the potential for change represented by the heroic female body. Collins' novels, however, push the limits of this form of re-inscription, attempting to deconstruct the idea of the solitary, exceptional heroine and replace her with a heroine who works to disrupt normative discourse and manipulate them for her own means. Through fomenting new constellations of affective communities and the rejection of the simplistic hetero-normative romance plot, Katniss Everdeen comes to offer the possibility of a heroine with definitively third wave feminist leanings. It is possible to see how she opens up gaps in the prevailing postfeminist discourse, and sets up the conditions for potential and possibility for alternatives to emerge.

The motivation for this selection of texts was threefold. Firstly, as postfeminism is a discourse that works primarily within the realm of popular

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<sup>21</sup> Indeed, the extent to which Jennifer Lawrence and other actors of both genders in the films became cultural icons is rather ironic given the strong messages of the text. Sadly, this is perhaps an indication of the fact that this critical aspect of the novels was either ignored, misunderstood, or simply less interesting to contemporary audiences than other aspects of the trilogy. Perhaps too it is an indication of the way in which capitalist, consumer culture encourages the representation of certain forms of rebellion so that it can co-opt and convert these into culturally marketable items. This idea will be taken up further in Chapter 3 dedicated to *The Hunger Games* trilogy.

culture, it was imperative to choose texts that were examples of popular fiction, though the level of success they achieved in the literary market varies. Secondly, in order to interrogate a wider variety of heroines, it was necessary to select texts from different genres. To this end, re-writings of classic neo-feminist texts, the comic book genre and young adult dystopian speculative fiction respectively were selected as the sites for investigation. Each chapter opens with discussion of how and why each genre impacts the way in which the heroine is constructed. Third and finally, texts were selected that offered heroines who all use violence to achieve their aims, but for whom violence is differently mobilised; it can be a pleasure, merely part of the job description or a problematic means to an end. Bound up within the discourse of violence is the question of who is at the receiving end of these actions. As such, the enemy against whom the heroines are fighting, as well as the end goal of the action, is equally varied in each text. Each chapter will consider the way in which the texts fit into larger concerns surrounding the postfeminist Gothic and the resurgence of the zombie, the comic book and the super-heroine, and (feminist) uses of dystopia and speculative fiction, respectively.

I have adhered to the norms and guidelines for referencing as set out in the 7th edition of the MLA except for in two cases. When internally citing the texts from the corpus I have made a slight modification so as to facilitate the identification of the works being discussed. So as not to confuse the re-written texts discussed in Chapter 1 with their original works, rather than citing by author (so as to avoid lengthy parenthetical references with two authors being mentioned) I have opted to indicate the novel being discussed through the use of a fragment of the title. This will be clarified as the novels themselves are introduced. In the discussion of Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* trilogy, I have opted for abbreviations of the titles (again, clarification is given at the moment of introduction of each text) so as to avoid long, repetitive parenthetical references.

Though this thesis is, in no way, a comprehensive analysis of the myriad heroines currently peopling the contemporary cultural landscape, it does aim to offer a conceptual framework for interrogating this ubiquitous figure. Further, the relationship the heroine maintains with postfeminist discourse and representation will be probed, as will the possibilities of imagining alternative heroines, alternative representations of women's heroism and bodily representation.



## **Chapter 1.**

# **Spectres of Feminism: Postfeminism and the Zombie Apocalypse**





## 1.1 Posthuman Monsters: Understanding the Other

“Better decapitation, an honest separation of body and head,  
than being one of the living dead” (Massé 708)

The female action-adventure hero is a seductive character. She is strong, quick-witted, and heteronormatively attractive. Her ability to fight, to defend herself and others, and to do so all while continuing to be heterosexually (and potentially, though unintentionally, homosexually) desirable is what makes her such an enduring figure. As this chapter will show, when pitted against the undead others who populate the landscape of the novels *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009) by Jane Austen and Seth Grahame-Smith, *Jane Slayre* (2010) by Charlotte Brontë and Sherri Browning Erwin and to a lesser extent *Sense and Sensibility and Sea Monsters* (2009)<sup>1</sup> by Jane Austen and Ben H. Winters,<sup>2</sup> the heroine’s fight is not only against the enemy hordes, but also, and problematically, against the threat to the patriarchal system. Perversely, despite, or perhaps because of, her potential to contest rigid gender norms, the heroine can often be read as implicated in reinforcing said rigid genders.

This section discusses the tropes of the zombi/e, the vampire, the werewolf and other posthuman monsters and looks at how their bodies and those of the heroines can be read when they come into confrontation with each other. Histories of the posthuman, theories of their potential as metaphor and what they represent have been widely discussed in a variety of both scholarly and non-scholarly writings. Perhaps of the most seminal for feminist theory and literature are Katherine Hayles’ readings of the posthuman (1999) as the interface between *Homo sapiens sapiens* and cybernetic technology (whether real or imagined) resulting in a new species, and Donna Haraway’s cyborg (1985, 1997) which looks at the way in which new alliances and corporealities create a human-technology interaction that alters our understanding of what it means to be human as well as what it means to be gendered. More recently Rosi Braidotti’s pedagogical *The Posthuman* (2013) has synthesized the main arguments around this concept.

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<sup>1</sup> The texts will be referred to as *Pride*, *Slayre*, and *Sense* when used for in-text citations.

<sup>2</sup> As ‘re-writings’ of the original novels, the texts are all co-authored. For convenience sake, the citation and references in the text will use the second author, the ‘re-writer’ as the referent.

General theories of posthumanism rely on the mind-body duality of Humanist thought as a way of interrogating our relationships to ourselves, our bodies and the technologies which surround us. For my purposes, I apply here the term posthuman in Braidotti's concept of these beings as destabilising the androcentric Enlightenment and Humanist understanding of human bodies. Through a metamorphosis quite often involving the transfer of bodily fluids, the posthumans interrogated here – the undead, the vampires, zombies, and werewolves of myth, legend and contemporary mass-media – force the confrontation between the boundaries of self and other. While subsequent chapters will delve further into what Hayles, Haraway and Braidotti, among others, have theorised, the present chapter is concerned principally with the revenant posthuman. As figures that offer alternatives corporealities and ways of being in the world, the heroine's opposition to this figure often allies her with the patriarchal system itself, as we shall see further on. Furthermore, I am interested in considering their meaning when they are pitted against the as-yet-alive, or rather, the not-yet-undead. This category as posthuman quite often results in the battle that the heroines undertake in the hopes of protecting and maintaining their corporeal integrity and rejecting alternative embodiments.

These posthuman beings are enjoying a resurgence in rewritings of classic literature in the twenty-first century. These texts are reappearing, this time haunted by monstrous creatures of all sorts. While there is a long tradition of women being haunted by other-worldly and posthuman creatures in literature, both oral and written, especially in the Gothic, the focus here is on texts that did not include manifestations of monsters, for example *Jane Eyre* or *Pride and Prejudice*, but for whom the protagonists are obligated to fight for their position in society and their right to exercise a modicum of control over their lives.

Of special interest here are the rewritten texts whose originals feature singular, proto-feminist heroines. Of the most popular are Seth Grahame-Smith's *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009), Sherri Browning Erwin's *Jane Slayre* (2010), Ben H. Winters' *Sense and Sensibility and Sea Monsters* (2009), Lynn

Messina's *Little Vampire Women* (2010) and Sarah Gray's *Wuthering Bites* (2010).<sup>3</sup> In their original manifestations, these texts were not populated with zombies, vampires, sea monsters or werewolves; arguably, however, the protagonists were required to do battle, either against social conventions, those who would attack their honour, or even against their own feelings. With the introduction of monsters that must be physically confronted, the metaphorical or psychological battles facing the heroines become all too corporeal.

The focus in here is on Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, the Dashwood sisters in *Sense and Sensibility and Sea Monsters* and the eponymous *Jane Slayre* as epitomes of the heroines who fight the posthuman menace (that is, feminism embodied in the posthuman figure). Under close scrutiny will be the heroines themselves as well as the creatures they must combat and the way in which they are forced to negotiate a dangerous landscape and reach domestic felicity by the end of the novel.

The Bennet sisters, in *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* are all trained in the arts of slaying zombies. While not a requirement for all the ladies of their day, it is a valuable skill to possess as all of England (and it can be assumed the world, though this is never made explicit) has been over-run by the "sorry stricken" (*Pride* 24). The novel retains much of the romance and domestic drama of the original, however now much of their daily activity involves intense training and maintenance of their physical abilities. While Mr. Bennet would rather see his daughters spend their time exercising their martial arts, Mrs. Bennet, not surprisingly, would prefer to have them engage in the marital ones (Grahame-Smith 8). The zombie threat helps explain the presence of the soldiers encamped at Meryton, as well as offering further possibility for the social stratification that already plagues the Bennet family. The romantic alliances (and failures) and family loyalties remain as they are in Jane Austen's text, and the principle personality traits of each of the characters also remain intact. Indeed, the text itself is listed as co-authored as the original serves as the basis over which Grahame-Smith overlays the zombie narrative, altering for coherence rather than for content.

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<sup>3</sup> Between 2009 and 2011, a plethora of these 'mash-ups' were published, though not all concerned heroines/revenants.

Jane and Elizabeth Bennet are highly skilled zombie killers, trained in China (along with their sisters and father), and their excellence in this field is added to their more mundane attributes in the social field. Their younger sisters, however, are also excellent zombie fighters though they lack the discipline of the other two. This is a mirror of their social graces which, though certainly adequate for attracting the attentions of the less discerning soldiers are less than acceptable in the spheres in which the sisters need attract a mate if they are to compensate for the lack of financial attraction they can offer.

Curiously, though Mr. Darcy is an excellent and renowned zombie killer, as is his aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, Mr. Bingley, Jane's beau, has never learned to fight, nor have his sisters or many of the other 'ladies' in the novel. The seamliness of being a female zombie fighter is brought into debate, with the suggestion that it is suitable only for the very wealthy, who can afford to take it on as a hobby. The Bennet sisters, who are of a less stable economic class, may be respected as zombie fighters, but this does not automatically confer on them other types of respect. Despite their prodigious abilities, they are still expected to do their utmost to obtain the most valuable thing of all – a rich husband.

In *Jane Slayre*, Sherri Browning Erwin rewrites Charlotte Brontë's classic in much the same way the Grahame-Smith alters *Pride and Prejudice* by converting the eponymous Jane into a zombie/vampire/werewolf slaying heroine. As a slayer, Jane has a (super) natural ability to defend herself and others against the posthuman monsters that populate the text. She can sense when one of the undead is near, has a knack for designing and using the tools of the slaying trade, and experiences a rush of pleasure and pride bordering on the sexual when she successfully eliminates one of the many menaces running through the English landscape.

Just as the Bennet sisters must attend to both their training and their social engagements, so too must Jane Slayre learn to navigate the tricky world of being a slayer (a family legacy, as her name would suggest) and fulfill the dictates of her own desires for home, family, and love. It is, in both texts, the relationship between domestic happiness and the role as fighter of the undead which creates tension and must be resolved.

*Jane Slayre* builds on the original premise of the novel, as a young girl tries to avoid the pitfalls of being an orphan and having to make her own way in the world, while maintaining her honour. To further complicate things, however, in this re-writing Jane navigates a world in which she must defend herself against vampires, zombies and even werewolves in order to save herself and those she loves. While the Reed family is now converted into a nest of vampires, Lowood Charity School is now a breeding ground for zombified servants and Bertha Mason is, in addition to her lamentable state as imprisoned, mad wife of Rochester, a werewolf. Jane learns to fight off these creatures, with the help of her now vampire-slaying cousin St. John Rivers. In the end, Jane must choose between vampire slaying with St. John and returning to Rochester, who has been converted to a werewolf by the end of the novel, and attempting to save him.

*Sense and Sensibility and Sea Monsters* by Ben Winters is, much like *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, a re-writing of the Austen classic which has the Dashwood sisters trying not only to find love and happiness despite their small dowries but also trying to defend themselves, their new home, and their loved-ones against the continuing menace of the sea creatures. Water, and every animal that lives in it, has now become threatening to human life. The novel even goes so far as to posit the possibility that the sea creatures are capable of thinking and planning their attacks on humans, not just reacting in a predator-prey relationship. Added to the evident threat posed by sharks, fish and other marine life, sea witches, mermaids and mermen and the mysterious Leviathan all combine to cast doubt on whether or not the Dashwoods will even survive long enough to find their true love. Fortunately, their mother and friends have fostered in the sisters the ability to defend themselves. While they are not the overt monster-slaying heroines of the other two novels, they are actively engaged in the fight against what threatens their world, and they are also responsible for their own safety.

It would seem, from these re-writings, that defending one's honour and guarding one's principles are no longer enough for the heroine to be seen as an independent, strong female. Now they are physically aggressive postfeminist warriors who readily wield their weapons in a fight against the monsters that plague their country. These texts seek to appeal to contemporary readers – or to

further capitalise on the steady sales figures of these classic novels<sup>4</sup> – by pitting the heroines against the undead hordes, and portraying their proto-feminist independence as postfeminist violence. The result is two-fold. On the one hand, in order to ensure a ‘fair fight,’ our heroines become the recipients of specialized and much more violent educations, sometimes extending to training sessions in Asia. Reading, writing, painting and languages all stay on the curriculum, but added to them are sword-fighting techniques, hand-to-hand combat, and in some cases the elaboration of specialised weaponry or elixirs.<sup>5</sup> Their training becomes more holistic, as they are not merely exercising their bodies, but must learn the techniques of warrior culture in addition to fostering an Orientalist view of the East.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, the need to fight and engage in violence becomes naturalised, something to be expected, almost desired.

To call them super heroines would suggest that they have powers beyond those that can be cultivated by the average woman, however, unsettlingly, their only ‘super’ power is their ability to balance extensive training hours with all the other requirements society places on them. They become super women, indeed, as they are hyper-educated, multitasking, physically fit, and mistresses of social graces. The fact that they have attained these levels of prowess and that there is nothing magical or supernatural about them suggests that everything they have achieved is a direct result of their dedication, perseverance and self-discipline.<sup>7</sup> What makes this problematic is the assumption that those women who do not follow the same regimen, or subject themselves to these same levels of self-discipline and scrutiny are somehow failures as women. While these female heroes are certainly exceptions in their social sphere, there is also the sense that they have achieved what every woman would be capable of, if she were to choose to do so. What comes across as remarkable is not their level of achievement – as this is

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<sup>4</sup> In an interview for *Time* magazine, author Seth Grahame-Smith (2009) suggests that the idea really was to capitalise on the enduring attraction of the zombie as monster and one of the classics of public domain literature.

<sup>5</sup> Similar training regimes are also seen in the popular heroines Lara Croft of *Tomb Raider* (West 2001) and The Bride in *Kill Bill* (Tarantino 2003, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> The Bennets’ training in Asia especially highlights this approach, as the young women work hard to uphold the “warrior code” (*Pride* 13) their ninja master imparted to them.

<sup>7</sup> Arguably this level of training is not specific to the heroine, and her male contemporaries, as is the case for both Mr. Darcy and St. John Rivers (in *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* and *Jane Slayre* respectively) are both equally disciplined and well trained. However, the postfeminist ideology this represents is enacted differently on the cis-male and cis-female body.

presented as being within every woman's reach – but the fact that they should decide to dedicate themselves to this life. This sets up a series of expectations for women which disqualifies the general achievements of work and family, among others, as unexceptional, and simultaneously excelling in all aspects of life as normal.

The 'superwoman syndrome'<sup>8</sup> so pernicious to contemporary women is here played on to an almost literal degree as they reflect the hyper-educated, multi-tasking, mother/wife/daughter/homemaker/professional women are expected to aspire to be. This is part of the postfeminist ideology that, through neo-liberal discourse, situates the individual as responsible for her own empowerment, that is, for her own economic, social, and sexual achievements. This position undeniably negates the very real, material circumstances that make 'empowerment' beyond the reach of most women. The heroines in these novels, thus, open up a space that on the one hand suggests that achieving the 'superwoman' ideal is a matter of will and perseverance, while on the other exemplifying the very exceptional nature of what they have achieved.

Perhaps more disturbing because of its subtlety, is the naturalisation of the posthuman situation and the necessarily antagonistic relationship between the heroines and the 'monsters.' This suggests that the need to kill as many posthumans as possible, the very nature of the posthuman as necessarily opposed to the other humans, is taken as a *fait-accomplis*. There is, in the novels considered in this chapter and in many other human-monster manifestations in contemporary culture, for example in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Whedon 1997-2003) and the *Resident Evil* (Anderson 2002, 2004) franchises, no reflection on who or what is being killed off so efficiently by the katana swords of the warriors,<sup>9</sup> nor do they

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<sup>8</sup> See Catherine Rottenberg "Happiness and the Liberal Imagination: How Superwoman Became Balanced" for a discussion of the way in which the 'Superwoman' trope continues to be used in contemporary discourse.

<sup>9</sup> I would be tempted to use the word *guérillères* to talk about women who do battle in these texts however the term would connect these heroines to Monique Wittig's renowned 1969 novel *Les Guérillères* with whom they share very little ideologically. I mention Wittig here because her text offers a sharp contrast to the heroines discussed here. While Wittig's warriors attempt to reconstruct the post-patriarchy along matriarchal terms, the women heroes analysed here do more to reaffirm the patriarchal order than they do to disrupt it, especially given the fact that they live in societies that are under attack and susceptible to change and reinvention. While Wittig's text is concerned mostly with the moment of apocalypse and the post-apocalyptic aftermath, the zombies, werewolves, vampires and the like are, at least in these texts, being fended off, and the concern the



question the 'rightness' of their actions or wonder about whose greater good they are serving.<sup>10</sup> It is the double negation in these texts that concerns me; the naturalised violence of the heroines, the negation that there is something excessive in their violence, and the ease with which a permanent state of 'warfare' is rendered 'normal,' are disturbing because they set up a state of exception that can be revoked whenever it is no longer necessary. It also suggests that what the heroines are defending is a state in which their position as heroines can be altered or taken from them when their services are no longer necessary. Indeed, what they are fighting for is effectively a return to the pre-menace era, in which their skills would not have been needed or even cultivated. My worry stems from the post WWII era in which women in the West were forced back into more traditional pre-war roles after having been an integral part of the workforce as part of the war effort. The result is that the heroines are paradoxically fighting to eliminate the menace that enabled them to become heroines in the first place.

### 1.1.2 The Postfeminist Revenant

Through the introduction of the zombie, the vampire and/or other monsters, the novels analysed here can be situated within what Benjamin Brabon and Stéphanie Genz identify as the Postfeminist Gothic mode. Despite their contention that the genre becomes "a site for the construction of meaning, a contentious location that cannot be fixed or contained as it is 'in process,' exploring more than defining" (Brabon and Genz 1), their work makes clear that the intersection of the Gothic with a postfeminist sensibility is not accidental, rather it brings together two discourses that are uncomfortable with and wary of strong women.

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heroines evince is more to defend the social structure that existed previous to this attack, to deny the apocalyptic possibility being offered by the posthuman attack. In the third section, when speaking about *The Hunger Games* and the heroine of the apocalypse, the difference between the heroine who attempts to preserve the patriarchy and repel the apocalypse and the one who looks to navigate the apocalyptic moment and her position within it will become clearer.

<sup>10</sup> One famous exception, of course, is Richard Matheson's 1954 novel (and later film adaptations) *I Am Legend*, in which the story is predicated on the eventual need to question who, exactly, are the monsters, what it means to be human and who has the right to kill whom. There are, of course, multiple examples of films, television series, and novels concerned with the love story between a posthuman and a human. I refer here to those that do not treat the posthuman as love object, but rather as opponent.

It is “the Female Gothic,” they argue, that is “the mode par excellence that female writers have employed to give voice to women’s deep-rooted fears about their own powerlessness and imprisonment within patriarchy” (Brabon and Genz 5). In “Somebody’s Trying to Kill Me and I Think It’s My Husband: The Modern Gothic” (1983), Joanna Russ proposes

that the modern Gothics are a direct expression of the traditional feminine situation (at least a middle-class feminine situation) and that they provide precisely that kind of escape reading a middle-class believer in the feminine mystique needs, without involving elements that either go beyond the feminine mystique or would be considered immoral in its terms. (671)

Russ gestures toward a critical question for the analysis at hand, namely, in what way does the Female Gothic give way to the Postfeminist Gothic via the resurrection of the feminine mystique? Specifically, how does the Postfeminist Gothic, with its revenant battling heroines, re-inscribe a middle-class, conservative ethics and aesthetics?

Rebecca Munford and Melanie Waters suggest that the real revenant is not necessarily the undead monsters of the texts, but rather that it is feminism itself. Their assertion is tied in with their reading of postfeminist texts as engaged in a recovery of traditional modes of femininity: “The re-enchantment and re-mystification of precisely those models of femininity that were investigated and debunked by second wave feminists suggests that popular culture is now haunted by a ‘postfeminist mystique’” (Munford and Waters 10). As feminism becomes figured as the revenant, “the postfeminist mystique ‘ghosts’ images and styles of femininity (and feminism) that belong to the past as a means of exposing what is missing from the present – and more speculatively – from the future” (12). Nowhere is this more visible than in these re-writings, where the ‘images and styles’ of a past femininity are preserved and rearticulated within a postfeminist aesthetic. By building on the original novels that presented, in both Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* and Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, heroines whose exceptionality is part of their appeal and yet who conform to a conservative patriarchal discourse in the contemporary moment, the ‘femininity’ they embody in the re-written texts ‘exposes’ the extent to which postfeminist discourse is merely a repackaging of traditional modes. Indeed, the femininity displayed by

Elizabeth Bennet and Jane Slayre is further enhanced by its comparison to the monsters they battle: the zombies for Bennet and the vampires, zombies and especially Bertha Mason the woman werewolf for Slayre. As we will see, the metaphorical significance of these monsters is key to understanding the way in which the heroine is constructed in these novels. Before turning to that, however, the question of postfeminist femininity at the intersection of the Gothic remains.

Elizabeth Bennet, Jane Slayre, even the Dashwood sisters all boast what can be termed 'a killer body.' This play on words is apt as they are simultaneously "tough and independent, sexy and stylish, the physical prowess of the late-twentieth-century supergirl is mobilized rather than hindered by the trappings of femininity" (Munford and Waters 112). We may read the 'killer body' as the body that can both literally slay through violence (as the heroines fight the undead Other) and also in the more colloquial sense, as a body that is heteronormatively attractive, and 'kills' the viewer with its desirability. Indeed, these bodies come to signify the tension within postfeminist discourse that asserts that the heroine's willingness to sacrifice her search for a husband in favour of her 'career' will undoubtedly result in attaining the type of physicality most likely to garner heterosexual attention and, ultimately, a husband.

The inclusion of the walking undead is not the only aspect of these adaptations that unites them to the Gothic plot, indeed they also contain "examples of the Gothic mode that encode women's fears about entrapment within the home and the body" (Munford and Waters 137). And yet, they seem to turn this fear of entrapment on its head. What the postfeminist heroine appears to fear is not 'entrapment within the home' but rather exclusion from it. She is not the "unprotected young female in an isolated setting [who] uncovers a sinister secret" (Massé 679). Instead, she can protect herself, and the 'sinister secret,' in the form of the monstrous Other, is often an open secret – that is, everyone knows they exist, even though it may be impolite to talk about them.<sup>11</sup> The aversion to acknowledge the presence of the monstrous Other can be read in more than one way. On the one hand, it is the conscious denial of the existence of Otherness, and of the threat this can pose to the self. On the other hand, it is bound up with

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<sup>11</sup> All of the texts discussed here frequently employ euphemisms to refer to the monsters that plague them: the 'sorry stricken' or 'unmentionables' being the most common appellatives.

questions of propriety, in much the same way that bodies and bodily functions (and certainly within Austen and Brontë's texts and their re-writings sexuality) are ignored so as to preserve the idea of bodily integrity and control over corporeality.

As much as the presence of zombies, vampires, etc. is an integral part of the plot, it is worth pointing out that Bertha Mason, in *Jane Slayre* continues to be the 'dark Other' hidden in the attic. Imelda Whelehan has argued that in postfeminist Gothic texts feminism becomes the madwoman in the attic, "the illegitimate other of femininity" (Whelehan xiii). In seeking to destroy Rochester's first wife, Jane Slayre can thus be read as attempting to reassert her traditional femininity: she cannot marry Rochester until Bertha Mason dies, and as long as she is estranged from him, Slayre must continue to work, earn her own keep, and engage in slaying activities. That she should give up these pursuits upon marrying him is testament to the fact that with Bertha Mason's death, Second Wave feminism is symbolically slain. Though the lycanthropy lives on in Rochester, Jane Slayre manages to 'cure' him of it and Slayre is free to take on the traditional role of wife and eventually mother.

"The originating trauma is the prohibition of female autonomy in the Gothic, in the families that people it, and in the society that reads it" (Massé 681), and for these contemporary adaptations this is even more pernicious. By disguising 'the prohibition of female autonomy' behind the mask of postfeminist 'equality,' the postfeminist Gothic re-inscribes the fear of entrapment and the Other. This fear is now figured as being unable to return to the domestic sphere, of falling victim to the monster who is now the spectre of feminism-as-corpse dragging itself through the postfeminist landscape. This monstrous Other must be killed so that the heroine does not become infected and can be freed to return to her home and traditional femininity.

### 1.1.3 Raising the Dead

As many accounts of the various histories of the monstrous posthuman already exist, my aim here is less to provide a complete history of the undead than it is to consider the trope of the monster and how it is used in contrast to the various heroines against whom they must do battle. Invariably, the fight between the monster and the heroine forces questions about what it means to be human and

the negotiation between Self-Other or Us-Them. This section looks primarily at the zombie, as a common trope in several of the texts being considered and perhaps the most ubiquitous of the posthuman monsters in 21<sup>st</sup> century popular culture, but will turn to consider how the vampire, sea monster and werewolf are also constructed and used as foils in the novels. To begin, while not giving an entire history of the zombie I will give a short reading of them because it will be necessary to refer to the mythologies constructing the posthumans in order to understand their positions in the novels. As a result, it may be propitious to first offer a brief outline of where the zombie comes from, what it represents and where it is going.

In their article “Some Kind of Virus: The Zombie as Body and as Trope,” Jen Webb and Sam Byrnard suggest that, although zombies are “a fantasy, we know enormous amounts about them (85).” What they are pointing to, when they say this, is not only the idea that the zombie has a well-documented ontology, whether you take as the point of departure their appearance, as zombi, in Haitian mythology, further back to their gestation in African mythology and belief systems, or in alternative, more contemporary forms like George Romero’s cinematographic re-creation.<sup>12</sup>

The mediatic manifestations of zombies are the direct descendents of Romero’s 1968 film *Night of the Living Dead*; a lumbering, slightly decomposing, autonomous consumer of human flesh and brains that threatens to invade our bodily integrity through its bite and our psychological integrity by converting us into drones as mindless as itself. Byrnard and Webb very clearly recognise the way in which the zombie has become such a prevalent part of contemporary culture that most people in the West have access to a wide array of knowledge about these monsters – lending themselves to a wide variety of uses in the media – such that its representations are multiple and burdened with the task of embodying a wide variety of tropes, from the contagious body to the overt consumption of capitalism to the mindless repetition of daily life. The direct correlation between zombies and

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<sup>12</sup> Romero is often credited as ‘inventing’ the contemporary zombie with the first in his series of zombie films *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). However, as will be discussed, the zombie did not spontaneously arise from Romero’s films. Rather, it had a long, complicated, and important role in both African and Haitian cultures, prior to being co-opted as a capitalist media icon.

consumer culture is made evident in Romero's second zombie film, *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), in which much of the action takes place in a suburban shopping mall. The zombies in this film 'return' to the places they knew in life, and one of the predominant images is of the mindless wandering around, amongst all the now useless consumer items, in which the zombie is engaged, just as in life. The suggestion is that the compulsion to go to the mall was as pointless in life as in death.

For a being that is rather limited, both in its capacities and in its physical manifestations, the zombie has proven to be very fertile ground for the sowing of metaphor and for cultural appropriation. The zombie has been put to work in contemporary Western culture. Loyal to its Haitian origins, the contemporary zombie works tirelessly, though now it is in the name of a variety of causes. From 'Zombie Walks' (whether for promotional or purely recreational purposes), to advertising campaigns like that of FNAC and its "Día del Orgullo Zombi," February 2011 ('Zombie Pride Day,' would be the loose translation, and the parallel drawn between 'Zombie pride' and Gay pride is disquieting, to say the least), and even the American Centre for Disease Control used the trope of the zombie as a way of informing citizens about the necessary precautions to be taken in case of emergency (zombie apocalypse or more 'mundane' issues be they weather related or disease related).

It is this adaptability, or rather the monotonous continuity of this monster that lends itself so easily to becoming a *tabula rasa* upon which we can write our own interpretations and meanings and inscribe our own fears which particularly facilitates its use as a metaphor for social anxiety. The reader (or audience) can see "the life-in-death of the zombie [as] a nearly perfect allegory for the inner logic of capitalism, whether this be taken in the sense of the exploitation of living labour, the deathlike regimentation of factories and other social spaces, or the artificial, externally driven stimulation of consumers" (Moreman 269); the multiplicity of manifestations is rampant. The ceaseless need for the zombie to consume human flesh is frightening due in part to the needlessness of the consumption. Eating without real hunger or necessity, these posthumans do not consume to survive. Theirs is the wasteful excess of a desire so primal it is portrayed as needful. And yet, as A. Loudermilk argues, this indiscriminate consumption negates the signifier

of the consumer product, it “makes null the capitalist structure” (85) because the consumed object is invested with no meaning. It does not alter in any way (physically, psychologically, or conceptually) the one who consumes it. Nor does it even seem to offer even an illusory and fleeting sense of satisfaction, and in the same way, it is not sought out or constructed as an inherently desirable object in itself. The flesh upon which the contemporary zombie feeds is as devoid of individuality, as much an indistinguishable part of the faceless multitude, as the zombie itself. While the zombie may crave brains over and above any other body part, they are not discerning in terms of ‘whose’ brains, and will be equally (un)satisfied with any other organ or flesh. Whether or not they happen to achieve the goal of consuming a brain, they will continue to seek out more.

However, much as the zombie is often taken as the metaphor for consumers or producers (or both) in the late-capitalist model, it has other, varied, interpretations due to its double myth of origin.<sup>13</sup> Previous to Romero’s film, zombies had a different form, a different *raison d’être*. They were an integral part of the Haitian Voodoo culture, in which “[t]he resurrected individual is deprived of will, memory, and consciousness, speaks with a nasal voice, and is recognized chiefly by dull, glazed eyes and an absent air” (Ackerman and Gauthier 474). Of specific note in the Haitian zombi form is that it is a body controlled by someone else, usually the person who created it.<sup>14</sup> This type of zombi is perhaps less populous in contemporary media, but continues to haunt it, in books and cinema, and certainly in conversations about the autonomy of the body *vis-à-vis* corporeality and the mind, and, most relevant to the purpose of this dissertation, the master-slave dialectic.

The Haitian zombi as source material for the contemporary zombie is problematic for the way in which the meaning is co-opted and converted into something similar in kind and yet perverted in meaning. As Hans Ackerman and Jeanine Gauthier have noted, the Haitian zombi is a colonial import, brought

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<sup>13</sup> See, for instance, Christopher M. Moreman, “Dharma of the Living Dead: A Meditation on the Meaning of the Hollywood Zombie;” A. Loudermilk, “Eating ‘Dawn’ in the Dark Zombie Desire and Commodified Identity in George A. Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead*;” Keith Frankish, “The Anti Zombie Argument.” Each one analyses from various perspectives on the ways in which the zombie can be interpreted and deployed as a metaphor for and criticism of late capitalist society.

<sup>14</sup> As is customary, I use the spelling ‘zombi’ to denote the Haitian figure, and ‘zombie’ to denote the capitalist re-invention.

aboard the slave ships to the West Indies (467). The link they draw between the Haitian zombi, the West Indian 'duppy,' and the 'soucliant' of the French Antilles suggests that the trope of a body without a soul was (and is) a powerful representation of the relationship between the body and soul, and its submission to or rebellion against the slave owner (484). The efforts of Hans Ackerman and Jeanine Gauthier to link the various Caribbean zombis to each other would appear to be an attempt to legitimise the zombi as part of a belief system with a long, and geographically disperse history. They further attempt to find some 'rational' explanation for this recurring figure. The authors suggest that "many characteristics of the flesh-and-blood zombi can be explained by mental disorders, notably amnesia and catatonic schizophrenia" (475) of the slaves. This attempt to 'legitimise' the zombi by linking it with mental disorders can, in many ways, be considered as the attempt of the knowledge producing West to read the body of the Other, and impose on it knowable parameters and conditions.

Resurrected by someone, usually for the purpose of exacting slave labour from the reanimated corpse, the zombi is so completely a slave to its master that the possibility of rebellion is rendered null. By depriving the body of its soul, the will and the ability to act independently are eliminated. When the slaves are forced to cross the Atlantic, the zombi mode is reproduced, in the dark holds of the slaving ships. They are, in this sense, conceptually converted to a semi-state of zombification by the colonial, early capitalist importers. It "only symbolically defies mortality, and woefully at that" as it remains trapped within the body of a corpse (Lauro and Embry 97). The zombi can also be considered the very nightmare of the slave, condemned to toil indefinitely, even after death and the liberation of the soul from the body, for the benefit of another. It is necessary, however, to recognise that the zombi is not only slave, but also slave rebellion, as noted in its prominence in the Haitian Revolution "when reports of the rebelling slaves depicted them as nearly supernatural" (Lauro and Embry 98). The appropriation of the zombi for North American (and later globalised) markets can be read as an imperialist act, one in which the monster which defeated the American colonial forces is brought into servitude of the great commercialising machine. As a cinematic figure the "zombie is a colonial import: it infiltrated the American cultural imagination in the early twentieth century, at the time of the U.S.



occupation of Haiti” (Lauro and Embry 96), and the rebellion of the slave becomes the consuming monster of capitalist iconography. In so doing, “the zombie’s insatiable hunger figure[s] the white consumer instead, effectively swallowing the slave body as the icon is reappropriated” (Lauro and Embry 97). The violence of the metamorphosis from slave to slave rebellion to consuming machine is evidenced in the body of the zombie itself. While Lauro and Embry argue that “the slave is performing someone else’s labor, more like a machine, while the zombie labours for no one and produces only more zombies” (99), I would argue that the zombie does indeed labour for others, most specifically for the capitalist market that benefits from its constant, immutable and ever haunting imagery. Indeed, the latest appropriation of the zombie has, paradoxically, been put to use in the ‘Occupy’ movements of the autumn of 2011.

Andrea E. Shaw has remarked that “[a] haunting and memorable feature of these protests has been the choice of zombie swallowing as the ‘costume *de rigueur*’ for the Occupy movement,” and “[t]he politics of representation underlying this symbolism implies that corporations have become ghoulish automatons, devouring anyone in their path” (*Zombie* np). It is significant and in some ways ironic that zombies should become the icon for an ‘occupation’ force, given Haiti’s troubled history with America and Haiti’s own occupation by American military forces from 1915 to 1934” (*Zombie* np).<sup>15</sup> Just as the protestors are rallying against American fiscal policy, so too were those opposing the American presence in Haiti critical of the fiscal and cultural domination and occupation. The occupied used the zombi to rebel, now the occupiers are painting themselves as zombies, invoking the zombified nature of American (and arguably global and neo-liberal policies) markets and wealth distribution. In some ways this mirrors what Paul Gilroy argues about how cultural modes were and are exported, co-opted and adapted to serve the primary cultural demands. “The style, rhetoric and moral authority” he suggests, “of the civil rights movement and of Black Power suffered similar fates [to that of reggae]. They too were detached from their original ethnic markers and historical origins, exported and adapted, with evident

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<sup>15</sup> Note that in Dany Laferrière’s novel *Pays Sans Chapeau* (1996), the exact nature and method by which the zombi both comes to signify resistance, and be used against the people who would resist is engagingly explored.

respect but little sentimentality, to local needs and political climates” (Gilroy 82-83). The re-articulation of the zombi, in its media friendly context, results in some alterations from the Haitian form. While “the zombie has a fluid body that transgresses borders by infecting those it bites; the Haitian zombi could only be created by non-zombi. Thus, in its articulation of Western fears of the infectious spirit of rebellion, this trend manifests itself in the cinematic zombie in a metaphor of ubiquitous contagion” (Lauro and Embry 97). It is worth noting at this point that the zombie is infectious while the zombi is not, because the primary roles of the two are different. This tension between production and reproduction, as elicited in the primary functions of both representations is crucial for understanding their respective symbolic functions. The zombi is a means of production, serving an early capitalist master and disrupting the master-slave dialectic by relocating the power outside of the body of the zombi/slave. Rather than a relationship in which the mechanics of power flow between the master and the slave, the master-zombi relationship is characterised by the absence of the exchange of power. As a body without a soul, the zombi lacks all agency and self, and is rendered mechanical and completely passive. The zombie, on the other hand, has no master. As an agent of pure desire, it works only to satiate its own hunger, much like the individualism inherent in capitalism. It is a slave only to itself, continually aching to feed its own need. While the zombi is a creature whose purpose is production in the service of its master, the zombie is a creature of pure reproduction – if it can be said to produce, the only thing it produces is more zombies.

Even though the Voodoo zombi had a brief encounter with cinematic portrayals<sup>16</sup> there is no doubt that the flesh-eating zombie is the one that has most successfully captured Western popular imagination. That the zombie should be so closely tied to cinema is important because of the link often made between the capitalist system of consumption and zombie patterns of consumption; considering that the film industry itself can be deployed as an important form of capitalist consumption, the fact that the zombie is a product of it is telling. Ironically, it is often used to critique the repetitive consumption championed by

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<sup>16</sup> Such as Jacques Tourner’s *I Walked With a Zombie* (1943) and Victor Halperin’s *White Zombie* (1932).

the capitalist model, while at the same time being dependent upon it for its genesis, as can be seen in the previously cited *Dawn of the Dead*.

But the horror of the zombie does not end here. They are also monsters that are frightening because they are constant reminders of what humans wish to forget as they are the incarnation of death, and the thin line which separates us from them is the very thing that also joins us to them (The American television drama *The Walking Dead* (Darabont 2010-) is a prime example of how this plays out). When faced with the zombie it becomes impossible to deny death, only to hold it at bay temporarily, because “they force death upon the viewer relentlessly. The horror of the zombie lies, to a large extent, in the realization that each of us will die regardless of what we might do to forestall it” (Moreman 273). The inescapable fact of death and the need to confront it when faced with a zombie are paramount. However, despite this constant reminder of death, there is something intriguing, almost enticing about the zombie in that it cannot be killed by “being deprived of ‘life’” (Lauro and Embry 88). For all intents and purposes, the zombie no longer *has* a life to be deprived of. Lauro and Embry point out that the question “what kind of *life* that would be [the zombified one],” shows “that our fascination with the zombie is, in part, a celebration of its immortality and a recognition of ourselves as enslaved to our bodies” (88). What is potentially most troubling, however, is how the zombie acts as a constant reminder of how we are all moving toward death. They are “[t]he same, yet not identical: zombies are ‘people without minds;’ the undead; and thus are both us and not us. In this respect, they are like the dead themselves, and so must be exiled from the community of the living” (Webb and Byrnard 85).

It seems paradoxical that such a shallow, limited creature like the zombie has been invested with such a weighty amount of cultural meaning. After all, as Chuck Klosterman has indicated, the interpretation of the zombie can occur in a multitude of ways, but “[w]hat makes that measured amplification curious is the inherent limitations of the zombie itself: You can’t add much depth to a creature who can’t talk, doesn’t think and whose only motive is the consumption of flesh” (“My Zombie” np). However, perhaps it is this very lack of diversity (despite its individualistic motivation, every zombie has the same driving force) that which makes the zombie so effective as a monster. The zombie is always and only the

monstrous enemy, there is no way to make it an ally, as a result there is no need to ponder the moral issues of an offensive against the undead hordes. For Halberstam, “the Gothic novel produces an easy answer to the question of what threatens national security and prosperity (the monster), the Gothic monster represents many answers to the question of who must be removed from the community at large” (*Skin* 3). Read in terms of the postfeminist Gothic, however, Halberstam’s assertion takes on new meaning. As the heroine battles against violation by the monster, her skin, her body, must be increasingly inviolable. The horror of sharing bodily fluids is rampant, and the monster becomes even more monstrous as the greatest threat becomes contamination – and conversion into the monstrous other. In the contemporary context in which the spread of the Ebola virus and (though now less mediatically present) the AIDS virus, the way in which the miscegenation taboo, and racist and homophobic discourses are linked to the spread of disease is of special note. These ideas will be taken up further on in the discussion of the posthumans and the boundary crossing they threaten.

The implication of constructing the zombie as the monolithic enemy is telling if we consider that “when we think critically about monsters, we tend to classify them as a personification of what we fear” (“My Zombie” np). What is feared when the loss of the self amidst the masses is projected onto the zombie? Is it that the zombie is such an easy monster to want to kill because it generates the fear of becoming a mindless drone? Or is it the fear that this has already happened and the zombie is the surrogate self? The question of whether or not anything is shared with the undead is raised by Christopher Moreman in his article “Dharma of the Living Dead.” He suggests that with the creation of the cinematic zombie in lieu of the Haitian zombi, some changes were made not only to the physical appearance of the zombie, and to the ways in which it’s zombification manifested itself, but that: “In removing the supernatural elements from the creature, Romero introduced a monster that was entirely human, and in so doing exploded the normal dichotomy of Us versus Them. Now, Them were Us” (Moreman 270). Although the ‘entirely human’ aspects of the zombie are debatable, and would require a discussion of just how integral consciousness is to the human experience, suffice it to say that the fear of becoming a zombie and the ability to recognize the

self in the zombie is perhaps what motivates the fear of locating the zombie in the self.

Further, as noted by Webb and Byrnard, the monsters' "remarkable similarity to us can be used to turn our attention to *embodied* knowledge, *embodied* cognition, *embodied* identity" (95; italics in original). It is the awareness of this embodiment, and the need to defend our bodily integrity that most clearly separates us from what we fear. The zombie revels in the consumption that is the integration of the flesh of the Other, is not even conscious that there is an Other, only that there is something to be ingested. We, on the other hand, do our utmost to defend against ourselves against becoming the object being ingested, against becoming somehow integrated within the body of the zombie by being consumed by it. The fear of the cannibal, and of being cannibalised, will be addressed shortly in the discussion of food and who or what is being consumed.

#### **1.1.4 The Heroine and the Undead Others: Bodily Integrity in the Face of Danger**

While the zombie as enemy is the primary focus here because it provides an apt metaphor (among so many others) for the way in which the heroine becomes engaged in zombified postfeminist rhetoric, the vampire, the werewolf, the woman-wolf, and sea monsters also rear their heads in these texts as worthy foes. In *Jane Slayre*, the variety of opponents is legion. Unlike *Pride and Prejudice* and *Zombies* and *Sense and Sensibility and Sea Monsters*, where there is only one type of monster to fight, Jane Slayre must, in turn, face off against vampires, zombies and a woman-wolf. Thus, it is worth turning, after the extensive introduction to the monster via the zombie trope, to consider how these other beings are used.

The vampire is perhaps as famous, if not more so, than the zombie. Like the werewolf, it has a long history in myth and legend, and all three beings share the dubious honour of having difficult to pin down origins. For expediency's sake, the vampire considered here will be the literary entity, that which Paul Meehan argues "emerged during the Victorian Era, at the same time that human reality was being transformed by modern science and technology" (209). He refers, of course, to John Polidori's 1819 text *The Vampyre* as the moment when this monster became fixture in the written literary tradition, though it existed previously and in many

cultures within the oral tradition. He characterises the vampire as having “always been associated with illness and plague” (12), primarily because of the blood transmission from the vampire bite. This bite, for Franco Moretti, who reads the vampire through Marx, functions as “the metaphor for capital” (92), as that which sucks the life/blood out of its workers/victims. Further readings of the vampire, for Moretti, result in the argument that:

the nineteenth century is able to imagine monopoly only in the guise of Count Dracula, the aristocrat, the figure of the past, the relic of distant lands and dark ages. Because the nineteenth century bourgeois believes in free trade, and he knows that in order to become established, free competition had to destroy the tyranny of feudal monopoly. (93)

The contemporary reconfiguration of the zombie clashes with the vampire, where the former represents mass consumption and the latter a much more selective and discerning restricted mode of feeding. As much as the vampire may drain the blood of the capitalist worker, his mode, as Moretti has noted, is far more indebted to figurations of the aristocratic feudal economy. However, Moretti is loath to eschew the potential for vampire-as-capital, further suggesting, by citing Marx, that “[t]he *stronger* the vampire becomes, the *weaker* the living become: ‘the capitalist get rich, not like the miser, in proportion to his personal labour and restricted consumption, but at the same rate as he squeezes out labour-power from others, and compels the worker to renounce all enjoyments of life’” (91; italics in the original). The vampire, then, is both capital and pre-capital, a point that will become clearer when the figure is taken up later as part of the discussion of *Jane Slayre*. What the zombie and the vampire both have in common, however, is way in which they are representations of Otherness – of Moretti’s ‘relic of distant lands.’ The two monsters are fearsome in part because of the threat of racial impurity that they represent through the bodily fluids exchanged through their bite. The fear of contamination, of becoming the racialised Other and of reproducing that Otherness replicates discourses on the fear of miscegenation that continue to hold sway in contemporary society (one need only consider the way in which nations attempt to erect boundaries and control whose admittance is legitimised to see how this continues to operate).

In her work on literary vampires, Lorna Piatti-Farnell considers how the agelessness of the vampire, the fact that it does not show the physical signs of ageing, will not grow old and die/decay, works as “a clear metaphor for capitalist accumulation” and “provides a fruitful model for apprehending the various and varied forms of cultural activity, including those of labour and leisure in Western economies, that capitalist society has staked out for American youth” (58). The ‘eternal youth’ of the vampire is both the fear of ageing so prevalent in contemporary Western society as well as the cult of youth that surrounds the capitalist machine. Piatti-Farnell is quick to point out, that in “placing a focus on youthful beauty and perceived immortality, however, the majority of vampire fiction negates the possibility of seeing the vampire as what they are in many other examples: dead creatures which still move around, a charming incarnation of the undead corpse” (58).

Indeed, the vampire has close ties to lust and seduction, though it is perhaps only in contemporary representations that s/he has become a sustainable love-object. I am not only thinking of the contemporary representations like the recent four-book *Twilight* series (2005, 2006, 2007, 2008) by Stephanie Meyer and the subsequent movie adaptations, but the nature of Dracula in Bram Stoker’s text is also extremely appealing. When compared to zombies as an undead form that clearly bring to the fore the decaying, decomposing aspects of the corporeal form, vampires would deny the abject and can be turned in to alluring lovers and partners. The zombie, however, cannot be made into a love (or lust) object. While a vampire’s bite is often extrapolated as a sexual encounter, a zombie bite is, to my knowledge, never constructed as anything but undesired and repulsive, never romantic. Jonathon Levine’s 2013 film *Warm Bodies* would appear to contradict my claim that zombies can be love/lust objects, as the storyline follows a young male zombie and the female protagonist he kidnaps/rescues and the budding romance between them. However, the narrative resolves this problem quite neatly – by falling in love, or by experiencing the ‘human’ emotions of love (platonic or romantic), zombies can be saved, cured of whatever makes them posthumans, and restored to their humanity. While the film is a fascinating site for interrogating the meaning of being human, it is outside the scope of this discussion. But by asserting that feelings are in a sense what makes ‘us’ human, the film maintains the assertion

that zombies cannot be love objects (without turning them back into humans). While the vampire is also 'humanised' by her/his love for humans, s/he is not 'cured' of vampirism through these feelings.

Worth pointing out is that the vampire is a revenant that rejects, in many ways, the abject and grotesque imaginings so inherent in the zombie. Though he/she may open the body of the victim in order to drain their blood, with this puncturing and exchange of bodily fluids, the contrast between this method of consumption and that of the zombie, or even the human, is striking.

While the contemporary zombie feeds indiscriminately, wastefully, the vampire, while s/he may take more blood than necessary, can only drain the corpse, leaving not the ravaged and mangled body of the zombie, but a lifeless, bloodless, still-contained body. The vampire is much more subtle, the point of entry much more compact, less noticeable, so that proving penetration has occurred can be much more difficult. Obviously the link to rape and rape culture is patently clear here. It becomes the burden of the survivor to provide the physical, demonstrable indicators of penetration, and even these may be questioned. The vampire qua capitalist sucks "blood until the life is utterly departed from the body" (Bartolovich 213), without necessarily doing so noticeably. For this reason, because of the 'stealthy' side of the vampire (especially as compared to the zombie who is many things, but neither stealthy nor subtle), this monster is often associated with disease, with the secret, invisible infection that attacks unseen. Though Shannon Winnubst reads the vampire as reproducing "through the sharing of their blood, through the spilling of the gooey, messy fluids that course through our bodies" (12), I would argue that the 'messiness' of the vampire is limited. Indeed, the most terrifying aspect of this figure is that contamination, the sharing of fluids, can occur without the outer signs of penetration and the compromising of bodily integrity. The corporeal 'I' can be pierced, and the object of this piercing may not be entirely sure that penetration has occurred.

The vampire then, as the dark Other who slips in unseen, also prefigures fears of racial contamination, of the contamination from miscegenation. It is in this instance that we begin to see the vampire as it will be mobilised in *Jane Slayre*, as the fear of the racial, social and colonial Other, and the buttressing against the changes that colonisation (and the ensuing capital) wrought in the novel's



landscape. This aspect links it to the zombi in the colonial Caribbean explored in the previous section.

Jane Slayre's other foe is the she-wolf, or the woman werewolf in the form of Bertha Mason. Like the zombi, the she-wolf in *Jane Slayre* is linked to the colonised Other. Bertha and her brother Mason are creole inhabitants of the West Indies who force the spectre of Otherness to be taken into account. As Tabish Khair has noted of postcolonial Gothic texts, "what was brought back from those Other spaces of empire was not just a significant silence or a metaphorical meaning or a ghost, curse or artefact, but a flesh-and-bone colonial Other" (Khair 33-34). Jane Slayre must come to terms with this Other not only as it is wrought in the form of the zombis at Lowood, but also in the form of the Mason siblings. While the werewolf and the she-wolf<sup>17</sup> will occupy a relatively small portion of the discussion, it is still worth investigating, albeit briefly, its primary characteristics and uses in literary forms. In contrast to the vampire and the zombie who are figures that, whatever other similarities or differences they may have, are both dead, the werewolf is very much alive.

Brent A. Stypczynski, in *The Modern Literary Werewolf: A Critical Study of the Mutable Motif* (2013), offers a compelling analysis of the werewolf, arguing that because "[t]he werewolf manifestation appears in virtually every Western culture, in both the New and Old Worlds" (15), it forms a crucial part of (Western) fears and concerns.<sup>18</sup> Primary among these is the question of "where the line between nature and nurture, or between humans and other animals, is drawn" (2). Indeed, the werewolf is a boundary figure, existing in the liminal space between the animal and the human worlds and corporealities. The ability to change form signals the ability to cross boundaries, to not be confined by one set of norms or regulations,

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<sup>17</sup> I would like to point out that the zombie is relatively genderless, that is, the gender it embodied in its living form does little to change the way it acts or is perceived in its zombified form. Conversely, both the vampire and the werewolf are highly gendered figures. A female vampire does not carry the same meaning as a male vampire, and a werewolf and a she-wolf also differ in their metaphorical tasks. As the question of gender for the vampires in *Jane Slayre* is beyond the scope of this text, I have not delved into the representational differences thereof. However, the she-wolf as opposed to the werewolf is of great concern to the text, and will be broached in the discussion of the novel. See Jones (2012) and Auerbach (1995).

<sup>18</sup> It should be noted that, while Stypczynski mentions only the Western context, that the werewolf is not only a figure of Western fears, but that appears in a variety of cultures and contexts. See Douglas 1994 for a history of werewolf legends across the globe.

much like the vampire and the various legends that attribute to it the ability to become a bat.<sup>19</sup> Further, Stypczyński suggests that werewolves:

act upon their socially transgressive impulses, thereby providing a vicarious psychological release. Said impulses include wildness, violence, nudity taboos, bestiality (in both senses of the term), social bonds (medieval representations are commonly associated with marriage), adultery, and rape. (14)

As a metaphor, then, the werewolf and the she-wolf are figures of transgression that offer a means of fantasising about the possibilities of breaking the rules and discarding the conventions of the human world. While the werewolf's long historical presence has led to a variety of metamorphoses and iterations, contemporary audiences will easily assert that the werewolf and the full moon have a close relationship, with the full moon bringing out the 'wolf' characteristics whether or not a full change to wolf form is required. Silver bullets are commonly thought to be the most effective way of killing the werewolf (though this varies depending on each narrative, it is the case in *Jane Slayre*), and the condition is transmitted, like both the vampire's and the zombie's, through the bite.

In *Sense and Sensibility and Sea Monsters*, as the title indicates, the foe the heroines face is multiple and varied: any water dwelling creature is an enemy. Though the sea monster as a potential enemy does have a very long history and ontology (see for example the Kraken, the infamous Loch Ness Monster, or the Leviathan of the Bible), in this text the "Begilled Tormentors" or "the Unfathomable Ones" (*Sense* 12) are not as symbolically important as the monsters in *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* and *Jane Slayre*. Indeed, they are secondary to the text, serving the function more of a distraction from the romantic plot than as a motivation for heroic endeavours. As such, what is of interest is less the figure of the monster itself, and more the various explanations offered for its presence. By turns, various characters espouse their views on the "source of the Alteration" (*Sense* 8), as the rise of the sea monsters is called. One suggests that "there was discoverable, in some distant corner of the globe, the headwaters of a noxious stream that fed a virulent flow into every sea, ever lake and estuary, poisoning the

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<sup>19</sup> The human-animal boundary crossing, and the significance of 'becoming animal' will be taken up at greater length in Chapter 3.

very well of the world" (*Sense* 8) and which had turned the sea creatures against humanity. This theory strongly speaks to a critique of environmental policy, suggesting that human pollution and lack of care will be humanity's undoing. Another theory speaks of "a tribe of subterranean cave-men" who worshipped a pantheon of monster-gods "older than time itself" with the sea monsters being a symbol of the day of "wakening" (*Sense* 331), when the monsters will rise up.

Regardless of the explanation for the way in which the sea monsters attack humans, one aspect cannot be denied: they do so consciously. After an especially vicious attack by giant lobsters Elinor Dashwood notes that:

There was something else troubling about the night's events: those lobsters, as best Elinor could tell, hadn't even attempted to feast on their victims, only to savage them and then move on to the next. They were, in other words, mauling and killing human beings for pleasure – the foremost trait that was supposed to have been trained from them in the laboratories of Hydra-Z. (171)

This lobster attack occurred during a 'performance' in which the lobsters were to act the part of trained animals, doing tricks for the pleasure of the human audience, and as a way, as the quotation suggests, of demonstrating human 'domination' over the beasts. Indeed, as animals developed in a laboratory, they are a further example of the posthuman, in this instance as the techno-scientific strain. That the creatures 'hadn't even attempted to feast on their victims' points to the fact that this attack was not the result of hunger but rather formed purely for the purpose of killing. In fighting and killing these creatures, then, the Dashwoods are depicted as merely protecting themselves or others from being attacked.

The final possible explanation for the 'Alteration' is the most persuasive. The Dashwoods's cousin, Sir John Middleton, "held the lifelong conviction that the Alteration resulted from a curse laid by one of the tribal races who had come under England's colonial dominion over the centuries, and he spent the better part of two decades in search of the culprits" (32). Again the link between the colonised Other and the monstrous being becomes apparent, a link that also exists in *Jane Slayre* with the figure of the she-wolf. The monster and the fear of racial miscegenation are brought together here. As will be discussed further, the colonial critique the novel offers, in the form of satire, supports the idea that the

sea monsters started attacking humans as a means of retaliation for human hubris (that it should be as a result of a curse is less convincing though not impossible given the 'fantastical' aspects of the novel).

All told, the variety of the monsters that populate and harrow the protagonists of these novels speaks not only to the adaptability of the monster but also to the contemporary taste for action heroines. When these monsters are transported into early 19<sup>th</sup> century novels, their common expression of racial fears related to colonial domination become apparent. As Franco Moretti points out:

the monster expresses the anxiety that the future will be monstrous. His antagonist – the enemy of the monster – will always be, by contrast, a representative of the present, a distillation of complacent nineteenth-century mediocrity: nationalistic, stupid, superstitious, philistine, impotent, self-satisfied. But this does not show through. Fascinated by the horror of the monster, the public accepts the vices of its destroyer without a murmur. (84)

What we shall see is how the various monsters throughout the texts come to contrast not only with the bodies of the heroines, but as Moretti suggests, serve to render invisible any failings that they may have. By opposing themselves to the monsters, the heroines appear to be vouchsafing their credentials as postfeminist figures. What becomes hidden, less perhaps than the characteristics Moretti identifies, are a series of conservative, neo-liberal traits, and a firm desire to reinforce heteronormative ideals for both physical appearance and love and sexuality.

It is, as a result, not surprising that the heroines of these novels, specifically Elizabeth Bennet and Jane Slayre, are heroines for whom honour and bodily integrity are very closely bound. It is not, I think, coincidence that the act of being bitten, whether by a vampire, zombie, werewolf, or sea creature, involves the penetration and exchange of fluids that so easily extrapolates to metaphors of sex and loss of virginity and of racial purity as well. These young women are defending themselves against more than just the undead menace. They are defending against the loss of purity that would render them undesirable on the marriage market – whether this loss is attributable to sexual penetration or the oral penetration of being bitten. This is undeniably true in the case of Charlotte Lucas, Elizabeth Bennet's best friend, who marries Mr. Collins (the stodgy and unpalatable hitherto

suitor of Elizabeth) after she has been bitten by a zombie (*Pride* 99). Arguing that this may be her only chance at marital happiness, and the no man will find her marriage material once she begins her transformation, the rhetoric very closely resembles that of a woman who has 'lost her virginity' and fears social reprobation. Indeed, the scene Charlotte Lucas recounts of being bitten is worth citing at length:

Daring to make the trip alone and unarmed, she had hastened upon the road undisturbed, until she happened upon an overturned chaise and four. Seeing no unmentionables about, Charlotte approached and knelt – readying her eyes to meet the gruesome visage of a crushed coachman. To her horror, she was instead met by the grasp of a zombie who had been trapped beneath the carriage. Her leg caught in its bony fingers, she screamed as the creature's teeth broke her skin. She was able to free herself and continue to Longbourn, but Hell's dark business had been carried out. (99)

Arguably worse than the rhetoric that mimics the social control over a woman's sexuality is the way in which the 'bite scene' is strongly reminiscent of a rape scene, and the invocation of 'Hell's dark business' combines rape and the racialised body. The young woman, who 'dares' to travel "alone and unarmed," stops to see if she can help in an accident, and instead she becomes the victim of an attacker whose "teeth broke her skin" as "she screamed." The violence of this scene is undeniable, and while it serves, on the one hand, to illustrate the violence of the zombie and evokes the racist trope of the Black man raping the young white woman, (as well as offering the motivation for Charlotte Lucas's engagement to Mr. Collins), on the other hand it also works to set up a strong dichotomy between the 'trained' lady, such as the Bennet sisters, and the 'untrained,' as is Charlotte Lucas. While the former would, it would seem, have been prepared or at least armed, and thus justified in leaving the house unescorted, the latter is to a large extent engaging in 'risky behaviour' by leaving her house alone. Indeed, the rhetoric that argues that women must not go out alone at night so as to avoid being raped or attacked seems to function here, suggesting that Charlotte Lucas' decision to go out unescorted in such dangerous times is in part to blame for her being bitten. While this is certainly never made explicit, the subtext exists, and offers further weight to the argument that the female action heroine is bound up within a neo-liberal discourse that suggests that her capacity to defend herself is both a privilege

conceded by postfeminist rhetoric as well as a responsibility via wherein the individual must take pains to prevent an attack, rather than the system changing to limit patriarchal notions of power over women's bodies that engenders violence against women. Though Charlotte Lucas does manage to free herself, "Hell's dark business" has already been worked, and she must now live with the consequences.

One such consequence is shame. When she tells her friend Elizabeth of the attack she says: "I beg you will not be angry with me" (99). The feeling of victim-blaming this scene evokes is disturbing, to say the least. It must be noted, however, that the text is ambiguous about whether her friend will be angry about the attack, the engagement to Mr. Collins, or both of these things. While in no way meaning to shame Charlotte Lucas for not having mastered the skills of self-defence needed to protect herself against the zombies (as her friend has done), it is a crucial part of the heroine that her bodily integrity remain intact, and that her training in part functions as a way of defending against just such penetration as Charlotte Lucas has suffered. Kerry Fine, in "She Hits Like a Man But She Kisses Like a Girl: TV Heroines, Femininity, Violence, and Intimacy," has argued that the purpose of scenes of "sexual assault is not to sexualize their bodies but to expose the characters to situations that will reveal their heroic nature" (167). However, when that violence is perpetrated not on the heroine but on her friend, (if we continue the metaphor of the zombie attack as sexual assault), then the result is far less optimistic.

Elizabeth Bennet's response to the attack on Charlotte Lucas does little to illustrate Bennet's 'heroic nature.' Indeed, her first reaction to her friend's news is to condemn her. Though she outwardly maintains a show of support, her interior monologue reveals what she now thinks of her friend's situation: "She thought often of striking Charlotte down – of donning her Tabbi boots and slipping into her bedchamber under cover of darkness, where she would mercifully end her friend's misery" (101). Although she feels that killing her friend would be the kinder option, rather than allowing her to live, again the discourse is disconcertingly similar to one which would shame the victims of gender violence rather than the perpetrators.

This reaction by the heroine is, perhaps, more indicative of the neo-Gothic nature of the text than of heroine's of more contemporary stock. As the prohibition

on sexual congress outside of wedlock is one of the aspects the re-written is loyal to, penetration, whether by zombie bite (or, as we will see, vampire or werewolf), is equivalent to death.

Further to the demands of defending themselves against bodily harm, the burden these women must shoulder becomes increasingly heavy as they seek to defend not only their family and friends from the threat of the undead hordes, but they must do so in such a way that can leave no space for questioning their bodily suitability as potential wives. Curiously, while they seem to be engaged primarily in fighting monsters, they are not released from the need present in the original novels to defend themselves against unsuitable suitors or compromising situations. Their bodies, so carefully refined and sculpted so as to be lethal machines are still vulnerable to dishonour and potential social disgrace.

## 1.2 The Heroic Body

As commented in the previous section, in *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* the original romantic plot from Jane Austen's text is maintained, with the added twist of a world in which, for the past fifty years, the dead have been rising from their graves and attacking the living. Those who can afford it are sent to Japan or China to train in the martial arts and learn to defend themselves and their nation. On their return, they are enlisted in the service of the King, and required to continually fight the living dead. Everyone, man or woman, who is trained must pledge to fight the zombies. Proper zombie training is a costly endeavour – not something affordable for the majority of the population, as it involves at least one prolonged trip to Asia – and even then, there is great polarity between training in the more expensive, and putatively more advanced, Japan, and training, as the Bennets do, in the more traditional China. As a result, only the privileged can afford this overseas education. For women, the possibility and even the desirability of this training is not entirely clear. While it does not fit into the category of a trade (because it is out of reach of the lower classes), it is not looked upon as entirely suitable by all of the women in the novel, namely the Bingley sisters and the Bennets' mother. And yet the most revered woman in the novel, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, is respected both for her social position and for her exceptional skill at killing zombies – almost besting Elizabeth herself. The exact social position of the

female zombie killer is, thus, unclear and perhaps best considered as something unfit for all but the exceptional (as is the case with Lady Catherine and, by the end of the novel and because of her marriage to Darcy, Elizabeth as well). Further, while Mr. Bennet feels that he “would much prefer [his daughters’] minds be engaged in the deadly arts than clouded with dreams of marriage and fortune” (*Pride* 8), there is no denying that zombie slaying is presented as something wealthy women might amuse themselves with, but for women who are still looking for a husband or who do not have their wealth assured, it is not an entirely acceptable means of attracting a mate. Although Mrs. Bennet does comment on Mr. Bingley’s preference for Jane Bennet as arising in part “because she fought so valiantly against the unmentionable,” she is quick to point out that it is also because he found her to be “the prettiest” young lady at the ball (18). While the skills of the warrior may be counted as among a woman’s charms, they are certainly not enough on their own.

### 1.2.1 Fighting Figures: Shaping the Heroic Form

Elizabeth Bennet and her sisters are zombie-fighting warriors who have all trained in the Shao Lin temple in China, and are masters in the use of the katana sword and other weapons. They are the defenders of their family and of the neighbourhood, and can decapitate a walking corpse with a sword, shoot one through the eye and into the brain, or with a swift kick, knock the head off. The text is full of examples in which Elizabeth and her sisters demonstrate their prowess in the ballroom scene (14), in which the sisters must fight together to defend their friends and neighbours, or the scene where Elizabeth alone fights some of the unmentionables as she is walking to visit Jane at Netherfield (24).

It is curious that throughout the novel the zombies are often referred to in euphemistic terms as ‘the unmentionables’ or ‘the sorry stricken.’ In a novel in which much of the action pivots around topics that are ‘unmentionable’ or not for polite conversation (money, sex), the use of this term to describe the zombies is telling. As previously mentioned, the zombie apocalypse is almost naturalised in the text – the levels of violence that are not only acceptable but necessary are astonishing. And yet, as much as both the warriors and their actions are not questioned, there still exists the need to politely pretend that what is happening is



not actually happening. By referring to the zombies as unmentionables, their presence is both highlighted and abnegated as well as aligned with those other 'unmentionable' topics. That young women would be involved in fighting something that cannot be talked of in good company suggests that the zombies are more than simply a threat to the status quo, but also that the women who fight them are somehow equally as unpalatable as what they are fighting.

Those women who do choose to develop the zombie fighting skills, however, are relieved of their duties as warriors if they get married. While not forming part of the regular army, the Bennet sisters are all enlisted into the service of their monarch, and dedicate regular hours every day to training and to hunting and killing zombies. Their involvement in zombie fighting is twofold. On the one hand, it protects them and their loved ones from harm, and on the other it offers them the possibility of earning a living once their father dies. They can, as Elizabeth notes, become mercenaries or bodyguards, living from the trade they have been taught (*Pride* 55). Obviously, to have to work for a living would be a step down in the world for these daughters of the gentry, but they have been provided with the means to do so, should the need arise.

While not part of the militia, the Bennets are militarised and as Nira Yuval-Davis has argued "one of the main motivations for women to join the military is an opportunity to empower themselves, both physically and emotionally" (178). However, this empowerment is problematic in some ways, not least of which is that the military model is one both constructed on and reproductive of patriarchal norms and values. Elizabeth and her sisters, in their games together and when fighting the zombies, are often extremely violent. It has been noted by Laura Sjoberg and Caron Gentry that "[t]he reality is that women who commit violence interrupt gender stereotypes. Instead of requiring protection, they are the people from whom others should be protected," (7) and consequently a variety of techniques are employed to 'legitimise' women's violence and rob it of this potentially disruptive capacity. Among these strategies are the sexualisation and maternalisation of their actions (points that will be returned to further in this thesis), and/or their incorporation into state-sanctioned systems of violence, as happens with the Bennet sisters (as will be further explored in Chapters two and three).

The military is a site of condoned violence and aggression; women who are fighting on behalf of their country are, not unproblematically, 'permitted' to be violent, often because this aggression is contained within a discourse of protection: self defence, or defence of loved ones is acceptable. For the most part, Elizabeth Bennet's acts of violence in the novel are always represented along these lines. While she may, at several times, wish to violently take revenge on others or defend her honour, she usually controls herself. In this way, she is constructed not as threatening to society, but preserving it. Curiously, Elizabeth is extremely sensitive to slights either against her own and her family's honour or anything that can be construed as criticism of her loved ones. Her reaction to these affronts is to wish to physically harm, usually to kill, the perpetrator. When Mr. Bingley ceases his attentions to Jane Bennet, Elizabeth wants to harm both of his sisters for meddling in his affairs (the brother's crime, of heeding the advice of his sisters and his friend Mr. Darcy, apparently does not warrant death). While she never follows through on these desires, it is remarkable the level of violence she deems acceptable as punishment for social slights. An example of this can be found in the famous scene in which Mr. Darcy refuses to dance despite Mr. Bingley's attempts to persuade him otherwise. When Mr. Bingley suggests that Mr. Darcy dance with Elizabeth Bennet, the latter says: "She is tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt *me*; I am in no humour at present to give consequence to young ladies who are slighted by other men" (13; italics in original). Upon over-hearing this, Elizabeth Bennet "felt her blood turn cold. She had never in her life been so insulted. The warrior code demanded she avenge her honour [...] She meant to follow this proud Mr. Darcy outside and open his throat" (13-14). She is prevented for following up on her design by the intrusion of a horde of zombies into the ballroom, and while there are further moments in the text in which she feels that 'the warrior code' demands her to seek violent revenge, she is always, for one reason or another, prevented.

Although neither Elizabeth nor her sisters appear to engage in gratuitous violence, there is one exception to this rule which is worth some further attention. While it is true that Elizabeth almost exclusively conserves her violence for fighting zombies (except for in the excerpt under consideration), she does engage in two hand-to-hand combat situations. The first is when she fights Mr. Darcy and

the second when she fights his aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh. Both of these incidents are constructed as inevitably requiring violence, in the first because Mr. Darcy has interfered in Jane's potential relationship with Mr. Bingley and must be punished. In the second it is Lady Catherine who directly attacks Elizabeth, and she must defend herself. When she wins the fight, Elizabeth has the opportunity to kill her opponent, which of course she declines, preferring to be generous and also loath to possibly kill the aunt of the man she loves. When Elizabeth visits her friend Charlotte Lucas, she is introduced to the great Lady Catherine de Bourgh, a woman who is famous as much for her fighting skills as for her wealth. This encounter is frustrating for Elizabeth because Lady Catherine underestimates Elizabeth's skills and insults the Chinese master who trained her, so when she is challenged to a fight against Lady Catherine's three best ninjas – not against the lady herself as apparently she has no need to demonstrate her skill – Elizabeth is keen to prove herself. By presenting her ninjas for combat rather than fighting herself, de Bourgh participates in a highly problematic example of racist and classist disdain for the body of the Other. Her servants, who are Japanese citizens imported to England for her lady's protection, are sacrificed to the combat she herself chooses not to engage in. Elizabeth confronts each of the ninjas, in turn and blindfolded, and is disdainful of the life she is taking. Although her violence in the rest of the novel is primarily confined to killing the unmentionables, here she is killing humans. Elizabeth engages in acts that can be read as excessively violent – she not only disembowels one of her opponents, but she strangles him with his own intestine. To the third ninja “she delivered a vicious blow, penetrating his rib cage, and withdrew her hand – with the ninja's still-beating heart in it” (132). She proceeds to take a bite of it, blood dripping down her chin. I don't want to dwell too long on the fact that there is, in this scene, a disturbing de-humanization of the Oriental Other while Elizabeth's violence is somehow acceptable, in that she is killing what have been constructed as Lady Catherine's possessions – some ninjas brought back from Japan. It is worth, however, discussing the way in which this battle serves to dehumanise Elizabeth, or at the very least, to call into question what it means to be a zombie, feasting on the flesh of the Other.

This image of Elizabeth eating the heart of one of her ninja opponents is troubling in the way it parallels images of the zombies eating people throughout

the novel. In a sense, by biting into one of the vital organs of her vanquished foes, she more closely resembles a zombie than a well-bred young woman. Inherent in this is the idea that, in adopting her soldierly ways the part of her that is 'human' is forgotten or subsumed under the part that is a warrior. Just as, in trying to rationalise to herself later in the novel that Mr. Darcy no longer cares for her – and why she should cease to care for him – she identifies herself as the “Death’s betrothed” (272), again placing her role as a warrior ahead of her possible ‘desire’ for Mr. Darcy. She would deny, or at least negate, the part of herself that has feelings or sentiments in order to become a better warrior and to maintain her self-image as primarily a zombie-fighter. I will return to Elizabeth’s role as a warrior versus her desires to marry Mr. Darcy further on, but for the moment I wish to turn to the image of Elizabeth eating the heart of the ninja, as Elizabeth Bennet the cannibal, and the dehumanisation that ensues, for both the consumer and the consumed, when people become food.

### 1.2.2 Who’s for Dinner? The Politics of Eating and Integrations of the Other

In *Carnal Appetites* (2000), Elspeth Probyn argues that the cannibal as popularised in colonial literatures (much as we have seen with the vampire, zombie and she-wolf) is a rich trope for looking at the way in which humans construct ideas of Self-Other and functions as a way of disrupting this binary opposition. The racist discourse surrounding the figures of colonial nightmares is also present here. I would say that just as with the zombie, crossing the line and becoming food doubly dehumanises, not only by disrupting the human’s place on the food chain, but also by risking contamination, becoming a zombie oneself. Probyn suggests that the cannibal is “a clear example of the fact that ‘disgusting’ designates the horror of being brought into intimate contact with what is considered to be another category of being” (138). While, technically speaking, the zombie is not a cannibal because it does not feed off of other zombies, only off of the still-living, Elizabeth’s act cannot be misconstrued. Not only is she dehumanised by her consumption of the Oriental Other, she is at one and the same time become a zombie and a cannibal. This is an interesting inversion of the cannibal myth which Crystal Bartolovich has argued is such that “European cannibal narratives have been important in justifying colonial violence and theft” (210). The novel is haunted by the spectre of Orientalism (Said

1978), as China and Japan become the best places to learn zombie-fighting technique, and their material goods and even people are pillaged so that the English zombie fighters can return to their homes with not only the skills but also the trappings of their sojourn in the East. Lady Catherine boasts “a team of ninjas” (86) – among whom are those Elizabeth kills and ingests – and Mr. Darcy’s home boasts a “solid jade door” and is “handsomely fitted up with art and furniture from Darcy’s beloved Japan” (195). Even the housekeeper, “a respectable looking English woman, dressed in a kimono and shuffling about on bound feet” is made to play a part in the cultural appropriation (195). Thus, it is even more curious that the one engaged in cannibalism is Elizabeth Bennet, as she would represent the violent colonial power.

The one who is ingested, the imported Japanese ninja, is further dehumanised from a position in which he is already treated as chattel, and yet so too is Elizabeth as she “strangled [one] to death with his own large bowel” (130). There is an awkward distribution of labels here as the Other becomes flesh, and Elizabeth becomes Othered, when “all but Lady Catherine turned away in disgust” and “Elizabeth took a bite, letting the blood run down her chin and onto her sparring gown” (132). To return to Bartolovich for a moment, “the deployment of cannibalism [serves] to mark a voraciousness of appetite [...] that seems to have no limits whatsoever” (208). Clearly, for all that the zombie is not a cannibal, there are chilling parallels between them, as they too demonstrate a ‘voraciousness of appetite.’ As much as Elizabeth Bennet is to some extent aligned with the cannibal here, as one who eats the flesh of another, the Othering which serves to convert the ninjas into objects, beings that are not human, or not quite human, also aligns Elizabeth with the zombie, who eats the flesh of one who is like him/her, but not quite the same. Neither the zombie nor the cannibal eats to sustain themselves, but instead they eat to glut themselves on the power of eating. Elizabeth too is guilty of conspicuous consumption, choosing to feast on the heart of her human victim not out of necessity or even general hunger, but out of the triumphant desire to demonstrate her power over her vanquished foe. Who gets to eat whom, and in what circumstances, are questions both terrifying in their implication, and (perhaps comfortingly) have strictly delineated answers most of the time. By

eating a man's vital organ, Elizabeth shocks us by confusing the normal boundaries.

It is, unfortunately, not surprising that Elizabeth's more violent display is for the benefit of a primarily female audience, while the talents she exhibits for male viewing pleasure do not involve physical contact with another person or monster, nor do they involve the ingestion of organs or other body parts. In fact, what is emphasised is the great control Elizabeth exerts over her body, its flexibility and strength, but also how contained and strictly bound by decorum it is. As Lady Catherine is known for her own physical violence and capabilities, it is obvious that part of what Elizabeth is engaged in is a competition between herself and the other woman, a competition that is fully realised at the end of the novel when Elizabeth and Lady Catherine fight physically. Not only is it acceptable to demonstrate her physical violence in front of the other ladies, it is in some ways necessary for Elizabeth to show that she is deserving of Darcy because she is as physically capable as the woman who would stake some claim to his allegiance, and yet this must be done without him witnessing it.

It is worth turning for a moment to the texts *Sense and Sensibility and Sea Monsters* and *Jane Slayre* to consider how they depict the act of eating the Other and their politics of eating. In *Sense and Sensibility and Sea Monsters*, the Dashwood sisters are set adrift from their home at Norland and sent to live on a treacherous island. Surrounded by the sea, and thus by sea creatures (whose mission appears to be the maiming or killing of as many humans as possible), their position is precarious to say the least. Reflecting not only their financial straits, as in the original novel, but also their susceptibility to physical harm, the sea monsters of the title are an ever-present menace against which the Dashwoods must be constantly vigilant.

As women of uncertain financial futures but of a certain class must somehow learn to physically defend themselves from threats to their person, while at the same time attracting a possible spouse who will financially protect them, the Dashwood sisters and their mother are well-trained sea monster assassins. As such, they collaborate in the on-going efforts to eradicate as many sea creatures as possible (the same mission but inverse, it would seem, that the creatures themselves have). One of their duties resides in making as many meals as they can

from the corpses of fish and crustaceans that they have killed, as Mrs. Dashwood notes that it is appropriate to enjoy “every opportunity to dine upon the hated foe” (17).

The politics of the Dashwoods’ consumption contrasts starkly with that of Elizabeth Bennet’s and the zombies,’ as well as what we will see in *Jane Slayre*, because they do indeed eat to satisfy their basic needs. While quantity may be a concern, as excessive consumption is rampant in much of the developed economies, the food they ingest, even when it is their foe, does serve to nourish them. They are, in a sense, deriving strength from their enemies. While this may not seem entirely noteworthy, the Dashwoods’ social class has much to do with their ‘choice’ of entrée.

As guests of their more affluent family friend in Submarine Station Beta,<sup>20</sup> the two eldest Dashwood sisters enjoy a lifestyle they cannot afford on their own income. Much as for the other inhabitants and visitors to the sub-marine pleasure centre, to eat fish is unacceptable, both socially and legally. So while their above-sea level meals are part of the ‘war effort’ against the marine villains, it is also a result of economics and what is available to their social class. They do their duty, but have little choice in the matter. There is something disturbing, however, about the relish with which they go about the task of eating their various sea creatures, not least of which may be identified by Helen Tiffin in her article “Foot in Mouth: Animals, Disease, and the Cannibal Complex.” She asserts that “[c]arnivory in general reminds us that though we are the meat consumers, we are ourselves potentially meat” (20), and nowhere is this more true than in the novel where the frequent boat trips, sea side-walks and the lifestyle in general constantly put the sisters at risk of being attacked and consumed by sea creatures. Tiffin further expands on the tension between diner and dined-upon by looking at our relationship to sharks “who have the capacity, if rarely the inclination, to eat us” and how they:

can, potentially, expose us as the flesh of which we are composed, and their ability to ingest our meat – like ours theirs – makes them too proximate in terms of self-exposure and self-reflection, obliging

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<sup>20</sup> This undersea pleasure ground that has been created as a replica of the city of London will be discussed further on.

us to exaggerate their differences through the very similarity we are reluctant to acknowledge: their apparent 'savagery' in 'attacking' prey as against our 'civilized' dining. (20)

In *Jane Slayre* the politics of eating are even more clearly-defined and the consequences for improper consumption, and for becoming food, are dire indeed. Jane's first encounter with the Other is in the home of the Reeds. As the novel opens, we learn that while Jane is a human child, she is disdained by her adoptive family because they are vampires, and she lacks their bloodthirstiness, their ability to hunt, and their physical strength, among other things. Jane is their inferior both physically and socially as their social status and wealth is superior to hers. As Sherri Inness has noted in her work *Tough Girls: Women Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture* (1998), class is often a deciding factor in whether or not a woman is socially permitted to be violent and/or strong. As somehow less than female and definitely not 'feminine', women of lower social classes are seen as breaking fewer boundaries, or their violence is somehow more easily understandable than that of middle or upper class women (9). Indeed, they are depicted as though brutalised by the life conditions that are often (though certainly not always) traits of poverty, and the conceptual leap to animalising them is not far off. The violence of the heroine and the *posthuman* is conceptually linked here. And yet, at the beginning of the novel, Jane's social status is both what protects her from the vampiric Reeds, as they fear contamination should they drink the blood of their social inferiors, and what makes her unfit to be one of the powerful and bloodthirsty undead (it is also, as shall be discussed later, what connects her to her dead parents and makes her fit to be a slayer). Mrs. Reed reminds her children that Jane's "common blood will bring on fevers, maybe apoplexy! We only eat what we kill out of doors, or nobility!" Mrs. Reed's insistence on purity of blood kept the servants feeling safe in her presence, but John Reed had occasionally shown that his appetite could overcome even this prejudice" (*Slayre* 8). It is his attempt to 'snack' on Jane that finally lands her in the red room, and precipitates her aunt's decision to send her to Lowood. The scene, in which John Reed comes across Jane while she is alone, and penetrates her with his teeth so as to feed off of her is especially suggestive of a rape scene, especially when Jane Slayre, bruised and bleeding, is blamed and punished for the attack. While John



Reed does not suffer any 'fevers' or 'apoplexy' from his feeding on Jane, it does come to light later in the novel that his downfall is his inability to continue to feed off of his own class, and his association with people who are 'below' him. This is also what precipitates Georgiana's death, as her association with people who would feed on peasants is what has her cross paths with the now trained Jane and St. John Rivers, and what eventually gets her killed. Indeed, to continue the metaphor between vampiric feeding and sexual predation, it is possible to infer that Aunt Reed's prohibition against feeding from the disenfranchised classes is a repetition of the veiling of prostitution during the Victorian (and certainly other) times. Just as the healthy body of the patriarch could not (publicly) be sullied by the body of the prostitute, so too must the Reeds guard against 'impurity,' at least in the public eye.

While the vampires in the novel are not always aristocrats and people of means, they are linked to decadence and the emergence of capitalism. As Franco Moretti has argued, "[t]he vampire, like monopoly, destroys the hope that one's independence can one day be brought back. He threatens the idea of individual liberty" (Moretti 93). Jane's fight against the Reeds, if not against all of the vampires in the novel, can be framed as a fight against the landed gentry's economic model in favour of one that is, as her powers as a slayer are brought to the fore by the uncle that is a colonist in Madeira, more reliant upon the emerging economies of colonial trade. The posthuman figures are linked by the colonial discourse, and betray the anxiety surrounding the colonial Other. As a figure that is critical of Humanism and its racist and sexist narrative, the posthuman, as zombie, vampire, or she-wolf, also works to destabilise notions surrounding the colonial project, especially as it relates to expansion, as it highlights the permeability of borders. The posthuman here has no respect for borders and boundaries, neither national nor corporeal, and makes apparent the penetrability of both.

In "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak addresses the imperialist thematic present in Charlotte Brontë's text and the way in which they were addressed in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1965). She argues that the Brontë's text enacts "the general epistemic violence of imperialism" (251), and as such, the colonial Other is a revenant that haunts the narrative, and that must be sacrificed for Jane Eyre's

proto-feminist 'self' to emerge. Browning Erwin's text is equally haunted by the colonial Other, though this haunting can be seen much more literally, as the zombies created at Lowood school are linked to the West Indies (*Slayre* 69) while the vampires come out of the East, and are expanding their reign into India (such that St. John's mission is to move to the subcontinent as a slayer).

When Jane meets her cousin Georgiana later in the novel, she finds that 'Georgie' is the leader of a group of vampires who are robbing farmers and the working class, taking what they see as their right to blood and livelihood – in a direct iteration of feudalist and colonial discourses. Despite the prohibition placed on them by their mother, two of the three cousins have taken to drinking the blood of their 'social inferiors', and it is this contamination via miscegenation that is framed as their final downfall. While Mrs. Reed repents of her actions, and is saved from an after-life of hell by Jane, her cousins, one of whom is killed by Jane, are depicted as betraying both their mother and their social class by roaming about the city and/or countryside in search of human meals.

Further, the question of consumption is of primary importance when considering the zombies Jane must combat. As the novel progresses, Jane moves from the Reed mansion – and the vampiric aristocracy represented there, to another form of monstrous threat. In Lowood School, Jane discovers the creator of the zombis – one of whom was a servant in the Reed household – Mr. Bokorhurst. The man responsible for Lowood charity school, which Jane attends after leaving the Reeds', takes the bodies of girls who have died at the school – and given the "unhealthy nature of the site; the quantity and quality of the children's food; the brackish, fetid water used in its preparation; the pupils' wretched clothing and accommodations" (*Slayre* 98), the mortality rate is rather high, and turns them into zombis. A sort of amalgamation of the Haitian and Western zombie, the only way to restore them to 'peace' is to sever their heads from their bodies, releasing the green 'goo' that replaced their blood.

Helen Burns acquaints Jane with zombi lore, and we learn that her West Indian governess told her about zombis and bokors – the person who can make zombis. The original Mr. "Brocklehurst's more sadistic aim is to mortify in these girls the lust of the flesh: the ordeal of growing up should transform them by graduation time into etherized spirits, attendant to duty and the principles of

orderly conduct” (da Vinci 196). The ‘lust of the flesh’ turns the Victorian ideal for virginal (appearing) femininity into a literal craving for meat. These ‘etherized spirits’ are the angels of the house who subdue their materiality. In order to achieve the same ends in this novel, the now Mr. Bokorhurst (after the Haitian bokor, or Voodoo priest), turns the girls who die into zombies, who “serve their master in all things [...] As long as the zombified remains roam the earth, the spirit of the deceased cannot ascend to heaven. They’re most calm, nearly lifeless in demeanour” (*Slayre* 70). Most troublingly, however, is the fact that these ‘calm’ and ‘nearly lifeless’ girls become savage and murderous if they taste meat, in a metaphor suggesting the unleashing of sexual carnality should the ‘angel of the house’ taste the pleasures of the flesh. While their normal existence is one in which they shun food and beverage, the smell of cooked flesh excites them, and they enter into a frenzy of feeding once the food passes their lips. In this state, they do not distinguish between meat as food and meat as people, causing them to feast upon whatever is closest at hand. In Haitian zombi lore, the zombi can only be fed saltless food, lest their soul should be attracted by the salt and find its way back to the body (Ackermann and Gauthier 474). The twist of keeping the zombie girls from eating, especially meat, is sinister, as it is done not to keep the girls from their souls, but rather only to protect the humans nearby.

The use of food, or better yet the denial of food, as a means of control is sadly reminiscent of Western notions of femininity and female corporeality. In no uncertain terms, the prevailing notion in the West that women’s bodies (and increasingly men’s bodies) must conform to a rigid ideal, an ideal that, at least for women, implies that less is better. The prevalence of anorexia in teen-aged girls (and again, increasingly in teen-aged boys) indicates the internalisation of both the notion that control over the body can be exerted by denying it food (a sinister parallel occurs here with the zombified girls in *Jane Slayre*) along with the notion that the less space female bodies occupy, the better. Indeed, the Lowood zombi-girls are created so as to become servants in wealthy homes and their prevailing traits are silence and that they do not need to eat. The text appears to offer a damning commentary on the notion that the most ‘useful’ young girls in society are those who make no noise and have no appetites (perhaps for this reason, the

postfeminist rhetoric that espouses the consumption of capitalist goods as a demonstration of women's 'equality' appears so convincing).

In Mr. Bokorhurst's attempt to create slaves who will only obey and never revolt is an attempt at creating a group of young women whose sole purpose is to serve. In this text (and in the original *Jane Eyre*) Bokorhurst's goal is the indoctrination of submission. The time the girls spend reading the Bible epitomises the imperative to obey the patriarchal word. Bokorhurst is not alone in idealising the kind of young woman who neither eats, nor speaks, nor has any desires of her own. Sleeping Beauty, Snow White, and the Little Mermaid (to name only a few of the most famous fairy tale women) make it clear that whenever possible, it is best if the girl is sleeping or dead and always silent.<sup>21</sup>

### 1.3 Framing the Heroine

Piecing together this history, we find that what Jane is fighting this time is the monstrous Other, brought back to England by Bokorhurst, who would misuse the myth and religion of the colonial Other-place by putting lower-class English girls under his spell, resuscitating their bodies and enslaving them to an un-life of servitude. Unwittingly, Mr. Bokorhurst involves himself in a politics of consumption that results in his becoming food for the zombies he created. He dies from wounds inflicted upon him when the zombi girls, feasting on the hand of one of their already decapitated cohort, attack their creator and start to chew on him, eventually severing an arm. He dies from his wounds and from what Miss Temple terms his "unnatural pursuits" (98). Curiously, in this scene, the zombi girls attack their maker immediately after Jane exhorts them to "[s]tand up! Rise up!" (96), and to rebel against the man who controls them. While what incites the girls is not Jane's words but rather the severed hand that falls from her apron, the rebellion does occur and the zombis do destroy their maker.

Despite their rebellion, and eventual victory over Bokorhurst, it is Jane and Miss Temple who sever the girls' heads and return them "to nature, to the heavenly home they deserve" (95). As with the killing of the vampires, Jane's work to kill the

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<sup>21</sup> As a disturbing extension of the 'sleeping girl' plot there has also emerged the 'dead girl' plot, wherein the protagonist is a ghostly revenant. See Tonya Hurley (2008) and Linda Joy Singleton (2008).

zombis is framed in terms not only of her destiny as a slayer, but also as saviour – something her Uncle Reed’s ghost exhorts of her when he says: “Save them, Jane, as only you can” (15). In protecting the living from the monsters, she is also saving the immortal souls of the not-dead-enough. “I could not forget my uncle’s words, his charge to me to right wrongs, his insistence that I had it in my blood, the power to effect a change. I was Jane Slayre, and the time had come to act accordingly” (79).

Jane’s role as a saviour is further highlighted as the principal occupation of the zombi-girls, when they are not engaged in working, is to read psalms. When Jane finds Helen Burns the zombi, the other girl will not talk to her, telling her: “Leave me. I must read my psalms” and that “Mr. Bokorhurst instructs us to find the Lord in all things. Mr. Bokorhurst alone knows the way to God” (90). The irony of this is, of course, not lost on Jane, who feels that their bodies and souls are chained to the Earth, unable to return to heaven. After decapitating Helen Burns the zombi, Jane feels that she had “done the right thing. [She]’d saved Helen. [She]’d set her free” (92). After Miss Temple congratulates her on ‘killing’ the zombis she is given further approbation when her mentor decides that it is time to face the zombi-maker, and to do away with all of the zombis at the school.

This decision is precipitated not so much by the desire to liberate the girls, as from the crisis created when they consume meat pies that the unknowing housekeeper prepares and attack the poor woman and other residents of the school. Only then does Jane feel that it is her duty to ‘slay’ the zombi girls and ‘release’ them from their life of servitude. Jane and Miss Temple work together to trick the zombified into the library where she “delivered a strong stroke, a clean cut. After the fourth, it became mechanical. Eight more came in succession, and I made short work of them all” (94). The rising and falling of Jane’s sword, combined with the brutality of decapitating her fellow students (however deservedly), works to dehumanise Jane by turning her into a sort of human guillotine.

### 1.3.1 Motivations and Manipulations

While Elizabeth Bennet’s violence, in fighting the ninjas is de-humanising and involves her in a politics of consumption that partly zombifies her, Jane’s violence in the slaying of her zombified friends is depicted as a quasi-religious act wherein

she saves them by severing their head from their body so that their souls can return to them and they can rest peacefully. Jane as saviour is framed several times in the novel as committing acts of kindness and generosity. Elizabeth is framed in the same light, curiously, when she does not slay one of the zombies. Specifically, when the Bennet girls are out for a walk, they encounter a horde of zombies and commence killing them. Once they finish and continue along their way, a female zombie, carrying a baby zombie, emerges from the forest and the girls are faced with the question of whether it is kinder to allow the mother and her child to 'live' or to kill them. Elizabeth contemplates killing them both, but in the end her 'compassion' wins, and she allows them to continue:

'A zombie infant – no more alive than the musket I mean to silence it with.' Elizabeth again raised her weapon and aimed. The female dreadful was now more than halfway across the road. She trained her sights on the elder's head; her finger caressing the trigger. She would put it down, reload, and dispense of them both. All she had to do was squeeze. And yet...she did not. There was a stranger force at work, a feeling she faintly recalled from her earliest days, before she had first traveled to Shaolin. It was a curious feeling; something akin to shame, but without the dishonour of defeat – a shame that demanded no vengeance. 'Could there be honour in mercy?' she wondered. It contradicted everything she had been taught, every warrior instinct she possessed [...] It was agreed that none of them would ever speak of it. (*Pride* 92)

Visions of the 'mother' and infant seem to return Elizabeth Bennet to a state prior to her warrior training, suggesting in no small part that the warrior training is the learned, performed persona, while the more 'natural' state is that which would feel sympathy for the baby and the 'woman' who cares for it. And yet, the relationship of this feeling to shame is somewhat curious. Even though the 'warrior instinct' would indicate that what she feels as a warrior is more primal, more 'natural,' there is a tension between the decision to spare the two zombies and its relationship to the proper lady that she was before she was trained as a warrior. That she feels 'shame' is perplexing – the indication is that the feeling is the result of heeding the impulse not to 'kill.'

Whereas Jane Slayre is seen to be compassionate and kinder when she kills the zombified girls, Elizabeth is at her most compassionate when she allows a zombie mother and child to 'live.' Leaving aside the question of how the humanity

of the zombies is misread here, with Elizabeth attributing characteristics of love and care to the 'mother' zombie (characteristics she cannot, as a zombie, possess), and turning to the fact that it is the presentation of motherhood that which sways Elizabeth. While she reprimands herself for her 'weakness' the whole situation is presented as an example of her femininity. There is something strange and disconcerting about this scene as it occurs during the visit with Mr. Collins who is on the brink of asking Elizabeth to marry him. It is hard to know whether we are to read it as an indication of her adequacy as a potential wife and mother (though of course not for Mr. Collins) or if the scene is meant to demonstrate that despite all of the preceding indications to the contrary, she is not only driven by her warrior sensibilities but that she has more traditional female values at heart. Of course, the presentation of motherhood is extremely disconcerting. As zombies are famous for continuing to engage in the actions which characterised them in life, this zombie can be read as demonstrating her past as a mother. That Elizabeth should respect this above other potential 'pasts' is a haunting dictum on just how pervasive the rhetoric on the sanctity of motherhood is.

For her part, Jane Slayre, whose mother was killed while slaying vampires with Jane's father, can only leave her child the legacy of slaying. Jane then moves through the novel attempting to locate a mother figure and failing miserably. In Lowood, both Helen Burns and Miss Temple substitute as maternal objects. Both, of course, end up abandoning Jane, Helen by dying (and requiring that Jane behead her zombified corpse) and Miss Temple by marrying and leaving Jane for her life with her husband:

From the day she left, I was no longer the same. Without Miss Temple, every warm and settled feeling, every association that had made Lowood in some degree a home to me, was gone. I had imbibed from Miss Temple something of her nature and many of her habits. Peaceful, harmonious thoughts had taken over the violent, wild feelings I'd begun to develop in my youth. (101)

The role the maternal figure plays in attenuating the violence of the protagonists by mentoring them and teaching them to harness their skills is quite evident in *Jane Slayre*. It is Miss Temple who initiates Jane in the practice of slaying and also creates the feeling of 'home' that she yearned for. Unsurprisingly, to fulfill her destiny, Jane must leave Lowood and seek out a new master, St. John Rivers

first, and later on Rochester. Returning to this point in a moment, it is worth digressing and pointing out that Elizabeth Bennet and her sisters do not, of course, have the benefit of a strong maternal figure to initiate them into the ways of the warrior. Instead, it is their father who (like Jane Slayre's uncle) urges them to become more proficient and to hone their skills. And they too must undertake the journey toward the eventual master, as does Jane Slayre, when they go to train in China. It would seem that the Dashwood sisters in *Sense and Sensibility and Sea Monsters* are the only ones who are not required to travel in order to complete their training. While on the one hand this could be attributed to their relatively minor role as warriors—in that they do not engage in the same level or frequency of combat as the other protagonists—, on the other hand it could also be attributed to the strong role model they have in their mother.

The first act of battle that we see in Winters' text has Mrs. Dashwood as the primary figure:

It was Mrs. Dashwood who acted first, even as the sailors were still loading their blunderbusses and the coxswain was pulling the tarpaulin off the Ship's cannon. She grasped a spare oar from its rigging, snapped it in twain upon her knee with a swift motion, and plunged the sharp, broken point into the churning sea – piercing the gleaming, deep-set eye of the beast. 'Up, mother! Drive it up!' shouted Elinor, and leant hard upon the flattened oar end to push the sharp point into the brain of the sea serpent. (29)

The image accompanying the text shows a formidable Mrs. Dashwood with two of the girls 'cowering' behind her, and the sailors chaotically and ineffectually moving around on the deck of the ship – with the sea monster occupying half of the frame, with the torso of a sailor in its mouth (30). While Elinor Dashwood will come to engage in hand-to-hand combat with other sea monsters, and even with a group of pirates, Mrs. Dashwood is obviously a strong role model (at least in the warrior ways if not others) for her daughters.

The texts seem to indicate that the absence of a (strong) female role model requires that the heroines leave the domestic sphere and seek out training from a secondary source. That said, all three texts highlight the importance placed on the heroine's desire for improvement and her dedication to being a warrior that is evidenced by studying and self-teaching. The heroic journey, as defined by Campbell (1949), is played out here as the heroines must undergo the departure,



initiation, and return. However, Stuller argues that the female hero privileges 'understanding' the world rather than "dominating, controlling, or owning" it (5). As such, the journey, for the heroine, does not involve the triumphant return, but instead, she returns in order to continue to fight and, ultimately, to marry.

### 1.3.2 Violent Displays and Heroic Forms

As a counter-point to the excessive violence Elizabeth demonstrates when she is challenged by a more powerful (socially and economically) woman than herself, I want to consider how Elizabeth displays her talents when the one who challenges her is male. In this episode she again illustrates the skills she learned while training in China, this time for Mr. Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam as well as the others. She chooses to demonstrate for them her ability to walk on her fingers. As Stuller has noted, "[b]ecause a woman learns early that it is her destiny to gain the treasures of financial support, love, and social acceptance by pleasing others rather than by heroically acting and changing the world, she focuses not on what she sees, but on how she is seen" (23). She has tied a 'modesty rope' about her skirt, and "placed her hands upon the floor and lifted her feet heavenward" (136). Compare the gore and violence of the first scene with this, more tame display. The primary purpose of this exercise of Elizabeth's appears to be to convert her into an object of spectacle for the young men. The pleasure of looking at her, the schophophilic act that Laura Mulvey, through Freud, suggests exists "as the erotic basis for pleasure in looking at another person as an object" (9), is made patently clear here. There is no doubt that Elizabeth Bennet is engaged in any act but that of performing. The "*to-be-looked-at-ness*" (italics in the original 11) that Mulvey identifies as the principle role of women on screen is not contradicted here. The whole performance is conceived so that the males present, Mr. Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam, can *look* at Elizabeth. Mr. Darcy goes so far as to "station himself so as to command a full view of the fair performer's countenance" (*Pride* 136). The point is further driven home as the scene ends with "the request of the gentlemen [that she remain] on her fingertips till her ladyship's carriage was ready to take them all home" (138). The fingertip exercise is witnessed by the entire party: Lady Catherine, Darcy and Fitzwilliam, as well as Mr. and Mrs. Collins, Charlotte's sister

Maria, Lady Catherine's daughter and her maid. Yet throughout only the gentlemen and Lady Catherine are seen to address the protagonist. Any reaction the rest might have to Elizabeth Bennet's feat is ignored. Lady Catherine is the only woman permitted a voice during Elizabeth Bennet's performance; and as a figure who, despite her wealth and skill and the potential inciting change that these might confer her, is clearly a figure of patriarchal power. She is, in a sense, the figure that, as a woman has broken through the barriers of what women can be expected to achieve, and yet she has done so not only by abiding by the rules of patriarchy but also by strictly enforcing them. The result is that the scopophilic pleasure of looking is also granted to her. Even so, she takes the opportunity to diminish Elizabeth's skills, and asserting her own (though the reader is not given an example) by observing the performance and offering "many instructions on execution" (139). Though this might be read as a desire to aid the protagonist and improve her skills, it is coupled with the fact that the elder woman never gives "compliment to Elizabeth's skills" and only voices criticism, in a clear demonstration of the way in which rivalry between women is fomented by patriarchal society (132).

During the finger-walking scene, Lady Catherine comments that Elizabeth "has a very good notion of fingering," Darcy replies: "'That she does' in a manner such as to make Elizabeth's face quite red" (138). This innuendo about her 'fingering technique,' which Mr. Darcy makes, sexualises Elizabeth's physical skills. Her body is undeniably strong, and physically capable of a variety of feats, both violent and nonviolent, but to make that body conform to ideals of femininity or womanhood, to the ideals which will render her attractive to her male audience, she becomes an object that they can look at. The physically impressive feat of walking on her fingers is here reduced by Darcy's remark to a comment on her ability to perform a sexual technique. This observation is further complicated by the fact that Mr. Darcy can have no knowledge of Elizabeth Bennet's sexual abilities, and anything he could say to the point would be mere conjecture.

The tendency to make mildly off-colour comments occurs throughout the novel, as Mr. Darcy also puns on the word 'balls,' on two occasions deliberately invoking the slang for testicles when the conversation is about the social gathering. When dancing with Elizabeth, she says to him: "I may observe that private balls are

much pleasanter than public ones” to which he replies, “On the contrary, I find that balls are much more enjoyable when they cease to remain private” (73). There is also the exchange between Caroline Bingley and Mr. Darcy: “‘I should like balls infinitely better,’ she replied, ‘if they were carried on in a different manner.’ ‘You should like balls infinitely better,’ said Darcy, ‘if you knew the first thing about them’” (45). As Elizabeth understands the innuendo, and Caroline Bingley does not, the implication is somehow that the warrior woman is better acquainted with the sexual side of things than the non-warrior woman. The protagonist’s ability to understand Darcy’s meaning adds a further layer to her, so that she is also versed in vulgar sexual terms (as we have seen previously in the ‘fingering’ remark).

Rather than the active body that fights off three well-trained ninjas, her performance for Lady Catherine’s nephews is passive, involving the no doubt difficult but comparatively sedate act of walking on her fingers. When her warrior skills are put on display for a primarily female audience, when she has been directly challenged by another woman, she is merciless and brutal. When the audience is masculine, however, she demonstrates a different type of skill – one that can, as it does for Mr. Darcy, elicit heteronormative desire. The further implications of this scene, as with the accompanying one of Elizabeth fighting the ninjas and the later scene in which she fights Lady Catherine, hint at the trope of women’s competition amongst themselves. In a sense, Elizabeth is showing off, displaying her talents for the male observers, and in the fight against Lady Catherine there can be no doubt that the women are competing for Darcy’s affection/attention.

This same trope, in which women fight each other for male attention, is repeated in the other two novels as well, though less explicitly. As in the original, Elinor Dashwood’s rival for the affections of Edward Ferrars is Lucy Steele – a sea witch. The rival for Mr. Rochester’s ‘affection,’ or at least his hand in marriage, is the same Bertha Mason – now a she-wolf. In Elinor’s case, while she and Lucy Steele never engage in hand-to-hand combat, the magic of the sea-witch often attacks her whenever Edward Ferrars is in danger of becoming too attached to his fiancée: “Elinor’s mind was aflame; her entire spirit throbbled with distress. The five-pointed symbol, that totem of agony, returned” (*Sense* 316). This recurring image, and the pain it causes the protagonist, is often repeated throughout the

novel, though it is only at the end that the reason is revealed: “‘It is the five-pointed symbol you described, and its accompanying distress,’ came the reply. ‘Certain sensitive souls can sense their [sic] presence of sea witchery; they come to sense the distinctive presence of a witch, and it causes them a searing, throbbing pain, precisely as you have described it’” (320). The implication is that Elinor Dashwood is not only Lucy Steele’s rival, but also endowed with a certain ‘sensitivity’ that means that Lucy’s presence causes her pain. The enduring patriarchal structure that pits women against each other is seen in these texts (and in *Jane Slayre*) more literally: the impediment to the protagonists’ happiness is not just another woman, but a *monstrous* other woman. By fighting against this Other, the protagonist is not only securing her own potential marital felicity, but also performing a necessary public service. The feminism as zombie trope, in which the heroine engages in her fight without reflecting on the mechanisms that require her to do so, is made patently clear here.

Returning to *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, readers find that much of Mr. Darcy’s attraction to Elizabeth is, as in the original novel, a result of her singular education combined with her more independent personality. This independence of character is re-worked in the zombie novel to become closely attached to Elizabeth’s capacity to restrain her violence or for the violence to be restrained. When Mr. Darcy first proposes to Elizabeth, she kicks him into the living room fireplace. Unable to control her violent impulses, she engages her suitor in hand-to-hand combat.<sup>22</sup> In this instance, the first one in which Mr. Darcy sees Elizabeth’s skills used against someone other than a zombie, she is restrained by him, as his own ability exceeds hers, repeating the literary motif of the strong woman eventually falling in love with the man who can dominate and restrain her (either physically or emotionally), as in *The Taming of the Shrew* classic theme. The wild woman, the one who would eschew the heterosexual contract, is quite often made to see that submitting to the male figure is ‘enjoyable’ and ‘desirable.’ This trope, that in which the love interest must be capable of physically subduing the heroine, will be revisited in the following chapter. However, it is worth noting that as much as the capacity for violence and physical action does not dampen the desirability of

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<sup>22</sup> The scene is curious because it is both a proposal and a combat scene between Mr. Darcy and Miss Bennet (*Pride* 149- 153).

the heroine, an excess of it, that is, if it cannot be controlled by her love interest, would exclude her from the heteronormative happy ending. Further, subduing the heroine reinforces the male ego cultivated by patriarchal norms, through which satisfaction is gained in subduing the 'wild' woman, and the greater the challenge the greater the sense of achievement.

Accordingly, by the end of the novel, Elizabeth learns to repent her attack on her beau and accepts that in order to be attractive to him, and for him to understand her feelings for him, she must limit her violence to the zombie hordes. This is apparent when she is challenged in combat by Lady Catherine, and despite eventually beating the woman Elizabeth refuses to kill her. For both Elizabeth and Lady Catherine the "failure to kill her [the latter] when she had the chance" was a demonstration of weakness which "would forever turn Darcy's eye away" and yet it has the reverse effect, convincing him that she did love him else she "would have beheaded Lady Catherine without a moment's hesitation" (299). While she may have been attractive before, it is her ability to control her violence which Darcy reads as the capacity to love him.

In his study on comic book culture, Bradford Wright questions to what extent heroines are constructed as role models for girls and to what extent they are another extension of male desire. He argues that comic book heroines are "not so much a pitch to ambitious girls as an object for male sexual fantasies and fetishes (Wright 21)." I would take this one step further – in today's postfeminist culture, in which women's bodies are depicted as strong and violent primarily as a means of selling products, I think these heroines, like Lara Croft, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, or Silk Spectre of the *Watchmen*, are constructed as role models for young women, role models who clearly triangulate the relationship between women's rigorous attention to their bodies, physical strength, the healthy or attractive heteronormative body, and the desiring male gaze it elicits. In her study on *Gender and the Media*, Rosalind Gill illustrates how

[c]ontemporary femininity is constructed as a *bodily characteristic*. No longer associated with psychological characteristics and behaviours like demureness or passivity, or with homemaking and mothering skills, it is now defined in advertising and elsewhere in the media as the possession of a young, able-bodied, heterosexual, 'sexy' body. (Gill 91; italics in original)

As a zombie fighting heroine, Elizabeth Bennet's body is subject to great scrutiny; it is her primary weapon. If we consider how her 'rival' for Mr. Darcy's romantic attentions, Caroline Bingley, describes Elizabeth we are told that:

I must confess that I never could see any beauty in her. Her midriff is too firm; her arms too free of loose flesh; and her legs too long and flexible. Her nose wants character – it is unbearably petite. Her teeth are tolerable, but not out of the common way; and as for her eyes, which have sometimes been called so fine, I could never see anything extraordinary in them. They have a sharp knowing look, which I do not like at all; and in her air altogether there is a self-sufficiency and composure which is intolerable. (*Pride* 218)

Although Caroline attempts to discredit Elizabeth by describing a body that may not be attractive to her, in her time, it must be acknowledged, is a body which fits quite well with the contemporary notion of female attractiveness that privileges the not-too-athletic body achieved through exercise; a firm midriff, long and flexible legs, no loose flesh. Admittedly, Elizabeth's body is not the direct result of an attempt to mold her figure so as to be attractive. Rather, it is through following her goals to become a warrior that she comes to have a physically fit and desirable body according to contemporary norms (though certainly not those of the 19<sup>th</sup> century England). Returning to Rosalind Gill for a moment, we find that discourse in the media codes feminism so that "[w]omen are presented not as seeking men's approval, but as pleasing themselves and, in doing so, they *just happen* to win men's admiration" (Gill 91; italics in original). This is doubly true for Elizabeth, who by having a 'profession' and for the way this codes her body is both more physically desirable to Mr. Darcy though perhaps socially less appropriate as a mate.

The attention to Elizabeth's body is extremely important, not only because of the way in which the postfeminist heroine is constructed as acceptably violent because she is (hetero)sexually desirable. It is worth returning to the figure of the zombie for a moment, as that which Elizabeth is fighting against (and theoretically the only acceptable target for her violence) and that against which her body is contrasted. With their infectious bite and degrading bodies, the zombies are a constant threat to the bodily integrity of the living because with one bite the human body is infected and no longer human. This threat of contagion is the threat of losing control over the body, however imaginary this control might be, as

zombification automatically connotes the inability to impose the will on the body. Shannon Winnubst articulates the relationship between the abject body and what she terms the 'body-in-control' as follows:

To be a body-in-control, it must be tightly sealed – rigidly separated, distinctly individual, and straightly impermeable ... strict boundaries between itself and the Other are what allow this subject to count itself as a solid individual... And yet it is fluids that it contains – soft, gooey, sticky fluids circulate through this body's veins and cavities.  
(6)

The imperative to eradicate as many zombies as possible is, for Elizabeth, the double imperative to also deny the part of herself that is physically similar to the zombies, the part that is soft and fluid and at risk of infection. For the body-in-control to be at risk of contamination by the zombies, the similarity between the two bodies (us and them) must be, at least unconsciously, recognized. As Webb and Byrnard note, “[t]he transmission of the ‘virus’ between us and them indicates our closeness: viruses (mostly) travel between like species” (84). It is this similarity that is most frightening and what must be fought against. For the postfeminist body, the carefully sculpted, heteronormatively attractive one, it is necessary to project the image of a body that is whole, contained, and most certainly not leaky or excessive. Elizabeth's body occupies the dual position of physically attractive (at least by contemporary postfeminist standards) and responsible for eliminating the threat the zombie poses to humans – both the threat of bodily contagion and the threat of disrupting the social order. Killing the zombies is the reaction to the need to defend the self from the threat of death that they embody, and also the need to negate the abject, the part of the self that is uncontrolled or uncontrollable, that is always threatening to exceed the bounded limits of the contained, militarised body.

It is not only Elizabeth's *body* that is constructed as a postfeminist ideal but also, through her training and education, her attitude and manners as well. Indeed, as he lists the requirements of the ideal woman Darcy illustrates the increasingly unattainable levels to which a woman must aspire if she is to elicit heteronormative desire. He is no longer satisfied with the upper-class woman's education. His suitable life-partner must also be a woman who has received a zombie-slaying training, something, as noted previously, that is rare, difficult to

attain, and not for those of the lower classes. The longer list indicates the demands placed on women (and it must be admitted, increasingly on men as well) to greater levels of discipline in order to fit the mould of heteronormatively attractive bodies.

This new woman

must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages; she must be well trained in the fighting styles of the Kyoto masters and the modern tactics and weaponry of Europe. And besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions. (34)

This is a daunting list indeed, and the ideal, for him, is a woman who is trained in both the traditional ‘female arts’ and the new, zombie fighting ones as well as the more mysterious ‘something’ that only he can identify – this something that could keep a woman guessing and constantly trying to measure up. The same training that can help a woman to earn independence by giving her a trade, is the very one that makes her more desirable. For Rosalind Gill, “[t]his is the new superwoman: intelligent, accomplished, effortlessly beautiful, a wonderful hostess and perfect mother who also holds down a demanding professional position” (82). In enumerating the reasons why Darcy had fallen in love with her, Elizabeth states that it must have been because:

You were disgusted with the women who were always speaking, and looking, and thinking for *your* approbation alone. I roused, and interested you, because I was so unlike *them*. I knew the joy of standing over a vanquished foe; of painting my face and arms with their blood, yet warm, and screaming to the heavens – begging, nay daring, God to send me more enemies to kill. The gentle ladies who so assiduously courted you knew nothing of this joy, and therefore, could never offer you true happiness. (311; italics in original)

This account, aside from raising the question of *who* Elizabeth’s foes were, as it is unlikely that she would have painted herself with the contaminating blood of a zombie, also points to how it is her difference from the other women of their acquaintance, who are not zombie-slayers, that makes her attractive. While her manners and “liveliness” (311) make her a socially acceptable mate for Darcy, what distinguishes her from the “ladies who so assiduously courted” him is her specialised knowledge of the martial arts. She further suggests here that, unlike



these other ladies, she did not court him, did not seek to win his approval or his love, and perhaps it is this trait, more than the others, which she thinks eventually wins him over. As Gill further argues in talking about how feminism has been co-opted by the media as a way of attracting the opposite sex, “her pursuit of feminist goals (or, at least, goals encoded as feminist signifiers within the discourse of advertising) makes her more, rather than less, attractive to men” (97). A corollary of this is the aforementioned satisfaction to be gained through the ‘taming’ of the independent woman, which frames her re-inscription within the heteronormative contract as a conceptual defeat of feminism.

Jane Slayre’s body, at the beginning of the text is less trained, more childish and spare. Mrs. Reed says to her:

I regret to be under the necessity of keeping you at a distance; but until I hear from Bessie and can discover by my own observation that you are endeavouring in good earnest to acquire a more fierce and bold disposition, a more athletic and controlled manner – something quieter, stealthier, more unnatural as it were – I really must exclude you from privileges intended only for ruthless, bloodthirsty little children. (2)

Though by the middle of the novel, once she has trained and become St. John’s acolyte, her body has also morphed, becoming stronger, and through her study sessions with him she is also able to craft and engineer weapons and speak other languages.

We can compare Elizabeth Bennet’s and Jane Slayre’s corporeality to that of Elinor Dashwood who is:

this eldest daughter, possessed a strength of understanding which qualified her, though only nineteen, to be the counselor of her mother. She had an excellent heart, a broad back, and sturdy calf muscles, and she was admired by her sisters and all who knew her as a masterful driftwood whittler. Elinor was studious, having early on intuited that survival depended on understanding; she sat up nights poring over vast tomes, memorizing the species and genus of every fish and marine mammal, learning to heart their speeds and points of vulnerability, and which bore spiny exoskeletons, which bore fangs, and which tusks. (11)

Clearly, the requirements for a young woman are multiple and varied. Indeed, this passage clearly demonstrates not only the need to have a prodigious amount of

training and education, but also the fact that it must be combined with a self-control, or perhaps better said, a self-discipline in that much of Elinor's studying (and Jane Slayre's and even Elizabeth Bennet's) comes from her own desire to learn and improve herself and her skills. These are not women who are simply obeying the dictates of society or some master, but rather women who in and of themselves feel the need to learn and expand their skills. Further, again repeated is the way in which the female body is divided into parts, is 'a broad back' and 'sturdy calf muscles,' rather than a whole. While this passage does not make it explicit, further on readers learn that Elinor also has "a delicate complexion, regular features, and a remarkably pretty figure" (51). While her sister Marianne is "still handsomer" (51), readers understand that Elinor is a physically attractive woman along with her accomplishments. It is worth noting that when the various marriage plots have been resolved at the end of the novel, Marianne is married to the more wealthy and important Colonel Brandon (though he is less attractive, as half of his face resembles an octopus) while Elinor, the less heteronormatively attractive (though perhaps more accomplished) of the two, has married a man of lesser consequence.

However, just as we saw in the scenes where Elizabeth Bennet exhibits her various talents, it is necessary to combine traits coded as more feminine with those of the good warrior. Elizabeth may assert that she believes the "[c]rown more pleased to have [her] on the front lines than at the altar" (115), those very skills that can put her at the front lines are the same ones which will eventually lead her to heteronormative happiness with Darcy. What makes Elizabeth more of a postfeminist heroine than one who espouses Third Wave feminist ideals is arguably not only the fact that she welcomes the opportunity to become Darcy's wife, but rather her position as a warrior fighting the zombie menace. It is this role which engages her in the repetitive and mindless activity which requires her to discipline her body above all else.

While the posthuman monsters threaten British society, women are urged to move out of the domestic sphere and into the active social sphere, and yet in fighting them, women are in a sense fighting to protect the patriarchal order. By fighting what appears to challenge the social order, they are, in fact, fighting to maintain it. The Bennet sisters, and indeed many physically aggressive heroines,

are even further entwined in the patriarchal order, because of their role as fighting heroines since, despite being highly effective warriors, they are subordinated to a patriarchal figure. By joining the ranks of the warriors they swear allegiance to their Chinese master, and upon their return to England, to the King, as they have taken a “blood oath to defend the Crown above all things” (185). Further, upon marriage it is assumed that they will retire “as part of [their] marital submission” (Pride 85). The possibility for new constellations of power is diminished as the skills which would permit other relations are inevitably re-codified as the very ones that are desirable for heteronormativity and controlled by the patriarchy. Through the swearing of allegiance, first to the Chinese master (if not first to their own father), then to the King, and finally to a husband, the Bennets are at no point fighting to challenge the established order.

The zombie apocalypse does, however, open up the possibility for women of the Bennet’s social class to enter the workforce, as “Jane and Elizabeth tried to explain that all five of them were capable of fending for themselves; that they could make tolerable fortunes as bodyguards, assassins, or mercenaries if need be” (55). Unfortunately while the heroine is certainly a strong, independent-minded young woman, the task of fighting the undead hordes is not a liberating one. It is one that further entrenches women within a patriarchal system that, rather than offer new social structures, uses the rhetoric of postfeminist girl-power to convince its heroines that they are not forced into domestic bliss, but that they have freely chosen it themselves.

#### **1.4 Resistant Bodies: Legacies of the Other**

In line with the argument in the previous section, I will argue here that Jane Slayre, in the midst of all of her heroic slaying of the undead, is, perhaps unwittingly, fighting to reinsert herself into the patriarchal structure that her skills could potentially liberate her from. Put another way, while her ability to fight the posthuman menace makes her physically strong and capable, her insistence on aligning herself with the patriarchal social order, and not with the monstrous Other, results in her using this strength to defend the same social structure that restricts her. It is Jane’s construction as a postfeminist heroine who is physically powerful, extremely feminine and heteronormatively attractive (at least to two

men) which entangles her within a discourse in which her strength and possible independence are co-opted by patriarchal society and rendered innocuous.

To further complicate matters, the Monstrous Other, whether it be werewolf, vampire or zombie, is entwined within the narrative of the Postcolonial Other and the discourse of globalised capital. This troublingly locates Jane at the centre of a xenophobic and retrograde fight to protect England from the contaminating influence of these various Others, and rid it of those who have infiltrated its borders – whether willingly, or as slaves, or as commerce returned from the postcolonial/globalized capital Other-place.

Tabish Khair in *The Gothic, Postcolonialism and Otherness: Ghosts from Elsewhere* (2009) suggests that a common trope in Gothic and Gothic-inspired texts is that the Other is present through haunting and suggestion, but is rarely seen as a corporeal, concrete being who is more than just a presence. *Jane Slayre* continues to be haunted by Otherness, as Khair suggests, but the Other is now a corporeal being that does have a body, and its corporeality is marked by its provenance from another place and representing a non-capitalist mode of production (both metaphorically and in the manner of their reproduction). This physicality is one that Jane feels obliged to eliminate, despite the fact that it is in the fighting of these monsters that Jane herself comes to embodiment. Not only does her training make her physically stronger and more aware of her body and its movements, the act of slaying is, for Jane, about more than just the performance of a duty; she derives real physical pleasure from it. The first time she confronts Mrs. Reed she finds that “[s]omething of vengeance, of violence, I had for the first time tasted. As aromatic wine it seemed, on swallowing, warm and racy, burning in my veins intoxicating” (40). This feeling repeats itself throughout the novel as each time she kills she has “a feeling of power and triumph, a fierce pleasure racing through [her] veins” (92).

Nowhere in the novel is the physicality of the post-colonial Other as prevalent as in the now werewolf, Bertha Mason. Hidden in the attic, arguably for her own good and for the safety of the local inhabitants, Bertha becomes a werewolf with each full moon, and when she escapes she attacks people and livestock indiscriminately. In the Gothic novel of the nineteenth century, the heroine’s persecution is very often a result of psychological circumstances, “[t]he

phantasmagoric horrors that bombard her are the natural companions of repression, the price she must pay for her transgression, desire, even when it is only obliquely acknowledged and represented" (Massé 680). For Jane Slayre, these are not psychological horrors, but embodied ones, and she in turn experiences her desire, (the desire to slay) physically. Bertha is no longer only the mad wife Rochester has locked up in his house, she is also physically monstrous. Her body, her monstrosity is contrasted to Jane's heroic body.

Bertha's body is uncontrollable, it is infectious, and it changes without her permission. Not only is *she* unable to control it, but even Rochester has difficulty to subdue it. Jane's body, on the other hand, is sculpted from exercise that she does on purpose to improve her fighting technique. Where Bertha's body is leaky, Jane's is contained, in a dichotomy that clearly articulates what Winnubst (2003) articulates as a defining characteristic of the monstrous Other. Where Rochester cannot control Bertha's body, he does best Jane in a fight. If the vampire is the representation of the old economic system that will change with the colonial and post-colonial ventures, and the zombies are the representation of the mis-use of indentured slavery, then the she-wolf is equally sinister, combining as she does the uncontrollable body of the racialised Other.

Spivak argues "that Bertha's function in *Jane Eyre* is to render indeterminate the boundary between human and animal and thereby to weaken her entitlement under the spirit if not the letter of the Law" ("Three" 249). While Sherri Browning Erwin may or may not have read Spivak's text, it certainly seems as though she has taken the theorist's reading in the most literal sense. By turning Bertha Mason into a she-wolf, the 'boundary between the human and animal' is blurred and it becomes impossible to determine where the human ends and the animal begins, and the posthuman body is brought to the fore.

Bertha Mason's madness becomes, in Browning Erwin's novel, a literal posthumanisation. The werewolf is different from both the zombie/e and the vampire in that it is not dead, indeed, it is very much alive and it is the human-become-animal, the liminal figure that exists in the myriad becomings that Deleuze and Guattari (1987) theorise as part of nomadic deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation. Cynthia Jones (2012) argues that literary representations of "the female werewolf (especially in the nineteenth and twentieth century) present

the female as a willing participant in the bodily transformation from human woman to she-wolf" (41), and further that the she-wolf may find "that as a wolf, she is freer and can experience the world in ways that she had never known" were possible (43). Jones' optimistic reading of the potential for the she-wolf to offer a freer position for women, one that deems it unnecessary to abide by the strict patriarchal norms of Western society, is problematic though not impossible in the context of *Jane Slayre*.

Bertha Mason, the she-wolf, is imprisoned in Thornfield Hall. She is seen as a danger, both physically and socially, to Mr. Rochester, and as such he rationalises her treatment as a form of protection – going so far as to suggest that he is protecting her from herself. Needless to say, the freedom Jones argues as available to the she-wolf is non-existent here. However, it is possible to read the imprisonment of Bertha Mason as a direct response to the potential for freedom. The need to imprison the she-wolf, the descriptions of the havoc (dead cows, arson) she wreaks when she escapes, serves to underscore her 'danger' to society. The implication, however, is that the 'free' woman is dangerous, that, as Angela Carter asserts in *The Sadeian Woman*: "A free woman in an unfree society will be a monster" (27). For Spivak, in her reading of *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1965), Jean Rhys' now famous novel offers a re-writing of Brontë's work that highlights the very colonial themes that haunt the novel of *Jane Eyre*: Bertha Mason's character, Antoinette, "must play out her role, act out the transformation of the 'self' into that fictive Other, set fire to the house and kill herself, so that Jane Eyre can become the feminist individualist heroine of British fiction" (251). Jane Slayre is fulfilling her "destiny" (*Slayre* 15) by embracing her role as a slayer of monsters, and much of the tension in the text now revolves around her desire to slay the she-wolf, and in so doing liberate her lover from his unhappy marriage, and the feeling that he would no longer love her were she to do so. This fear is also seen in *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* when Elizabeth Bennet worries that Darcy will be repulsed by the fact that Elizabeth has bested Catherine de Bourgh in a fight. The dilemma of the postfeminist heroine is articulated around the fear that her violence may make her less desirable. Indeed, when Jane Slayre is reunited with Rochester she says to him: "What holds you back now? Your wife is dead, or so I have come to understand. Did I hear wrong?" and to herself thinks: "I swore to God if she was in

the attic now, I was going to dig out my gun with the silver bullet and march right upstairs and shoot her, right or wrong. Against his wishes or with his blessing” (377). What is most unsettling, perhaps, in this exchange, predominantly in the furor with which the protagonist asserts her willingness to shoot Bertha Mason, is the fact that she comes armed not only with the silver bullet, but also with the knowledge of a possible cure for lycanthropy, a cure which she later uses on Rochester to positive effect. That Jane Slayre has been working on finding a cure, even before she knew that Rochester had been bitten and so was himself a werewolf, is used as evidence of her goodness, her desire to save the other woman, and yet when even the hypothetical possibility arises, she swears to shoot and kill her, not to save her.

*Jane Slayre*, understandably perhaps, does not vary from the source novel, where the colonial female Other is already a monster locked in the attic; and indeed, Bertha Mason must die so that Jane can be rewarded with matrimony and her ‘true love.’ To ensure that she will continue to be viewed as a ‘good’ heroine, however, Jane cannot be responsible for killing Bertha Mason, and thus pave the way for her own marriage, but rather must wait until she dies. To return for a moment to Spivak, the narrative works to “*make the heathen into a human so that he can be treated as an end in himself*” (248). In this case, the ‘heathen,’ is the monstrous Bertha Mason, and turning her into a human serves the function of releasing Rochester from being married to her. This ‘conversion’ or ‘saving’ would make it impossible for Jane to marry Rochester, but by the same token to kill Bertha would have the same function, as this would go ‘against his wishes.’ In an interesting, but perhaps not unforeseeable, twist, before jumping to her demise, Bertha Mason bites Rochester.

Whenever there is someone Jane doesn’t like, she looks for signs of un-dead-ness. She hopes that the people she doesn’t like are monsters so that she can kill them without feeling guilty – indeed, so she can kill them and feel righteous and have an alibi for her killing. At Lowood School she dislikes Mr. Bokorhurst and thinks:

In that moment, I cared not a whit for Mr. Bokorhurst’s supposed mortality. Vampire or no, I wanted to strike him through the heart for giving Miss Temple a fright. I would absolutely never take the life

of another human being. It was out of the question [...] I found myself wishing I could discover some terrible secret about him, something that might *require me to save humanity by removing him from existence*. (64-65; italics mine)

Mr. Bokorhurst is not the only one. Another teacher comes in for the same treatment: “As far as I [Jane] was concerned, Miss Scatcherd was almost as bad as a vampyre. I studied her closely in case I could catch a glimpse of razor-sharp canines. Was it an accident that she sat far away from any windows?” (56). Even more troubling, and an aspect of the text that highlights the stereotype that women must compete with each other for men’s attention, Jane Slayre hopes that Blanche Ingram, Mr. Rochester’s supposed future wife, is not entirely human. She wonders: “Had she placed herself under an enchantment to accomplish so much and to do it all well? Was she perhaps an ugly goblin under a glamour to make her appear as a beautiful woman? All things were possible, and I would be considering her every move” (180). As she searches for indications of monstrosity in the people she does not like, there can be no doubt that, when she finally slays her cousins and eventually her aunt, there will be a feeling of justice being done, of punishment being rightfully meted out.

Returning to the trope of the post-colonial Other, *Sense and Sensibility and Sea Monsters* attributes, at least according to one theory, as previously mentioned, the rise of the sea creatures against the humans to the effects of colonial expansion. Readers of Austen’s text will remember that the two elder Dashwood sisters move to London with their friend Mrs. Jennings for part of the text. In this re-writing, the sisters move not to the above-ground urban metropolis but rather to an underwater cityscape: Sub-Marine Station Beta.<sup>23</sup>

And thusly was implanted, four miles below the ocean’s surface, a thriving city of some five and seventy thousand souls. Here were the living laboratories, where teams of hydro-zoologists worked to perfect new techniques of marine animal domestication and control; here were munitions experts and shipwrights, designing more effective vessels and armaments to wage war against the sea-beasts; and here, for those having the means, was a place to live and work and be diverted by numerous undersea pleasure gardens and aquatic

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<sup>23</sup> A Sub-Marine Station Alpha precedes ‘Beta’ but was destroyed in a plot by a merman.



exhibition halls. All in the total safety provided by a fortress in the very heart, as it were, of the enemy camp. (148)

The blatant folly and arrogance of constructing a city in the midst of the 'enemy campy' notwithstanding—which also raises the question of who, exactly, are the monsters and who the civilised beings—, the Sub-Marine Station is constructed primarily for two functions: pleasure and 'science.' It is a "city of wonders" (146) and visiting "would be productive of much amusement" (142). The laboratories and technical and scientific aspects are also highlighted, although their purpose appears to be directed primarily at ways of dominating and controlling marine life, not at co-habiting. The residents are certainly living among the sea creatures, but not with them. In the station they can look "out on the sea-life, treacherous and beautiful by turns, that went past the protected world of the Sub-Station" (150). Clearly the goal is not to integrate into the territory, but rather to continue as much as possible with the on-land lifestyle, modifying only where necessity dictates. The sea and its inhabitants are, like the colonised territories and colonial Others, impediments to be overcome in the quest to dominate or little more than curiosities to be looked at and 'domesticated.'

The text's critique of colonial 'civilising' missions does not stop at the merely satirical representation of the Sub-Marine Station inhabitants and lifestyle. It goes one step further by detailing the destruction of the city at the hands of the underwater creatures. The critique lies less in the actual destruction and more in the blatant ignorance and unawareness of the inhabitants. During the entirety of their stay, Elinor Dashwood noticed a "rapidly spreading network of tiny cracks in the Dome-glass, with its epicenter where the swordfish continued at their unending labour" (242). However, the blind faith in the engineers of the Dome, in technology and the superiority of the coloniser, leads her to do nothing about her observance. When the entire structure is about to be destroyed by the attacking sea creatures, the inhabitants still cling to the fact that "The engineers say we have nothing to worry about" (249). Though they are finally convinced of the error, and the Dashwoods and their friends do make their escape, it is clear that the attack serves as a criticism of the colonial ethos that sees colonial territories as a mere extension of the homeland and obliterates the occupation of lands inhabited by indigenous peoples.

The heroines of all three texts are engaged in a battle for survival against a myriad of monstrous Others who threaten their corporeal and ideological integrity. Whether these Others are zombies, vampires, a she-wolf or sea creatures, tension arises through the question of just how *other* these beings are. A close examination has hopefully revealed that in many ways, the heroines and the monsters have much in common. Further, despite being highly trained, capable and skilled, the fight against the monster is framed solely in terms that negate any potential the protagonist might have for enacting social change. Her mission, as it were, is not to slay the monsters and create a new society, but rather to fight for reinstating the *status quo*. By focusing on re-writings or ‘mash-ups’ of early, proto-feminist Victorian or Regency texts, it becomes clear that violent or active heroines are desirable, captivating and attractive, but that their talents are only secondary to the principal goal of finding a suitable mate. Even though the re-writing would indicate that gender roles would need to be renegotiated in the texts for them to appeal to contemporary audiences, the postfeminist discourse permeates them functions to reinvigorate “particular models of white, middle-class femininity that belong to the image repertoire of ‘pre-feminist’ cultural productions” (Munford and Waters 11). That these texts should enjoy popularity in the contemporary moment is testament to prevailing notions of postfeminism, and the idea that a woman’s agency and independence is only advantageous in so far as it helps her conform to patriarchal models for heteronormative desire and capitalist exploitation. The following chapter will interrogate the ways in which postfeminist discourse operates within a different genre – that of the comic book – and consider how or if the narrative shifts when the protagonist is racialised and the enemy is a different kind of posthuman – the technological kind.



**Chapter 2.**  
**Violent Heroines, Comic Books, and**  
**Systemic Violence**



## 2.1 The Role of the Action Heroine in Comic Books

That is, some of the qualities associated with  
masculinity are written over the muscular female body.  
These action heroines though, are still marked as women.  
(Tasker 149)

The focus of this chapter is on the comic book heroine and on both the violence she wields and that is wielded against her. Of primary concern is the way in which she is engaged within a discourse (both visual and textual) that delimits potential for agency and further entwines her within patriarchal norms. Despite this somewhat pessimistic view, this chapter will also turn to consider potential sites of contestation, moments in which the heroine tests the boundaries of her representation, and questions the framework of violence, systematic and physical, in which she is necessarily bound.

Continuing the work within the framework of Third Wave versus postfeminist theories previously implemented, this chapter turns to consider the intersection of violence in the racialised female heroic body, within a military discourse rooted in the long apocalypse through the analysis of the comic book heroine. As the women previously discussed were contrasted not only to the bodies of the apocalyptic monsters against whom they were fighting, but also in relationship to their eventual husbands, this section begins to consider the body and its relationship with the nation-state and the militaristic machine most specifically in its visual representation in the comic book or graphic narrative. The postfeminist ideal of the independent heroine as using precisely her supposed independence and physical prowess as traits that enhance her heterosexual desirability having been interrogated, it becomes evident that desirability is the cornerstone upon which the heroine's violence is predicated; not only does the heroine's normative physicality make her violence palatable and acceptable, but her violence also works to make her attractive within a heteronormative economy of the desiring gaze. The heroines seen so far in this thesis use their violence as a tool which reinforces the patriarchy, and nowhere does this become more evident than when their agency (problematic and questionable as it may be) is re-inscribed within the patriarchal structure with the reinsertion of the heroine into the private sphere when she marries at the end.

While we have seen the way the neo-Gothic re-writing continues to inform and be informed by a postfeminist iconography of heteronormativity, setting the heroine at the centre of a discourse of desirability in which her violence is mitigated by inciting heterosexual desire, the super heroine of the comic book genre, through her very visual representation, takes this one step further. By expanding on how violence as a postfeminist tool for inciting male heteronormative desire functions as a way of containing the liberatory potential of female agency, and by questioning how it is that violence by women comes to stand in as a marker for women's equality, this chapter will further examine alternative strategies for containment by considering the multiple ways in which representations of violence by women not only come to negate the very real, material violence inflicted on women, but also how these representations themselves can be read as a form of symbolic violence exerted on the female body.

Crucial to this analysis is a three-fold interrogation. The aim of this chapter is to look at the way in which violent women are represented in graphic novels and the way in which their violence is constructed as contingent upon an essential femininity. By turning to the comic book female hero, who, by her very nature must wield violence, we will finally move to consider if it is possible to resist these narratives. The racialised, heterosexual, young, working-class heroine Martha Washington, of the eponymous comic book series (Miller and Gibbons 1990-2007), will serve as the principal site of assessment of her potential to complicate dominant heroic female discourse.

The primary aim, as the title of this chapter indicates, is to consider the ways in which the violent heroine is both the agent and object of violence. Indeed, the way in which she enacts violence, or rather how this violence is represented, will be interrogated as the site of the symbolic violence used against her. While it is necessary to address the ways in which action heroines become the objects of violence, that is, how they are subjected to 'physical' violence throughout the narratives, the goal is to move past this to consider the ways in which the representation of heroic female violence, that is the codes used to present, condone or make it palatable or even 'heroic,' is in itself a way of enacting violence upon the female body.

In order to do so, a small variety of heroines from contemporary comic books will also be considered. By engaging in a brief history of the comic book super heroine, from her origins in *Sheena, Queen of the Jungle* (1937) and *Wonder Woman* (1941), up to the present day, and taking into account her transmutations and shifting signifier within her cultural landscape, a general theorisation of the heroine will emerge. While the more traditional representations – Batwoman, Captain Marvel, Oracle<sup>1</sup> and the like – are of note, Martha Washington will serve as the centre for an analysis because she opens up possible fissures within the commercially successful female super hero genre. While Martha is certainly not unproblematic, her racialised, militarised, dystopic narrative affords access to a discourse that does not rely on ‘sexiness’ as a key attribute for female heroism.<sup>2</sup>

Evidently, what is at play here is a tense relationship between the overt violence enacted by the heroine and the symbolic violence in which she is inevitably enmeshed. As Bourdieu (1977) has noted, bodies are bound up within relationships of power that are characterised by what he terms “symbolic violence,” that is, “that form of domination which, transcending the opposition usually drawn between sense relations and power relations, communication and domination, is only exerted *through* the communication in which it is disguised” (237; note 47). In contrast to more obvious violence, symbolic violence is naturalised, almost invisible, as it comes to form part of the system that produces it, acting upon bodies in such a way that, while no physical markings are discernible, it undoubtedly impacts and coerces the social order.

This symbolic violence against the heroines takes many forms. It can be seen in the costumes, noticeably revealing and rarely functional; in the lack of diversity, white women with only one body type represented – thin but curvy –

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<sup>1</sup> Batwoman first appeared in 1956, in DC Comics, by the writer Edmond Hamilton. Oracle, also a DC Comics character, is the alias of Barbara Gordon (who was Batgirl until she is paralysed in a fight), and first appeared in 1989 by the writer John Ostrander. Captain Marvel is from the Marvel Comics imprint, and is an ongoing character, the second Captain Marvel is Monica Rambeau starting in 1982 and the seventh Captain Marvel is again a woman, Carol Danvers, appearing in 2012. It is worth pointing out that, as the two principal comic book publishers, Marvel and DC are crucial in changing or maintaining diversity in the superhero genre, especially if we take into account that they are also highly influential in bringing the genre to the cinema.

<sup>2</sup> Note, of course, that ‘sexiness’ is highly subjective, and yet most heroines, as will be seen, do conform to a prototype of the white, busty, and beautiful woman and wear costumes that highlight their figures.



and almost exclusively heterosexual (contemporary Batwoman as the exception);<sup>3</sup> and in the hyper-sexualisation of female violence. It is the violence that ensures that, while the heroine may be defending the downtrodden, fighting on behalf of the weak or even saving the world, her body will come to represent what is at stake in both “overt violence and gentle, hidden violence” (Bourdieu 192).

Any doubt as to the importance of a heroine’s physique, and the rigid norms that govern it, can be dispelled with a quick perusal of some of the more popular comic book covers featuring women. Even the most cursory glance reveals cleavage baring costumes, high heels, exposed midriffs, and high-cut lingerie style body suits. The argument can certainly be made that the male superhero is subject to as strict a bodily discipline as is the heroine. Indeed, heroes are mostly white, muscular, heteronormatively attractive men. They too are the objects of a strict corporeal normativity. The aim here is not to compare or contrast female and male heroes, nor to elucidate an argument on who is the object of stricter disciplinary norms. Rather, while the male body is in many ways instrumental to his crime-fighting mandate, and the costumes worn tend to aid rather than hinder physical action, the heroine’s body type does little to further her heroic acts. The top-heavy, slim-waisted, thin-limbed body type (not to mention that long hair is often an accessory), would seem to hinder more than help. It is difficult to imagine carrying out the myriad of action scenes the heroine engages in while wearing tops that risk exposing the breasts, high cut unitards that leave the legs entirely bare, or the ubiquitous high-heels. Indeed, Kamala Khan, the first generation Pakistani-American teenager who takes up the mantle of Ms. Marvel in 2014<sup>4</sup> (and notable as a young, racialised, super-heroine who is the title character), complains about the costume saying “the hair gets in my face, the boots pinch, and this leotard is giving me an epic wedgie” (Willow Wilson #2). While she may have hoped that becoming Ms. Marvel would make her “feel strong” (Willow Wilson #2), what she finds

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<sup>3</sup> In *Batwoman* #17 (2013), the protagonist proposes to her girlfriend, Maggie Smith. This would have been the first same-sex marriage for characters in the DC publishing house (Marvel, the other major comics publisher, had the X-Man Northstar marry his long term boyfriend in June 2012). Controversially, in September 2013 DC’s editorial board, led by notable science fiction author Orson Scott Card, informed the author and graphic artist of *Batwoman*, J.H Williams III and W. Haden Blackman, respectively, of their refusal to allow Batwoman to marry, thereby provoking the resignation of both (Barry 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Kamala Khan first appeared in *Captain Marvel* #7 (2013), and headlines her own series as Ms. Marvel in *Ms. Marvel* Vol. 3 #1 (2014).

instead is that the experience “isn’t liberating” but rather “exhausting” and uncomfortable (Willow Wilson #2). The alienation produced by the uniforms or costumes is not, understandably, equally felt by all heroines. Indeed, there are some, like the 2010 *Batwoman* reboot, who enjoy uniforms that offer them “tech options” (*Batwoman: Elegy*, 2010). And yet the norm continues to be revealing, impractical outfits that function more as a way of reassuring readers that the heroine’s body is undeniably ‘female,’ than as an integral part of her crime-fighting activities.

I approach this sexualisation, by route of body type and uniform, as a highly complicated strategy of symbolic violence that serves to make overt heroic female violence palatable. It works as a containment strategy that reinforces her femininity despite her violence, and yet, it converts her actions into part of her desirability. It serves as yet another example of what, in his *Supergirls: The Fashion, Feminism, Fantasy, and History of Comic Book Heroines*, Mike Madrid (2009) identifies as “[s]trike a pose and point” powers (292). Madrid’s observation highlights the extent to which the heroine’s powers are extensions of her sexuality, not just actions her body engages in. The idea is that the heroine’s powers are not based on action, movement or even physicality, but rather that they are designed to be used when the heroine is standing still in a frame, limiting the body-to-body contact that would disturb the alluring image of the heroine standing, legs spread, arms outstretched, aiming her super-power at her opponent. While Madrid’s configuration is perhaps an oversimplification – contemporary heroines *do* often engage in hand-to-hand combat, and physically dominate the villain – there appears to be a disconnection between what the heroine *does* and how she is *depicted*.

Indeed, the overt sexualisation of the action heroine, the way in which her violence is intertwined with her sexuality, raises a series of questions. Sherri Inness (2004), in her work on action heroines, has asked “[f]irst, are they sex symbols developed primarily for a male audience? Second, how much is their power lessened by making them appear feminine and beautiful?” (Inness, *Action Chicks* 9). These questions are key to understanding the ways in which the action heroine is both a representation of powerful female agency and also a hyper-sexualised, heteronormative object of the late capitalist desire machine. These

heroic bodies are easily understood as postfeminist icons, whose individual desires are problematically bound up with hetero-normative male desire. In her analysis of the comic book and subsequent film *Tank Girl*, Elyce Rae Helford (1999) suggests that contemporary (Western) “[y]oung women seek to ‘project’ their sexuality as a form of individualistic empowerment; however, this ‘projection’ tends to be aimed directly at men, to attract their attention and, ultimately, approval” (Helford 297). Undoubtedly, then, the physical empowerment of the action heroine is intrinsically linked to a rhetoric that makes explicit the need for her agency to be couched in terms that continue to render her desirable to the male spectator. This problem, of course, is not new nor is it specific to visual media like film or comic books. It is, however, quite often ubiquitous to these media and postfeminist rhetoric conflates the relationship between physical empowerment and desirability, such that the two become signifiers for a nominal social equality, false as this might be.

Contemporary comic book heroines are certainly just as, if not more, physically active and engaged in the fight against evil than their predecessors, and yet they must, undeniably, look even more fetching while doing so. In his analysis of trends in comic books, Madrid has noted of the 1990’s that “[t]he irony of the whole situation was that finally there were more titles than ever starring women, but they were so highly sexualized that it seemed to cancel out any of their power” (283). The crux of the matter lies here, in Madrid’s observation; while there may be a plethora of representations of action heroines, it is not enough to simply have a handful of women in comic books, rather it is necessary to interrogate who, how and in what capacity they come to fill the ranks of the comic legions.

In 1999 Gail Simone, one of the few women working as an artist/writer in the mainstream super hero comic book industry in the United States, identified a troubling pattern within super hero story lines. What she found was that women, regardless of their status within the story – heroine, sidekick, girlfriend or villain –, were far more likely to not only be violently attacked, they were far less prone to recover from these attacks and so would disappear from the narrative. What’s more, the aim of killing off or maiming women within the texts was often in the service of the enhancement of a storyline for one of the male characters (that is, so that he could seek revenge for the death of his girlfriend, for example). Frustrated

with what she identified as a sexist trend within the already highly sexist comic book industry, Simone and some of her colleagues started a webpage listing all the women in super hero comic books who had been dealt such a violent fate, and asked readers to contribute characters they had identified as having been treated this way. She named the site *Women in Refrigerators*,<sup>5</sup> after the episode in the *Green Lantern* #54 (1994) comic when the eponymous hero comes home to find that his girlfriend has been murdered and stuffed into their refrigerator. While the site was successful in its attempts to draw attention to the way in which women characters were written out of the storylines it, inevitably, drew criticism and backlash from some readers who argued that comic books and super heroes were *supposed* to be violent, that male characters were also killed, tortured and maimed. Critics argued that Simone was exercising the type of ‘victim feminism’ which draws attention to the ways in which women are treated as victims but ignores the ways in which men are subjected to the same violations (as though this somehow makes it acceptable for people to be physically assaulted).<sup>6</sup> As Simone argued, the question is not whether or not the heroes are also subjected to violence, but rather, in what ways and to what ends – and this is where her critique was focused. Women, she argued, are not only a smaller percentage of characters, and percentage-wise are attacked far more often, but they are also more frequently the

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<sup>5</sup> Simone is not the only person interested in ‘talking back’ to comic book creators, and interrogating how they represent women. The Hawkeye initiative is a collaborative effort that encourages readers to think critically about how women’s bodies are drawn by displaying the contrasting images of a) a woman’s pose in a comic book next to b) the popular hero, Hawkeye, rendered by readers, imitating the woman’s pose and garb. The frequently humorous results highlight not only the disparity between male and female bodies but also how ingrained it is that women are sexualised in ways that men are not. The ‘absurdity’ of seeing Hawkeye drawn in pin-up girl poses that are somehow naturalised for women underscores just how deep the gender divide is drawn (no pun intended) in representation of heroic female bodies. At readers can find a ‘scientific study’ which calculated the BMI, or body mass index, of super heroes and super heroines and determined that while most heroes have BMI’s so high that they would be considered overweight, the average heroine, unsurprisingly, has a BMI of an underweight person – despite that fact that these women must often rely on physical strength to best their foes. A final mention is for Anita Sarkeesian’s online project “Women vs. Tropes” in which she discusses the ways in which women are represented not only in comic books but also in video games.

<sup>6</sup> It is worth mentioning the backlash, often quite violent, that Sarkeesian herself was subjected to when she first proposed the “Feminist Frequencies” series. This series, which considers how women are represented in mainstream media – she started specifically with video games but has since expanded her area of analysis – was produced through crowd-funding, despite the violent, extreme and often quite frightening verbal abuse launched at Sarkeesian for wanting to undertake this project. For a look at just how resistant the gaming industry, gamers and fans (some, not all) are to feminist discourse, and Sarkeesian’s experience in confronting it, see “Anita Sarkeesian at TEDxWomen 2012.”

object of incapacitating violence. Further, while heroes may be killed-off or maimed or lose their super-power, she found that it was often part of a narrative story arc which gave depth and motivation to the hero, whereas the heroine, in the same situation, became the impetus behind the hero's story or quite simply died (Sarkeesian 2011).

The ways in which heroines and super heroines of comics are violated, the ways in which their bodies and the violence against them become fodder for narrative arcs that progress as a result of the exclusion of the leading heroines, is as varied as it is troubling. Undeniably, being an action heroine, whether super or otherwise, opens one up to the possibility of being on the receiving end of physical violence. Arguably, it is part and parcel of the heroine's 'job description,' that she will be subject to attacks on her person. Indeed, Kathleen Kennedy and Frances H. Early (2003), in their work on women warriors argue that "[t]he just warrior is the responsible citizen whose willingness to shed blood for the common good entitles him to mastery over self and others" (1). Despite the fact that Early and Kennedy's definition of the 'just warrior' is predicated on a male subject, I think it's possible to extrapolate from this and apply it to the female warrior. With this move I in no way suggest that the action heroine is simply the female version of the action hero but rather that their primary functions must be the same. As Kerry Fine has noted, "[h]eroes are important in that their primary role is to protect or rescue" (154), and the starting point for the understanding of female heroes is this very premise: they 'protect or rescue.' And yet, by this account, the heroine would simply be a female gendered version of the hero, a woman who protects and rescues. However, as Fine further notes, and as will become apparent throughout this chapter, the heroine is not simply the definition of the male hero but biologically female: "As tough, aggressive protectors, [female heroes] trouble the traditional masculine construction of heroic power and expose it as a production of cultural performance" (155). This chapter will attempt to define the woman warrior in her role as heroine, and determine how we can recognise and understand her, without recourse to the simple binary of hero/heroine, that is, through the relationship – positive or negative – with the hero. One of the primary methods used is an analysis of the ways in which the condition of being female is used as a defining feature of the heroine, superseding even her actions.

The heroine is entitled to ‘shed blood,’ if we return to the definition of the ‘just warrior’ offered us by Early and Kennedy. Part of what constructs the heroine as such is her recourse to violence as a defence mechanism (of the self or of others). Corollary to this, then, is her positioning as someone who will, as a result, become the object of violence; presumably, some of the blood being shed might be her own.

### 2.1.1 Who’s That Girl?

Today’s action heroines, whether they grace the pages of comic books, television and movie screens, glossy adverts, or the media in general, come from a relatively short line that starts with *Sheena, Queen of the Jungle* in 1937. This is not to say that violent women didn’t exist in popular culture until they were drawn into comic books, quite the opposite. We need look no further than to the Amazons, ancestors of another famous heroine, Wonder Woman (1941), to see that, indeed, strong, violent women did not emerge from the heads of Will Eisner and S.M. Igor (the creators of *Sheena*), like Athena from the head of Zeus, during the Golden Age of comics (late 1930s to early 1950s). The modern-day heroine uses her powers for good – or in most cases, in the service of a specific nation-state that interprets her behaviour as good and heroic. In “La imagen de la mujer en los comics estadounidenses (1900-1950),” José Joaquín Rodríguez Moreno has noted that while action comics were fruit of the Great Depression, the emergence of the action heroine as a popular figure coincides with the Second World War and America’s participation in it. As middle class women were suddenly called to participate in the war effort, working within the public sphere, the super heroine who was strong, brave, beautiful and patriotic appeared in comic books. Worth noting, of course, is that with the end of the war, the number of headlining heroines (and heroes as well), would drop significantly, as the conservative politics of the day would push women back into the private sphere, the heroines too would beat a hasty retreat from their international sphere of action (Rodríguez Moreno 130-131).

The Golden Age of comics, then, saw a myriad of action heroines fighting crime, usually as sidekicks though occasionally in their own right. Most of these crime fighting ladies were rich heiresses who were bored with their pampered

lifestyle.<sup>7</sup> As Madrid has noted; “They had been forced into the roles of well-mannered daughters or girlfriends, and a secret life gave these women a chance to be themselves” (5). Especially worth of note here is the idea that the alter-ego is what offers these women the chance ‘to be themselves.’ For Madrid, the function of the secret-life is to offer the heroine the opportunity of casting off the strict social norms adherent to the middle and upper class women who were ‘bored’ with the role allocated to them by society. It would seem that ‘the problem that has no name’ identified by Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) served as impetus for these first comic book heroines.

Madrid’s analysis of the history of comic book heroines in the United States argues that early female heroes were “all inducted into the world of crime fighting by the men in their lives, who played a fatherly role by sanctioning a secret life for their girlfriends [...] But also, the message here was that these women didn’t have any inherent desire to do good; they were merely fighting crime to prove their love for their (boyfriends” (12). Indeed, Román Gubern and Luis Gasca assert that initially “[l]a heroína de los comics es la compañera del héroe, pero es también a menudo el objeto de su protección y defensa” (66). While Wonder Woman has since become a highly recognisable figure in popular culture (Sheena has not been so lucky) and is often thought to be representative of assertive, action heroines,<sup>8</sup> Bradford Wright notes that

there was a lot in these stories to suggest that Wonder Woman was not so much a pitch to ambitious girls as an object for male sexual fantasies and fetishes. The stories were rife with suggestive sadomasochistic images like bondage, masters and slaves, and men grovelling at the feet of women. Wonder Woman herself had a tendency to become enslaved by other women and forced to endure gratuitous humiliations. (21)

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<sup>7</sup> As highly charged as the word ‘ladies’ is, I use it consciously here to signal that the women depicted were, at least by day, representative of the normative and normalising social category of ‘ladies’: demure, upper-class, white, heteronormative, they represented the constraints of patriarchal normativity for certain women.

<sup>8</sup> Lynda Carter as the first television Wonder Woman is an iconic figure easily recognised even thirty years later. Wonder Woman herself became a sort of pop culture representation of the Women’s Movement in North America, gracing the inaugural cover of *MS Magazine* in 1972, and captioned “Wonder Woman for President”. William Moulton Marston was the creator of the *Wonder Woman* comics and a well-known psychologist.

What all of these authors point to are the various ways in which early comic book heroines were less portrayals of agentic, powerful women than they were images of corollaries to heteronormative desire. Admittedly, this is unsurprising; while heroines were included as an attempt to increase female readership, the principal market for action comics was (and still is, though to a lesser degree) young and male.

Arguably, the situation has changed drastically since Wonder Woman had to balance her love (unrequited when she is her alter-ego Diana Prince) for Steve Trevor with her super-heroic duty.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, while Trevor is enamoured of Wonder Woman, he is moderately dismissive of Diana Prince. Wright does note that she is a strong and able heroine, and yet “while the character was indeed powerful and the series featured more prominent female characters than any other, William Moulton Marston’s stories often underscored the Victorian assumption that superior female virtues like compassion and empathy were best applied as a restraining influence on aggressive men, not as a means to female self-sufficiency” (21). Further, Wonder Woman “behaves as though her mission to end tyranny is more important than romance, all the while fretting to herself that Steve might lose interest” (Madrid 44). If until now we’ve been focused on Wonder Woman, it’s not because she was the only woman fighting crime in the 1940s, but rather because she is one of the original women to not only headline her own series but who was also not conceived as a partner or derivation of a male super hero. Further, she not only continues to be recognisable to contemporary audiences, but her series is still being published. Her contemporaries, Miss America (1943-), Hawkgirl (1941-), Golden Girl (1947-), or Phantom Lady (1941-) – to name only a few – were relegated to the status of sidekicks or, oftentimes worse, mere love interests. Hawkgirl was originally Hawkman’s girlfriend, Miss America and Golden Girl fought as part of Captain America’s team, and Phantom Lady’s boyfriend worked for the U.S. State Department, and it was not always clear if *she* was helping *him* fight crime or if *he* was helping *her* (though he did not know about her secret identity). The 1980s, however, were a heady time for women in comics, as they slowly but surely came to have a greater presence.

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<sup>9</sup> Trevor is the military officer who ‘discovered’ the island of the Amazons where Wonder Woman lived a woman-only existence as Princess Diana.



While there were and continue to be women present in action comic books, they are undoubtedly a minority presence and with limited scope for action. Indeed, as Madrid again notes,

[c]omic book writers often suggest that women don't have the same dedication to the noble cause, because their need for love is often of equal or greater importance than their quest for justice. Super heroines want to fight crime, but want to settle down as well. [...] The implication is that no matter how powerful a woman is, she needs the love of a man to complete her. (57)

The intersection between a woman's power, her ability or desire to fight crime, and 'needing' "the love of a man to complete her" is a trope that continues to be pertinent seventy years after Wonder Woman abandoned her community on Paradise Island so that she could remain with her love, Steve Trevor. While still prevalent, however, it is thankfully not the only trope out there. In fact, as both comic books and their audiences have become more diverse, the twenty-first century has seen an increase in young women crime-fighters whose sexuality is deployed differently.

### **2.1.2 'Give Me Liberty:' Martha Washington and the Constraints of Heroic Women**

The comic book series that started with the initial edition of *Give Me Liberty: An American Dream* (1990) features a young, Black heroine, Martha Washington, in the war-torn United States of America at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century. As a way out of poverty, and the criminalisation of poverty in the gated slums of a dystopic Chicago, Martha joins the federal army, the ironically named PAX or Peace Force. Throughout the *Martha Washington* runs, which comprise twenty series issued over seventeen years, Martha emerges as a gifted soldier whose various exploits both on Earth and in space serve as the principal narrative of the graphic novel. In 2009 the entire series was collected in *The Life and Times of Martha Washington in the Twenty-First Century*. I use the term graphic novel interchangeably with comic book in this context, as the text lends itself to both appellations. The collected works offers the entire Martha series and at 600 pages can be considered a graphic novel. Though originally published in comic book format, that is, sequential issues published periodically,

the collected edition meets the requirements of the graphic novel form, a bound collected edition with a finite narrative arc. Given, as well, that it is the most complete collection, and that it includes page numbers which are absent from the initial publications, all references are to this edition.

Martha Washington's adventures open up a series of questions, most notably about the figure of the racialised heroine, the interaction between the heroic female body and technology, and of course the problematic militarisation of the young female of colour. Martha is not gifted with 'super' powers; she is resourceful, bright though with limited formal education, tough and dedicated, and while she has access to varying types of technology, she has no non-human attributes. While it may seem illogical to group her in to the super-hero genre discussed in the introduction to this chapter, she shares many of the traits and tropes deployed therein. Indeed, many are the heroes and heroines who have no super powers *per se*, and yet are undoubtedly superheroes. Examples include Batwoman, Batgirl and Batman, though are certainly not limited to the Bat 'family.' It is, however, precisely Martha's *humanity* that makes her of special interest. Much as Elizabeth Bennet and Jane Slayre discussed in the previous chapter, Martha's heroism is a blend of an innate capacity for heroics combined with discipline and a potential for action.

Amid the myriad heroines available for analysis, Martha Washington stands out as one of the only women of colour to headline her own comic. Milestone Comics, an imprint of DC Comics, did come out with its own woman of colour heroine during the nineties. Rocket, a teenage, single-mother and super-powered heroine is a fascinating character, and yet she was, until recently, relegated to the position of Icon's sidekick (McDuffie 1993-) and is not a title character in her own right.

As Jennifer D. Ryan has noted in "Black Female Authorship and the African American Graphic Novel," "[i]n black graphic narratives, characters' negotiations of the complexities of racial categories also engender a self-reflexivity whereby they comment on the very form they inhabit as a means of openly challenging both narrative conventions and social norms" (924). Martha's author and illustrator are both white men, and thus her series is far from exemplary of the "African American Graphic Novel" discussed by Ryan. Indeed, Caribbean-Canadian speculative fiction

writer Nalo Hopkinson asserted in a speech on women writers of colour that “it is obvious that *Martha Washington* is written by a white American, it’d be pretty obvious to many a woman reader that it’s written by a man. The markers scream loud and clear” (Hopkinson np). However, Martha’s presence within the panorama of superhero comics during the 1990s does open up a field of representation.

Hillary L. Shute and Marianne DeKoven assert that graphic narratives “have the potential to be powerful precisely because they intervene against a culture of invisibility by taking the risk of representation” (772). The very format of the graphic narrative, with its blending of visual and written representation offers a form of visibility that differs greatly from both the cinematic and the novel form. Chute and DeKoven argue that part of the difference between film and graphic narrative resides in the reader’s position *vis à vis* the text:

While seminal feminist criticism has detailed the problem of the passive female spectator following and merging helplessly with the objectifying gaze of the camera, the reader of graphic narratives is not trapped in the dark space of the cinema. She may be *situated* in space by means of the machinations of the comics page, but she is not ensnared in time; rather, she must slow down enough to make the connections between image and text and from panel to panel, thus working, at least in part, outside of the mystification of representation that film, even experimental political film, often produces. (770)

Arguably, then, the ‘power’ they locate in the comic book is both that of making visible the marginalised and/or invisible, and also that of enabling more active reading practices. This is not to say that readers of graphic narrative are all active, critical agents, but rather that the *possibility* for such readers is broadened by the form. The connections that must be made, as they state, “between image and text and from panel to panel” can be extended to what exists between panels as well, to the blank spaces, the space between frames. If the need to ‘read between the lines’ is inherent to the comic book form, the ‘risk of representation’ is prevalent throughout the super hero genre. Indeed, the previously mentioned alter-ego, the one that allows the hero or heroine to enact their inner selves, is always at risk of exposure, of becoming too visible. This double-edged sword of visibility, however, has its parallel within questions of race and racialisation. For Martha, the young, impoverished, Black female body, representation is both the entrance into the

symbolic space of the comic book, the possibility for readers to identify and recognise her, and the exposure to the extreme physical and symbolic violence enacted upon her throughout the story.<sup>10</sup>

Given that she is engaged in military actions throughout the length of the series, it is not surprising that the levels of violence depicted are at times extreme. She fights with all kinds of weapons, including hand-to-hand combat, repeatedly killing or maiming her opponents and quite often being injured herself. Questions are raised about the role of women in the military, how violence forms part of the discourse of postfeminism, and to what extent the nation-state figures in the representation of action heroines. Martha Washington directly confronts these questions, often subverting the normative codes of conduct for female heroes.

From the very first issue in the series, the representation of the young, heroic, Black female is problematised. The comic book series that started with the initial edition of *Give Me Liberty* (1990) is subtitled *An American Dream* and the four books that comprise it are titled “Homes & Gardens,” “Travel & Entertainment,” “Health & Welfare,” and “Death & Taxes.” Taken as a whole, the *Give Me Liberty* series is quite blatantly drawing on the tropes of the American identity that privilege ‘life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness’ as part of the American (white, male) birthright, and, as the story reveals, satirising them. The cover image of *Give Me Liberty* is quite clearly meant to de-stabilise concepts of national identity. The image is of a uniformed Martha Washington, with close-cropped blonde hair and serious expression, holding on to the android child she adopts later in the narrative, with her right arm held aloft, a spiked crown ringing her head and an image of the fragmented United States map in the background. Clearly the image is meant to suggest the Statue of Liberty. The title is taken from a speech by Patrick Henry, one of the so-called *Founding Fathers* of the United States, whose most famous line is repeated in full on the back cover: “I know not what course others may take but – as for me – give me liberty or give me death.” The irony and satire at play in the series is highlighted here before readers even open

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<sup>10</sup> The question of visibility and representation is an inherently complicated one. On the one hand, for the racialised body invisibility can act as a safety mechanism, especially when, as current events have shown, the ‘visible’ Black body becomes the target for violence. And yet, mis- or non-representation is equally though differently violent, erasing, as it does, the Black and racialised body from social spaces and discourses.

the text in the contrast between the words spoken by a white, land-owning, 'Father' of the nation and a young, Black woman whose pose and name, as we will see, position her as the 'Mother' of the nation.

The idea of 'liberty' is put into question over and over throughout the text, as from the very beginning we see how Martha and her family are incarcerated in the low-income housing project 'Cabrini Green,' with guards that supposedly 'protect' the people inside, but whose function is to bar those inside from going out. Of her teacher, Donald, a man from 'outside' who volunteers to come in to teach every day, Martha says: "Nobody forced him into the Green. He volunteered. He doesn't act crazy, but he volunteered" (Miller and Gibbons 21). To him she says: "You ought to get out of the Green, Donald. You can, so you ought to" (21). Not surprisingly, Donald's decision to come in to teach everyday proves to be deadly, as he refuses to bribe one of the guards and is subsequently killed. Martha's admonishment proves correct –if you can get out, 'you ought to.' Crossing over, going back and forth, is not an option. Certainly, as much as Donald's death suggests that crossing from outside in is deadly – liberty of movement, of mobility both social and physical, is a mirage of the 'American dream' – crossing from in to out can be just as deadly. Martha's older brother, Ken, left to join the Peace Force that Martha too will one day join, though once he did so he "never came home. Might be dead" (21), we are told. The idea that the liberty to change one's social class is part and parcel of the American identity is questioned over and over again. Martha herself demonstrates just how difficult it is to leave the 'Green;' she manages only by faking her own insanity.

The institutional and systematic violence enacted by the state is contrasted to the physical violence enacted by Martha Washington and others in the text. The first time Washington is violent, when she is barely twelve years old, occurs before she enlists in the Peace Force. Within the low-income housing project from which she cannot leave, one of her mentors and teachers is murdered. In turn, she kills the murderer. The horror this violence instils in Martha is such that she is sent to a psychiatric institution. The text positions Washington's actions as doubly justifiable in that on the one hand, they spring from her need to defend a loved one, and on the other, she is repulsed by her own actions, by the fact that she has killed someone (22-26). Her own horror offers the reader the opportunity to condone

and absolve her of the violence perpetrated by clearly demonstrating that her actions were firmly taken in an attempt to protect someone, and not to satisfy any personal desire for action. Problematically, the result is that her actions are depicted as not being taken of her own volition; indeed, she is acting out of love, out of defence (of self and other), and from instinct. Seeing her mentor bloodied and beaten, Washington simply reacts by stabbing the murderer with his own weapon. The text is laid out so as to convey the feeling that the action occurs quite rapidly. Washington goes to the classroom to see her teacher, and instead, upon opening the door, sees first his glasses, broken and lying on the ground, and then in the next frame, the torso and face of the bloody body. By using multiple, thin frames on the same page, all grouped together and showing the reader only one image at a time (frame one contains only Martha Washington's shocked face as she opens the door, frame two only the glasses, frame three the torso, four the murderer's arm and, number five, the murderer's bloody weapon, also on the floor), the feeling conveyed is that of a short time-span. The images occur in such a way that there is little time to dwell on each, little information given in each frame, thus moving the eye quickly along the page. When the reader's eye, and we are to assume Washington's as well, comes across the final image on page 22, that of the bloodied hook used to kill her teacher, the accompanying text is only one word: "Donald," her teacher's name. This one word has been repeated over the course of several of the images on this page, and is the representation of Washington's thoughts as she, like the reader, takes in the images and draws conclusions. The next image, on the following page, distances the reader from Martha Washington. We no longer see from her point of view, but rather have the entire scene laid out for us: the teacher's body on the floor of a classroom littered with overturned furniture, where there has obviously been a fight, the murderer sits in a chair, pulling a knife from his arm, with his back to the scene, and Martha rushes into the room (23). Arguably, the frames that precede this one are necessary as a means of creating complicity. The reader sees the horror of the scene contiguously with Martha so that, when she raises the weapon to attack the man who killed her beloved teacher, the violence is not only Martha Washington's but also the reader's. The hurried feeling the layout creates suggests that everything occurs not only quickly but also somewhat automatically, without forethought or

premeditation. Repeating the word ‘Donald,’ suggests that Washington’s motivation comes from her feelings for her teacher, the respect and friendship that existed between them, as a way of acting out the sadness and rage she feels at the violence done to him.



Fig. 2 *The Life and Times of Martha Washington in the Twenty-First Century* (Miller and Gibbons 2009).

Further, the layout of these and the following pages also reinforces the visceral and instinctual nature of her actions. During the two page spread over which she stabs and is pursued by the man who killed Donald, there is no dialogue or even internal monologue. Rather, the ‘words’ that appear, and even these are minimal, are guttural onomatopoeia “hnff” or “hurgg” (24-5), made by the man she stabbed as he pursues her while he bleeds to death. The initial rage on Washington’s face when she first stabs the man (23) is replaced by horror and fear (24-5). The final image in this sequence shows Martha Washington squeezed into a locker, her hands to her face, her mouth and eyes wide open in shock, or terror. The man she stabbed sits on the floor, just to her right, exposing her inside the locker but also dead of exsanguination beside it. The accompanying text reads

“when they find me in the locker, I can’t talk. At least...” (25). Supposedly it is the shock of finding her teacher dead combined with that of her own actions and being chased down by a bleeding, dying thug that traumatise her so that she cannot speak.

Curiously, as much as Martha Washington’s violence in this scene is couched in terms of protection, instinct and the reaction to trauma, it also opens up a space for what Elizabeth Hills terms “dynamic subjectivity” (40), in “From ‘Figurative Males’ to Action Heroines: Further Thoughts on Active Women in the Cinema” (1999). For Hills, the “ability to adapt to the new, to negotiate change” (40), is one of the defining traits of the agentic female action hero. While Hills reads this in terms of the character Ripley from the *Alien* (Scott 1979, 1986, 1992, 1997) movie franchise, applying this notion to Martha Washington offers a way out of the strict containment strategies for violent women, opening up a more nuanced way of understanding her representation. While Washington’s violence is encapsulated within the terms of instinct and ‘gut’ reaction, linking her violence to an essentialised notion of female as protector of loved ones, the following page, where she is incarcerated in a mental institution, suggests that she is capable of more than merely reacting to situations, but will also learn to manipulate them, as she decides “by the time I’m alright [recovered from the shock], by then I hear them talking about taking me away, away, to a state facility, out of the Green [...] It breaks mom’s heart to see me acting like I’m stupid and crazy, but there’s no way to tell her [...] whatever they feed me I’ll get out” (26). The “ability to transform herself” and “a willingness to experiment with new modes of being” (Hill 40), are characteristics Martha Washington displays throughout the series, and as one of her commanding officers says of her: “Lieutenant Washington is one of our best kept secrets. She’s off the charts in resourcefulness, stealth and combat acumen—all of which make her one of our top infiltration operatives” (Miller and Gibbons 276).

These powers are especially useful for Martha, as she negotiates the shifting terrain of a United States that is torn by civil war as a member the Peace Force or PAX, a military organisation run by the United States whose goal is allegedly to bring peace back to the country and whose recruiting method is to harness those with criminal backgrounds so that “if you join PAX, they clear your record. You



can't get arrested for anything" (Miller and Gibbons 42).<sup>11</sup> Martha, whose crime is to be young and poor, joins after she kills a 'sanitation worker' while she is living on the streets, having been evicted from the institution. While the series is predicated on Martha's struggles as a Peace Force member and how she at turns must battle prejudice (racial, gender, classist) within the military, as well as her own allegiance to her nation, the first five issues focus on the American civil war that has Martha Washington fighting on behalf of PAX, while the subsequent issues have her fighting on behalf of the planet (though from a decidedly American vantage point).

## 2.2 Disrupting Representation, Unruly Bodies

Certainly, at the intersection of discourses on violent women and the heroic body, emerges what Sherri Inness has termed 'toughness' (1999) and what Halberstam identifies as 'female masculinity' (1998). Indeed, we have already seen how the overt sexuality of the comic book heroine in particular and the action heroine in general serves to elide or minimise the potential for disrupting patriarchal norms.

### 2.2.1 Female Masculinity and 'Tough' Women

By couching their physical power in blatantly essentialised terms, whether as maternal bodies or heteronormatively sexualised bodies, the threat they pose is contained. In *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema* (1993), Yvonne Tasker argues that "if images of men have often needed to compensate for the sexual presentation of the hero's body through emphasising his activity, then images of women seem to need to compensate for the figure of the active heroine by emphasising her sexuality, her availability within traditional feminine terms" (19). What Tasker identifies as 'compensation' and I term 'containment' refer back to the same principle, that of making palatable, pleasurable and non-disruptive the

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<sup>11</sup> Factions include: "The New England Federation of States;" "The First Sex Confederacy;" "The Lone Star Republic;" and "Wonderland" (what was California), to name but a few. As a member of the PAX Martha fights, at different times, against these factions, in an attempt to reunite her country; The Fat Boy Burger Corporation, on both American soil and in the Amazons where it is cutting down rainforests for pastureland; various extra-planetary groups that threaten Earth; the human-made program, Venus, tasked with running Earth's infrastructure so as to avoid further conflict; other un-named groups of people, mutants, and machines.

shifting gender signifiers associated with the heroic body. For Tasker, “[t]he muscular male body functions as a sort of armour – it is sculpted and worked on – which is repeatedly breached, an understanding expressed in the image of Achilles’ heel, a body with one point of physical vulnerability which betrays the otherwise invincible warrior, and which itself becomes intensely vulnerable” (Tasker 16-17). Arguably, what is most vulnerable about the action hero, and I hope to demonstrate for the heroine as well, is the coding of the heroic body as natural, both in terms of gender and power to act. The moral authority of the heroic figure will be addressed in the next chapter, but it is worth a brief mention here that the ‘natural’ location of ‘right’ within the heroic body is discursively tied in with the naturalisation of gendered identities. If the overt sexualisation of the heroine renders her violence ‘palatable’ or ‘acceptable,’ if the excessive sexuality of the femme fatale is what marks her as deviant and her violence as unacceptable (regardless of how heteronormatively ‘stimulating’ the representation), the way in which sexuality is managed and represented is part and parcel of the representation of the moral authority of the heroine (and certainly of the hero as well).

### **2.2.2 Race, Sexuality, and the Tomboy: Intersections and Discourses**

An undeniable aspect of the graphic novel is the way in which it is “composed in words and images, written and drawn” (Chute and de Koven, 768). As such, any interrogation of a heroine’s corporeality must necessarily consider her visual representation along with the textual, and these two intertwine to create, what Silke Horstkotte and Nancy Pedri identify as “a higher unit of semiotic organization” (336). Certainly, where Martha Washington is concerned, this line of questioning must also take into account the way in which her body, or better yet the representation thereof, transforms over the course of the series. It is worth noting that Washington was drawn by the same artist throughout the series, a fact that may seem unremarkable to those unfamiliar with comic books, but that

reinforces the idea that Washington's story is one continuous, contained, and finite narrative.<sup>12</sup>

The way in which Martha Washington's body is transformed throughout the narrative, then, can be considered the result of her aging process (the comic opens with her birth, though it 'begins' when she is twelve and we see her progress to late-adolescence, finally jumping to the end of her life, when she dies as an elderly woman), and technological changes which are linked to her uniforms. Her body, understandably, does not remain the same, but it does carry the markers of her race, gender and heroism throughout the series.

Of particular interest is the way in which Washington's body offers a sharp contrast to other better-known heroines within the super-hero genre. As Yvonne Tasker has argued, it is clear that "the big-breasted or muscular women found in comic strips are fantasy figures. Yet in companion with their exaggerated sexual characteristics, these heroines have exaggerated physical powers, in swordplay or marksmanship, a strength which marks them as transgressive, as perverse" (30). The tension that results from the interplay of the 'exaggerated sexual characteristics' and the physical prowess is part of what renders these characters fascinating, and, indeed, less threatening to patriarchal standards of femininity. And yet, hyper-sexuality is not the only way of containing the transgressive power of the female action heroine. Certainly, the 'tomboy,' this figure of pre-pubescent girlhood that resists the passivity associated with girlishness, is a trope worth interrogating, especially as the 'tomboy' becomes the 'tough woman.' Hills argues that "these powerfully transgressive characters open up interesting questions about the fluidity of gendered identities and changing popular cinematic representations of women, action heroines are often described within feminist film theory as 'pseudo males' or as being not 'really' women" (38). Curiously, if one of the strategies for diminishing the transgressive potential of strong women is to tie them to a bodily aesthetic that highlights their femininity, an alternative strategy

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<sup>12</sup>The nature of the publishing format for comic books is such that it is not at all uncommon for the various collaborators (writer, artist, colourist, etc.) to change over time – or even from one issue to the next. As such, it is possible that everything from the writing style to the actual shape of a character's body (curvy, well-defined visually, thinner, less physically imposing...) to the shade and tone of the colours can be different from one issue to another. One defining aspect of the graphic novel, as opposed to the comic book, is the homogeneity, that is, the use of a single writer and colourist throughout the whole work.

works in the opposite direction, symbolically denying their womanhood and constructing them, as not *real* women. The discourse plays on the idea that women who do not conform to heteronormative standards of desirability are neither men nor women, existing outside of the binary of normative sex-gender constructs. This third space, or what Marjorie Garber terms “the third,” is “a mode of articulation, a way of describing a space of possibility. Three puts in question the idea of one: of identity, self-sufficiency, self-knowledge” (11). This ‘third’ potentiality undeniably undermines the very possibility of an either/or gender identification system and situates the muscular, powerful action heroine in a position that is all the more transgressive. Certainly in the representation of Martha Washington, questions of racialised femininity and sexuality, and the recurrent tropes of animality and maternity, re-inscribe her within a ‘tamed’ female corporeality and work to reign in the potential of the action heroine to do more than just fight crime.



Fig. 3 The cover of *Ms. Marvel* #3 (2014) and the cover of *The Life and Times of Martha Washington in the Twenty First Century* (2009).

Recognising that there are certainly others (the 2014 Ms. Marvel, for example), Martha Washington stands out as a heroic woman of colour in comic books. Her body is, with few exceptions, fully clothed in military style uniforms that are functional (rather than fashionable or sexy) and not only minimise potentially feminine aspects of her body, but also tend to highlight her musculature, if they highlight anything at all. Her hair is closely-cropped or entirely shaven, or occasionally in chin length corn-rows. However, as a result of a

chemical attack during her first battle, her hair colour changes from black to a very golden blonde (Miller and Gibbons 47-51).<sup>13</sup>

Certainly, Washington's hair defies the stereotype of the 'sexy' heroine, who, despite the impracticality of it, tends to have long hair —an undeniable sign of heteronormative sexiness in popular culture. Indeed, while it may seem trivial, there is a politics of hair that is worth exploring, even more so in relation to questions of race. When Washington's hair is turned to blonde, it is disturbing for readers who are sensitive to the ubiquitous 'whitewashing' that occurs when successful women (and to a lesser extent, men) of colour are represented in the media.<sup>14</sup> While other issues surrounding the racialised heroic body will be raised further on, the 'blonding' of Martha Washington is a troubling part of the narrative, reinforcing as it does dominant beauty standards in which blonde is more attractive and desirable than black, brown or any other colour.<sup>15</sup> It occurs, as mentioned, while Washington is deployed in the Amazon Rain Forest, fighting one of the enemies of the United States. Indeed, the chemical rain which changes her hair colour begins to fall immediately after her first battle, when she has survived where most of her colleagues have not. As she wanders the forest alone, she begins to cry, and the reader sees the first patches of blonde emerge on her head, as she repeats to herself: "This won't kill me. I won't die here. This won't kill me" (51). While she is undoubtedly talking about the war not killing her (and not the colour change her hair is undergoing), in the very next image we have of her she is in the hospital, with her head bandaged – indicating that something must have damaged her head. The following image has Washington in the battle field once again, with her hair now completely blonde and a PAX bandanna wrapped around her head. In the shift from the hospital to the battle, she has gained not only the previously mentioned new hair (cropped closely to her head, with markings indicating small, tight curls) but also a much more muscular frame. It is difficult not to wonder if a

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<sup>13</sup> Curiously, this change in hair colour goes unremarked by any of the characters in the text.

<sup>14</sup> For a comprehensive discussion, one that branches out to include the various ways in which symbolic violence is employed in visual media, see Jean Kilbourne's documentary 'Killing Us Softly' (the most recent update released in 2010) or Martin (2014).

<sup>15</sup> The relationship between hair and African American and Black American culture is a far more politically weighted issue than may first appear. The ubiquity of beauty stereotypes that equate attractive hair with Caucasian or Asian hair texture, and unattractive with Black texture, reaffirms the damaging notion that white bodies are more desirable. For discussions of these issues see Chris Rock's 2009 documentary *Good Hair* and Kiri Davis' 2005 documentary *A Girl like Me*.

correlation exists between her 'new' blonde hair, her much more muscular body, and the milestone of having survived her first battle. The text between these two frames is a typed letter to her mother in which, among other things, she writes: "I'm a sergeant now, after only six months. That means better pay and I don't have to take orders as much. I guess PAX is pretty happy with me" (52). This transition, from private to sergeant, from rookie soldier to more experienced, coincides with the shift from physically lithe and young-looking (she is all of fourteen when she enrolls) to a much more muscular, imposing body, and the blonde hair.<sup>16</sup>

Specifically, Martha Washington's body resists being coded as feminine and yet is still undeniably legible as female. Sherri Inness' work on women and toughness is especially useful in this context. Inness analyses the way in which musculature can be read, specifically the muscular body of the female action hero in film. She asserts that "the tough girl often displays well-defined or even unusually heavy musculature because American society perceives large muscles as one attribute of toughness" (*Tough* 24). This 'toughness,' however, is a problematic construction that goes beyond the mere cultivation of a muscular body. Indeed, the 'tough' female action hero works to highlight insecurities surrounding women's violence and physicality. As previously discussed, the containment strategies used to delimit the disruptive potential of the strong heroine often recur to the heteronormative desire machine. That is, the heroine becomes the object of the desiring male gaze (whether that gaze be located within the text, containing her within a romance or marriage plot, or exterior to the text, with the spectator, as can be the case with visual modes such as film or graphic narrative). While Washington's bodily representation resists the hyper-sexualised codification of so many of her peers, the recurrence to the trope of whitewashing *vis-à-vis* her blonde hair suggests that with the increasing access to physical empowerment as a result of her promotion and greater muscularity, the nod towards white, dominant, hetero-normative standards for beauty is still made.

The book *Homes & Gardens* (Miller and Gibbons 1990), which begins with Martha's birth in the Chicago housing projects and follows her as she breaks out of

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<sup>16</sup>Martha Washington wears her hair completely shaved, is entirely bald, for a good portion of the series, precisely, from *Martha Washington Goes to War* to *Martha Washington Stranded in Space* at which point she grows out her blonde hair into cornrows.

the slum and becomes a soldier who is sent to the Amazon Rainforest, opens with an image that replicates the cover. A younger, early-adolescent Martha is depicted, holding a Raggedy-Anne doll, and wearing the same Statue of Liberty crown, with her arm raised. This time, however, rather than an army uniform, she sports an ambiguous green garment, the colour of the oxidized Statue of Liberty, that could be either a t-shirt or a hospital gown.

These images more than adequately convey how Martha is constructed in the text. She is dressed in part as the Statue of Liberty, the emblem of the 'free nation,' with a young and terrified looking creature in her arms, and a gaze that is both strong and confident. Coupling this image with the character's name, Martha Washington, taken from the first First Lady of the United States, wife of George Washington, and a very wealthy land-owning and slave-owning woman, our Martha becomes prefigured as the mother of the nation. Bearing in mind that this dystopian text has deemed sickness a crime and attributes the governance of the nation to an un-bodied brain, housed in a cybernetic robot-machine, there is little doubt as to the ironic intentions of this re-writing of the historical Martha Washington. There is undeniably subversive potential in refashioning the 'mother of the nation' as an impoverished, young Black woman who actively fights for her country, defends the environment, and has a romantic affair with a First Nation's man.<sup>17</sup> However, there is also something stultifying in the depiction of Martha as a maternal figure, something that means we are often reading her violence as something committed in defence of someone else or of the state rather than as an active choice on her part.

Given this representational coding, Martha easily fits in to the imagined field of women's violent action as maternal violence identified by Lynda K. Bundtzen in her essay "Monstrous Mothers. Medusa, Grendel and now Alien". Bundtzen analyses the character Ripley in the *Alien* film series, contrasting the way in which the maternal principle is represented by the monstrous alien and the victorious heroine. She sets up the dichotomy of the "woman who practices the

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<sup>17</sup> The positioning of Washington here within the discourse of eco-womanhood, with links to the 'Earth Mother' ideology is strengthened by her relationship to the environment and the Native American tribe. Yet, again, her racialised body works to disqualify her from identification with an image that was exploited by the eco-feminist ideology of early Second Wave feminism, of the Gaia Earth mother.

maternal as compassionate care vs. a biological-maternal principle of monstrous proportions” (105). While her primary goal is to dissect the way in which motherhood as a cultural choice is contrasted to the fecund, messy reproduction of the villainous alien, what is of interest and yet goes unexamined in her work is the way in which the ‘maternal’ functions as an exculpatory device, masking the violence committed by both the heroine and the alien behind a façade of maternal protectiveness. What Bundtzen terms “maternal heroism” (105) appears to function in much the same way as overtly sexualised images of the heroic female body; it diverts attention away from the heroine’s actions, limiting her agentic potential by unequivocally linking her violence to an essentialised female trait. This is not to say that Martha Washington’s violence is only ever presented as stemming from her representation as the maternal body. Indeed, the multiple and layered representation of her heroism is what makes her such an intriguing figure for analysis. The overt and hyper sexualisation of the heroic female body is one of the principal ways of containing and minimising the potentially disruptive capacities these bodies may represent. The representation of Martha Washington, however, resists this easy method of constraint. Interwoven within the representation of this comic book heroine are discourses not only on the maternal-violent body, but also on the military body, the intersection of women’s violence and technology, and, perhaps, the discourse which is interwoven through the others, that of the racialised female body and violence.

In “Imagined Violence/Queer Violence: Representation, Rage and Resistance” (1993), Halberstam argues for the revolutionary potential of representing violence by Others. The work suggests that it “is the fantasy of unsanctioned eruptions of aggression from ‘the wrong people,’ of the wrong skin, the wrong sexuality, the wrong gender” (199); it is the convergence of the ‘unsanctioned’ with the ‘wrong people’ that encodes the potential for the greatest disruptions. It isn’t difficult to understand the ways in which heroic female violence is ‘sanctioned’ and therefore non-disruptive. Laura Sjoberg and Caron Gentry have articulated how there are further ways of representing female violence so that it is contained and sanctioned, rather than disruptive. We have already seen how the very sexualisation of women links their violence more to questions of sado-masochistic pornography than systematic disruptions of



patriarchy. They have also identified the maternal field, that is, violence in the name of protecting the family or children. Violence that is filial, not affiliative – thereby robbing women of the possibility of agentively choosing to be violent in defence of an ideal. Instead, their violence is represented as reactionary, a violence that they will quickly give over should someone else step in to do the protecting, a violence which, as Sherri Inness notes when speaking of action heroines, quite often the violent, active exterior is only temporary and that “when a man appears to rescue her, the tough woman often returns to a more feminine prototype” (*Tough* 21).

Given, then, the encoding of women’s violence, whether heroic or not, within a framework that is still contingent on essential feminine traits – sexiness, maternity, reproduction, it is difficult to understand Halberstam’s assertion in favour of representing violent women. The argument hinges on the idea that

role reversal never simply replicates the terms of an equation. The depiction of women committing acts of violence against men does not simply use ‘male’ tactics of aggression for other ends; in fact, female violence transforms the symbolic function of the feminine within popular narratives and it simultaneously challenges the hegemonic insistence upon the linking of might and right under the sign of masculinity. (191)

Of note is that the representation of Martha Washington’s body and her actions are undeniably ensconced within the containment strategies for representing female violence, and yet she appears to not be drawn through the lens of the objectifying sexual gaze so often applied to her peers. Instead of being ‘sexy’ (and certainly, the fact that she is not seen as traditionally sexy may have much to do, as we will see, with her race and less to do with more ‘liberated’ ideals from her creators) she is reinscribed within a discourse of ‘acceptable’ female violence which aligns her with the maternal body: frequently she is seen rescuing children, feeding her troops, and she even adopts an orphan. Given that Martha Washington’s is a racialised, maternal and violent body, the maternity represented is not simply the “conscious, chosen, cultural motherhood” (106) Bundzten defends as depicted in the body of Ripley (Sigourney Weaver’s character: white, slim, muscular, short-haired). Indeed, Black motherhood carries signifiers that distance it from its white

counterpart. As a way of interrogating this difference, it is worth returning momentarily to the irony of Martha Washington's name.

As previously mentioned, the first famous Martha Washington was the wife of George Washington, first president of the United States of America, and not unproblematically known as the mother of the nation (where George Washington was the father). There is more than just a tongue-in-cheek casual reference occurring by using a young, Black, impoverished woman as the reincarnation of the mother of the nation. Indeed, if the Black woman supplants the white one as the national maternal figure, and maternal instinct is offered up as a plausible 'excuse' for women's violence, the question is worth asking just what it means to represent Black women's violence, as racialised images of the maternal do not carry the same symbolic weight as white images.

Patricia Hill Collins has interrogated Black women, feminism and representation in the seminal text *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. She argues that: "From the mammies, Jezebels, and breeder women of slavery to the smiling Aunt Jemimas on pancake mix boxes, ubiquitous Black prostitutes, and ever-present welfare mothers of contemporary popular culture, the nexus of negative stereotypical images applied to African-American women has been fundamental to Black women's oppression" (Hill Collins 7). Given this panorama, the representation of a physically strong, Black woman who repeatedly defends and rescues her country breaks from the oppressive stereotypes and offers an empowering model for Black femininity. And yet, not surprisingly perhaps, Martha Washington's representation, and the way in which her violence is contained and controlled, is not without its problematic side.

Indeed, motherhood and Black femininity cannot, it would seem, be easily separated. Hill Collins description of the mammy is especially apt:

The first controlling image applied to African-American women is that of the mammy – the faithful, obedient domestic servant. Created to justify the economic exploitation of house slaves and sustained to explain Black women's long-standing restriction to domestic service, the mammy image represents the normative yardstick used to evaluate all Black women's behaviour. By loving, nurturing, and caring for her white children and 'family' better than her own, the

mammy symbolizes the dominant group's perceptions of the ideal Black female relationship to elite white male power. (71)

While physically, at least, Washington does not adhere to the idea of the mammy, as she is not "portrayed as overweight" (Hill Collins 78), but rather quite fit, there is something insidious in the way in which Washington's emergent violence, and its corollary of protection, are contingent upon her presentation as a mother figure. Indeed, if we extrapolate to consider that the "white children" she cares for are doubly substituted in this case for the nation as a whole and for Raggyann, the "psychic schizophrenic" (Miller and Gibbons 71) government developed mind-reading weapon/child she meets first in the mental institution, and who she later rescues from an exploding space ship while on a mission (82), then Washington's portrayal becomes even more disturbing. Indeed, Washington has a hegemonic power that goes beyond that of merely serving her country as a soldier. She must both protect the country, including the defence and rescue of 'innocent' people – children, non-combatants, etc., and also be the mother of the nation – though with the implicit understanding that she remain "asexual and therefore free to become a surrogate mother to the children she acquired not through her own sexuality" (Hill Collins 78). While Martha Washington does develop a love interest, whose role and representation will be considered later in this text, this relationship takes a second plane to both Washington's adventures as a soldier, and even her relationship with Raggyann.

Unsurprisingly, the majority of the other characters in the text, and certainly all of those occupying positions of power or responsibility (the president, Washington's commanders, the Surgeon General, etc.) are all white men. Indeed, while the landscape of the country is populated with a veritable smorgasbord of 'others' – mutants, robots, cyborgs, and 'ghosts,' among others – Washington is one of the few characters, except for her boyfriend, who is racialised and still has a speaking role. The nation Martha Washington is trying to save, the one she risks her own life to protect, and the one that she is ironically depicted as 'mothering' on the cover page, is a white nation, albeit a white nation that is destroying itself. Washington's attempts to rescue the nation, to defend the United States of America against itself and the civil war it embarks upon, are, in the first half of the series,

depicted as the correct thing to do to protect and rescue the country. While this changes in the second half of the series, so too does Washington's relationship and implementation of violence. Troublingly, Martha Washington's representation as the ironic mother of the nation reverberates, metaphorically, with Hill Collin's assessment that "the mammy image is one of an asexual woman, a surrogate mother in blackface devoted to the development of a white family" (72). Washington's representation as 'asexual,' or at the very least as impervious to her own sexuality, combined with her continual struggle to fight for the development of the nation, when this nation is repeatedly depicted as white, reduces many of her actions to symbolically 'maternal,' and devoid of agency, as legible only within a schematic of Black female stereotype. It appears, as Susan E. Linville has argued, that violent women in the military are constrained by the representation of their violence as differently motivated, so that "soldierly acts of violence are implicitly motivated by maternal protectiveness [...] a domestication of female aggression that tends to render that aggression socially acceptable" (Linville 114). Female aggression is, in the case of the Black violent heroine, doubly constrained as the link to maternal and filial care calls up the image of the mammy, but also because, as bell hooks notes it helps perpetuate "the matriarchy myth to impress upon the consciousness of all Americans that Black women were masculinised, castrating, ball-busters" (hooks 81).

In *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, hooks deconstructs the way in which the myth of the matriarch has been used to "encourage black women, who are economically oppressed and victimized by sexism and racism, to believe that they are matriarchs, that they exercise some social and political control over their lives" (81). Her argument suggests that "young black women [...] claimed matriarchy as an African cultural retention" (80), which, as did the idea of the mammy, did more to serve white ideas surrounding Black female sexuality and society, and worked for rather than against patriarchal norms. This trope, the idea of the Black female as the matriarch that, again to cite hooks, "saw her ability to endure hardships no 'lady' was supposedly capable of enduring as a sign that she possessed an animalistic sub-human strength" (81-82). While we will return to the animalising imagery surrounding Black female representation further on, for the moment it is necessary to consider how the mobilisation of the image of the

matriarch functions as a containment strategy for Black female violence to much the same ends as does the mammy, that is, to negate, undermine and render invalid or worse, invisible.

The Martha Washington series ends in 2007 with the publication of the one-shot "Martha Washington Dies." The issue is set in the year 2095, when Martha Washington is one hundred years old (and seventy-seven years since we have last seen her). It is, as the title suggests, the night she dies. The issue previous to this one, the last time we see Martha Washington, ends as the heroine embarks on an inter-galactic space exploration mission. She has 'saved' the Earth, though at the price of submerging the world in "the endless darkness of a global Blackout" (Miller and Gibbons 530) and now goes out to explore the farthest reaches of the universe. Cryptically, then, when the reader next sees Washington almost eighty years later, the Earth is again at war, this time against "the barbarians" (543). Martha Washington the explorer (of whose exploits the reader is not told but whose attempts to map the galaxy, to "know," what is out there has decidedly colonial overtones) has become "Gannie," the woman "that speaks of things old and true. With her unearthly calm" (541). The woman who "has survived a beloved husband and three strong sons" and who has been "a soldier. A warrior. An explorer of the wildest depths of the universe. A wife and mother and a leader and a teacher" (542), has gathered together a group of fighters she calls "children" and tells the group about the universe. Her tone, her story, is cryptic and dark, with slightly Christian overtones as she says "our whole universe -- it's just a sprinkling of dust [...] we're dust" (548) echoing the biblical passage "for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust" (Psalm 103:14). The Christian imagery is overt in this text as the group is gathered in a bombed-out room with a crucifix hanging on the only remaining wall, a woman dressed as a nun in the black and white habit, and even Martha herself wears a scarf on her head that resembles the religious attire of a nun. While the Christian imagery would seem to contradict the idea of Martha Washington as a matriarch and grandmother, the Granny and elder, there is no doubt that she is the leader of the group if not physically, given her advanced age, then certainly emotionally. The focaliser for this one-shot is a teen-aged girl who tells readers that "Gannie speaks - and we listen" (541). Washington's authority over the group positions her as the matriarch, the

grandmother and elder, an image which has as its “core ingredient an image of woman as active, powerful being” (hooks 83), it is equally true that this image is “the embodiment of woman as passive nurturer, a mother figure who gave all without expectation of return” (84-5).

The text appears to struggle with this representation of Martha Washington, oscillating between representations of Black femininity as powerful and agentic, and as passive, submissive to patriarchal dictates. The irony the comic book series opens with – the aforementioned use of a young, Black impoverished woman as the revenant of the first Martha Washington – is repeated in the final scenes. This time, however, rather than making use of the ‘maternal’ figure of the first First Lady, the Christian imagery appears to present Washington as somehow Christ-like. Indeed, the final pages of the text are arranged in such a way that it appears as though Martha Washington is preaching to a small congregation, who are fighting against the “barbarians” (Miller and Gibbons 543). Her final words, however, are for an invisible presence only she can see: “I did what you said to do. I came back here. I did my part. Now take me home. Give me liberty” (551-2). As Martha Washington dies the young narrator tells readers: “The sky opens with a scream. The Earth writhes like a newborn baby. A terrible wind tosses us like rag dolls. The world is made of lightening” (553). This is certainly reminiscent of the death of Jesus Christ in the New Testament (Matthew 27:45-54), with its attendant darkness and subsequent earthquake, winds and lightening, along with the pleading to a higher order.

However, the most striking image is the double-page spread that is the second to last image of the text. In it the reader sees a ravaged cityscape in darkness, buildings in ruins, craters and fires punctuate the visual field. The text is located in the top left hand corner, in a small white text-box, and reads “...and she bids us fond farewell” (Miller and Gibbons 554). The skyline, above the shells of the buildings, is filled with multi-coloured fireworks and in the centre of the rises a straight line of light from the place Washington dies, and ends at the top of the page in a shining white star. After the barrage of Christian imagery, this star raised over the wasteland of the city, appears as an inverse of the star of Bethlehem, which marked where Jesus Christ was born (Matthew 2: 1-9). Indeed, just as the re-writing of Martha Washington turns on its head the image of the mother of the

nation as a white, upper-class slave owner, this representation of Martha Washington appears to be making a tongue-in-cheek gesture towards Washington as the messiah. In the reversal of the birth of Christ narrative, where the Star of Bethlehem marks the birthplace, here it marks the place of death, and also the location of the next armed battle. What is most disarming, of course, is the re-writing of the messiah figure as a Black woman – and one who clearly used physical violence against her enemies, rather than ‘turning the other cheek.’ Indeed, if the characteristics usually associated with Jesus Christ – peaceful, loving, caring, non-confrontational – are often female gendered, in her triangular positioning as messiah-matriarch-mammy, Martha Washington comes to embody a form of female masculinity.

In the final two-page spread of the series, the troops who had gathered around as Martha Washington died turn outward from the make-shift chapel and raise their guns toward the apparently on-coming enemy. The text that accompanies the image reinforces the idea that the troops are not only physical warriors but also fighting a spiritual battle: “And now the barbarians sing their chants and set off their bombs and pray for the Armageddon we’ll never let them have. Gannie has gone back to the source of all things. But the war goes on. And we are ready” (556-557). The references to ‘barbarians,’ ‘chants,’ ‘prayers,’ and ‘Armageddon’ all suggest that there is more at stake than just physical territory. In yet another gesture towards the Biblical imagery, Martha Washington is sacrificed at the end of the story, having lived her life in the service of others, protecting them as a mother figure, in the end she must die so that they can come into their own.

### 2.2.3 Othered Masculinities

The way in which masculinity is deployed on the (heroic) female body directly impacts the way in which her violence is represented. Conversely, the representation of violence is also a crucial factor in the construction of female masculinity. I do not seek to resolve this seeming tautology; rather, I am more interested in interrogating the implications of this double construction, the ways in which female masculinity and violence exist in a feedback loop in which they both enable each other. Further, I want to explore the way in which the racialised body

is represented when it intersects with female masculinity and violence. Less than an interrogation of the ways in which the racialised female body differs from the mainstream 'white' body, the question becomes how to understand the position of race within the previously mentioned feedback loop of violence and female masculinity. Taking my cue from Halberstam in *Female Masculinity*, as a means of interrogating female masculinity, I want first to consider the way in which masculinity is asserted on the heroic body. Halberstam argues:

If what we call 'dominant masculinity' appears to be a naturalized relation between maleness and power, then it makes little sense to examine men for the contours of that masculinity's social construction. Masculinity [...] becomes legible as masculinity where and when it leaves the white male middle-class body. Arguments about excessive masculinity tend to focus on black bodies (male and female), latino/a bodies, or working class bodies, and insufficient masculinity is all too often figured by Asian bodies or upper-class bodies. (*Female 2*)

The heroic male body, a site at which 'dominant masculinity' appears to be firmly entrenched, is potentially a site of subversion. The Others identified by Halberstam embody corporealities that threaten normative masculinity by highlighting the way in which the boundaries and definitions become blurred and uncertain. That 'excessive' or 'insufficient' masculinity is still identifiable as such suggests that the social definitions are shifting and unstable.

Returning to Halberstam, we are told that "[m]asculinity in this society inevitably conjures up notions of power and legitimacy and privilege; it often symbolically refers to the power of the state and to uneven distributions of wealth" (Halberstam, *Female 2*). They do function, I would argue, as these same symbols of 'power and legitimacy and privilege,' and they undeniably represent 'the power of the state' (though they may not be working *for* the state and may even be working against it, if it is corrupt). And yet, as Halberstam further argues, these signifiers become unmoored in the heroic male body: "The action adventure hero should embody an extreme version of normative masculinity, but instead we find that excessive masculinity turns into a parody or exposure of the norm" (Halberstam, *Female 4*). While Superman, with his imposing physique and Earth-saving feats is a paragon of masculinity, he also, as Halberstam argues, makes evident the impossibility of this masculinity. Both the male and the female superhero must



necessarily walk the fine line between being identifiable as male or female (regardless of whether or not they are human or human formed), and thus identifiable as role-models and part of the human community, while at the same time being different enough so as to be capable of defending and saving this community. In this sense, gender identification plays a strong role in constructing this feeling of Otherness. The excessive female or male body, the excessive musculature, excessive sexuality or the entire lack thereof, all speak to the way in which the heroic body is not normative. Jeffrey Brown's work on masculinity in comics asserts that "superhero comics are one of our culture's clearest illustrations of hypermasculinity and male duality premised on the fear of the unmasculine Other. Since the genre's inception with the launch of Superman in 1938, the main ingredient of the formula has been the dual identity of the hero" (Brown, *Masculinity* 31). This duality between the hypermasculine and the unmasculine is played out between the secret and public identities of the superhero. Indeed, Brown's formulation of the dichotomy between the hypermasculine and the unmasculine suggests that the fear of the Other that exists is a fear grounded in the superhero her/himself. The 'secret' identity, the heroic identity is the hypermasculine one while the non-heroic identity, the one used in day-to-day life, is generally weaker, 'feminised,' and functions to deflect suspicion away from this character. And yet, the inverse does not work as clearly on the body of the superheroine. As much as she is hyperfeminised in terms of the prominence of her sexualised body, the agency, power, and violence she yields is not encoded as traditional femininity. Rather, it is her alter ego, generally a shrinking, wall-flower type whose sexuality is repressed, who is seen as the more 'feminine' of the two.

The argument goes that such a masculine, capable and physical man as the superhero could not be, in his daily life, an effeminate, weak and passive individual. That being said, if we return for a moment to Brown's formulation that this duality is 'premiered on the fear of the unmasculine Other,' leads to the question of who that 'unmasculine Other' is. Is it the alter-ego of the hero or the villain he must fight? Indeed, as Catherine Williamson has asked: "which identity is the secret one?" (6).

In asking this question I am not suggesting that the hero is both hero and villain (though this may be the case), but rather that the apparently feminised

identity is rarely presented as the 'real' identity. Instead, it is the mask, the performance, the superhero must don in order to protect his crime-fighting identity. In using femininity as a form of costume, as something that must be performed in order to deflect suspicion from the truth, the feminine becomes something that must be convincingly enacted in order to protect the masculine. However, not only does the feminised alter-ego protect the hypermasculine 'super' ego from discovery, it also protects it against charges of *excessive* masculinity. As Brown again notes, "the gay man, the Jewish man, the Asian man (and many other 'Others') have been burdened by the projection of castrated softness, the black man has been subjected to the burden of racial stereotypes that place him in the symbolic space of being *too* hard, *too* physical, *too* bodily" (Brown *Masculinity* 28). The intersection of race, gender and sexuality on the body of the Other is here made explicit by Brown. For the hero (read: white and male), the coexistence of the hyper-masculine and the feminised identities on the same body protect him from charges of both excessive and insufficient masculinity. He need not, thus, be afraid that readers will associate him with either the 'castrated softness' of some Others nor the 'too physical, too bodily' space of the Black male other. While this discussion has centred around the superhero and the alter-ego, it is worth pointing out that the action hero who does not have an alter-ego quite often has his masculinity constructed in similar terms through the use of the love interest.

Yvonne Tasker has argued that the heroine "both offers a point of differentiation from the hero and deflects attention from the homoeroticism surrounding male buddy relationships" (16). It should come as no surprise that the 'homoeroticism' of the action narrative needs to be dispelled in order to consolidate the masculinity of the hero. Thus, "the woman in the action narrative may operate as some kind of symbolic guarantee, a place for the fixing of difference and heterosexual desire," and that "[t]his role is sometimes also played by a 'weak' male character" (16-7). If (heroic) masculinity can thus be understood as the mobilisation of heteronormativity and patriarchal power, triangulated and rendered both exceptional and acceptable through the feminised Other, how, then, does masculinity become written on the heroic female body?

For both Jeffrey Brown and Sherrie Inness, the intersection between female masculinity and the action heroine is a complex terrain that does not simply invert

the term of heroic male masculinity, but rather must work to inscribe these signs on the female body. For Inness, “[o]ne reason the tough woman who adopts a persona that is strongly coded as masculine is disturbing to many is that she reveals the artificiality of femininity as the ‘normal’ state of women. The masculine tough woman reveals that femininity is a carefully crafted social construct that requires effort to maintain and perpetuate” (Inness, *Tough* 21). In a similar vein, Brown notes that “[t]he muscular body is a heavily inscribed sign: Nothing else so clearly marks an individual as a bearer of masculine power” (Brown, *Masculinity* 27). The muscular heroic female body (as well as Other muscular bodies) is threatening, then, precisely because of its potential for bearing ‘masculine power’ and disrupting preconceived notions on gender. While the containment strategies previously discussed work to minimise the potential threat the muscular body might pose, it is worth interrogating the ways in which muscularity is made manifest on women’s heroic bodies, specifically on the body of Martha Washington.

### 2.3 The Heroine Fights Back

Returning momentarily to Yvonne Tasker, we find that “[w]eakness, vulnerability is expressed through the mobilisation of traits associated with femininity” (17). For the tough female, it is necessary to negotiate the representation of these identity markers. The heroine cannot afford to be seen as ‘weak’ or ‘vulnerable,’ as her condition as female already marks her out as a body that is ‘naturally’ characterised by these traits. It is, however, a rather fine line to walk. The heroine must somehow overcome her femininity, demonstrate that she is not defined by traditional feminine traits and yet, at the same time, she must also prove that “she is neither imitating men nor ‘becoming a man’” (Hills 45). It is this aspect of the tough heroine that is so compelling, the way in which female masculinity becomes a way of breaking with binaristic definitions and identity constructs, offering an alternative position (or, optimistically, alternative positions). For Inness, this alterity reinforces the disruptive potential of the heroine for whom “her association with masculinity is one reason the tough woman is disturbing to society, because [...] she challenges the notion that there is a ‘natural’ connection between women and femininity and between men and masculinity” (*Tough* 21). Be

that as it may, it is worth bearing in mind the extent to which even the muscular heroic body (male or female) is very often the result of a process of construction and maintenance. Bluntly put, even heroic bodies need to work out.

### 2.3.1 The 'Musculinity' of Martha Washington and Othering Desire

Interestingly, Inness further argues that while they do highlight the constructed side to gender performance, the tough heroine is also given slightly mythic status; “no real woman could ever hope to achieve” the same level of toughness or capability (*Tough* 25). The way in which the heroic body is sculpted is suggested in Martha Washington’s shift from young teenager to soldier. The transformation occurs over the course of one page, divided into three panels (Miller and Gibbons 43). The top panel shows a hospital-gowned Washington, whose body is thin and slight, and who is noticeably smaller than the other people in the frame, undergoing what appears to be a physical for admittance into PAX. The frame directly below it, in the middle of the page, shows Washington doing one-armed push-ups, dressed in army green clothing, with her hair now cut short, obeying the orders of a burly officer. The final image on this page shows a group of PAX soldiers in the forest, none of whom are recognisable as Martha Washington though the ambiguity suggests that the soldiers are indistinguishable from each other, having been converted into a homogenous group, wielding weapons and dressed in heavy gear, again being shouted at by an official.

The following pages, which detail Washington’s first combat situation, are small frames grouped together and show the heroine only from afar, or in miniature, occasionally her terrified face is given a close-up. It is not until the battle is over, and Washington appears to be the lone survivor in the forest that the reader is given a more detailed view of her body. In this full page scene (Miller and Gibbons 50), Martha Washington sits in full-gear, gun propped beside her, with muddy boots, a rip in the knee of her pants, but otherwise her entire body is fully covered, and from the neck down it is not immediately apparent whether hers is a male or female body. Indeed, the androgynous depiction, muscular thighs and

upper arms, broad-shoulders, little to no accentuating of the chest or waist, suggests that the transformation from young, impoverished girl to battle-hardened soldier is complete. Counteracting this image, however, is Martha Washington's face. Eyes closed, mouth wide-open, tears stream down her face, suggesting that the physical transformation and the emotional one are not on par.

Page 51, the facing page, is also a full page image, a close-up of Martha Washington's face this time. To counteract the preceding image, here the reader sees Washington wipe away the tears, a grim and determined look on her face, teeth clenched and brow furrow. The interplay between the two images works to establish a variety of character traits for the main character. Both her survival and her strong-looking physique indicate that Washington is indeed a 'tough' woman, though the tears, that are not indulged in until she is alone and the fighting is finished, suggest that she retains some of the vulnerability of the teen-aged girl (she is, after all, no more than fifteen in these images). The image of her wiping the tears away reinforces what readers learn on the preceding page: her feelings, her emotions, will not get in the way of her job. They are under her control, and while she still continues to have feelings (an indication that she has not lost her femininity), as a tough heroine they do not control her nor do they interfere with her ability to take action.

What becomes apparent in this first scene of Martha Washington's work as a soldier, and which develops throughout the remainder of the text, is the necessary balance that must be struck between the 'toughness' required to do her job and the 'femininity' required to keep readers from losing sympathy with her. Just as the action hero previously mentioned used either the alter-ego or the love interest to dispel fears about his masculinity, Martha Washington must also negotiate the terrain of female masculinity, dispelling fears about what it means for the heroine to perform masculinity. As Halberstam has noted:

when and where female masculinity conjoins with possibly queer identities, it is far less likely to meet with approval. Because female masculinity seems to be at its most threatening when coupled with lesbian desire [...] heterosexual female masculinity menaces gender conformity in its own way, but all too often it represents an acceptable degree of female masculinity as compared to the excessive masculinity of the dyke. (*Female* 28)

Unsurprisingly, then, Martha Washington's heterosexuality must be demonstrated in order for what can be read as her female masculinity to remain unthreatening. As an early adolescent, the case can be made that Washington is, at least until her first battle, represented as a tomboy, what Halberstam asserts is "a 'natural' desire for the greater freedoms and mobilities enjoyed by boys. Very often it is read as a sign of independence and self-motivation" (*Female* 6). As such, Washington's resourcefulness and activity are not read as threatening but rather as laudable traits associated with this early female masculinity. However, "the image of the tomboy can be tolerated only within a narrative of blossoming womanhood; within such a narrative, tomboyism represents a resistance to adulthood" (Halberstam, *Female* 6). Once she becomes a soldier, then, it is not only Washington's physique that changes, but also the way in which her gender is mobilised. It is no longer appropriate for her to be presented as a tomboy –because a soldier who is 'resistant' to adulthood is not, perhaps, to be trusted.

The first instalments of the series work to establish Martha Washington as an effective soldier. Readers witness her in various combat situations from which she always emerges victorious, if not always unharmed, and learn of the enemies she makes because of her loyalty to the president. Indeed, much of *Give Me Liberty* details the way in which Washington works to defend her president and escape her own death at the hands of her nemesis, Coronel Moretti. As such, the reader finds various images that assert Washington's 'toughness.' One such example works to inform readers that it is not only the threat of enemy combatants that Washington must face, but internal dangers as well, such as physical assault at the hands of her squad and Moretti. The incident with her squad occurs over the space of two small side-by-side panels with larger panels situated both above and below. The panel above shows Martha Washington in the jungle, and the much larger panels below show Martha on the base, in conversation with her superior officer. The panels of interest appear to be set in a locker room shower. In the first we see the head and upper body of a burly, blond man who is bleeding from the mouth and nosed being held face-down by a Black foot on his neck. The panel beside it shows a close-up of Washington's beat-up face, also bloodied and swollen, and is accompanied by the text: "I said no fraternization between officers. Do we understand each other, gentlemen?" (Miller and Gibbons 70). It becomes clear that

Martha Washington has been the object of an attempted sexual assault, but that she has managed to defend herself and, at least temporarily, impose order. The incident does little, if nothing, to advance the plot. Indeed, it is given very little space on the page and is quickly passed over. Two possible interpretations arise. The first is an example of Gail Simone's previously discussed gratuitous violence against women in comic books. However, I am more inclined toward a second reading. Given that there is no image of violence being committed against the heroine, rather, she appears to be in control of the situation, if bruised and bloodied, it is more convincing to assume that the scene is both a comment on the relatively dangerous situation lived by women in the military as well as Washington's ability to defend herself and to physically dominate her opponents. The heroine's femininity is reaffirmed here, as she is both 'feminine' (and thus vulnerable to sexual assault) and 'tough' (as capable of defending herself against this violence).

With this scene, and others, used to assert her physical and mental toughness, it should not be surprising that mechanisms of representation work to undermine the potential for her toughness to be read as a threatening manifestation of female masculinity. Indeed, after rescuing and adopting one of the 'wirehead' creatures (Miller and Gibbons 82), and thus alleviating the potential for female masculinity to act as a threat to "the institution of motherhood" (Halberstam, *Female* 273), and reinforcing the notion of "maternal heroism" (Tasker 105), the text is quick to introduce the potential for a love-interest, as a way of further confirming Martha Washington's heterosexuality (and potentially as a way of forming an ad hoc heteronormative family of father, mother and child).

The man who will become Washington's boyfriend is a Native American known only as Wasserstein. He is a member of the eradicated Apache tribe, and comes from a socio-economically privileged background, with a father who has an "utterly boring business" (Miller and Gibbons 129) that supplies him with a variety of high-tech gadgets (reminiscent of Batman). Wasserstein, as the name suggests, plays with two distinct racial stereotypes: the rich, Jewish business person and the Earth-loving Apache. Keeping in mind Brown's assertion of the feminisation of certain male bodies, specifically the Jewish and Native American bodies, there is strong contrast drawn between his body (and his long, flowing hair) and

Washington's body ('masculine' and cropped hair). As the series progresses, Wasserstein comes to join a band of environmental rebels and eventually convinces Washington to follow suit. He and Martha Washington spend relatively little time together, and indeed he appears to act more as a foil and, as mentioned, a confirmation of her heterosexuality than as a partner or even a side-kick.

Tasker's text considers how Ripley, the character portrayed by the actor Sigourney Weaver in the *Alien* film franchise (though she focuses on the first two films), "provides an interesting instance of the ways in which image-makers have dealt with the 'problem' of the action heroine" (15). Among the 'problems' she locates is the symbolic transgression of femininity when the active heroine is not sexualised, that is, when her physical attributes are not coded as hyper-feminine so as to counter-act her more 'masculine' traits: her active role, her aggression, her independence. It is not coincidence that female characters were often introduced into comic book storylines (Batman, Superman, etc.) as a way of asserting the heterosexuality of the hero (Tasker 15), and as such, their femininity need be beyond suspicion. The result, however, borders on the parodic: "[b]ecause masculinity tends to manifest as natural gender itself, the action flick, with its emphases on prosthetic extension, actually undermines the heterosexuality of the hero even as it extends his masculinity" (Halberstam, *Female* 4).

In much the same way that trying to locate normative masculinities on the stylised body of the hero makes evident the excesses of the heroic body, the location of normative femininities is equally complicated. Tasker identifies this as "the sense in which exaggeration, which is over-statement, so easily crosses over into parody. Clearly the big-breasted or muscular women found in comic strips are fantasy figures. Yet in companion with their exaggerated sexual characteristics, these heroines have exaggerated physical powers, in swordplay or marksmanship, a strength which marks them as transgressive, as perverse" (30). The co-existence of the 'exaggerated sexual characteristics' with the 'exaggerated physical powers' is no accident, the latter necessitating the former as a means of downplaying the transgression or perversity Tasker identifies. However, this does nothing to address the 'tomboy' or the 'tough' female who is neither buxom and sexy nor a mere foil for the hero.



As previously mentioned, the problematic of 'what to do' with the action heroine, when her representation is not sexualised within the economy of the heteronormative gaze, arises. Halberstam makes a very intriguing argument about the imitative capabilities of femininity and masculinity, arguing that, in the urinary segregation scenario,<sup>18</sup> where one must choose whether to use the 'men's' or the 'women's,' "[i]t is remarkably easy in this society not to look like a woman. It is relatively difficult, by comparison, not to look like a man [...] Unless men are consciously trying to look like women, men are less likely than women to fail to pass in the rest room" (*Female* 28). The performative aspects of masculinity, for Halberstam, are more "expansive," compared with those of femininity (*Female* 28). Thus, the tomboy, with a gender performance that quickly "finds the limits of femininity" (*Female* 28), pushes against the normative and constrictive boundaries of gender, and the 'musculine' heroine, whose femininity is even more approximate and less legible, becomes even more destabilising.

For the male hero, the introduction of a love interest dispels fears of excessive masculinity and confirms heteronormativity; the question remains, however, as to how the love interest functions in relation to the female hero: as either containment of a hypersexualised body for some heroines or a demonstration of heteronormativity for the 'musculine' heroine. Arguably, while Wasserstein does confirm Martha Washington's heterosexuality and alleviate tensions surrounding her appropriation of masculine power, this is not simply the reverse of the male hero – female heroine love interest scenario. In order to understand the way in which the relationship between Martha Washington and Wasserstein functions as a containment strategy for the liberatory potential of Washington's active female heroism, it is necessary to consider how both characters occupy positions of 'Othered' masculinity.

As Jeffrey Brown has argued, the male Other, represented as upper class, Jewish, Asian, Native American, gay or anything that is not middle-class white heterosexuality, occupies a position of suspect masculinity, as either the feminised

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<sup>18</sup> The use of the term 'urinary segregation' comes, of course, from Jaques Lacan's reformulation of Ferdinand de Saussure's postulation of the Signifier/Signified relationship, which Halberstam references in *Female Masculinity* (28) so as to highlight the potential hazards in assuming gender is an either/or binary. See Lacan's *Écrits* (416-418).

or excessively masculinised Other (Brown, *Masculinity* 173). The Black female body, however, as discussed, can also take on a myriad of symbolic meanings. Specifically, for Halberstam, depictions of “black female masculinity [play] into stereotypical conceptions of black women as less feminine than some mythic norm of white femininity” (*Female* 29). As a result, it cannot be a simple matter of assuming that Martha Washington’s love interest confirms her heteronormativity while reassuring readers of her non-threatening masculinity. Indeed, their relationship is a curious mixture of cultural media tropes which work to both indicate Washington’s position as an active and agentic heroine, while also entrenching her within heteronormativity and female stereotypes.

Wasserstein seldom figures in the narrative. Indeed, he is most prevalent in *Martha Washington Saves the World* (1999), when their relationship ends (533). Despite the ill-fated and secondary role of their relationship, it is still worth delving into the way in which it is represented, and the impact it has on the character and her development. The first meeting between Martha Washington and Wasserstein occurs in *Give Me Liberty* when Washington is stranded in the desert and is taken captive by the Apache tribe to which Wasserstein belongs. There is in this account an ironic re-writing of the captivity narrative that flourished in Puritan New England in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries (and beyond).<sup>19</sup> If the captivity narrative was promoted “as testimony of man’s utter dependence on God” warning against the idea “that man could rely on his own strength for salvation” (Slotkin 114), then Washington’s rescue of herself and Ragyann, rather than passively waiting for rescue, re-writes this type of narrative. Further, the captivity narrative relied on the trope of the white woman (or man) being taken by the Native Americans into the wilderness, where the contrast between the ‘civilised’ (read Puritan Christian) settlement left behind and the ‘barbaric’ is made patent. Aside from the religious symbolism, the captivity narrative also highlights the fears of miscegenation and the contamination of the ‘pure’ community the Puritans sought.

As a Black-woman-as-mother-of-the-nation, the capture of Washington and Ragyann by the Apache tribe throws on its head the fears latent in the Puritan

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<sup>19</sup> See Mary Rowlandson (1682) for example and Richard Slotkin (1973) for an analysis of the genre.

captivity narrative. Further complicating matters is the fact that Wasserstein falls in love with his captive, invoking an inverted version of the Pocahontas story, in which John Smith is supplanted by a young Black woman, and Pocahontas is now a Jewish-Apache man. In this story, the captive exhibits no yearning for the captor though she does regret that her presence in the village should become the occasion for the government to destroy the Apache nation via nuclear bombs. In this instance, the capture of the Black woman becomes the motivation for the white government to annihilate the First Nation community, though it should be noted that the goal is not the rescue of Martha Washington, but rather the hope that she will also die in the bombing. Washington and Wasserstein come to represent the fear of the Other, and the potential for disturbance of the patriarchal position should the two combine forces.

The first image readers are offered of Wasserstein is one that occupies the top third of a page, in which he is firing a weapon at Washington's helicopter (90). The image is of Wasserstein in profile, riding atop a jeep, wielding an enormous bazooka-style weapon. The next image, directly below the first and filling just less than a third of the page, is of Wasserstein's face, presumably as he watches the missile he just fired bring down Washington's helicopter. He wears a half-smile and a fixed glare, and a green-patterned bandanna holds his long hair in place, though some strands are blowing across his face. The image is one of control, of confidence, of self-satisfaction. As the following images show Washington and Ragyann as they are captured and taken prisoner by Wasserstein's colleagues, there is a sharp contrast between the calm in Wasserstein's face and the confusion depicted in the aftermath. Washington does not seem to realise where she is at first, as Ragyann pleads with her to "Wake up," and that this is "No time for flashback [sic]" (Miller and Gibbons 90). The juxtaposition between Washington and Wasserstein continues further on when he appears to check on her in the tent where she is being held hostage.

The series of images that narrate this gaze start as the last two panels on the bottom third of the left-hand page. The first shows Washington's face lying next to a sleeping Ragyann and the shadow of a pair of legs behind them, occupying the top half of the image. Washington's facial expression is aggressive and hostile (unsurprisingly, considering she is a hostage). The next image is, again,

fully occupied by Wasserstein's face, a move that is repeated throughout the text. The reader is frequently given a 'close-up' of his facial expression. Here, curiously, though the image is part of a sequence of three in a tier on the bottom third of a page, his panel is slightly larger than the other two, giving the impression that he is even more imposing as the reader sees him draw aside the curtain to where Washington is being held and gaze at her. In the next image, on the facing page, he stares at her from the doorway as she sits up in her make-shift bed, and we can see her hands tied behind her back as she looks back at him. Though in this image we see only the back of her, the next gives us her facial expression – hard, challenging, defiant. This exchange of gazes is interrupted by Ragyann, who reads Wasserstein's mind in her sleep: "Strong body. Beautiful in moonlight" (97). Readers again see a 'close-up' of his face, which has changed its expression and now registers mild surprise. The next image of Washington's face shows something akin to panic or fear. The politics represented in this exchange of gazes merits interrogation. While the reader has more images of Washington, Wasserstein is always represented as 'facing' the reader and standing up, while Washington is lying down or sitting, often with her back to the reader, in a position that highlights her status as captive. If we compare the facial shots, Wasserstein's are controlled, in the sense that they do not evidence any clear emotion, even when his thoughts have been given away. Indeed, it is Martha Washington who reacts most strongly to the revelation that he is evaluating her body. Her gaze, which up to this point has been oppositional, challenging his right to look at her, changes to one of near terror. In "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators," bell hooks has argued that "[s]ubordinates in relations of power learn experientially that there is a critical gaze, one that 'looks' to document, one that is oppositional" (116). The tensions surrounding the gazes exchanged between Martha Washington and Wasserstein in this scene are clearly organised around the way in which the protagonist is situated as 'subordinate' through his invocation of her sexuality. When readers view Washington's face she is clearly returning Wasserstein's gaze, that is, however, until the terms of his gaze become focused on her physicality, thereby incapacitating her (momentarily) from returning his gaze. Indeed, the first interactions between the two are all predicated on his ability to overpower her, physically and psychologically. As a result, her normative

heterosexuality, while not the focus of the narrative, reinforces rather than tests the boundaries of the patriarchal discourse that constructs her.

These boundaries are made clear every time Wasserstein and Washington interact throughout the series. Indeed, one of the prevailing tropes of the text, and one that is ubiquitous to heroic female storylines in general (and that we have seen played out in the previous chapter), is the fight between the heroine and her eventual love interest. Indeed, it seems almost *de rigueur* in the stories of violent heroines that as powerful as they may be, the one man who can physically dominate them is the one they will love. This is a re-writing of the conventions of the heteronormative romance narrative, in which the heroine falls in love with the man who can offer her security and protection. In the case of the action heroine, the conventions are re-written but not wholly abandoned, as she is more than capable of defending and protecting herself, then the one man who can 'win her heart' must be even stronger than she is. Worryingly, however, this trope, especially as it is played out through the combat scene between heroine and 'hero,' reflects the insidious tendency to glamorise and normalise gender violence. If the only way to 'win' the heroine is to beat her into submission, then these narratives support an economy of sexual/gender violence that asserts a postfeminist re-inscription of gender norms and behaviours that include the need to preserve traditional masculinity at the expense of alternative femininities.

The relationship between Wasserstein and Washington is punctuated by these altercations, and they alternate with scenes in which Washington rescues her boyfriend. Before turning to consider what is at stake when the heroine rescues her lover, it is worth considering what happens when Washington and Wasserstein fight each other. They engage in combat three times in the course of the series, the first while she is still a captive of his tribe.

When she tries to escape from the Apache compound (102), Washington is first lassoed by a guard in a hunting-style hidey. The imagery is disturbing. As Washington runs away from the compound, into the desert, readers see a small inset panel depicting a close-up of Washington's face as a lasso is thrown over her head as she runs away. The panel directly below this shows only her feet being lifted off the ground, supposedly as she is yanked backward by the lasso. The bottom tier shows the two guards coming out of their hideys, one pulling

Washington by the rope tied around her next. The disturbing aspect is, of course, the correlation made between Washington and a hunted animal.



Fig. 4 Washington single-handedly takes on several guards and escapes from the compound (Miller and Gibbons 2009).

Though she fights back on the facing page, and eventually overcomes her hunters, the last image readers have before turning to the next page is a small panel showing only her hand holding a gun, with a tranquiliser dart lodged in her wrist. If the animal imagery is not clear enough, the following page is entirely made up of an eagle and a black jaguar engaged in combat: the symbol of the Black Panther Party is pitted against the American eagle, symbol of the United States of America. The eagle, however, is also a popular image in many Native American traditions, and so an alternative, and more plausible, reading would suggest that the eagle is not the United States, but rather signifies his allegiance to Apache culture. In this

reading, the fight between the two can be read as a divisive action that pits the two groups against each other, rather than against the hegemonic power.<sup>20</sup>

The facing page shows, frame by frame, the fight between Wasserstein and Washington, though it does not seem to be a fair fight, given that he has already shot her with one tranquiliser, and in the second frame of their fight he shoots her in the neck with another. The final image on this page is of Washington passed out in Wasserstein's arms, as he supports her with one hand and holds her face in the other. The way in which he grips her jaw, as though to examine the inside of her mouth, is evocative of the way in which slaves have been evaluated by human traffickers. Disconcerting as this image is, the accompanying text is even more so as he says: "A cat. Of course" (Miller and Gibbons 105). While this clarifies the preceding page with the eagle and the jaguar fighting, it also reinforces tropes about Black femininity (and Native American masculinity as well). The eagle, who represents Wasserstein, faces outward, claws extended, eyes red as it swoops in towards the jaguar (Washington), whose back haunches face the reader, and while its mouth is open in a ferocious posture, its claw outstretched so as to swipe at the eagle, the uncomfortable evocation of the hips and buttocks of the Hottentot Venus is inescapable. As Patricia Hill Collins asserts "the animalistic icon of Black female sexuality" is prevalent throughout popular culture, dating back to the nineteenth century, if not earlier (171). It is no accident that Wasserstein is figured as an eagle and Washington as a cat. Should these two animals be compared in terms of the sensuality we ascribe to each, the jaguar is by far the 'sexier' of the two animals, though the 'tough' quotient ascribed to each is perhaps equal, if also tilted toward the feline. It is not enough that Wasserstein hunts her like an animal, shooting her with tranquiliser darts after his colleagues have lassoed her like a domesticated animal, but that she is seen, in his mind, to *become* a jungle cat is even more problematic when read against the knowledge that they will eventually become lovers.

Yvonne Tasker has suggested that blackness, animality and toughness are bound together on the Black heroic body. She states that "[i]t is in part the blackness of these heroines which opens up, through notions of black animality,

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<sup>20</sup> In Native American traditions the meaning of both the eagle and the black panther or jaguar can vary depending on the culture and history. For a detailed reading of each see Heike Owusu (1999).

the production of an aggressive female heroine within existing traditions of representation” (Tasker 21). It is the relationship between the Black female body and the animality that which produces the space of possibility for the aggressive Black heroine. By converting this aggression into an aspect of an animalised nature, which in turn is closely tied to an excessive or base sexuality, the violent heroine’s actions become re-inscribed within patriarchal discourse. That this, the first physical contact between Wasserstein and Washington, should result in him dominating her, and carrying her back to the Apache compound as a captive, speaks volumes to the way in which the violent heroine is not only subordinated to masculine power and violence, but that this subordination is seen as almost desirable when it leads to a romantic relationship. Again, for Tasker, the markers of toughness “of the black action heroine – her ability to fight, her self-confidence, even arrogance – are bound up in an aggressive assertion of her sexuality” (21). Though Washington is almost rigorously represented as a virginal character, and does not ‘assert her sexuality,’ the undercurrent is that her potential sexuality is contained within her relationship, thereby rendering non-threatening any sexuality she may exhibit. In turn, her violence and her sexuality are *tamed* by the love-interest. The narrative subtly asserts the classic trope in patriarchal literature that the hero must subdue the heroine, must teach her the value of submission, and subordinate her rebellious potential to his domination.

Washington’s violence and sexuality are even further contained within acceptable bounds not only by inscribing them within a heteronormative framework, but also by subordinating her physical prowess to that of Wasserstein. Unsurprisingly, if the physical contest between the two leads to their burgeoning love affair when he bests her, the end of their affair is signaled near the end of the novel when they again face-off and she beats him. Worth noting is the fact that Wasserstein subdues Martha Washington through the use of tranquiliser darts, whereas, when she overpowers him, it is only through the use of her physical power. In short, she beats him in hand-to-hand combat. The series images illustrating their fight are telling. They occupy more than half of the top tier of a double-page spread. The first three images are repetitions of the same scene, Martha Washington in various poses as she kicks or punches Wasserstein, finally rendering him unconscious as she squats on top of him and punches him directly



in the head. Marking a sharp contrast with the images of Wasserstein besting Washington, readers see Martha face-on, they witness the expression on her face, which is one of rage. The following two images show only Washington's head from the side as the word "Krunch" is repeated in both frames, and drops of blood fly off of her raised fist. The fact that her second in command must restrain her at first suggests that she is out of control, that it is not the 'human' side of her, but the aforementioned animal side that has taken over. When she is told: "Captain. No. You're killing him." Her response is: "Oh, yeah. You're damn right about *that*" (516; italics in original), indicating that she has, perhaps, not entirely lost control but has taken the decision to beat her now ex-lover to near death. However, she later apologises, telling Wasserstein that she is "sorry...about what [she] did to [him]. It wasn't [his] fault" (532), thereby indicating that she did indeed lose control of her rational side, giving in to impulses (worth noting is that he never apologises to her, and that they never address the fact that, had she not beaten him, he would have killed her).

Washington's ability to beat Wasserstein is not depicted as the result of her having become stronger or improved her fighting skills. Indeed, it is presented as his having become weaker. His weakness (and the reason Washington must physically overpower him) is explained to readers (and Martha Washington) by the computer program that has taken possession of his (and the majority of the Earth's) will power. The program (called Venus) explains: "He was easier to bring around that you might've guessed, Martha. Oh, he fought us, to be sure. As best he could. But we have our ways. And our boy had a couple of weaknesses" (513). Certainly, a principal aspect of the story is precisely the protagonist's ability to resist being taken over by Venus and Washington argues that if she "was able to resist it" then there should be no doubt that Wasserstein can (504). Washington's 'victory' over Wasserstein is coloured by the fact that he appears to want her to win, and that it is not a simple case of her having superior skills. He says to her: "Please kill me" (513), not because she has inflicted so much pain that he would rather die than continue experiencing it, but because of the shame he feels for not resisting Venus. He explains to Washington, once the altercation is over and she has saved the world:

I was always the best at everything. Everything. I was the fastest. The smartest. The best. When I met you I thought I'd found an equal. Somebody worthy of me. That's how full of myself I was. But you're better than me, Martha. Stronger. You fought [Venus] off. You're better. You have a magnificent destiny, my love – and I'm not a part of it. (533)

What this paragraph makes explicit is the way in which the heroine is constructed in relation to her partner or love interest: as long as he continues to be smarter, stronger, better than her, he can recognise her as an 'equal,' but when it becomes apparent that she is 'better' than he is, the relationship must end. It can be no coincidence that Washington's mission following her break-up with Wasserstein is a deep-space adventure that has her away from the Earth for several years (and that is not narrated in the text). Quite literally, she has been exiled.

This dire condemnation of the heroine's potential love life could, of course, be read as though suggesting that the powerful, agentic action heroine 'deserves' a partner who is equally exceptional and capable. Martha Washington is punished (if having your boyfriend break up with you is a punishment) for being too good, for being too competent and capable. And yet the suggestion that the male partner cannot be weaker or somehow 'less than' the heroine is a pernicious and sexist stereotype that merely serves to reinforce essentialist ideas surrounding normative sexualities while disguised as a liberated discourse celebrating female liberation.

Wasserstein and Washington's relationship is not, however, defined by such rigid binaries. Another recurring theme is the fact that it is Washington who quite frequently comes to the rescue or is the means of saving Wasserstein. There is a ludic binary inversion that occurs as the heroine saves her lover on various occasions. In fact, this happens so often that he comments: "Rescued again. I hope you realize this isn't doing my ego any good at all" (Miller and Gibbons 378). This tongue-in-cheek recognition of the way in which a role reversal has taken place functions to both highlight the fact that Wasserstein is the more vulnerable of the two on more than one occasion, as well as to mock the idea of the male ego that suffers from having to admit this vulnerability.

As Kerry Fine has noted in "She Hits Like a Man But She Kisses Like a Girl: TV Heroines, Femininity, Violence, and Intimacy," it is typically "the male hero

[who is] protector and savior of the weak white female who traditionally symbolizes passive, civilized, domestic society” (Fine 154). I would add to this that the ‘male hero’ is also predominantly a white, heterosexual hero as well. That the hero should be a woman of colour, and that she is now seen repeatedly rescuing a Native American man (thereby inverting the myth of the Native American as frontier menace or as simple side-kick), re-writes the notion of heroism as a mostly white, male domain. While Washington is fighting on behalf of, and rescuing, humanity, it is Wasserstein who readers see being directly rescued. If, again from Fine, the primary role of the hero “is to protect or rescue somebody –in most cases, a woman or group of people too weak to protect themselves” (154), the use of Wasserstein as stand-in for ‘the protected’ is suggestive. On the one hand, it references the racist ideology of the ‘good savage,’ the Native American as effeminate, as needing protection. And yet he is not depicted as either of these things. Rather, his physique and his mental skills both mark him out as both strong and capable, as someone who usually occupies the role of protector, not protected. The symbol of ‘passive, civilized, domestic society’ that Fine identifies as typical of the person in need of protection is here converted into a symbol of the untamed frontier, of wild, untamed nature and, even more problematically and much like the Lone Ranger’s sidekick Tonto, into the domesticated but never equal Other.

In this section of the narrative, Martha Washington is fighting against the computer program run amok whose primary function is to coordinate Earth’s activities, but who has developed delusions of grandeur, and seeks to subordinate all of humanity to her whims. In an ironic gesture that will be addressed further on, this villain is named Venus, and she is represented as a devious form of artificial intelligence capable of controlling the minds and bodies of the people on Earth. Wasserstein, as capable as he is, is eventually revealed as having succumbed to Venus and her mind control, of being absorbed, like the rest of humanity, into her technological web, and of needing to be rescued. Martha does rescue him, as previously mentioned; however the last time she does so is also the signal for the end of their relationship.

Unsurprisingly, the last time that Martha Washington saves Wasserstein is also the moment when she physically beats him. In this scene, it would almost appear that the villain she is saving him from is himself. After losing face and

having to admit that he is not “smarter” or “stronger” than Washington (504), that he cannot resist Venus, even though she (Washington) can, she must beat him or he becomes the author of the world’s doom. Martha’s relationship is shown to be untenable because the feminisation of the male Other is not an acceptable form of heteronormativity, breaking as it does with the female-male binary system. Indeed, while Martha Washington and Wasserstein’s relationship is mentioned throughout the text, and while it does not in itself constitute a predominant storyline it is subtly pervasive, it is only just before Washington beats her lover that readers learn that the relationship had no sexual component. She misinterprets the situation, thinks that the trouble is personal, and says: “You’re angry with me. You’re sick of being strung along. I can’t blame you for that. You’ve got every right. You’ve been as patient as a saint with me” (450). While he denies the accusation and tells her that she’s “worth any kind of wait” (450), this exchange is crucial as it affirms Washington’s virginity and thereby reinstates her within the constraints of a female sexuality that must be controlled or contained. Washington’s control over her own sexuality is depicted here as her ability to suppress it or hold it in check.

The text reinforces the idea that she is heterosexual but abstinent (therefore not a Jezebel or femme fatale, but a chaste, mammy-like figure, or even as the Christ-like figure referenced earlier who is also supposedly chaste), and takes pains to point out that hers is not a ‘deviant’ sexuality, but rather that she is simply behaving according to a patriarchal, conservative morality that takes great pains to both control women’s sexuality but also blame them for any deviance from the norm.

Washington *is* a desiring subject. When she must say good-bye to Wasserstein before a mission, she is surprised when he doesn’t “flirt” with her, “I guess he’s serious about being patient,” she thinks, “I’m almost disappointed, which is pretty hypocritical of me, considering” (Miller and Gibbons 451). Here she demonstrates, on the one hand, that she is subject to heterosexual desires, while on the other hand she disturbingly reinforces the notion that women are ‘hypocritical’ in their sexuality, saying no but meaning yes. This is, certainly, a troubling exchange in the text, supporting as it does the oft repeated refrain in rape culture that ‘she was asking for it’ or ‘she said no but she meant yes.’ Combined with the previous exchange in which Washington apologises for

‘stringing Wasserstein along’ the text appears to reinforce the prevailing idea that women’s sexuality is duplicitous and is often employed as a tool for subjugating men.

The text does nothing to problematise the double standard surrounding (Black) female sexuality, rather it seems to reinforce the notion that ‘good’ sexuality is that which is not expressed or that which is only expressed within the confines of a heteronormative monogamous relationship and that is subjugated to male desire. Indeed, it would seem that, like many of the female action heroes before her, the relationship with Wasserstein has the primary purpose of demonstrating Washington’s “ability to have a traditional, heterosexual relationship” (Helford 302).

The Black female hero, represented as is she here, asserts aspects of female masculinity and must be re-inscribed within a discourse of heteronormativity and non-threatening sexuality so that her ‘masculinity,’ her physical capability, her mental and physical toughness, can be contained by a normative and controllable sexuality. Thus, the heroine does not threaten the status quo so much as she functions as an example of systemic flexibility.

### 2.3.2 **The Goddess and the Machine**

Martha Washington’s body becomes a space of competing signifiers: race, sexuality, class, gender and the representation of violence all converge in this comic book heroine, and test the limits of conventional heroic females without actually breaking them. Throughout the series, Martha Washington demonstrates a keen ability to manipulate technology, as well as a tense relationship with the way in which technology is mobilised. Starting in issue five of *Martha Washington Goes to War*, “Kingdom Come” (Miller and Gibbons, 1994), the tension becomes even more apparent as technology ceases to be a tool the heroine merely employs and becomes instead the very thing against which she must fight. The title is taken from the Lord’s prayer in the Christian tradition: “Thy kingdom come, they will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven.” Again, Martha Washington is figured as a messianic figure who will enact, in this case, god’s will on Earth. As Linville has noted, “technology in its feminine aspect is culturally coded as dangerous or treacherous” (115). Nowhere does this become more patently obvious than when

Martha Washington takes on Venus, the computer program originally designed “to be nothing more than a program, an organizational tool” that becomes “a security threat of the highest order. Immensely powerful – and utterly insane” (Miller and Gibbons 444). Because of her ubiquity, Venus is not recognised as a threat by any of the humans except Washington, and her fears and warnings are disregarded, primarily because Venus has integrated herself into not only the infrastructure but also the minds of the human population. Washington is able to defend herself against Venus because “her mental discipline is like nothing [Venus has] ever encountered” (478). The text sets up the confrontation between Washington and Venus, pitting the super-human resourcefulness of the heroine against the almost absolute control the villain exerts. As such, the two come to represent two ways of conceptualising femininities. The symbolism of Venus’ name is certainly the first clue toward understanding the way in which these two characters will come to be juxtaposed, as her name comes from the Roman goddess of love and beauty, while Washington’s name, as previously mentioned, is linked to the mythology of the founding of the United States.

Prior to turning to an analysis of the ways in which Washington and Venus come to play out what Nina Lykke identifies as the battle between the cyborg and the goddess, respectively (1997), it is worth turning briefly to consider the way in which the text positions Martha Washington in relation to the various technologies that inform her life. One of her principal features, from the very beginning of the text, when she is a small child at school, is her ability to understand and manipulate technology. Whether this be the re-programming of computers, repairing aircraft mid-flight, or simply coming up with alternative uses for the equipment at hand, there is never any doubt that Washington controls the objects around her. As she herself says: “I’ve always liked computers. They’re easy to trick” (257).

The ease with which Washington navigates the technological devices around her coincides with a vision of both technology and femininity that brings to mind Donna Haraway’s cyborg. For Haraway, the cyborg is “the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism” (430). Inherent in this relationship, then, is both the capacity to manipulate and integrate technology into the body as well as the potential to subvert the systems

of production from which it springs. Disrupting Haraway's optimistic view of the potential for human-machine hybrids is the way in which the technology Washington uses is, more often than not, faulty. On one of the several occasions in which the machines she uses fails her, Washington notes: "They've got me trying out weaponry that's never been combat tested. The problem is that nothing they ever invent these days works" (255). In these scenarios, in which Washington's bodily integrity, her very life, is endangered by technologies that continually malfunction, the potential for cyborg corporealities is frustrated by the limitations of the machines. Indeed, within the patriarchal, militaristic social framework, the machine trumps both the potential for cyborg symbiotic relationships as well as the human bodies that wield them. As her equipment fails, and she is left alone, her commanding officer informs her: "you're on your own out there [...] Destroy this prototype before they can get their hands on it. Your life is expendable" (Miller and Gibbons 255-56). Interestingly, it is the failing state Washington is aligned with that can neither produce effective technologies nor take seriously the lives of its soldiers. Washington eventually comes to recognise the way in which the state apparatus functions. She argues that: "They lie and lie and kill and kill and there's no end to it [...]. They turn everything into just another way to kill. Just another weapon. That's what they did to me. I'm just another weapon" (358). This realisation is what compels her to turn to the rebel organisation and fight against the government she had always defended, and aligns her with Haraway's cyborg, as outlined above. As she comes to realise that the government doesn't "want things to get better. They don't want the war to end" (Miller and Gibbons 343) and that this directly contradicts the mission she thought she had been fighting for, she turns to the secret rebel group whose purpose is "to establish a new government" (339). This group is presented as ideologically opposed to the system Washington was serving. Not coincidentally, the technologies that failed the corrupt, decayed system are fully operative in the rebel organisation. Her first time in battle, Washington notes: "Everything these people make works" (363). The failing of functional technology stands in as a metaphor for the failing or functional operations of the government system. The corruption the old regime suffered from is played out in the corruption of its weapons and devices, while the new, 'healthy' model enjoys technology that works.

The first two images readers are offered of Washington going in to battle as part of the rebel regime are telling. The first offers only a view of her eyes, and occupies the final frame on a page dominated primarily by the face of Venus, divided into three parts. Washington and Venus are here contrasted, as reflecting images of each other – the machine in blue tones, her eyes fill the frame, and the text boxes are filled with orders being given to one of the rebel operatives. Washington's frame is full colour, though again features her eyes, staring out at the reader, fixed in concentration, with the surrounding text divided between internal dialogue and a conversation with Venus (363). It becomes apparent that the two are positioned as reflections of each other, though it is as yet unclear what their relationship will be.

The following page directly confronts the relationship between Washington and the new technology (364). It is almost a full page image of the heroine flying in to battle in a full-body flight suit that is clearly taken from the pages of science fiction narratives. Washington is leading a pack of other rebels as they fly through the sky, above a desolate and barren desert landscape. There is no doubt about the way in which readers are meant to understand Washington's relationship to the technology that quite literally envelops her. Arms held in a position similar to that of a flexing muscle-man, feet together, wires and tubes discreetly linking various parts of her body, what is most striking is the way in which her body is foregrounded here as the woman-machine of cyborgian imagery. The suit highlights her impressive musculature, offering as it does an image of the powerful, 'tough' heroine readers are already familiar with (and that has been previously discussed). The image is certainly one of power and control. Disturbingly, however, the suit also highlights Washington's bust and hips, calling attention to a feminine physique that has, until now, been concealed under the androgynous PAX uniform. Further, as all but a glimpse of her face is concealed beneath the suit, it also functions as a means of de-racialising her.

The seemingly contradictory image, one that exposes both her femininity and her physical power can be read as a comment on the way in which the combination of female masculinity and technology is a threatening concept. While Washington was represented as an androgynous (though heterosexualised) body, her access to technology was incomplete – that is, her skill at manipulating and



controlling the devices around her was undermined by the failure of these mechanisms. When she is given access to devices that work, her body is immediately represented as feminised, her breasts are augmented and protruding and her hips become prominent. This overt sexualisation also appears to act as a counterpoint to the internal dialogue that runs down the page beside this image. The text offers Washington's thoughts as she goes in to battle with the rebels for the first time. What becomes clear is that this change in allegiance is bound up with a burgeoning self-confidence as she thinks: "a bigger stronger voice inside me is telling me I'm doing the right thing. It's bigger and stronger than any voice I've ever heard from anybody else [...] it's my voice and it's the only one I'm going to follow from now on" (364). Washington's new-found confidence in herself foregrounds the ensuing narrative which pits her against her nemesis, Venus. The fact that she will no longer listen to other voices, will only 'follow' her own, points to the way in which the text will begin to deconstruct the new, individualistic mindset Washington adopts versus the communal, group mindset offered by Venus.

It is certainly possible to read this new sense of self-assurance as a corollary to the depiction of the more sexualised body, that is, the 'sexy body' is a direct result of the confidence Washington now possesses. However, the argument that Washington's confidence is derived from her 'sexiness,' or even that her 'sexiness' is derived from her confidence, ignores the way in which such representation works as a means of containing the potential threat the confident, tough heroine aligned with technology poses to the patriarchal war machine when she will no longer take "any orders" (Miller and Gibbons 376). Further evidence of the way in which the body of the heroine and her access to technology must be contained by strategies of heteronormative desire can be read in the series directly following the emergence of Venus. Washington is sent into space and once again her body is entirely covered, this time by a baggy spacesuit. To counteract this 'masculinisation,' her hair is grown out, done in corn rows, and unmistakably blonde once again. The whitewashing combined with the longer hair that replaces her previous bald style is a strong indicator of the tension that becomes played out between the representation of toughness and attractiveness.

Anne Marie Schleiner has pointed out how: “The fusion of femininity, death and technology in characters like Lara Croft is a lucrative and enduring formula in capitalist market-based economies, a potent combination” (222). Schleiner’s principal argument circles around the power that the woman plus technology equation has over the neoliberal postfeminist consumer, and she highlights the extent to which women’s access to death technologies comes to stand in for a systemic access to social equality. Just as the ability to wield violence, to be tough and physically capable appears to substitute for access to patriarchal power, the ability to use weapons symbolises patriarchal military acceptance of women. The problematic arises when the question is posed as to whether the goal is symbolic acceptance and equality, or whether it is a profound renegotiation and disruption of the systems that privilege death technologies as symbols of power.

The dynamic played out between Martha Washington and Venus has much to do with the discourse of capitalism and neoliberalism, and the narrative of American exceptionalism, though it is couched in terms of the fight between individual and group morality. Frank Miller, the comic’s author, discusses his ideas for Washington’s story and how it focuses “on issues of competence and incompetence, courage and cowardice” and to take “the fate of humanity out of the hands of a convenient ‘Big Brother’ and [place] it in the hands of individuals with individual strengths and individual choices made for good or evil”<sup>21</sup> (385). Not only does his comment evidence a clearly neoliberal bias toward the role of the individual in society, it also demonstrates what Elyce Rae Helford has critiqued as one of the prevailing downfalls of the contemporary action heroine. Helford notes that in contemporary narratives: “Each village’s problem is solved in isolation from the larger culture by an individual hero who proposes individualist solutions that never threaten the patriarchal and classist structure that is plainly evident” (294). The role of the heroine, as Helford notes here, is not to effect lasting or profound changes, but rather to defend the status quo, to return the world to its previous state, regardless of what that state was, asserting that “the limitations of the female action-adventure hero are equally (or more) important to attend. The heroic figure is individualistic, most often a loner. But, even when working with others, s/he acts

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<sup>21</sup> This text is part of an “Afterword” included in the omnibus edition.

to right wrongs without insisting on greater cultural change” (Helford 294). The impact of this on Martha Washington’s narrative can be clearly seen in the clash that emerges between the heroine and Venus.

Following Tudor Balinisteanu’s work in “The Cyborg Goddess: Social Myths of Women as Goddesses of Technologized Otherworlds,” which analyses the way in which the television series *Star Trek: The Next Generation* pits the goddess/nature against technology/culture and problematises these relationships, I want to suggest that in some ways the Venus/Martha Washington dichotomy is a complex revisiting of the same problematic, but with a late capitalist/neoliberal slant.

For Balinisteanu, there is tension between the “goddess figure as the keeper of balance between nature and humans” (404-5), and nature as “a constant reminder of the otherness whose taming insures human progress” (406). As such, the goddess is both mediator between humans and nature, but also charged with protecting one from the other. If ‘taming’ nature is the path toward ‘progress,’ understanding this last term as a reflection of the industrialist agenda, then technology becomes a tool through which this can be achieved. Balinisteanu articulates it as “the envisioning of progress, [which] stirs an entire slew of contemporary dilemmas as the issue of the containment of nature through technoculture is framed with questions regarding the socially acceptable definitions of feminine-identified nature” (399). This statement asserts two distinct ideas, both of which are crucial for understanding Martha Washington and Venus; the first is the correlation between nature and the feminine and the second is the way in which technology and culture become aligned not only with the masculine but also with the role of ‘containing’ the natural. In her theorisation of the cyborg, Haraway notes that: “It’s not just that ‘god’ is dead; so is the ‘goddess’. Or both are revived in the worlds charged with microelectronic and biotechnological politics” (Haraway 433). Thus, the strict separation between nature and culture, the goddess and technology, is blurred, and the binary ceases to function as an organisational model.

The ‘revivification’ Haraway identifies is played out quite literally in *The Life and Times of Martha Washington in the Twenty-First Century*. Washington realises that Venus “thinks she’s God” (444), though she is “supposed to be nothing more than a program, an organizational tool” (444). Indeed, the god/dess comes to

'life' here, or rather, becomes the reification of the stuff of technological nightmares: "she's developed delusions of omnipotence" (444). As a program that develops the ability not only to manipulate data but also the humans who should 'control' her, Venus becomes the replicating female so ubiquitous to traditional science fiction.

It is worth pointing out that Venus is depicted as a woman – a fact that may be unremarkable, except that it points to her anthropomorphism, to the need to give her a 'body' despite the fact that she is the effect of a computer program.<sup>22</sup> She appears in the narrative as a blue face – reinforcing her alienness and the fact that she is energy, (a mere computer program), as well as giving her an identifiable form. Her features are Caucasian and she is primarily represented as only a head, without the rest of her body, though her replicants are depicted as entire bodies, with her same face. Her ability to control and implant herself into both the systems and the physical bodies of all of Earth's technologised peoples suggests that her corporeality is multiple. In fact, she quite literally reproduces herself as well, in the form of identical gynoids that increase in number as the text unfolds. These robots *are* Venus; they have no autonomy from her, and yet destroying one (or even various) does not limit or damage the origin. Perhaps Venus' most frightening aspect is not so much her tentacle-like grasp over the world's systems, but her encroachment on the bodily integrity of the human population. Unable to tolerate Washington's "self-reliance" and her "habit of playing cowboy" (Miller and Gibbons 441), Venus implants a microchip into Washington's head.<sup>23</sup> This chip enables Venus to control Washington's thoughts and actions, and even though the heroine eventually resists: "Not only does Venus still hold power on Earth, but those B-chips are still in our heads, too deeply wired into our brains to remove without killing us. They're still Venus's to employ if she can get close to us" (486). By compromising the bodily integrity of Washington and her crew, Venus

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<sup>22</sup> While this may be in part the result of the need to visually depict the character, representing the 'goddess' in 'human' form, though certainly part of the Roman/Greek tradition which envisioned the gods/goddesses as able to adopt corporeal forms, it also gestures toward what N. Katherine Hayles identifies as one of the defining characteristics of the posthuman view, that it "configures human being so that it can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines" (3).

<sup>23</sup> Venus' critique harkens back to the initial confrontation between Washington and Wasserstein, wherein she can be read as the 'cowboy' and he the 'Indian.' Curiously, this positions Washington as the law-abiding figure of American expansion, the one who, though independent and solitary, opened up the frontier for settlement and 'civilization.'

symbolically disrupts the Enlightenment 'I,' the individual body governed by reason that is so threatening to the collective. The posthuman, the figure for whom "there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulations, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals" (Hayles 3) is enacted here.

With this implant, Washington becomes an extension of the machine, inverting the prevailing human-machine dichotomy which situates technology as a tool for human use, not the other way around. Playing out what Kaye Mitchell has argued as: "The suggestion of much technocultural theory is that contemporary technology has rendered these boundaries unstable, permeable, negotiable" (116), in much the same way that the cyborg renders the human-machine boundary as much more fluid and malleable.

For N. Katherine Hayles, "the erasure of embodiment is a feature common to *both* the liberal humanist subject and the cybernetic posthuman. Identified with the rational mind, the liberal subject *possessed* a body but was not usually represented as *being* a body" (4; italics in original). This understanding of the posthuman is indebted of course to critiques of liberal humanist subjectivities made by feminist theorists, pointing out as it does that subjectivity "has historically been constructed as a white European male, presuming a universality that has worked to suppress and disenfranchise women's voices" among many Others (Hayles 4). The relationship between Venus and Washington highlights the complicated nature of embodiment and the posthuman subject.

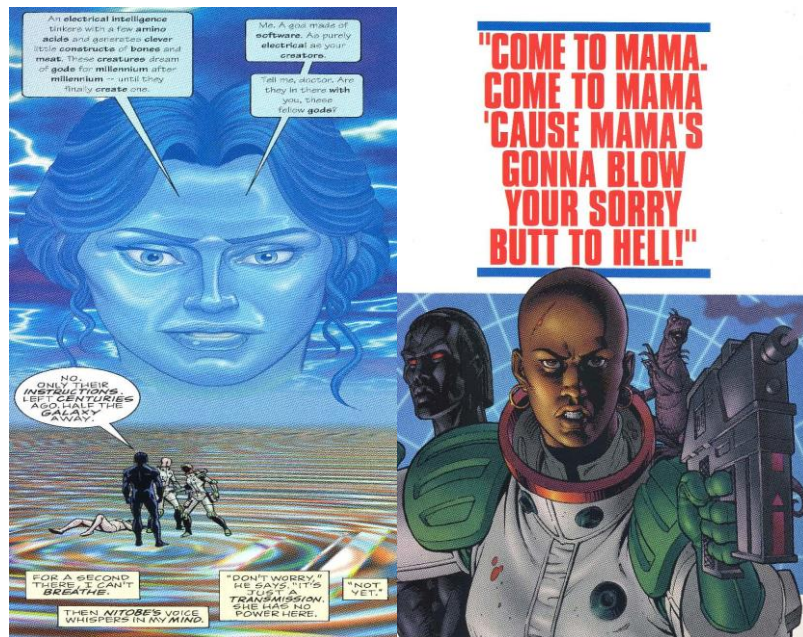


Fig. 5 The first image shows the artificial intelligence program, Venus, while the second depicts Martha Washington as she prepares to fight her enemy (Miller and Gibbons 2009).

While Venus fights to ‘embody’ as many corporealities as she can, to adopt and control as many of Earth’s people as possible, she can be read as aligned with the humanist subject who possesses but is not a body, and can “can claim for the liberal subject its notorious universality” (Hayles 4), though this ‘universality’ is, of course, a fiction. However, I would argue that Venus is suggestive more of a posthumanist position, one that is critical of the separation between mind and body that the humanist tradition privileges.

The scenario in the novel would appear to come straight out of a science fiction B-movie script: the program generated as a means of facilitating and maintaining life develops autonomy and uses its powers to control humankind. While the premise may seem slightly risible, it does highlight the manner in which gender-nature-technology are triangulated. Although both Washington and Venus are clearly represented as opposing examples of the way in which Lykke reads cyborgs as entities that deconstruct the idea of nature. They “subvert the representation of nature as a transcendental category” (Lykke 10), highlighting just how constructed it is as a concept. They do so by resorting to what Balinisteanu identifies as the nature/culture divide (where technology resides in the category of culture, as does the controlled body of the ‘I’ of Enlightenment ideology). Both the goddess and the cyborg “have problematized the dichotomy by

insisting that nature is always acculturated or fictionalized, rather than merely translated through metaphor, while culture, when naturalized, offers the visions that in/form society's material processes" (Balinisteanu 395).

It is not only through her feminisation that Venus comes to be aligned with the uncontrolled aspects of nature, indeed it is also through the repetition of alignment with death. This alignment is not, as may first appear, through her representation as a death technology, but rather in the fact that Washington repeatedly threatens to "kill" her (Miller and Gibbons 523 and 524, among others), until she finally achieves it: "and Venus dies" (529). Indeed, the adjectives used to describe Venus, "instincts of a sadist," "devil," (488), "insane," (444), work more at 'humanising' her than the comments that she is "purely electrical" (522). As Lykke has pointed out, "[t]he mixture of human and non-human dimensions is what constitutes the monster's monstrosity" (Lykke 16). And Venus is undoubtedly, depicted as a "monster" (Miller and Gibbons 528), despite her humanised characteristics, like "the scream of a soul sent straight to the heart of hell" she emits when Washington 'kills' her (527). Venus' monstrosity, however, is problematic.

Despite the fact that Washington has decided that Venus must die, the text itself, while certainly supporting the heroine's cause, does not offer concrete clues as to why Washington versus Venus is "the battle for human freedom" (Miller and Gibbons 426). Both of these characters claim to be fighting for "common good" (426). The question is raised as to what constitutes this 'common good.' While under Venus' control, Washington thinks: "This is happiness. This is life the way it ought to be. This is peace. This is freedom" (469). By Venus' own measure: "It is my humble duty to choreograph Earth operations. To weave the fabric of a new society" (441). This new society is, according to Venus, peaceable: "After millennia of hatred and murder and war – the human race will finally be free. Free from all the sorrow and pain that come from stubborn spirits, from the congenital failing of you species to simply agree and cooperate" (Miller and Gibbons 470). It is far from my intention to advocate or even argue the philosophical issue of happiness/loss of free will versus sorrow/free will which the text asserts. What is worth pointing out, however, is the cost of Washington's victory over Venus.

For Rosi Braidotti, the posthuman condition signals “the end of the opposition between Humanism and anti-humanism and traces a different discursive framework, looking more affirmatively toward new alternatives” (*Posthuman* 37). As she elucidates the relationship between Humanism and the discourse of free will and autonomy, Braidotti comes to assert that the posthuman will remain grounded in a materialist, feminist understanding of subjectivity, while simultaneously undermining the Humanist ideal (*Posthuman* 13). Clearly, Martha Washington clings to a Humanist understanding of the body and subjectivity, as it links to postfeminist and neoliberal understandings of the individual and the body. Washington rejects the potential for the communal that Venus offers; she rejects the potential for a posthuman alternative, opting instead to defend the individualistic position.

If Venus the computer program advocated killing to achieve a purpose is warranted (Miller and Gibbons 441), this discourse does not vary as much as one would expect in the case of the heroine. ‘Killing’ Venus meant short-circuiting the entire Earth’s electrical system. Though her lieutenant says: “You’ve saved the world, Martha” (550), Washington herself recognises:

I knew there’d be hell to pay. I knew it from the first moment I decided to go for broke. And hell it was. Utter hell. [...] Nothing could help people protect themselves or find their way in the endless darkness of a global blackout. [...] I pray I never know how many millions I killed, during those long, dark nights. But it was my decision. My responsibility. And when the lights came on again, all over the world, there were millions dead -- and billions, tens of billions freed.” (550-551)

While Martha Washington’s mission statement is: “I’m here to do my part. To make a happier world. A better world” (384), there is no denying, nor does she try, that achieving her mission comes at the cost of millions of lives. Whether or not the ends justify the means is a separate debate. What is at stake here is the formulation of the neoliberal individual, the heroic figure in the narrative, who can say: ‘it was my decision.’ And again, ‘[m]y responsibility.’ As Washington herself articulates: “We’re only human” (534). With this codicil she not only distances herself from Venus the posthuman, clearly demarcating the difference between the machine and the human (though certainly this difference is problematic at best), but also asserts the reason for which she is qualified to take the decisions she does: her



humanity. The anthropocentric ideology at the core of the narrative is a further reflection of the postfeminist heroine as neoliberal subject. The defense of stable identity categories, combined with the rejection of the multiple in favour of the individual all point to the way in which the heroine, in this case Martha Washington, offers an understanding of contemporary femininity and corporeality as produced through iterations of neoliberal subjectivity.

Juxtaposed against the zombie fighting heroines discussed earlier, it would seem that the racialised heroine, the heroine as female masculinity, offers little way out of the discourse which contains and disciplines the aggression and agency of the female action hero. Though the eventual recontainment strategy for the former is the heteronormative marriage contract, for Washington the result is a return to the patriarchal, neoliberal system. For her, there is no renegotiation of the system, no attempt at an alternative, but rather the triumph resides in the possibility of returning the world to its former state.

Given that this is certainly a prevailing trope in heroic narratives, it should come as no surprise. However, it is not the only possibility. The following chapter will turn to consider the way in which the female action hero can re-vision the role, and in so doing re-vision the possibility for systemic change.

## **Chapter 3.**

# **Katniss Everdeen and *The Hunger Games*: Dystopia as Resistance to Neoliberal Demands**



### 3.1 Modes of Dystopia

“I really can’t think about kissing when I’ve got a rebellion to incite”  
(Collins *CF* 125)

This chapter moves away from the female heroine as agent of postfeminist representation and toward a more Third Wave representation of women’s heroic bodies and actions. For this purpose, Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games* trilogy is the primary site for interrogation of the ways and possibilities for the alternatives to the capitalist, neoliberal heroism and postfeminism on offer in the previous models. Collins’ trilogy is comprised of the young adult novels *The Hunger Games* (2008), *Catching Fire* (2009) and *Mockingjay* (2010).<sup>1</sup> The novels have enjoyed wide spread success and acclaim, and have spawned the release of other dystopian, young adult narratives featuring strong, rebellious heroines. While to date none have had quite the same cultural impact as Collins’ work, the *Divergent* series (2011, 2012, 2013), a trilogy by Veronica Roth, follows a similar theme as that laid out in *The Hunger Games*: a teenaged woman living in a post-apocalyptic dystopia plays a key role in the rebellion that will overthrow the despotic government of her time. As Miranda A. Green-Barteet has argued in “‘I’m beginning to know who I am’: The Rebellious Subjectivities of Katniss Everdeen and Tris Prior,” (Everdeen and Prior are the protagonists of *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent*, respectively), the texts’ reliance “on dystopian futures is not coincidental as such settings have the potential to make readers more aware of the ways they are limited by social structures and to encourage their development regardless of such limitations” (34). It is the very fact that the novels are set in dystopian worlds that which Green-Barteet identifies as granting the possibility for both readers and the protagonists to explore gender roles and limitations and “empower Katniss and Tris to redefine what it means to be a young woman” (35). Before turning to consider how Katniss Everdeen can be read as practising a Third Wave feminist politics of resistance that opposes the postfeminist heroic construction, it is worth turning first to a brief description of the texts, and also to a consideration of how and why dystopian, speculative, utopian and science

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<sup>1</sup> Henceforth to be referred to as *HG*, *CF*, and *M* in internal citations.

fictions have been and continue to be fruitful sites for feminist writers to explore the potentialities of possibility.

*The Hunger Games* trilogy is set in a dystopic future, in which twelve 'districts' provide the labour and goods for the Capitol, the site of mass consumerism and entertainment and tyranny over the impoverished districts. The country, "that rose up out of the ashes of a place that was once called North America" (HG 21), is a country recovering from environmental apocalypse, that has been decimated by war and economic collapse, and is run by the dictator President Snow. Katniss Everdeen, the protagonist, lives in the poorest and smallest district with her mother and her younger sister, her father having died in a coal mining explosion some years previous. With her father's death, Katniss, at thirteen, steps in to fill the role of provider for the family, as her mother suffers from a crushing depression. The family dynamics will be further interrogated in greater detail later in this chapter, but what is pertinent for understanding the trilogy is that as the family's provider Katniss must hunt outside the district's fence – an activity that is illegal, punishable by whipping if not death, but that also provides her with the skills that will enable her to survive when she is sent to the Arena to compete in the activity that gives the first novel and the entire series its name, the Hunger Games.

As punishment for rebelling against the Capitol seventy-five years earlier, every year each district must supply a young girl and a young boy (between the ages of twelve and eighteen, chosen by lottery) to compete in the 'Games.' Once in the Arena, the Romanesque style amphitheatre where the adolescents are sent after brief training and presentation to the public, the tributes, as they are called, must fight to the death, with only one remaining alive, to return to their district and live a life of ease and relative wealth. Her time in the Capitol and in the Arena serve to convert Katniss from a young girl whose primary concern is the well-being of her family to a politicised agent of resistance against the Capitol and President Snow, as well as the symbol of the rebellion and the rebels who, by the third novel, rise up in war against the tyrannical and despotic regime.

This section considers the ways in which Collins' *The Hunger Games* trilogy uses the dystopic mode to highlight and criticise aspects of contemporary society. As Brian McDonald has suggested: "The trilogy is, among other things, a cautionary

tale about the dark side of entertainment” (8). While McDonald attributes a ‘cautionary’ motive to Collins’ work, the texts appear to function more in line with of Jameson’s second dystopic mode, wherein it is human nature, not the logical outcome of an avoidable set of circumstances that which is developed. Indeed, the ‘dark side of entertainment’ is most certainly a central part of the first text – the novel takes its name from a ‘reality’ style television program in which adolescents must fight to the death – however, the eventual rebellion and overthrow of the government is as reliant on televisual media as a tool for resistance as the repressive regime depended on it as a tool for oppression. The novels are not an example of what can go wrong when entertainment substitutes political engagement, rather they appear to offer an inquiry into human nature (as contestable as this field is). They appear to suggest that the envisioned future is less the result of political apathy, for example, than the inevitable consequence of power struggles.

There are two lines of inquiry into the novels that will be brought to bear on the argument that Katniss occupies a heroic position that embodies some aspects of Third Wave feminist ideologies rather than postfeminist discourse. The dystopic trilogy works to question the way in which bodies are circulated (or not) and represented, and the role of the media in shaping both public opinion and control. Further, the issue of rebellion and resistance is explored, with special emphasis on the possibilities of profound systemic changes rather than superficial ones, and how Third Wave feminist theories on caring and affect inform these changes.

### **3.1.1 Feminist Imaginings: Writing Speculative Fiction and Dystopic Narratives**

Speculative fiction since the 1960s has proven a fertile territory for feminist writers, among others, in which to sow questions about social structures and relations, and the place of women within these structures. While the majority of these texts speculate on a future moment they do so whilst firmly rooted in their present. Through reading and writing the future, the present is made readable as well. The dystopic novel posits a future in which something has, arguably, gone wrong. While reading that future can be telling in its ability to imagine ‘what could happen if,’ it is important to carefully consider that speculative fiction is as much a

product of the historical moment of writing. Though this may appear self-evident, it is worth keeping in mind that the speculative text often serves, not as a scare mongering device in which we are warned of what may happen in the future, but as a way of making visible the social structures at work in society, as Heather Urbanski has asserted in *Plagues, Apocalypses and Bug-Eyed Monsters: How Speculative Fiction Shows Us Our Nightmares* (2007).

In “Body/Language: French Feminist Utopias” (1986), Cecile Lindsay suggests that “Feminism is a necessarily *utopian* enterprise; that is, it proposes utopias of one kind or another” (46). Her argument asserts that feminism is a project that works based on the belief that something better, an alternative to the present situation, is possible, and hints at why speculative fiction and feminism are often brought together; the feminist project necessarily depends on the belief that change is not only possible but necessary and that the future will not look like the present. However, in “Feminism’s Apocalyptic Futures” (2000), Robyn Wiegman argues that the misunderstandings of the feminist project automatically presuppose a moment when that utopic ideal will have been reached. As Weigman points out, however, for this to be possible, not only would a common goal be necessary but there would have to be a utopia that fit within the vision of a unitary feminist project. Yet feminism, as discussed in the introductory chapter to this thesis, is a methodology and critical theory, which, while certainly as an activist movement sees the end of gender oppression as a goal, is also a lens through which society is viewed rather than only a means to an end. It is increasingly recognised as a poly-vocal movement and theory for which the possibility of one ideal utopia which comprehends the material reality of all beings is difficult to locate. Working toward an ideal future is necessarily an act which interrogates the present and looks for alternative ways of organizing or living social relations.

If the dystopic, the utopic, and the speculative are ways of positing alternatives, it is useful to ask the question, ‘alternative to what’? To best answer this question it is necessary to move, for a moment, to consider the history of second wave feminism, and to try and tease out an understanding of third wave feminism. In her work on the uses and modes of speculative fiction, Belén Martín-Lucas has asserted that “[a]lthough dystopia is most often considered a pessimistic and depressive mode of writing, this is in fact a genre of hope: after all, there is life

beyond the apocalypse and, even more importantly, dystopic fiction's cautionary tales signal the ways to prevent it happening" (Martín-Lucas 69). Indeed, it is necessary to bear in mind that while the dystopic is specifically concerned with what 'went wrong,' the "the apocalypse is always post-apocalyptic, explicitly so here. It supposes the beginning of a new world" (Ahearn 461). It is this potentiality for something new, the belief that the apocalypse is the precursor of the *post*-apocalypse, which anchors the hope Martín-Lucas locates in dystopic fiction.

Unsurprisingly, there is another 'post' that interests me, one that is also moored in hope and the possibility that alternative social constellations are possible: postfeminism. As we have seen, the discourse of postfeminism is premature if it means to herald the end of patriarchy. To celebrate the end of feminism is, at best, to buy into a fabricated utopian dream, at worst, to recognise elements of an equally dystopic fiction. If the present world is one in which the aims and work of feminism are no longer necessary, then we are living in the consensual hallucination of the most depressing of speculative texts. There is, despite my rather pessimistic view of the contemporary moment,<sup>2</sup> a fertile and productive history of feminist work and speculative texts. While postfeminism may be a dystopic version of feminism's potential, speculative fiction has long been used to posit alternative futures, both post-patriarchal and optimistic as well as the more pessimistic varieties that envision futures where feminism is merely a failed historical moment.

In his analysis of science fiction texts, Adam Roberts asserts that many feminists "use the SF encounter with difference to focus gender concerns" (99). As a genre that not only allows but is driven by a discourse of possibility and alternatives, speculative fiction opens up a variety of ways of interrogating what it is to be human, and how bodies are lived, material expressions of gender. This discourse of alterity, whether it be through the use of aliens, animals, or beings that have little in common with how bodies are currently constructed, necessarily reflects the way these bodies are currently perceived. In her work on the posthuman (2013), Rosi Braidotti has affirmed the need to move past the model of Humanism to question both the anthropocentric bias and to introduce "a new

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<sup>2</sup> This pessimism is one that is, to greater or lesser extents, shared with Gill (2011), Coleman (2009), Probyn (1993).



brand of materialism, of the embodied and embedded kind" (22). In this respect, she sees her own work, and the work of feminist science and speculative fiction, as an "attempt to devise renewed claims to community and belonging by singular subjects who have taken critical distance from humanist individualism" (39).<sup>3</sup> As a "genuine discourse of alterity would examine the ways gender constructs difference, the way a person's gender is conceived in terms of difference" these fictions necessarily posit the idea that the difference is in relation to something already known or accepted (Roberts 100).

My interest in speculative fiction, and specifically dystopic fiction by women, is derived from the way in which it foregrounds the discussion of women's role within society. Whether by postulating alternative genders (or alternative ways of embodying biological sex), alternatives to understanding motherhood as a biological effect, or alternative social and political structures, the majority of the texts suggest that the question of women's biology and identity is intrinsic to understanding patriarchal culture, and most suggest that by challenging the idea of biology as a marker for difference then alternatives to patriarchy will arise. But it is worth bearing in mind that, while alternatives and differences are posited, it is always within the constraints of a critique of the present that seeks to propose in equal measure a way of being for the future and a way of thinking about the present.

In the 1960s and 70s speculative fiction written by women started to occupy a greater part of the science fiction market (James 222). Not coincidentally, it was also an important moment for feminism as it marked the emergence of second wave feminist activity. In his history of science fiction, Edward James notes that "[t]he revival of *sf* utopias in the 1970s was largely a result of the re-

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<sup>3</sup> Braidotti's work is grounded in an antihumanism that works toward an understanding of the posthumanist perspective that "rests on the assumption of the historical decline of Humanism but goes further in exploring alternatives, without sinking into the rhetoric of the crisis of Man. It works instead towards elaborating alternative ways of conceptualizing the human subject" (37). Her work is especially critical not only as a means for articulating alternative understandings of embodiment, but also for ways of being in the world which question the neoliberal individualist mode that rests so firmly on Humanist concepts of Man. For feminist writers of science and speculative fiction, the way in which the posthumanist perspective permits explorations of alterity and difference extends past the material and corporeal, those these are both important, toward understandings of community and life that extend beyond the 'human.' Further, the very genre itself, feminist science and speculative fiction, can be read as 'posthuman' in the way that it interrupts understandings of 'legitimate' fictions and genres, and blends tropes and conventions to produce alternative readings.

emergence of feminism in the later 1960s, although the contribution of the Civil Rights movement, the New Left, the ecological movement, the anti-war protests of the early 1980s and the emerging gay and lesbian movements were all significant as well” (James 222). That the feminist movement and science fiction should be so closely linked is not surprising if, as Veronica Hollinger argues, speculative fiction “is a potent tool for feminist imaginative projects that are the necessary first steps in undertaking the cultural and social transformations that are the aims of the feminist political enterprise” (128). Nor is it surprising that “feminist theory continues to influence the development of the new worlds and new futures of genre” (129), as both feminist theory and speculative fiction seek to disrupt the accepted truths about human relations and society and suggest alternative ways of organizing social relations.

The parallel projects of feminism and speculative writing become even clearer when we consider Nicole Pohl’s argument that the “critical intervention of utopia reaches out for alternative visions of society and community through both preserving and reconceptualizing the status quo” (6). Considering the role of utopic intervention as that which searches for alternatives, it is, to turn back to Hollinger, in line with the project of feminist theory which seeks to contest

hegemonic representations of a patriarchal culture that does not recognize its ‘others.’ Like other critical discourses, it works to create a critical distance between observer and observed, to defamiliarize certain taken-for-granted aspects of ordinary human reality, ‘denaturalizing’ situations of historical inequity and/or oppression that otherwise may appear inevitable to us, if indeed we notice them at all. (129)

That both projects should seek to make visible what may be “taken-for-granted” or “appear inevitable,” and to posit alternatives or at least question the status quo, is an important part of feminist speculative fiction.

In an interview discussing her work, speculative fiction writer Ursula K. LeGuin argues that “[o]ne reason women banged into science fiction so hard in the 60s and 70s was that some writers realized that this is this wonderful place to write novels that show different societies. I mean, that’s what [her novel] *The Left Hand of Darkness* is – I’m trying out a different physiology, finding out what gender is by doing away with it” (Wilson np). While speculative and dystopic fiction

certainly seeks to make visible and to question present social or political arrangements, it is also part of what Le Guin points towards, namely the articulation of something new. What I would like to examine is how the alternatives offered in speculative fiction are not necessarily alternatives for a *future* moment, but rather that they are the present moment viewed from a perspective which alienates the reader from the moment, and makes visible otherwise taken for granted power structures and social relations, what Frederic Jameson, in *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (2007), terms “the dialectic of Identity and Difference” (Jameson xii).

Lucy Sargisson argues for the feelings of affinity and estrangement, as produced by speculative texts, as the result of the impulse to create something new or different in *Contemporary Feminist Utopianism*. And it is through these feelings that the speculative project is most effective. The function of estrangement is to shift the perspective so as to create the possibility of viewing society as an outsider (180). This posits the reader as necessarily othered from the text, and pushes them to question not only the world they are reading, but also the one they are living. Evidently, the utopic text would at least suggest an alternative society that is, in some way, an improvement on the historical moment in which the text is written. The dystopic text, however, presents a world in which something has gone awry, and the idea that society is necessarily progressing forward, toward a future that is inherently better, is disrupted and twisted so as to present a society that is not only strange, but also horrifying.

Questioning the idea that society is steadily marching *forward* in anything but the temporal sense that is at the heart of Modernity, the dystopic mode reflects the distrust of the palliatives ‘modernity’ and ‘development’ as proofs that the future will be an improvement on the past (and present). If the contemporary dystopic, especially as will be seen in *The Hunger Games* trilogy, is indicative of the anxieties of the moment of writing, then what is reflected is that the present moment is, as Antonio Baños Boncompain (2012) asserts, one of neofeudalism which harkens back toward a pre-democratic, pre-capitalistic age in terms of social organisation. The society of Panem is situated in an undefined future, and yet it is undoubtedly disruptive of the notion of time as progress as it describes a pseudo-medievalist world in which the majority serve the central figure of the

feudal lord who exploits their labour for his own benefit, in exchange for nominal stability.<sup>4</sup> As mentioned, the Games are reminiscent of gladiator-style battles that served as entertainment during the Roman Empire. In Collins' novels, two people (one boy and one girl) between the ages of twelve and eighteen are chosen each year to fight to the death in a televised spectacle that serves the function of a reality-style program that is broadcast throughout the nation. The site for these 'games' is different each year, and contestants must battle each other and the natural elements (including the hunger that gives the event its name), as well as specially designed hazards, in order to survive. Capitol viewers who have the means can place bets or sponsor participants, and of the twenty-four contestants, twenty-three will die, most often in a bloody, violent manner.

Speculative fictions take as their starting point the premise that there are alternative possibilities for society. These alternatives are necessarily ones that exist outside of state sanctioned possibility, alternatives that would disrupt the status quo and question what appears natural or normal. To posit these potential differences it is necessary to first make clear the 'unnatural' way in which society is constructed (that is, highlight the way in which it is a construct), and speculative fiction does so by imagining societies or bodies that push the limits of what has been normalised.

The dystopic society of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is representative of dystopic and utopic texts in the way it posits a future world that is an extension of the historical moment in which the text was written. The text in many ways encapsulates the central questions of dystopic fiction – What could the future look like? How could it go wrong? What are we doing now to bring about that change? When the narrator, known only as Offred,<sup>5</sup> considers how her mother had fought for women's rights in the period prior to the implementation of the

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<sup>4</sup> The novels are clearly constructed with a view of referencing the age of the Roman Empire. The name of the country, Panem, is taken from Latin and many of the characters in the Capitol have names taken straight from Roman times: Flavius, Coriolanus, Cinna, Ceasar. Conversely, and as though to highlight their social position, the people of the districts have names that are representative of their job or the area they live in: Katniss, Primrose, Wiress, Rue, Gale. Further, the 'Games' themselves owe much symbolically to the gladiator arenas of Roman times.

<sup>5</sup> The naming conventions for the 'handmaids' (the women who are tasked with reproduction) in the novel is in itself a gesture toward the perils of patriarchy. The women not only take the name of the man whose child they are to engender but they are designated as his 'property,' they are 'of' him. In this case the narrator, Offred, is 'Of' 'Fred.'

dystopic regime, she imagines herself telling her mother: “You wanted a women’s culture. Well now there is one. It isn’t what you meant, but it exists. Be thankful for small mercies” (*Handmaid* 164). Although Offred’s comment that they should ‘be thankful’ is laced with irony, given that the ‘women’s culture’ that has come to exist in the novel differs radically from the one her mother was fighting for, it highlights the extent to which the dystopic is a tool for cultural critique. In a discussion of her work *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination* (2012), and as a theorisation of the genre, Atwood articulates what she terms ‘ustopia’ or “a utopia embedded within a dystopia” that is inherent within every dystopic text (‘Road’ np). She is referring to both the way in which dystopic texts themselves often narrate rebellion, on a small or large scale, as well as the way in which they function for readers to imagine that despite what *is* there is always something else that *could be*.

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that the role of dystopic fiction is only to make visible the possible pitfalls society could face in an indistinct future. While the dystopic text may be “the present co-opted to evil ends, driven to one logical (though not inevitable) conclusion, its understandings and language perverted” (Neuman 864), it is not without the implication that something different, perhaps something positive, is also equally possible and as such it is inextricably linked to the present. What is most disturbing in dystopic texts is not, perhaps, the possibility that they represent a future yet to come, but rather that they represent the present, and have only twisted the lens to show it to us in a way we had not imagined. Collins’ texts are illustrative of this function, one of which is to point toward the contemporary fascination with the appearance of youth. Katniss notes:

They do surgery in the Capitol, to make people appear younger and thinner. In District 12, looking old is something of an achievement since so many people die early. You see an elderly person, you want to congratulate them on their longevity, ask the secret of survival. A plump person is envied because they aren’t scraping by like the majority of us. But here it is different. Wrinkles aren’t desirable. A round belly isn’t a sign of success. (*HG* 150-151)

While not subtle in its critique of a culture that will go to great lengths to deny the visible effects of getting older, the texts certainly point to the way in which

'achievement' and 'success' and even 'survival' become twisted and perverted. As the Capitol is represented as the root of the misery in the districts, this passage clearly demonstrates how Katniss, as a marginalised figure, views with repugnance both the bodily manipulation and the superficiality of a late-capitalist society that survives off of the oppression of others. Not marginal to this critique is the role that class plays in demarcating not only questions of desirability, but also of how bodies are constructed through cultural norms. Only the wealthy worry about corporeal 'excess' (age or weight), and the social construction of the body dictates what are desirable corporealities.

Inherent in utopic fiction is, returning to Sargisson, "a way of thinking that begins from dissatisfaction or disaffection with/in the political present as perceived and experienced by the writer concerned. It is critical of the present, destroys certainties, challenges dominant perceptions and, in the process, creates something new" (76). Dystopian thinking, for Margaret Atwood, does the same. The mirroring aspects of the genre are critical in that it combines "utopia and dystopia – the imagined perfect society and its opposite – because, in my view, each contains a latent version of the other" (Atwood, 'Road' np). The basis for both utopic and dystopic writing is the idea that alternatives are not just possible, but probable. The future, as it were, will not be the same as the present. While this future can take many forms, whether through its political, social, or economic organization, or whether the difference is more dramatic in the way that the bodies or beings which populate these future societies are constructed, it is inevitably a future that is tied to the present of the writer writing. And this imagined future is linked to the historical present in which it is written. In an interview about her dystopic novel, *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood asserts that just "[a]s with *The Handmaid's Tale*, it invents nothing we haven't already invented or started to invent" (Atwood, "Perfect" np). The dystopic text, then, is the attempt at imagining alternatives for the future, but also at interrogating the present. Both Sargisson and Atwood underscore the necessity of reading speculative fiction, whether utopic or dystopic, as texts that seek to disrupt and challenge the present by positing a future that is, for better or worse, an extension of that present.

In her "Histories of a Feminist Future" (2000), Elizabeth Grosz writes about how it is necessary to imagine a past, present, and future that are more mutually

dependent than they are discrete time frames. Her argument is that the “past, present, and future are composed not only of dates but also, in a more complex and incalculable way, of events” (1017-1018). She further invokes Luce Irigaray’s future anterior to argue that the place of feminism cannot be measured by what it was, what it is, or what it will be but rather “what will have been, what the past and present will have been in light of a future that is possible only because of them” (1019). While Grosz’s argument that the past becomes legible (or is read) through the future that will be, is not new, her use of the virtual and the real opens up possibilities for feminisms, for their past, present and future, that do not delimit or contain them to a single trajectory, but rather embrace multiplicities of “significance, value, or meaning of a text or event” (1020). Her understanding of the past as continuously being rewritten by the present, and will be re-written again by the future, argues that “what time is, and what matter, text, and life are, are becomings, openings to time, change, rewriting, recontextualisation. The past is never exhausted in its virtualities, insofar as it is always capable of giving rise to *another* reading, another context, another framework that will animate it in different ways” (1020; italics in original). Grosz argues specifically for feminist time, however her vision can be applied here to the discussion of feminist speculative fiction, informing the reading of these texts to assert that they not only tell us about the moment in which they are written and the moment in which they are read, but can work to enable a reassessment of the past as well. The reader of the dystopic text, positioned between the moment of writing and the future to come (regardless of the length of time between these two moments), can, according to Grosz, re-asses and re-interpret all three of time’s modalities: past, present, and future. The reason I invoke Grosz’s argument here is because it reinforces the idea that speculative fiction is inherently part of the moment of writing, and that the future it imagines is inextricable from, and critical of, the past which constructed it. As Martín-Lucas asserts, the post-apocalypse is not “an ahistorical zero moment, a moment of erasure; on the contrary, in the conflation of past and future there is a cultural history to be re-membered in the act of envisioning the future” (72).

Robin Wiegman argues that “the hyperbolic anxiety that the future may now be unattainable because the present fails to bring the past to utopic

completion” produces narratives of apocalypse (807). Arguably, the dystopic novel seeks to imagine what present constellations of power, social relations, economic or environmental concerns could produce a future apocalyptic moment.

### 3.1.2 Rebellion and the Utopic Impulse in the Dystopic

In her book *Feminist Popular Fiction* (2001), Merja Makinen points out that utopias are unable to cope with dissent or critique and presuppose a future in which conflict is absent (143). The result of a utopian imagining is, as Žizek argues, that those who are not part of the new utopic order (presumably those who do not see it as the utopian solution), are “to be excluded from humanity itself” (563). Perhaps the goal is not to reach a utopian ideal, but rather that rebellion and struggle are, in some ways, the closest possible means of embodying that ideal. In a way, Collins’ texts illustrate how, as Slavoj Žižek argues, “[r]evolution is not experienced as a present hardship we have to endure for the happiness and freedom of the future generations but as the present hardship over which the future happiness and freedom already cast their shadow” (559). *The Hunger Games* trilogy participates in the articulation of discourses of rebellion by imagining the conditions of dissent. As such, it locates the utopian impulse in the act of resistance.

Makinen explores the way in which science or speculative fiction and feminism have had coinciding trajectories. She suggests that “first wave feminism resulted in utopias broaching women’s suffrage, educational reform and contraception” (132). Her argument hinges on the idea that utopian writing was an important way for early feminists to imagine the type of society they were working toward. Traditionally it can be argued that “utopia is about envisioning ways in which human society might be reorganized on Earth. Its mechanisms are legislation, education or institutional changes in technology or environmental management” (James 227). For those interested in women’s rights, it is also about a way of reorganizing society and using these mechanisms to improve the position of women within the social structure. But utopian fiction is not limited to imagining a better future. It is also critical of the present, and serves to highlight how the present is not living up to its potential. As Wiegman argues, the idea that



the present feminist movement will fail to produce a future for feminism is to assume that there are alternative ways to enact feminism, and that we are failing to do so. What utopic and dystopic fictions argue is not so much that the present will have led to the speculations on the future, but rather, that the present in some way resembles that future.

In *Archaeologies of the Future*, Frederic Jameson argues that there are two principle modes within the dystopic. The first extrapolates from the present, and works as a harbinger of the future, arguing “if this goes on...” (198), working as cautionary tales the dystopic “shows us our nightmares and therefore contributes to our efforts to avoid them” (Urbanski 1). The second, or what he terms the ‘Orwellian’ mode, is far more political in its aspirations, positing a “creeping totalitarianism” that “springs from human nature itself, whose corruption and lust for power are inevitable, and not to be remedied by new social measures or programs, nor by heightened consciousness of the impending dangers” (Jameson 198). While the first acts as a sort of warning, what Atwood had in mind with the *Handmaid’s Tale* and with the *Maddaddam* trilogy (*Oryx and Crake* 2003, *Year of the Flood* 2009, *Maddaddam* 2013), the second works not to make visible what might be but rather what *is*; it is a reflection of what human nature is capable of, and only one possibility for what that might look like.

Jameson further asserts that: “The critical dystopia is a negative cousin of the Utopia proper, for it is in the light of some positive conception of human social possibilities that its effects are generated and from Utopian ideals its politically enabling stance derives” (198). Indeed, the utopian and the dystopian impulse are not so far removed, and for some, like Atwood, the difference between the two lies merely in the point-of-view. The utopia necessarily harbours a darker side, the side that negated difference and eliminated resistance on the path to imposing its socio-political model, as we have already seen through Atwood’s comments on her own work. Jameson again notes, “there is a systemic perspective for which it is obvious that whatever threatens the system as such must be excluded: this is indeed the basic premise of all modern anti-Utopias from Dostoyevsky to Orwell and beyond, namely that the system develops its own instinct for self-preservation and learns ruthlessly to eliminate anything menacing its continuing existence without regard for individual life” (205).

Indeed, even in *The Hunger Games* the two sides of this coin become visible: while the districts are impoverished, and readers' sympathies lie with Katniss and those who would rebel against the government, the Capitol residents are well-fed, entertained, and apparently free from responsibilities other than dressing in the latest fashions. The utopia that is the Capitol is sustained by the dystopic conditions for life in the districts. One might argue that Collins' novels work to critique the late capitalist model in which the lifestyle and excesses of many in the West is made possible through economic inequality and oppression of many developing nations.

The Games themselves serve this function. As Katniss notes: "Taking the kids from our districts, forcing them to kill one another while we watch – this is the Capitol's way of reminding us how totally we are at their mercy [...] To make it humiliating as well as torturous, the Capitol requires us to treat the Hunger Games as a festivity, a sporting even pitting every district against the others" (*HG* 22). Jameson associates the role that the carnival plays, as theorised by Bakhtin, with moments of utopian impulse, moments when the systems that support the relations of power are inverted. He cautions, however, that carnival, like utopia, offers "just such a critique of the old order which is also a prophetic warning about the new repressivities of what replaces it. Are both to be considered then, in the light of carnival's moment of freedom, dystopias?" (198). It is easy to see how this critique can be read in the Capitol of Collins' novels. As a world of spectacle which privileges the body as a site of conspicuous consumption, the Capitol is, however, as dystopian as the districts, with entertainment serving only as a means of covering over the deeply repressive and oppressive politics at work. The 'carnavalesque' here takes on a darker function, in which the 'moment of freedom' is illusory. Underscoring the way in which the supposed 'festivity' is a mechanism for control – both for Capitol residents as for residents of the districts, though in different ways – is the fact that viewing is obligatory. While the producers of the program attempt to mask the fact that all of Panem is required to watch the horrific spectacle, as well as the interviews before and after (with the survivor/winner), Katniss is quick to point out the hypocrisy: "My arm is about to fall off from waving when Caesar Flickerman finally bids the audience goodnight, reminding them to tune in tomorrow for the final interviews. As if they have a

choice" (HG 443). This lack of choice, however, is not only for the residents of the districts, but for those of the Capitol as well. Despite the fact that they seem to be more avid consumers of the Games, and appear to have nothing to do "besides decorating their bodies and waiting around for a new shipment of tributes to roll in and die for their entertainment" (HG 80), the first novel hints at the possibility that not all the Capitol residents are happy. Indeed, in the second and third novels the rebel forces have some members who are ex-Capitol residents.

The presence of 'Avoxes,' inhabitants of the Capitol who used to be citizens but who have had their tongues cut out and are now servants, are testament to the fact that not everyone enjoys the 'pleasures' of Capitol life. When Katniss meets one she reflects that: "Haymitch had called the Avoxes traitors. Against what? It could only be the Capitol. But they had everything here. No cause to rebel" (HG 101-102). Katniss' assessment of the 'cause to rebel' in terms of whether or not inhabitants have access to goods, her assertion that the Capitol residents have 'everything' tangible and thus no need to rebel, is indicative of the way in which citizens are implicated within the capitalist system to believe that they should be grateful for what they have, especially when they compare themselves to those who have less.

Further affirming the Capitol's discourse of control of its citizens is the way in which those in the districts are also organised into those who have more and those who have less, which makes those districts who are 'privileged' compared to the other districts even more defensive of their position. In *Mockingjay*, when the rest of the districts are rebelling, Katniss notes that District 2 continues to fight for the Capitol. She reflects that, as the district that supplied Peacekeepers, "the Capitol babied the inhabitants" there (M 226), and as a result, "the people of 2 swallowed the Capitol's propaganda more easily than the rest of us. Embraced their ways. But for all that, at the end of the day, they were still slaves. And if that was lost on the citizens who worked in the Nut, it was not lost on the stonecutters who formed the backbone of the resistance here" (M 226).<sup>6</sup> Katniss' analysis

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<sup>6</sup> The 'Nut' is the nickname of the mountain turned base of control that the Capitol used in District 2. The people who worked there enjoyed greater privileges than those who worked in the quarries, thus Katniss' reflection that they were used to greater comparative comfort and less willing to rebel against the Capitol.

illustrates the way in which the concession of a few privileges to a select group of people ensured that that group would be more loyal to the Capitol, would, to a certain extent, be thankful for the position they held; even if this position is still one of servitude it is viewed as privileged or less servile.<sup>7</sup> The question of class is paramount here, as it becomes clear that the manual labourers are less likely to support the system than the others who enjoy greater economic stability.

For Jameson, there is a kinship between the dystopic and the apocalyptic: “The term apocalyptic may serve to differentiate this narrative genre from the anti-Utopia as well, since we do not sense in it any commitment to disabuse its readership of the political illusions Orwell sought to combat, but whose very existence the apocalyptic narrative no longer acknowledges” (199). Certainly the questions of what is the apocalypse and how can it be prevented are determining aspects of this type of text. While Collins is vague about what, exactly, led to the oppressive regime, readers are given hints about civil war, environmental collapse, widespread poverty and a breaking down of the means to supporting the technological culture that came before when told of “the disasters, the droughts, the storms, the fires, the encroaching seas that swallowed up so much of the land, the brutal war for what little sustenance remained” (*HG* 21). But whether there is one definitive apocalyptic moment, as will be noted, is less easy to diagnose.

As Marcin Mazurek argues in *A Sense of Apocalypse: Technology, Textuality, Identity* (2014), the “apocalypse remains double-coded; it denotes violent decomposition of the old and at the same time *reveals* the emergence of the new” (10). It is in this ‘emergence’ that feminist speculative fictions locate their foothold; while the new may not be better than the old, it certainly offers the potential for change, and for an analysis of the present. Indeed, Mazurek elaborates on the idea of hope discussed above, and upon which:

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<sup>7</sup> Homi K. Bhaba in “Of mimicry and man: The ambivalence of colonial discourse,” in *The Location of Culture* (1994) argues that “colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite* (122; italics in original). The ambivalence generated by the ‘almost the same, but not quite’ is a fruitful site for understanding the way in which power flows function here. The inhabitants of District 2 who become Peacekeepers both replicate and disrupt the hegemonic system, as they are tasked with upholding the system in the districts they are assigned to while at the same time, they occupy an ambivalent position, being neither of the districts nor the Capitol.

the very possibility of post-apocalyptic representation is based on the assumption of the at least partial incompleteness of the destructive process. Whatever emerges after the catastrophe can only be dealt with by survivors whose very presence confirms the apocalyptic mechanism's malfunction. It is they who are left with the mission to either create a new order or resurrect the old one. (21)

The incomplete destruction of the human race, the fact that somebody survived, reveals not only the hope in the construction of a future, but raises the question of what that future should or even could look like. The potential to 'create a new order' rather than simply resurrecting 'the old one' is perhaps the most optimistic characteristic of the post-apocalyptic text.

While *The Hunger Games* trilogy is certainly dystopic in its representation of tyranny and oppression, the movement away from merely representing the societal ills, and toward the burgeoning uprising and rebellion in the second novel (and that comes to fruition in the third novel), represents what I read as the most powerful aspect of the texts. In concentrating less on what the future looks like, and more on what the process of change involves, Collins' work joins other feminist dystopic fictions in its refusal to argue for an ending, and in suggesting that resistance, subversion and collaborative action are potentially utopian visions in and of themselves.

Indeed, *The Hunger Games* trilogy offers rather meagre clues as to what, exactly, provoked the long apocalypse, what led to the rebellion of the 'Dark Days' (the rebellion that led the government to install its Draconian measures and the 'Games' as a method of social control), and that sets up the novel's present. While Katniss' emergence as tribute in the 74<sup>th</sup> 'Games' functions as the impetus that incites the rebels' cohesion and subsequent uprising, what the civil war actually achieves is left up to the readers' imagination. In the third novel, *Mockingjay*, when Gale inquires of Plutarch Heavensbee, one of the leaders of the rebellion, "who would be in charge of the government" if the rebels win, his answer is "a republic" and that "it's worked before [...] if our ancestors could do it, then we can too" (83-84). Collins is obviously less concerned with imagining what an alternative society would consist of than she is concerned with detailing the potentialities of rebellion in and of itself. The ending of the third novel is somewhat conservative in its depiction of Katniss' future, as readers learn almost nothing about the society she

and Peeta have helped to create, only that she has married Peeta and had two children with him. Though I will return to consider the implications of this ending in terms of the gender relations within the text, this rather heteronormative ending appears to be almost an afterthought, as it takes the form of an ‘epilogue’ of less than two full pages, that tells readers that Katniss did “agree” to have children, because “Peeta wanted them so badly,” and her primary concern is now how to “tell them about that world without frightening them to death” (389). Even though Plutarch, after returning Katniss to District Twelve once the revolution is over, posits that: “Maybe we are witnessing the evolution of the human race” and that perhaps this time the “sweet period where everyone agrees that our recent horrors should never be repeated” will last indefinitely (379), Collins gives no indication of how that will be achieved or even what it would look like. As Thomas Moylan has argued, dystopian texts can “generate nonnarrative spaces of possibilities that can suggest openings in the system and thereby offer meanings that exceed the pessimism of the plot” (181). Through focussing on the rebellion, rather than the society that emerges post-rebellion, Collins’ text underscores the fissures within the system and Katniss’ power seems to reside in her ability (often unconscious) to enlarge and break them open.

To a certain extent, there appears to be, in Plutarch’s comment on returning to past government, an intimation of what Mazurek identifies as the pre-apocalyptic moment, that is, the moment dedicated to the prevention of the apocalypse when “[t]he sense of imminent danger and the resulting urge to avoid it” (22) are most prevalent. However, part and parcel with the pre-apocalyptic mode is, for Mazurek, the idea that “the question of what exactly we are being saved from remains a mystery” (22). This is in keeping with Mazurek’s assertion that

the very notion of a happy ending, however ironic it may sound in this context, always narrates a successful prevention of the end through effective restoration of the *pre-threat* order. In fact, the real end never takes place in the pre-apocalyptic works since the plot always revolves around the desperate attempt to avoid the threat which had cast a grievous shadow upon the initial equilibrium. (23; italics in original)

It is in this tension between pre/apocalyptic/post that Collins' trilogy is most engaging, blurring as it does the idea that there is an identifiably 'apocalyptic' moment that sets in motion the conditions for the dystopic text. There is, in the *Hunger Games* novels, no defining moment when the apocalypse ended and the post-apocalypse begins. I am aware that Collins dates, in the first novel, the creation of the 'Games' as seventy-four years earlier, when the districts rebelled against the Capitol, and upon their defeat were punished with the yearly reaping. However, it is logical to assume that, even prior to this rebellion/Civil war, the organisation of the government was tyrannical and oppressive, and thus the motive for the earlier revolt. As such, the creation of the 'Games' is not, I would argue, in itself an apocalyptic moment, but rather another symptom of the long apocalypse/dystopic mode. Rather, her texts work, as do many dystopic fictions,<sup>8</sup> within what I would term the *long apocalypse*. Rather than one moment or crisis generating wholesale systemic collapse, the long apocalypse encapsulates the time during which the system is recognisably broken and yet the fight is still maintained to keep it in place.

In contrast to a moment of crisis, whether political, environmental or otherwise, in which the fate of a given society is indelibly altered and must reconstruct itself within a set of new conditions (if not always along new lines of organisation), the long apocalypse is suggestive more of a process of subtle alterations, leading to what Davina Bhandar has termed the 'new normal' (2004). To understand the 'new normal' as a process through which the acceptance of a dystopic regime occurs, and the way in which it coincides with an understanding of the long apocalypse, it is worth turning to Bhandar's definition:

the structures arrived at through the 'new normal' are understood by the subject as simply ones that are required for managing everyday life in a 'risk' society or a society at risk. This new way of being is underwritten by a sense of anxiety and the practice of managing anxiety on a daily basis. The hyper-alertness of the 'new normal' does not result in an improved alertness or improved circulation of mind and body, something that would be understood through an experience of 'true enlightenment'. Rather, these articulations of the 'new normal' suggest a sense of fear, anxiety and impending death. (264)

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<sup>8</sup> See Atwood (1985, 2003, 2009, 2013), Carter (1977), and Roth (2011, 2012, 2013) for examples.

The installation of a 'new normal' is not necessarily the result of a single event or trauma, rather it is the *threat* of such that motivates the shifting ideological positions. The 'Games' that President Snow initiates as a form of control over the populace of the districts are not a reaction to the civil war as such, rather, they are a means of protecting the Capitol and its residents against a future threat.

Katniss' initiation of the conditions which will perhaps put an end to the long apocalypse can be informed by Jameson's reading of Frank Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending* (1967). Kermode "associates the apocalyptic with two distinct (yet perhaps related) sources: a projection of existential fears of death, and a formal consequence of the structural requirement that narrative have some kind of ending" (199; note 32). If the apocalypse is read as the 'ending' of the narrative then can it be interpreted as not only the pessimistic destruction of everything but also, as is the case in the *Hunger Games* trilogy, the heteronormative closing down of the potential for further resistance via the 'happy ending?'

While I certainly am not defending the idea that the happy ending can be read as an apocalyptic moment, there is something disturbing in pat endings which close down the potential for further action, what Kermode is distinctly identifying as the unifying characteristic of both the apocalypse and the narrative – the need to locate the moment of closure.

Returning to Jameson, we find that

whereas in modern industrial times, in which the state has itself become a character or individual, freedom is redefined as release from the oppression of state power itself, a release that can take the form of existential pathos, as with the dilemmas of the individual rebel or anti-hero, but which now, after the end of individualism, seems to take the form of identification with small groups. (206)

This move toward 'freedom' as throwing off the oppression of the state as though the state itself were a 'character or individual' is made manifest in the dystopic text, as in the *Hunger Games* trilogy where the state itself comes to be embodied in the dictator President Snow. Curiously, this 'end of individualism' is depicted in Collins' novels not through the use of the hero/ine or anti-hero/ine, but rather through the way in which the central figure, Katniss, breaks down the individualism so rife in the Capitol.



### **3.2 *The Hunger Games* and Resistance**

As previously mentioned, the novels, especially though not limited to the first, interrogate the way in which 'spectacle' functions as a means of discipline in society. The spectacle that is the televised Hunger Games is only one part (though a very raw and violent part) of the televised event. As a tribute, Katniss is brought to the Capitol almost a week before the Games begin, and during this time she is subjected not only to the non-televised training sessions but also to media events that serve as her introduction to the members of the Capitol society and the districts who will witness as she and the twenty-three other tributes fight to the death in the Arena.

#### **3.2.1 Spectacle and Fashioning the Body**

The actual Games (wherein the tributes fight each other until all but one are dead) is mandatory viewing for all inhabitants of Panem, both in the Capitol and in the districts. Also mandatory is viewing of the televised events prior to sending the tributes in to the Arena: the reaping (when the tributes from each district are chosen); the 'pageant' that parades the newly arrived in the Capitol (but still heavily 'beautified') tributes dressed in costumes that represent their district to the citizens; and finally, the interviews that occur the night before they are sent in to battle and offer the tributes their only chance to 'speak' about themselves (though what they say is, to a certain extent, highly manipulated by both the interviewer and the prep teams). The 'point' of these televisual events, aside from merely offering further fodder for media consumption to the Capitol residents and a way of further entrenching the consumerist values of Capitol society in the districts, is so that 'sponsors' (those with the means to purchase gifts and send them to their favourite tribute in the Arena) can decide who they want to bet on. Needless to say, and as will be explored further on, these events, while broadcast to the whole country, serve very different purposes depending on the location and economic status of the viewers. They are prime examples of the way in which the tributes' bodies become objects for consumption, manipulation and exploitation, and highlight the production of narratives whose purpose is to gratify the privileged Capitol residents and further cow the residents of the districts.

The 'beautiful' bodies constructed by and for Capitol consumption are converted into gladiator-style figures that must, in no uncertain terms, either kill or be killed while in the Arena. Unsurprisingly, as the time in the Arena passes, and more and more tributes die, those who survive become bruised, bloodied, emaciated, burnt, and both physically and emotionally damaged and traumatised; they move as far as is possible from the superficial, docile and aesthetically pleasing bodies first presented to viewers. The extent of this transformation is remarked upon by Katniss, after she wins the Games in the first novel: "There's usually a lag of a few days between the end of the competition and the presentation of the victor so that they can put the starving, wounded mess of a person back together again. Somewhere, Cinna and Portia [her and Peeta's 'costume' designers] will be creating our wardrobes for the public appearance" (425).

Throughout the trilogy, the way in which the tributes' bodies are manipulated and the way in which various disciplinary mechanisms operate both on the bodies of the district residents and on those in the Capitol, is brought to the fore. The role of the televised spectacle, the way in which watching and being watched constructs bodies and relationships of power, is also highlighted. Indeed, the criticism of the entertainment industry that McDonald identifies as central to the novels is supported by Collins' own assertion in an interview that the trilogy emerged after "channel surfing on television [during which] images of reality television where there were young people competing [was juxtaposed to] footage from the Iraq war" and that in her mind the two 'spectacles' became "fused together" ("Contemporary" np).

The way in which the society of Panem, both in the downtrodden districts and in the affluent and privileged Capitol, functions through both internal and external surveillance becomes telling given its post 9/11 context. The way in which self-monitoring and distrust of the Other are pushed as normative social values reflects the society of fear that continues to pervade in the United States and Canada over issues of national security. Davinda Bhadar argues that these practices of vigilance and surveillance "are understood by the subject as simply ones that are required for managing everyday life in a 'risk' society or a society at risk. This new way of being is underwritten by a sense of anxiety and the practice

of managing anxiety on a daily basis” (264). ‘Risk’ is felt to be omnipresent, and defending against it becomes the order of the day, regardless of whether or not any tangible threat is present. The ‘threat’ that pervades Panem, the threat of punishment for rebelling but also, as President Snow informs Katniss, the threat that even the slightest of hint of rebellion could “*grow to an inferno that destroys Panem*” (M 6; italics in original).

The district inhabitants are held in place by the fear of punishment from the Capitol that the ironically named Peacekeepers – the military unit that polices the country – will mete out for breaking any of the myriad infractions. Katniss, and her friend and hunting partner Gale, are of course quite aware of the Capitol’s power, and of its limits. As people who regularly break the rules and go outside of the boundaries to hunt (‘poaching’ from the land is illegal and could result in being whipped or even killed), Katniss and Gale are both acutely conscious of the rules and sensitive to the repercussions of breaking them, while at the same time they have worked out a way of escaping from them – that is, they do step outside of the limits of the district; they do hunt and gather food to feed their families; they not only break the rules, but also sell or barter their goods to the very people who could enforce their punishment, thereby instituting a type of security system that, by engaging the enforcers of the law in the infraction, ensures that they can, within certain bounds, defy the rules. The potential to break the rules, to escape surveillance (at least in its external form, by retreating to the woods) renders Katniss less than malleable, more resistant, to the efforts in the Capitol to groom and objectify her when she becomes a tribute.

As Susan Shau Ming Tan has perceptively noted, “Panem seems a nation based on scopophilia” (67). The role that is played by the television, the spectacle, the politics of who looks at whom, is central to the way in which the government controls its citizens. Mixed in with the desire to look, or as is the case for many in the districts the imperative to look, is the way in which surveillance operates as the inescapable backdrop to the citizens’ lives. The spectacle of the Games may on the surface appear to be no more than a violent and bloody form of entertainment doubling as an overt threat of what the Capitol is capable of, but it is also a means of reinforcing that the people of the districts are merely bodies to be manipulated and looked at through the lens of death.

In *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Michel Foucault asserts that “[v]isibility is a trap” (200). Certainly his analysis of the effects of the Panopticon and bodily discipline is an informative way in to understanding the way in which power and spectacle function in Collins’ novels. In his definition of the Panopticon, Foucault writes:

Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers. (201)

The functioning of President Snow’s Panem seems to have taken a page from this definition as the citizens of the districts are implicit within a system that binds them within their own self-monitoring. The effects of the Capitol’s monitoring of the districts results in Katniss worrying, even when she’s in the woods, technically outside the district’s fence that “even in the middle of nowhere, you worry someone might overhear you” (*HG* 7). This effect of power has been ingrained in her from when she was a small child: “I learned to hold my tongue and to turn my features into an indifferent mask so that no one could ever read my thoughts” (7). The result of this on a widespread scale is that while there may have been discontent among the residents of the districts, the power of the Capitol is such that they become ‘the bearers’ of this power, censoring themselves and remaining silent. Of course, the Peacekeepers represent a highly visible representative of that power, the potential for other, less identifiable actors means that Foucault’s assertion that “power should be invisible and unverifiable [...] Unverifiable: the inmate must never know whether he is being looked at any one moment; but he must be sure that he may always be so” (201) is made manifest. The distrust between residents works to seal each individual within his or her own space; it ensures that individuals will be wary of each other, suspecting each other of potentially being an agent of power or, – to return to the way in which fear became one of the foremost mechanisms of control post 9/11 – of being an agent of terror.

The paranoia that is rampant in the surveillance society disciplines citizens into monitoring their own behaviour and suspecting those around them of being agents of power/terror silences them and separates them from each other, and limits the potential for rebellion. As Gale notes in the first novel: "It's to the Capitol's advantage to have us divided among ourselves" (*HG* 17). A further demonstration of the way in which power flows is that Katniss is able to recognise that while she agrees with Gale she will "never say so" (*HG* 17).

That Katniss cannot share her discontent, even with her closest friend, indicates the extent to which the disciplinary measures the Capitol has set up work to close off each individual from the others. As a result, the act of joining herself to Peeta takes on even stronger implications. During the costume pageant preceding Katniss' first appearance in the Games, she is at first confused when Haymitch<sup>9</sup> suggests that holding hands could be construed as an act of rebellion:

'Whose idea was the hand holding?' asks Haymitch.

'Cinna's,' says Portia.

'Just the perfect touch of rebellion,' says Haymitch. 'Very nice.'

Rebellion? I have to think about that one for a moment. But when I remember the other couples, standing stiffly apart, never touching or acknowledging each other, as if their fellow tribute did not exist, as if the Games had already begun, I know what Haymitch means. Presenting ourselves not as adversaries but as friends has distinguished us as much as the fiery costumes. (96)

By publicly claiming Peeta's hand (and he hers) the two demonstrate that the mistrust or even hatred the tributes feel for each other, and by extension that the district residents feel, is a construction designed by the Capitol to maintain its system of power. As the act is later manipulated as part of the romantic narrative that is told about Katniss and Peeta, the flexibility of power, its capacity to adapt and change, is made even more patent. Indeed, the 'perfect touch of rebellion' is qualified as 'very nice,' that is, acceptable in that it is not risky and does not directly challenge the system. The flexibility of the system is such that this minor act of 'rebellion' will be co-opted by the system to further its own agenda of promoting the entertainment aspect of the Games. Katniss and Peeta's 'love story'

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<sup>9</sup> Haymitch is the sole surviving past winner of the Games from District 12, and as such must act as Peeta and Katniss' mentor and strategist to help one of them to win.

(which will be analysed in greater depth further on) offers an obvious example of the way in which rebellion comes to be co-opted. While, as the quotation about hand-holding suggests, the idea that two tributes could be anything but enemies is something of a disruption to the system, it quickly recovers and converts the narrative into a commodity for its own use, “to guarantee the most dramatic showdown in history” (*HG* 416). To this effect, even though for Katniss “the romance has been fabricated to play on [the audience’s] sympathies” (*HG* 360), the potential for disruption is re-inscribed within the limits of commodity culture.

The televisions and mandatory viewing that are ubiquitous to all of Panem serve a function beyond that of surveillance; they are also means of discipline. Christina Van Dyke has analysed the extent to which the docile body and discipline are primary agents in Collins’ novels. In “Discipline and the Docile Body: Regulating Hungers in the Capitol,” Van Dyke asserts that the citizens of the Capitol are complicit in not only the de-humanisation of the residents of the districts, but also in their own process of docility which works to substitute the desire for active political agency with that of entertainment and strict beautifying regimes. For Van Dyke, “the more time and energy the Capitol citizens focus on body modification and their social lives, the more self-focused they become and the less likely they are to notice or care about political injustices that don’t directly affect them. The frivolity of the citizens is actually used by the Capitol to strengthen its power” (251). Katniss herself wonders: “What do they do all day, these people in the Capitol, besides decorating their bodies and waiting around for a new shipment of tributes to roll in and die for their entertainment?” (79-80).

The importance of adhering to these bodily standards is made clear by the fact that the tributes, before they can enter the Arena, must all undergo a process of ‘beautification.’ In a disconcerting and somewhat contradictory fashion, the tributes must first be made to look ‘human’ – specifically, what is deemed ‘human’ by residents of the Capitol – before they can be converted into objects of slaughter. For Susan Shau Ming Tan this process is bound up within the televisual discourse that makes the tributes objects to be looked at.

Indeed, as the ceremonies of the Games elevate the tributes and then reduce them to items of sport, Panem emerges as a posthuman world in the most terrifying of ways: where humanity is to be given and

taken away. On stage, Katniss can be a compelling figure, an object of admiration and desire. But, in the arena, she is nothing but a source of bloody spectacle. (61)

While Ming Tan's definition of the posthuman as 'where humanity is to be given and taken away' is somewhat problematic, suggesting as it does that 'humanity' is easily recognisable and a state of being that can be conferred by someone or thing, there is a very intriguing notion in her argument, such that the demarcation and differentiation between the 'stage' and the 'arena' is the fundamental aspect determining Katniss' humanity. Even though the role of the tributes in the Arena is to be reduced to objects of 'bloody spectacle,' it is noteworthy that the reverse of Ming Tan's 'posthuman' argument can be read into the politics of the Games. The novels gesture toward the possibility that while in the Capitol, while she is subjected to the corporeal manipulations and re-imaging, Katniss is only nominally human – she is, in this context, emptied of interiority, and is reduced to her image. In contrast, it is in the Arena, when she is supposedly stripped of her humanity by the necessity of taking the 'inhuman' action of killing others for sport, that Katniss comes to recognise both the importance and power of those very characteristics of which her Capitol image tried to strip her – the affective bond between herself and others.

### 3.2.2 Consuming the Body Politic

In "Real or Not Real – Katniss Everdeen Loves Peeta Melark [sic]: The Lingering Effects of Discipline in the *Hunger Games* Trilogy," June Pulliam asserts that "Panem operates as a hybrid of what Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* terms a sovereign society, where citizens are dominated through mechanisms focusing primarily on the body, and a disciplinary society, in which citizens are controlled through having their consciousness transformed into instruments of their own subjection" (172). Her analysis of the novels uses the concepts of sovereign and disciplinary society as developed by Foucault. Certainly, her assessment that Panem functions in both sovereign and disciplinary mechanisms is difficult to refute. She further analyzes the way in which the Games themselves function on the disciplinary level, both on the tributes and on the spectators in the Capitol and the districts. She argues that

the Tributes must pretend to play the Games with the banal enthusiasm of someone participating in a reality television show so that they appear to the audience as having become instruments in their own subjection. Residents of the districts, for whom the Games are required viewing, are far less likely to resist domination because the annual competition communicates to them the messages that opposing the Capitol is futile. The Games also perpetuate the idea that people from the districts are wholly different from residents of the Capitol since the Tributes' [sic] seem willing to abandon their humanity in order to play the Games. (173)

Pulliam's argument here is well worth interrogating, as it identifies three mechanisms through which power is circulating, and hints at the way in which Katniss, by disrupting this circulation, by making visible the mechanisms at work (albeit unintentionally at the beginning), helps to produce the conditions necessary for the rebellion. The first mechanism, that which makes the tributes appear as 'instruments in their own subjection,' functions through the make-overs the tributes receive. The very nature of the Games, the fact that the Capitol chooses young people, seemingly at random, to die every year, functions as the second mechanism by signaling that 'opposing the Capitol is futile' and the district residents are therefore 'less likely to resist domination.' Finally, the third mechanism, that of differentiating the Capitol residents from those in the districts, is enacted on the bodies of the tributes. Prior to the Games they are presented in a 'beautified' state, closely resembling the style of Capitol residents, but are sent into the Arena in clothes that are "the same for every tribute" (175). This contrast in presentation underscores the fact that any 'individuality' or style they may have acquired over their brief time in the Capitol was merely for the spectacle and public consumption. In the arena, they are merely bodies that will kill or be killed.

Katniss recognises her complicity with the system early on in her time in the Capitol and tries to remember "why [she] is here. Not to model flashy costumes and eat delicacies. But to die a bloody death while the crowds urge on [her] killer" (*HG* 97). There are few ways for her to communicate this knowledge to viewers, and doing so would greatly diminish her chances of winning the Games as appealing "to the crowd, either by being humorous or brutal or eccentric, you gain favour" which is necessary "in terms of sponsors" in order to get help in the form of gifts of food or weapons while in the Arena (141). Katniss, however, has trouble not letting "the audience see how openly [she] despise[s] them" (143). Aware that



her chances of survival increase if the audience ‘likes’ her, Katniss follows the advice of her mentor and styling team to the best of her ability, hoping it will be enough to win over the Capitol viewers. On the one hand, by following her mentor’s advice and doing her best to curry favour with the audience, Katniss becomes complicit in her own oppression. On the other hand, however, this can hardly be considered a willingly made choice, given that her only other option is certain death. Katniss’ complicity, then, is given in exchange for potential life – the parameters of her ‘choice’ are extremely limited.

The elaborate styling and coaching processes that preceded each public appearance prior to entering the Arena are, for Pulliam, opportunities for the Capitol to present the tributes “to viewers in a way that shows them as anything but frightened children whose lives have been marked by brutal deprivations and who are most likely destined for a horrific death in the Games” (176). This process of *objectification*, by which the tributes are reduced merely to objects of spectacle and stripped of any personhood before the cameras works to transform them “into one-dimensional characters who do not threaten the status quo” and in the case of Katniss and the other female tributes “by teaching them to perform as stereotypically feminine beauties” (176).

This *objectification* begins immediately after the reaping. Susan Shau Ming Tan asserts that “[f]rom the moment Katniss is selected as tribute she becomes public property. Her body is not her own, and as she sees herself prepared for an interview her own image is made strange” (60). Ming Tan’s argument may appear contradictory, as Katniss’ body was certainly an object of governmental control prior to her entrance into the Games. What the author is gesturing toward, however, and what coincides with my argument, is that the ‘public’ in this case refers to the viewing public, the spectators and citizens of Panem for whom Katniss was, previously, invisible. Now, however, she becomes not only visible but also an object for consumption. Even before she is prepared for her interviews, Katniss and Peeta are both rendered objects to-be-looked-at, almost dehumanised. On the train heading toward the Capitol, the two are scrutinised by Haymitch as he decides whether or not to help them as their mentor (even though this is his official role):

‘Stand over here. Both of you,’ says Haymitch, nodding to the middle of the room. We obey and he circles us, prodding us like animals at times, checking our muscles, examining our faces. ‘Well, you’re not entirely hopeless. Seem fit. And once the stylists get hold of you, you’ll be attractive enough.’

Peeta and I don’t question this. The Hunger Games aren’t a beauty contest, but the best-looking tributes always seem to pull more sponsors. (70)

As the tributes are looked at ‘like animals’ and subjected to an evaluating gaze that has everything to do with their physical appearance, it becomes increasingly clear the extent to which value is placed on the exterior as ‘the best-looking tributes’ get more sponsors and thus a better chance at survival. This evaluation by their mentor is disturbingly reminiscent of the slave market, in which the body of the slave becomes an object to be ‘circled’ and ‘prodded’ and evaluated for fitness and attractiveness.

Far from wanting to draw a comparison between the slave body and the animal body, (though there is certainly scope for comparison between the treatment of these bodies), I want rather to draw attention to the way in which animal imagery functions throughout the novels. Indeed, this seems an appropriate moment to consider what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) term “becoming-animal.” The liminality and boundary crossing of the she-wolf and the vampire in the first chapter of this thesis, as well as the posthuman bodies differently discussed throughout, give way in *The Hunger Games* to yet another interpretation of the posthuman as encapsulating the animal. For Deleuze and Guattari:

There is an entire politics of becomings-animal, as well as a politics of sorcery, which is elaborated in assemblages that are neither those of the family nor of religion nor of the State. Instead, they express minoritarian groups, or groups that are oppressed, prohibited, in revolt, or always on the fringe of recognized institutions, groups all the more secret for being extrinsic, in other words, anomic. (247)

The link between the becoming-animal expressed here and what we will see as Katniss becomes the Mockingjay is patently clear. As she works to formulate her own assemblages, that is, her own affective bonds and groups, Katniss materialises the liminal embodied position of becoming-animal.

Part of Collins' critique of the power of spectacle also considers the way in which it operates differently on different bodies. Specifically, the gendered nature of bodily discipline comes to be scrutinised, as Katniss reflects before her second Games, in the novel *Catching Fire*, when she must undergo the beautification process once again:

What does this mean? It means I get to spend the morning having the hair ripped off my body while Peeta sleeps in. I hadn't thought about it much, but in the arena at least some of the boys got to keep their body hair whereas none of the girls did. I can remember Peeta's now, as I bathed him by the stream. Very blond in the sunlight, once the mud and blood had been washed away. Only his face remained completely smooth. Not one of the boys grew a beard, and many were old enough to. I wonder what they did to them. (CF 47)

The disparity between the process the 'boys' and the 'girls' must endure is evidenced by the fact that Katniss will 'spend the morning' subjected to that very gendered of personal hygiene dictates, the removal of body hair. In keeping with the image of the tributes as children, not as men and women, Katniss notes that the 'boys' did not grow beards, and when she wonders 'what they did to them' there is a gesture toward the way in which disciplinary practices must always appear as 'natural' and invisible from the outside.

Collins' critique extends beyond that of gender towards that of age as well in the first two novels. During the parade previous to the Quarter Quell in *Catching Fire*, when the tributes are comprised of past winners, and so the rule of youth – that tributes will be drawn from the pool of twelve to eighteen year olds – no longer holds. As Katniss considers the representation of her fellow tributes she notes the extent to which the spectacle cannot hide the disparity between not only youth and 'beauty' but also economics and class:

I think how it's bad enough that they dress us all up in costumes and parade us through the streets in chariots on a regular year. Kids in costumes are silly, but aging victors, it turns out, are pitiful [...] But the majority, who are in the clutches of drink or morphling or illness, look grotesque in their costumes, depicting cows and trees and loaves of bread. [...] Small wonder the crowd goes wild when Peeta and I appear, looking so young and strong and beautiful in our brilliant costumes. The very image of what a tribute should be. (CF 219)

For the Victors, life after the Games has not automatically conferred status or access to the Capitol. Indeed, they have become ‘grotesque’ figures, parodying the ‘image of what a tribute should be.’ As Katniss and Peeta represent what the crowd desires and expects to see in a tribute, the others demonstrate the extent to which this parade is a product of the Capitol’s production of bodies. The same costumes that look ‘silly’ on young children are morphed here into signifiers of the ‘pitiful’ that cannot be hidden by the make-overs the stylists offer. The disparity, the decadence of the Victors’ bodies speaks volumes of the way in which life in the districts, a life that even for a Victor speaks of poverty, acts upon bodies so that they no longer conform to the desired bodies of the spectacle.

Brian McDonald astutely notes that “[f]or Katniss, one’s looks shouldn’t be fodder for remaking, any more than one’s body devoured in the arena shouldn’t be fodder for entertainment” (14). Curiously, at a moment when she is most vulnerable to the dehumanisation inherent in the aesthetic ‘remaking’ process, Katniss others her team of stylists in much the same way that she is othered by those of the Capitol:

I stand there, completely naked, as the three circle me, wielding tweezers to remove any last bits of hair. I know I should be embarrassed, but they’re so unlike people that I’m no more self-conscious that if a trio of oddly coloured birds were pecking around my feet.

The three step back and admire their work.

‘Excellent! You almost look like a human being now!’ says Flavius, and they all laugh. (*HG* 75-76)

The process of othering, in this case through the evaluating lens of bodily discipline, is clearly at play here, as Katniss views her styling team as ‘a trio of oddly coloured birds,’ and turns them into something strange much in the same way that they, despite their efforts, can only concede that she has become ‘almost’ a human being. The irony, of course, is that through their efforts Katniss has become, at least superficially, much more artificial, and with prosthetic eyelashes, make-up and body adornments can be read as actually less human than before they started. Significantly, Katniss likens her team to birds, the very animal she herself will ‘become’ by the third novel, thus partially explaining why it is that she feels such sympathy for them despite the part they play in the Capitol’s spectacle.

The critique of the styling team, and by extension those who live in the Capitol and follow its norms, is a critique of the way in which disciplinary practices produce citizens that, as Christina Van Dyke has acknowledged, are so fully consumed by “efforts to keep up with constantly changing styles (such as stenciled cheekbones and gem-studded collarbones) transform them into ‘docile bodies’” (256). For Foucault, this process is defined as follows:

Thus discipline produces subjected and practised bodies, ‘docile’ bodies. Discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience). In short, it dissociates power from the body; on the one hand, it turns it into an ‘aptitude’, a ‘capacity’, which it seeks to increase; on the other hand, it reverses the course of the energy, the power that might result from it, and turns it into a relation of strict subjection. (138)

Indeed, docile bodies are produced both in the Capitol and in the districts, although these processes work differently even if they have much in common. If the Capitol citizens are rendered docile via the focus on the rigours of disciplining the external performance of corporeality, the district citizens are rendered docile precisely via the same mechanism of observation and the fear of reprisal. For the Capitol citizen, failure to comply is avoided through the self-policing of the citizens who fear social ostracism. For the residents of the districts the self-policing is equally powerful, and yet works to maintain distance and distrust between individuals, dividing and isolating them, and creating ‘cells’ that impede the formation of a group. Arguably the results are the same in the Capitol, as residents are so concerned with their own bodies that they are isolated and divided from the social body, creating again individuals bodies that are rigorously separated from each other.

This ‘docility’ means that “the Capitol citizens generally remain so indifferent to the systemic injustices on which their comfort rests” (Van Dyke 251). Evidence of this can be seen after Katniss wins the first Games and is returned to her styling team for preparation for the victor’s interview. As she listens to them while they prepare her for yet another public appearance she feels:

It’s funny, because even though they’re rattling on about the Games, it’s all about where they were or what they were doing or how they felt when a specific event occurred. ‘I was still in bed!’ ‘I had just had

my eyebrows dyed!' 'I swear I nearly fainted!' Everything is about them, not the dying boys and girls in the arena. (HG 429-430)

It would seem that the process of creating docile bodies is so effective that it renders the citizens incapable of distinguishing between the body as spectacle and the body as person. Or, rather, the process of dehumanisation is such that they cannot recognise that the bodies on screen, the bodies used to provide 'entertainment,' are also children who are dying. Although docile bodies are not necessarily passive bodies – that is, they are not merely planes upon which power exercises itself – it is difficult to understand how the spectators of the Games in the Capitol can be so oblivious to the cruelty being enacted especially after so many pains have been taken to transform the bodies of the tributes into bodies the Capitol can recognise as such.

The irony is not lost on me, however, that the very systems under critique in Collins' novels are reproduced in the way that her trilogy has permeated the Western cultural sphere. The novels have been transformed into films of the same name, and enjoy widespread success as objects of entertainment and consumer culture. The stars of the films (Ross 2012, and Lawrence 2013, 2014, 2015), Jennifer Lawrence (as Katniss), Josh Hutcherson (as Peeta), and Liam Hemsworth (as Gale) have become the same sort of bodies to be looked at as the characters they play in the novels. The star-machine that operates out of Hollywood has converted these young people into bodies to be consumed by the public. They are, as is *de rigueur* in the entertainment field, dressed up, subjected to scrutiny, physically manipulated (from styling, hair and makeup, and exercise regimes), and paraded around to premiers and photo shoots. The films themselves paradoxically participate in the critique of the body as spectacle embedded in the novels and benefit from its allure for modern spectators. The fact that a series of novels that criticises this very activity (although it is debateable to what extent Hollywood requires its 'stars' to battle to the death) should enjoy such widespread popularity with the viewing public speaks to the way in which the co-optation of rebellion and resistance, of critique and questioning, are fundamental aspects of capitalist culture. Rose Braidotti's affirmation that "advanced capitalism is a spinning machine that actively produces differences for the sake of commodification" (*Posthuman* 58) appears here to speak directly to the way in which *The Hunger*

*Games* trilogy has had at least part of its critique of the entertainment industry repurposed for capitalist gain.

Even though tributes spend only a handful of days in the Capitol, fulfilling television obligations for interviews and parades and learning basic skills to help in the arena, they are subjected to a very intense level of bodily intervention. After hours spent removing hair from her body, scrubbing, brushing, trimming and performing every sort of modification short of surgery, tributes are then dressed in fancy clothes and paraded in front of the viewers. The result is that even Katniss has difficulty not only recognising herself but viewing herself as human, and begins to identify as posthuman. When she sees herself in her interview outfit she thinks: “The creature standing before me in the full-length mirror has come from another world [...] I am not pretty. I am not beautiful. I am as radiant as the sun” (146). Here, she sees herself as a ‘creature’ and likens herself, in her radiance, to ‘the sun’ rather than choosing the more common adjectives pretty or beautiful. By identifying herself as a creature, Katniss questions the stability of the category ‘human,’ and blurs the boundaries between the Humanist ‘self’ and those *others*. In this instance, the beautifying, or more precisely, cosmetic practice is what creates this feeling of alienation in Katniss. For Mimi Thi Nguyen, “beauty is especially imagined as a redemptive promise, such that the act of naming someone or something as beautiful can draw that person or thing – once an outcast, perhaps – into a relation with others, with the world” (362): in much the same way that the inverse is true, and ugliness, as the folk tale of the Ugly Duckling warns us, can create social outcasts. In her transition from district resident to tribute, Katniss is beautified, and does enter into a relationship ‘with others, with the world.’ And yet, Katniss surpasses even the ‘humanising’ effect of the cosmetic regime, by becoming even more than beautiful, she remains an object; she becomes the “girl who was on fire” because her dress was quite literally engulfed in synthetic flames (*HG* 82). Her fellow tributes undergo a similar process, whereby “[t]he monstrous boy from District 2 is a ruthless killing machine. The fox-faced girl from District 5 is sly and elusive,” and Rue, Katniss’ eventual ally, is “a magical wisp” (*HG* 151-152). The tributes become synonymous with a single attribute, reduced to an adjective or noun, so that Capitol viewers can decide whether or not to bet on them. Indeed, the posthuman bodies, that is the bodies of the tributes who traverse

the boundaries of the strictly human in their representation, are legion. As an effect of the Capitol's entertainment machine, these boundary bodies are both tools of and against the tyrannical regime.

There is a further layer to the atrocity of watching the tributes fight to the death, as McDonald notes: “[w]hat makes Flickerman’s [the host of the Games] interview show obscene is that the spectators are not watching an *imitation* of tragic action that has the power to make them wiser and better; instead, they are glutting their sense of power by becoming parties to the infliction of tragedy” (20; italics in original). Katniss is not unaware of the way in which the screen, which mediates between her and the audience, makes the entire event even more unjust. She asks: “Why am I hopping around like some trained dog trying to please people I hate?” (142). Very quickly, however, she recognises the power in the image. During the first parade through the Capitol she feels viscerally how representation can work to make her more than just a nameless tribute: “The pounding music, the cheers, the admiration work their way into my blood, and I can’t suppress my excitement. Cinna has given me a great advantage. No one will forget me. Not my look, not my name. Katniss. The girl who was on fire” (85).

### 3.3 Disruptive Dissent

For Jessica Miller, Katniss’ recognition of the power of representation is in part the recognition that she must adopt “feminine norms to survive” (146). Aside from the norm of female beauty, that she performs primarily through the work of her stylists, is that of the ‘girl in love.’ As readers of the novels will know, during the interview portion of the Games, Peeta professes to be in love with Katniss, to have been in love with her since she was a young girl. Katniss does not trust Peeta’s story, and views it as a mere ploy to garner sympathy and sponsors. She rejects the narrative of the ‘star-crossed lovers’ that Peeta and Haymitch have constructed:

‘But we’re not star-crossed lovers!’ I say.  
Haymitch grabs my shoulders and pins me against the wall. ‘Who cares? It’s all a big show. It’s all how you’re perceived. The most I could say about you after your interview was that you were nice enough, although that in itself was a small miracle. Now I can say you’re a heartbreaker. Oh, oh, oh, how the boys back home fall



longingly at your feet. Which do you think will get you more sponsors? (164)

While she initially thinks that the ‘romance’ angle will make her appear weak, she does come to accept Haymitch’s argument although “unlike many heroines in young adult literature, Katniss refuses to see herself as the ingénue caught between two lovers”<sup>10</sup> (159). Indeed, for Katniss, the romance narrative is just another tool, another way to manipulate her image for the camera. “Romance is useful to Katniss only as way to win over sponsors, who will pay for the gifts, like bread, that are sent to the tributes in the arena” (Gilbert-Hickey 99).

### 3.3.1 Romancing the Spectator: Narrative Resistance

There are differing opinions as to how to read Katniss’ use of the romance narrative set up for the viewers in the Capitol (and to a lesser extent the districts).

For June Pulliam:

Peeta’s public confession of love for Katniss recontextualizes her ability to fight in the arena, making it part of her conventionally feminine public persona due to its association with her fierce ability to care,<sup>11</sup> a quality that is most typically associated with hegemonic femininity, rather than as something stemming from a violent masculine pragmatism. (179)

For Miranda Green-Barteet, however, the fact that “Katniss performs as a young woman in love to save herself, her family, and Peeta actually serves to reinforce the many ways she flouts gender stereotypes” (41; note 11). Certainly, it is easy to see how both Green-Barteet and Pulliam’s arguments hold sway. Arguably, the ‘conventionally feminine public persona’ Pulliam sees is one that is created more for the Capitol viewers than it is for either Katniss or readers of the text for whom the ‘girl in love’ is explicitly a performance.

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<sup>10</sup> The reason Miller mentions two lovers is because Katniss’ friend Gale also claims to be in love with her, and in the second and third novels vies for her affections, although she refuses to even consider forming a romantic relationship with either, given that: “The very notion that I’m devoting any thought to who I want presented as my lover, given our current circumstances, is demeaning” (*M* 40).

<sup>11</sup> This ‘fierce ability to care’ links Katniss to Martha Washington, and the validation of violence through essentialist stereotypes for women. Katniss, however, resists and reconfigures this discourse.

Love, however, becomes for Katniss not just a role she has to play but also a form of armour that has the potential to protect her from punishment. For June Pulliam: “Katniss’s resistance to the Capitol’s domination in these moments arouses the sympathy of viewers because her behavior is consistent with normative femininity and so she does not threaten their deeply ingrained beliefs about how women should behave” (178). As noted previously, however, while the Capitol citizens may see her ‘normative femininity’ as non-threatening, by ‘loving’ Peeta she demonstrates the extent to which affection can be a tool for resistance.

The popularity of the romance narrative for viewers in the Capitol is such that there is a revision to the rules part-way through the Games, which would allow for both tributes from the same district to be crowned winners should they survive to the end (*HG* 300). While Katniss has spent her time in the Arena up to this point focused on her own survival (and for a short time on that of Rue), she immediately seeks Peeta out and joins with him, in the hopes that they might both win the Games. She is quick to understand that performing as “one of the star-crossed lovers from District 12 [is] an absolute requirement if [she wants] anymore help from sympathetic sponsors” (*HG* 299). While the Capitol viewers may have bought in to the story of the tributes-as-lovers, Katniss must work to maintain the narrative. The emphasis on the fact that this is not something that comes easily to Katniss, and indeed that she must interpret the role, is made quite clear to readers:

I’m not really sure how to ramp up the romance. The kiss last night was nice, but working up to another will take some forethought. There are girls in the Seam, some of the merchant girls, too, who navigate these waters so easily. But I’ve never had much time or use for it. Anyway, just a kiss isn’t enough anymore, clearly, because if it was we’d have got food last night. My instincts tell me Haymitch isn’t just looking for physical affection; he wants something more personal. (*HG* 364-365)

While Capitol viewers may interpret Katniss’ actions as those of a girl in love, readers can hardly ignore that they are the result of calculation, a precise attempt to ‘ramp up the romance’ in order to get food. Interestingly, there is some ambiguity as to whether or not Katniss views displays of affection and intimacy as inherently performative, as it is not clear whether the girls ‘who navigate these waters so easily’ are simply more adept at interpreting the role or whether it stems

from impulse rather than calculation. Either way, “Katniss reminds herself to act for the cameras in the way a girl in love would act, whether that means tender kisses, gentle caresses, affectionate glances, or fighting desperately to keep her lover alive when he is grievously injured” (Miller 156). By making it explicit that she is acting ‘for the cameras’ Katniss highlights the way in which romantic love is a constructed narrative – if it is so easy for her to convince audiences that she loves Peeta merely by acting as though she is then these actions become de-naturalised. However, while the audience may be convinced (and Peeta also comes to believe Katniss loves him), Katniss herself has difficulty separating “out [her] feelings about Peeta. It’s too complicated. What [she] did as part of the Games. As opposed to what [she] did out of anger at the Capitol. Or because of how it would be viewed back in District 12. Or simply because it was the only decent thing to do. Or what [she] did because [she] cared about him” (*HG* 435). Despite the turmoil Katniss feels, the novels resist falling into a narrative that privileges the romantic plot, and highlight just how constructed this is, and also, that though she may not be *in love* with Peeta, she certainly does *care* for him. Miller notes that “Katniss subversively uses the tools of femininity to control how her story is interpreted. After the Games, to bolster the romantic interpretation” (158). She is convinced that the ‘romance’ between herself and Peeta is a survival mechanism; to stay alive she must pretend to be in love.

Implicit in this ‘love story’ is the way in which the romantic narrative is often employed in patriarchal discourse as a means of domesticating heterosexual women, as commented in the previous chapters. Katniss must, quite literally, ally herself with an ailing and fragile Peeta so as to improve her chances with the sponsors, while at the same time this increases the likelihood that she will be caught and killed by her opponents in the arena (who are immune to or ignorant of the love story). Though Peeta himself poses no direct threat to Katniss, the fact that Katniss is manipulated into staying with and protecting Peeta so as to ‘prove’ that she loves him draws attention to the way in which romantic love propitiates the conditions for gender violence in contemporary culture. While Katniss argues that she must protect the wounded Peeta so as to further the romance narrative and gain sponsors, it is clear that to do so Katniss must put herself at risk. When deciding whether or not to fight the remaining tributes so as to gain access to the

medicine Peeta needs, she reasons that if she doesn't do so: "the audience would hate me. And frankly, I would hate myself, too, if I didn't even try" (*HG* 334). The implication is that if she truly loves Peeta, she will risk her own safety, her own well-being, and her own chance to win the Games in order to get save him (though if she fails they will both die). The romantic narrative the audience expects is one of selflessness in the face of love, where 'love conquers all.' Disturbingly, domestic violence feeds upon this narrative, one that expects women (predominantly though not exclusively) to suffer for their partner, at the hands of their partner, and to do so in the name of 'love.'

When the last minute rule change informs Katniss and Peeta that only one of them can survive after all (despite the previous change that they could both be winners), Katniss uses the threat of poisonous berries and a double suicide to manipulate the seemingly infallible Games, deciding that either they will both die or both live. Worth noting is, as Katy Ryan has argued in her work on slavery, resistance, and Toni Morrison's narratives (2000), suicide can sometimes be read as a strategy of resistance. As such, the implied suicide attempt unleashes the ire of President Snow and the rest of the government (though it is wildly popular with the audience), Katniss becomes identified with a very overt form of rebellion, differing from the more subtle 'caring' that she demonstrates until now.

Funny, in the arena, when I poured out those berries, I was only thinking of outsmarting the Gamemakers, not how my actions would reflect on the Capitol. But the Hunger Games are their weapon and you are not supposed to be able to defeat it. So now the Capitol will act as if they've been in control the whole time. As if they orchestrated the whole event, right down to the double suicide. But that will only work if I play along with them. (*HG* 435)

Even though Katniss is aware of the role that she is playing, and uses it to subvert the Capitol's control over her, she still recognises that even her performance of love is dictated by the Gamemakers. The romance narrative, that she played along with in order to save herself and Peeta in the Arena, now becomes a role she will have to interpret 'outside' as well. Haymitch warns her that in order to appear not as a rebel but as a sympathetic young girl: "You're only defence can be you were so

madly in love you weren't responsible for your actions" (*HG* 433).<sup>12</sup> And yet, even though she must go so far as to become engaged to Peeta in order to convince the government of the veracity of her feelings, for readers this too is a subversion of heteronormative felicity, pointing to the way in which marriage can be a tool of patriarchal and oppressive culture, and not only the fairy-tale ending to a romantic story.

The very constructed and performative aspects of her relationship with Peeta, however, leave her mistrustful of the effects that it could have: "[h]er time in the Capitol, both before and after the games, demonstrates to her that she could inspire people, but she dismisses this ability, believing the citizens of Panem are responding to the Capitol's constructed version of her rather than her true self" (Green-Barteet 39). This is not surprising, as the role of the image, the role of *her* image in the rebellion is what she is confronted with on several occasions. When she is finally given the chance to join the rebels fighting on the frontline in *Mockingjay*, she and her squadron are told: "it's been decided that you are of most value on television. Just look at the effect Katniss had running around in that Mockingjay suit" (*M* 257).

In the second and third novels, the narrative of performance is just as strong. Even though Katniss must maintain the romance plot, not only to attempt to pacify the Capitol and deflect suspicion but also to maintain support from those in the districts who responded to her display of love by believing that a rebellion was possible, she must also learn to perform the role of the Mockingjay. The bird is a hybrid, and was the form of the pin Katniss wore as her token in the first Games: "A mockingjay is a creature the Capitol never intended to exist. They hadn't counted on the highly controlled jabberjay having the brains to adapt to the wild, to pass on its genetic code, to thrive in a new form. They hadn't anticipated its will to live" (*CF* 91). The bird becomes not only the symbol of the revolution but also an apt metaphor for Katniss herself. Because the Capitol did not intend for Katniss to exist – it intended only to create obedient citizens. Further, as a technological,

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<sup>12</sup>Lest the 'love' defense be viewed as overly imaginative, I would submit the fact that in 2014 the Spanish princess Cristina de Borbón y Grecia used a similar argument in an attempt to not be implicated in her husband's money-laundering scheme. When required to admit in court how she could be unaware of her husband's activities, she reportedly asserted that she loved and trusted him to manage their business.

scientific creation that materialises Haraway's cyborgian premise, by becoming the Mockingjay Katniss embraces the potential in becoming-animal and disrupts understandings of bounded, Humanist bodies.

As Susan Shau Ming Tan has argued, "Katniss becomes simulacra the moment she enters the realm of the screen" (67). From the moment in the first Games when she reacts to her image and Peeta's during the parade and thinks, "[a]t first, I'm frozen, but then I catch a sight of us on a large television screen and am floored by how breathtaking we look" (*HG* 85), to the moment in *Catching Fire* when she again returns to the pre-Games interview program, she is aware of the way in which her image is almost beyond her control. Her stylist and friend, Cinna, designs her second Games interview dress, by modifying the wedding dress she would have worn had she not had to return to the Arena. When she lifts her arms to twirl and show the audience her gown, it starts to smolder, and burn, and turns into a different dress altogether. It is only when she sees herself on the screen that she realises that "Cinna has turned me into a mockingjay" (*CF* 252).

Working through Deleuze and Guattari's concept of becoming-animal, Gerald L. Bruns (2007) asserts that:

becoming-animal is a movement from major (the constant) to minor (the variable); it is a deterritorialization in which a subject no longer occupies a realm of stability and identity but is instead folded imperceptibly into a movement or into an amorphous legion whose mode of existence is nomadic or, alternatively, whose "structure" is rhizomatic rather than arborescent, that is, restless, insomniac, or in flight rather than settled. (Bruns 703-704)

By becoming the Mockingjay, Katniss mobilises the becoming-animal as the movement toward allegiance with the rebellious army. Her position as Mockingjay serves a dual function, not only to unite the districts behind the image of a rebel leader but also to destabilise the rigid structure of the rebel force. As the visible image of the rebellion, Katniss subverts the potential for total control hitherto held by Alma Coin.

With this manipulation of Katniss' image, Cinna changes Katniss from the 'girl who was on fire' in the first novel (and from the girl who was in love) into the very symbol that will be used to unite the districts against the Capitol. This new role, however, turns out to have disturbing parallels to the girl in love who so

captivated audiences in the first Games. After she is rescued and taken to District 13 to join the rebels, Katniss learns:

What they want is for me to truly take on the role they designed for me. The symbol of the revolution. The Mockingjay. It isn't enough, what I've done in the past, defying the Capitol in the Games, providing a rallying point. I must now become the actual leader, the face, the voice, the embodiment of the revolution. The person who the districts – most of which are now openly at war with the Capitol – can count on to blaze the path to victory. I won't have to do it alone. They have a whole team of people to make me over, dress me, write my speeches, orchestrate my appearances – as if *that* doesn't sound horribly familiar – and all I have to do is play my part. (*M* 10-11; italics in original)

The disconcerting similarity between the role the rebels want her to play as the Mockingjay and the role she played as a tribute foreshadows the way in which both Alma Coin and President Snow are prepared to use Katniss as a symbol: the former as a symbol of rebellion, the latter as a symbol of dictatorial control. Katniss herself is turned into a mere representation, as they try to empty her of meaning and agency in an attempt to harness her for their own purposes.

Just as Foucault argues that the incarcerated body, as a body subject to discipline through being looked at: “He is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication” (200). So would both Coin and Snow convert Katniss into a body that does not see, that is projected to the country and that is constantly observed but cannot see or understand the mechanisms that enmesh her within the politics of observation. As both the Capitol and the rebels produce information about Katniss and write and direct her narrative for her, it would appear that there is little space for resistance, little opportunity for Katniss to have a measure of control over her own image, even for her to follow the advice of her stylist/friend Cinna when she experiences stage fright: “Why don't you just be yourself?” (*HG* 147). And yet, as the production team in District 13 comes to realise, whatever it is that audiences respond to in Katniss, whatever the reason for her popularity and power, their efforts to limit her sphere of action to controlled televised appearances fail as Katniss is only truly compelling when she is, in fact, ‘herself.’ After several attempts she (and those around her) realises: “I perform well only in real-life circumstances” (*M* 76). As a result, Katniss is sent into the warring districts, sent to meet the wounded and to interact with the

rebels, thereby facilitating her capacity to connect with people and to follow her own goals which, by the third novel, have become reduced to one principle focus: “I kill Snow” (41), she tells the rebel commander before agreeing to become their symbolic leader. Her desire to be the one to kill the despotic President is primarily fueled by the desire for individual revenge for the ways in which he has attacked her, however, it also extends to include a desire to avenge the deaths he has provoked – and the deaths she feels responsible for provoking through her fight against him. Katniss struggles throughout all three novels with guilt for the many deaths that Snow’s regime instigates, feeling that through her actions, her rebellion, she is responsible. When she visits District 12 after it has been firebombed in *Mockingjay* she looks at the corpses that “now lie reeking in various states of decomposition, carrion for scavengers, blanketed by flies. *I killed you, I think as I pass a pile. And you. And you*” (6; italics in original). Her guilt is not the result of having actively participated in these deaths – she did not drop the bombs or order it done – but rather demonstrates the way in which ‘participation’ is not only an active choice, but can also be understood in terms of tacit passivity. In this case, her sense of responsibility is bound up in her desire to kill the president as a means of redeeming herself and the deaths resulting from the rebellion.

Katniss comes to understand the power of surveillance, the way in which it exerts power over her, and also the way in which she is, in part, responsible for that power. Though Foucault is doubtlessly talking of a much less conscious interplay of relations between observer and observed, his words (except for the gender pronouns) still ring true for Katniss: “He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection” (202-203).<sup>13</sup> That Katniss should attempt to manipulate, to the best of her ability, the terms of this subjugation is clear from the very first novel, when she refuses to accept the rules for the interview. When told during her preparation that the audience wants “to know about her” she replies: “I don’t want

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<sup>13</sup> Foucault’s use of the third person singular masculine pronoun is not unproblematic as the way in which bodies, power, and visibility ‘play’ upon an individual differs depending on race, sex, gender, and class, among others.



them to! They're already taking my future! They can't have the things that mattered to me in the past" (142). Even within the dictates of the format, and knowing that there will be consequences for alienating those who might sponsor her, Katniss still seeks to exercise what little agency she can.

Katniss appears to accept this subjection, in part because it situates her within a matrix of power relations that, even though she is constantly observed, still permits her a level of influence within the rebel plan. This plan is one that shows how the rebels have learned quite well the strategy employed by the Capitol, and the way in which entertainment can be used as a weapon. The plan, she is told in *Mockingjay*, "is to launch an Airtime Assault," says Plutarch. "To make a series of what we call propos – which is short for 'propaganda spots' – featuring you, and broadcast them to the entire population of Panem" (M 44). Where once she was fodder for the entertainment of the Capitol citizens, and forced to kill other tributes from the districts, she will now be mediatically 'assaulting' those same people, in the hope that they will join the rebel cause.

When it looks as though she has been killed in battle (though she and a small troupe of soldiers have actually escaped from the army and are following Katniss' own orders), her image becomes even more powerful in the propaganda war: "Up comes a heavily doctored photo of me looking beautiful and fierce with a bunch of flames flickering behind me. No words. No slogan. My face is all they need now" (M 294). Her image has, with her supposed death, slipped out of her control, as the rebels show 'a heavily doctored photo,' one that bears perhaps only a passing resemblance to Katniss, she becomes a signifier so laden with others' meanings that there is no need for words or a slogan. The rebels even appear to send the message that her actions are no longer necessary, that her 'face is all they need.' This speaks to the way in which contemporary society, since the infamous debate between Nixon and Kennedy in 1960 ushered in the era of politics of the image. This is not to say that images did not participate in politics prior to the first televised political debate, but that the way candidates *look*, their physical appearance holds increasingly greater sway over the population. Add to this the fact that politics and entertainment are increasingly entwined discourses, with actors becoming politicians (Ronald Reagan and Arnold Schwarzenegger spring to mind) and lending their *image* to political debates (woman and man actors alike

are frequently sought out to support political candidates). Steven J. Ross asserts that Hollywood has had a profound impact on American politics, such that “the Hollywood right sought, won, and exercised electoral power” (4) and that there is a widespread belief that “movie stars had a right and an obligation as citizens to participate in the nation’s political life” (6), as if being famous were somehow qualification for political office.

The response from the Capitol is, predictably, one that seeks to re-write the narrative that Katniss and the rebels constructed. President Snow offers a strange sort of eulogy in response to her supposed death:

he predicts a turning of the tide in the war, since the demoralized rebels have no one left to follow. And what was I, really? A poor, unstable girl with a small talent with a bow and arrow. Not a great thinker, not the mastermind of the rebellion, merely a face plucked from the rabble because I had caught the nation’s attention with my antics in the Games. But necessary, so very necessary, because the rebels have no real leader among them. (*M* 294)

President Snow’s attempts to discredit Katniss, while suggesting that she is, as she herself suspects, a mere ‘face plucked from the rabble,’ and not a ‘real leader,’ almost serves the opposite function than what he would intend. Katniss, through his own definition, became ‘so very necessary’ and was someone the rebels could ‘follow.’ While it’s true that she is no ‘mastermind,’ it is possible that this very fact is what renders her more potent as a symbol for the rebels and an enemy to Snow. The residents in the districts can recognise themselves in her in part because she is not exceptional. In fact, she is only made exceptional by her ‘small talent with a bow and arrow’ and by the love narrative Haymitch and Peeta spin around her.

The supposed love story between Katniss and Peeta takes on an even darker turn when they return to the Capitol during their Victory Tour (an event scheduled between the winning of the Games and the beginning of the next one). As Susan Shau Ming Tan suggests, “[u]naware of the political implications of Katniss and Peeta’s act, Capitol audiences view Katniss and Peeta’s love as the ultimate consumer item” (64). What for Katniss was a complicated strategy meant to save herself and Peeta by garnering favour with the audiences becomes a ‘consumer item’ that further supports the fetishisation of the spectacle. At the party in their honour Katniss finds that: “Apparently my Mockingjay pin has

spawned a new fashion sensation, because several people come up to show me their accessories. My bird has been replicated on belt buckles, embroidered into silk lapels, even tattooed in intimate places. Everyone wants to wear the winner's token" (CF 77). In a move that underscores the emptiness of a consumer culture that would 'buy' the love narrative and ignore the political one, the ignorance of the Capitol residents is criticised. While Katniss will 'become' the Mockingjay, she doubts whether she is truly inspiring people or whether "the citizens of Panem are responding to the Capitol's [and the rebel's] constructed version of her rather than her true self" (Green-Barteet 39). Katniss does not fully overcome this fear, she does, however, come to trust her own desire for revolution as a motive for action.

### 3.3.2 Affecting Change: Rebellious Bonds

In their review of *The Hunger Games* trilogy, Margaret Skinner and Kailyn McCord discuss the way in which Katniss evolves throughout the novels. Of the first novel, McCord asserts that the "[t]he citizens of Panem watch as she [Katniss], this girl who's meant to be an object of entertainment, displays her humanity, and her very real, very emotional relationship with the violence done to her fellow human" (108). While McCord is referring to one specific moment in the text, the one in which Katniss covers Rue, her friend and ally in the arena, with flowers and sings to her when she is killed, the statement could apply to any number of scenes in the novels: Katniss has few 'profound' relationships (in which she feels that she can love and trust the other person) and yet her greatest talent is perhaps the ability to not only establish emotional relationships but also to value them very highly and work to protect them.

That said, Katniss does not trust easily, nor does she enter into relationships lightly. As Margaret Skinner has noted, at the beginning of her time as a tribute, Katniss "realizes she cannot get along just on self-sufficiency but must learn if and how she can trust another" (108). This process of learning to trust is key to the novels. Katniss, for better or for worse, is, throughout the novels, relatively inept at understanding and attributing motive to those around her. She frequently mistakes friend for foe (though rarely mistakes foe for friend, this is due in large part to her general mistrust for everyone). In fact, in the first novel, Katniss confuses the performance the Capitol demands of her with Peeta's words and

actions, thinking that he too is ‘performing’ a role, the role of the boy in love, when really he is as invested in staying alive as she is. She assumes that her duplicity, the personality she puts on for the Capitol like the dresses she must wear for the television programmes, is also part of Peeta’s strategy. After their grand entrance in the city, dressed in matching fire costumes, Katniss thinks:

A warning bell goes off in my head. *Don’t be so stupid. Peeta is planning how to kill you*, I remind myself. *He is luring you in to make you easy prey. The more likeable he is, the more deadly he is.* But because two can play at this game, I stand on tiptoe and kiss his cheek. Right on his bruise. (88; italics in original)

This inability to ‘read’ Peeta’s motivation (and the motivation of most of the people around her) has far-reaching results, such that in the beginning of the ‘Games,’ Katniss does not understand that Peeta joins the ‘Careers’ in order to protect her, and instead reads his alliance as a betrayal. The tributes from the more privileged districts are known as ‘Careers’ because they have greater access to food and training than those in other districts, and thus becoming a tribute is less a death sentence than a chance at glory. Katniss aligns herself against these teenagers because they not only represent an unfair advantage over the poorer districts and tributes, but also because they “project arrogance and brutality” (*HG* 116) and represent the Capitol’s morality over that of the districts that do not enjoy favour from the Capitol. That Peeta should join this group is read, by Katniss, as a betrayal not only of the tentative friendship they may have formed, but also of the district they come from. Skinner further comments on Katniss’ process of learning to accept help from others:

At the beginning of their training, Katniss thinks she will survive on pure self-reliance and grit. She quickly realizes this approach is futile. Katniss and Peeta face challenging decisions about whom to trust in the Capitol, and whether they can trust each other. Katniss slowly discovers that she must rely on Peeta and others for a new kind of survival. (111)

The convergence of the awareness that ‘a new kind of survival’ is necessary along with the realisation that it will come at the cost of her idea of herself as self-sufficient is one of the more powerful themes running throughout the trilogy. Although she recognises the important alliance between herself and Gale, that he

gave her a “sense of security” and “companionship” (HG 135), theirs is a bond forged by mutual need and occurs over time; it is not a relationship formed over a matter of days in the artificial world of the Capitol (nor is it one that will survive the war in the third novel). Though she will eventually come to recognise Peeta as an ally and a friend she experiences understandable confusion about what her relationship to Peeta is, even after he saves her life:

Peeta! *He saved my life!* I think. Because by the time we met up, I couldn't tell what was real and what the tracker-jacker venom had caused me to imagine. But if he did, and my instincts tell me he did, what for? Is he simply working the Lover Boy angle he initiated at the interview? Or was he actually trying to protect me? And if he was, what was he doing with those Careers in the first place? None of it makes sense. (HG 238; italics in original)

The confusion she feels about how to comprehend Peeta's actions is indicative of her relative inability to judge and understand others' motives. If she misreads Peeta, believing that “[h]e is already fighting hard to stay alive. Which also means that kind Peeta Mellark, the boy who gave me the bread, is fighting hard to kill me” (HG 73) even though readers know that Peeta is actually working in conjunction with Haymitch to *save* Katniss, he is not the only one she misjudges.

In a coincidence difficult to believe, Katniss is attended by a slave of the Capitol who, a few years earlier, she had watched being caught in the woods. While rescuing the girl would have certainly meant capture for both of them, Katniss still blames herself for not at least trying, when she had the chance. When she finds this young woman, now rendered mute as part of her punishment, Katniss misreads the girl's thoughts. She thinks: “I hate her too, with her knowing reproachful eyes that call me a coward, a monster, a puppet of the Capitol, both now and then. For her, justice must finally be happening. At least my death will help pay for the life of the boy in the woods” (HG 144). What Katniss sees in the young woman's face is her own feeling, not that of the servant. This misrecognition continues throughout the three novels, and is not limited to people she knows only in passing. In

*Catching Fire*, when she is rescued from the Arena in the Quarter Quell<sup>14</sup> and Peeta is left to be captured by the Capitol, Katniss thinks:

It's enough to die of spite. To punish Haymitch, who, of all the people in this rotting world, has turned Peeta and me into pieces in his Games. I trusted him. I put what was precious in Haymitch's hands. And he has betrayed me. '*See, this is why no one lets you make the plans,*' he said. That's true. No one in their right mind would let me make the plans. Because I obviously can't tell a friend from an enemy. (CF 389; italics in original)

Certainly, though Katniss laments the fact that she 'can't tell a friend from an enemy,' this is not entirely true. Her relationship with Rue, her eventual trust in Peeta, her love for her sister, Finnick Odair, Commander Boggs, and her faith in the people in the districts who join in the rebellion all reinforce the fact that she knows who her 'friends' are. Further, her mistrust of Alma Coin, the nominal leader of the rebellion and head of District 13, is justified by the end of *Mockingjay*. Indeed, Katniss has always *known* who the enemy is, even if she is not quite as skilled at recognising those who would be her friends:

*Enemy. Enemy.* The word is tugging at a recent memory. Pulling it into the present. The look on Haymitch's face. '*Katniss, when you're in the arena...*' The scowl, the misgiving. '*What?*' I hear my own voice tighten as I bristle at some unspoken accusation. '*You just remember who the enemy is,*' Haymitch says. '*That's all.*' Haymitch's last words of advice to me. Why would I need reminding? I have always known who the enemy is. Who starves and tortures and kills us in the arena. Who will soon kill everyone I love. My bow drops as his meaning registers. Yes, I know who the enemy is. And it's not Enobaria. (CF 377-378; italics in original)

In recognising that it is not the other tributes but rather the Capitol, President Snow, and his politics that are responsible for pitting the districts against each other and fomenting the animosity between them, Katniss realises that they would be better served joined together fighting against oppression than against each other. Not only in the first book, but also in *Catching Fire* and *Mockingjay*, Katniss'

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<sup>14</sup> In *Catching Fire* both Katniss and Peeta must return to the Arena as tributes, as the 'Quarter Quell' is a special edition of the Hunger Games that occurs every twenty-five years and offers an especially horrific twist. In this, the seventy-fifth year, the tributes from each district are selected from living victors; from District Twelve this leaves Peeta, Haymitch and Katniss as eligible for the reaping.

decisions on whom to trust are not just based on evaluations of her own chance for survival, rather, her growing awareness that her goals (from protecting her sister to defeating President Snow) will best be carried out within a matrix of community and mutual support are what lend her a Third Wave feminist consciousness.

In her article “Girl Power and Girl Activism in the Fiction of Suzanne Collins, Scott Westerfield, and Moira Young,” Sonya Sawyer Fritz argues that “[b]ecause Katniss is characterized from the opening pages of the trilogy as a survivor, an intelligent and independent individual who daily confronts the tyranny of her country’s oppressive and opulent Capitol, it is relatively easy to locate her character within the matrix of girl power” (22). While the ‘girl power’ movement can perhaps be read as a capitulation to the demands of late capital to commercialise and render innocuous social rebellion and counter culture, it is a prevalent and powerful source of identification within contemporary film and literature. Even though my own analysis would locate Katniss within a discourse that rejects the commodification that ‘girl power’ comes to represent, Sawyer Fritz’s arguments about the way in which Katniss comes to recognise her own agency are pertinent and useful. Katniss is a ‘survivor’ and her growth throughout the trilogy from one who ‘confronts the tyranny of her country’s’ government for personal reasons to more politically engaged and community-focused motives is crucial for understanding her role as a Third Wave feminist icon.

As Susan Shau Ming Tan has suggested, although the Arena is essentially a stage upon which the tributes must kill each other, it is here that “Katniss is forced into contact with others from outside her district. And, as she finds herself unable to ignore their humanity, Katniss is finally allowed voice, able to hear and be heard” (58). Indeed, prior to becoming a tribute, Katniss has no contact with anyone outside of her district. The relationship between districts is non-existent, and the ‘Games’ function to foment distrust and competition, and ensure that districts do not bond with each other. In *Mockingjay* Katniss is finally able to articulate the Capitol’s strategy. When asked by a dying Capitol soldier to give him a reason not to shoot she says:

‘I can’t. That’s the problem, isn’t it?’ I lower my bow. ‘We blew up your mine. You burned my district to the ground. We’ve got every

reason to kill each other. So do it. Make the Capitol happy. I'm done killing their slaves for them.' [...]  
 'I'm not their slave,' the man mutters.  
 'I am,' I say. 'That's why I killed Cato ... and he killed Thresh ... and he killed Clove ... and she tried to kill me. It just goes around and around, and who wins? Not us. Not the districts. Always the Capitol. But I'm tired of being a piece in their Games' [...] 'District Twelve and District Two have no fight except the one the Capitol gave us.' (*M* 215-216)

It would be hasty to hope that Katniss' recognition that the districts have a common enemy in the Capitol would result in a sense of community and equal purpose amongst all those in the districts. Indeed, shortly after giving this speech Katniss is shot by a Capitol soldier (*M* 217). This simplistic view of ally/enemy does not persuade everyone; it does not persuade even Katniss. Though she feels a sense of responsibility and care for the people in the districts, especially the rebels, she is fully aware that there are individual interests at stake as well as the communal or social ones.

Arguably, what Katniss is advocating is what feminist and social activists would recognise as a form of coalition building. Brenda Lyshaug defines this activity as "bringing diverse constituencies together in the temporary pursuit of specific shared goals, coalition building enables subjects to act in concert without ignoring or suppressing the politically significant differences that divide them" (78). While Lyshaug problematises coalition building as a superficial means of bringing people together because it privileges temporary goals as that which can bind people, rather than what she terms 'enlarged sympathies' (79) which permit individuals to feel *with* each other rather than speak for or to one another, she asserts that there is definite value in constructing and maintaining sites of mutual sameness that do not elide difference. This 'enlarged sympathy' asserts that "[f]eminist connections across difference must be built on a more durable and generous form of reciprocal recognition than that of mutual instrumentality if a sense of mutual accountability is to be maintained between allies" (Lyshaug 81). For Katniss, this process of recognising not only 'mutual instrumentality' but also developing an ethics of mutual *caring* – wherein she both learns to care for those outside of her immediate circle, as well as learning to allow them to care for her – is framed as the process by which she comes to accept her potential as a political



actor within the social (and given that this is a novel for young adults, it is also part of the *bildungsroman* aspect of the story wherein Katniss moves from being a child to being an adult).

At the outset of the first novel, Katniss' community, those she cares for, is quite small. Not only is this a result of being 'imprisoned' in her district, but it is also depicted as an aspect of her personality. As previously mentioned, she cares for few people: her sister, her mother, her friend Gale, and trusts even fewer (Gale alone). As readers learn early on, and as Katniss learns throughout the trilogy, her agency, her ability to effect change, resides in her capacity to care for others, a capacity that she must develop as she is forced to interact with the world around her. Sonya Sawyer Fritz asserts that "Katniss's political activism and acts of rebellion in the Hunger Games novels are also often largely informed by her impulse to look after others" (28).

While the heroic impulse can arguably be attributed to the desire to protect others, it is generally an individual impulse, one based not on the forming of community or *mutual* dependence, but one based on the hero (male or female) acting on behalf of others. Katniss comes to terms with the fact that as an individual she is less effective than as a member of the group and must learn to depend on others. Her burgeoning sense of the power of community is in no way an impulse toward homogenising individuals, rather it stems from the recognition of the power of Gayatri Spivak's notion of strategic essentialism (1988). In working with this notion, Diana Fuss (1989) argues that the category of women can still be a politically viable one, that while the need to consider the multiplicity of women's experiences and the intersecting identity and experiential categories that class, race, geography, sexuality, gender, religion.... all contribute to disrupt the notion of a monolithic identity category 'woman.'<sup>15</sup> For Chandra Talpade Mohanty, the question of difference and commonality is crucial for feminist thinking and activism, arguing that: "The challenge is to see how differences allow us to explain the connections and border crossings better and more accurately, how specifying

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<sup>15</sup> The utility of strategic essentialism is not without its detractors. Judith Butler (1990) raises the very valid concern that even these contingent positions can "have meanings which exceed the purposes for which they were intended. In this case, exclusion itself might qualify as such an unintended yet consequential meaning" (4-5).

difference allows us to theorize universal concerns more fully. It is this intellectual move that allows for my concern for women of different communities and identities to build coalitions and solidarities across borders” (505). Fuss also asserts that there is something useful in asserting political categories, of forging sympathetic alliances, contingent alliances, that seek to sustain and build points of contact between women, rather than looking for points of dissimilarity. Coalition building and strategic essentialism function in similar ways as “useful for anti-essentialist feminists who want to hold onto the notion of women as a group without submitting to the idea that it is ‘nature’ which categorizes them as such” (Fuss 5).

Because Katniss is not explicitly concerned with ‘women’ but rather with the subaltern subjects of the districts,<sup>16</sup> Meghan Gilbert-Hickey argues that Collins “details if not a post-feminist protagonist, then certainly a young woman with no use for either feminist or paternalistic ideology” (96). The binary posed here between feminist and paternalistic is problematic, suggesting that a feminist ideology is somehow the opposite of a paternalistic one – while I would argue that matriarchal is a more apt term – however there is a useful observation being made. Katniss employs an ethics of care and strategic essentialism that is not based on assigned gender or sexuality, and yet still enacts a Third Wave feminist sensibility. Although Carol Gilligan’s seminal work *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development* (1983) relies on a somewhat essentialised notion of women and femininity, her theorisation of how the care bond is developed is useful for thinking about the way in which Katniss’ sense of responsibility and her emotional development are necessary for understanding her position within the novels. For Gilligan “women not only define themselves in a context of human relationship but also judge themselves in terms of their ability to care” (17). What is interesting in the texts is the way in which the ‘ability to care’ is not rooted in Katniss’ femininity so much as it is depicted as an aspect of her heroism. Collins’ novels do not, as Gilbert-Hickey appears to suggest, imagine a post-gender world

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<sup>16</sup> I do not wish to make a facile distinction between ‘women’ and ‘society’ as terms of alliance, but do wish to point out that Katniss’ alliances are located within the binary Capitol-Districts, (and the ensuing class division that arises), and are not constructed in terms of race, sexuality, gender, religion, etc.

(in fact, they are rather conservative in their heteronormativity, among other 'normativities'), rather they detail a world in which change and resistance are enacted and based on feminist principles. This can be summed up by Rosi Braidotti in her arguments for a nomadic feminism that utilises strategic essentialism as its starting point:

In contrast to the oppositions created by a dualistic mode of social constructivism, a nomadic body is a threshold of transformations. It is the complex interplay of the highly constructed social and symbolic forces. The body is a surface of intensities and an affective field in interaction with others. In other words, feminist emphasis on embodiment goes hand in hand with a radical rejection of essentialism. In feminist theory one speaks as a woman, although the subject "woman" is not a monolithic essence, defined once and for all, but rather the site of multiple, complex, and potentially contradictory sets of experiences, determined by overlapping variables such as class, race, age, lifestyle, and sexual preference. One speaks as a woman in order to empower women, to activate sociosymbolic changes in their condition: this is a radically antiessentialist position. (*Nomadic* 25)

While Katniss does not speak 'as a woman' she does indeed work 'to empower women' (and all the citizens of the districts) and 'activate changes in their condition' and I would argue that she does so from the antiessentialist position pioneered by Braidotti through her use of an affective strategy for mobilising not anti-essentialist but strategically essentialist discourses.

Katniss enacts and recognises the importance of resisting the neoliberal discourse of individuality and consumption that goes hand-in-hand with a postfeminist ideology that is all too friendly with capitalist ideology. As Belén Martín Lucas has argued in her discussion of Canadian dystopic fiction by women of colour: "Their emphasis on community constitutes perhaps the most efficient tool against the fierce individualist alienation on which capitalism depends" (Martin-Lucas 76). As Katniss battles her impulse toward selfishness and 'individualist alienation' she becomes an even more potent force. This process of growth, the way in which Katniss enters into a consciousness of her capacity for action on behalf of others, is located in her maturation, in the movement from self-centred motivation versus the need for communal gains. In *Catching Fire*, Gale pressures her to look beyond herself, to consider the way in which she can be of use not just to her family and friends, but to the country as a whole: "What about

the other families, Katniss? The ones who can't run away? Don't you see? It can't be just about saving *us* anymore. Not if the rebellion's begun!' Gale shakes his head, not hiding his disgust with me. 'You could do so much'" (CF 99-100). Perhaps one of the reasons that Katniss is so appealing for adolescent (and post-adolescent) audiences is that in her moments of introspection she does not shy away from feelings of self-doubt; she is not an infallible, confident young woman who acts out of an unshakable conviction. Katniss is plagued by insecurity, and recognises her own mistakes and flaws, and yet does not let this stop her from acting:

Because I'm selfish. I'm a coward. I'm the kind of girl who, when she might actually be of use, would run to stay alive and leave those who couldn't follow to suffer and die. This is the girl Gale met in the woods today.

No wonder I won the Games. No decent person ever does.

*You saved Peeta*, I think weakly.

But now I question even that. I knew good and well that my life back in District 12 would be unlivable if I let that boy die.

[...]

The berries. I realize the answer to who I am lies in that handful of poisonous fruit. If I held them out to save Peeta because I knew I would be shunned if I came back without him, then I am despicable. If I held them out because I loved him, I am still self-centered, although forgivable. But if I held them out to defy the Capitol, I am someone of worth. The trouble is, I don't know exactly what was going on inside me at that moment. (CF 117-118)

The reason for using this lengthy quotation is in part to demonstrate that Katniss' self-doubt, the feeling that she is not *good enough*, is an ingrained part of her character, and yet she not only still chooses to act, but that she is perhaps more effective for recognising her own fallibility. As a protagonist she is not simply "so amazing [...]" The way she could hunt and go in the Hob and everything. Everyone admired her so" (M 188), but also 'despicable,' 'forgivable,' and possibly 'someone of worth.' Although the novels describe her efficacy at uniting the districts ambiguously as "the effect she can have" (HG 111), Katniss works to live up to the expectations the rebels have for her without relinquishing her own belief that she must be not only responsible for her own actions but also accountable to the people in the districts who look to her for hope. Indeed, throughout the novels, it is clear that Katniss *alone* cannot overthrow the government and effect lasting change, but that action must be taken communally.

Katniss has no illusions about her own power or even about her role within the community of rebels in the districts. When the Quarter Quell is announced in *Catching Fire*, and Peeta and Katniss face returning to the Games, Katniss reflects on the way in which her desire to save Peeta is not entirely at odds with her desire to rebel against the Capitol. She decides:

Yes, everyone in the districts will be watching me to see how I handle this death sentence, this final act of President Snow's dominance. They will be looking for some sign that their battles have not been in vain. If I can make it clear that I'm still defying the Capitol right up to the end, the Capitol will have killed me...but not my spirit. What better way to give hope to the rebels?

The beauty of this idea is that my decision to keep Peeta alive at the expense of my own life is itself an act of defiance. A refusal to play the Hunger Games by the Capitol's rules. My private agenda dovetails completely with my public one. And if I really could save Peeta...in terms of a revolution, this would be ideal. Because I will be more valuable dead. They can turn me into some kind of martyr for the cause. (243)

She imagines that she will be 'more valuable dead,' though the impulse to turn herself into a 'martyr for the cause' is not a self-aggrandising reflex. After her experiences in the Capitol, Katniss is well-aware of the power of the screen and the image in constructing public opinion. What she has clearly grasped is that the *image* of the Mockingjay will be as useful a motivational tool as the live body. Further, the assertion that her 'private agenda' and her 'public' one are coextensive is what is most powerful in the above statement. Protecting Peeta, refusing to privilege her own life above that of another person is the defiant action. As Lindsey Issow Averill succinctly argues, what makes her such a potent figure is the fact that "Katniss *cares*" (163; italics in original).

Though she may care, Katniss is quick to recognise that everyone has their own 'private games' that they are playing, and that often she and Peeta have unknowingly been manipulated for others' ends. Haymitch, Gale, President Snow and Alma Coin, among many others, are all eventually viewed as "[a]nother force to contend with. Another power player who has decided to use me as a piece in her games" (M 59). Katniss does not think herself as any different from these others. In fact, she asserts: "I have an agenda of my own and am therefore not to be trusted" (59). And yet, Katniss' agenda is not of a piece with the others, at least not entirely. Gilbert-Hickey asserts that "[t]he difference then, between Katniss and Coin is that

Coin engages in the act in order to promote her own interests, while Katniss's motives more closely align with the 'feminine' care ethic" (104). While I would rather align Katniss' motives with a 'feminist' care ethic than a feminine one, what is clear is that the act of caring is a powerful tool.

As powerful as it may be, caring, and the potential it opens for affective relationships that can destabilise and disrupt oppressions, the effects of caring are not always positive. For Katniss, caring leads to an increased vulnerability; it exposes her to a range of emotions that she sought to contain since the death of her father. Her alliance with Rue in the first Games is indicative of just how fraught the dynamics of caring can be: "I turn and head back to the stream, feeling somehow worried. About Rue being killed, about Rue not being killed and the two of us being left for last, about leaving Rue alone, about leaving Prim alone back home. No, Prim has my mother and Gale and a baker who has promised she won't go hungry. Rue has only me" (258). By caring about Rue, Katniss must learn to renegotiate her own hierarchy of caring, where previously her sister came first, the field appears to have become horizontal instead of vertical and it becomes a network of caring and affect rather than a straightforward ranking based on kinship or long-standing friendship. She recognises the value of friendship when she takes Rue on as an ally, a move that is both personal and political, as she reflects: "I realize, for the first time, how very lonely I've been in the arena. How comforting the presence of another human being can be" (*HG* 252).

There are problematic aspects to Katniss' growing awareness of the potential for caring outside of her immediate circle. Indeed, as she begins to care about those in the districts, even those she has never met, her sense of responsibility also increases. As she recounts those who have died to protect her or because they have joined in the rebellion she thinks: "They lost their lives because of me. I add them to my personal list of kills that began in the arena and now includes thousands" (*M* 274). This 'list of kills' is not merely a list of people, like those in the arena that she has personally killed, but expands to include those who, because they believed in her power as the Mockingjay, also rebelled against the Capitol, and lost their lives in the attempt. While this can certainly be read as a somewhat self-centred mindset, as the extension of this belief would suggest that those who rebelled and died did not act of their own volition, but rather because

they were simply following her lead, I think it can also be read as the result of extending the bonds of affect beyond those we know and toward those with whom we would claim affinity.

After visiting some of the wounded rebels in the districts, Katniss recognises just how powerful caring can be. She also realises that the strength in this bond is that it is symbiotic, the rebels care about her as well:

I begin to fully understand the lengths to which people have gone to protect me. What I mean to the rebels. My ongoing struggle against the Capitol, which has so often felt like a solitary journey, has not been undertaken alone. I have had thousands upon thousands of people from the districts at my side. I was their Mockingjay long before I accepted the role [...] Power. I have a kind of power I never knew I possessed. (*M* 90-91)

In accepting her role as the Mockingjay, Katniss has merely solidified a relationship with those in the districts that began when she took her sister Prim's place in the reaping, and demonstrated her capacity to care, and continued through her short-lived but intense relationship with Rue, and was, in the first novel, epitomised by her love for Peeta. Through these acts of affection Katniss engenders affect in those around her, and it is her capacity to care, when the Games are engineered specifically to punish those tributes and spectators who form bonds of affection, that is most subversive. Susan Shau Ming Tan asserts the "[b]y offering her body as sacrifice, and willingly making herself vulnerable to physical destruction, but on her own terms, Katniss inspires her world to take action" (63). Although I agree that the people in the districts are inspired by Katniss' willingness to protect her sister and those she cares about, regardless of the cost this might have, I would point out that Katniss does not simply agree to sacrifice herself, nor does she willingly submit to physical destruction. She may accept death (and possibly martyrdom) as a potential outcome, yet she is not merely waiting for death. Katniss cares, but she also fights back.

In her first trip to the Games, she fights hard not only to keep Peeta alive, but also to keep herself alive. After killing some of her opponents, she manages to acquire the bow and arrows one of them was carrying. As she is especially skilled with these weapons, from years of hunting, she thinks:

I really think I stand a chance of doing it now. Winning. It's not just having the arrows or outsmarting the Careers a few times, although those things help. Something happened when I was holding Rue's hand, watching the life drain out of her. Now I am determined to avenge her, to make her loss unforgettable, and I can only do that by winning and thereby making myself unforgettable. (HG 293)

As seen previously in the convergence between Katniss' desire to save Peeta and her desire to rebel against the Capitol, here too the desire to win the Games, to survive, coincides with her desire to 'avenge' Rue's death. While just thinking in terms of 'avenging' the death of a tribute in the Arena demonstrates that Katniss firmly lays the responsibility for this death on the Capitol, not on the boy who physically killed Rue, by wanting to win so that she can make both herself and Rue 'unforgettable' she seeks to destabilise the Capitol's discourse that would render the dead tributes and the people of the districts in general as a nameless, almost faceless mass who have no individual will or agency, or even personality. Again, Katniss' ability to rebel against the Capitol is firmly anchored in her belief that the people in the districts are worth caring for.

In *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (2004), Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri argue for the need to rethink the way in which we think about the people who populate the planet. They put forward the idea that it is necessary to think less about 'the people,' as a generalised group, and more about 'the multitude,' as individuals comprising the group. They argue:

The population, of course, is characterized by all kinds of differences, but *the people* reduces that diversity to a unity and makes of the population a single identity: 'the people' is one. The multitude, in contrast, is many. The multitude is composed of innumerable internal differences that can never be reduced to a unity or a single identity – different cultures, races, ethnicities, genders, and sexual orientations; different forms of labor; different ways of living; different views of the world; and different desires. The multitude is a multiplicity of all these singular differences. (xiv; italics mine)

While their project may appear to be a purely linguistic one, substituting 'the people' or even 'the masses' with 'the multitude,' Katniss' struggle to form affective bonds which celebrate difference as a site of encounter rather than dissonance speaks to their project. For Katniss, the inhabitants of the districts *are* the multitude. When she visits a hospital in District 8, in *Mockingjay*, she is able to see



more than just “the wounded,” “[b]leeding, limbless, unconscious” (*M* 102), to the individuals: “A hand reaches for me out of the haze. I cling to it for support. Attached to the hand is a young woman with an injured leg. Blood has seeped through the heavy bandages” (*M* 105). Though the victim begins as just a hand emerging from ‘the haze,’ Katniss quickly comes to perceive the person attached to it.

### 3.3.3 Gender(ing) Violence

Obviously, merely caring about the people in the districts is not enough. While Katniss’ actions have the potential to be read as disruptive, we have seen that at times this is, if not coincidence, the result of a conflation between her actions and what people want those actions to mean. Throughout the novels, Katniss’ awareness of the impact she can have builds. As Sawyer Fritz has noted, “Katniss is also aware that her actions have added meaning as a form of political rebellion due to the fraught power dynamic at work in the districts’ relationship with the Capitol; she worries afterward about the consequences of her behavior” (23). Caring is not, in and of itself, enough. Direct action is also necessary, and the repercussions these actions can have begin to dawn on Katniss. Perhaps problematically, one of the primary ways in which Katniss can act, one of the primary methods of rebellion, can be read as diametrically opposed to the act of caring: the use of violence.

Even though Katniss’ most powerful weapon in winning the support of the people in the districts who watch the Games is her capacity to protect and provide for her loved ones, however it is impossible to overlook the extent to which violence plays such a crucial role in Katniss’ caring. Sawyer Fritz genders the way in which young women engage with social systems they seek to change by arguing that “many girls’ political activism rises out of the behaviors and attitudes that they have been socially conditioned to possess as girls, particularly the roles of caregiver and nurturer” (26). In the novels, however, the social conditioning identified by Sawyer Fritz appears to be “muddled” (Gilbert-Hickey 96). Even though Katniss does ‘nurture’ Peeta when she finds him injured in the Arena, she recognises that the role of caring for him is not one she is good at, and that her sister would be better suited to the task than she is (*HG* 311). Gilbert-Hickey argues that “[g]ender,

in these texts, isn't the elephant in the room. It is, in the figure of Katniss Everdeen and the symbol of bread, muddled to the point that the masculine and feminine are temporarily indistinguishable" (96). However, Gilbert-Hickey bases this argument primarily on the fact that Katniss hunts and Peeta bakes and decorates cakes and that "the Capitol's gamemakers are of both genders, and the only storyline involving prostitution centers on Finnick Odair, a man widely held as the most beautiful person in Panem, who is prostituted by the government in exchange for the safety of his female fiancée" (100).

Although Katniss' gender roles, and those of some others in the novels, may not at first appear to be aligned with 'traditional' models, to suggest that they are examples of post-gender is somewhat hasty. Katniss' father began teaching her to hunt before he was killed, however it was not until after he died that she began to fully develop these skills. Her ability with the bow and arrow, her comfort with the dangers of the forest outside the fence of District 12, are brought about by the need to do so in order to take care of her family. She reflects that after her father's death: "all I knew was that I had lost not only a father, but a mother as well. At eleven years old, with Prim just seven, I took over as head of the family. There was no choice. I bought our food at the market and cooked it as best I could and tried to keep Prim and myself looking presentable" (32). It is not my goal to suggest that Katniss did not possess an inherent skill for hunting and gathering, as her excellence in these areas is certainly beyond the scope of mere practise, but the fact that she was pushed into these roles out of necessity is indicative of the way in which class and gender (among others) are enacted upon bodies. What is crucial, however, is to understand that Katniss adopts *both* roles out of necessity, that of the mother and the father. While she may have a greater affinity for hunting than for cooking, she shoulders the burden of performing both tasks until her mother regains her health and can help her.

As critics of Second Wave feminism have pointed out, as discussed in the introduction to this thesis, reading work in or outside the home as a gendered activity elides the way in which class and economic factors have long played a key role in whether or not a woman engages in work that contributes economically to her household (and the reverse for men). As Katniss argues, the 'choice' to engage in hunting, to move into the public sphere to buy or barter for food, to cook and to

be 'head of the household' are less the result of a post-gender society than they are the result of necessity. Further, the intersection between class and gender (and certainly race, as we saw in the previous chapter on Martha Washington, though this is less visible in Collins' novels) is made patently clear; working in the public sphere cannot be read as a sign of gender equality when it is motivated by economic requirement, as the billions of working class women in the world have clearly demonstrated. As Patricia Hill Collins has noted, "motherhood as a privatized, female 'occupation'" (53) is necessarily dependent on both class and race. This same argument holds true for Peeta's gender role; he is a baker and a cake decorator because it is (in District 12) a middle-class occupation, and one that is already held by his father and will presumably pass down to him. Reading Katniss as masculine and Peeta as feminine (because he bakes, is emotional, cries, loves her) is to reinforce a white, middle class, heteronormative, Western notion of masculinity and femininity rather than work to destabilise these notions. While I do think Katniss offers an example of adolescent heroism that is not defined by traditional femininity, she is especially disruptive in her gender representation because she does not simply enact masculinity, but rather appears to break open the binary, and suggest that gender is not an either/or position, or one that is necessary at all.

As Jessica Miller argues in "She Has No Idea. The Effect She Can Have' Katniss and the Politics of Gender:"

The stereotype of the nurturing mother tends to be associated with warmth and kindness. In contrast, Katniss's protectiveness requires actions more typically associated with masculinity. *The Hunger Games* begins and ends with two incredible physical displays of protectiveness. First, Katniss volunteers to take Prim's place in the Games, knowing it is a virtual death sentence. Second, Katniss threatens to kill herself rather than allow fellow District 12 tribute Peeta to die. (147)

Miller's analysis of the way in which Katniss embodies a 'masculine' protectiveness rather than a more 'feminine' one that aligns with motherhood is perhaps a tad simplistic. The image of the protective mother, who would physically defend her children, and who we saw in the previous chapter on Martha Washington, should not be discarded. Further, there is a resonance as well between the sacrifice Katniss is willing to make and the image of Jesus Christ, much as we saw in the

previous chapter, with the depiction of Martha Washington and the biblical imagery. That said, Katniss makes clear from the first pages of the novel through to the last pages of the final book that she has no desire to be a mother. The world, she thinks, is no place for children (*HG* 453). However, though she has little interest in biological maternity, it is possible to read Katniss' desire to protect her younger sister, Peeta, Rue, and even the people of Panem as one that is neither maternal nor paternal, but rather an extension of the ethics of caring. Curiously, the affective bonds Katniss forms can be read as provoked by her hatred of the Capitol politics and President Snow, since her affective bonds are depicted as forming in resistance to the Capitol and its prohibition of such relationships. Sara Ahmed has argued that "[t]he passion of these negative attachments to others is re-defined simultaneously as a positive attachment to the imagined subjects brought together" through the opposition (10). In a sense, the affective bonds forged in the novels are brought about through 'negative attachments,' and yet they work to reimagine the possibilities of the bond by imagining the way in which the affective community can stand against the despotic regime. Katniss can and does nurture – when Peeta is injured, when she takes Rue as an ally, when she feeds and clothes her sister – but Miller's point, and one that I agree with, is that Katniss' 'caring' is primarily asserted through action. And it is, arguably, the problematic alliance of 'action' with masculinity that Miller is identifying.

Katniss' actions are, as mentioned, often quite violent. In her role as protector/defender of herself and others, it is necessary for her to kill. While it would be easier to relegate this sort of unpalatable behaviour to necessity, and argue that Katniss only kills when she is directly defending herself or others (and in so doing align her actions with an essentialised femininity that strips women's violence of agency) the text resists such a facile reading. Although Katniss rejects violence merely for the sake of violence, her actions also suggest that the idea of woman as passive and non-violent stems from social restrictions against such behaviours. When she acquires the bow and arrow in the arena she reflects:

The weapons give me an entirely new perspective on the Games. I know I have tough opponents left to face. But I am no longer merely prey that runs and hides or takes desperate measures. If Cato broke through the trees right now, I wouldn't flee, I'd shoot. I find I'm actually anticipating the moment with pleasure. (*HG* 239)

Access to weapons, weapons that she is not only comfortable using but that she is skilled with, alter her outlook on the situation; arguably, she moves from the position of 'prey' to one of predator. In so doing, she accepts the role violence plays in this potentially more 'empowered' position, and anticipates 'with pleasure' being able to exercise this new agency. Lest it appear that Katniss is unequivocal in her attitude toward violence, it should be noted that she is often conflicted and troubled by the ramifications of her actions and those of others. At the end of the first novel, when Katniss and Peeta are the only two tributes left alive, there is no doubt, for Katniss, that she cannot use violence against Peeta, regardless of the fact that the alternative is death: "'Then you shoot me,' I say furiously, shoving the weapons back at him. 'You shoot me and go home and live with it!' And as I say it, I know death right here, right now, would be the easier of the two" (417). Although the easiest reading of this exchange suggests that Katniss is unwilling to use violence against a loved one – as violence should be used to protect those she cares about – her motivation is more complicated. She knows that: "if he dies, I'll never go home, not really. I'll spend the rest of my life in this arena, trying to think my way out" (417). Choosing not to kill him is about preserving herself as well, not just about preserving him.

As has been discussed in previous chapters, violent women are often discursively constructed so as to make their violence somehow align with traditional ideas of femininity, like that of the mother protecting her child or the woman driven mad by lust. For Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry: "This is where the 'double-transgression' of women's violence becomes clear: a violent woman has committed two crimes: her violence and defying gender stereotypes that deem her incapable of that violence" (7). Through her violence, Katniss commits the 'double-transgression' Sjoberg and Gentry identify, and yet, she resists being reinscribed within stereotypical modes. Because "women's participation in political and criminal violence *looks like* gender equality because women are engaging in a realm of global politics that was previously reserved for male participation" (Sjoberg and Gentry 17), Katniss cannot be read as defying gender norms outright merely by being able to wield a bow and arrow to great effect.

When Katniss joins the rebels in District 13, her agency and ability to act are severely tested. For Sawyer Fritz, "[a]s Katniss takes the nation's spotlight as the

Mockingjay, the symbol and mouthpiece of the rebellion, she begins to evolve from a girl who is merely defiant into a powerful agent of political change. At this point in her story, Katniss wants nothing more than to confront and kill her country's terrifying dictator, President Snow" (23). Curiously, what can be read as becoming 'a powerful agent of political change' is here undermined by the recognition that what Alma Coin, the leader of District 13 and the rebellion, does is turn Katniss into a 'symbol and mouthpiece.' Plutarch emphasises this when Katniss asks why she was rescued instead of Peeta:

'We had to save you because you're the Mockingjay, Katniss,' says Plutarch. 'While you live, the revolution lives.'  
The bird, the pin, the song, the berries, the watch, the cracker, the dress that burst into flames. I am the Mockingjay. The one that survived despite the Capitol's plans. The symbol of the rebellion. (CF 386)

The items Katniss lists are all objects that take on the symbolic function that culminates in Katniss' embodiment as the Mockingjay. Peeta, however, is quick to identify the way in which Coin and her team of rebels are co-opting the symbol for their own ends. On a televised interview with him while he is held prisoner, he speaks to her through the camera to say:

Don't be a fool, Katniss. Think for yourself. They've turned you into a weapon that could be instrumental in the destruction of humanity. If you've got any real influence, use it to put the brakes on this thing. Use it to stop the war before it's too late. Ask yourself, do you really trust the people you're working with? Do you really know what's going on? And if you don't ... find out. (M 113)

The relationship between Katniss and violence is made overt here as Peeta warns her that she has been turned 'into a weapon' that could destroy 'humanity.' When Katniss acts on her own impulses, utilises violence as a tool and yet does not become the tool, she has potential as an agent of change: "Ultimately, Katniss becomes a fully autonomous individual when she stops merely responding to her circumstances and begins making choices of her own accord" (Green-Barteet 42). Even though she does not always 'know what's going on' and how those in positions of power are manipulating and using her, here Peeta suggests that if she does not 'think for [her]self' then rather than saving people she will doom them to death.

Certainly Katniss' actions do not always have the desired results, even when she acts out of her own sense of what is right. When she disobeys orders and sets off to assassinate Snow without Coin's approval, she comes to view her plan as "a complete disaster" (M 324). The loss of life of her fellow soldiers, that she accepts as her fault because they "lost their lives defending [her] on a mission[she] fabricated" (323), makes it difficult to accept her decision to follow her own mission, especially considering that shortly thereafter the rebels take the Capitol while Katniss can only look on.

That Katniss should be a spectator to the ending of the war rather than a participant in it is rather prescient. Even though she will be engaged to fire "the last shot of the war" (M 366), her final arrow is meant to be only symbolic. In a twist that demonstrates the extent to which Katniss, at the end of the third novel, finally rejects the role of symbol and image, and seeks instead to be an active agent on her own terms, she does not kill President Snow with her arrow (though he dies in the *mêlée* that ensues). Instead, she uses her final shot to kill Alma Coin, the new president of Panem. Her action is 'treasonous' and perhaps unexpected as she has clearly been presented as fighting alongside the rebels, and would logically support her rebel leader. And yet, this final display of violence can be read as a means of radically breaking with the old regime. As the similarities between Snow and Coin become increasingly clear – not only between the way in which they use Katniss and manipulate her image but also in the way in which they both seek power for their own ends – Katniss uses her final shot as a means of achieving the goal she had set out for herself: to overthrow the despotic government in the hopes that something new would arise.

The ending of the trilogy, however, is somewhat disappointing for readers hoping to catch a glimpse of what, exactly, that something 'new' would look like. The epilogue to *Mockingjay* elides the greater social changes that Katniss and the rebels fought so hard for, and shows only that Katniss and Peeta have settled into the heteronormative family structure and have two children. For Katherine R. Broad in "'The Dandelion in the Spring:' Utopia as Romance in Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* Trilogy," this ending is proof of the importance of the romance narrative to Collins' work. Rather than seeing Katniss as a heroic figure, she sees her as a much more passive protagonist who is motivated by romantic love rather

than any need to make structural changes to her society. Broad states that “[r]eaders are as much on their seats asking ‘Peeta or Gale?’ as they are wondering how the trio will outrun, outsmart, and outlast the enemy at their heels” (118). She argues that especially for the girls and young women reading the novels, the question of *who* Katniss will ‘end up with’ far outweighs questions regarding the impact of her actions on the social sphere. Further, she suggests that “each boy represents a different path out of dystopia, making the outcome of the romantic choice nothing less than what the future society will be” (Broad 118). As such, the ‘future society’ is one in which Katniss is ‘free’ to form a family with Peeta.

The romance plot that was so crucial to Katniss’ and Peeta’s survival in the Games is read by Broad as cementing “Katniss’s cause to the revolution at the same time that it renders her a docile subject manipulated by both sides of the war” (122). Broad’s arguments are difficult to contest. Indeed, it would seem that Katniss does not even ‘choose’ her partner in the end, but rather “although Peeta is meant to represent the better option, the choice of suitor is one that Katniss is never allowed to make; she simply winds up with the one who pursues her back to the bombed out District 12 at the end of the war” (Broad 124). And yet, this rather passive mode of selecting her eventual partner does seem to undermine somewhat the idea of romantic love, or at least suggests that the Prince Charming model is flawed, and love has as much to do with luck and compatibility than with idealised notions of love. Collins gestures toward this in *Mockingjay* when, thinking that Katniss is asleep, Peeta and Gale discuss the possibility they both have of ‘winning her’ in the end:

‘I think it’s unlikely all three of us will be alive at the end of the war. And if we are, I guess it’s Katniss’s problem. Who to choose’ [...] ‘Yeah.’ I hear Peeta’s handcuffs slide down the support as he settles in. ‘I wonder how she’ll make up her mind.’ ‘Oh, that I do know.’ I can just catch Gale’s last words through the layer of fur. ‘Katniss will pick whoever she thinks she can’t survive without.’ (329)

Katniss’ reaction to this overheard conversation, which she reads as depicting her as “cold and calculating” (330) is, not surprisingly, hurt and anger and she decides that “the choice would be simple. I can survive just fine without either of them” (330).



Broad argues that Katniss' 'choice' is another example of the passivity she demonstrates throughout the novel, arguing that "Gale is the revolutionary figure, the one who rails against the Capitol, seeks to initiate change, and actually does things besides get injured and pine for Katniss" (120). Her scything assessment of Peeta, that he simply 'gets injured and pines for Katniss,' would seem to negate the very real way in which he protects her and motivates her to act out her desire for change. It also suggests a very patriarchal view of masculinity as active, and that there is more value in 'railing against the Capitol' than in giving bread to a hungry girl or being able to articulate that murdering "innocent people [...] costs everything you are" (*M* 23).<sup>17</sup>

Collins' novels, in fact, are not especially forgiving of those who embody strict normative genders. Gale, the "classic male romantic hero, [...] is tall, dark, and handsome. He's slightly mysterious, protective, and prone to displays of temper and violence. His worldview is black and white and leads to harsh judgment of wrongdoers. Gale fits the stereotype of rugged masculinity" (Miler 155). Even though he is given a "fancy job" in District 2 after the war (*M* 384), he disappears from the narrative, and all Katniss can feel is "relief" (*M* 384), so that in the end, he does not 'win' the heroine, but is abandoned by her.<sup>18</sup> While, as previously argued, there is little to suggest that Collins' trilogy is asserting a 'post-gender' viewpoint, it is certainly not rewarding those who stick to contemporary gender norms.

Prim, Katniss younger sister and "the only person in the world [she is] certain [she] love[s]" (*HG* 11), is described by Miller as "being fragile, being terrified by the woods, and viewing adventures as ordeals. She is said to have a knack for traditionally feminine pursuits like cooking and flower arranging. Especially capable of ministering to the sick, Prim exhibits a type of strength that's

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<sup>17</sup> Peeta and Katniss were merely classmates before the reaping that sent them both to the Hunger Games, but they had one meaningful exchange prior. After her father died and her family were starving, Peeta risked being beaten by his mother in order to give Katniss a couple loaves of bread. She never formally thanked him, but it was his kindness that "gave [her] hope" (*HG* 39). While neither acknowledged his act until the Games themselves, Katniss views it as that which enabled her to figure out how to survive.

<sup>18</sup> While neither Gale nor Katniss can be sure, there is evidence to suggest that one of the bombs Gale designed was used in the attack that killed Katniss' sister. That Gale follows "the same rule book President Snow used" (*M* 186) when he designs weapons aligns him too closely with the oppressive regime for Katniss to be fully comfortable with him after the war.

more acceptable for women in our culture” (Miller 150). And yet, Prim’s more ‘acceptable’ femininity does not save her from being horrifically murdered at the end of the series as she tends to wounded children in the Capitol (*M* 347). Katniss’ mother is depicted as possessing many of the same traditionally feminine qualities as Prim; although she survives the end of the trilogy her relationship with Katniss is still distant. Much of the tension between the protagonist and her mother arises from Katniss’ perception of her mother’s inability to ‘care’ for her children after the death of her husband. After his death she was sunk in depression and became a “woman who sat by, blank and unreachable, while her children turned to skin and bones” (*HG* 10), while eleven year old Katniss fought to feed and clothe herself and her sister. Though the relationship between mother and daughter improves throughout the trilogy, and though she does love her mother, she notes in the first novel that “I didn’t trust her. And some small gnarled place inside me hated her for her weakness, for her neglect, for the months she had put us through. Prim forgave her, but I had taken a step back from my mother, put up a wall to protect myself from needing her, and nothing was ever the same between us again (*HG* 64). Katniss’ ‘hatred’ is rooted in rejection of her mother’s perceived ‘weakness’ and ‘neglect,’ as they forced Katniss to step into the role, as previously mentioned, of both mother and father of the family at a very young age. Indeed, it is her mother’s inability to take action that Katniss finds most detestable; her mother’s ‘passivity’ marks her out as ‘feminine.’ Indeed, Katniss’ mother portrays one of the more harmful tropes of traditional femininity, that of the woman who is incapable of surviving the loss of her husband. At the end of the third novel Katniss and her mother are, if not reconciled, at least joined in their mourning of Prim: “I open the letter Haymitch gave me from my mother, dial the phone number and weep with her as well” (*M* 451). If those who represent ‘traditional’ gender norms are not rewarded in the novels, Katniss’ mother is no exception: she has lost her youngest daughter and is separated from Katniss after she moves to a different district to work in a hospital so she does not have to return to District 12 (*M* 380).

And yet, Broad is not wrong in suggesting that the ending of the trilogy leaves something to be desired. The assertion that “[i]f the upshot of overthrowing a dystopian regime is being able to settle down and have kids, then whatever happens in the rest of the country will not involve Katniss” (Broad 125) seems

rather dismissive of the role the heroine plays in overthrowing the dystopic regime. Broad posits that the reason Katniss is marginalised at the end (she is sent back to the poorest and smallest district and given no official or even unofficial role) is due to the social structures surrounding rebellious young women in contemporary novels in general: “Ultimately, the final image of complacent adulthood with husband and children suggests that Katniss’s instances of rebellion are permissible for girls, not women” (126). In other words, rebellion and resistance are attributes of the young protagonist (as they are frequently considered attributes of adolescence), but once this period is over, the now young woman will return to a heteronormative and submissive position. Certainly, this trope can be considered as a variation on those seen in previous chapters, wherein rebellion ends upon marriage or is cut short by being literally marginalised to outer space. Despite this rather pessimistic reading of the ending of the trilogy, there also appear to be valid reasons why Katniss would choose to abandon the public sphere in favour of the private. After she assassinates Coin, she is detained in the room that housed her during her time in the Capitol, when she was being prepared as a tribute. When she considers that perhaps it is a sign that she will once again be converted into the symbol of something (someone else’s power) she decides:

I won’t do it. If I can’t kill myself in this room, I will take the first opportunity outside of it to finish the job. They can fatten me up. They can give me a full body polish, dress me up, and make me beautiful again. They can design weapons that come to life in my hands, but they will never again brainwash me into the necessity of using them. I no longer feel any allegiance to these monsters called human beings, despise being one myself. (*M* 377)

In this passage Katniss clearly demonstrates that, whether or not society has changed *she has*. She now clearly rejects the possibility of violence as a tool, and rejects the beautifying regime that somehow made the violence if not more subtle then certainly more palatable. Further, she clearly troubles the forced dichotomy between monsters and humans (as seen with the posthumans in Chapter 1), as she identifies the humans *as* the monsters.

In his discussion of the heroic body, Bruns asserts that “[b]ecoming human means the transformation of flesh into the body of strength, the heroic body that is

impervious to whatever is not itself, above all impervious to suffering and (ignominious) death, including the experience of desire, hunger, pain, and fear; impervious, moreover, to the gaze of the other, whether human or animal" (707). Arguably, Katniss is rejecting the human and the heroic, as she is certainly not 'impervious to suffering' nor to those around her. For Broad, "[t]he dystopian society is overwhelmingly against the nuclear family, the social unit the novels will come to idealize as the antithesis to all the dystopia represents" (120), and so by accepting Peeta and his desire for the nuclear family, she is, in a way, continuing to resist the dystopic model and also embracing the permeable, affected, and affecting body.

Despite reservations about the way in which Suzanne Collins' trilogy ends by reinscribing Katniss within a heteronormative relationship that appears to curtail her potential as an agent of resistance and rebellion, the novels do resist representing the action heroine as a monolithic category of neoliberal self-fashioning. Although the novels are rather conservative in their representations of race and sexuality, Collins does use the dystopic mode to critique the ways in which the postfeminist heroine, as an object of late capitalist consumer culture, has come to be figured as an agent of fierce individualism. Rather, Katniss' narrative arc centres around her resistance to the discourse of exceptionalism and the focuses on her attempts to build and defend her community and foment bonds of caring that break the competitive bodies of the spectacle and entertainment privileged by the Capitol.



**Conclusions.**

**Postfeminist Others: The Super Woman and The  
Pernicious Effects of The Heroic Model**



Some years ago, I came across Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's book *Well-Behaved Women Seldom Make History* (2004). As a historian, Ulrich is primarily concerned with the way in which women and their contributions to history are so often elided in dominant discourse. Her text works to recover some of these missing *herstories*, to demonstrate both that women not only existed and participated in society and culture, but also that their contributions helped shape their respective societies. Admittedly, though I value the feminist project of re-writing women into our discourses and social narratives, what most fascinates me (and many others, as the appearance of the phrase on everything from coffee mugs to t-shirts attests) about Ulrich's text is the title. How could it not? For someone whose research is centred on the exceptional woman, the action heroine, it strikes me as both a self-evident proclamation, but also one that hides a multitude of subtleties. To what extent does the heroine 'mis-behave?' Is the pleasure I experience when reading about her, writing about her, or watching her exploits on screen a pleasure derived from vicariously experiencing the way in which she pushes the boundaries of what is socially acceptable? Is it the pleasure of identifying "imaginatively (and temporarily) with complexly rendered, fictionalized 'others'" (Lyshaug 95) who are strong, agentic, and capable of kicking-butt? What I hope to have demonstrated throughout the analysis of Elizabeth Bennet, Jane Slayre, the Dashwood, Martha Washington, and Katniss Everdeen is that there is a complex negotiation at work between the heroine's capacity to use her body and brains to overcome her enemies, and a narrative discourse that struggles to contain her actions within the bounds of 'acceptable' femininity. I worry that it is precisely the fact that her rebellion is converted into a mechanism for postfeminist desirability what makes her most appealing. In short, her misbehaviour is just enough to experience the thrill of pushing the boundaries, but not enough to actually push her out of the sphere of representation.

This constraint on heroic women is in line with contemporary discourses around feminism and postfeminism. These narratives about feminism are articulated by Jenny Coleman as follows:

we have an interesting development in feminism – the mainstream media now gives endorsement to a 'new feminism' which is basically about individual women and free choice. The old feminism, the get-a-



life brigade who still harp on about women's oppression and men's dominance, even though women are ruling the country, are still stereotyped and denigrated. The new feminism seems largely silent on issues that have absorbed the old feminism for decades; issues such as why, when we have had an Equal Pay Act since 1972, women still only get around 83-85% of men's average wage in the same occupations, or why we still have not achieved a basic equality (assuming that equality means 50-50) of representation in parliament, on governing bodies and advisory boards, and the like. Presumably the gender pay gap and lack of equality in political representation are women's choice? (4)

I take the liberty of citing Coleman at length here because her text quite cogently takes into account the competing discourses and the way in which the mainstream media is so instrumental in determining how the narrative is represented. Further, Coleman quite aptly articulates the extent to which what she calls 'new feminism' and what I call postfeminism, is articulated around the individual as agent, and the social (the wage gap, political representation) is sacrificed to an idea of 'choice' that directly serves neo-liberal and late-capitalist interests.

In *The Sadiean Woman* (1978), Angela Carter argues that: "A free woman in an unfree society will be a monster. Her freedom will be a condition of personal privilege that deprives those on which she exercises it of their own freedom. The most extreme kind of this deprivation is murder. These women murder" (27). The postfeminist heroine, as we have seen, is decidedly *not* monstrous. Rather than 'murder,' her violence is coded as necessary for the protection of others, as a means of defending others' freedoms within social bounds, and not as a means of forwarding the heroine's personal agenda. Further, as she is positioned in juxtaposition to the monstrous, as defending the human in the face of the posthuman, the postfeminist action heroine is decidedly 'unfree.' The way in which the heroine is, at the end of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, *Jane Slayre*, *Sense and Sensibility and Sea Monsters*, and *Martha Washington*, re-inscribed into the social body condones her violence, and renders her difference non-threatening. Indeed, the way in which she is positioned in relation to the posthuman Other is telling. As Donna Haraway has noted, "[u]nlike the hopes of Frankenstein's monster, the cyborg does not expect its father to save it through a restoration of the garden; that is, through the fabrication of a heterosexual mate, through its completion in a finished whole, a city and cosmos" (151). The heroines discussed in the first two

chapters patently fight against the potential for cyborgian change (though the first chapter does not consider the cyborg as such, the principles can be extrapolated). The posthuman is mobilised in the first two chapters of this thesis as the enemy of the heroines, as what must be defeated in order to restore order. The order that she looks to restore, however, is one that is highly invested in the patriarchal system. Rejecting the posthuman, whether as revenant or as cyborg, comes to represent the rejection of feminist potentiality. Chapter 3 of this thesis is telling, as the heroine, Katniss Everdeen, through the process of becoming-animal, embraces the possibility of the posthuman condition, and works to directly destabilise her present. She succeeds in implementing the *conditions* for an alternative society even though, as readers, we never learn what this society looks like. While the postfeminist heroine is an articulation of neoliberal demands and Humanist discourses, the Third Wave heroine can arguably be figured as sharing affinities with the posthuman and looks to subvert patriarchal patterns for being.

What emerges from considering the three types of action heroines interrogated in this thesis is the clear idea that postfeminist rhetoric is instrumental in discursively constructing the limits and reaches of these potentially agentic characters. The re-writings of Austen and Brontë's texts demonstrate the enormous power of the heteronormative desire machine at work in contemporary Western society. By considering the way in which the postfeminist Gothic inscribes Second Wave feminism as a haunting spectre that needs to be slain for the heroine to enact her 'choice' to embrace the domestic sphere and heterosexual matrimony it becomes clear that the heroine is fighting more than just the monsters in the texts. These monsters – zombies, vampires, the she-wolf, and the sea monsters – are liminal figures that cross boundaries between the human and the posthuman, between the human and the animal, between the self and the Other. Elizabeth Bennet, Jane Slayre, and the Dashwood sisters are constructed as a bodies-in-control, disciplined and intact, in direct contrast to the contagious monsters they battle.

Martha Washington, in the subsequent chapter, is engaged in a similar battle, one that poses questions surrounding the goal of the heroine and the world she is fighting for. As she confronts the cyborg posthuman, Washington also confronts questions about the role of the comic book heroine in articulating the extent to

which heroism is codified within a discourse which privileges the maintenance of the *status quo*, in which the patriarchal order is defended at all costs, and the potential for change is negated. As Washington's body confronts the cyborg, it becomes clear that what the heroine is defending is the Humanist notion of materiality and embodiment which clearly delineates between the self and the Other, and rejects the potential for alternative materialities.

In Chapter 3, Katniss Everdeen opens up the potential for resistance toward materialities, patriarchally mobilised violence, and the fierce individualism so crucial to the neoliberal project. Through a keen critique of the society of the spectacle, Collins' novels suggest that affinities and affect are vital strategies for articulating new ways of being. As Katniss comes to care, she also comes to disintegrate the boundaries between bodies, and through becoming-animal, embraces the Mockingjay and is instrumental in the resistance movement. As Bruns has articulated, from a posthuman view, "supposing there to be only one such thing, how we are with respect to animals is open not only to the invention of new concepts but also, [...] to new ways to be, not just for ourselves but for animals as well" (Bruns 714). The 'new ways to be,' extend through Katniss' own embodiment of the Mockingjay to the potential reconfigurations of power and society that will supposedly emerge at the end of the rebellion.

Lorna Hardwick argues that the Amazon is a figure of dissent, evolved from the refusal to submit to the typical role of women captured by an invading army. There are several parallels to be drawn between the way in which the Amazon warrior is present within contemporary discourse, and the way in which the Third Wave heroine is made manifest. In representations of the Amazon, the only way to reject the traditional position and forge something new is by adopting the masculine warrior role. And so the Amazons are, according to Hardwick, the "image of a war-like society of women, living on the borders of the known world" (14). It is their dual position as war-like and outsiders which enables representations of their autonomy. I turn to the Amazon warrior for two reasons: the first is that she is ubiquitously present as traces and references for women's heroism. The second, and most imperative, is that the negotiation of representation and legibility of the figure of the Amazon is played out, albeit in a

different way, in the narrative of the (post)feminist heroine for whom negotiations of acceptable femininity and violence are crucial to her legibility.

Ben Barootes argues that “[t]he Amazons, a matriarchal society comprised of strong, proud warrior women, are set up as a foil to Hellenic society. The idea being that the further one goes from the centre, the stranger (more unnatural, more monstrous) all things become” (191). And it is this very monstrousness that gives them the power to disrupt. A similar reflection is made by Joan DeJean in her analysis of the ‘Strong Woman’ in early modern France. The Amazon, centuries later, is still “the ‘equal’ of male military heroes” (124), though she is also, at times, merely “male fantasies of female militarism” (121). The tension between the portrayal of the Amazon as ‘equal’ or ‘fantasy’ is important as it highlights the difficulty in recognizing the Amazon as inherently violent. Instead she is either a fantasy of the male imagination “and their violence is never believable enough to be taken seriously” (De Jean 121), or she is equal to man, and therefore her “authority is founded on her ability to match her fellow soldiers’ capacity for violence” (De Jean 122). Arguably the Amazon’s authority is neutralized in both scenarios. As a fantasy or as an equal the Amazon is dependent upon the male imaginary to set the terms of her definition.

They are likened to men in their capacity for violence and warfare because, as Barootes further argues, “if the other were entirely divorced from that to which it is opposed – monster from ‘normal’ for instance – it could not be discussed and analysed” (191). Barootes’ argument brings us back to the question of legibility, and also to the question of representability: I would argue that the heroines analysed in this thesis are legible as such precisely because they do not push the boundaries too far (including Katniss Everdeen, though she certainly pushes farther than the others). That is, their heroism, their bodies, their violence are all recognisable as characteristics of the heroine because they conform to, or at least do not test too strenuously, the notions of postfeminist agency.

This short detour to consider the Amazon serves as a means of reflecting on the way in which the discourse surrounding the action heroine’s violence is not restricted to the contemporary moment. Rather, as this thesis has demonstrated, the action heroine’s violence is reinscribed within a narrow field of patriarchal representation. As I have argued throughout Chapter 1, the heroine’s violence is

mobilised as a characteristic of her heteronormative desirability. The violent body does not open up the possibility for alternative constellations of corporeality, rather it is rigidly re-contained by the inevitable marriage plot at the end of the novels discussed – *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, *Sense and Sensibility and Sea Monsters*, and *Jane Slayre*. As an expression of her ability to attract a man, the violence she enacts is subordinated to her eventual husband, and the posthumans she fights become metaphors for the Second Wave feminist thinking she works to slay at every turn.

The textual analysis undertaken in Chapter 2 considers how the representation of the heroic female and her violence is renegotiated both via the conventions of the comic book form and by considering the way in which the racialised female body is discursively constructed. The overt hyper-sexualisation of women's bodies that predominates within the super hero genre serves as a means of containing the potential of the heroine's action. Martha Washington, however, defies the codification of her violence as a direct expression of a hyper sexuality. As a heterosexual, Black woman of few economic means, however, her actions and violence are reinscribed within a discourse which links women's violence to essentialised female characteristics and to racist tropes. Washinton is configured not as the desirable heroine of the first chapter, but as the 'Mammy' of the nation, who fights for the protection of her (nominal) white children.

The violent bodies of Elizabeth Bennet, Jane Slayre, and the Dashwood sisters offer little in terms of resistance to dominant patriarchal models for heroic women. Bound up as they are within narratives which seek to re-appropriate their violence either as a condition of heteronormative desirability or as an essentialised and racialised femininity, Chapter 3 looks at a more resistant violent body. Katniss Everdeen's violence is reframed throughout the novel, so that it is mobilised not on behalf of the patriarchal system but rather against it. Lest this should be read as merely a turning of the tables, it is worth keeping in mind that she is not the model for the individualistic heroine seen in the previous chapters. Rather, *The Hunger Games* novels work to destabilise the romance narrative, and undermine as much as possible the heteronormative imperative so frequently bound to the heroic female character. Katniss Everdeen offers a contrast to the heroines we saw in the previous chapters, Elizabeth Bennet, Jane Slayre, the Dashwoods, and Martha

Washington, as she actively engages in attempts to effect lasting systemic changes, rather than concentrating on discrete individual action. Even so, and perhaps most strikingly in Katniss' narrative, the tension between the desire to focus on "personal concern[s] for the female teenager," (such as rescuing and protecting her family) "rather than a more widespread social or political concern" is made paramount (Berridge 482), though is questioned and problematised, and Katniss does come to see the value in acting on behalf of more than just those closest to her.

In the introduction to this thesis I cited *Time* magazine's 1998 cover that asked "Is Feminism Dead?" Given that the question was posed almost fifteen years ago, I thought it appropriate to look into the relationship between *Time* and feminism in the contemporary moment. It is not that I grant *Time* any special authority on understanding feminism or feminists, but given its wide, non-specialised readership as a news magazine, it speaks to (when it is not creating) public opinion.<sup>1</sup> In November 2014, the magazine conducted a poll asking: "Which Word Should Be Banned in 2015?" Although it later apologised for the poor 'execution of the poll,' one of the words on the list was 'feminism' (*Time* 2014). The good news, then, is that feminism is most decidedly not dead if the logic that a movement, and the word that represents it, could arguably be banned means that it must certainly be still 'alive.'

I recognise that the way in which *Time* bandies about the word feminism is little more than anecdotal, and yet from proclaiming it is dead to, fifteen years later, wondering if it should be banned speaks to what Maria Stern and Marysia Zalewski identify as 'feminist fatigue' (2009), "the idea that feminism has performatively failed" and that there is an "attached weariness inflecting feminist narratives" (612). Going back to what Jenny Coleman sees as the characterisation of non-popular feminists as "old feminism, the get-a-life brigade" (4), it becomes clear that feminism has a 'public relations problem.' Annadís G. Rúdólfsdóttir and Rachel Jolliffe (2008) argue that even if young women "expressed feminist ideals

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<sup>1</sup> *Jezebel*, *Bust*, even *Ms.* magazine all engage a much more critical feminist perspective, and yet for this very reason I choose not to cite their various engagements with feminism and society – given that their target audience is one already sensitised to intersectional politics. *Time* is the most widely read news magazine in the United States "State of the Media" (2013). For a breakdown of their readership demographic see "Time Media Kit" (2015).

and values, they were reluctant to label themselves as feminists” (269). This should not be surprising, given that “[w]omen do not normally get acquainted with feminism by reading feminist manifestos; rather they see glimpses of it in popular culture” (Rúðólfsdóttir and Jolliffe 268). Though none of the texts I have discussed in this thesis use the word feminist (none of the protagonists identify as such, nor do they explicitly dis-identify; the question is quite simply never raised), I do think that it is necessary to engage in critical feminist readings of these texts, in order to elucidate the way in which postfeminist discourse and the heroine it produces function. Further, by eliding the word ‘feminist,’ I think the texts work at reinforcing a postfeminist narrative that sees the work of feminism as complete; after all, they offer representations of strong young women, women who are physically and intellectually strong and engaged in the public sphere. That the question of gender equality is never raised can be read as indicative of a discourse that assumes that it is no longer an issue.

Admittedly, I often find postfeminist representations of heroic women deeply disconcerting. While I often do pleasurably consume their narratives, I engage equally (also pleasurably) in a critique of the way in which their presence in popular culture is dominated by a discursive construction that elides so many of my Third Wave feminist concerns. To this end, I am guilty of what Joanne Hollows calls ‘recruitism’, or the tendency in “feminist cultural politics [...] to ‘make-over’ both ‘the popular’ and ‘the ordinary woman’” (Hollows 203). There is a decidedly pessimistic sense of frustration with the heroines discussed in Chapter 1 ‘Spectres of Feminism: Postfeminism and the Zombie Apocalypse’ and less acute in Chapter 2 ‘Violent Heroines, Comic Books, and Systemic Violence’ of this thesis that gives way to a tentative optimism in Chapter 3 ‘Katniss Everdeen and *The Hunger Games*: Dystopia and Resistance to Neoliberal Demands.’

Primarily, this cynicism has to do with what Angela E. Hubler identifies in “Beyond the Image: Adolescent Girls, Reading, and Social Reality” as the difference between representations of individual oppression and of systemic oppression and how the girl heroine confronts these. In her analysis of mass-market fiction for girls she notes that:

Compared to the much greater transformation of society required by other analyses of women’s oppression, the changes suggested in

novels like those [she analyses] here are minimal and relatively easy to achieve. While girls may be inspired by such novels, they may also be offered a false sense of optimism about how oppression might be overcome. Certainly, [the novels discussed in her analysis] suggest that if girls just prove themselves to be as competent as boys, they will be treated as equals. (Hubler 2)

The postfeminist heroine falls into some of the same discursive pitfalls as those identified by Hubler: the problems faced are immediate and not confronted in such a way that would offer systemic changes, the heroine must be ‘as competent’ (or more so) than their male counterpart, and thus the burden is on the heroine to adopt capabilities that will ensure her ‘equality.’ Hubler is critical of “the belief that by providing proper role models, girls can be shaped as strong, assertive, courageous, independent individuals, and in this way they will be able to achieve equality. But this implies that sexism persists because women individually have not been strong enough in the past” (4). Although the heroine may offer a certain type of ‘role model,’ I agree with Hubler’s assertion that the exceptional status that marks her out as ‘heroic’ carries with it the implication that non heroic women ‘have not been strong enough.’ Furthermore, and most pernicious, there is no re-evaluation of the characteristics that belong to the successful heroine: she is measured against ‘the boys,’ and must adopt their characteristics without ceasing to be one of ‘the girls.’ This is not to say that I think young women should not strive to be ‘strong, assertive, courageous, independent individuals’ but rather that the list of traits generally associated with (white, heteronormative, middle-class, able-bodied heroic) masculinity become the principal traits by which equality is measured.

Though Hubler focusses on fiction for young girls, there is a disturbing replication of these patterns of exceptionality for women in other genres. As Alex Link has noted in an analysis of the Supergirl comic book, “Supergirl’s shared secret with readers is not the specific identity of her mundane alter ego – as with readers who know Superman’s secret identity – but that any mundane girl might be more powerful than she seems” (1179). Link’s comment on Supergirl appears to turn on its head the notion that only the exceptional woman can be the heroine, by arguing that even those who appear to be unexceptional or mundane could be hiding a powerful secret identity. And yet



the message remains the same: equality, even the desire to achieve it, can only emerge from the exceptional body.

In “Introduction: Futures of Feminism” (2008), Ivana Milojevic articulates a theory of the functioning of patriarchy:

Like capitalism, colonialism and racism, patriarchy has shown to be incredibly resilient system of organising human affairs, equally being able to renew, transform and quickly respond to the changing conditions that may undermine some of its basic rationales for being. This patriarchy – a widespread social system of gender dominance – has been very successfully doing, since it first came into being. One of the ways it has exercised power is through discrediting of women’s and feminist priorities and preferred futures – by, for example, labelling these visions ‘utopian’, irrelevant, bound to fail, naïve, unrealistic or even ‘outdated.’ (315)

Even though Milojevic draws similarities between capitalism, colonialism, racism, and patriarchy, where I would argue that they are intersectional and mutually supporting systems, the thrust of the argument is clear: the flexibility of patriarchy, and the ‘discrediting’ rhetoric it generates must be taken into account when discussing feminism’s potentials. As we have seen, the postfeminist heroine, and postfeminist discourse in general, is a direct result of patriarchy’s adaptability and ability to ‘respond to the changing conditions’ in society. The woman that emerges does offer an image of strong, intelligent, agentic, and courageous female heroism, and yet these qualities are contained by discourses that link them to essential femininity, heteronormative romance narratives, or the individuality/exceptionality of neoliberal discourse.

The heroines considered in this thesis are, obviously, fictional representations. That said, the trope of the Super Woman is one that has plagued anti-feminist backlash discourse since the 1980s. This ‘Super Woman’ has been easily recognizable since “the 1980s, as more and more middle-class women entered the public sphere, [and] the question of work-family conflict entered the feminist discussion” (Rottenberg 147); she bridges the public and the private realms and is ‘successful’ in both. Catherine Rottenberg notes: “As many in the X and Y generations seem intuitively to know, ‘having it all’ for upwardly mobile women has meant – quite mundanely – pursuing a meaningful career and cultivating an intimate family life” (145). This narrative, she argues, has come to

have a new interpretation in the new millennium, one that requires not only having both a public and private life, but that now focusses on 'balance' as a key to happiness. For Rottenberg there is "a reorienting of the liberal feminist discursive field away from notions of freedom, equal rights, and social justice and toward the importance of well-roundedness and well-being" (147). What Rottenberg is gesturing towards is the way in which postfeminist rhetoric has worked its way into the conversation on the 'Super Woman.' The image of the mother who works outside the home is highly contested, among other reasons for the way in which it is largely a middle-class fantasy that there is even a 'choice' involved for the majority of women. And yet, rather than address the structural and systematic reforms necessary for private sphere work to be valued as a contribution to society (and de-feminised), 'well-being' as Rottenberg argues, has come to substitute for social equality: "Consumption (and its cousin, leisure) is central to postfeminism as a strategy and to some degree its connection with liberal feminism's tenet of personal choice" (Harzewski 155).

The repetition of the neoliberal, individuality model is clear: the answer to a social structure which places the burden of the private sphere primarily on the shoulders of women is to privilege individual happiness. Lazar has noted that in a social model in which "the public sphere of work presents challenges to modern women in a postfeminist era, the solution resides not in re-structuring work-life balance, but in temporary pampering relief" (377). What becomes evident is that the 'Super Woman' who can effectively negotiate her public and private life can only do so if she occupies a social class that enables this – more often than not by relying on the labour of other women instead of demanding men to do their due share. Admittedly, the myth of the 'Super Woman' and 'doing it all' is impossible "except for the few women who have superhuman powers or enough money to buy full-time substitutes – nannies and housekeepers, tutors and psychotherapists" (151). Further, as men's role within the household continues to be predominantly framed in terms of 'helping' with the tasks generally required to maintain a household and those who live within it, when he is required to participate at all, the discussion is frequently derailed. Housework is culturally devalued, and suggesting that 'good' men 'help' around the house continues to place the onus on women to carry the burden, and liberates men from having to

take equal responsibility for unremunerated tasks performed in the private sphere (or presents them as exceptional should they take equal responsibility).

As the diminishing middle class draws attention to the fact that the 'Super Woman,' that is, the woman who works both in and outside the home, is the norm due to economic necessity, postfeminism again shifts the terrain of the debate. Whitney argues that in the postfeminist moment:

the framing of choice with regards to occupation is undergoing a significant shift in meaning. Being able to choose your vocation, while still important, is being nudged aside in favor of the idea that a choice between career and family is inevitable. This argument is certainly not new, but it is distinctly post-feminist in its rhetorical framing, which contends that feminism tried and failed to create a world in which women could 'have it all.' Subsequently, the post-feminist world must regroup, and give renewed emphasis to a revived domestic sphere. (Whitney np)

Feminism's 'failure' to enable women to 'have it all' is based on the misconception that the goal of the women's movement was and is a reformist endeavour to "end male supremacy" (Willis 91). Rather, as Ellen Willis has noted, there exists a strong current of radical feminism that sees "capitalism as the source of women's oppression" (93). One of the revenants that continues to haunt feminist discourse, and which is exemplified through the figure of the action heroine who fights the posthuman other, is the integration of the heroine into the domestic sphere as a 'choice' or reward for excelling in the public sphere.

Embracing the image of the 'domestic goddess' is a tool within postfeminist rhetoric to discredit Second Wave articulations of femininity, specifically the notion that "femininity is the embodiment of subordination" (Schippers and Grayson Sapp 29). Worth keeping in mind, however, is the possibility identified by Third Wave feminist theorists and activists that "femininity is a set of cultural or social ideals concerning what a girl or woman should be. Femininity is not so much imposed *on* women or embodied *by* women as a result of their subordination, but instead, available to and can be embodied by anyone" (Schippers and Grayson Sapp 29: italics in original). Further, "androcentric hierarchies are disrupted and challenged when women articulate femininity in ways that transform it into something new and of value" (Schippers and Grayson Sapp 31). The domestic sphere as a space for transformative femininities is possible should part of the

transformation include a re-evaluation of the public-private divide, one that recognises the value and importance of the labour of the domestic sphere, whether the labour is paid or not, and shared. Clearly the material analog of the 'Super Woman' to the fictional representations of the postfeminist action heroine is not without its intersecting terrain. Indeed, the women as hero opens up a space for thinking about resistant embodiments and social and political constellations. Critiquing postfeminist discourses offers an aporia on questions of women's use of violence, sexuality, and spectacle as tools for constructing alternative, resistant femininities.

The focus of this thesis has been on the analysis of a selection of literary heroines who, through close reading, have been interrogated for the way in which they are shaped by contemporary postfeminist discourse. I understand that there is inevitably a wide gap between the heroines and violence that are wrought through textual or graphic representation and the lived material reality of women. Certainly, it is not my intention to assert that there is an easy relationship between the representation and the reality. However, the women we read about or confront within the sphere of popular culture are products of a similar set of discursive constructions that also shape living, breathing women. As such, they offer an intriguing site for considerations of the way in which postfeminism has discursively infiltrated the ranks of even the strongest of us.



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