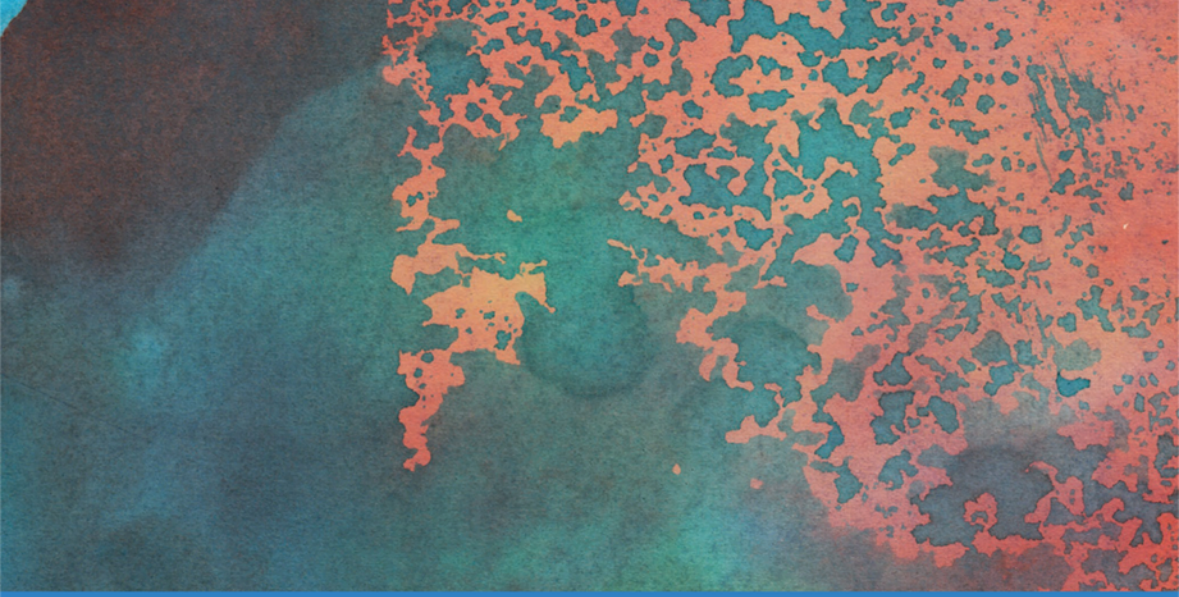
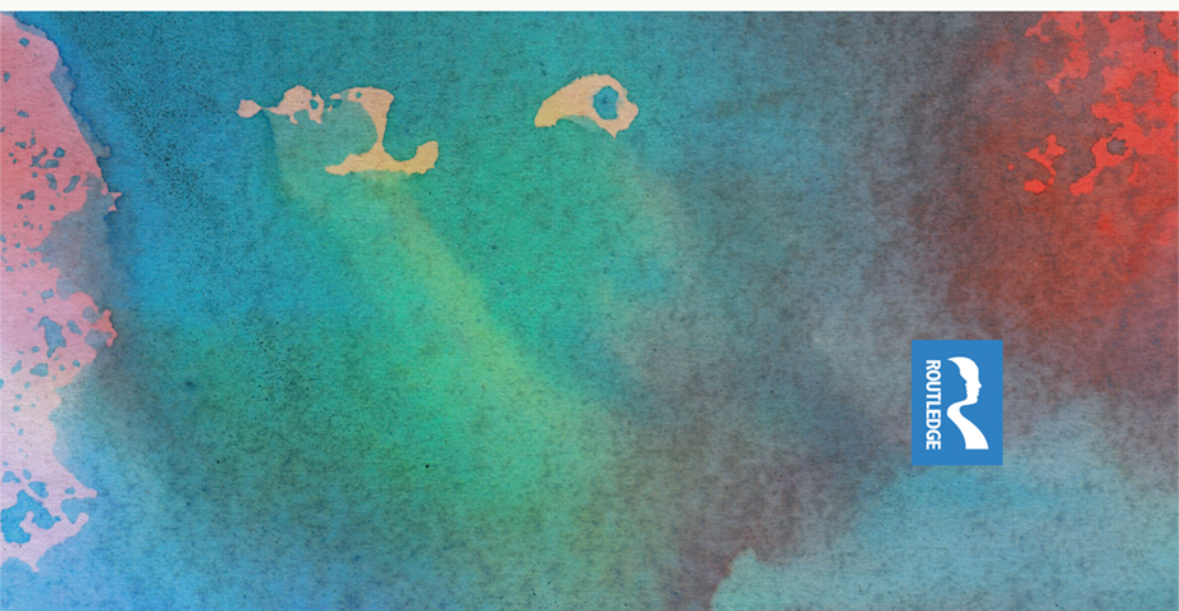


Interdisciplinary Research in Gender

HEROIC GIRLS AS FIGURES OF RESISTANCE AND FUTURITY IN POPULAR CULTURE

Edited by
Simon Bacon



Heroic Girls as Figures of Resistance and Futurity in Popular Culture

Heroic Girls looks at the recent proliferation of young girl heroes in many recent mainstream films and books. These contemporary 'final' girls do not just survive but rather suggest that in doing so they have fundamentally changed something about themselves and or the world around them, seeing them become the 'First Girls' of this altered reality. The collection brings together a wide range of perspectives and cultural viewpoints that describe many recent narratives that explore the idea of a Final Girl and her "after-story". The essays are divided into four sections, beginning with more theoretical approaches; cross-cultural examples; the ways in which fictional narratives bear strong relation to real-world circumstances; examples that more strongly depict themes of resistance, survival, and individual agency; and, finally, those that describe something more fundamental and transformative. Films and television shows covered in the collection include *The Girl with All the Gifts, The Witcher, The Hunger Games, Star Wars, The Fear Street* and *Pan's Labyrinth*. This book will be of interest to researchers and students of film studies, gender studies, and media studies.

Simon Bacon is a writer and film critic based in Poznań, Poland. He has written and edited 30+ books on various subjects including *Gothic: A Reader* (2018), *Horror: A Companion* (2019), *Eco-Vampires* (2020), *Nosferatu in the 21st Century* (2023), *1000 Vampires on Screen* (2023), *The Palgrave Handbook of the Vampire* (2024), and *The Palgrave Handbook of the Zombie* (forthcoming). He is Kasi the editor of the book series 'Vampire Studies: New Perspectives on the Undead' at https://www.peterlang.com/series/vsu.

Interdisciplinary Research in Gender

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Foreword

Alexandra Heller-Nicholas

For a girl to make it through adolescence to womanhood is of itself a major victory. In a world where so much attention is placed on policing women's bodies — how they should look, what they should do and, most of all, what they should not do — the teenage years for so many young women is a period where enormous pressure is placed on transformation. On one hand, teenage girls especially have great social and cultural power, the figure of the nubile young woman broadly deemed the ideal state of feminine sexuality. Yet so much of the world we live in seeks to repress that power, deny girls and teens any sense of agency, and portray any attempts to utilise their power as potentially dangerous, devious, or monstrous.

This book is about that power and asks questions about what shapes it can take when that power is allowed to roam free in screen culture, literature, and music. Women — all women, young and old, cis and trans — are fighting to stay alive, to stay safe, every single day, in every corner of the world. Sexual, domestic, and intimate partner violence are a global epidemic. The fantasies of agency, dreams of equality, and aspirations of empowerment presented in the myriad texts this book explores therefore offer very real-world responses through the imagination of their creators to the gaps and ellipses that have formed between the cold hard reality of how things are and our shared, visceral gut feeling of how they should be.

More than merely mapping out the ambitions for girlhood these diverse texts offer, this book looks ahead, into the future, united by a shared vision of something better that this range of different girl heroes collectively gestures towards. It is in their shared articulation of this fundamental spirit of hope that the detailed analyses that make up the bulk of this collection come together to form amongst themselves a critical manifesto of sorts, where girls are revealed to be as deserving of agency, liberty, and safety as anyone else — even white, powerful men. As such, this book is so much more than the sum of its parts; built on that fundamental spirit of hope, it is nothing less than a blueprint for the future.

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And most importantly my eternal gratitude to my forever Mrs Mine, Kasia, without whom nothing would be possible or worth doing, and of course our two monsters, Seba and Maja, who are always able to provide distraction, relief, and wonder at any given moment. And last, but never least the constant support (and sernik Magdi) of Mam i Tata Bronk.

Introduction

Simon Bacon

Heroic Girls looks at the proliferation of young girl heroes in many recent mainstream films and books. This is obviously not a new phenomenon, but since the 2010s it seems to have taken on a new significance. In this time frame, real-life figures such as Malala Yousafzi, Greta Thunberg, and Amanda Gordon have entered the popular consciousness as symbolising the potential and power within the figure of a young girl and as one that might change the future rather than reinforce the hierarchies and mistakes of the past. Indeed, contemporary 'final' girls, to use Carol Clover's often overused term, do not just survive but rather suggest that in doing so they have fundamentally changed something about themselves and/or the world around them, and not just for themselves. Films and texts, such as *Girl with All the Gifts* (Carey 2014; McCarthy 2016), *Doctor Sleep* (King 2013; Flanagan 2019), and *Enola Holmes* (Springer 2006–10; Bradbeer 2020), to name but a few, reflect this view. They all feature young female protagonists that resist the strictures of the world they are born into to create something new. This collection will look at the recent history and cross-cultural diversity of such final/first figures to ascertain if their 21st-century manifestations indeed mark not just an evolution but a turning point. More specifically, it answers the question of whether we have finally realised that the future is no longer to be left in the hands of the forms of manhood that have brought the world to its current position but should rather be passed over to the girls.

There is much here of Simone de Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray, and Rosi Braidotti that sees the necessity of a language, a system, and an imaginary that is specifically about, for, and of women. In part this is a means of gaining agency over one's identity as a women in the patriarchal order that categorises everything in relation to itself, but it is also a way of establishing, quantifying, and controlling their difference to men — difference being an important aspect here, especially in relation to becoming as Braidotti in particular has viewed Deleuze and Guattari's description as rooted in the very system they are trying to find a trajectory away from (1991). Of further note is the sisterhood of women and the individual identities within it. So one can still talk about 'women', as a whole, but one that is made up of myriad subjectivities in relation to cultural, ethnic, and personal histories. In relation to

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this we can then say that *Heroic Girls* is not about young women who are on the 'Heroes Journey' but ones who are, at the very least, on the 'Heroines Quest' if not on a trajectory completely separate to both. Trajectory is also useful here, not just in terms of the evolution of the Heroic Girl within the narrative in which she appears but as a category or trope over time — not that she is defined by a particular genre even if here we focus mainly on Gothic horror, or fantasy narratives. This in part speaks to the times or cultural moments that she appears in — emerges from — and also the wave of feminism that was occurring at the time. Coincidentally, and importantly for this study, this corresponds strongly to Clover's idea of the Final Girl ([1992] 2015), which has equally changed over time, and will be looked at in more detail later. Here though it is worth noting that Clover identified the figure in relation to slasher movies such as *Halloween* (1978) and *Friday the 13th* (1980), where a psychopathic killer hunts down and kills a group of teenagers but a single girl survives. Importantly the girl has a special link to the killer — or at least the killer thinks he does to her — and it is her own resourcefulness that leads to her survival. Of importance here is that the girl is often the one that most closely corresponds to patriarchal demands on the female body — demure, sober, and virginal — while the other victims are all socially and sexually transgressive. Of further note is that it is often only the, always white, Final Girl that survives while everyone else dies (Means Coleman 2011). There is a sense here that the original Final Girls where the ones that affirmed the patriarchal order and so did not need killing — this did not prevent them from going through various kinds of abuse and torture to survive — though it also clearly aligned the psychopathic murderer as representing patriarchal society itself. Over time this has changed, partially due to the sequel — and certain slasher films have produced substantial franchises — that had to evolve the original story and the character of the Final Girl that consistently appeared in them. This has more closely aligned the Final Girl with the Heroic Girl and a variety of other female characters who are survivors and gain revenge and/or agency over the men — symbols of patriarchy — that have sexually and physically victimised them. In this sense *Heroic Girls* is less a strict and focused trope in the way that Final Girls can be and is more an umbrella (nomadic) term that describes the ways that young female characters with various cultural and ethnic backgrounds find the agency and their authentic selves in the face of patriarchal prohibition and violence around them. More so, this is an act they do not attempt just for their own sake but equally for those — sisters, mothers, daughters — around them.

Heroic Girls in the 21st Century

Heroic Girls have become a surprisingly common trope in the past 10 years: Amy in *The Passage* (Cronin 2010 & Heldens 2019), Arya Stark in *Game of Thrones* (Benioff 2011–19), Melanie in *The Girl with All the Gifts* (Carey

2014 & McCarthy 2016), Sabrina in *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (Aguirre-Sacasa 2018–present), Abra in *Doctor Sleep* (King 2013 & Flanagan 2019), Rey in *Star Wars* (Various 2015–19), Eleven in *Stranger Things* (Duffer Brothers 2016–present), and Enola in *Enola Holmes* (Springer 2006–10 & Bradbeer 2020), amongst many others. All of these suggest a shift in terms of the anticipated audience response as well as their preferences. In part it can be seen to be led by a greater influence of literature and films intended for young adults and which also appears to have a certain appeal beyond their intended audience, with *The Twilight Saga* (Meyer 2005–08 & Various 2008–12) a good example of this phenomenon. Bella Swan is 17 when the story begins and, whilst it largely attracted a young female audience, it also gained appeal in older women as well. Alongside this, as Anita Harris explains, this increase in attention on the lives of young women, particularly via social media, suggests that, just as the category of adolescence becomes central to envisioning a future at the end of the 19th century (fin-de-siecle), so the adolescent girl performs a similar function at the start of the 21st. In particular, the young girl is seen to embody a kind of self-reliance, flexibility, and resilience that are seen as key features of coping with the future as the 21st century progresses (2004, 8). Resultantly, authors and producers tailor their narratives and series to appeal to a younger female audience — DC Comics released *Super Hero Girls* in 2016, which showed many of the established female superheroes such as Wonder Woman, Supergirl, and Harley Quinn when they were at school, specifically to bring young girls into the wider DC Universe (Walsh 2019). Likewise, the Heroic Girls of sci-fi and Gothic fantasy or horror are often cast as 'warriors' as they regularly need to fight, metaphorically and literally, the forces of the old order within the narrative worlds they inhabit.

Svenja Hohenstein sees these 'girl warriors' of the 2010s — Katniss from *The Hunger Games* (Collins 2008–10 & Various 2012–15) and the Disney Princesses (specifically Merida in *Brave* (Andrews and Chapman 2012) — as something of a fruition of a 1990s 'girl power' agenda (2019). The focus on and depiction of girlhood in Hohenstein's reading is necessarily complicated as it is as much constructed by outside forces as by the young girls who are actually living it. However, a focus on the 'heroic' or 'warrior' girl can in part elide fears over the influence of society on the construction of the heroic girl as they often specifically resist the social constraints around them, at least in the recent examples cited here, to establish their heroic status. Harris translates fictional heroics to real-world actions and describes the new 'hero girl' as one that "lives large" in a world of "celebrities, pop stars, supermodels, actresses and entertainers … [and is] encouraged to become somebody' (2004, 120). In this sense, it is the ability of young girls to visibly populate the spaces of social and wider mainstream media that has made their migration to the role of hero, warrior, and auger of the future possible, and indeed a necessity.[1] As such heroism in the 21st century is a networked term, one that reverberates across the myriad webs of the internet and social media. Not

unlike Buffy then, the new female hero is one that resonates with and empowers many other heroes. This is given real-world embodiment in figures such as Malala Yousafzai, who in 2014, at the age of 17, became the youngest Nobel laureate, and Greta Thunberg who has become a globally recognized environmental activist, addressing the United Nations at the Climate Change Conference in 2018, then only 15 years old. Both these figures have stood up against patriarchal traditions — for Malala this was traditional religious values under the Taliban in Pakistan that sought to stop her getting an education and force her into an arranged marriage, whilst for Thunberg it is the forces of consumerism — to example the need for resistance and change.[2]

As mentioned previously there is much overlap, at least within the horror genre, between Heroic Girls and the 'Last' or Final Girl, and it is worth looking at this a little more closely here. The Final Girl, particularly in relation to what has been discussed in the context of heroes, heroines, or warriors, would seem to indicate the last girl left alive or to survive an ordeal. And to some extent, it is just that; the one who made it to the end or the one that reached their goal. As Clover saw it, many horror films of the late 1970s and 80s, featured a young(ish) girl who survived the continual attacks of a homicidal maniac, a psychotic family, or an unstoppable serial killer, who managed to escape without the help of a male rescuer. Obvious examples of this are Laurie Strode (Jamie Lee Curtis) in the *Halloween* films (Various 1978–2018), Nancy Thompson (Heather Langenkamp) in *Nightmare on Elm Street* (Craven 1984), and Ellen Ripley in the *Alien* films (Various 1979–97). In Clover's reading the horror genre is viewed as one intended for a young male audience and, subsequently, for the male gaze and male pleasure.[3] Yet the films themselves manage to shift the sympathies of audiences from identifying with the male killer to the female victim; they follow the Final Girl and feel for her ongoing plight. For the most part this has been interpreted as pro-feminist, with a conclusion that no matter how dangerous the plight, or the tortures she suffers, the Final Girl still prevails (though, as fans of the genre will know, this 'prevailing' only lasts until the sequel and that cinematic victims such as Laurie Strode have been 'prevailing' for 40 years now which rather goes against the initially positive reading of survival[4]). Still, Clover herself notes in the 2015 reissue of her book that the true focus of the films is not really the survival but the extreme pain and brutalisation the victim goes through. She says: '"Tortured surviver" might be a better term than the "female hero." Or, given the element of last-minute luck …. "accidental survivor." Or, as I call her "victim hero" with an emphasis on the victim' ([1992] 2015, x). What is important in Clover's reading is that survival is an end in itself and understandably so when most horror films end at the moment when the Final Girl survives. The literal "pains" one must go through to achieve survival, whilst being heroic, never really lead anywhere.

Interestingly, characters such as the aforementioned Laurie Strode and Ripley actually accumulate their 'pains' — over much time — in their horrific versions of Bildungsroman, during their journeys of ongoing survivorship, so

they might better survive next time. It is this idea of a journey that becomes an important phase between being the Final Girl of the previous narrative and becoming the Heroic Girl of a new one — this change is often noticeable in how she no longer just manages to survive by herself but tries (however ineffective that might ultimately be) to help others. This further reveals how the 'birth' of the Heroic Girl is often not an immediate change, but a slow evolution, showing how the victim grows and transforms, even if the world around them seems resistant to this change. The girls depicted in films and stories are often on the upper end of their teens, if not early twenties, yet their 'journey' and survival never signals the same kind of things as it does for boys, and that too is of interest for the present collection. In the 1980s, when the early slasher films were being made, horror films quite often used the idea that by killing the 'monster' the male survivor matures as a man and is ready to start a family (vampire films in particular showed this in *Fright Night* (Holland 1985), *Near Dark* (Bigelow 1987), *The Lost Boys* (Schumacher 1987)). In contrast then, whilst the boys went on to become men — and repeat the same ideological narrative that created them — the Final Girl was something of a full stop, where survival itself was the endgame. This conclusion was predominant at least until the appearance of Buffy Summers in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Whedon 1997–2003) — though not the earlier film by Fran Rubel Kuzui (1992). There is a reason why the series succeeds in this where the film fails as the latter shows Buffy as a Final Girl, when, in fact she is not — she is actually more of an Heroic Girl. And it is the series that shows this virtually for the entirety of its seven seasons as she learns, evolves, and tries to save not just her friends and family but the society of girls around her.

The idea behind Buffy was to act as a contrast to the expectations of the genre in which vampire hunters, such as Van Helsing and Blade, tend to be male and often, in the case of those actually tasked with killing vampires (the crew of light in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*), athletic young men. Whedon's novelty, or one might say spoof, was to make this person a young girl and one who is literally genetically engineered to do so.[5] Buffy does not learn of this preordained fact of her life until she is a teenager, and in this way her subsequent and ongoing battles with the monsters of the dark more closely follow the 'coming of age' trope from the 1980s mentioned earlier. The series, then, follows Buffy from the moment when she finds out about her 'hidden' powers and goes through the trauma of killing her first vampire. Afterwards, she has to revisit this trauma over and over again — oddly not that dissimilar to Laurie Strode in the Halloween films. As such, Buffy's credentials as a Final Girl stem from that original kill and then the continual physical abuse and torture she receives at the hands of the various 'big bads' that populate the ongoing series. Alongside this, of course, is the fact that Buffy dies … and comes back to life twice. In this sense, Buffy is in fact multiple Final Girls and multiple Heroic Girls; first she follows the normal course of a Final Girl until her first kill, when she no longer just prevails, but fully embraces her new identity as an Heroic Girl — a new kind of vampire hunter within a largely

male-led genre; second, she becomes another Final Girl, when she dies for the first time, and then, thirdly, another Heroic Girl when she is resurrected, again providing a new path from what had gone before; fourth, and finally with her second death and her final position as another new Heroic Girl she actually creates many other Heroic Girls who will all go on to write their own stories — the power of writing one's own story or even giving voice to the story that has already happened being central to the subjectivity of an Heroic Girl. As seen, then, the idea, or even function, of the Heroic Girl is to originate a new path or direction from the one previously taken. More specifically, it describes a girl who, by surviving the old order — in most cases hypermasculinities created by patriarchal normativity — is able to change her own life, and quite often, the lives of those around her. The apocalyptic story like *The Girl with All the Gifts* is an obvious example of this — Melanie effectively brings about the end of human life and is the first of a new species.[6]

The Heroic Girl is one who literally defeats the world she was born into to become something she was not before. In this sense then, the *Final* Girl symbolises the period when she has struggled and fought against the often deadly violence of the ideological system which refuses to let her change or evolve, and holds her in its undying grasp until she can no longer breathe. Yet this resistance marks the point and process of this Final Girl to create a different starting point so that an alternate outcome may occur. As described by Stephens and McCallum, 'the female hero will have a different starting point and will arrive at an alternative outcome by inhabiting a different mode of existence' (1998), that of the Heroic Girl, the girl that exists beyond the old order and makes her own future and identity with every step she takes.

The Journey from 'Last' to 'First'

This collection brings together a wide range of perspectives and cultural viewpoints that describe many recent narratives that explore the idea of a Final Girl and her "after-story". More often than not, it describes the emergence of a First Girl, though the actual nature and intent of their 'new' existence, and rightly so, can vary greatly from individual agency to post-apocalyptic reimagining. The essays are divided into five sections, beginning with more theoretical approaches; cross-cultural examples; the ways in which fictional narratives bear strong relation to real world circumstances; examples that more strongly depict themes of resistance, survival, and individual agency; and, finally, those that describe something more fundamental and transformative.

Part I, 'Theoretical Approaches', begins with 'The Narratives of Survival: Final Girls in Videogames' by Carl Wilson and considers the idea of Heroic and/or Final Girls in relation to video games and the problematics of these terms in relation to audience/player agency. This results in an in-depth study of what exactly might constitute a surviving-victim, last-woman-standing, or agentic heroine. Following this is 'Fighting Fate: Representations of a 'New

Order' in *Beautiful Creatures*', by Lauren Christie, which more closely focuses on the novel *Beautiful Creatures* (Garcia & Stohl 2009) to examine how the heroic girl is configured in contemporary YA fiction. Further she looks at how it is used to help construct the possibility of change for the central female protagonist and her struggle for a life beyond traditional familial and cultural expectations. Next is 'The Shadow Self and the New Girl: Breaking Down the Old Worlds in Ursula Le Guin's *The Tombs of Atuan* and N.K. Jemisin's *The Stone Sky*' by Bronwen Calvert, who looks at the Jungian idea of the 'shadow-self' in relation to the female teenage protagonists of Ursula Le Guin's *The Tombs of Atuan* (1972) and N K Jemisin's *The Stone Sky* (2017). Therein the author describes, utising the idea of the heroine's quest, how the respective female characters use their shadow-self to discover and utilise their authentic selves both to survive and exceed the world they were thrown in to, though to as-yet unwritten futures. Next is Robyn Ollett's '"She would never fall, because her friend was flying with her": Gothic Hybridity, Queer Girls and Exceptional States in Helen Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl* (2005) and M. R. Carey's *The Girl with all the Gifts* (2014)', who applies the theory of New Queer Gothic to the two texts mentioned to explore how the evolving identities of the girl protagonists relate to real-world events and how they necessarily queer normative, patriarchal frameworks and categories. The section ends with 'Cheerleaders, Orphans, School Girls: The Persistent Sounding Riot (Grrrl) in the (Televisual) Apocalypse', by Renée Coulombe, which examines the sonic tropes of the resistant 'Grrrl' and how they have been employed in fictional narratives and in real-life representations of adolescent female heroes, such as Greta Thunberg and Malala Youszafai, subsequently revealing the punk feminism at the heart of heroic Grrrls who endure and survive, not just for themselves but for world(s) around them.

Part II, 'Cross-Cultural Heroes', looks at the ways in which heroic girls have found different kinds of expression across multiple cultures, which often also include forms of resistance to, and re-appropriation from, colonial (patriarchal) cultures that have long suppressed them. This begins with '*Tranquilas*: Monstrous Resistance and Feminist Storytelling', by Inés Ordiz, which features short pieces written by young women describing their lived experiences of actual and lived spaces of male violence in Latin America and Spain. Here the act of writing — becoming female writing as Deleuze describes it — breaks the silence of oppression, facilitating new forms of female resistance, control, and even agency. Phil Fitzsimmons, in 'Sister-matic Cannibalism in the *Dying Breed*: Heterotopic Representations of Australia's Lingering Colonial Connectivity', shifts to Australia and, more specifically, Tasmania, where a young girl turns the violence of the colonial society that created her back on itself. This heroic girl then becomes a symbol both of the loss of Tasmanian identity and its natural innocence as well as the colonial savagery that came to consume it for individual wealth. The location shifts in 'Seeking Resistance in Tropes: A Reading of the Final Girl Trope's Use in *NH10* and

Stree and Its Socio-Cultural Significance', by Debaditya Mukhopadhyay and reveals not so much a decolonisation but an appropriation of tropes from a colonial and all-colonising power, that of Hollywood. Here, in Bollywood 'horror' films from the past ten years, the trope of the Final Girl has evolved into that of the 'take-action' girl that reflects real-life events of the abuse of women on the streets of India but also symbolises hope and a wider call for change. 'A Gothic Agent of Revolt: The Rebel Female Hero in *Pan's Labyrinth*', by Michail-Chrysovalantis Markodimitrakis looks at the young girl hero in del Toro's 2006 film to examine how she both resists and imagines a world beyond the one she is trapped in, so much so that she is finally able to escape to it to be her true self. Finally, 'From Vancouver Island to the City of Troy: Prophecy, Heroism, and Indigenous Classical Reception in Catherine Knutsson's *Shadows Cast by Stars'* by Svetlana Seibel completes the section, moving to the Indigenous peoples of North America. In this paper, indigenous storytellers intersect traditional styles with Eurowestern classical epics to create young female protagonists that reconfigure the idea of the hero and heroism to create unique visions of possible indigenous futures.

Part III, 'Resistance, Revenge, Reimagining', focuses more obviously on the intersections and complications of the figure of the Final Girl. Here she becomes an evolving figure that encompasses the tropes of surviving-victim, rape-revenge, proactive and focused aggressor, and heroic champion for non-normative identities. The first essay, 'Coralie Fargeat's *Revenge* (2017) and the Rape-Revenge Action Hero' by M. Keith Booker is a close reading of Fargeat's rape revenge film which turns the genre on its head by reversing the traditional male gaze that has featured so heavily in depictions of the objectification of, and violence towards, women. The positions of victim and abuser are exchanged, revealing the heroine's quest as one of wresting control of the camera and the power of being the one whose view of the world is the dominant one. Stephanie Schoellman, in '"What about you, Maxine? What's your American Dream?": *X* and *Pearl* Radically Refit the Final Girl with an Axe and Hack Apart the American Pastoral', further complicates the roles of victim and killer which for the dynamic thrust of the Final Girl narrative is so central. Here it is the American Dream that itself becomes the insidious, murderous danger to the aspirations of young girls — hopes that the patriarchally constructed 'Dream' itself engenders — revealing it as a system that inherently turns all its victims into killers, who are then inevitably become victims again. Next is 'After the Credits Roll: Jade Daniels, Trauma and the Postmodern Final Girl', by J. Simpson, who looks at the female protagonist, Jade Daniels, from Stephen Graham Jones' Indian Lake Trilogy. Jade, being of indigenous descent, has always been excluded from the American Dream but not of the on-screen American nightmare of the slasher film. Becoming her own version of the Final Girl she decides she not only has the right to live, but to also take no more shit! Following this is Cristina Santos' 'Killer Girls: Red Riding Hood, Girlhood and the Final Girl,' who further considers the relationship between the victim and killer, applying the idea of the Final Girl

to modern interpretations of fairytales. Here though, the violence perpetrated by the victim turned killer — in the spirit of Buffy the Vampire Slayer — is controlled and purposeful as a calculated act of individual and collective resistance and feminine empowerment. Lastly, Agnieszka Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska in 'A Girls Agency and Rebellion in *The Witcher* Saga', examines the role of the young girl protagonist Ciri, who follows a similar arc to the characters from Santos' chapter. However, her development from helpless victim to accomplished killer does not inevitably result in revenge upon those that have assaulted her, but rather in reclaiming her own agency in the face of those that would have power over her.

Part IV, 'Into the Future', continues the themes from the previous section around Heroic and Final Girls but reads them in ways that connects them more strongly to otherness and agency in the 21st century and how this can be more supportive of contemporary concerns around sisterhood, the environment, and an ongoing legacy of female empowerment. The first essay here is 'Persephone Distorted: From Teen Witch to Queen of Hell — The Evolution of Sabrina' by Karen Graham, which looks at the figure of the teenage witch Sabrina who has been featured on multiple mediums over the years. Her steady evolution has revealed her as a resilient figure but one who only really became heroic in the recent series on Netflix. Her transgressive positioning as a 'good' witch who cares and even sacrifices herself for friends and family has made her a very 21st century Final Girl and an example of feminism that aims to change the oppressive nature of the system for everyone. Next is '"The Witch Forever Lives": Redefining the Path for Empowered Final Girls in the Trilogy *Fear Street*' by Bruna Foletta Lucas, which continues on the themes of witches and how a once monsterised category under patriarchal oppression is becoming a means of individual and collective agency. Further, it examples the evolving nature of the Final Girl which is becoming increasingly pluralised in terms of heroic surviving and thriving girls, daughters, mothers, and grandmothers. 'First Girl, Last Jedi, Final Girl: Rey, Resistance, and the Future of *Star Wars*' by Cathleen Allyn Conway continues this idea of the heritage of heroic girls to establish a lineage of agentic women and one that wrests power from the hands of patriarchal societies and ideologies. The collection closes with Ildikó Limpár's 'The Environmental Context of Hope in Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* trilogy and M. R. Carey's *The Girl with All the Gifts*' considers the post-human and ecological possibilities offered by young female protagonists of two futuristic texts. More so, she relates these narratives to contemporary political and ecological crises to reveal the hope that is embodied in these fictional representations of young girls that might offer a way to reconfigure the established gender hierarchies both within human society and the environment we depend upon.

Ultimately, this collection shows how the figure of the heroic girl, the girl who survives and prevails, is no longer a rare exception. Indeed, whilst the world appears to be intent on limiting the freedoms and choices open to women, young girls are the ones that are still able to envision and make

possible an environment that is different than what existed before. These young women are no longer Final Girls in the singular, but Heroic Girls in the plural who care equally for their sisters, friends, family, and the environment who more than ever before are fighting to not only be heard and take control of who and what they are, but to change the very nature of today and tomorrow.

Notes

1 Kathryn Wright equally argues for the importance of new technology to the idea of the female hero in the twenty-first century and how the idea of the new female hero is in part embodied through it — this idea plays out equally in contemporary society as it does in contemporary popular culture. In this sense heroism, though constructed by singular acts of resistance and change amount to nothing if not recognized by a wider, connected, audience (see Wright 2016).
2 At the time of writing this Malala is now 26 and still an activist for female education, and Greta Thunberg, who is now 20, continues to be a highly regarded public figure and environmental activist.
3 This point has been called into question particularly in relation to modern audiences and to some extent the realization of that has been partially responsible for the evolution of the Final Girl.
4 Ripley from the Alien franchise is one of the few to have broken the cycle by actually becoming the monster herself (*Alien Resurrection*, Jeunet 1997).
5 It should be noted that Buffy was by no means the first fictional female vampire hunter and the trope goes back as far as Paul Féval's *Vampire City* (1867) which featured the wryly named vampire hunter Anne Radcliffe.
6 Humanity in *Girl with All the Gifts* being symbolised by the patriarchal human-centric racism and military authoritarianism of Sgt. Eddie Parks and the medicalised hierarchies of control and worth of Dr. Caldwell. Consequently, the death of humanity is actually about a radical change of ideological imperatives.

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Part I
Theoretical Approaches

1 The Narratives of Survival
Final Girls in Videogames

Carl Wilson

The Tortured Survivor

In the 2015 preface to *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, Carol J. Clover concisely explains that within slasher movies the Final Girl is 'the character whose story we follow from beginning to end, and the one from whose vantage, even through whose eyes, we see the action; and it is she who, at the end of the film, brings the killer down' (2015, x). Writing from a point some 20 years after the first publication of her original 1992 thesis, Clover goes on to add that the Final Girl, has, through further circulating discourses, become something of a 'female avenger' or 'triumphant feminist hero'. Gladys L. Knight offers a slightly different approach within her discussion of female action heroes, suggesting that 'the term *final girl* was originally associated with horror and slasher films, but it is now associated with any female lone survivor in a film' (2010, 99). This intertwined development is understandable, given that any female lone survivor in a media text who manifests their position through autonomous action is likely to be engaging with some form of power fantasy narrative, be that against the male killer in the slasher genre, or any other of the countless ways in which female power has been restricted. Significantly, these heroes can be disruptive to patriarchal structure, causing 'male anxiety' around gender norms, for example, as Amy Taubin notes in the now classic example of *Alien* (1979) (1993, 94). But, in broadening the scope of the Final Girl, with a focus on what Carolyn Cocca calls 'the often-sexualised "women warriors" of today's media' (2016, 6), as Jennifer K. Stuller observes, there is still often the same reliance on masculine power strategies, so 'there is little room for female experiences to be considered heroic' (2010, 4).

While Clover, in her preface, does not entirely disagree with the reformulated iteration of the Final Girl, and the new directions that the term has taken, she is keen to stress that critics and commentators engage with a process that decentres the successful dénouement of the story for a focus on the journey instead. Framed in this way, Clover suggests that 'victim-hero' or 'Tortured survivor' might be better terms to use than just 'hero' when describing the Final Girl (2015, x), because to focus only on the heroic 'last minute reversal is truly missing the point' (xi).

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The purpose of this chapter will be to apply this approach to the videogame medium. Clover refers to an understanding of the Final Girl through plotted action (the 'surviving' part of the ordeal), which culminates at the end of a film's predetermined narrative, yet the functions and types of narrative in videogames differ significantly from that within film. This chapter will explore how these differences can create new ways to explore and comprehend the possibilities afforded by the recontextualised Final Girl.

The Final Girl and Videogame Genre

Clover writes about the 'slasher (or splatter or shocker or stalker) film' that lies 'At the bottom of the horror heap', from which the Final Girl could originally be found (2015, 21). There are titles that adapt, incorporate, and foreground the aesthetic and narrative conventions of these movies into videogames, such as *Splatterhouse* (1988) or *Night Trap* (1992), neither of which feature Final Girls, but these are not genre types that typically exist within videogame definitions. As David Myers asserts, 'The representational form of video games may be distinguished in terms of the relationship the game establishes among out-of-game objects and in-game representations' (2009, 53), which indicates a key difference to the formation of film genre: Videogame genres can also be culturally codified by a description of the dominant gameplay mechanics within them, such as 'beat 'em up' for *Splatterhouse*, or 'interactive movie' for *Night Trap*. Dawn Stobbart discusses how in videogames, 'genre classification has become the norm for videogames as it occurs across mass media, with gamers, retailers, and also the videogame industry itself using classifications that have become part of the everyday language of gaming' (2019, 25). Yet, where Stobbart then argues that there is a cultural space for formalised splatter and slasher genres, the examples that she pulls from for splatter games, *Mortal Kombat* (1992) and *DOOM* (1993), are again, widely known by their underpinning mechanics: 'Fighting game' and 'first-person shooter', respectively (for example, see Maine 2022). This does not mean that videogames with slasher genre elements do not exist, but shifting the governing rules and terms from one media type (and audience) to another is not a matter of direct transposition. For example, Steam — an online marketplace of digital videogames — allows users to 'tag' any videogame with a term that they 'think [is] appropriate or relevant to that title' (Valve Corporation n.d.-b). A search of their store shows that there are 9,828 results for games tagged with 'Horror' and there are 0 (zero) results tagged with 'Slasher' (or splatter or shocker or stalker). Simply put, the videogame Final Girl cannot be easily found within the videogame 'slasher', as it is a game genre that itself is not easily located; it does not currently exist in any (commercially/culturally/formally) meaningful way.

As outlined in the introduction, the cinematic Final Girl has become untethered from their slasher genre roots, but how then has the videogame Final Girl also found traction, if at all, as a 'lone survivor' within the wider horror

genre? Within pop-culture media, the difficulty in locating the Final Girl can be seen in attempts to present definitive list articles (or 'listicles') of Final Girls in videogames. A list of '6 Best Final Girls In Games' published by *The Gamer* offers caveats for Clementine from *The Walking Dead* (2012) as 'The game slightly goes against the traditional Final Girl convention due to the lack of a major antagonist' and the end of *Prey* (2017) 'isn't a perfect Final Girl scenario because it also means Morgan kills all the living people left on the station, which isn't typically a Final Girl move' (Jessey 2023). In their '6 Best Final Girls from Horror Games', *Game Rant* suggests that '*Resident Evil* doesn't have a "true" final girl', due to the presence of other survivors, before going on to place Claire Redfield of the *Resident Evil* series in their number one spot (Davison 2022). In establishing their terms and criteria, both of these listicles acknowledge that the Final Girl is a trope that comes from horror films, but these lists, in having to bend the rules that govern only a short selection, imply that within horror games there may only be a limited number of Final Girls to choose from, or that their working definition, taken from film theory, is not entirely viable.

The lack of confidence in finding the 'true' Final Girls in videogames invites a further question: What other comparable types of female survivor are there? A potential shift in focus within horror game titles is acknowledged by Ashley Bardhan in her *Destructoid* article, 'Terrible Females: Video games' Forever Girls', where the term Forever Girl is promoted because 'When video games do focus on a single woman character, she tends to be a subversion of the typical Final Girl' (2021). Thinking about female-led horror titles such as *Lollipop Chainsaw* (2012) and *Parasite Eve* (1998), Bardhan sees the strength and agency of Forever Girls as being an advantage, because 'unlike movies, which necessitate a passive audience, video games anticipate an active, and often even aggressive, audience' (2021). However, such a formation of the female action hero also reiterates Stuller and Cocca's concerns with the representation of female power, as Shira Chess observes that while female characters are also portrayed as physically powerful in game worlds, this 'resonates with those who play video games that have been designed for intended masculine audiences' (2017, 165). In 1998, Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins observed that 'Violent games without positive representations of women [...] continued to dominate the field' (1998, 10), and in a 2016 update, Cassell noted that 'It is tragic that still today the norms of gender and of gamer collide in such dangerous ways' (2016, vii). Where Bardhan finds positive representation within the aggression of the phallic-chainsaw-wielding, high-school hero of *Lollipop Chainsaw*, in Amanda C. Cote's comprehensive study on female players, 'One game players frequently said they avoided was *Lollipop Chainsaw*', with participants recognising 'the need for games to treat women more seriously' (Cote 2020, 155). Bardhan's Forever Girl offers a direction for female protagonists out of the genre restrictions of horror videogames, but in doing so, they become part of a missed opportunity in line with Laurie N. Taylor's observations that horror games have the

potential to use 'the game's control and world structures to subvert dominant western — and masculine — modes of representation and play' (2009, 59).

In being oppositional and antithetical to the Final Girl, the Forever Girl de-emphasises the struggle, torture, and victimisation that the Final Girl undertakes. Chess cautions that 'we must take care to make sure that these narratives do not so overtly reify tragedy that they cast these stories only in terms of victimization', but where the Final Girl represents the accretion of transformative power through the narrative process, the Forever Girl represents power as Final Product, with their survival being guaranteed (and baked into the 'Forever' moniker) before the game story even starts.

There are other ways in which the empowered 'female lone thriver' is manoeuvred into making a space for themselves within horror games. Synthesising Clover's aforementioned work, and Mary Ann Doane's work on the femme fatale, Stephanie C. Jennings points towards Ada Wong's playable chapter in *Resident Evil 6* (2012) as an example of the 'feminine gaze' in videogames, whereby 'the game invites players to play with femininity through their embodiment of Ada, subverting and challenging traditional gender roles and conceptualizations of gaze along with her' (Jennings 2018, 247–8). Notably, Ada's level of narrative interactivity also changes throughout the series. In *Resident Evil 2* (1998), she is a supporting character that appears in non-interactive cut scenes to assist/tease the male lead, Leon Kennedy, with his story quest. In *Resident Evil 4* (2005) and *Resident Evil 6*, Ada is again interwoven as a supporting figure within the main storyline, but she is also controllable in scenarios that only become available, and their existence only known to the player, once the initial game chapters have been completed. In both cases, Ada's story has a heightened difficulty, reflecting her increased capabilities (and that the player should have also mastered the controls, and be looking for further challenges). Moving beyond the original series, in the remake of *Resident Evil 2* (2019), Ada is present once again, but she is now playable within the main body of the storyline, with the mission of proactively saving the injured male-in-distress, Leon, countered against the fact she then has to be rescued herself by Leon. By comparison, should Claire be selected as the main character, the player is later made to play an escape plot segment as Sherry Birkin, a 12-year-old girl who is unarmed and entirely vulnerable to zombies and the aggressions of middle-aged male figures. Therefore, while a playable version of Ada has been brought in from the fringes of the story and is becoming incorporated within the central narrative to a greater extent, her appearance is currently still contingent on the presence of female narrative counterbalances, such as Sherry (and Ashley in *Resident Evil 4*) and a male narrative lead.

Malkowski explains, there are few femme fatales in games with a presumed male purchaser because 'the femme fatale must seem like too clear and present a danger to be allowed to manifest in games in her most empowered forms' (2017, 34). It is equally significant then that in her analysis of Ada Wong, through exploring Yvonne Tasker's definition of the femme fatale,

Jenny Platz constantly reiterates that because 'the puzzle of Ada is never solved, she is also never viewed as a monster' (2014, 118). Although Samantha Langsdale and Elizabeth Rae Coody acknowledge that 'monstrous women evoke damaging cultural norms in patriarchal contexts' (2020, 5), Ada's actions and governing female framework permit her to continue avoiding the limitations of comparable fatales in ensuring her survival within the horror genre while still challenging masculine modes of play. However, potentially indicating where the boundaries of the femme fatale are in subverting masculine modes of representation for a certain demographic of gamer, in response to her appearance in the remake of *Resident Evil 4* (2023), it has been reported that the voice actor, Lily Gao, was openly harassed on social media because 'her dialogue has been changed to be slightly less openly flirtatious/sexy' (Terasaki 2023a). Lily Gao's response was that 'It is time we stop only capitalizing on the sexualized, eroticized, and mysterious Asian woman', and with resonances of the Final Girl once more fighting male power: 'My Ada is a survivor' (Terasaki 2023b).

Within horror videogames, the Forever Girl and the femme fatale can operate within and against masculine narrative frameworks, although there is an inherent risk to themselves. The complex relationship that both types of women share with masculine constructed notions of feminine ideals can elicit (masculine) cultural criticism; but separately, the Forever Girl offers a way of defeating the (masculine) killer as an action hero, but does so at the cost of female experiences, whereas the seductive actions of the femme fatale may eventually undercut their own position of feminine strength within the (masculine) narrative.

The Forever Girl and the femme fatale are comparable to the Final Girl, with whom they share several overlapping features, but they do not function in exactly the same way. Where Clover reframes the Final Girl as a 'Tortured survivor', she also inadvertently points towards a popular subgenre of videogame horror: Survival horror. While there are Forever Girls and femme fatales contained within their boundaries, it is within the survival horror genre that academic claims for a 'true' Final Girl have also been made.

Bernard Perron observes that 'the video game has *remediated* the film' and, while they may not share the same industrially derived genre 'tags' and cultural designations, 'This videoludic refashioning of cinematic forms could not have been more evident with regard to horror', especially 'stalker', or slasher, films (2012, 13). Perron continues, 'the horror film provides a breeding ground for formal figures and techniques of mise-en-scène […] It also provides an ideal narrative framework: a small group of stereotypical characters barricade themselves in a place — or try to escape — in order to fight against and to survive an evil force embodied in monsters or ghosts' (2012, 15).

Here, Perron is describing a survival horror genre scenario for a videogame, but he goes further to state that it is the emphasis on play (the interaction between the spectator and the stalker), repetition (variations within an understood framework), and survival (the melding of cognitive and emotional

conundrums), which when expressed through gameplay mechanics defines the genre, inclusive of the Final Girl.

In discussing the 'stalker simulation', Matthew Weise notes:

> Writing about the stalker film, and its subsequent adaptation into the stalker simulation, is in some ways very easy. Clover sets out a clear series of conventions to discuss, and those map neatly to the overarching design of several individual video games.
>
> (2009, 250)

For Weise, survival horror games *Clock Tower* (1995) and *Clock Tower 2* (1996) are perfect examples of the stalker simulation partly because the protagonist, Jennifer Simpson, 'is a textbook Final Girl' (2009, 243). Through the player's actions, Jennifer has to control her emotions when she is unarmed and chased by a killer ('Scissorman'), and she must use her wits to be the last survivor from her group of friends, which is reflected in the exploratory and cumbersome point-and-click game structure that the player must use as an approximation of Jennifer's own struggle with her own capabilities and situation. In these observations of Jennifer, Weise is largely correct in mapping Clover's features, although he later concedes that in terms of boyish looks, another character called Helen is actually 'a more prototypical Final Girl than Jennifer' (2009, 249). *Clock Tower* may be considered the best videogame expression of adapting the slasher genre, but Jennifer is not a perfect Final Girl, nor is she consistently a Final Girl. Of the nine possible endings, friends may survive, Jennifer may never escape, and Jennifer may not act like a Final Girl. In ending 'H' of the game, for example, a player can make Jennifer escape in a car, with the understanding that her friends have all been left to die, to then find the killer emerging from the back seat as the game ends.

In Weise's revered example, exemptions are immediately offered, but, in her overview of Slasher gaming, Stobbart contends that when applying the rules of the slasher genre to videogames, 'It is not necessary for all of these criteria to be met', citing Clover's analysis of *Psycho* which 'provides a more open definition of the slasher genre' (2019, 43). It is significant that Perron, Weise, and Stobbart have all used *Clock Tower* — a niche title that was only released in Japan — as their case study examples in how the videogame Final Girl operates. Yet, if Stobbart's observation is to also be applied to the videogame Final Girl, then the character is not fully fixed in place by a number of determining factors, but can equally be defined by a loose set of related features. Where the listicles added caveats to their Final Girls, and Weise seeks impossibly perfect examples from a limited pool, the videogame Final Girl should be treated like the Forever Girl and femme fatale with an acknowledgement in how they have adapted to survive within a (masculine) genre framework.

With this adaptation comes both consequences and opportunities. Perron points towards *Resident Evil* (1996) as an example of implicitly gendered game design (the male hero is stronger than the female hero), but there is

some overlap as both characters are subjected to a survival horror narrative: They are both tortured survivors (2018, 398). Furthermore, in the way that the characters are handled, the game permits actions irrespective of the gender of the person playing the game. The point here is not that gender boundaries have become diffuse to the point of being meaningless when aspects of play, repetition, and survival are expressed through gameplay mechanics, but that there are constant possibilities being offered for a medium-specific exploration of, and interaction with, a plurality of potential Final Girls.

Weise argues that for a player, 'the extent to which they are able to display the perceptiveness, wits, and determination of an effective Final Girl — determines whether or not they will survive to see the end of *Clock Tower*' (2009, 245). However, one might interrogate this assertion further. Clover focusses on the narrative journey that the Final Girl undergoes and believes that the struggle is where the value of the character can be found. In a movie, the narrative outcome is assured by the sequential playing of the assembled footage, but in a videogame, as Weise points out, the player may not enable an *effective* Final Girl within the text, and so the story outcome is different. Aside from death screens, the multiple 'good' and 'bad' endings of *Clock Tower* depend entirely on what actions the player makes Jennifer do. Therefore, with the possibility that player actions may create an *ineffective* Final Girl, and that they might retain their 'Final Girl' moniker based on some shared understanding or expectation that one of the other multiple combinations of player input might make the character fulfil this heroic role, it is well worth considering how videogame narratives can specifically shape and disrupt the character of the Final Girl within a text.

The Final Girl and Videogame Narrative

In his work on happy endings in Hollywood cinema, James MacDowell considers that 'Rather than treat closure as what happens when plotlines reach resolution, or even only as a product of a combination of narrative *and* narrational resolution, I think it is useful to understand closure in the far more inclusive sense' (2013, 58–9), which is to consider the 'importance and interdependence of narrative resolution, thematic elements, style, genre, point of view and implied narrative continuation' (59). This understanding echoes Clover's comments on the Final Girl: 'Fill this ['sketch'] out with the dimensions of affect, identification, pacing, and audience, and the picture gets kinkier' (2015, x). For MacDowell, as well as Clover, closure can stretch throughout the text and into the future. Notably, the slasher genre can deny certain types of closure for the Final Girl. As Isabel Cristina Pindeo points out, 'when the surviving female kills the killer, she loses narrative agency', which in subsequent films may mean a return of the surviving woman and the renewed threat of death (1997, 86). Yet, in addition to the qualities outlined by MacDowell and Pinedo, as Weise indicates in his discussion of *Clock*

Tower, the construction of the videogame Final Girl is also contingent on the medium-specific type of narrative moments that can be encountered or denied to the player and/or protagonist.

In *Game Writing: Narrative Skills for Videogames*, Richard Boon explains that traditional story-writing schemata, such as Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey and Syd Field's Screenplay model, are 'complicated by the fact that videogames are not solely a narrative medium' (2021, 45). Boon broadly outlines four basic forms of videogame storytelling that incorporate ludic involvement: Implicit narrative and Formal narrative, which one can think of as a contrasting pair of concepts, and Interactive narrative and Interactive stories. Through the use of survival horror genre examples, this chapter will unpack how these narrative forms create or inhibit potential Final Girl scenarios that are not possible within film. This will prove useful in understanding the potential shape(s) of the videogame Final Girl and how they may offer cultural commentary different to that found within other media presentations.

Implicit narratives give rise to emergent (non–pre-scripted) stories. An example would be the asymmetric multiplayer survival horror online game *Friday the 13th: The Game* (2017), where the last survivor can be a female character. However, the route that the player would have to take to become the Final Girl is based entirely on how the multiple players engage with the game system and with each other within the game space. Notably, the emphasis within the game is on escaping the killer through collaborative action with other players (refuelling the car, finding the keys, fixing the engine, etc.) to create a victory condition. As an emergent Final Girl is entirely contingent on players interacting with predetermined (implicit) game elements (the ability to run, use a weapon, etc.) to slow the killer, but in a way that does not create fully scripted outcomes (the player may run into or out of danger, miss with their weapon, etc.), it is possible that the game ends with no Final Girl (due to all of the female characters dying, or multiple characters surviving). In addition, a victorious player controlling the Final Girl will have a narrative experience that is from a different viewpoint to the other players sharing the same game space, who cannot experience the shared victory in quite the same way given the fatal conclusion of their own characters. Likewise, a player could select a male character (or play as the killer) and entirely fail to share any of these experiences, irrespective of the win conditions set upon them.

The way in which a title such as *Friday the 13th: The Game* differs from Battle Royale (competitive last-person-standing) games such as *Fortnite* (2017) is in how the parameters of the genre impact upon these gameplay mechanics, some of which are distinctly gendered. For example, in *Friday the 13th: The Game* there is an in-game achievement called 'The (Unlikely) Final Girl' with the requirement of 'Playing as Tiffany, be the sole survivor in a match' (Valve Corporation n.d.-a). Tiffany is the 'flirty girl', who, in following film genre conventions, one would expect to die. Her character design is also highly stereotypical of a movie slasher victim in that compared to the other male and female characters, 'She tends to freak out more easily and, in

general, has less in the way of Composure' (Greenback 2016). Yet, the achievement emphasises how through creating a space in which players can engage with and potentially upturn inherited film genre conventions, a gender-based outcome that is unlikely in one medium (unless subverted) can become plausible in another.

The Evil Dead: The Game (2022) and forthcoming *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (2023) demonstrate the rising cultural interest in this genre of game, with the appeal being in part that a shared universe of killers and heroes can be adapted and brought within an asymmetric multiplayer arena. Where *Friday the 13th: The Game* is an adaptation of the *Friday the 13th* (1980–present) slasher series, another notable asymmetric multiplayer survival horror online game, *Dead by Daylight* (2016), incorporates multiple cinematic Final Girls directly into the diegesis. *Dead by Daylight* differentiates itself with a blurring of intertextual boundaries as Final Girls drawn from the *Halloween*, *Scream*, and *Ring* franchises are imported to fight alongside each other, against killers from various other series.

With an inciting scenario of convenience drawn from cosmic horror, *Dead by Daylight* places less stock in the specificity of the various horror movie genre trappings to emphasise emergent survival horror gameplay. Where the plurality of overlapping references may work to flatten the tropes and traditions of formal horror genre narratives, for titles such as *Friday the 13th: The Game* and *Dead by Daylight*, the act of a female figure becoming the victim-hero or tortured survivor is, instead, a direct product of user-generated implicit narratives. This focus on the mechanical process of creating the conditions for an emergent Final Girl victory over any predetermined narrative expectation of victory (which with resonances of Pinedo, equally fails to offer final closure, as the player is immediately encouraged to restart and play a newly reconfigured game experience) also offers an empowering challenge to the player and their ability to learn from their experiences: Overcome the killer again, but with a better outcome. Here, the Final Girl can use the lack of fixed open/closed narrative resolutions to save their friends in a new story that they themselves may not survive.

The second type of storytelling, formal narration, is the element that gives rise to scripted stories. Where implicit narrative is the emergent story that comes from player actions, formal narrative 'involves storytelling that is delivered via pre-scripted methods' (Boon 2021, 48). This can mean 'animated scenes, text files', loading screens, or dialogue conveyed by non-playable characters. The first-person survival horror game *Alien: Isolation* (2014) is a useful case study in how formal and implicit narratives work in tandem. Continuing the narrative from the movie *Alien* (1979), Amanda Ripley — daughter of Ellen Ripley, 'the last survivor of the Nostromo' — is hunted by the xenomorph creature aboard a space station. The story is established by a non-interactive cut-scene introduction, but as the game is played from the first-person perspective across a timeline of linear progression, the player can choose to access computer terminals and recorders to find

Nostromo logs or Archive Logs: Game world-building companywide records and personal recordings from within the diegesis that expand upon the events prior to Amanda's arrival. Given that the player is perpetually hunted either by an alien creature or some other stalker killer, the logs — and, therefore, wider narrative comprehension — are optional objectives embedded within a risk-reward gameplay mechanism. The focus within *Alien: Isolation* is not on formal narration (the *why*) which adds context, but on the implicit narrative (the *how*) that arises when the player/protagonist hides in vents, ducks behind tables, and avoids an enemy programmed with an adaptive intelligence that can learn from, and respond to, the specific actions and patterns of the player (Burford 2016).

With agency, the player is directed to behave like a Final Girl in avoiding the killer to eventually overcome them, but one significant difference is that the player's character is expected to be brutally killed numerous times before the credits roll, signalling the plotted end of the formal story experience. A variation on this approach would be *Returnal* (2023), where the female protagonist is aware that they are caught within an iterative time-loop each time they die. Unlike in movies, where Final Girls may reach the end of the narrative through luck, determination, or special knowledge and potentially without cognisance of the fatal events that affect their friends, survival in *Alien: Isolation* is driven by player iteration and emergent experimentation (although they may be partly aided by the knowledge gleaned from various formal narrative devices within the game). For the player, these deaths can be instructive or meaningless, purposefully probing or by accident, and each one mostly plays out with the game removing implicit narrative control from the player to impose a formal narrative conclusion as a grisly and often protracted death animation plays out from the protagonist's unbroken point of view. The collision here between the two narrative forms in which autonomy is once more wrested from the player is designed to be abrupt and horrific, and an approximation of the same lack of agency suffered by victims in their spectacular final moments in horror movies: Nothing more can be done.

There are further consequences to this recurring Final Girl termination. Genre boundaries may become blurred. For example, an action-adventure game such as *Tomb Raider* (2013) can be reframed as a horror game with a Final Girl precisely because of the array of explicitly violent endings that may befall the player-controlled Lara Croft (Brown 2018). Through a reliance on repeated death as both an emergent learning tool and formal horror genre mechanism, the player may also become desensitised to the effects of the latter in favour of being more competent at the former. The *Resident Evil* series of games lean into this and encourage repeated play by offering in-game rewards for various completion times, but a counterpoint to this would be to change the perspective within the formal narration so that the threat — and genre related purpose — of horrific character death for the Final Girl can be maintained. For example, in the Ghost Survivors mode of the *Resident Evil 2* remake, the player can experience alternate timeline versions of main

campaign events. One of these reframed narratives includes 'Runaway!' where the player no longer controls a weapons-proficient hero; the Final Girl is now the innocent mayor's daughter who survives her rapacious male killer. It is through a shift in narrative perspective when combined with a shift in available gameplay options that an entirely different type of female-centred experience can be offered within the same game.

The third type of storytelling, interactive narrative, 'allows the player's actions to affect the delivery of the narrative' (Boon 2021, 48). The plot remains the same, but the actions that the player takes decide which, if any, of the pre-scripted responses are given. The controlled movement of the character can elicit interactive narrative responses. In the opening scenes of the original *Resident Evil*, for example, if the player has chosen Jill Valentine and they return back to the dining room instead of pressing forward into the mansion, an NPC will offer the dialogue 'Lost Courage already? That's not like you'. Here, an implicit narrative experience, which reflects upon the hero's character, comes from the player's interactions, which is neither emergent (the NPC will always say the same thing under the same conditions), but equally would not occur without a player's series of inputs at that moment and cannot later be reproduced within the narrative.

In the remakes of *Resident Evil 2* and *Resident Evil 3*, a subtle way of establishing the Final Girl's attitude to their situation can occur during combat. When the player chooses to aim a weapon held by the protagonist (Claire Redfield or Jill Valentine) towards an enemy, during combat with the enemy, or after the enemy has been defeated, a semi-random situational quip or 'dialogue bark' will be triggered by these actions. This line will speak directly to the opponent or be used as a pep talk for the character to carry on with their survival ambitions. The combat itself is an emergent narrative, but the interactive narrative works in tandem as both a directional, formal narrative commentary for the player and to add characterisation to the Final Girl's character in a way that shows how they differ from their male counterparts in an identical situation (Beaulieu 2020).

In the original *Resident Evil 2*, a player may inadvertently make their Final Girl experience more difficult because of interactive narrative events. Actions and engagements taken by the male figure in the A scenario can have a direct impact on enemy difficulty and item availability for the female figure in the B scenario as they are presented as a parallel formal narrative but are directly affected by sequential interactive events. The overall performance of a player in controlling their Final Girl can also affect the narrative. After poor performance (the first death of the character), the remake of *Resident Evil 2* will display a text screen asking the player if they would wish to switch to an Assisted mode. This 'easy' mode regenerates character health, turns on Aim Assist, and makes enemies easier to defeat than in Standard mode. Furthermore, and potentially unknown to players as *Resident Evil 2* does not advertise this feature within the title itself, within these difficulty bandings, which fix certain gameplay mechanics in specific ways, the game also features

adaptive difficulty. As producer Yoshiaki Hirabayashi explains, *Resident Evil 2* 'does adjust based on player performance […] so that no matter how well you're doing, there's always going to be that sense of dread and tension there' (Donaldson 2018). The concessions to accessibility ensure that the maximum number of players can engage with the scripted narrative trajectory, but the game is still attuned to the player's actions, with zombies coming to life where previously they may have remained dormant, or enemy aggression levels being tweaked in the background, to reconfigure the context of survival. In altering the components that set up the emergent narrative (potentially encouraging action hero, run-and-gun play instead of the tentative steps and ammo conservation of a tortured survivor, for example), the unfolding game significantly reshapes and multiplies the number of Final Girl narrative experiences that can be provided within the one text.

The final type of narrative is the interactive story. An interactive narrative can add variation to a story with fixed plot points, but the interactive story can dynamically alter the plot itself. The horror games made by developer Supermassive Games, including *Until Dawn* (2015), The Dark Pictures Anthology series, and *The Quarry* (2022), initially appear to be consistent examples of how this narrative strategy can create Final Girls within a videogame text.

All of these titles allow a player to move a character around a fixed series of landscapes at predetermined narrative points. Through the inputs of the player, the character interacts with environmental triggers. Some of these are formal narrative descriptions of an object or situation which add context and expand upon the story but do not affect the direction of the narrative, but at other points, the narrative trajectory is determined through the use of interactive 'quick time events' and through time-sensitive dialogue choices with other characters. These second types of interaction will largely move the narrative onto the next 'scene', but they will also directly present or set up for later in the story fail states for the lives of the ensemble cast of characters. None of the Supermassive Games titles are played with only the one character, so the gruesome, horror movie–inspired deaths could be for the character directly controlled by the player, or the non-playable character(s) in the scene (who equally, may have been previously successfully controlled, or have later become a playable character within the game narrative, should they have stayed alive). When a character dies, the game does not present a game over failed state, but the plot irrevocably branches the interactive story towards a different series of predesigned narrative events and a different story unfolds.

Of the eight protagonists in *Until Dawn* it is possible for Sam to be the lone survivor. Actor Hayden Panettiere provides the voice and motion-capture performance of Sam, and her character was also featured heavily in advertising for the game. Being careful to avoid the type of rhetoric associated with *Clock Tower*, Sam is a checklist of Final Girl traits, but unknown

to the player, despite the torturous scenarios she may find herself in, she is literally unkillable until the last act of the game. With the game being skewed towards the survival of the level-headed female hero played by a Hollywood actor, this combination of factors also mimics movie conventions. Panettiere's character of Kirby also survived in the slasher movie *Scream IV* (2011), for example. A crucial difference between this game and the other Final Girl games though is that instead of earning the Final Girl status for a near-invulnerable Sam, it is a title gained through the player simultaneously failing a series of medium-specific-actions that would kill the other characters in the story. Where Weise was concerned with the player taking the correct gameplay steps to make an effective Final Girl, here it comes about through the player making ineffective gameplay decisions about every other character. These events do not necessarily diminish Sam's standing, but they do offer her as a counterpoint to the other horror games discussed.

Notably, the other titles made by Supermassive Games also have their own Final Girls, but they resonate against Sam's safeguarded status as a teen white girl. The series may appear to be entirely beholden to the conventions of the particular subgenres of horror that they each present, but, as an overlaying thematic narrative, they also explore their own continuous representations of the Final Girl character. For example, *Man of Medan* (2019) has Fliss. Unlike Sam she is a French Polynesian black woman. Also, unlike Sam, to get to Final Girl Status, Fliss 'has the most deaths (with 11) and has the most chapters to die in (with 7)' (Fandom 2019). *Little Hope* (2020) promotes Andrew into the role, the twist being that he is a Final Boy; and *House of Ashes* (2021) has Rachel, although the 'Final Girl' achievement is given when any sole final character survives, irrespective of their sex.

These variances demonstrate that there is no 'perfect' Final Girl in videogames, but upon closer inspection, their differences and the evolving cultural discourses that surround the subject open up the possibility of different avenues and parameters for the Final Girl to exist and operate within. In videogames, the Final Girls are not Forever Girls, nor are they femme fatales; they are not strictly the result of outwardly heroic actions of a 'female avenger' or even one that operates only within the boundaries of a certain 'triumphant' narrative inevitability, but these are features that they can all share and adopt to various degrees within and against male power structures.

As Jennifer Malkowski and Treaandrea M. Russworm observes, 'representation is not fully separate from the implicitly hard-core elements of games: it is achieved through and dependent on player and machine actions, on code, and on hardware. Not just on surface level images and sounds' (2017, 3). While further study is required into all of the elements that comprise a videogame, in unpacking how the four types of videogame narratives function in combination, one can see how the medium specificity of a videogame Final Girl differs significantly from that of their cinematic counterparts (even when they share similarities on the surface). Furthermore, it indicates

how the wider transmedial concept of the Final Girl can be expanded to potentially incorporate these new perspectives and narrative approaches to resistance and reflections on the act of survival.

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2 Fighting Fate

Representations of a 'New Order' in *Beautiful Creatures*

Lauren Christie

For centuries, authors and storytellers have communicated idealised morals and messages to a young readership through the medium of literature. Even though the content of these messages may have evolved over time to reflect the relevance of a contemporary audience, the purpose remains the same: To support the reader as they navigate their way through the complexities of life. It can be argued that one powerful motive behind this form of storytelling is to support the reader through bibliotherapy, a form of literature that offers young readers an outlet to explore these complex changes or emotions. Dr Carol Berns from the Child Bereavement Centre in Florida defines bibliotherapy as: 'the use of reading materials to bring about some kind of change in affect or behaviour' (Berns 2004, 324). For example, the monstrous creature is frequently present in children's texts, often representing a metaphorical embodiment of a much more complex issue, such as depression or grief. Due to the versatility of bibliotherapy and its relationship with creativity and emotions, the diverse application offers a powerful insight into challenges or trauma that anyone may face in life.[1] Josie Billington acknowledges the importance of promoting reading to young people by arguing, 'reports from influential international and governmental bodies have shown recreational reading to have a more powerful effect on cognitive development, educational achievement and social mobility than socio-economic status' (Billington 2019, 1). Understanding the important role that literature, particularly in a bibliotherapeutic format, can have in a young reader's life, in what ways can we continue to produce content that is both beneficial and attractive to a young and ever-evolving readership? One theme that appears to be emerging amongst contemporary young adult literature (and many examples of children's fiction) is the retelling of traditional tales through adaptation, often with a gender role reversal. Elisabeth Gruner observes, 'fairy-tale and romance retellings […] become the means through which a gendered reading leads to female empowerment' (Gruner 2019, 55). Usually focusing on a reversal of gender stereotypes, contemporary fairy tales or young adult fantasy literature often explores themes of self-discovery and identity (whereby connecting contemporary literature with bibliotherapy). Many popular

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novels that embrace a gender role reversal and that are targeted towards a young audience often convey a powerful message to the reader, focusing on the emotional and physical journey of a strong female heroine; reading this through the lens of bibliotherapy has the added benefit of presenting a strong role model for a young audience.

Young adult fiction is a bourgeoning and continuously evolving genre that experiences a great deal of critical attention. As the genre might suggest, characters are often at the cusp of discovering their own identity as they age. Due to the high volume of contemporary young adult novels being published, society is saturated with options. Arguably, with so much choice and a great deal of repetition surrounding themes and tropes, the reader could come to expect an exploration of moral dilemmas, character development, or personal relationships. Despite this popularity of reinventing traditional tales, certain topics may be considered overworked within popular culture, resulting in tiresome stereotypes. One example of this overuse can arguably be identified through young adult novels that explore supernatural worlds and creatures (vampirism in Stephanie Meyers' *Twilight* series and Charlaine Harris' *True Blood* series for example). The more that this genre continues to develop, the reader may come to expect revisions and additions to these tropes, looking for refreshing adaptations of material published with the hope of reaching a wider contemporary audience who may be experiencing something similar in their personal lives. Contemporary young adult novels frequently consist of heroic female protagonists battling against predetermined ideals that may lead to them challenging and rebelling against political oppression, family or societal constraints, or peer pressure; this chapter will explore a novel that consists of a selection of these issues. Whilst there is a danger of labouring over repetitive ideas, this burgeoning critical interest in the supernatural within young adult fiction has led to a greater scope for future possibilities.

The present chapter will focus on the first novel in Kami Garcia and Margaret Stohl's Caster Chronicles series, *Beautiful Creatures*. Set against the suffocating backdrop of a small town in the southern United States, the first novel explores the arrival of Lena Duchannes and the unrest within the town in the wake of her presence. As the plot develops, revelations around Lena's personal life simultaneously disclose a complex and powerful supernatural world co-existing alongside this small-town American community. Lena must learn to control the supernatural strength she possesses within, to harness her powers and discover whether she is fated to become a Light or Dark Caster. Unable to accept the pathway of only one outcome, as the series develops it is revealed that Lena rebels against her ancient family custom by establishing her own destiny — one of both Light and Dark power. During the climactic ending of *Beautiful Creatures*, Lena likewise accomplishes what has never been achieved by blocking out the moonlight completely, thereby delaying her Claiming ceremony. Progressing the narrative and befitting to the genre, *Beautiful Creatures* also presents the reader with a powerful love

story between Lena and her co-protagonist, Ethan Lawson Wate. Their love story is accentuated through personal narratives, complex analepsis, and detailed story worlds that are all entwined. Creating such complex narrative layering that outlines societal and familial pressures highlights tensions surrounding the concept of fate and questions of free will.

As Lena and Ethan become closer, they discover that they can connect with each other through 'Kelting', a telepathic bond that they share. Their bond becomes stronger upon the discovery of an ancient locket in a nearby plantation, a talisman that transports them back in time in order to disclose vital information connected to their current relationship and future fate. Upon investigating this connection further, it transpires that the reason for their inexplicable draw towards the locket is deeply rooted in their combined family history; the bewitched object belonged to their distant ancestors who once shared a powerful love, doomed by their individual supernatural and mortal status. Garcia and Stohl make frequent use of analepsis to inform the reader of poignant moments in history which serve the purpose of drawing a connection between Lena and Ethan and their ancestors. The result of this complex narrative structure combines the past, present, and future with tensions between the supernatural and the mortal world. Due to a mixture of narrative time and place, the reader is alerted to the significance of the past in their present bond and how this discloses vital information as Lena and Ethan's relationship develops and they comprehend their future. As the young couple fight for their destiny, the characters are forced to unravel centuries' worth of family secrets to battle complex supernatural adversaries and ancient traditions that appear to work against them. Through Lena's journey to discover her own destiny, the protagonists encounter unexplored territories, powerful female characters, and familial rebellion; the pair must fight against expectations and tradition, thereby breaking traditional bonds and creating a unique future together.

Tensions between expectations (familial, cultural, religious, and political) and Lena's unconventional pathway create chaos as the wider book series unravels, with the authors disclosing more information about the supernatural world. Lena's decision to rebel against tradition by Claiming both Light and Dark magic results in her embodying a symbol of a new order of Caster; although this provides her with the autonomy to make her own life choices, it also has consequences that ricochet throughout the supernatural underground. Lena's character provides readers with a powerful representation of a young teenage girl who is finding her place in life, challenging societal expectations and those around her to establish a way forward that reflects all aspects of her personality and character in a healthy and authentic way. Furthermore, this series portrays ancient traditions that highlight ways in which Lena is presented as the last within her line of supernatural Casters due to selecting her own destiny during her 'Claiming' ceremony. Rather than following in the footsteps of her ancestors who were forced to choose between Light or Dark magic, good or evil, Lena blocks out the moonlight,

thereby delaying her Claiming ceremony until the series develops transpiring that Lena has embraced both the Light and Dark magic within. Remaining true to her own character, Lena embraces the moral complications of a humanity capable of both good and evil.

A shift occurs upon Lena's arrival and through Ethan's description of his town: 'there were only two kinds of people in our town. "The stupid and the stuck", my father had affectionately classified our neighbours. "The ones who are bound to stay or too dumb to go. Everyone else finds a way out'" (Garcia and Stohl 2010, 1). Ethan's comical description of Gatlin immediately makes an impression on the reader as to the nature of this town. Lena's arrival at the local high school, in a town so deeply rooted in comfort and routine, appears to disrupt the entire balance of the status quo:

> even if I hadn't seen her, I'd have known she was there […] everyone actually stepped aside when she came down the hall. Like she was a rock star. Or a leper. But all I could see was a beautiful girl […] a girl who didn't look like she belonged in Gatlin. I couldn't take my eyes off her.
>
> (32)

Ethan's initial description of Lena highlights two crucial character traits: Lena's individuality and her lack of interest in conforming to her peers. As the reader is introduced to Lena's character through Ethan's narrative, they are presented with a biased viewpoint from someone who is immediately struck by her refreshing appearance: 'she tucked her dark curls behind her ear, black nail polish catching the fluorescent light. Her hands were covered with black ink […] she walked down the hall as if we were invisible. She had the greenest eyes I'd ever seen, so green they could've been considered some new colour altogether' (ibid). Noting Lena's dark appearance through her hair, ink, and nail polish, it becomes clear that her character is adhering to an appearance considered stereotypically 'Gothic'.

Lena's presence in her new school necessarily generates interest from her peers; however, her lack of willingness to conform to their behaviour results in vilification. Lena is isolated by everyone except Ethan, and the further that she is taunted the more her rage grows in strength, eventually revealing the true nature of her powers:

> Lena was staring straight ahead, but her jaw was clenched and she was unnaturally focused on one point in the front of the room, like she couldn't see anything but that spot […] *ENOUGH!* Now the voice was so loud, I grabbed my ears. The grinding stopped. Glass went flying, splintering into the air, as the window shattered out of nowhere […] that's when I realised what that creaking sound had been. Pressure. Tiny cracks in the glass, spreading out like fingers.
>
> (58–9)

As the novel progresses and Lena edges closer to her Claiming ceremony, she discovers more about her magical abilities, which are often triggered by her emotions. During this scene, the ongoing bullying from her peers throws Lena into a supernatural rage which causes their classroom windows to explode. Although Garcia and Stohl have incorporated the stereotypical trope of a budding romance fighting against external forces, and a typical high school experience, the series presents something refreshing to a young readership — a greater level of autonomy for the heroine who creates her own destiny. Lena uses her growing bond with Ethan to support herself as she attempts to understand and control her powers so that she can channel them into a new pathway moving forward. Not unlike a young adult readership, Lena must endure the insufferable small mindset of local bullies to build resilience and learn to control both her gifts and her rage. As a couple and on an individual level, they must rebel against those around them to be together. Although this love interest does form much of the plot, the primary focus remains on Lena's decision and fate during the Claiming ceremony.

Continuing the notion of fate and predetermined pathways, Lena and Ethan are introduced to each other through uncanny circumstances. Implying that he felt it was 'fate', Ethan's intense feelings towards Lena dictate much of the narrative:

> Lena Duchannes. I couldn't breathe. I knew she had green eyes; I'd seen them before. But tonight they looked different — different from any eyes I'd ever seen. They were huge and unnaturally green, an electric green, like the lightning from the storm. Standing in the rain like that she almost didn't look human.
>
> (43)

During this expression, Ethan appears overwhelmed by the intensity of his feelings for Lena, whilst also subtly aware of her supernatural air. Despite this intensity and solidarity expressed towards Lena, on occasion Ethan's thoughts result in 'Othering' her:

> Ravenwood Manor, the great house. I had been so wrapped up in who she was, I had forgotten *who* she was. The girl I'd been dreaming about for months, the girl I couldn't stop thinking about, was Macon Ravenwood's niece. And I was driving her home to the Haunted Mansion.
>
> (48)

Similar to the Gatlin residents, Ethan appears to be identifying Lena solely through her relationship with a reclusive family living in a 'haunted mansion'. Although these suspicions are accurate regarding Lena's supernatural nature, Ethan detaches himself from the majority of his peers in order to provide support as she decides her fate. Learning more about the ceremony, Lena

explains that on her 16th birthday all members of her family must face their destiny by being Claimed as either a Light Caster or a Dark Caster — the ultimate representation of choosing a moral pathway between good and evil:

> In my family, when you turn sixteen, you're Claimed. Your fate is chosen for you, and you become Light […] or you become Dark […] Dark or Light, Black or White. There's no grey in my family. We can't choose, and we can't undo it once we're claimed. […] We can't decide if we want to be Light or Dark, good or evil, like Mortals and other Casters can. In my family, there's no free will. It's decided for us, on our sixteenth birthday.
>
> (188–9)

During this strained conversation with Ethan, Lena stresses that 'there is no free will' (191) because her understanding at this point in the novel is that she is unable to determine her own fate; she must instead accept what is out with her control. However, as Lena approaches her 16th birthday, further secrets about her future are disclosed:

> He's the one who has been lying to you all this time. He let you believe your fate was predetermined — that you didn't have a choice. That tonight, on your sixteenth birthday, you will be Claimed Light or Dark […] you're right, but you're different. Tonight, you will not be Claimed. You will have to Claim yourself." The words hung in the air. *Claim yourself*.
>
> (520)

The truth behind Lena's destiny is uncovered by her infamous Dark Caster mother, Sarafine. Throughout the novel Sarafine's name is feared within the supernatural world due to her power and strength. Revealing herself towards the climax of the first novel, Sarafine discloses vital information to Lena causing confusion, and takes great pleasure in explaining that whichever side Lena chooses, the other side will perish. This revelation not only contributes pressure to Lena's decision, but also exposes Sarafine's ulterior motives for leading her daughter into the darkness. When confronted with the weight of these consequences, Sarafine furthers her disruptive presence within the family by burdening Lena with this decision of life or death for those around her. However, adhering to her stereotype of a rebellious heroine, Lena turns against tradition and predetermined expectations by selecting her own pathway moving forward. During the Claiming ceremony on her 16th birthday, she blocks out the moonlight and therefore at that point remains unclaimed, thereby breaking a centuries-old tradition. As the series develops, Lena chooses both Light and Dark magic as she moves forward — again something that has never been previously achieved.

During the scenes of temptation from her mother and her Dark Caster cousin Ridley, the authors focus on fire, ancient casts that stem from the

magical 'Book of Moons', and present another of Lena's cousins, Larkin, in the shapeshifter form of a snake. These aspects directly mirror a biblical scene, with the Book of Moons treated as the Christian community of Gatlin would view their Holy Bible and the Snake as the ultimate symbol of temptation from the Garden of Eden. Reflecting on the history of children's literature, the presence of a tempting Satanic figure frequents many beloved bedtime stories (for example the wolf in *Little Red Cap* by the Brothers Grimm), emphasising to a young reader the importance of choosing the 'correct' moral pathway through life. Although contemporary novels still relay this message on occasion, there has been an identifiable shift, as demonstrated by Lena's character acknowledging both the Light and the Dark, the 'correct' moral pathway and the human tendency to succumb to temptation. Lena therefore further represents a new order by demonstrating to the reader the shift between an outdated notion of moral decisions existing in a vacuum and the decision to embrace human flaws.

Introducing the Book of Moons to the reader, although clearly a symbol of a supernatural religious order, the authors succeed in emphasising a darker significance of something demonic:

> The book was warm. As if it were alive, breathing […] Then she saw it. It was in Latin, a language she knew well […] The Binding Spell. To Bind Death To Life […] "Miss Genevieve, you need to understand. Those words are more than a Cast. They're a bargain. You can't use The Book a Moons, without givin' somthin' in return." […] she was crossing a line none of the Casters in her family would ever have dared.
>
> (240–1)

The book is first introduced to the reader in such graphic detail through one of the supernatural flashbacks, informing Lena and Ethan of its significance. During this scene, they become aware of Lena's ancestor Genevieve's decision to cast a spell in order to bring her beloved back to life after he is killed during the Civil War. Making a deal with the Devil to do so, reveals to Lena the origins of the Duchannes family curse and the true cost of Genevieve's actions, "*You can't get nothin' from* The Book a Moons *without givin' somethin' in return* […] *Your fate, child. Your date and the fate a every other Duchannes child that's born after you'* (314). Expanding on the significance of the Book of Moons and Lena's journey as a rebellious symbol of futurity, Gruner explains:

> Magical books have a long history in children's and young adult literature […] some have built communities, others have threatened or even shattered them. Young adult novels that depict readers engaging with magical, prophetic, or sacred texts literalize the potential dangers that certain books […] may incite risky but ultimately beneficial action. They demonstrate both the promise and the threat of literacy.
>
> (Gruner 2019, 116)

This quotation refers to the archaic perceived dangers in exposing women to literature. In *Beautiful Creatures*, the Book of Moons houses the one spell that doomed Lena's ancestor Genevieve and cursed their entire bloodline. However, this can also be viewed as Gatlin's regressive community reacting to the threat of Lena interacting with magic. Despite emphasising her ancient lineage, Lena's family are scrutinised by the residents of the town. The 'closed' nature of the town merely accentuates the narrow-minded nature of the inhabitants, and despite Lena's family being one of ancestral status, they are vilified due to their reclusive nature. Upon describing Lena's uncle Macon, her peers observe, ""just like Old Man Ravenwood. He's probably tryin' to lure those kids into his house so he can kill them […] then he can put their bodies in his hearse and take them out to the middle a nowhere and bury them." *Shut up*. I heard the voice in my head again' (Garcia and Stohl 2010, 57–8). On this occasion, Lena's hostile peers drawing similarities between her car and a hearse, and her uncle to a killer furthers Lena's status as a recluse. During this scene, Ethan is aware of Lena's distress as she is exposed to her classmates' toxicity about her uncle. *Beautiful Creatures* is primarily narrated by Ethan, with the majority of Lena's voice being presented through their supernatural Kelting. Although Ethan and Lena are presented as a united front, the decision to base the novel primarily on Ethan's narrative further isolates Lena from the reader.

Despite the toxicity of Gatlin's behaviour towards Lena and her family, Macon makes his view clear on the town:

> "Ravenwood is my home, not Gatlin." He spat out the word like it was toxic. "When I pass on from the binds of this life, I will have to find someone to care for Ravenwood in my place, since I have no children. It's always been my great and terrible purpose, to keep Ravenwood alive. I like to think of myself as the curator of a living museum."
>
> (2010, p.124)

Regarding Macon's supernatural status, this viewpoint provides crucial insight into his relationship with their family home and history. Describing Ravenwood as his 'terrible purpose' and likening the building to a 'living museum' implies a deeper connection to a vastly supernatural hub housing their supernatural family. Referring to Gatlin through a toxic tone suggests that neither Macon nor Lena are affected by popular opinion from local residents. Observing the significance of landscape and the house in Southern Gothic traditions, Timothy Jones explains,

> it is often remarked that the house — and especially the collapsing house — sits at the centre of the Southern Gothic […] the collapsing house is the place where the disintegrating family unhappily attempts to reside […] the past of the South haunts its present.
>
> (Jones 2018, 54)

The collapsing house reflecting a disintegrating family unit has played a significant role in contemporary horror literature and is a feature that dates back to the original crumbling castles present in traditional Gothic literature. The unusually lifelike manner of Ravenwood is further explained as the Caster series develops, when Ethan reveals that the house, under a supernatural hex, directly reflects Lena's temperament. Therefore, when Lena feels overwhelmed by familial expectations and pressures, the house adopts a similar state of chaos and disarray. During his initial state of ignorance, Ethan puzzles, 'it didn't make sense. Ravenwood had transformed into something entirely different since the last time I was there. It looked impossible, like I had stepped back in history' (Garcia and Stohl 2010, 123).

As their relationship progresses, Ethan furthers the connection between Ravenwood and the uncanny by noting,

> I wasn't scared of Ravenwood, even if it turned out to be as creepy as it looked. The unexplained was sort of a given in the South; every town has a haunted house, and if you asked most folks, at least a third of them would swear they'd seen a ghost.
>
> (63)

Returning to Lena and Macon's combined indifference for the residents, their detachment generates speculation, mystery, and gossip about supernatural and 'unholy' activity. Ethan recalls his best friend's mother 'campaigning to ban' the *Harry Potter* books her son was reading 'because she thought it promoted witchcraft' (107). In a town that celebrates the violent history of the Civil War on an annual basis, and that resides over an underground labyrinth of supernatural tunnels and behaviour, the ongoing battle between mortals and supernatural beings merely highlights Gatlin's prejudiced behaviour. Ironically, there is a great deal of similarity between J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series and the Caster Chronicles when considering themes, tropes and a young audience. Discussing the politics and racism present in *Harry Potter*, Bethany Barratt observes, 'Perhaps the single most important political theme in Rowling's works is the simultaneous power and danger of racial and genetic politics' (Barratt 2012, 59). Comparing the strict anti-muggle viewpoint of 'pure bloods' in *Harry Potter* with the Dark Casters and their violent opposition towards the mortal world and Light Casters alike, similarities arise surrounding prejudice and race.

Beautiful Creatures explores a great deal of hostility through tensions between the supernatural and the mortal worlds, tensions within the supernatural realm between Light and Dark Casters, and the flashbacks to the Civil War. Placing Lena at the centre of this unrest creates a bond with a young readership as she attempts to navigate her way through a supernatural storm. Discussing the influence of the American Civil War, Steffen Hantke explains:

> War could be presented as an expression of humanity's worst moral impulses, a scenario in which war would be subject to collective and individual moral choice […] war could be presented as a result of the species' evolutionary programming, a scenario that dooms humanity to self-destruction due to a tragic flaw in its essential make-up.
>
> (Hantke 2018, 31)

As Lena attempts to understand her powers and determine her own future, she is forced to do so amidst the chaos of the unrest surrounding her. Observing that war is 'an expression of humanity's worst moral impulses' supports the strong theme running throughout the book of autonomy and Lena's necessity to be Claimed as either Light or Dark, and in the end, choosing both pathways for herself.

As Jones explains, 'The Southern Gothic's concerns move beyond the borders of the states it depicts and it becomes a national genre; but in doing so it risks offering only the shadowed history of slavery and various Southern miseries' (Jones 2018, 55). Observing the connection between the America South and slavery, Jones highlights a theme that runs strongly throughout this novel. Gatlin and its residents are enslaved by their own history due to the annual re-enactment of the Civil War and their apparent inability to embrace contemporary society, as evidenced by their reaction to Lena. The notion of a 'shadowed history' is reflected strongly through Gatlin and its residents and succeeds in casting Lena and her family as outsiders; Lena is the symbolic representation of a new order, and is therefore considered strikingly different within this setting. The residents are likewise considered an additional factor in Lena's distress due to the fact they are vehemently against witchcraft, 'throughout the Christian tradition, belief in the power of the demonic to invade our world has ebbed and flowed, but it never disappeared entirely. Conflating belief in witchcraft with the Devil and his fallen angel' (Cowan 2008, 176). Despite being supernatural and residing in a religious town, Lena and her family have followed tradition for centuries. The authors succeed in presenting Lena as the embodiment of a new supernatural order, doing so by situating Lena in an environment where she appears to be constantly searching for her place amongst the mortal inhabitants of Gatlin and her supernatural family and ancestors.

As the series progresses it becomes clear that both Lena and Ethan belong to families that are firmly rooted in tradition. Gatlin's community succeeds in portraying Lena and her supernatural family as outcasts; Ethan's primary carer Amma practices voodoo culture, worshipping her ancestors and attempting to protect Lena and Ethan from supernatural unrest. Macon Ravenwood's overprotective nature towards Lena is apparent upon first discovering that they possess the infamous locket. Despite his powerful supernatural gifts, Macon is noted as 'taking great efforts to compose himself. His glib manner was gone. His voice had an edge, a sense of urgency he was trying very hard to disguise' (Garcia and Stohl 2010, 129). During a threatening interaction with Lena's Dark Caster cousin, Ethan observes, 'Macon walked

down the staircase, without taking his eyes off Ridley. I was watching two lions circle each other, and I was standing in the middle' (167). Acting as a parallel to their ancestor's fate, Lena and Ethan are both at the mercy of war, which threatens to break them apart; on this occasion this takes the form of a supernatural battle between Light and Dark Casters. As time progresses and Lena is clearer about the purpose of the locket in enlightening them of the doomed fate of their ancestors, they learn more about its purpose:

> "What about this locket?" I pointed at the photo, almost afraid to ask. "Supposedly, Ethan gave it to Genevieve, as a troth of secret engagement […] it was said to be a powerful talisman, the broken bond of a broken heart." I shivered. The powerful talisman wasn't buried with Genevieve; it was in my pocket, and a Dark talisman according to Macon and Amma. I could feel it throbbing, as if it had been baking in hot coals.
>
> (236)

As Ethan learns more about the significance of the locket and the darkness it possesses, describing it 'throbbing' in his pocket draws a parallel between the dark power of the locket and the darkness generating the Book of Moons.

Beautiful Creatures presents the reader with a powerful heroine who eventually champions her own destiny; however, it also introduces readers to powerfully dark supernatural females within Lena's family. Upon considering traditions and stereotypes, the novel presents several striking conundrums. For example, although the novel champions the strong heroine determining her own fate, it likewise weaponises femininity through monstrous beings such as dark witches and Sirens. Lena notes Ridley is a Siren, beings who are understood to be some of the most powerful and dangerous supernatural female creatures in existence. Explaining her powers to Ethan, Lena notes, Ridley's a Siren. Her gift is the Power of Persuasion. She can put any idea into anyone's head, get them to tell her anything, do anything. If she used her power on you, and she told you to jump off a cliff–you'd jump (Garcia and Stohl 2010, 183). During Ethan's first interaction with Ridley, he introduces her through a striking appearance and as an unsettling embodiment of a powerful Other within Gatlin's small community:

> There she was. The second prettiest-girl I had ever seen […] she was sucking on a lollipop like a cigarette, her pouty red lips made even redder by the cherry-coloured stain […] she had long blonde hair, with a thick pink stripe sweeping down one side of her face […] she was wearing giant black sunglasses and a short black pleated skirt, like some kind of Goth cheerleader. Her cut-off white tank was so thin, you could see half of some kind of black bra, and most of everything else. And there was plenty to see. Black motorcycle boots, a belly ring, and a tattoo […] I was trying not to stare.
>
> (159–60)

Later in the novel when Ridley's true nature is disclosed, she begins to interfere with Lena's decision to try and entice her towards the darkness. At this point, the nature of Ethan's description shifts significantly,

> Ridley turned to me and smiled, pulling her shades from her eyes. They were just wrong, glowing gold, as if they were on fire. They were shaped like a cat's, with black slits in the middle […] She looked over at me, with that sinister smile, and her face was twisted into darkness and shadows […] she looked like a monster.
>
> (174–5)

A similarly ominous introduction is placed around Sarafine's first appearance as Lena prepares herself to face her mother:

> Amma looked at the ceiling, mumbling under her breath. "She's comin', child. She's comin' for you, and she's a force to be reckoned with. As Dark as night." […] Amma pulled a small pouch that was dangling from a leather cord around her neck out of her shirt and clutched it, lowering her voice like she was afraid someone might hear her. "Sarafine. The Dark One." "Who's Sarafine?" Amma hesitated, clutching the pouch even tighter. "Your mamma […] She's the Darkest Caster livin' today".
>
> (290)

Amma's introduction of Sarafine is furthered when Ethan first encounters her, noting, 'where Lena was frighteningly beautiful, Sarafine was simply frightening […] instead of Lena's beautiful green eyes, she had the same glowing yellow eyes as Ridley and Genevieve. And the eyes made all the difference' (516). The eyes of Light and Dark Casters throughout the series are noted as green or gold to differentiate between good and evil. As the series progresses, having chosen both Light and Dark, Lena's eyes become both green and gold. As Lena learns more about her mother's dark powers, she appears to act in an even more powerful manner, challenging her mother's Caster abilities and rebelling against her pre-determined fate,

> Sarafine didn't stop. Lena closed her hand. A fire line shot up through the tall grass. Sarafine froze in her tracks. She hadn't expected Lena to be capable of much more than what she had probably considered a little wind and rain.
>
> (531)

During this climactic scene in the novel, despite Sarafine's role as temptress to Lena's destiny, the fact that Lena was the original firestarter through her powers is significant as reflecting both the Light and Dark capabilities within her.

Lena Duchannes is a powerful embodiment of the contemporary heroine who engages courage and autonomy to challenge predisposed archaic traditions

and fight for her own fate, future, and destiny. Lena's strength is perfectly situated against a challenging and oppressive small town in Southern America, which succeeds in emphasising the difference between Lena and her peers but also highlights the stark contrast between the residents' moral beliefs and the Ravenwoods' supernatural powers. Despite the constant unrest and chaos surrounding them, through Lena and Ethan's relationship, Lena is able to draw upon the strength from Ethan's devotion to find her own pathway both in terms of her powers, as well as regarding their 'ill-fated' relationship as both supernatural and mortal. Similar to bedtime stories of the past, the novel consists of moral messages and suggestions, but with a contemporary twist through the autonomy and strength of the protagonist. *Beautiful Creatures* situates Lena as a powerful figure of rebellion to young readers as she must choose her own moral pathway, determining her own future as a Light or a Dark Caster. As such, the Caster series is a prime example of young adult literature that provides the reader with powerful female characters who are aware of the consequences of their actions and are reaching a critical point in their lives where they must decide on the nature of their morals and the use of their power (for good or evil); a decision which inevitably impacts their future destiny.

Note

1 This information has been selected from my unpublished doctoral thesis, exploring the application of bibliotherapy in children's literature.

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3 The Shadow Self and the New Girl

Breaking Down the Old Worlds in Ursula Le Guin's *The Tombs of Atuan* and N.K. Jemisin's *The Stone Sky*

Bronwen Calvert

In her essay 'The Child and the Shadow', Ursula Le Guin discusses the interplay between fantasy literature — especially stories that centre on adolescent protagonists — and the Jungian concepts of the unconscious and shadow-selves. For Le Guin, these young fantasy characters occupy a special place in relation to a developing understanding of their shadow-self:

> For the shadow stands on the threshold. We can let it bar the way to the creative depths of the unconscious, or we can let it lead us to them. For the shadow is not simply evil. It is inferior, primitive, awkward, animal-like, childlike; powerful, vital, spontaneous. It's not weak and decent […] it's dark and hairy and unseemly; but, without it, the person is nothing. What is a body that casts no shadow? Nothing, a formlessness, two-dimensional, a comic-strip character. The person who denies his own profound relationship with evil denies his own reality. He cannot do, or make; he can only undo, unmake.
>
> (1980, 64)

Le Guin views the encounter with the shadow-self as part of a journey or rite of passage in which the adolescent character travels 'down into the subconscious and the collective unconscious, and up again to self-knowledge, to adulthood, to the light' (1980, 65), crossing that 'threshold' and 'undergo[ing] an inner quest to confront the shadow' (Littlefield, 1995, 244), a process that follows the pattern of the mythic 'hero's journey'.

In this chapter I examine the motif of the journey to discover the shadow-self in connection with the child/young teenage heroines of Le Guin's *The Tombs of Atuan* (1971; the second book of her *Earthsea* trilogy) and N. K. Jemisin's *The Stone Sky* (2017; the final novel of her *Broken Earth* trilogy). While Le Guin engages directly with Jungian myth and symbol in her fiction, Jemisin, without directly referring to Le Guin's understanding of the shadow-self, nevertheless presents a world-view that in many ways echoes Le Guin's. The central character of *The Tombs of Atuan* is believed to be the reincarnated priestess of the Nameless Ones, born to a poor farming family she can hardly remember. She is trained from childhood to follow the Temple rituals

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and to devote herself entirely to the service of the gods. Her previous life is entirely erased, and this is reflected in her renaming from her birth name, Tenar, to Arha, meaning the 'Eaten One'; her selfhood is symbolically 'eaten' in the service of the Nameless Ones. In *The Stone Sky*, Nassun is an 'orogene', an individual who can sense, communicate with, and draw geological power from the earth and from huge crystal 'obelisks' that orbit it. The practice of orogeny is illegal on this planet; only those trained in official centres, known as the Fulcrum, are permitted to use their abilities to stop or divert geological disasters. Orogenes living outside the Fulcrum must hide or mask their abilities in order to survive, since they will be killed if their gift is discovered. Both these young characters are positioned as shadow/other, as separate, and as dangerous; both evidence a connection to the earth and to 'dark' powers and are linked with oppositions such as making and unmaking, darkness and light. As female adolescents, these characters disrupt the usual structures of the 'hero's journey', which includes the resolutions of their narratives. In examining parallels within novels published 46 years apart, I highlight the similarities in the characters' experiences of their respective journeys and in the resolution of each narrative through connections the child/adolescent heroines forge with their shadow-selves. These connections allow them to undergo 'profound transformation' (Cassidy 2021, 65), to claim their authentic selves and — as Le Guin suggests — create their own realities. This analysis reveals the enduring nature of this mythical structure for adolescent heroines in fantasy narratives.

Engagement with the shadow-self via a journey into unconscious depths or darkness is an enduring motif for Le Guin. It is evident throughout her essays and talks, as well as in her fiction. In *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968), the wizard Ged battles a 'shadow' he released into the world during a failed spell, a shadow which turns out to share his own true name. Ged appears in *The Tombs of Atuan* as a guide to Arha as she grapples with her own shadow aspect. Similarly, in the Broken Earth trilogy, Jemisin presents Nassun's growth as an orogene, even when accompanied by guide/Guardian Schaffa, as a struggle with that 'powerful, vital, spontaneous […] unseemly' dark aspect of her self, which could at any moment overcome her control. In both narratives, a (symbolic and literal) journey beneath the earth provides the means for these adolescent female characters to undergo powerful transformations in the process of acknowledging and accepting their shadow-selves, and thus uniting all aspects of their being.

The question of 'balance' is central to much of Le Guin's thinking on the journey towards the shadow-self and ensuing acceptance and transformation. The ideal 'balance' is frequently expressed as an interaction between darkness and light, as in the guidance the young wizard Ged receives: 'But you must not change one thing, one pebble, one grain of sand, until you know what good and evil will follow on that act. The world is in balance, in Equilibrium' (1968, 56). The world of Earthsea is in constant conflict between good and evil, light and dark, as the adult Ged tells Arha, 'The Earth is beautiful, and bright, and kindly, but that is not all. The Earth is also terrible, and

dark, and cruel' (1971, 118). The concept of balance or equilibrium is pivotal too in Jemisin's *Broken Earth* trilogy. There, the 'Stillness' is a world thrown violently out of equilibrium and subject to random geological events that bring destructive 'fifth seasons' to the surviving populace. In both narratives, a striving for balance implies that good and evil, light and dark, coexist; that one is not complete without the other. The connection and reconciliation with shadow-selves that the young characters Arha in *Atuan* and Nassun in *Stone Sky* experience, and the journeys they undergo, are set against this view of balance. As Le Guin notes, what is 'inferior, primitive, awkward, animal-like, childlike' is also 'powerful, vital, spontaneous' (1980, 64), and thus, the whole process of connection and achievement of balance with a shadow-self is an essential one in the individual's development.

The quest or journey to achieve this balance, a key aspect of fantasy narratives, dramatises 'that journey, its perils and rewards' through 'the symbolic language of the deeper psyche' (Le Guin 1980, 65). This archetypal journey is conceptualised by Joseph Campbell as 'the hero's journey' (1949), and reframed by Annis Pratt as 'the heroine's quest' (1998). These journey archetypes outline common features, such as the departure from the everyday world, encounters with adversaries and with helpers, ordeals leading to transformation, and the return from the quest. Conceptualising Le Guin's and Jemisin's narratives as quests or hero(ine)'s journeys is complicated by the age and gender of these characters; Arha is around 15, Nassun around 11. Arha's and Nassun's presence at specific locations come about through forces acting upon them, not through their own quests to reach these places. Instead of the 'call to adventure' of the hero's journey, Arha and Nassun experience a removal from their known environment; it can certainly be argued that neither character chooses her move to 'adventure'. Furthermore, each adolescent character could be seen as a peripheral player in the narrative. *Atuan* can be read as a story of Ged's quest to find the Ring of Erreth-Akbe, told from an outsider's point of view (Nodelman 1995, 187; St John Stott 2006). Similarly, alternating chapters of *The Stone Sky*, and much of the previous books of Jemisin's trilogy, focus on Nassun's mother Essun, and her quest to find her daughter.

However, both narratives are structured in other ways that fit the pattern of quest or heroine's journey, and this is especially so in the sequences of physical travel underground, which are also mapped as interior journeys. Arha's journey takes place beneath the Tombs of Atuan themselves, within the Labyrinth's paths and hidden spaces, and is carried out mostly in darkness, both mental and actual. Arha's engagement with her shadow-self is characterised through the patterns of connection and trust she establishes with Ged. Nassun's quest or journey plays with the usual concept that such an endeavour passes from 'darkness'/ignorance to 'light'/enlightenment or knowledge. Nassun's literal journey is motivated by hatred and revenge — she intends to use her orogenic powers to cause the Moon to collide with the Earth and so destroy humanity. Yet the new connections Nassun achieves

through her quest ultimately change her intended path. What both these narratives have in common is the intersection of the quest/journey motif with the character's developing discovery, and subsequent acceptance, of their shadow-self. What both show, also, is the enduring nature of the journey or quest motif, especially with regard to the transformation that is part of a traditional 'hero's journey' or rite of passage. Le Guin described *Atuan* as 'a feminine coming of age' and noted that '[b]irth, rebirth, destruction, freedom are the themes' (1976, 11). Both adolescent characters engage in 'a dynamic and active retrieval of selfhood' (Cassidy 2021, 84) through their decisions to embark on their journeys through darkness.

In conceptualising the powers each adolescent girl possesses, both Le Guin and Jemisin describe them in terms of what is dark, what is hidden, and what is kept secret; these powers become linked to their dark shadow-selves. Arha's education as Priestess of the Nameless Ones is framed as a passing on of secret information between her past and present self: the former One Priestess instructs other women, who in turn use that information to train Arha after her reincarnation (1971, 57). At 15, Arha is taught about 'certain matters pertaining to the Domain of the Nameless Ones' (34), specifically, details of the Labyrinth that is Arha's 'own domain' (35). The passing on of knowledge and power in this place is thus connected to Arha's past lives as One Priestess, reinforcing a sense that Arha is a shadow in the long line of previous Priestesses.

> The dark places under the hill were so familiar to her, as if they were not only her domain, but her home […] she danced across the centuries, barefoot in black robes, and knew that the dance had never ceased.
>
> (58)

While critics note that 'Le Guin's labyrinths, like her caves, are places that resonate with the subtlety and mysticism of female power' (Douglas and Byrne 2014, 5), this can be seen more as potential than actuality, and it is a precarious potential. The novel dramatises an ongoing power struggle between the 'Nameless Ones' whose worship is fading over time, and the more recently established 'Godking', who possesses wealth and political power. The Temple plain of Atuan is isolated, 'nobody came but under orders' and '[p]ilgrims were very few' (1971, 59). The chanting at Arha's dedication ceremony of 'a word so old it had lost its meaning [….] Over and over they chanted the empty word' (16) epitomises the 'meaningless repetition' of her existence as Priestess (Donaldson 2013, 44). These examples strongly suggest that, rather than possessing hidden or secret powers, Arha's 'domain' is as empty and forgotten as the rituals she performs.

The Broken Earth's orogenes exist in secrecy and concealment, owing to the general population's mistrust, fear, and mistreatment of them. Like other orogenes, Nassun has had to keep her powers secret, to suppress them for fear of discovery. Jemisin's depiction of orogenes highlights the subjugation

of peoples under colonial powers; '[i]nspired in particular by African-American experience, orogen[e]s could be any of numerous racial and ethnic groups that have been enslaved across human history' (Iles 2019, 8; see also Steur 2022, 120–1). Nassun's developing command of her orogeny is shaped by her Guardian Schaffa's previous connections with the official Fulcrum training centres and their use of orogenes as tools to exploit the Earth's energies, and so it is also caught up with dark and violent actions to subjugate and exploit orogenes. As Schaffa explains:

> We [the Guardians] prevent orogeny from disappearing — because in truth, the people of the world would not survive without it. Orogenes are essential. And yet, because you are essential, you cannot be permitted to have a *choice* in the matter. You must be tools — and tools cannot be people.
>
> (2015, 178; italics original)

As San Miguel notes, '[f]or orogenes, staying alive entails being enslaved, dehumanised' (2020, 476). Part of Nassun's growth, especially through the narrative of *The Stone Sky*, is towards the realisation of the way her society has treated people with her powers. Her orogenic abilities are 'dark', both in the sense that they are dangerous, and in the sense that they are reviled and rejected by others. Nassun begins to question that rejection; though her unconscious voice reminds her of her shadow self, '*But you have done such evil things*', she asserts, 'I don't think being [an orogene] makes me bad or strange or evil' (2015, 87; italics original). She comes to realise that 'the things that happen to orogenes don't just happen. They've been *made* to happen' and that this has implications for her own continued survival: 'People need other people to live. And if she has to fight to live, against every person in every comm?' (178). For both Nassun and Arha, the realisation of the exploitative or empty social structures around them lead them to begin their journeys towards enlightenment. Their journeys include the rejection of established ways of being — in Nassun's case, a rejection so strong that she is willing to create apocalypse rather than continue within existing structures — and the determination to break the patterns and systems of their old worlds.

In both narratives, the journeys made by the adolescent heroines take the form of a literal and symbolic descent into darkness. In *The Tombs of Atuan*, Le Guin utilises imagery very deliberately in descriptions of Arha's descent to the Labyrinth. The place is physically dark, excessively so: 'It was absolutely black. There was no light. The dark seemed to press like wet felt upon the open eyes' (1971, 40). Le Guin's descriptions show that Arha finds the Labyrinth special and compelling, a secret and unseen space where paradoxically she is able to move freely. She cannot use sight to find her way; instead '[t]ouch was one's whole guidance; one could not see the way, but held it in one's hands' (42). Arha's initial affinity with the Labyrinth is shown in descriptions of darkness and movement: the place 'seemed sweet and

peaceful as a starless night'; she 'plunged into the clean darkness, hurried forward through it like a swimmer through water' (45); 'she blew out the candle […] and without slowing her pace at all went forward in the pitch dark, easy as a little fish in dark water' (68). Arha's movement through the dark passageways is figured as similar to movement in water, through something that has mass and weight, and could overcome the unwary or unskilled. Like the champion swimmer or the fish, Arha has the skill to navigate this potentially dangerous environment.

In the motif of the Labyrinth, Le Guin includes 'the connotations of getting lost and finding one's way, which are associated with labyrinths and mazes, as metaphors for self-transformation' (Douglas and Byrne 2014, 5). The Labyrinth can be viewed more negatively, as 'an emblem of social and spiritual constriction' (Donoso 2019, 120; my translation), and this is reinforced when Arha's symbolic journey to confront with her shadow-self includes her passage through the mental darkness of her ingrained beliefs in the Nameless Ones. Ged tells Arha, 'They are not gods' (1971, 118, 125), yet these beings do have power: 'They are dark and undying, and they hate the light' (118), 'they are stronger than any man' (125). Arha's sense of her own underground 'domain' shifts, becoming uncertain and threatening. She attempts to communicate with those dark powers but, despite her years of dedication and ritual, 'There was no answer. There had never been an answer' (134). To remake and reclaim herself as Tenar, she must face the shadow-self who has followed those dark powers, 'who condemned three men to death by starvation, […] who is capable of evil' (Sobat 1996, 28). Sobat's analysis specifically names Arha as 'her [Tenar's] darker self' (ibid), and this is reinforced when Tenar reclaims her name and asserts her new self, accepting that this means 'Arha will die' (ibid) as she refuses an empty future as the One Priestess.

Nassun's physical journey to Corepoint is another journey into hidden depths and darkness. These qualities are emphasised through Jemisin's language in this section, with the movement into 'the yawning black of the pit. There's nothing ahead any more. Only down' (2015, 238). Yet it is from this darkness that Nassun is made aware of a completely new perspective from which to see the world. She sees 'the world's unfettered heart' (243–4) and even has the illusion that she is '*touching* the burning earth' (240, italics in original). Unlike Arha's Nameless Ones, the Earth does speak to Nassun, '*Hello, little enemy*' (245; italics in original). Nassun experiences a closeness and melding, 'she is part of the earth […] It is *her*, it is *in* her, she is in *it*' (240, italics in original). Jemisin's patterning of italicised words here emphasise the way in which Nassun and the earth, two exploited and subjugated entities, join together and communicate. As Alastair Iles notes, Jemisin's trilogy 'evoke[s] an ecocentric perspective in which Earth's presence and power must be respected, not despoiled' (2019, 14). Through her journey through the Earth, Nassun realises that the Earth itself is a sentient being, pillaged by humans 'not used to respecting lives different from their own. […] they saw

only another thing to exploit' (2015, 247–8). Jemisin makes a parallel between Nassun's vengeful rage and the Earth: like the Earth, Nassun has used her orogenic powers to kill and destroy; like the Earth, she has been exploited. 'The people of the Stillness have long since robbed her of childhood and any hope of a real future' (248) and her anger reinforces her determination that '[t]his has to stop. I will stop it' (249). Through this underground journey, Nassun melds with the Earth as her shadow-self, the angry, vengeful orogene, vows to enact the Earth's wish for revenge. It is a key point of contrast between these two narratives that, while the silence of the Nameless Ones reinforces Arha's turn from them, symbolised by the restoration of her childhood name Tenar (109), the speaking Earth turns Nassun away from humanity, as it awakens her to the realisation that her planet is a living entity that has been exploited just as orogenes have been.

Facing the dark capabilities of her shadow-self, and the mental darkness of the Nameless Ones, enables Tenar to turn away from destruction towards balance and enlightenment. In *Atuan*, this turn is expressed as a death and rebirth. With the restoration of her birth name, Arha becomes Tenar once again, an ordinary girl, not the One Priestess. Where Arha had walked and run through the darkness of the Labyrinth, Tenar is 'afraid of the dark' and of vengeful gods: 'If I leave the service of the Dark Ones, they will kill me. If I leave this place I will die' (1971, 126). Ged's reply, 'You will not die. Arha will die' (127), emphasises the rebirth open to Tenar if she can overcome her past training and assumptions. It is important to note that Tenar makes her own choice to leave the Tombs. She plays an active part (Littlefield 1995, 248); she and Ged work together, in 'a healing reconciliation of masculine and feminine' (Sobat 1996, 28) to find and restore the Ring of Erreth-Akbe (1971, 127–8) and then to find a way out of the Labyrinth, using Tenar's embodied knowledge of the passageways and Ged's ability to create light and break through the 'red rock of the shut door' into the open air (135). This counters the early part of her story, when she was removed from her birth family and taken to the Tombs. Now, Tenar is an active participant in her own journey.

Tenar's process of rebirth is represented through light imagery. Her journey to enlightenment begins when, as Arha, she sees Ged's wizard light inside the Labyrinth, a 'faint blooming of light where no light had ever been, in the inmost grave of darkness' (69). The light reveals

> the great vaulted cavern […] not hollowed by man's hand but by the powers of the Earth. […] immense, with glittering roof and walls, sparkling, delicate, intricate, a palace of diamonds, a house of amethyst and crystal, from which the ancient darkness had been driven out by glory.
> (ibid)

This experience of light and of what it reveals in the Labyrinth is the beginning of her slow enlightenment and the transformation of her shadow-self, symbolised through further light imagery. Ged describes her 'like a lantern

swathed and covered, hidden away in a dark place. Yet the light shines' (120) and tells her, 'You were never made for cruelty and darkness; you were made to hold light' (158). Light imagery is dominant in their escape sequence: Ged's wizard light is 'a white radiance that broke as a sea-wave breaks in sunlight' (135), and Tenar is able to leave the Tombs when she fixes her eyes on 'the starlight on the silver of the ring on her arm' (136). At the end of their journey, when they reach the king's city, a new light shines: 'She lifted up her right hand, and sunlight flashed on the silver of the ring' (160).

Nassun's enlightenment and rebirth is a more complex process. It arises from her intention to destroy the world and becomes a battle against her mother Essun, who is trying to restore the world. By linking her orogeny to the obelisks orbiting the planet and manipulating their energy, Nassun reaches a new development in her orogenic powers. Her connection with the Obelisk Gate 'makes her temporarily omnipotent' (2015, 304); however, Nassun's omnipotence is impossible to sustain. Engagement with energy conducted through the obelisks eventually turns the human body into stone, and this is Nassun's first, physical transformation: 'her crystallization has begun', 'the fingers of her left hand have turned as brown and stony as [her mother Essun's] own (384–5)'. Nassun's second, mental transformation is her understanding of Essun's intention to save the world: 'End the Seasons. Fix the world. This […] was [Essun's] last wish' (387). At the 'omnipotent' peak of her orogenic power, as Essun dies in order to save her daughter, Nassun no longer 'allow[s] [her] vast sorrow and outrage to take [her] over' (San Miguel 2020, 473) and instead uses her physical and mental transformations to move towards restoration and renewal.

The traditional finishing point for a quest, hero/heroine's journey, or rite of passage is the return or reintegration of the protagonist. Typically, in fantasy stories, the hero/heroine emerges from their journey in possession of new, special powers. Their return is thus also a starting point, from which they will embark on new adventures with the powers they have gained. As Pratt notes in relation to archetypes of female quest narratives, however, the return process may be more difficult for a heroine, who differs from a hero in that she 'is unlikely to be able to reintegrate herself fully into "normal" society' (Pratt 1988, 143; Sobat 1996, 24). In the examples of Le Guin and Jemisin, the adolescent heroines conclude their journeys having lost or given up their special gifts or status. Arha has become Tenar and is no longer the One Priestess; through her alignment with the Gate, Nassun can no longer be an orogene. In confronting their shadow selves, and emerging physically and mentally from the underground, they lose the particular distinctions that defined them. Nevertheless, they are transformed: Tenar is symbolically reborn while Arha is finally/fully 'eaten'; Nassun's last act of orogeny reconfigures the structure of her body, creating a literal new self. In a sense, both characters experience a return to the mother, to female power. Tenar reclaims the name her mother gave her, along with her memory of her mother, and so 'achieve[s] a type of reconciliation' (Sobat 1996, 25). Nassun comprehends

her mother's determination to save her as well as the world: 'even as [Essun] died, [she] was reaching for the Moon. And for her' (2015, 387). Both characters experience 'a rebirth, a primal state that includes both the liberation of the spirit and its defenselessness' (Donoso 2019, 128, my translation) as they complete the movement of the journey 'down into the subconscious and the collective unconscious, and up again to self-knowledge, to adulthood, to the light' (Le Guin 1980, 65). That Jemisin's narrative also fits the pattern of the journey so closely indicates that the archetypal journey to the shadow-self retains resonance in contemporary storytelling and remains an enduring motif.

The apparent loss of the protagonists' special status or powers makes both narratives resistant to neat conclusions, as both Tenar's and Nassun's futures are left open-ended. Both characters have, in a sense, won freedom; yet they are also exiled from their past lives. However, it is this exile that allows Tenar and Nassun to begin to create their own realities, as their 'reborn' selves offer new potential for remaking. A common critique of Le Guin's novel is its 'failure' to create a heroine's future for Tenar (Lefanu 1988, 132; Cummins 1990, 155); as Littlefield notes, 'It will take almost twenty years for Le Guin to be able to reexamine and re-imagine Earthsea in a way that will allow her to find a place for Tenar' (1995, 249–50). Another way to read the ending of *The Tombs of Atuan* is as deliberately open — the reader is free to imagine Tenar's eventual future self. This very openness presents opportunities: 'for Tenar the need to enter a world of choice is just as important as the need to adopt a particular social role' (Stott 2006); 'it is her refusal of masculine power [after Atuan and before Le Guin takes up Tenar's story again in Tehanu (1992)] that signals Tenar's potential' (Donaldson 2013, 46); without reading further than the end of *Atuan*, we have evidence that Tenar is not going to become a typical woman of Earthsea. Similarly, after Nassun's journey to open the Gate, her future without orogeny is only suggested, but Jemisin does hint that she could still have a part to play in a restored Earth, in which those with orogeny and those without can coexist, 'Different choices have always been possible', '[o]rogeny […] was never the only way to change the world' (2015, 395–6). Viewed in this way, at the conclusion of each novel these heroines, emerging from 'the dark that nourishes, where human beings grow human souls' (Le Guin 1983), have only begun the discovery of their new selves.

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4 'She would never fall, because her friend was flying with her'

Gothic Hybridity, Queer Girls and Exceptional States in Helen Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl* (2005) and M. R. Carey's *The Girl with All the Gifts* (2014)

Robyn Ollett

This chapter will provide a comparative analysis of two contemporary British novels that suggest the hybrid subjectivity in the figure of the queer girl protagonist enables her to challenge hegemonic systems of power and control. In contemporary Western media, the figure of the heroic girl is increasingly recognised as essential to challenging the global turn to radical right-wing politics. Girls, gays, and 'theys'[1] have historically been at the forefront of civil rights movements and activism in the Western world: In 1960, Ruby Bridges was the first child to enter a de-segregated school in the United States; Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera trailblazed the Pride movement in the 1970s; and a 2022 twitter exchange between climate activist Greta Thunberg and pop-misogynist Andrew Tate confirmed another girl's firm place on the genealogy of girl-fronted activism. The girls I will discuss in this chapter might be fictional, but they represent a continuum of a trend that demands more attention.

Helen Oyeyemi's protagonist in her novel *The Icarus Girl* is Jessamy Harris, a British Nigerian adolescent girl. During her first visit to her mother's homeland, Jess makes a friend named Titiola and gives her the nickname 'TillyTilly' because, like many Brits, she struggles with the correct pronunciation. Through the course of the novel, TillyTilly's supernatural abilities are revealed, and Jessamy begins to fear her malevolent intentions to possess Jess and usurp her place in the world. Jessamy's hybridity is presented as a trauma and a conflict, an internal civil war in which she is conscripted to harm others. Her body and her subjecthood are under threat from becoming possessed by TillyTilly and, in themselves, figure as an abstract site of exception. The heterotopic space Jessamy occupies during her war with TillyTilly, and the place she fears becoming trapped, is conveyed as a place without sovereignty or the possibility of subjectivity. In *The Girl with All the Gifts*, Melanie, a half human, half hungry (an infected human, much like a zombie) is the top of her class on an army base compound where military scientists test her capacity for human learning and emotion. When their base is overrun by

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'hungries' (those who have been colonised by the Ophiocordyceps fungus lose the semblance of humanity), Melanie helps a group of human civilians traverse an apocalyptic wasteland and encounters other children like her. Melanie's biologically hybrid status places her and her fellow 'hungry' children as the apex species on the Earth. Carey's plot sees Melanie become a 'bioweapon' just as the villainous scientist, Dr Caldwell, predicts, but her role as such serves to wipe out humanity rather than save it, so that a new order and new species inherit the earth.

Comparing and contrasting the presentation of postcolonial hybridity in *The Icarus Girl* with biological hybridity in *Gifts*, this chapter will argue that these novels suggest a challenge to our own real-world power structures. Drawing on the work of Giorgio Agamben and Achille Mbembe, this chapter will assemble its reading of these New Queer Gothic novels around the broader concepts of postcolonial queerness and biopolitics, working towards the argument that these readings evidence the undeniable value of Gothic fiction as a tool for understanding how power structure affects individual and social identities and a place where girls lead revolutions in their fight to survive.

Hybrid identity is central to the characterisation of the girl protagonists in *The Icarus Girl* and *Gifts*. Each novel implicates sexual and racial subjectivity in its construction of hybridity and, while two very different readings are prompted by the novels' uses of hybridity, *The Icarus Girl* and *Gifts* similarly provide readers with opportunities to engage with questions of subjectivity formation. In both novels there is a little girl who is figured as queer and gothic in her search for who or what she is and both girls consistently prompt the reader to understand this figure as a symbol of the conflicting, ambivalent, fragmented image our contemporary neoliberal society has of the human citizen and its future. Where in *The Icarus Girl* the signification of hybrid excess, palimpsest assimilation, and disjointed belonging builds a sobering image of postcolonial, biracial identity coloured by psychic trauma, *Gifts* illustrates hybrid identity as new, exceptional, and revolutionary as it draws not only on postcolonial discourse but on ideas of posthumanism in a trajectory towards a queer utopia.

Sarah Ilott and Buckley's (2016) reading of *The Icarus Girl* foregrounds its framing of hybridity as negative and disturbingly Gothic. Using Homi Bhabha's *Location of Culture* (1994) to read hybrid spaces and hybrid peoples in a 'utopian light', they describe the novel's form as a subverted Bildungsroman, not least because Jessamy is 'increasingly divided (both physically and psychologically), but any transformation of national space is rendered threatening as the protagonist is effectively displaced, slipping between worlds'. Ilott and Buckley make the case that traditional narratives of hybridity are 'assumed to embody transformative potential' which can be noted in other critics' readings of the novel, particularly with respect to its ambiguous ending (2016, 405). Oyeyemi makes clear that TillyTilly wants to possess Jessamy and usurp her position in the living world, so that they

would swap places and Jessamy would be confined to the spirit world. After presenting this battle for subjectivity, Oyeyemi writes a scene of violent corporeal assimilation of the Gothic Other:

> TillyTilly pleaded in a scream that rang in Jess's ears, but Jess ran at her with the wind and an invisible current of fast-moving air behind her, taking her feet nearly off the slippery ground (she didn't hear the silent sister-girl telling her that it wasn't the right way, not the right way at all) and *hop, skip, jumped* into Tilly's unyielding flesh as she clawed at Jess's presence (*it hurt them both burningly*) back into herself. Jessamy Harrison woke up and up and up and up.
>
> (2005, 322)

Diana Adesola Mafe argues that it suggests the ending of the novel as an 'awakening' which proves 'symbolic, hinting at a broader awakening in her new millennial postcolonial landscape, and perhaps ours as well' (2012, 33). Mafe reads *The Icarus Girl* as an 'adaptation and subversion of traditionally androcentric narrative' (22), noting that feminist interventions in Gothic studies gained traction in academia during the 1970s and 1980s 'in tandem with postcolonial criticism'. Mafe contextualises Oyeyemi's novel and its re-gendering of a hero from Greek mythology (as suggested by the novel's title) as part of an ongoing impulse that began in 1976, when Ellen Moers coined the term 'female Gothic fiction' to reclaim 'female-authored and female-centred Gothic fiction, as narratives that indict patriarchy, critique the 'othering' of women, and represent the suppressed Feminine' (23). The compulsion to view Jessamy as a utopic figure with a reparative ending is understandable, but that reading undermines the significance of choosing the particular Greek myth of Icarus. Rather than a cautionary tale of flying too close to the sun and falling, the narrative incongruence aligns 'up and up and up' with being 'awoken' (or, as has entered the popular lexicon, being politically, socially, or culturally 'woke'). The Icarus myth did not speak to ascension as the goal in this schema, as Mafe seems to have it, but to flying neither too close to the sun or the sea: A rock and a hard place. This chapter then sees this link to the titular myth as describing the precarious balancing act Jessamy has had to perform throughout the course of the novel, struggling to reconcile the constituent parts of her identity.

Carey's protagonist in *The Girl with All the Gifts* is also introduced to the reader via her association with Greek mythology since the novel's title refers to the Greek heroine, Pandora. Where one novel uses its titular myth to highlight the ambivalence involved in hybridity as it relates to Jess' mixed-race identity, *Gifts* appropriates the story of Pandora more literally: Melanie's narrative trajectory towards unleashing all sorts of disease and horrors to catalyse the end of humanity and the beginning of a new age is inextricably bound to her hybrid identity. The duality of Pandora hinges on her status as goddess, and bringer of life, as well as her status as the first human woman, made by Hephaestus, and bringer of death.

Carey's novel is an apocalyptic science-fiction, fantasy novel, following Melanie, an intelligent 'hungry' child tasked with proving her capacity for human intelligence and emotion at the collapse of the human world. Initially held on a military base and subject to experimentation for the research of Dr Caroline Caldwell, Melanie develops an infatuation for her teacher, Miss Justineau. Her burgeoning love inspires her to lead a tribe of other non-human children, and the role-reversal ending sees Justineau incarcerated (or preserved) in a research pod so that she can continue her work as a teacher. The plot, in the vein of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) or Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend* (1954), spins dystopic apocalypse into a tale of post-human utopia, provoking readers to wonder who the real monsters are between the humans remaining on earth and the new species seeking to inherit it. Melanie's hybrid identity is marked by her ability to pass as human, and to look and act like a normative human child, while also proving capable of the super-sensory abilities and the animalistic attacks which define the narrative's zombie-like hungries: These are subjects who are no longer human, thought to be devoid of intelligence and emotion, and driven wholly by their hunger for human flesh. Much of what indicates monstrosity in Carey's novel has to do with senses and sensory ability, revolving around controlled and uncontrolled desire. Melanie's hybrid identity sees her accepted into the company of human characters and enables her to mix with hungries undetected. When Caldwell discovers that Melanie's hybridity is a result of being born from an infected mother, born with the Ophiocordyceps fungus rather than having her body colonised by it, Melanie and other children like her are described as 'second generation' hungries. The children's 'second generation' status allegorises postcolonial identity in paralleling discourses around diasporic or migrant communities in neoliberal multicultural Britain.

Where Oyeyemi appropriates the androcentric myth of Icarus for her girl protagonist — something Mafe recognises as paralleling her re-gendering of the traditionally male bush tale protagonist of West African folklore — Carey shows Melanie to appropriate the icon of Pandora reimagined as an androgyne, embodying the curiosity and thirst for knowledge in the mythic feminine archetype as well as incorporating attributes of the traditionally male Titan figures. Gods, Titans, and the myth of Pandora feature in the lessons Miss Justineau gives to Melanie's class. In one of the many instances where Carey shows Melanie to be repressing her love for her teacher she expresses her desire to perform mythic hero traits in order to preserve their relationship: 'Melanie wants to call her back, wants to say something to make her stay: *I love you, Miss Justineau, I'll be a god or a titan for you, and save you*' (2014, 28; emphasis in original). Melanie's hybridity is always already bound up with her queer desire to love and protect her teacher. Comparing herself to Aeneas setting out to found Rome, she 'seriously doubts now that the princes she once imagined fighting for her exist anywhere in this world, which is so beautiful but so full of old and broken things' (292). Towards the end of the novel, her hybrid identity proves crucial to looking forward to the creation of a new society.

While there is no overtly recognisable project to align whiteness with morality in the racializing of characters in *Gifts*, it does serve in Carey's novel to set white Melanie and her black love interest apart. The fetishizing of Miss Justineau's skin attends the impulse to preserve her; Melanie plans on keeping her as a live specimen in the research pod (like a vitrine in a museum) after all life on Earth has been purged. This conjures the 'white saviour' trope as one aspect of the naïve and problematic presentation of a queer post-human utopia suggested by the end of the novel. Another factor crucial to problematising a 'utopic' reading of the novel concerns Melanie's saviour status as contingent upon her status as a child, wherein 'innocence' is intensified by her whiteness. Via her relationship with Miss Justineau, and the impression she makes upon her adult love-object, Melanie's hybrid status is revealed to revolve around the paradox of the Gothic child as expounded by Steven Bruhm: Of innocence and monstrosity. The construction of her hybridity is presented through the initial mistrust and revulsion with which Justineau perceives her:

> It's like she dug a pit trap, nice and deep, squared off the edges, wiped her hands. Then walked right into it. Except that it was test subject number one, really, who dug the pit. Melanie. It was her desperate, obvious hero-worshipping crush that tripped Justineau up, or at least threw her enough off balance that tripping became inevitable. Those big, trusting eyes, in that bone-white face. Death and the maiden, all wrapped up in one tiny package.
>
> (30)

Here Carey shows Justineau self-consciously assessing the emotional toll her job is taking.

Later in the novel, Melanie's hybrid status as both a human child and a zombie creature is accepted, and the mistrust and disgust are replaced with something more like awe:

> She's out in the world now, her education accelerating from a standing start to some dangerous, unguessable velocity. She thinks of an old painting. *And When Did You Last See Your Father?* [Yeames 1878] Because Melanie's stance is exactly the same as the way the kid stands in that picture. For Melanie, though, that would be a completely meaningless question.
>
> (260–1)

Remarking on her curious orphan status, this quotation emphasises a new appreciation for Melanie as post-human. Moreover, it further suggests Melanie as a postmodern image of childhood as it pertains to its genealogy since 19th-century Western society's invention of the category and of its general obsession with the figure of the child, owing, as Catherine Robson

describes, to the various strains of Victorian Christianity that 'found themselves variously in contention and agreement with Romanticism's view of the child as pure and innocent' (2001, 7). Using the Yeames painting as a vehicle to deploy a historic representation or definition of the child is a particularly loaded technique. It depicts a fictional scene set in a Royalist manor house during the English civil war, showing a boy being questioned by Parliamentarians on the whereabouts of his father. The child figure stands out as the central point of light in the composition, his pale skin, blonde hair, and light-blue suit contrasting starkly with the dark and muted figures littered around the periphery, giving him an angelic aura. Significantly, however, the painting's scene used for this comparison depicts a fictional event. The reader's assessment of Melanie is therefore mediated through this black character's gaze, mediated again through a 19th-century representation of child-as-innocent. This treatment of the child figure works to situate her within the paranoid tropes of the Gothic as well as in a genealogy of white, 'innocent', heroic children, striking a palimpsest tableau of the innocent and truthful child responsible for the fate of their elders in the context of civil unrest and wartime violence. The heroic girl has a tragic and impossible task on her hands owing to the heavy expectations placed upon her to 'save' the world after humanity's extinction.

Where Melanie's hybridity hinges upon her embodiment of the monster/saviour, zombie/child dichotomies, Jessamy's hybridity is crucially postcolonial. Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl* is similar to *Gifts* in that it too explores the hybridity of its girl protagonist via a maternal relationship. Jessamy meets TillyTilly in the abandoned boys' quarters on her grandfather's compound in Nigeria, her mother's home. The two connect initially over a book. When Jessamy fears she might not get to see her friend anymore Oyeyemi italicises her thoughts: '*Please, please, please. Let me keep her. She is my only friend; I have no one else. She gave me a book, my mother's book. I have no one else*' (2005, 72). Coupled with the 'stain of thick, wrong-flowing biro ink' (4) that Jess smells on her mother in the novel's opening passage, the connections between TillyTilly's arrival into her life and Jess' relationship with her mother are bound up with the notion of writing the self and finding articulations of identity.

Emphasising the problematic potential of representing racialised bodies through mimesis and doubling, Natalya Din-Kariuki comments upon the importance of Oyeyemi's fiction to questions of postcolonial narrative as it relates to subjectivity (2017, 62). Jess' relationship with her mother is implicitly conflated with her relationship to her Nigerian roots and heritage. Oyeyemi shows her as resistant to the idea of embracing that part of her identity:

> Jess blinked. It was incredible that her mother could really believe that a mother's dreams, a mother's fears, were the same as her child's, as if these things could be passed on in the same way as her frizzy hair had been, or the shape of her nose.
>
> (2005, 178)

While travelling Jess notices a woman watching her, she keeps

> 'her eyes on the woman, caught by her gaze, gradually growing frightened, as if somehow she could not look away or let this woman out of her sight. Would that be dangerous, to *not* look while being looked at? […] Nigeria felt ugly. Nye. Jeer. Reeee. Ah.
>
> (9)

There are two functions to this passage: One is the violent phonetic breakdown of the signifier to degrade it, and the other is the implication that Jess internalises how she appears much in the same way as Frantz Fanon describes in *Black Skin, White Masks*. Fanon describes his encounter of the gaze of a little boy on a train: 'My body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recolored, clad in mourning in that white winter day. The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly' (1952, 86). Oyeyemi inverts this scenario by offering us the perspective of a mixed-race child confronted by the gaze of a Nigerian woman and suggests a similar distrust or disconnect as Fanon felt in the gaze of a white child in the 1950s.

Fanon describes not only being hyper–self-conscious, but also aware of his body in the third person

> in a triple person. In the train I was given not one but two, three places. […] I existed triply: I occupied space. I moved toward the other … and the evanescent other, hostile but not opaque, transparent, not there, disappeared.
>
> (2008, 84)

Oyeyemi's novel echoes Fanon's metaphor; she actualises it for Jessamy, who over the course of the novel finds herself at once bifurcated then soon sliced into three subjects, her human self; her sister-girl twin, Fern, who alternates in appearance as a baby or a tall silent woman with long limbs; and TillyTilly. Jess' mother realises this as a culturally, racially specific phenomenon affecting her child:

> Three worlds! Jess lives in three worlds. She lives in this world, she lives in the spirit world, and she lives in the Bush. She's abiku, she always would have known! The spirits tell her things. Fern tells her things.
>
> (2005, 174)

Oyeyemi's inclusion of the mother knowing and understanding effectively frog marches the story out of the realm of childhood imaginary: With adult validation, the threat on Jessamy's life is emphasised and Oyeyemi engages the reader's guilt or complicity in having not wholly accepted the veracity of the child's subjective account. Up to this point TillyTilly would most likely be read as an imaginary friend. Now that her status as a metaphor or symbol is questioned, Oyeyemi imbues her with more tangibility as a threat. What this revelation also does is supplement this chapter's overall argument that Gothic fiction of this kind synthesises the factual and the imaginary to construct

representations of real structural conflicts and problems, like the many forms of racism rife in our society, but more specifically the hostilities faced by mixed-race people in British society.

Oyeyemi and Carey present queerness in their girl protagonist differently, but both suggest same-sex attachments and narratives that speak to notions of self-discovery rather than any overt 'coming out' tale. Melanie is certainly more self-assured than Jessamy. The present-tense omnipotent narration Carey uses allows Melanie's feelings of love for her teacher to be explicitly conveyed to the reader as moments of desire, as in the pivotal scene where Miss Justineau breaks the strict protocol prohibiting staff from physical contact with the dangerous children and caresses Melanie's hair: 'lights are dancing behind Melanie's eyes, and she can't get her breath, and she can't speak or hear or think' (2014, 27). This focus on desiring touch is returned to throughout the novel; when Justineau stops Dr Caldwell from dissecting Melanie there is a tonal shift from expressions of desiring maternal embrace to more libidinal same-sex desire:

> she raises her arms in an instinct too strong to resist. She wants Miss Justineau to lift her up. She wants to hold her and be held by her and be touching her not just with her hair but with her hands and her face and her whole body.
>
> (70)

Rather than the historically paranoid representation of predatory lesbianism with which Gothic and horror genres have associated queer and Gothic tropes, it transpires here that her queer desire for Miss Justineau demonstrates her humanity and blocks her from any violent impulse.

As in *Gifts*, *The Icarus Girl* accesses queer desire through descriptions of touch. Touch establishes desire and alters the dynamic between the girls from an affinity contingent on mimesis to an abject transgression, an invitation of corporeal intimacy and involvement. On the pair's first meeting, TillyTilly presents as little else but a 'veritable Jessamy-echo' (2005, 45) in the copycat game, but it soon becomes apparent that this urge to mimicry betrays a broader desire to possess Jessamy, to bring her 'down' (150) so that Titiola might possess and animate her body.

Where queer attachment in *Gifts* enables Melanie to control the harmful and dangerous part of her hybrid identity, it functions in *The Icarus Girl* to bind Melanie closer to the malevolent Titiola. Lovelorn and lost without her new companion, Jessamy's reaction to being separated from Titiola is written as a corporeal, physical trauma that she does not, herself, understand:

> Jess had been looking out of windows for extended periods of time, sailing eagerly towards the front door whenever there was a knock or the doorbell rang […] Then, after this period of absorption (with … what, exactly? Friendship bracelets? Expectancy? Impossible to tell) came the inevitable fever'.
>
> (80)

Much in the vein of James' *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), the child is seduced by the ghost in its corruption: TillyTilly, in her developing malevolence first manipulates and seduces Jessamy through alternating presentations of supernatural prowess and vulnerability. Threatening to snatch away the friendship Jessamy has come to rely on, TillyTilly uses mimetic performance again to re-present a version of the love-sick episode Jessamy had experienced:

> Her head was flopping listlessly to one side and her limbs were spread limply, looking more as if they surrounded her than belonged to her. Jess, embarrassed, tried not to look at her pink knickers. After the initial throb of panic at seeing Tilly, Jess stared for a second longer when Tilly didn't get up but continued to gaze impassively at the ceiling.
>
> (233)

Here Jess sees her erstwhile indomitable love object as vulnerable. However, the performance of vulnerability, where limbs appear disarticulated from the body, presents a parody of Jess' own insecurities surrounding her fragmented sense of self. What this quotation further indicates is the objectification of the disarticulated body in its availability to an eroticised gaze. Oyeyemi suggests Jess to be making connections between her queer self as Other and her queer self as desiring with the pink knickers providing a crux to this anxious and complex image.

Titiola represents an intensely malevolent form of desubjectivization. Her primary aim, Oyeyemi stresses throughout the novel, is to rob Jessamy of her subjectivity by putting her in the place she inhabits, where only half-girls, dead sister-girls, and formless spirits live. While there is no clear seduction in her manipulation, the queer subtext of TillyTilly's manipulation of Jess is overt. TillyTilly's powers to project through time and space parallel her ability to possess and puppeteer living people, as she demonstrates with Jess' Dad and then her 'solid' friend, Siobhan. After isolating her, the violating behaviour accelerates:

> something began to drip slowly on to Jess's back, so slowly that she almost didn't feel it until she felt the cloth of her pyjamas cling and stick to her back. She nearly put her fingers to the wet patch, but, with enormous effort, lay still, her eyes wide and watchful. She felt as if her mind was slipping away from her, soaring so high that she would not be able to reclaim it.
>
> (249)

The language here is connotative of a sexual assault where a young girl is paralysed by fear as she feels an interloper in her bed at night. The 'dripping' of hateful ideas Titiola impresses on Jessamy quickly manifest physically into real liquid, a 'wet patch' that she feels through her pyjamas, a wetness that makes her clothing and skin stick together. With water imagery illustrating

Jess' possession via the drip-feeding of corruption, the effect is penetrative and connotes a malevolent sexual transgression devoid of consent.

Achille Mbembe's thesis in *Necropolitics* is essential to understanding biopolitics and applying that understanding to a critical reading of New Queer Gothic fiction. In the book, Mbembe discusses the relationship between politics and death within systems that might only function under what Giorgio Agamben (2005) would call a 'state of emergency'. Mbembe develops his thesis from Foucault's theory that biopower functions by presupposing the distribution and division of the human species into different groups, the 'establishment of a biological caesura between the ones and the others […] racism' (2003, 16–7). This is one of the mechanisms through which biopower, according to Foucault, 'divides people into those who must live and those who must die' (ibid). The murderous capabilities of the state are contingent upon the economic functions that racism provides. Mbembe builds on these ideas to put forward the notion of necropower and necropolitics, which he describes as having to do with the creation of 'death worlds' where a living-dead status is conferred upon whole populations by the threat and deployment of weapons of mass destruction. He explains that the lines between resistance and suicide, sacrifice and redemption, martyrdom and freedom are blurred under the conditions of necropower. Mbembe, proferring the term 'necropolitics' asks,

> is the notion of biopower sufficient to account for the contemporary ways in which the political, under the guise of war, of resistance, or of the fight against terror, makes the murder of its enemy its primary and absolute objective?
>
> (12)

Jasbir K. Puar remarks that for Foucault massacres are 'literary events', whereas Mbembe's foregrounding of death evidences 'the brutality of biopower's incitement to life' (2007, 33) and poses the questions: 'How do queers reproduce life and which queers are folded into life? How is life weighted, disciplined into subjecthood, narrated into population, and fostered for living?' (36). These questions are considered by the queer girl protagonist in *Gifts*. The group arrive at a residential area that was overrun by hungries and firebombed:

> *We couldn't kill the hungries, so we killed ourselves* […] An adult and a child, arms thrown up as though they were caught in the middle of an aerobics workout. Fascinated, the hungry kid measures herself against the smaller shape. It fits pretty well.
>
> (2014, 275; italics in original)

Melanie's lessons continue outside of the classroom and onto the apocalyptic wasteland where she realises humans have already sealed their own fated extinction.

Giorgio Agamben describes his work on the state of exception as an investigation 'into the no-man's land between public law and political fact, and between juridical order and life' (2005, 2). Agamben's theories on the states of exception are interesting because they remark upon a paradox: When emergency laws suspend the usual rule of law in any state, they also suspend the juridical powers and sovereignty of that state, and thrown into a similar state of suspension are the rights and identities of citizens. The Third Reich is often used as primary example of the state of exception; other situations that provide examples often circulate around the circumstances of civil war locations like concentration camps, prison-of-war camps, or detention centres. Zones devoid of law, where identity is suspended and there is a dissolution between public and private life have historically been, and continue to be, a lived reality for huge populations around the world.

While the plot and setting of *Gifts* fit Agamben's definition of the state of exception precisely, Oyeyemi's novel relates to a more abstracted or psychic state of exception. Christopher Ouma reads the diasporic Abiku motif (tied to notions of the restless spirit of a deceased twin and 'ghost children') in *The Icarus Girl* as endemic of African literary aesthetic and a key symbol found in much fiction focusing on Nigerian and Yoruba traditions. 'These representations' he writes, 'sought to find narrative interpretability in the modern African world as it was emerging from colonial occupation' (2014, 190). Ouma describes the complications proposed in the novel as stemming from 'postmodernist aesthetic strategies' plotted against 'diasporic subjectivity'. When the Abiku narrative is displaced and crosses the Atlantic, 'Jess's biological and mythical heritages clash because the notion of race is complicated by the politics of heritage, myth, and legend' (202). In TillyTilly, this personification of a mythical spirit child carries an overload of signification, overwhelming the reader. Jess is grappling with lots of new information about herself and the confusion is compounded by school bullies: 'Maybe Jessamy has all these "attacks" because she can't make up her mind whether she's black or white!' (2005, 86). This works to reflect Jess' internalised racism and emphasises her anxiety that there are two irreconcilable version of herself. This idea of an undecided self is refracted in her relationships with other characters too. Jessamy's own mother cannot fathom her: 'I just feel like… like I should know her, but I don't know anything. She's not like me at all. I don't think she's like you, either. I can't even tell who this girl is' (204). She is as unknowable and illegible as her mysterious friend: 'Dr McKenzie thought that he knew what TillyTilly meant, but he was wrong. Nobody knew what Tilly meant, and nobody knew what Jess meant either' (278). What *The Icarus Girl* suggests, as well as the battle for sovereignty over one's own identity, body and life, is individual specific trauma of a kind that is not wholly representable or relatable: Hybridity signals a total rejection of heterogeneity. Jessamy exists in a metaphoric state of exception because she cannot recognise a whole singular identity in the dualism of her mixed-raced self. When TillyTilly enters the narrative, she wants to possess

Jessamy's body and swap places with her so that she would enter a physical state of exception, an otherworldly place without laws, or rights, or subjecthood.

The Abiku myth, personified in TillyTilly, is a figure who straddles the barrier between the realms of living and the dead, conjuring in abstract the 'deathworlds' Mbembe discussed in 'Necropolitics'. Like Melanie, TillyTilly is not bound by juridical law, but neither is she bound by the laws of time and space: She can move through walls, floors, and ceilings; she can appear in another country, on another continent, without explanation. The world that TillyTilly inhabits, sometimes referred to as 'the spirit world' or the 'bush' or 'the wilderness of the mind', is a heterotopic place that has psychic dominion over Jess' identity and so mimics a state of exception. Oyeyemi shows these spaces to form and shape Jess' mind:

> Memories were burdens that took Jessamy through three worlds of hurt, and three worlds that only twins inhabit, and she was only half a twin. Yet even as she fell asleep, Jess was aware on some level that her memories were being moulded so that they were all different.
>
> (293)

These spaces — the dystopic wasteland and the spirit world — become the sites where queer girls experience conflict, trauma, and loss bound up with each of their hybrid identities. Carey's protagonist expresses her heroism in burning down the world, whereas Oyeyemi's heroic girl fights to maintain her own subjecthood; both novels effectively represent queer girls as pioneers of ontological revolution.

Note

1 By which I mean any gender non-conforming or gender-queer individuals, inclusive of trans and non-binary identifying folx.

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5 Cheerleaders, Orphans, School Girls

The Persistent Sounding Riot (Grrrl) in the (Televisual) Apocalypse

Renée T. Coulombe

While Riot Grrrl as a mainstream feminist movement was both short lived and several decades hence, the persistence of associated sonic and aesthetic tropes, particularly in televisual narratives centred on an end-of-days mise-en-scène, continues unabated. Subsequent genealogies (Isaacson 2011; Nguyen 2013) trace the strategic deployment of punk aesthetics for the purposes of feminist negation, with punk's core of disruption and reorganisation of meaning within a chaotic and aesthetically confrontational style of expression. However, as an early manifestation of third-wave, or intersectional, feminism, it was concomitant with the emergence of a multiplicity of other critical theories of race, gender, queer, and postcolonial theories. Quickly obscured in mainstream media both by the emergence of subsequent feminist and 'post-feminist' rhetoric and by the closing of Riot Grrrl chapters with a disappearance of 'spokespersons' for the movement at the very moment it emerged into mainstream media, which was far from coincidental. As an ultimate negation of a negation, to put it into Žižekian terms, this strategic maneouver freed many signifiers associated with the movement — linguistic, sonic and visual — to free float, recycled in a variety of ongoing media contexts to signify the resistance and defiance of girls and young women.

Like so many other socio-political and cultural movements in late capitalism, however, rumors of the death of Riot Grrrl have been greatly exaggerated. Recent articles by *The New York Times* (McDonnell and Vincentelli 2019), *Medium* (Oliveira 2020), and listening guides in *Rolling Stone* (Sheffield 2020) and elsewhere, let alone the dozens of albums released since the early 1990s by self-identified Grrrl bands, all attest to the continued life of the movement (Battoclette 2021). The feminist fourth wave, now identified under the hashtag #MeToo, built on the DIY and tech savvy foundations of third-wave pioneers by adopting social media as a platform for ongoing protest. This persistence is particularly true in the contemporary post-nostalgic media landscape, in which freely circulating cultural signifiers — media memes, if you will — are often recycled and redeployed. This is particularly true within apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fictional narratives, whether speculative, fantasy or sci-fi, where the heroic figure of girls and young women as loci of resistance, disruption, subvention, and negation has become common. This is

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in large part due both to the emergence of Riot Grrrl's shout of young female empowerment as a fundamentally politicized category, as well as to the apocalyptic turn in fictional narratives more generally. The latter is in light of the emergence of highly debated concepts like the 'Anthropocene' as rallying cry for a host of anxieties of and around climate change and what is now being identified as the 'sixth extinction' (Kolber 2014).[1]

Finding deep roots in the apocalypses of the much-engaged *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003), this chapter traces themes of sound and embodiment through subsequent narratives that engage apocalyptic themes from a host of scientific and supernatural threats — and which, like the eponymous Buffy, place young women at the centre of the narrative. Given the central focus of Riot Grrrl on a host of soundings — from self-published manifestos and musical tracks, public demonstrations to personal acts of resistance and rebellion — the analysis looks at the adoption of both musical and aesthetic tropes from Riot Grrrl in subsequent generations of televisual heroines. Moving beyond the punk sonification as solely musical, to encompass a variety of verbal and linguistic subversions, through zine culture, community organizing, and this analysis attempts to take a far more nuanced view of Riot Grrrl sonifications, moving beyond punk musical aesthetics to trace other lines of flight similarly central to the movement's decentralised manifestation(s).

The analysis then pushes further, to examine recent media responses to contemporary young female activists engaged in some of the most cataclysmic of contemporary issues, including Greta Thunberg, Autumn Peltier, and Malala Yousafzai, to examine the ways in which now long-standing cultural tropes of 'Grrrl' have been deployed both to empower and to dismiss or suppress young female-identified voices in media culture. Replicating historical erasures of vocal resistance from marginalised peoples, even at this particular moment at the end-of-history, the voices of indigenous and other marginalised peoples who have already weathered overwhelming challenges to their cultures and habitats during colonialism therefore could provide invaluable insight as Western, male-dominated societies now face environmental, economic and political degradation as a 'new' reality.

Ultimately, taking on the persistence of the media trope is to confront the ways in which the sonic embodiment of young female televisual characters has pushed back in the media landscape to frame public reception of contemporary cultural movements in which the voices of young women resound at the centre.

Not Another White Man's Lament

This author has traced elsewhere the deployment of sonic and aesthetic tropes in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, whose emergence in the 1990s as both film and television series align it historically with the emergence of Riot Grrrl. However, such representations were nascent in the 1990s, and far more overt deployment

of music associated with the movement followed. Bratmobile, for instance, originating in Olympia, Washington, was associated with the initial emergence of Riot Grrrl but went on to release music until 2003. Their millennial track, *Eating Toothpaste*, was synced in Season 4, Episode 7 of *Orphan Black*, 'The Antisocialism of Sex' (May 26, 2016). The title of the episode itself is a potential reference to Bikini Kill's 'Anti-pleasure dissertation' which is, in turn, an exploration of '[t]he complexity of representing pleasure positively for feminist punk' (Isaacson 2011, 6). The series *Orphan Black* is an interesting one with reference to apocalyptic narratives, given the apocalypse in question is a personal one — the result of the bioengineering process that gave rise to the clones central to the narrative, and which was designed both with religious and scientific objectives. However, the deployment of a Bratmobile track at this particular point in the narrative, in a moment in which the protagonist Sarah (Tatiana Maslany) is both hallucinating and coping through some old addictive habits to deal with devastating consequences of her recent decisions, posits this particular sonic trace as one of disruption, destabilization, and inversion of the character herself. The sheer sonic drive of the song seems to match, in tempo and amplitude, the power of the character's traumatic response. The power of feminist punk aesthetics to match internal states of overwhelming circumstances is in play. The song is followed in the bar scene with a live source performance of *Bodyline* by Peaches, another outsized sonic reference to feminist musical artists with roots in the 1990s, which ups the sonic and visual amplitude to a frenzy.

Similarly, the inclusion of *Rebel Girl* by Bikini Kill as non-source music in Season 1, Episode 3 of *Doom Patrol* (September 23, 2021), in an early scene following the character of Crazy Jane (Diane Guerrero) as she goes out into town putting up posters, establishes her character firmly within the punk feminist aesthetic. Even the portion of the song chosen, highlighting the line "I want to make her my best friend" implicitly reinforces the idea that the eponymous *Rebel Girl* being sung about is Crazy Jane. The song contextualizes a scene in which the character staples handmade posters to power poles, demonstrating implicitly both a DIY aesthetic and civic engagement, which lends depth to the song's placement. The track cements important character and narrative details drawing on a host of Riot Grrrl precedents. Like Sarah in *Orphan Black*, Crazy Jane's character is marked by inner instability, with her multiple personalities brought on by severe childhood sexual abuse. Interestingly, this episode follows up Bikini Kill with a track by the Dead Kennedys, *Nazi Punk f**k off*, as Jane confronts townspeople harassing her as a freak and the scene devolves into an actual riot, thus both rooting Crazy Jane in within a punk feminist context and locating punk feminism itself within its broader punk rock roots.

Both *Orphan Black* and *Doom Patrol*, with their vastly divergent cultural roots and genres, entertain deeply posthuman feminist questions surrounding selfhood and humanity within the context of bioengineering, ableism, and bioethics. The episode of *Doom Patrol* that opens with Jane putting up

posters and fighting townspeople closes in a former Nazi's laboratory in Paraguay conducting dangerous research on human subjects — the closing joke being a test subject becoming 'animal-vegetable-mineral man' in an excess of bioengineering interventions. Far less overt, but nonetheless effective, the episode of *Orphan Black* significantly furthers a similar central crisis in the series, that of clones becoming ill with debilitating neurological conditions as a result of the genetic experimentation that produced them. Their conditions ultimately become fatal and thus represent an end-of-days mise-en-scène for the narrative. The episode features lengthy scenes of characters moving with crutches or in motorised wheelchairs, making clear the emotional fallout of the urgent race to find a cure. The sudden destruction of their research represents a pivotal trauma in the episode.

Third-wave feminism in general, and Riot Grrrl music in particular, focused on questions of bodily autonomy, consent, and empowerment and were early adopters of anti-ableist, neurodiversity, and body positive language. Gender and sexual diversity were seen as foundational in lived human experience, as was the inclusion of personal narratives around sexual trauma and rape. These marked many of Riot Grrrl's lyrics, were broadly featured in zines and self-published blogs, or spoken at demonstrations, concerts, and rallies. This inclusion documents apocalyptic experience at the individual level. Sonic references in both series add depth to the characterisation of the central subjects and identifies them as characters for whom complex negotiations around identity, trauma, healing, and empowerment were both early and ongoing. Their experience of heroism in the apocalypse is not the broad spectacle of anthroposcenic destruction in a Blockbuster film, but the individually negotiated heroism of the always already far more 'mortal' (Braidotti 2019) in the midst of other mortals.

'This Is How Many Apocalypses for Us Now?' (Buffy the Vampire Slayer 2002)

Like Buffy Summers before them, Sarah and Jane face down and negotiate apocalyptic threats at an individual level, without the Debordian Spectacle to shield them from the consequences of their choices. Additional trauma and loss are guaranteed, and often linger in whatever conclusion the narrative draws. Sharing gothic narrative roots of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the UK series *Crazyhead* (2016–16) tells a similarly supernaturally inflected apocalyptic tale replete with end-of-days machinations by a cabal of sinister dark forces, alongside a duo of young female protagonists aiming to stop it. Here, too, trauma forces the meeting of the two protagonists, Amy (Cara Theobald) and Raquel (Susan Wokoma), who are drawn together when the first is attacked by a demon and the second comes to her rescue. This self-aware flip of the hero-rescues-blond-babe trope, so often exploited in *Buffy*, sets the stage for similar disruptions, subversions, and reorganizations of the hero trope to follow in *Crazyhead*.

Drawing from contemporary artists with a retro-vibe, like Wanda Davis and Gin Wigmore ('Kill of the Night' serves as title theme), and deploying them alongside 1960s icons like Dusty Springfield and Creedence Clearwater Revival, extends the musical associations quite strategically forwards and backwards in time. With a distinctive arc over the course of the single season, the music transitions from more nostalgic and sweet, deployed for subversive purposes like The Cascades innocently singing *Rhythm of the Rain* while Amy pees on her demonically possessed roommate as part of an exorcism (Season 1, Episode 1) towards a distinctly indie-rock female vocal track replete with driving tempo and sonic aggression in the final episode, 'Beaver with a Chainsaw', the title itself a reference to feminist punk band names. The particular apocalypse that Amy and Raquel must survive in *Crazyhead* is one being engineered through Raquel's own trauma, and which has been designed — by her therapist — to retraumatize her so deeply she will unleash hell on earth. While Raquel and Amy do manage to defeat most of the bad guys and stem the apocalypse in the final moments, it is not through spectacular action. Reconnection and communication keep the hero from becoming a perpetrator, and a new feminist hero(ine) is born. Their deliberate choice both to survive and to keep fighting together represents the culmination of their initiation arc, one that is accompanied by the particularly heavy kick-and-clap beat of the band Dorothy.

The thread that unites this string of musical inferences about the all-too-mortal, in Braidotti's sense, young female hero's negotiation of apocalypse is trauma and its aftermath. The centrality of connecting openly through it in-and-of itself presents a powerful rebuke of previous feminist movements' exclusion of such topics as distasteful in public discourse. Far worse, the victim-blaming second wave left such topics, along with sexuality and gender expression, race, colonised or formerly colonised status, and others, all off the table in a bid to enhance the socio-economic and political gains of white women — a practice which has been called out since the 1970s (Simons 1979; hooks 2000, 2014).

> This aesthetic politics of negation comes in the wake of second wave feminism, a dismantled and partial feminism, wrenched from its original context as a radical challenge to patriarchy in the midst of more widespread social movements challenging imperialism and economic exploitation.... Thus another valence to feminist punk expressive negation is that it registers the failures and occlusions of second wave feminism. Recent generations of young women are not able to envision a financially secure future as either worker or homemaker. They have witnessed their mothers' domestic chores diminished by the dishwasher, washing machine, and microwave and yet all this freedom has not benefited them. The new quasi-feminist economy is one in which women are integrated into the labor force more frequently but not in equal conditions to men.
>
> (Isaacson 2011, 3)

Crazyhead's soundtrack jumping backwards and forwards in time while maintaining a strong female vocal presence thus becomes a self-aware audio commentary on the heroic journey Amy and Raquel undertake, connecting them with their feminist forebears while demarcating distinct differences in the sonic and visual bricolage. With an emphasis on sonic power as analog to alternative forms of empowerment firmly established, the series is free to explore a broader palette of soundtrack materials while keeping the characterizations firmly within a feminist punk aesthetic.

'How Dare You?' (Thunberg 2019)

This valence of feminist punk expressive negation resounds still and is carried forward in far broader sonic contexts than punk itself. This is exemplified in several more recent media products, including the richly orchestrated adaptation of the multiverse fantasy *His Dark Materials* (2019–22), which might at first seem a quite disparate kind of apocalyptic narrative from that of *Orphan Black* or *Crazyhead*. Yet the young adult novels that gave rise to the media adaptation emerged in the 1990s, and also engage a host of post-human questions surrounding religious and political complicity in an ecosystem collapse. As with so many of the protagonists discussed already, Lyra (Dafne Keen) is a young girl thrust into an apocalypse of her elder's making and is forced to encounter horrific exploitation and abuse on her journey towards saving worlds. Her origins give her both extensive trauma and unique abilities, through which she negotiates her complex present. Her heroic orchestral scoring, by series composer Lorne Balfe, has no doubt played a part in some of the criticism of the series, for crafting Lyra as a traditional epic hero despite the novels' more nuanced approach (Framke 2019). Nonetheless it is extremely clear that despite the more traditional musical scoring defining characters and action, in some ways they serve to enhance other kinds of feminist punk expressive negation that are deeply expressed within the miniseries.

The intergenerational conflict in this fantasy world, for instance, is quite reflective of second- and third-wave schisms within feminism in this world. The schism is made audible in Season 1, Episode 6, *The Daemon-Cages*, in the confrontation between Lyra and her long-estranged mother, Mrs Coulter (Ruth Wilson). In the episode, Lyra has been captured and taken to a strange scientific research facility in the north, where kidnapped children are separated from their daemons, or spirit beings, in the name of scientific research for the public good. Lyra escapes this devastating mutilation in the final moments only because her mother discovers the imminent severing and hears Lyra call out to her as mother for the first time. The central conflict is once again on post-human questions of agency or complicity in inhuman practices that Eurocentric modes of utilitarian thinking have categorized as being in the service of a 'greater good'. Indeed, the following scene shows Lyra tolerating an apologetic speech about her mother's involvement in horrifying experiments that were never designed to negatively impact her own daughter. While

making her escape, Lyra and her mother share a moment of sonic confrontation stripped down into the most expressive punk utterances of all: The uninhibited scream.

Contained within these foregrounded sonic utterances is a host of feminist punk expressive negation. At first, Lyra's is a scream of defiance in the face of overwhelming pressure to conform and excuse her mother's monstrous behaviour. Mrs Coulter's scream, on the other hand, envoices at first what feels like a lifetime of pent-up frustration about a lack of control. It is a spontaneous outpouring of emotion that simultaneously expresses her outrage and indicates her child's status as a less-than-autonomous being, whose refusal is overwhelming in its betrayal. That the scream call-and-response goes on for several moments, cutting rapidly from daughter to mother, allows the emotional nuance of the expressive negation to deepen. As Lyra continues to scream and pound on a locking mechanism to keep her mother away, her vocal expression resolves toward simple anger, as if emphasising the direct and personal nature of her vocalisation *at* her mother. In response her mother becomes more hysterical, her voice breaking at the top in over-exaggerated vocal fry. Indeed it is Lyra who brings herself back to the task at hand, that of stopping the mutilation of children her mother's research necessitated in the name of religion and hegemony.

Indeed, throughout the series it is Lyra's vocal abilities, which result in her hero name as Lyra Silvertongue, that often provide a central connection with the DIY aesthetics and personal empowerment of punk feminist expressive negation. In Season 3, Episodes 5 and 6, 'No Way Out' and 'The Abyss', it is precisely Lyra's commitment to personal narratives and alliance building that enables the rescue of lost souls caught in a dark hell dimension, very much like Ms Summers might have done. The hard work of heroism is not in defeating the monsters, but transcending monstrosity itself, doing the difficult emotional and mental labour necessary to build community, acknowledging the collective nature of true liberation.

What these young female heroines share across genres, decades, and styles is a relationship to punk feminism's core. Further, the apocalypses they face share some defining characteristics. First, their apocalypses are not separate from their experiences of personal and collective trauma, and often share interconnected roots. Neither are they one-offs, but ongoing in the face of historically inherited present crises that are not all one-and-the-same. Riot Grrrls think globally but fight apocalypses locally and with networked support. Even more, they reject the trappings of traditional heroism, interpreted within a feminist punk aesthetic as simplistic and sexist, very much like meme culture. This feminism is powerfully vocal, and lyrical, and its expressive negation is designed to disrupt mainstream narratives not for the purpose of replacing them but to expand and nuance them to include far more perspectives than are currently admitted to the term 'human'.

There has been a distinct crossover in recent years between such characters in fiction and so-called 'real life'. Greta Thunberg's impassioned speech to the

Climate Action Summit in September 2019 saw her emerge onto a global stage. As a Buffy fan, it was difficult not to notice that Greta was just 16 years old at the time of the Summit. As a Riot Grrrl fan, it was also unsurprising that just days after the summit, a version of her speech was released on the Fridays for Future YouTube Channel as a Swedish death metal cover, which has since been viewed more than 2 million times (Mollusk 2019).

The Spectacle of Our Own Destruction

While three days is an eternity in meme-time, the effect of re-recording Greta's speech as a death metal song quickly went viral. As evinced in the public comments, even those who did not want to hear Greta's thoughts enjoyed them thoroughly when voiced by a man in death metal style and musically accompanied. How unsurprising that for many, the 'stitch' made a spectacle of the disruptive potential of the original utterance to call out the unequal nature of climactic destruction — while Greta herself was quick to ground her own position as 'one of the lucky ones' (Thunberg 2019). Riot Grrrls understood implicitly what this meme was drawing upon: A collective experience of young women powerfully voicing expressive negation (frequently with vocal fry) into microphones on stages. Oddly, this musical version created a *gesamtkunstwerk* of outrage drawing directly on Riot Grrrl precedents, drawing clear connections between sonic power and the power of the disruptive message. Its publication on the *Fridays for Future* YouTube channel makes this an extremely self-aware deployment.

Similarly, young Indigenous Canadian water activist Autumn Peltier's address to the UN General Assembly (given when she was only 13 years old) almost instantaneously appeared on social media in a series of visual and text memes. The young activist and 2022 Finalist for the International Children's Peace Prize[2] has been extremely sophisticated in her deployment of social media as a platform for the affirmative ethics of water preservation and indigenous participation in decisions surrounding exploitation of tribal lands. Her vocal feminist expressive negation has come with steep personal and emotional costs, a fact she does not diminish in public interviews or documentaries.[3] Her affirmative ethics of care allow for fierce expression of vulnerability, of personal pain and loss, as fundamental means of community and consensus building. Similarly, the media presence surrounding educational activist Malala Yousafrzai highlights her youth, her defiance in the face of educational exclusion of girls and young women under the Taliban, and her vocal refusal to be silenced. That in 2014 she became the youngest person, at just 17, and the first Pashtun, to receive the Nobel Peace Prize was in many ways a testament to her adoption of digital platforms — an anonymous, online blog — to tell her story of life as a school-aged girl under the restrictive Taliban regime. Young, tech-savvy, vocal, politically engaged, and defiant on the world stage, Autumn, Malala, and Greta have come to represent, in the contemporary media landscape, what might even be called

Revolution Girl Style Now!,[4] their voices sounding and resounding feminist expressive negation through any media channels available.

Which is ultimately why the persistent sounding Riot Grrrl remains at the core in many apocalyptic narratives, both real and imagined. Her modes of expressive negation reach beyond meme culture and its endless cycles of swift and simplistic responses and towards a nuanced view of the populist rhetoric that has taken over in the wake of recent political movements on both the left and the right around climate change. Her apocalyptic scenarios resound powerful counter narratives to the paralysing impotence of traditional, masculinist heroic ones.

> Such an apocalyptic scenario is politically counterproductive because it spreads the sense of impotence, while it perpetuates Eurocentric habits of thought. It is ethically unsound because it cultivates a black hole of individual despair instead of labouring towards community. Affirmative ethics is an alternative to this disempowering position.
>
> (Braidotti 2023, 72)

By amplifying a host of affirmative ethics in the face of Eurocentric, masculine ones, Riot Grrrl modes of sonic, linguistic, and aesthetic disruption and subversion are ultimately, in-and-of-themselves, heroic acts — the heroism of routinely facing trauma and contradictory and impossible-to-navigate realities and not only live to tell the tale, but set it to music or amplify it. These subsequently forge aesthetic universes of new modes for punk feminist negation and expression, which adapts and adopts new media for expressive discourse as a strategic, ongoing negotiation.

Ultimately, the Grrrl hero, as a fundamentally networked and post-human subject, maintains her fierce and interdependent presence through a host of other human, biological, and technologic agents. Her soundings and resoundings strategically ground the expressed knowledge within a consciously circumscribed context, with the assumption that they intersect within a complex web of other contextual knowledge and subjects. In other words, she evinces post-human scholarship itself, in 'a positive relationship to the diversity of zoe — non-human life — in a non-hierarchical manner, recognizing the respective degrees of intelligence, ability and creativity of all organisms' (Braidotti 2023, 101). Employing a host of technologies and networks to survive, thrive, amplify, and distribute her message, she embraces alternative collective formations and alliance building in a positive affirmation of shared desire for existence.

Even in fantasy worlds from Sunnydale to the Republic of Heaven, when the apocalypse is averted, or subverted or disrupted, her work is not done, either. Instead of riding off into the sunset, she almost immediately gets down to the hard work of labouring towards community and care. Recognising that while apocalypses may be collective, pain and suffering are individual, she also passes the microphone to other willing knowers who may be ready

to share their perspectives, knowledges, and insights. Knowing full well she can embrace, in the presence of such collective awareness, whatever apocalypse comes next.

Notes

1 I borrow the point from Rosi Braidotti's joke about the apocalyptic rhetoric being everywhere these days, made in 'Necropolitics and Ways of Dying' (2019).
2 From her Instagram Bio, where she has 127K followers, https://www.instagram.com/autumn.peltier/
3 Particularly moving is her account of being bullied for the notoriety that her activism has brought with it, something she is incredibly open and vulnerable about in this very recent documentary published on the George Brown College channel: https://youtu.be/dQvWW1Tdnv4. Accessed 15 June, 2023.
4 Bikini Kill 'Revolution Girl Style Now!' Demo recording. Self-released cassette published 1991. Digital and vinyl releases on Bikini Kill Records, 2015.

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Part II

Cross-Cultural Heroes

6 *Tranquilas*

Monstrous Resistance and Feminist Storytelling

Inés Ordiz

Spanish-speaking countries are seeing an unprecedented resurgence of feminist activism. The Argentinean *Ni una menos* [Not One Woman Less] movement,[1] the Spanish #Cuéntalo [Tell It] initiative,[2] and the Chilean collective protest chant 'Un violador en tu camino' [A Rapist in Your Path][3] are examples of multimodal, revolutionary projects that have reached international prominence. A collective rage against instances of sexist violence against women and teenagers, such as the rape and murder of Nagore Laffage in Spain (2008) or Marina Menegazzo and María José Coni in Ecuador (2016), along with the judicial response to cases such as 'La Manada' [The Wolfpack] (2019) in Spain have partly fueled this transnational resurgence. The Spanish publishing industry has reflected these movements, and there has been a rise in attention to works by women authors and works of feminist non-fiction. In this context, the publication in 2019 of the collection of short stories by Spanish-speaking women writers, *Tranquilas. Historias para ir solas por la noche* [*Calm: Stories to walk alone at night*], can be understood as part of a collective and transnational feminist endeavor that partly answers to — and stems from — these movements. The volume includes texts by Ecuadorian, Peruvian, and Spanish authors who try to reflect on the fear of violence experienced by women in public and domestic spaces. *Tranquilas* aims to answer questions such as the following: '¿Qué sentimos cuando nos aventuramos? ¿Qué dolorosa memoria nos acompaña? Si algo sale mal, ¿cuáles son las herramientas que nos ayudan a dar nombre a lo sucedido?' [What do we feel when we venture out? What painful memories accompany us? If something goes wrong, what are the tools that help us name what happened?] (Folguera and de la Cueva 2019, 10).[4] The authors tell stories of gender violence in the first person while negotiating the fear of being attacked when walking alone at night, as well as the necessity of abolishing victim-blaming and taking back the streets for all girls and women.[5]

Tranquilas and Violence

The underlying subject that permeates the stories is fear of physical violence, sexual abuse, and femicide.[6] This last one is a societal problem that exceedingly affects the countries of the authors participating in the volume.

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According to the Gender Equality Observatory for Latin America and the Caribbean, in 2021, Peru registered a total number of 136 femicides, and Ecuador 71. The portal Feminicidio.net (2021) registered 82 cases of femicide in Spain in the same year. According to research conducted in that country, it is estimated that in a year there would be 400,000 incidents of sexual violence, of which 85–95% would be committed against women, and 100,000 against minors (Pueyo *et al*., 2020). Nevertheless, and as will be explored in the last section of this chapter, the most obvious issue addressed by the stories is silence. The silencing of women is understood here as another form of gender violence. As Rebecca Solnit affirms, this type of violence is 'a refusal of our voices, and of what a voice means: the right to self-determination, to participation, to consent or dissent, to live and participate, to interpret and narrate' (2017, 19). As will be seen in the following sections, *Tranquilas* aims to break this violence through teenage resistance and storytelling.

This chapter stems from a belief that it is necessary to both visibilise the work of women authors and the realities of gender violence suffered by girls and women. Regardless of whether this visibilisation is generated by activism, editorial choices, or academic and cultural circles, speaking up is, in the words of feminist author Andrea Giunta, a form of 'liberating other voices' (2019, 68) and, as we will see in the analysis that follows, a way of naming and opposing violent experiences that would otherwise be normalised. With this objective in mind, this chapter offers a close analysis of two of the stories by Spanish authors in *Tranquilas*: 'Primero fueron los mocos, después el ninjutsu' [First it was snots, then ninjutsu] by Edurne Portela and 'Bautismo' [Baptism] by Aixa de la Cruz. These texts are presented as reflections of adult women about their strategies in relation to the sexual violence suffered during adolescence. Their teen protagonists, feeling trapped in a changing body that is suddenly being sexualized, oppose such violence through monstrous becoming: The conscious, self-inflicted conversion into a monster. This limited resistance proves to be part of a process which is complemented, in adulthood, by a secondary act of defiance defined by feminist storytelling. Feminist criticism (Solnit, Giunta, Valencia) will be used to approach these texts. Moreover, and due to the focus on fear that the stories demonstrate, as well as their self-reflexive and recurrent use of words, expressions, and references from the horror and Gothic tradition, this analysis will also refer to works of criticism of horror and gender (Clover, Doyle, Halberstam).

In the prologue to the volume, the anthologists María Folguera and Carmen G. de la Cueva explain that the initial idea for putting together *Tranquilas* originated after the release of the documentary *Nagore* (Taberna, 2010) — based on the case of Nagore Laffage — and the publication of the journal article 'La escritora que murió por puta' [The writer who died for being a whore] by Ecuadorian author María Fernanda Ampuero (2016) — about the murder of María José Coni and Marina Menegazzo. Laffage (20 years old) was brutally raped and murdered during the festivities of San Fermín, in Pamplona (Spain) in 2008. Coni (21) and Menegazzo (22) were

two Argentinean travellers who were abducted, raped, and murdered in Ecuador in February 2016. The three women were, in one way or another, blamed for their own murders: Laffage's mother was famously asked by the judge during the murder trial if her daughter was flirtatious; Menegazzo and Coni were labelled as 'propitiatory victims' by the Argentinean psychiatrist Hugo Marietán because of the alleged risk they assumed while backpacking in South America without a man accompanying them (Piñeiro-Otero and Martínez-Rolán 2016). In the so-called 'Wolfpack case', in which a teenage girl was raped by five adult men in the entrance hall of an apartment building in Pamplona (Spain) during the San Fermín festivities in 2016, the Court of Navarra adjudged that the victim had been 'sexually assaulted' and not 'raped' (which would entail a longer prison sentence) due to what the judges perceived as a lack of violence and intimidation.[7] The case had great repercussions in the media, generating unprecedented street protests in Spain (Campillo, 2019), and brought the topic of sexual violence into the forefront of public and political discourse. Moreover, it encouraged other victims to share their stories of gender violence using the hashtags #YoSíTeCreo [I believe you] and the aforementioned #Cuéntalo. Although not specifically mentioned in the introduction (but addressed in some of the stories of the collection), one of the crimes that permeates the volume is the 'Alcàsser crime', which happened in November 1992 in Valencia (Spain). The teenagers Desirée Hernández (14), Toñi Gómez (15), and Miriam García (14) were kidnapped, raped, tortured, and murdered after hitchhiking to go to a club for a high school reunion. This case had strong repercussions in Spanish media and in the perception of danger of a whole generation of teenage girls — some of whom participated as authors in *Tranquilas*.[8]

Folguera and de la Cueva's volume serves as a tool to break silences by putting gender and sexual violence in the centre of its discourse. By creating alternative narratives to those of the rapists, the representatives of the judicial system, and the sensationalistic media coverage, the stories break the silences that 'protect violence' (Solnit, 2017, 46) and allow for rape culture[9] to perpetuate itself. The stories in *Tranquilas* engage in the frightening process of acknowledging patriarchy's violence, which is a necessary step when trying to imagine 'other possibilities' (Doyle 2019, 242) for girls and women to exist in the world. These narratives explore both the fear of violence and of naming that violence. The two stories chosen for this analysis, with their emphasis in teenage experiences, also investigate the possibility of present and future resistance.

Girls Becoming Monsters

'Primero fueron los mocos, después el ninjutsu', by Edurne Portela, narrates several instances of abuse suffered by the main protagonist during her adolescence. These accounts are accompanied by a reflection into her younger self's means of resisting this violence. When she was 12, the protagonist was

repeatedly groped by two boys while swimming in a public pool, an abuse she resisted by using her own body as a weapon:

> Comencé a sonarme los mocos con fuerza y les lancé a la cara el abundante material que saqué. Volví a sonarme, lanzarles mis mocos, a escupir, hasta que superaron la sorpresa inicial y se alejaron insultándome. Nunca más volvieron a meterme mano en la piscina. Con doce años, mi arma de defensa frente a esos dos gemelos abusadores de catorce o quince fueron mis mocos. Era una niña, al fin y al cabo, aunque ellos me hicieron sentir que no tanto.
>
> [I started to blow my nose and I threw the abundant substance. I blew my nose again, I threw them my snots again, I spat, until they got over their initial surprise and moved away while insulting me. They never groped me again in the pool. At twelve, my weapon against these fourteen- or fifteen-year-old abuser twins were my snots. I was still a child, after all, even though they made me feel that maybe not so much anymore].
>
> (Portela, 2019, 40)

The resistance strategy of the girl involved turning her own body, which had been sexualised against her will, into something repulsive. In the memories, above and below, the tools used to express dissent against a system that sexualises the bodies of teenage girls is to use that same body in monstrous ways. Some years later, this strategy develops into an exploration of Japanese martial arts. While remembering her ninjutsu training, the narrative voice reflects on the mixed feelings that she derived from this activity:

> Hasta ahora no me había parado a pensar en el placer que encontraba en la violencia contra mi propio cuerpo: no solo los nudillos ensangrentados, las espinillas hinchadas, también los moratones después de los combates, los miembros doloridos por las luxaciones, el estoicismo brutal con el que recibía los golpes que nos daba el entrenador con un palo de madera en los abdominales para fortalecerlos, el orgullo con el que soportaba la quemazón en los músculos…
>
> [Until now I hadn't stopped to think about the pleasure I'd find in the violence against my own body: not only in the bloody knuckles and the swollen shins, but also the bruises after the fights, the pain in my dislocated limbs, the brutal stoicism with which I'd accepted the pain when our trainer would use a wooden stick to hit us in the abs as a way of strengthening them, the pride with which I endured the burning sensation in my muscles …].
>
> (Portela, 2019, 37)

As the narrator concludes, practicing ninjutsu becomes not only a tool for self-empowerment, but a means of self-harm: 'ese sufrimiento era en realidad

el castigo contra un cuerpo que yo rechazaba y que sentía en constante exposición' [that suffering was in fact the punishment against a body which I rejected and felt continuously exposed] (Portela 2019, 37). In the first experience, the snot turns objectification into *abjectification*[10]. As the protagonist sees her body objectified and abused by others, she also discovers her own agency to explore its abject limits. In the second experience, practicing ninjutsu turns the rejection against the body into an embrace of its injuries and its possibilities of endurance. The violence exercised against it is, as in the abjectification exemplified by the nose-blowing, conscious and willing.

'Bautismo' [Baptism], by Aixa de la Cruz, is also presented as a reflection about the violence experienced by the narrator and her friend during their adolescence. The first of these recollections is the one that introduces the narrator and her best friend, Malen, into a violent reality that they would have to face for the rest of their lives: 'La adolescencia es una fase que merece el nombre de aquel festival en el que nos bautizaron en la cultura de la violación, Tiempos Oscuros' [Adolescence is a phase that should be called like that festival in which we were baptised in rape culture: Dark Ages] (de la Cruz, 2019, 277). The narrator finds herself in a violent situation in which she needs to make her way across a music festival, being subject to catcalling and groping, to meet 19-year-old Malen in the men's restrooms. Her friend has just been beaten for refusing to have sexual intercourse with her aggressor. As she tackles her attackers while she advances in the crowd on the way to the toilets, the narrator becomes a *Cloverian* Final Girl (Clover 1993): 'Cuando alcancé el vestíbulo parecía la superviviente de *La matanza de Texas*, con el cuerpo cubierto de fango y la cara desdibujada por el rímel corrido' [When I made it to the lobby, I looked like the survivor of *The Chainsaw Massacre*, with my body covered in mud and my face blurry with mascara] (de la Cruz 2019, 270). She finds that her physical appearance makes it easier for her to walk in the crowd: 'La gente se apartaba con aprensión y asco, y me sentí cómoda en aquel disfraz de escoria, de regresada de entre los muertos, porque los zombis no buscan la aprobación de nadie' [People would move out my way, scared and disgusted, and I felt comfortable dressed up as scum, as living dead, because zombies don't look for anyone's approval] (de la Cruz 2019, 270). Her body is now repelled by the same crowd which once sexualised it, and this newly acquired monstrous corporality makes her feel safe. Like the main character in 'Primero fueron los mocos', the abjection of her own body becomes a means of resistance.

Reflecting on these and other past experiences from adulthood, the narrator compares Malen's fearlessness (her 'chatty ingenuity' and 'reluctance to accept the rules of fear' [Folguera and de la Cueva 2019, 265–6]) with her own: 'Yo nunca he viajado sola, ni me montaría en un Blablacar conducido por un hombre, ni hablo con desconocidos en los bares' [I have never travelled alone, I wouldn't ride a Blablacar driven by a man, I don't speak to strangers at bars] (2019, 277). This comparison, along with the need to find ways to

speak about fear with her daughter, brings her to wonder '¿Qué haremos con el miedo?' [What will we do with fear?] (2019, 278). Being unable to find an answer that works in all cases, the narrator chooses to 'find comfort' (2019, 281) in stories of 'monstrous resistance':

> … en las imágenes de 'Lady Lazarus', el poema de Sylvia Plath en el que la protagonista se suicida y resucita por deporte, regresando una y otra vez de entre los muertos, cubierta de larvas, para devorar a los hombres como aire, o en esa historia que cuenta Mariana Enríquez en 'Las cosas que perdimos en el fuego', en la que las mujeres argentinas responden a la enésima oleada de feminicidios prendiéndose fuego a sí mismas.
>
> [… in the images of 'Lady Lazarus', the poem by Sylvia Plath in which the protagonist commits suicide and comes back to life as a sport, rising from the dead over and over again, covered in larvae, to eat men like air, or that story that Mariana Enriquez tells in 'Things We Lost in the Fire' in which Argentinean women answer to the umpteenth wave of femicides by setting themselves on fire].
>
> (2019, 281–2)

The bodies of Lady Lazarus in Plath's poem and the Argentinean women in Enriquez's text, but also those of the adolescent girls in Portela and de la Cruz's stories, find resistance in their monstrous becoming. Throwing snot at abusers, bruising one's own body, feeling empowered by one's own disgusting presence are all examples of a self-inflicted monstrosity that fights the objectification of the female body and immunises the girls against fear.

We could theorise the teens in these stories as figures similar, but different to, the Final Girl described by Carol J. Clover. It could be argued that these girls also fight against their attackers and survive (Clover 1992, 36) and that they do it from a position of 'unfemininity' (48) and even 'boyishness' (40). When adopting behaviours that the hegemonic binary system of gender has associated with boys (like playing with snot and mud or engaging in contact sports), the girls avoid the sexualisation imposed by the male gaze and, consequently, move on to a position of safety. However, unlike Clover's Final Girl, this experimentation with gender roles is not in place to please the male audience. Clover famously argues that the survivor of the slasher film needs to be female (because viewers would reject a story in which a male experienced abject terror) but 'masculine' enough that a male viewer can identify with her. But these stories, unlike the horror films described by Clover, are not about male fears and desires but about those of girls and women. The stories are *by* women, *about* women, and presented as first-person testimonies that invite the reader's identification with the women's gaze. In this sense, it is perhaps more appropriate to read the stories in *Tranquilas* considering Jack Halberstam's understanding of the Final Girl's gender as 'monstrous': 'a gender that splatters, rips at the seams, and is sutured together again as something much messier than male or female' (1995, 143). As this chapter

has been arguing, their monstrous becoming is precisely the characteristic that brings together the different types of resistance to patriarchal definitions put forward by these teens. The girls' gender, therefore, becomes another feature of their 'messy' selves.

The girls' monstrous 'disruption of categories' and 'destruction of boundaries' (Halberstam 1995, 27) is perhaps better signified by their existence within the border between girlhood and womanhood. In her recent study on gender and the horror genre, Sady Doyle builds on Halberstam's and other critics' theories to argue that women have always been seen as monsters, from adolescence to marriage, motherhood, and old age. This monstrosity, according to Doyle, has been defined by men's fears and has acted like a strategy of control. Of all the ages associated with the patriarchally prescribed cycle of womanhood, adolescence is the most threatening: 'Men never seem to feel more at risk than when in the presence of a tween girl' (Doyle 2019, 7). The liminality associated with the changing status of teenage girls represents a source of fear: 'In a culture where we've trained to protect children and loathe women, the border zone between the two states is the subject of intense superstition and terror' (18). Cristina Santos argues that teenage girls already grow up with a set of psychological limitations, such as 'the values of obedience and service to their male caretakers (father, brother, husband)' and the lack of choice to exercise 'control over their own bodies (such as having to bear children they sometimes do not want)' (2017, xvi). This set of restrictions is augmented in adolescence as a way to appease men's fears of women: 'Puberty marks the point where girls stop being people and start being women, where it becomes important to ensure their submission to male power' (Doyle 2019, 19). The protagonists of Portela and De la Cruz's stories experience the violent impulse of male control as soon as they reach adolescence. However, in their attempts to survive this violence, they fight against the definitions that *make them* monstrous and engage in a process of *becoming monstrous*. In this sense, these characters can be read as symbols of resistance and as a representation of a young generation that opposes the fear strategies designed to control their presents and futures.

For all the reasons previously explained, we could define the teens' monstrous becoming as empowering. In the inspiring conclusion to her study, Doyle dedicates a chapter to analyse the potential of monstrous women (particularly witches) to alter the patriarchal status quo. In Doyle's words: 'Women simply are outcasts, under the terms of patriarchy. But we can become outcasts with meaning and purpose; we can work wonders from the edges of the world' (2019, 243). In their attempt to escape violence, the girls in the stories do much more: They protect their bodies against subjugation and control and, therefore, become threatening. The patriarchal reaction is, as we have seen in the preceding quotes, of fear and disgust. If, as Doyle argues, 'Female monstrosity inspires terror because it really can end the world — or our current version of it' (2019, xxiii), then it is safe to assume that monstrous teenagers have the potential to become symbols of futurity.

The girls' resistance, however, is limited. Their monstrous becoming allows them to escape male violence in one particular instance but, as the rest of their narratives attest to, they have not always been able to avoid it. The protagonist of 'Primero fueron los mocos' does avoid the twins' continuous groping in the pool; she also seems to find a way to endure the growing rejection of her teenage body by harming it. The protagonist of 'Bautismo' feels a brief moment of monstrous empowerment. All these actions are reactive and imperfect, and still leave the girls in what seems to be an unavoidable path of fear and hatred towards their bodies. The stories seem to suggest that there is a limit to individual resistance. The possibility of changing the world glimpsed by Doyle's theory is not possible if attempted individually.

Women Becoming Storytellers

As mentioned in the introduction, one of the main issues addressed by *Tranquilas* is the normalisation of women's silence. This normalisation is reflected in recent statistics. As of 2017, one in five Spanish women over the age of 15 has experienced physical or sexual violence; less than a fifth of them have reported these to the police (Núñez Puente, Fernández Romero and Vázquez Cupeiro 2017). In 2020, the Secretary of State for Equality and Against Gender Violence (Government Office Against Gender Violence, Spanish Ministry of Equality) released the data of a macro-survey about gender violence carried out in 2019 among 9568 women residents in Spain of 16 years and older. The girls and women who decided not to report the sexual aggressions suffered at any point in their lives outside of their partnerships were asked why they decided to stay silent, and some of the higher percentages are quite telling: 35.4% reported it was because they were minors at the time of the aggression; 30.5% considered that they did not think the incident was important, grave enough, or constituted violence; 25.9% felt shame and did not want anyone to find out; 22.1% because it was 'another time' and these things 'were not spoken about'; and 20.8% were scared of not being believed.

The normalisation of violence that these numbers reflect is addressed by many of the stories in *Tranquilas*. Portela's narrative, for instance, describes the different violences suffered as a teen as 'los [traumas] propios de la edad' [age-appropriate traumas] (2019, 35). The discourse that upholds the silencing of women's stories and normalises violence against them also considers that a flirtatious woman is inviting rape (as suggested by the judge in Laffage's case); argues that a woman who travels is a propitiatory victim (as in Menegazzo and Coni's); and makes girls believe that experiencing violence during adolescence is 'age appropriate'.

Against these discourses, the volume *Tranquilas* addresses the patriarchal normalisation of violence against women and attempts to undo some of the structures that make it prevalent. Firstly, it fights against the consideration of violence as a sort of 'manifest destiny', in Sayak Valencia's words, that condemns girls and women to always exist under conditions of 'vulnerabilidad y

dañabilidad' [vulnerability and harmability] (2018) through narration and characterisation. Thanks to the use of first-person narration and the elaboration of complex characters, the girls and women in the stories are not portrayed as passive, but as victims with agency and, as we have seen, an ability to resist their aggressors. Secondly, the testimonial nature of these stories makes them narratives of denunciation, which allows for the potential identification of other victims. This recognition might help them manage some of the feelings of fear, shame, and inadequacy that statistically prevent women from reporting sexual aggressions. The multiplicity of voices in *Tranquilas* become an example of feminist storytelling with a collective task: That of breaking the silences surrounding violence and rewriting the discourses of fear and danger (Folguera and de la Cueva 2019, 13). This objective complements the limited resistance exemplified by the individual stories analysed in this chapter and becomes the texts' secondary act of defiance. The limited resistance to patriarchal violence explored during adolescence is complemented here by a network of liberated voices, illuminating a literary strategy that seems to suggest the necessity for collaboration and sorority in the imagination of a different future.

As this chapter has argued, the volume *Tranquilas* can be understood as a literary representation of a contemporary cultural movement defined by a resurgence of feminisms in Spanish-speaking countries. The two stories that serve as case studies for this chapter represent a recollection, narrated from adulthood, of the experiences of abuse suffered during adolescence. The girls in the stories look for means of resisting individual manifestations of rape culture by counteracting the sexualisation of their bodies. Dirt, blood, bruises, and snot become concealing agents. They hide bodies from the patriarchal gaze and bring a sense of safety to the teens. Albeit only temporarily, the girls are victorious in their aim to escape violence, as their abject bodies become symbols of monstrous resistance. This limited resistance accomplished at adolescence is complemented by a secondary act of defiance during womanhood: The act of liberating voices and resisting rape culture by engaging in collective storytelling. The stories told by the different narrators in *Tranquilas* attest to the need of rewriting the discourses that will define the girls and women of the future; the cultural work put forward by them illuminates a path to get there.

Notes

1 *Ni una menos* is a slogan that represents a feminist movement born in Argentina in 2015, which expanded to various countries in Latin America and around the world. It stands for a feminist collective that protests gender violence and femicide (Ni Una Menos, 2023).

2 The hashtag #Cuéntalo was launched in April 2018, to invite women to tell about the sexual aggressions they had suffered. The webpage collecting the results of the campaign defines itself as a historical document containing a collective memory of sexist violence narrated by its victims (#Cuéntalo, 2023).

3 Also known as 'El violador eres tú' [The rapist is you], 'Un violador en tu camino' is a participatory performance created in 2019 by the Chilean feminist collective LASTESIS with the objective of protesting the violations of human rights inscribed within the context of social revolt that the country experienced that year.
4 All translations into English from the original work are my own.
5 This chapter and the book of short stories it analyses narrate the experiences of cis girls and women, although I am well aware that these are not the only marginalized group experiencing sexual violence in Spanish-speaking countries (and beyond).
6 The term 'femicide' generally refers to the murder of women for being women. It acknowledges that these murders do not occur in isolation and urges society to address the multilayered structures of oppression that make them possible (Monárrez Fragoso 2018, in Petersen 2019, 23).
7 This court case was revised by the Supreme Court of Spain in 2019, which elevated the rapists' prison sentence to 15 years for sexual aggression. Moreover, partly fueled by the street protests, the Ministry of Equality recently promoted the Law of Sexual Guarantee (most commonly known as the 'Only yes means yes' law) approved by Parliament in 2023, which eliminates the distinction between 'sexual abuse' and 'sexual aggression' and makes specific consent a key factor in the trials of sexual violence.
8 The story 'Follación' by Lucía-Asué Mbomío Rubio (2019, 69–85) particularly addresses this.
9 'Rape culture', a term first used by second-wave feminists, refers to a setting in which sexual violence is prevalent and normalised as a consequence of societal attitudes towards sexuality and gender (Williams, 2015).
10 I use here Julia Kristeva's definition of abjection as explored in *Powers of Horror*, 1982.

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7 Sister-matic Cannibalism in the *Dying Breed*

Heterotopic Representations of Australia's Lingering Colonial Connectivity

Phil Fitzsimmons

Introduction: The End Is the Beginning

This chapter explores the lurking presence of a young female in the 2008 Australian horror movie *The Dying Breed* (Dwyer 2008). It is her presence in tandem with the heterotopian or topographical imprint of the landscape she lives in that form the narrative enablers and overlay of this movie.

Within this cannibalistic palimpsest she typically appears as an ever-present side presence, that is, until the last few minutes of this movie. In these final frames she shifts from her usual a-central position of watching and waiting for death to unfold to a killing vector as she seeks to rip open the throat of an outsider. To paraphrase Elana Gomel, a spatial movement and spatial reversal of space as such represents the 'carving out of a space of resistance, carving out a space of freedom and change in the static landscape of social and psychological determinism' (2014, 140). In effect, as an emerging cannibal she 'represents a far more profound threat to the status quo' (Hagelin and Silverman 2022, xii).

She is also emblematic of the violent history of Australiana that led to the 1820 miraculous escape of Alexander Pearce. Incarcerated on Sarah Island, without maps, Pearce disappeared into the Tasmanian wilderness and before recapture ate his fellow escapees in their run from the colonial forces. Unnamed and unable to escape, the young girl also represents what Tosgang Fossi has termed 'colonial amnesia' (2019, 129). Just as the colonial powers tried to forget Pearce as did history, as an illegitimate child ignored by those around her, she is the epitome of the quasi-historical absence or complete omission related to the suffering and slaughter of one subaltern group by a colonial power. However, as Hastie (2019, 273) points out, it is the creation of 'cinematic imagination' that 'empowers memory-making in its endeavour to contest organized forms of social amnesia. Cinematic revisitation enables the drawing together strands of history that had previously been considered separate'.

With its emphasis on 'heterotopiac spatiality' (Pezet 2022, 120), the elements of 'cultural amnesia' embedded in this movie are pulled to the surface narrative. These are representational 'places of memory where each individual

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leaves a personal signature' (ibid). Where these historical memories are the result of cultural trauma, these representations become conjoined mirrors of the monstrous, which are metonymically revealed in an array of porous and doubled spatial configurations. These interconnected strings of metaphor home in on 'the anguish of transgression, zones of both deficiency and excess open abyssal non-relations' (White, Faramelli, and Hancock 2018, 10).

It is through a heterotopian slide of spatial representations in this movie that this eight-year-old girl gradually and systematically touches on the Tasmanian and Australian colonial past, finally becoming the central blood-soaked infusion of cannibalism. Not only is this the 'absolute marker of savagery and primitivism' (Githire 2015, 5), it is typically emblematic of the last resort of resistance towards repressive authority. In heterotopian texts the shift to the finale is often cyclical and is reached though bursts in what has been termed 'Gothic moments' (Wheatley 2006, 7). Similar to the 'tell-tale gaps' in hardcopy literature these brief blips of the uncanny as Gothic excess and violence initially 'drip feed' onto the surface, which gradually coalesce and build into memory patterns of spatial touchstone similarities. In cinema this building of a scaffold of visual pathways leads to the complete and violent breakdown of the familiar veil of normality that allows the monstrous to narratively explode.

As briefly touched on previously, the slide into this patterning in this movie is the path trodden by markers of the feminine. The surface level of this gendered film commences with a focus on two white couples venturing into the wilderness of south-west Tasmania. Within the first few minutes of the movie, it becomes clear that, like the British colonialists before them, the two males, Jack (Nathan Philips) and Matt (Leigh Whannell) represent the total unpreparedness of the British to cope with the Tasmanian landscape and their arrogance in believing they could tame this wilderness. On the other side of the cinematic coin, the two women are portrayed in the same light as the convict women who were forced onto these wild shores. Bec (Melanie Vallejo) is oblivious to the actual nature of the wilderness and is often portrayed as being more interested in sex with Jack. Nina (Mirrah Foulkes) is the direct opposite. Her sister disappeared in this wilderness eight years beforehand, with the last contact a letter and photograph of a thylacine [Tasmanian tiger]. Like her missing sister, as a scientist she is aware of her surroundings and seeks to understand and appreciate the web of the Tasmanian natural world. However, as the film moves forward, it becomes clear that while she appreciates the beauty of the wilderness, she is Gothically and heterotopically aware that, as Botting states, 'nature informs the entire cruel rationality: "she" is cause, law, reason, energy; she is locus of creation, destruction, and absolute indifference' (2017, 28).

The south-west area that frames this narrative and the cannibalism of Alexander Pearce is the Gothic heart of an Australian Gothic Island state. As Nina, Matt, Jack, and Rebecca venture into this epitome of wilderness, they increasingly encounter living human remnants of Pearce's escape, who either

want them to leave or to consume them. One of this group is a young prepubescent female who literally and mimetically enables the shedding of blood to seep into the surface narrative. As revealed in the memorabilia hanging on the walls of the decrepit buildings, this group carefully guard the spatial representations of the false ideologies, repressed trauma, and socio-cultural fears of the original British colonisers.

As a shadow, this eight-year-old female is emblematic of the slithers of darkness ever present in Gothic narratives, especially those related to colonialism. These often humanesque foci are disturbed creatures in themselves, acting visually as multidirectional deformed discourse linkages between historical and contemporary populations and places: 'suspended between space and time and belonging to neither. … traces and shadows both of the past and of the future, expressing the way in which the certainties of yesteryear are corroded by fears of today and tomorrow' (Gomel 2014, 64). Further, as Mukherjee points out, all colonial-based narratives must also be read as cartographic formations and understood through a reflexive analytic process of linearity and circularity. This reflects the underlying epistemological framework of English cartographic-based colonialism and their use of this axiological lens that facilitated an understanding of:

> the dominating order of the empire…. It is through these theoretical practices that mentally constructed spaces steadily acquired identity with physical and social space. The articulation of colonial space which worked with representations became a crucial feat in sustaining the bases of power, control and governance, first of the empire and later for the nation.
>
> (Mukerjee 2021, 205, 268)

The intertwined process of circularity and linearity is enacted within the spatial tracing of this prepubescent and androgynous-looking female as she enters a physical spiralic directionality. She often appears to be a parallel character, and at times a silent reoccurring back-story presence. Thus, for much of the movie 'she is and is not' herself. In this sense of uncertain spatial vector, she is the silent monstrous that 'holds together and at the same time sets in motion a series of spatial, temporal, ideological and affective dimensions of marginality and liminality' (Pitroli and Zubak 2022, 6). In anthropological-narrative terms regarding the monstrous, she represents what Bratlinger (2003, 179) calls 'survivals, or traces of the past that linger on into the present to reconstruct the past'. Seeming to have the potential to kill and to eat human flesh, she begins to step into the same vein of the silent serial killer trope. Despite her deep connection and relationship to the intersection of spatio-geographical trigger points of attacks on humans, the plot connections in this movie reveal her role is to play a wait and watch game, and to 'bring out all the folds of time relating to a place' (Westphal 2011, 143).

Paratextual Pointers: The Sliding Emergence of the Cannibal

The first segments of the movie are a paratextual, intertextual, and metonymic linkage to the prepubescent young female, and the indelible 18th-century colonial frames of thought carried to the southern continent. While the fear of sailing to the other side of the world is understandable, Wagner contends that colonial thought was a palimpsest layered with apocalyptic visions, which he termed as 'terminal images' (1982, 20). Overall, theirs was a cartographic and geographical consciousness, an ontology that viewed the entire known and unknown world as theirs for the taking. Entwined in this perspective was their use of 'cartographic images and national iconography in general, which depicted British territory as female' (Mukerjee 2021, 106). While there was a seeming rape and penetration embedded in this visual mindset, it was also offset by a deep fear and uncertainty of the female body. Underpinning this was the bipolar colonial perspective that while they hoped 'the so-called primitive races will soon vanish from the earth' (Bratlinger 2003, 199) there was connected to this a white supremacist anxiety of the times 'about white, or more specifically English, racial degeneration' (Bratlinger 2011, 3). These British apocalyptic fears were especially expressed in the literature of the times, in themes of the fear that English violence in the colonies would be revisited on itself, and there would be cultural 'suicide by internal barbarism' (Bratlinger 2016, 178).

As is the purpose of paratext, the first section of this triptych reveals the 'sense of the inner rhythm of the text, … an intertextual ripple of the narratives storyline towards itself' (Angelaki 2023, 9). The first brief component reveals a map of Tasmania showing the site of Sarah Island, which metonymically contains all of the British fears. As the southernmost point of their Australian occupancy, and as occurred in their sites of other southern possession, this locational coordinate became a self-fulfilling prophecy known as a place of ultra-violence and deprivation. Such was the carnage wrought on the convicts sent there, both the prisoners and free settlers who arrived shortly after cartographically 'referred to this isolated island as Transylvania' (Buckman 2008, 155). Tasmanian lore has it that this label was specifically coined from Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, and the first diary entry of Jonathan Harker.

Slipping into a close-up perspective, the second section of paratext shows a close-up frame with the name Alexander Pearce being listed in neat colonial cursive script. In his seminal work, Bergson maintains any visual capturing of spatialised time or reference to an unseen person is a 'ghost of a space, haunting the reflective consciousness' (Bergson 2010, 99). Specifically, this kind of specific framing showing writing in action as an ordered process activates the 'temporal and spatial coordinates of dominant spatial geographies' (Brosseau 2017, 14). Hence, this form of focus behaves in the same way as film, situating an actual person in a close relationship between the view, the viewer, and the screen simultaneously creating spatio-temporal coordinates. The ordered

list and neatness of the script stands in direct contrast to the chaos, horror, and monstrosity of Tasmania's Gothic landscape. However, two other elements of oppositional axiological impressions are also embedded in this textual flow. While instances of this form of condensed on-screen–script aims to reveal the stability of the dominant culture and to eliminate societal differences and points of disorder, in a heterotopical sense in excluding the broader horizon lines as spatial orientation, this brief insertion exophorically speaks to another narrative of possible of rebellion.

Barrows has demonstrated that this form of intertexual insert was a common written modality in colonial horror narrative, such as found in the work of Rudyard Kipling. While signifying a 'comfortable precision' with the societal *status quo*, at the same time it signifies a 'refusal to allow the errant back into English society' (Barrows 2016, 52). He further contends that however ethereal this process of signification was, it at least partially conjoins a representation of a life that lay in another space and country as a component back story. Though not appearing explicitly on paper, it was deemed nonetheless just as tangible. In the same way, in today's semiotic cinematic forms a visual focus on writing is a discursive referent to those suffering complete dislodgment from a dominant cultural power. This results in 'unheimlich displacement' (Sugarman 2022, 153), where a character's existential psyche drifts in the hope of finding stasis and a sense of attachment in their surroundings. In a mimetic sense, the young nameless female represents Pearce's sense of dislodgement and prefigures the psycho-social state of the clan she finds herself living in.

The filmic handwritten note then cuts to a scene of a convict running from uniformed guards and dogs. Eventually a guard corners the escapee and names him as Pearce. The escapee spins around and in a vampiric-like act tears out his entire neck in a single bite. With other soldiers approaching he kicks the bloodied neck to a waiting thylacine that devours it. While clearly a reference to one of the escapes of Alexander Pearce, according to Auerbach this form of vampiric act is a signifier of 'an assertion of ownership' (1997, 71). However, for Pearce this was a false hope as soon after his final escape he was eventually hanged and his body sent to America where it was dissected.

This paratext locates this film in the context of refocusing cultural memory and national pain. It is the emblematic outcome of European arrival that set Australia on a disturbing trajectory. 'Empires move outward in space as a way of moving forward in time; the "prospect" that opens up is not just a spatial scene but a projected future of development exploitation' (Mitchell 1994, 17). The problem is that unresolved pain, either personal or national, eventually breaks out in violence. Shot with a sepia filter, this third phase of paratext gives the impression of a newspaper article fading with time and the associated loss of importance. This first section commences with the famous 21 seconds of actual restored footage of the thylacine in Hobart Zoo. Wandering around its fenced enclosure it is clearly distressed. While the most

obvious implication is the total extermination of thylacine itself wrought by graziers and pastoralists, the small cage in which it is confined also speaks exophorically to the space outside of the enclosure. In an heterotopian perspective, all caged or enclosed spaces represent a process as well as a place. In these sites corporality becomes an intrusion and a means of decentring, and where exterior and interior 'pass through one another and reflect one another' (White 2018, 81). While this short paratext is also a clear link to the British concept of *Terra Nullius* and the belief that nothing in Australia was of any value, this brief excerpt of entrapment is also a mirror double of the British fear of their own self-extermination.

From Paratext to Cinematic Text: Sounds of Silence

At the conclusion of the paratext, the notions of heterotopic disorder, confusion, and forestation become fused with silence in the narrative flow. In all the ensuing dialogue, the towering environment and young girl speak a mute mimetic connection of disorder, as death and cannibalism begin to occur as the four friends encounter both the young girl and her adult companions. As Nixon emphasises, meaning in any text 'resides not only in its contemporary relevance but also in its historical resonance' (Nixon 2022, 2).

It is also generally accepted that any use of silence or silenced humanity in Australian cinema indicates a site of monstrous exclusion, trauma, and absence of meaning. Another point that begins to subtextually focus on the young girl is that spaces of quietness can also be indicative of a monstrous return, one that that will fill a social void with the unexpected or uncanny — historical resonance with this is found in that court and colonial records of the period called Pearce 'the quiet man' (Collins 2004, 34). However, in yet another facet of this polyvalent narrative resonance to the silence, in Gothic texts strings of silence indicate the return of the repressed; a form of the original mute being will inevitably resurface. This creature will have a deep sense of absence and seeks to 'mark restored borders with sense, subjectivity and order' (Botting 2008, 28). This shift comes as a portent of dire issues, as this narrative monster also represents the need for the repressed contemporary society to be restarted in order that authentic social structures could possibly be reclaimed. In touching on this point Colebrook makes it clear that from a heterotopic perspective, societal 'unmaking and return to a clear slate' (2018, 161) of a societal group in a post-repression stage is unpredictable: 'Action, unlike making, is messy; it does not fabricate according to a model, and because it does not issue in a distinct product it cannot be reversed or erased' (Colebrook 2018, 161).

Linking the young girl's silence and concepts of 'return and unmaking', the movie shifts into the narrative proper, with a scene showing the arrival of Matt and Nina in Tasmania and their meeting with Jack and Rebecca. As an Irish zoologist, the impetus for Nina's journey is that her sister had sent a photo of a thylacine's paw print eight years previously, before she too

vanished in the wilderness. Their departure by four-wheel drive into the wild to hunt for evidence of a thylacine continues the Irish connection to Pearce, but also as redoubling of a thread already marked as death in a Gothic wilderness. As Botting notes, any form of redoubling in Gothic narratives 'signifies duplicity and an evil nature' (1995, 68). The mention of the thylacine is also repeated as a Gothic double, which when specifically connected to death seems to 'assure immortality and then promises death' (Smith 2000, 151). The journey out of civilisation by the four friends is heavily nuanced by further references to the Tasmanian elements of forest and riverine wilderness. As indicated previously these foci are uniquely marked as being not only being dark in nature, but also totally unruly spaces that nurture darkness. The meeting zone of rivers and forest in this part of the world are almost impenetrable, representing the inescapable presentness of the past.

Another set of redoubling is also embedded in this linear journey. The metanarrative written across Australian literature and film is often underpinned by masculinity; however, Tasmania is different. While the laconic male of the outback, bush, and desert metaphor underpins the mainland landscape narrative, the Tasmanian trope of masculinity is at best ambiguous. Often located within a wild landscape schema, which is perceived to be Gothic in nature, the male figures inhabiting this space are often framed being hyper-masculine where violence is the cultural capital. However, they also appear as being cowed by the seeming enormity and impenetrability of the terrain. With the core meaning the 'centrality of Gothic spaces is the relationship to the feminine body' (Halberstam 1995, 156), the resurrection of the silent and repressed figure briefly outlined in previous paragraphs is subtly being revealed as being feminine.

The end of the forest road for the group is at a ferry crossing. In Australian cinema, this place typically signifies a place of lawlessness, a site of frontier escape as resistance against authority. Despite the trials and ordeals, these thresholds should lead into a new form of existence, and as Collins points out, in Australian cinema this crossing over a definitive border is 'often in the company of a doppelganger or double' (2019, 38). In other words, the audience is able to clearly project and identify with the protagonist and sense a pathway and feel of place. In this instance, the still, dark water and lack of anything that bears a resemblance to modernity on the other side of the river sets up an emotional barrier, a mood of indifference and a borderline of foreboding. As Conley proposes, quite often in cinema death is personified, symbolically qualified, or 'contemplated at the edge of a river' (2007, 33).

While waiting to be taken across Matt notes that there is a blood-like substance in the water's edge, which Jack informs him is simply liquid from the T-trees that line the riverbank. With the forest on the other side marked as feminine, the T-tree seepage marks this river as feminine abject and sets up a hegemonic bloodline border. While typically this represents a demarcation line between a sense of the clean and unclean, as this blood reference is already in a site of isolation and a zone marked as a place of the Other, this area is

being framed in what Al-Mousawi (2021, 2) has termed, in other contexts, 'a two-tiered ontology'. In other words, human components have been spatially labelled along an imaginary line separating the affluent north and a degenerate of less-than-human south. This mind-frame border metaphorically 'dramatizes two modes and experiences of space and time that unfold in the same site but neither meaningfully mix nor collide' (Al-Mousawi 2021, 3). However, once these border zones are crossed, there is conflict and violence.

Adding to this feminine indicator of blood in this zone of uncertainty, Rebecca goes into the dense forest to urinate while waiting for the ferry. However, she becomes suddenly frightened and scurries out to the waiting group. In another form of 'feminine as abject' signage, as she clambers out there is a close-up shot of a headstone set in the bush at the ferry staging zone. The headstone bears the inscription marking the site where the colonial soldier in the paratext was killed by Alexander Pearce.

The cannibalistic aggression begins to emerge as soon as the four young people are on board the ferry and Matt notices a young, disheveled girl, sitting down and singing the Pieman Song. Matt tries to engage her in conversation, and she bites him. The ferry operator roughly pulls her into the back of his cabin. There is no hint of their relationship other than the male has a semblance of control. From this point on she does not speak again in the movie, and so becomes: 'a murmuring absence, out of which things may emerge, a space not of simple absence, limit, opposition, inversion, transition, or discontinuity, but where a language to infinity may appear in a flash, darkly, and brilliant in a moment of transgression' (Botting 2017, 32). Once on the other side the group of four find themselves in a dilapidated village called Sarah. While this reference was a none-to-subtle attempt at a connection to Alexander Pearce, there is also a linkage to the paratext in that all who live in this village are also trapped. By extension, the young girl is trapped within an inner drive that appears to be perfectly acceptable in her context of situation. In a heterotopic sense, she is space where meaning has collapsed, which is reinforced when the four friends are leaving. As they begin to put their gear into the inflatable boat to go upstream, Nina notices that she has left her camera in the car. Once found, she begins to return to her friends by the boat, but notices the young girl is fixated on a litter of puppies being bludgeoned to death by an older woman. Covered in the dog's blood the woman tells Nina: 'The mother and father were brother and sister. I told them this would happen'. While clearly a reference to the inbred nature of Sarah, the young girl's fixation with this killing and Nina's repulsion is also commensurate with the instability that occurs when blood, boundaries, and bodies from different worlds encounter each other without finding common ground or consensus.

More so, the young girl's engagement with the death of young animals represents the beginning preoccupation of many emerging serial killers. Clearly, she has begun to demonstrate a sense that any bodily form is a mere spatial surface to be broken into or penetrated. Deeply psychosexual in nature, once again the elements in the paratext resurface, emphasising the

focus on sexuality and identity being equated with forced enclosure, bloodletting, and complete disassociation from her emotions.

When Nina gets back and they begin loading the boat, she notices that Jack is carrying a crossbow. When challenged he makes a comment, 'when in *Deliverance*-land you have to be prepared'. This statement, with its psychosexual inferences of backwardness and inbreeding, not only pulls the heterotopic framing of *The Dying Breed* into a broader international cartographic and spatial significance, it also reveals the purpose of heterotopic framing and that of horror cinema. In connecting the concepts of the 'deeps souths' from the northern and southern hemispheres, these cinematic references highlight the actual foundational aspects of the surface crises experienced by both cultures through colonial occupation. Drawing on the work of Holohan (2015), these representational spaces symbolise deep unresolved issues of power and power struggles. Cinema is the primary modality that allows the portrayal of a space in crisis, focusing on its metonymic nature,

> of repetition and restoration into crisis through its encounter with an external world characterized by ceaseless flux. However, the starkly visual nature of this opposition within the film functions to make this conflict all the more explicit and reveals just what is at stake in the desire to demarcate a space that may be called 'home'.
>
> (Holohan 2015, 186)

In another direct transtextual visual reference to *Deliverance*, the four friends find a manmade dam that is not shown on their map of the river, which blocks their journey up the river. Avery argues that these forms of spatial omissions are 'ghostly matters', representing 'something more, where meaning — comprehension — and force intersect' (2008, 31). She further asserts that spatial deletions are linked to people who have been overlooked, forgotten, or deleted from history.

This sense of human omission becomes compounded and emphasised as when the group look upwards, they see a male form on top of the embankment portrayed in the same silhouetted form as the hillbillies on the cliff tops in *Deliverance*. Just as in the earlier film the group's call to the figure overhead is also ignored. In a split-second sweep the male figure disappears, replaced by what looks like the young girl. From a heterotopial and spatial perspective this looking above, lack of connectivity, and vague images speaks to the holistic colonial idea that in this region their religious and cultural perspectives had been inverted. The first colonists believed that they had been sent to the Biblical abyss: 'the dark chaos, a gaping void' (Bronfen 2008, 30).

With heaven figuratively in high positions and hell bellow, the four friends are in the allegorical place signifying elimination, a non-space that represents the epitome of 'illness and felicitous affect, allowing a glimpse of the forever-out-of time space, … where subjectivity is made as much as human life is lost' (Botting 2017, 55).

This sense of 'forever-out-of time' begins to narratively reach a crescendo from this point. In the same way searching a map for a specific point coalesces topographical 3D and 2D dimensionality, similarly because of the limitations of cinematic duration a situation of crisis occurs as all the associated heterotopic factors are emptied into an instance of acute immediacy. In *The Dying Breed* this occurs at a point of spatial disconnection. The narrative returns to the four friends retracing their river journey, finally coming ashore close to the dam wall in the wilderness. Trudging into the dense rainforest, a storm forces them to shelter in a series of caves, which appear to be a labyrinth of disused colonial mineshafts. These subterranean spaces once again link to the notion of the abyss, and as Gomel (2014) points out are equated with the opposite of the high positioning of embodied spatial mapping; the underground is heterotopically said to be 'carnivalesque, oozing, primitive, bestial and devolved' (182).

During the night Nina hears a noise and both she and Matt search outside and in torchlight see a thylacine. They awaken their companions, and Nina goes to retrieve her camera but finds the young girl standing in the dark. She takes her with her for safety and the group go into the surrounding bush. Finding nothing, Matt, Nina, and Jack return but Bec has been separated from them as has the young girl. In the torchlight Nina finds she is covered in blood, which she realises was on the foliage where she was searching for Bec.

In trying to return to the others, Bec is confronted by a disheveled male, who pushes her against a tree and tears out her throat. As the young girl watches, he then begins to eat large sections of her torso. Realising Bec has not returned they all move back to the forest, and in their search discover pools of blood. Finding the spot of the attack further coalesces this movie into smaller spaces and denser mimetic connections. As Botting (2017, 37) states, these conflations become a 'cruel mimicry'. The place where clearly Bec was torn apart revisits Pearce's savagery in the paratext, and moving over other plot points of cannibalistic carnage in this spiral towards a conclusion, the three friends meet one of the males from Sarah who leads them back into the mine tunnels to find their friend and the perpetrator. The young girl disappears from these frames. With all the metonymic associations of birth and rebirth, and the shedding of feminine blood, these tubular spaces propel the three friends out to the surface to find a small, dilapidated shack in the bush. Searching through this space, they find remnants of bodies, with Bec's dismembered body strung up on butcher's hooks. In a fit of rage Jack turns and falls into a man trap — a colonial device designed to capture escaped convicts. Nina runs back into the tunnels, followed by Matt. Eventually cornered on a bridge by two males, she escapes by falling backwards into the river below. Linking the appearance of the young girl on the dam wall and her ensuing disappearance and silence, Nina's silent plunge to her death now symbolically connects these females to the trope of disappearance, which according to Bartoloni can be equated to cultural trauma and 'relations of domination, cohabitation, absorption, oppression, erosion, marginalization' (2015, 146).

In the final section of the movie, Matt has been interviewed by the police in Sarah, but having subsequently been drugged and tied to a chair is seen facing the young girl. As he turns his head, he sees Nina tied face down on a table and about to be raped by the males of Sarah. The young girl opens her mouth, and as the words, 'I'm hungry' escape it she lunges at Matt, seeking to tear chunks of flesh from his torso.

Conclusion

The young girl's change to cannibalism fits within Melby's assertion that wilderness-related cinema is a bifold representation of both 'resistance to the obsessive will of the film's protagonists' within 'a paradigm of psychological struggle' (2010, 7). Thrown into this underpinning sense of resistance and cognitive issues, this young girl's cannibalistic transformation is indicative of the result of the unresolved fears of the colonial powers that gave metaphoric birth to her invasive anarchy and revolt.

She is a form of monstrous prescience, a warning to the dominant culture in which she is trapped. *The Dying Breed* is narratively indicative of the wilderness effect on individuals and culture, in that without a stable social network the human psyche becomes disorientated and prone to kill. Left untreated and alone the human state becomes even more 'disordered, confused and wilder' (Nash 2004, 2).

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8 Seeking Resistance in Tropes

A Reading of the Final Girl Tropes Used in *NH10* and *Stree* and Its Socio-Cultural Significance

Debaditya Mukhopadhyay

While the Final Girl is certainly a major trope of the Hollywood slasher films of the 1970s and 80s, her appearance is not restricted solely to those types of films. Drawing attention to the trope's recurrent appearances beyond the slasher genre and even the film media as a whole in the 21st century, Katarzyna Paszkiewicz and Stacy Rusnak describe the Final Girl as pervasive, flexible, and 'a cross-media phenomenon' (2020, 3). Taking a step forward from discussing the trope's cross-medial nature, in this discussion this essay intends to analyse films that attest to both the cross-medial and cross-cultural journey of the Final Girl. To this end, two post-millennial Bollywood horror films will be examined: *NH10* (2015) and *Stree* (2018), through a research model based on Carol J. Clover's observations on the figure of the surviving female of Hollywood slasher films. In both *NH10* and *Stree* the narrative ends with their respective female protagonists' victory amidst a society that celebrates privilege of men. Although *Stree* is not as closely related to the slasher as *NH10* is, the presence of revenging women who roam fearlessly on the streets at night and have the last word in the conflict presented in the film make the pair significant for this discussion.

It is important to note that the research model used in the following discussion is not just an application of Clover's ideas as is. Rather, the model adopted here will be an appropriated version of the Final Girl thesis from Clover's book and this appropriation will be implemented by focusing on a specific trend of Bollywood films that has emerged since 2012 in relation to a traumatic incident in Delhi, to be discussed later. The discussion here will unfold in three sections: An overview of the post-2012 trend of Bollywood films with a focus on understanding the milieu it emerges from; the development of the research model for analysing the trend and its connections with the Final Girl; and a reading of the two aforementioned films using the model as a lens.

Women with Agency: A Post-2012 Trend in Bollywood

Though this section refers to Bollywood films in particular, it is to be remembered that characters representing women with agency appeared in regional Indian cinema both before and after 2012. Keeping in mind the Bollywood

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connection of the two films in discussion, the present discussion will refrain from exploring such characters on a pan-Indian basis. As previously mentioned, 2012 is notable for the shocking incident later referred as the 'Nirbhaya case' or the '2012 gang rape and murder incident'. On December 16, a young female student was gang raped by six men (five adults and a juvenile) while travelling by bus at night with her male companion in a reasonably well-populated locality of South Delhi. The incident caused uproar and protests across the nation, in particular when it was revealed that the rapists applied various gruesome methods of torture upon the victim during the act.

The shocking incident caused shock waves within India for the following decade, and more so as it revealed that existing laws did not have any means of convicting the juvenile involved, even though he had reportedly been the one leading the incident, and the rest of the convicts — excluding one who reportedly committed suicide in prison — could only be given capital punishment. The prolonged delay in punishing the offenders despite their heinous crime contributed significantly in keeping the incident alive in public discourse. In spite of this, further gruesome gang rapes have continued to occur — the Unnao rape case in 2017, the Hyderabad gang rape-murder in 2019, and the Hathras gang-rape-murder in 2020 — serving as shocking reminders of the prevailing environment of endemic violence against women in India. Despite differences in location, age, identity of the victim, and so on, each incident is characterised by men, often in groups, attacking women travelling alone or at night. Moreover, all of the cases have shown the inability, or unwillingness, of the Indian legal system to act either quickly or proportionately to the crimes committed. Post-2012 these incidents raised multiple questions about the ongoing threat against women travelling alone (for whatever purpose), and significantly since that date Bollywood, one of the most powerful sources of popular film media in India, has increasingly released films featuring agentic women.

Coincidentally, it was 2012 when Bollywood released its, arguably, first commercially successful thriller featuring a female protagonist with Sujoy Ghosh's *Kahaani*, where the film's protagonist travels alone (with minor assistance from a police officer) in Kolkata to avenge her husband's killer. It was not until some time later that the film was acknowledged as a pioneering influence on Bollywood's otherwise machismo-driven content (Tiwari 2022). The subsequent release of similarly themed films suggests that the widespread popular anxiety around women's safety triggered by the Delhi incident corresponded significantly with this emerging trend. Subsequently, from 2013 to 2022, Bollywood has produced at least five commercial films every year with agentic female protagonists. These films include rom-coms (*Queen* [2013], *Hasee Toh Phasee* [2014], *Tanu Weds Manu Returns* [2015], etc.), biopics of renowned women (*Mary Kom* [2014], *Neerja* [2016], *Haseena Parker* [2017], *Shakuntala Devi* [2020], *Saina* [2021], etc.), women as cops (*Mardaani* [2014] and its sequel [2019]), women as detectives (*Bobby Jasoos* [2014], *Tumhari Sulu* [2017]), and women as revengers (*Hate Story 2* [2014], *Gulaab Gang* [2014], *Angry Indian Goddesses* [2015], *NH10* [2015], *Kahaani 2* [2016], *Akira* [2016], *Warrior Savitri* [2016], *Stree* [2018], *Badla*

[2019], *Mrs. Serial Killer* [2020], *Bulbbul* [2020], etc.). Sangita Gopal describes this recurrent release of women-driven films as the beginning of the 'take-action' genre as a result of the Nirbhaya effect (2021, 40–1) and identifies a few characteristic features of this genre's protagonists.

Women protagonists of the take-action genre are not characterised by having agency 'as an ontological attribute' (Gopal 2021, 41). Rather they 'are forced to take action' and driven by adverse circumstances that are thrust upon them by society, family, or both (ibid). Gopal proposes to exclude women with agency found in 'romantic comedy and horror' from this genre as such women are viewed differently from those forced to take action. Interestingly, Gopal discusses *NH10* as a notable instance of the take-action genre and though *NH10* is definitely not a supernatural horror, it certainly qualifies as what the collection *Bollywood Horrors Religion, Violence and Cinematic Fears* in India describes as 'cultural horror' (Goldberg 2021, 115–6). Besides, the protagonists of the take-action genre are found to be acting solely for 'saving or realizing the self' and not for 'collective change' which results from the neo-liberalist underpinnings of these narratives, while NH10 and a few other contemporary Bollywood horror films featuring women as revengers do signify a lot more than simply saving the self (Gopal 2021, 42).

According to Gopal, *NH10* is representative of a subsection of the take-action genre where women turn violent and amoral without caring for 'liberatory futurities' because such liberation is denied by their circumstances (2021, 41–2), but such views hardly account for the cultural politics of films like *Stree* and *Bulbbul*, which have been read as remarkable instances of feminist horror where women take revenge and retaliate against the repression of women in Indian society in general (Karmakar and Pal 2022, 25–6). Revising Gopal's observations, this discussion will read women taking action in revenge films not just as an act for saving themselves but also as a cultural response to the ongoing structural failure to punish or convict rapists as well political attempts to normalise these incidents (Fareed 2013). Among the various types of take-action films released between 2012 and 2022, the revenging woman narrative has been the most recurrent one. No less than ten films of this kind have been released and many feature the theme of the female protagonist fighting and terrorising males (mostly attackers) on night streets of India — which not only resonates with the rape incidents mentioned earlier, or what has been termed as SVAW (street violence against women) in India (Bhattacharyya 2016, 311–2), but also sees the instant enforcement of justice. This discussion will analyse how these instances of women protagonists reclaiming the night streets have developed a notable Indianisation of the Final Girl figure by reading NH10 and Stree together as representation of a sub-genre of films featuring women as those seeking revenge, or `revengers' against patriarchy on the night streets.

A Final Girl for a Bollywood Trend: The Research Model

The trope of the Final Girl has been largely applied to American films, often in regard to an inappropriateness for other cultural settings — Donato Totaro

draws attention to the trope's inability to explore European horror where killers are female (Totaro 2002), for example. Yet, as shown in multiple essays featured in the collection edited by Paszkiewicz and Rusnak, and indeed in the present volume, Clover's original idea has evolved to reveal for wider cross-cultural relevance. Indeed, to be fair to Totaro he never really debunks the Final Girl as a whole, but rather critiques a reliance on the original model and emphasises the need to break away from the limited domain of American horror (Totaro 2002). Such arguments imply a need to evolve the model particularly in relation to other cultural contexts. Though it is definitely beyond the scope of the present discussion to map Indian horror in its entirety, a model will be developed here in relation to the revenging-woman films mentioned previously.

As noted earlier, the female protagonists of these Bollywood films respond actively in the face of the threatening situations thrust upon them and will take any action, violent, amoral, or otherwise to ensure their survival, as suggested by Gopal (2021, 41–2). Accordingly, these female protagonists are defined by three factors: an adverse situation, a transformation into a revenger, and a willingness to do whatever it takes to survive. These aspects correspond to Clover's description of the Final Girl, albeit with some slight, if important, differences. In order to understand both the similarities and differences it is important to revisit the concept of the Final Girl.

Instead of presenting the Final Girl as an icon of female emancipation, Clover's initial arguments drew attention to the purpose this trope serves for adolescent male viewers of horror cinema. The Final Girl of Hollywood slashers of the 1970s–80s functions as 'a congenial double' for these adolescent male viewers (Clover 2015, xii), which is why in appearance she is ideally boyish (ibid). Expanding upon the dominance of boyish features, Clover adds that the Final Girl's 'smartness, gravity, competence in mechanical and other practical matters', her 'sexual reluctance', and even her name, are all markers of her boyish nature (Clover 2015, 40).

Clover has further explained in detail what a Final Girl has to go through in the narratives of slasher movies in her additional notes prefacing the 2015 edition by stating that prior to defeating the killer at the end the Final Girl has to undergo relentless torture as a helpless figure in sequences where she has to run, hide, get caught, and most importantly watch her friends die which, making her more akin to a 'tortured survivor' than a hero proper (2015, x). The fact that the Final Girl is nearly always a teenager (Harper 2004, 32) is also indicative of the helpless nature of the figure by hinting at her innocent and inexperienced nature. Even the final victory of the Final Girl, which definitely qualifies her as the final figure of the narrative, is not really a triumphant moment. Rather, it is viewed mostly as 'last-minute luck' (Clover 2015, x) and as 'a not entirely victorious moment' (Williams 1996, 198). Alongside this, the Final Girl is often noted as fighting for her own survival rather than for those around her, which can limit her symbolism as a fighter for feminism or wider social change.

Consequently, the Hollywood Final Girl has been identified on the basis of their nature (which is traditionally boyish, clever 'like' a boy, and sexually inactive), a transformation through torture (witnessing deaths, being chased helplessly, etc.), and survival (mostly) by luck in an adverse situation that they encounter, and indeed survive, accidentally. To adapt these to more closely fit the take-action or revenging woman films it seems necessary to add the reaction to patriarchal dominance for developing a research model suitable for studying the Final Girl's presence in Bollywood's post-2012. Clover does not directly address this in her book, although she does note that 'patriarchy run amok' is what motivates rural, killer families in slasher films (Clover 2015, 125). Neither does she trace to what degree the fight of the Final Girl is a resistance to patriarchy. Indeed, her initial observations are that the Final Girl is more obviously meant to enable male viewers' to identify with her while simultaneously satiating their sado-masochistic fantasies (Clover 2015, 53). However, it is important to note that Clover herself has highlighted the need to reconsider her viewing of the Final Girl and a number of critics (Jack Halberstam and Isabel Pinedo) have done so and argued her to be 'a figure of female agency' (Paszkiewicz and Rusnak 2017, 5). Additionally, the socio-cultural context of these Bollywood films imbues their narratives with reflection of patriarchal domination to a significant extent. Taking into account such potentials of the trope as well as the nature of the films to be studied, the research model to be used in the next two sections will consist of four co-ordinates: Nature, transformation, survival, and response to patriarchy.

NH10: Slashing Patriarchy with Swag

NH10 (2015), directed by Navdeep Singh, has been accused of unduly lifting ideas from the 2008 British slasher horror *Eden Lake* (Chatterjee, Huffpost, 2015). Comparison between the two plots indeed reveals some similarity due to the shared presence of a happy couple finding their weekend away going horribly wrong with the death of the husband, the wife ending up in their attacker's house, the attacker's family assisting the killers by trapping the woman, and so on. Yet, *NH10* differs on two major grounds: the survival of the wife who avenges her husband's death and the narrative's depiction of the sinister dominance of patriarchy. Unlike Jenny (Kelly Reilly) and Steve (Michael Fassbender) from *Eden Lake*, Meera (Anushka Sharma) and her husband Arjun (Neil Bhoopalam) do not simply run into a group of rowdies, as the men they encounter are a group of villagers running after a couple from their village with the intent to of murdering them as part of an honour killing — arguably the ugliest manifestation of patriarchal dominance in Indian society.[1] Even before Meera and Arjun's encounter with these killers, patriarchy is shown to loom large over the couple's life.

The opening credits of the film show the streets of Delhi at night. The couple remain physically absent and only their gleeful conversation is heard

in the background. They chat in a relaxed manner on their way to a party, enjoying the city streets at night. And yet the same streets soon turn sinister as Meera is attacked by two men on her way back from the party alone due to an urgent call from her workplace. Meera's attackers pick her as a target simply because she was travelling alone, and later when the couple visit the police station even the officer in charge reminds Arjun gently that he should not *allow* his wife to travel alone. Instead of taking immediate action against Meera's attackers the officer asks Arjun to get her a licensed gun, and ironically the possession of the gun plays a significant role in getting the couple into trouble. Eventually, when Arjun is slapped by the leader of the group of killers at a chance encounter at a roadside eatery, he gives chase, knowing that with the gun he will be able to teach the gang a lesson. By the time Arjun understands how ineffective a gun is against these ruthless killers — who previously brutally murdered a couple from the village, one of whom was the gang leader's own sister — he and Meera had already been captured by the killers. When they try to escape the killers chase them, soon bringing down Arjun.

Up to this point, which is halfway through the film, Meera has played second fiddle to Arjun, but as the final half commences she is seen moving around night streets of Delhi alone. It is in this second half when Meera begins to more clearly exhibit qualities of the take-action girl and revenger. She is shown to be very intelligent and we see this when she outwits her chasers; easily sees through the lies of the policeman who is working for the killers; and when she uses the gang leader's child as a hostage to escape after they have attacked her. Unlike Arjun she rarely makes wrong decisions, and more importantly she remains calm in all the crisis situations she faces alone. Meera's act of revenge too reveals an important aspect of her nature.

Though it has been suggested that the protagonists of the take-action genre act only for their own personal survival (Gopal 2021, 42), Meera's decision to go back to their attacker's village after seeing Arjun's dead body makes her action about much more than her own survival. She does not run away to the city for her own safety even though she knows how brutal the gang is and that the entire community of the area, including the police, are in cahoots with the killers. Even more so, her return to the village where she methodically kills each of the attackers in cold blood and her slowly smoking a cigarette before killing the gang leader establishes her as an extremely capable and a 'revenge-full' person in a way that is completely different from the 'survivor victim' as identified by Clover.

As Meera kills the gang leader right in front of his mother — who is the one who ordered the death of her own daughter to protect family honour — the all-pervasive nature of patriarchy is highlighted where women torture other women to maintain patriarchal control in India. It has been suggested that *NH10* was inspired by an actual case of honour killing in 2007 (Datta 2019, 262), and yet instead of simply retelling the case on screen, the film has erased the problematic role played by the Khap Panchayat in the actual case by presenting the murdered girl's mother as the main villain (Datta 2019, 264–6). Seen as a continuation of the film's gradual unravelling of how

patriarchy dominates each section of society, this narrative choice is a significant one. Though the Khap Panchayat which remains absent from the film is indeed a patriarchal institution, the film's portrayal of the mother ordering the slaughter of her own daughter is no less effective in highlighting the role of patriarchy in propagating violence against women in India.

Patriarchal control of Indian society is therefore a structural force in *NH10*, and Meera's character arc suggests the only strategy to survive in such situation is to reclaim personal agency. The first half of the movie shows Meera as a suffering, domesticated figure when she is not in control of her own life and follows Arjun and the codes of patriarchal society. However, as soon as circumstances force her to take charge of her life, she is far more intelligent and powerful than Arjun. More so, she does not require a gun when killing her enemies and dispatches them with a steel rod, a car, and even her pen which she is shown to carry all the time. When Meera walks away from the village of the killers she does not look boyish or like a tortured victim. Rather, her tired yet fearless steps on the night street emblematise a symbolic reclaiming of the space Indian women (especially working women) have been witnessing as a site of SVAW.

Stree: A Final Girl Who Can Do Anything

'*Woh Stree Hai*! *Woh Kuch Bhi Kar Sakti Hai*! [She is a woman! She can do anything!]' — the immensely popular one-liner from Amar Kaushik's horror-comedy *Stree* (2018) — sums up the nature of the agency shown by the eponymous character of the film. Though the tonality of Kaushik's film differs significantly from *NH10*'s sombre plot and gruesome violence, the two films correspond well for their depiction of the night streets of India as a source of fear. Unlike *NH10*, however, *Stree* shows men being abducted and, allegedly, killed when travelling alone on the streets of Chanderi (a rural area of Madhyapradesh) during the annual festival organized during the worshipping of a goddess and concurrent arrival of the supernatural entity named Stree (meaning woman/female). The spirit is said to follow men travelling alone, seductively call them by their name, and abduct them when/if they respond, needing some kind of consent before touching them. Despite the film, supposedly, not having any connection to real events, its premise comes over as exampling the take-action girl and the patriarchal dominance prevalent in India.

The film shows us the men of Chanderi as they prepare themselves for the festival that is meant to celebrate the annual arrival of Stree. Amongst these men are the film's male lead, Vicky the tailor (Rajkumar Rao), and his two friends, Jaana (Abhishek Banerjee) and Bittu (Aparshakti Khurana). Vicky is working in his shop when he is visited by a beautiful mysterious stranger (Shraddha Kapoor). He quickly falls in love with his new customer, but his friends start suspecting her to be Stree herself when they hear how the woman maintains anonymity, keeps vanishing mysteriously, and asks Vicky to collect ingredients for performing black magic. However, when Vicky and Bittu get into trouble after Jaana is abducted by Stree, it is the mysterious woman who saves them, making it clear they are not the same person.

As the narrative progresses the mysterious woman, who happens to be something of a witch, begins preparing Vicky, Bittu, and the town librarian Rudra (Pankaj Tripathi) for a final battle against Stree. Meanwhile the men of Chanderi have completely stopped venturing onto the streets at nighttime out of fear of the deadly female entity. As Vicky and his friends search for details on Stree and how to defeat her, Rudra comes across an old book in his library named *Chanderi Puran* that reveals that the deity/spirit had been born because of the evil doings of Chanderi's residents. The town has always had a thriving tradition of prostitution — as shown by Vicky and his friends frequently meeting such women on their walks around the town — and one of them, who had married a man who genuinely loved her, was killed by the men of the Chanderi. Since that event, once every year, Stree had started stalking the streets of the town. However, it seems that murder is not at the forefront of her mind, but rather her desire to be looked at by a man that loves her rather than one who just wants her for sex.

In the final fight with Stree, although it is Vicky who dispels the power of Stree by cutting off a lock of her magical hair, it is the nameless woman who had led the group and devised the plan that saved the town. Moreover, as the women leaves the town on a bus — Vicky still does not know her name — she places the lock of Stree's hair into her own, which confers its power into her, suggesting that they might both be two different avatars of a feminine power. The film ends with a scene showing Chanderi one year after the incident and Stree is shown standing outside the town, staring at her statue that was built by the people of Chanderi that has the request: "'O Stree protect us [O Stree Raksha Karna]' inscribed below it. This happens during the five days of the festival, and indeed this is the only time Stree and the unnamed woman appear, suggesting a link between them, as mentioned previously. In her study on Hindu myths, Wendy Doniger O' Flaherty describes the gradual rise of the image of the great Goddess in Indian culture saying:

> first the Indo-Aryan male gods were given wives, and then under the influence of Tantric and Saktic movements which had been gaining momentum outside orthodox Hinduism for many centuries, these shadowy female figures emerged as supreme powers in their own right, and merged into the great Goddess.
>
> (1994, 238)

This great Goddess in Hindu mythology is shown to appear in three main avatars. She is the warrior goddess Durga who slays the Buffalo Demon, and at the same time she has two other distinct forms: 'the golden, erotic Gauri' who is the beautiful wife of Shiva and 'the black goddess of death Kali' (O'Flaherty 1994, 247–52). The goddess shown to be worshipped in Chanderi has similarities with Devi Durga as she is a goddess worshipped for five days. Stree, on the other hand, looks connected to the third avatar of the great

Goddess as she functions quite like the violent Kali and they share a frightening, violent aspect. Vicky's love interest, the unnamed beautiful magician, resembles Gauri for her fair complexion, and just like Gauri, she too seems to be the ideal charming partner of a man. The goddess of Chanderi, Stree, and Vicky's beloved, therefore, mirror the triad of the great Goddess of Hindu myths to a significant extent. The Final Girl of Hollywood slashers are said to frequently show 'an inherent connection to their opponent' (Harper 2004, 33), but the Final Girl of *Stree* takes this connection to a different level by merging aspects of the killer and the Final Girl into one in order to develop a figure representing the multifaceted nature of feminine power and its battle against patriarchy. By nature the Final Girl of *Stree* is far from boyish, and though she is very different from those Hollywood slashers who often use weapons and violent aggression to 'penetrate' their victims, her use of witchcraft, as a power from within, and her need of consent mark her out as a different kind of agentic figure.

Conclusion

From the preceding discussion it is clear that the trope of the Final Girl has been evolved or added to by these two post-2012 Bollywood films showing women taking action or revenge. More so, both *NH10* and *Stree* encourage their respective audiences (both men and women) to unite in their reaction to, and condemnation of, Indian society's patriarchal bias. It is unclear whether the makers of these films intentionally incorporated the figure of the Final Girl into their narratives, though anyone familiar with the Western Horror genre, which these directors obviously were, would be aware of its major tropes and themes — indeed many Hollywood genre templates have been picked up and utilised/copied in Bollywood due to their global popularity. However, we should not forget the gradual development of Bollywood films featuring women characters with agency since 2012, which have gradually produced an Indian counterpart to the Final Girl in the take-action girl or revenger that embodies a very particular and culturally specific portrayal of female agency. Whatever the case may be, the appearance of dominant, take-action women fighting the evils of patriarchal society as protagonists in recent action web-series like *Aarya* (2020-present) and *Saas, Bahu, aur Flamingo* (2023) indicate Meera and Stree are definitely not the final Final Girls of Bollywood.

Note

1 Honour killing in India chiefly results from its caste-system that treats marriage outside one's own caste or religious community as an insult to the family. Patriarchy plays a crucial role in propagating these killings as it is the elder men of the family who are given the right to sanctify marriages and anyone marrying against the will of such men must be killed to maintain their authority.

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9 A Gothic Agent of Revolt

The Rebel Child Hero in *Pan's Labyrinth*

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Guillermo Del Toro is a master of modern horror, adapting stories from classical literature and popular myths into fairy tales that centre around human pathos, depicting a world where human nature is more insidious than the stereotypical supernatural creatures inhabiting the fringe of our imagination: It is his 'special touch' (Miles 2011, 200). His works are often dark, with influences from the Gothic mode, which becomes in his hands a language to express cultural and political anxieties. In works of the Gothic mode the settings and characters continuously change forms, signifying the revival of something repressed, always challenging notions that society considers permanent and pristine, such as familial bonds, power, and ideology; a textbook case of a modern Gothic film is *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006). The film takes place in Spain during World War II (1944), referring to fantastic stories set in an unidentified past. Del Toro uses Gothic horror and escapist elements to demonstrate the monstrosities of fascism, underlining the importance of revolt and resistance against the institutions of family and State, particularly through a young girl's experience of totalitarianism. This chapter will be primarily concerned with Ofelia, the film's Gothic hero, who becomes an agent of revolt against familial and societal expectations, as well as an enemy of the Spanish fascist regime. Focus will be given to the setting and the trials Ofelia must complete to reclaim her royal status. The trials, when contextualized, provide direct connections to her resistance against her parents' desires and the political rebellion against the ideology of Nazism and the Francoist dictatorship.

Gothic Settings and Gothic Heroes in Fascist Spain

The setting in the Gothic mode is of major importance to the plot, setting up the stories' revelations and character's motives. In the case of *Pan's Labyrinth*, the viewers are left pondering whether the fantastic elements of the film are only a figment of the protagonist's imagination, filtered through Ofelia's trauma and perspective. In the words of Del Toro from the British Film Institute's companion to the movie, '*Pan's* a game of interpretation where the reward for repeated viewings is not the addition, but the multiplication of

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meanings' (Diestro-Dópido 2013, 24). One of the first things a viewer will notice as the movie narrative unfolds is that the director purposely confuses the fairy tale settings with the actual ruins of a Spanish town ravaged by war. These ruins belong to the old town of Belchite Zaragoza, in Aragón, Spain, which was destroyed during the Civil War and never rebuilt. Through an examination of the small talk of the women working in the kitchen the viewers can learn that the setting of the movie is supposed to be rural Galicia. The location is not only one of the earliest inhabited places in Spain, but also has a rich tradition that 'regards the forests of the north of Spain as spaces inhabited by "hidden" creatures', be those the rebels (the well-known maquis) or mystical creatures like fauns and fairies (Diestro-Dópido 2013, 27). A location where myth and reality are entangled allows for clear parallels with the forces Ofelia (Ivana Baquero) rebels against, especially the fascist regime. Del Toro's choice to have his protagonist entangle herself in a mythical plotline that is parallel to the perilous and depressing reality she lives in can be interpreted in terms of a counter-narrative or even a defence mechanism of the child's subconscious: a parallel world with the sole purpose to protect her from being traumatised from the horrors she encounters and her oppressive upbringing.

The mythical proportions of Del Toro's film allow for an interpretation of fascism as a political topos that encourages the active return of repressed ideologies and actions. Emilio Gentile, in his attempt to describe aspects of totalitarianism to better define fascism, reveals a side of the ideology that resembles the portrayal of life at the mill and the ferocity with which the villain treats any insubordinates. An organic part of totalitarianism is its realisation as being a culture based on 'mythical thought', a 'tragic and activist' vision of life, conceived as the 'embodiment of will to power' (Gentile 2005, 48). This vision of life is heavily based on the 'myth of youth as the creative force of history' and the 'militarization of politics' as a life-model and a collective organisation, all to create a new order and a civilisation (Gentile 2005, 48). Ofelia has a very specific place in this culture and societal structure, a passive receiver of commands and orders, and eventually the instrument of the regime's reproduction. Mercedes (Maribel Verdú), a member of the kitchen staff that Ofelia develops a rather close relationship with, can be seen through that prism as the adult version of the young protagonist, should she grow up and accept the role that awaits her in a fascist regime. Mercedes too believed in fairy tales when she was little, but growing up she realised that reality was cruel and left no room for fairy tales and mythical creatures.

The eeriness of the setting and the rich history and mystification that surrounds it, along with the disbelief the adult characters exhibit towards the supernatural and Ofelia's experience, create the ideal cinematic setting for the Gothic to flourish and function as a language of rebellion against the various shades of oppression that make their presence felt throughout the film. According to Allison Milbank, the 'explained supernatural has perplexed critics, especially when it comes to works that are either written or have

female protagonists' (Milbank 2007, 157). Ofelia's mother Carmen (Ariadna Gil), for example, deeply disapproves of fairy tales; during the film she repeatedly attempts to shut down her daughter's fantastical endeavours: 'You're a bit too old to be filling your head with such nonsense' she says to her daughter, right before Ofelia replaces the eye in an ancient statue, releasing a praying mantis that will follow her till the very end of the movie, being emblematic of all the magical elements of the story.

The setting of the film in its material reality, the cottage and its surroundings, are all under the control of the film's villain, Vidal (Sergi López), who is a captain in Franco's army, and in true Gothic fashion, is Ofelia's stepfather. He shows how fixated he is on order and control when he meets Ofelia for the first time and violently grabs her extended left hand, noting that, 'It is the other one'. His mission is to eradicate the rebels that hide in the forests around the town and to establish the regime's legacy: At the same time, he wants to make sure his own legacy, his future son with Ofelia's mother, is also protected. In the captain's mind, the political and the personal are inextricably intertwined. To achieve his goals, Vidal has established what Giorgio Agamben (1998) calls a sovereign sphere, where he is the master of life and death, with his subjects in danger of losing their life at any given moment should they disobey him in any way. This is graphically seen in the figures of an old farmer and his son whose lives are of no value to the regime, and so he brutally tortures and executes them in his quest for information on the rebels in the area. Vidal, as Jacqueline Ford notes, represents the order of the regime and the absolute control over life, as the latter is 'locked away in the store-room to be doled out to the chant of "this is the daily bread in Franco's Spain"', along with medical provisions and the torture chamber (Ford 2011, 394); life and death here ironically occupy the same space.

Ofelia's motivation for her rebellion is the rejection of the life her parents and the fascist regime prepare for her, instead opting for her royal lineage in the Underworld. Per the Faun's revelation and guidance, her parents and guardians also immerse themselves in their own parallel realities, even if they are not as supernatural as Ofelia's fairy tale escapades. Her mother Carmen chooses to marry Vidal despite his sadistic nature, as her husband died during the Civil War: throughout the film he is hinted to have been on the Republicans' side. Dópido even argues that Carmen is 'perfectly aware of the cruelty of her new husband' and claims that there are even hints that her first husband was killed by Vidal (Diestro-Dópido 2013, 12). When Ofelia asks her mother why she had to remarry, her answer is pragmatic, 'When you are older, you'll understand that it hasn't been easy for me either'. Vidal in the role of Ofelia's stepfather, embodies the mythical proportions that fascism wants to surround itself with: he fixates on his origins, his father's legacy as well as his own through the birth of his son, who he believes is the only thing his wife is good for. Mercedes, on the other hand, leads a double life beyond her job as kitchen staff, as her own world has strong connections to that of the maquis, as her brother is the one leading the insurgents against the fascist troops.

From Resistance to Domestication

The trials Ofelia must succeed in to reclaim her rightful place as princess Moana shape her rebellious nature and ultimately cause the undoing of the fascists' operations in the area. The connections between fascism and obedience are central to the young protagonist's trials, as they are all marked by her own deviations from given instructions and disobedience. Del Toro describes how the choice of the age and the sex of the protagonist play a pivotal role in the narrative structure of the film:

> Her mother is saying, 'You have to leave all that behind, the world is a horrible, disappointing place, you have to believe me and you have to obey your father.' And I thought, this is the last moment when, as a kid, your spirit is still free, and if you give up that freedom then you become just another boring adult. And even more so when your father is a fascist. Because for a fascist, a central virtue is obedience, and I thought the young girl would be a more interesting figure of disobedience than the adult — she has even fewer social tools and so is able to resist from a genuine spiritual place.
>
> (qtd in Diestro-Dópido 2013, 11)

If for a fascist a central virtue is indeed obedience, then from the very start, when Ofelia receives the magical book with the blank pages from the Faun, the child is openly hostile against the fascist ideology. She is repeatedly warned by the Faun do everything exactly as he says, and yet during her first trial, she revolts against any instructions that restrain her behaviour and rebellious spirit.

Ofelia's first adventure sees her descend down a hole in a tree that resembles the rabbit-hole that Lewis Carroll's Alice falls into. This connection is reinforced by the young girl wearing a dress that is strongly reminiscent of the one worn by the aforementioned Alice in John Tenniel's illustrations of Carroll's books. The costume is a surprise gift from her mother — Ofelia had wanted a book — that was meant to make her look exactly like a princess for the captain's dinner, yet resonates more obviously with her fictional predecessor. As Ford accurately notes, Carmen's fairy tale version of Ofelia 'is not Alice, the curious adventuress but Alice, the docile and polite Victorian little girl' (Ford 2011, 390). As Carmen then attempts to impose her set of values and behaviours on her daughter, Ofelia escapes before the dinner to fulfil the first of the trials she must pass to become a princess.

The first trial is marked not only by the task, to steal something from a frog that self-combusts after fed a certain seed provided by the Faun, but also by the defiance that Ofelia exhibits, despite her perceived innocence and noble intentions. Prior to entering the subterranean lair, Ofelia removes the fancy dress and shoes that her mother gave her in an attempt to avoid displeasing her, hanging it on a branch that naturally (story-wise) breaks and the

dress is destroyed in the mud. Ofelia's crawling in the muddy tunnel is not the first time the young girl gets dirt on her; in the beginning of the film Carmen reprimands her daughter for getting mud on her shoes. In this case, however, the mud and the giant toad's insides get all over the girl and her new dress causing her mother to be extremely cross with her. Ford frames Carmen's disapproval towards the dirt that Ofelia is covered in as a 'pragmatic, mundane, down-to-earthness', which directly contradicts the 'magical realistic' occurrences her daughter has experienced (Ford 2011, 386).

Carmen's maternal disciplinarian comments and disapproval introduce Ofelia to signifiers that are pivotal in the world of fairy tales for female protagonists, more so in the context of dissident-surrealist mythology. The soil, dirt, and 'abject waste' on her dress and shoes, resembling bodily waste, 'point toward formlessness, disorder and decay, depriving the subject of her ordered, civilized, sane subjectivity' (Ford 2011, 386). Ofelia thus successfully completes the first step of the supernatural rite of passage towards royalty, prioritising her own desires over her parents' wishes.

Instead of treating Ofelia's dirty appearance as a byproduct of her quest, this chapter argues that the young hero wants to be soiled, as the first act of disobedience connected to her trials. For the 'clean' Spain that Vidal dreams, Ofelia's dirt is repulsive, dangerous, and abject. Bakhtin's association of the grotesque with the human body, with a focus on the 'material thingness' of the subject rather than intellect or spirit (quoted in Hurley 2007, 138) translates in the case of *Pan's Labyrinth* into a mode of resistance, a material proof of disobedience to the gender and societal role expected of the protagonist by the institutions of the family and the fascist state. As Ofelia is crawling in the lair, she gets mud all over her body but appears unfazed, free from adult oversight. She does not hesitate to search the toad's intestines and get dirt and slime all over her, which effectively goes against everything she has been warned against up to that point. Coming out of the toad's lair, Ofelia makes no effort to alter her appearance and proceeds to go back to the house, fully aware that she will be disciplined for her disobedience.

The soiled dress that would transform Ofelia to a 'princess', though meant to impress Captain Vidal, becomes a symbol of resistance and the first clear proof of Ofelia's revolt. As Carmen reprimands her daughter and attempts to make Ofelia feel guilty for disappointing her, the girl asks (seemingly) innocently if that was also the case with Vidal. Her smile after Carmen responds, 'Him most of all' is indicative of Ofelia's changing attitude and signals two things worth considering further. First, Ofelia's recognition that the grown-up world of order hides 'its own secret heart of disorder' (Ford 2011, 394). It is not only in the fairy-tale world that Ofelia turns things inside out as she did with the frog; she has successfully accomplished an act of resistance against her oppressive stepfather by destroying her 'princess-like' image. The second realisation for Ofelia is that the world of dirt is the world where she is fighting for her sovereignty. In this case, sovereignty denotes a set of rights: the right to be the mythical Princess Moana, as well as with the right to

explore and claim her own identity; the right to break from the imposed appearance, and finally the right to be a nonconformist: A 'butterfly for nobody' (Ford 2011, 394). Ofelia wants to be her own person, avoiding any form of ideological restriction imposed on her, be that the fascist or the maternal. She wears her soiled dress as a symbol of defiance in regard to all the maternal care and fatherly orders to which she has been has been subjected throughout the film.

Ofelia's actions are not without consequences though, and it is through these reactions by adults that viewers can see the chasm between the adults and a child's point of view under the fascist regime. In this case, seeing the dictatorship through the eyes of Ofelia helps decipher what José Antonio Quiñones calls the dreams and anxieties of representation itself (Quiñones 2012, 50). Examining Ofelia's motivation and the nurturing/disciplinarian actions of the adults surrounding her provides another view of fascism through the eyes of the subjects that self-regulate to protect their own lives. When Ofelia returns to the cottage, it is two women, Mercedes and Carmen, that undertake the task of correcting her appearance and behaviour, both acting on motives connected to their own individual survival. After being found by Mercedes, Ofelia is immediately put into a bathtub, to get rid of the dirt and become 'clean' again — the binary of cleanliness and dirt map the female body from a very young age, with maternal authority as the 'trustee of that mapping of the self's clean and proper body' (Kristeva 1982, 72). Carmen then, as Ofelia's role model into adulthood, scolds her daughter, identifying her daughter's fantasies as improper, 'dirty', strengthening her argument with the spectre of paternal disapproval and possible violence. Vidal's reaction to Ofelia's behaviour later in the story is, however, more politically motivated, especially in lieu of the dinner he expected Ofelia to attend, which is parodied and horrifyingly recreated during Ofelia's second trial in the Underworld.

Rebellious Actions and Fatal Consequences

The second and third trials that Ofelia undergoes in her quest for mythical emancipation provide clearer parallels to the fascist regime in place and the institutions supporting it. The iconography of the second trial starts with the dinner Vidal organises at the mill, the one Ofelia was meant to attend with her new dress, which is attended by representatives of all the institutions of power in a Western European community: Religion (a priest), the army, and town officials — symbolising the alliance of several interest groups that supported the new regime post–WWII and their ongoing persecution of democratic citizens and dissidents (Sánchez 2012, 139). The table full of food and delicacies comes in stark contrast to the horrific discussions between the priest and Vidal, as the two contemplate the future: As Vidal aptly notes, their will for a 'clean' Spain for the coming generations, as well as the determination to realize that version of the country even if that means eradicating all dissidents by any means possible.

The Pale Man that Ofelia encounters during her second trial is a monster that resembles several well-known Gothic motifs, prominently that of the Sandman from E. T. A. Hoffmann's tale (1817). It is a monster that takes children's eyes and devours them: In this case, however, his horrific appearance and practices are directly juxtaposed to Vidal, with reality often surpassing Del Toro's Gothic imagery. The monster inhabits a domestic space similar to Ofelia's house, essentially contained in the same premises within which Vidal exercises his sadistic torturing. Rather than an otherworldly location, as Edwards describes it, 'the underland is inside reality, like a kernel of truth or an essence made manifest' (2008, 144). The Pale Man is a horrific figure, with elastic skin and his eyes placed in the middle of his palms. His unsettling, gory appearance and behavior is only exacerbated by the iconographic suggestions of the horrors he is responsible for, as seen in the drawings on the wall that show the fate of other visitors in his lair, with the pile of children's shoes tangible proof of the child-eating lore that accompanies him. Although Vidal might look human, up until Mercedes slashes his cheek, his actions indicate otherwise and posit him as monstrous as the creature below. He sadistically kills a farmer and his son, bashing the latter's face repeatedly and ultimately shooting both. He also tortures an insurgent both psychologically and physically, exploiting a speaking problem he has, making the rebel beg the doctor for a merciful death, while Vidal later executes the same doctor, shooting him in the back. We also see him stitching his own slashed cheek with a needle and thread, seemingly unaffected by any kind of pain, exhibiting the same emotionless, inhuman state exhibited when he tortures dissidents.

Ofelia in her second and third trials faces both real and fantastic monsters as the stakes become increasingly high for her. During the second trial she invokes the Pale Man's wrath, as she defies the Faun's warnings and eats from the luscious delicacies on the table after stealing a dagger. However, before that, it is her defiant spirit that has allowed her to successfully complete the trial, as she chooses a different door than the one pointed to her by the fairy companions, thus acquiring the knife she was looking for: She essentially rebels against what Ford calls 'the fascism of the unconscious' (Ford 2011, 396). The revolt against following the path laid by others, and the blind obedience to rules that her societal and political role in the fascist regime demands, is not limited only to the choice of the door but also extends to the interactions she has with the Pale Man himself. As the temptations become more and more irresistible for Ofelia, so are the consequences more serious and almost fatal. Hence in this second trial, Ofelia revolts against the Faun, who serves as her guide in the realm of the Fantastic, even if that means falling victim to a childish impulse.

Ofelia's impulsive disobedience, however, teaches her a valuable lesson, demonstrating the fatal consequences of a rebellion against rules: The monster wakes up and proceeds to devour two of her fairy companions before the young protagonist draws a door with chalk to escape the Pale Man's premises. While the cost of defiance is the bloodiest so far for Ofelia, the pattern

of rebellion is established, and the hero becomes more aware of the limits of her power. Despite having great responsibility for the fairies' demise, Ofelia is as far as the viewers know the only child that successfully escapes the Pale Man's lair. She might have succumbed to her hunger, but it is her imagination and strong will that allowed her to open another door and escape the monster's home on time. The mentality she has acquired by the end of the second trial, though valuable for her future challenges, also brought her dangerously close to her own demise. Ofelia becomes much like the maquis, in being a visible threat for the fascistic and depraved goals of Vidal as she gets in his way in her attempt to save her newborn brother and fulfill the prophecy that will restore her royalty and reunite her with her real family.

Ofelia's third and final trial towards royalty and self-sovereignty is inextricably tied to her stepfather. That trial becomes the ultimate battleground for the ideological conflict that takes place in the film over who gets to shape the future. After Carmen's death in childbirth Vidal keeps his newborn son in the room, only to be drugged by Ofelia who steals her baby brother and attempts to find sanctuary with him in the labyrinth. As her third trial involves a blood sacrifice, with the Faun suggesting her brother be the victim, Ofelia takes the final step towards sovereignty by sacrificing herself. She is shot by Vidal, who murders her out of spite after realising that the maquis attack has destroyed his plans for his own and his son's future. Vidal is an agent not only of systemic violence as a military officer, but in multiple instances his sadistic behaviour seems to come from a personal depravity and a psychotic villainy. Vidal's inherent violence, from his torturing others, his indifference to pain, his violent outbursts, and the eventual murder of Ofelia are not only attributed to his own character and mental state, but are also complementary to his ideology and political background.

Vidal's behaviour bears some comparison to fascist practices in general and the captain's erratic and sadistic actions should not be taken out of ideological context, as there are clear connections to the mythical proportions often associated with fascism. Violence enacted by military officers is not a personal matter in *Pan's Labyrinth*; on the contrary, it is an organic part of the regime's ideology. Fascist practices were 'calculated' to instill terror and eliminate dissidents, particularly those popular among the people: 'certainly, pathological individuals may have supported and practiced fascist violence, but pathology alone did not motivate Fascism. Pathology cannot explain the State's systematic recourse to violence' (Sánchez 2012, 139). Vidal is without a doubt a devout fascist: He follows orders blindly, as the doctor remarks right before he is coldly executed by the captain. His enemy is the 'other', whether natural or supernatural. Ofelia and the elusive maquis both offer threats that are physical and ideological, actual and mythical: There is no other way to deal with them other than to eradicate them.

Ofelia's choice to sacrifice herself is then a political statement; the young protagonist's death defies both the indoctrination of fascism and its blind obedience to a superior (a person and/or ideology), and saves her

half-brother from becoming part of the fascist future in the hands of the captain. Her death is the final declaration of her sovereignty, as the child chooses to defy both her stepfather and the Faun, making her own path, away from the nurturing of parental figures from both worlds. Quiñones, discussing Ofelia's murder, argues that it encodes the 'crushing not only of a social protest but also of certain ethic/moral values (like innocence, exercise of imagination, or romantically understood freedom)' (Quiñones 2012, 57). Ofelia is not an innocent bystander: She is very well aware that her actions will lead to her death and chooses to proceed with them anyway. She, along with the doctor, do not show any kind of fear towards imminent death but choose to face it armed with their conviction and beliefs, accepting their fate.

In this sense Ofelia's death is a conscious choice to take control of her own life, deviating from the nurturing of all the adult and the supernatural creatures around her. As a Gothic hero living in troubled times, her descent into the Underworld is both metaphorical and literal: She refuses to sacrifice a defenseless baby, and then admits defeat by surrendering him back to her stepfather. In doing so, Ofelia seals her fate, as Vidal vindictively shoots her in cold blood, only to suffer the same fate in a mirror sequence at the hands of the maquis a few moments later (Edwards 2008, 146). Her death is marked by the systemic violence that fascism is based upon, but instead of becoming another forgotten dissident, like many rebels in fascist Spain, through her sacrifice she gains passage to the Underworld, where she is welcomed by her real family.

Del Toro's iconography throughout the film could be argued to portray Ofelia as a martyr of Christian proportions, as she appears to accept her death stoically with a promise for reward beyond the mortal plane. However, her actions point in another direction for her motivation. Ofelia is the future of the Republic, the offspring of the maquis, the child that rebels not only through her actions, but also through the political conscience she exhibits and develops. Even in the face of death, she does not compromise despite the monster she faces being more horrific than the Gothic figure of the Pale Man. Ofelia's success in the Faun's trials are not a result of obedience, but instead defiance and deviation from advice and the fairy tale trope of the 'good child.' By choosing to die in place of her brother, thus successfully completing her quest, Ofelia redefines what a Gothic hero is, adding to its dimension the resistance to (super)natural horrors and the control of her own life and death as an act of resistance and rebellion against the fascist regime and as an expression of her innate sovereignty. Ofelia chooses to depart the real-world conflict on her own terms. During a period when, under Franco's regime, all citizens had been stripped of their political agency and had virtually become expendable, Ofelia rebels by stripping the captain of the pleasure of breaking her spirit, thus becoming an ideological rebel, the kind that is far more dangerous to autocratic regimes, even more than the maquis. Her death is then a political statement, which is rewarded with

passage to the Underworld and the restoration of her agency over herself as a distinct political identity hostile to fascism's ideological goal for a 'clean' and 'uniform' Spain.

Conclusion: An Antifascist Fairy Tale

The politicisation of the fairy tale world the young protagonist visits in *Pan's Labyrinth* is linked to the role of fairy tales in the raising of children: Such stories are pedagogical in nature, often preparing children for the responsibilities that adult life will entail. Through that prism, Ofelia's Underworld is the testing ground for the protagonist's political defiance and formation of political identity and sovereignty. Guillermo Del Toro users caricatures, mythical creatures, and oppressive adult figures with distinct Gothic elements to present an enemy-adversary as visible and tangible as possible. The Faun in *Pan's Labyrinth*, along with the Pale Man and the other creatures of the Underworld, all share extravagant physical traits, yet throughout the film the most tangible threats come from human characters that also represent those with power; Vidal and his allies appear more human than the monsters of the fairy tale world, however they exhibit the same or worse violent tendencies than the Gothic creatures like the Pale Man.

What is at stake throughout *Pan's Labyrinth* is the ongoing attempt of all kinds of regimes, democratic or autocratic, to control their citizens' lives. This control starts from a very young age, aiming at producing obedient and law-abiding citizens that blindly follow orders and cultural norms. The Gothic mode in these types of stories serves as a subversive mediator, bringing to light those oppressing and oppressive practices, stripping them of ideological pretense. In this way the grotesque, authoritative, and sadistic villains serve as the embodiment of oppressive ideologies; the fantastic and uncanny settings prove themselves to be nightmarish distortions of the children's dreams and desires; however, the 'real world' proves to be more dangerous. Ofelia eventually realises that the most threatening figures of her journey, the ones she should really be afraid of, are not the abject, distorted animistic figures of the Underworld, but the ones that look like humans, holding power in her everyday life. As a child in Franco's Spain, her gender and expected submissive role in a fascist society leave little room for individuality and agency. Because of her rebellious mindset, Ofelia will suffer dire consequences, murdered in cold blood by the film's villain. At that point Ofelia manages to strip the regime of any last pretenses of logic and civility, forcing the agents of fascism to show their true violent and authoritarian face. If a child with no experience or broad understanding of politics can do that, what stops adult citizens from following their example? Del Toro implicitly poses this unsettling question to his audience, leaving them pondering when the end credits roll: Are they as brave as this heroic girl and how much of their life and ideology is really their own choice?

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10 From Vancouver Island to the City of Troy

Prophecy, Heroism, and Indigenous Classical Reception in Catherine Knutsson's *Shadows Cast by Stars*

Svetlana Seibel

Introduction

Cassandra Mercredi, the protagonist of Catherine Knutsson's (Métis) young adult novel *Shadows Cast by Stars* (2012), lives in a dystopian future, in a society controlled by UA government and torn by a deadly virus, the only antidote to which is the blood of Indigenous people — or 'the Others', as they are called — who are immune to it. This leads to Indigenous individuals, women most of all, being hunted and harvested in the name of sacrificing some lives to save all. Cassandra's family is Métis, and at the opening of the novel Cassandra resides with her father and twin brother Paul in 'the Corridor', which appears to represent an unidentified location in the Northwest on the Canadian mainland. Her non-Indigenous mother took her own life a few years earlier after contracting the disease. Cassandra's remaining family hide their Indigenous ancestry to the best of their ability, but when a new strain of the virus flares up, they fear for their safety and run to the Island (based on Vancouver Island, Knuttson's current home) governed by the Band and protected by a mystical barrier that only lets through Indigenous persons. Once there, Cassandra and her family have to find their place in this society that sees them as outsiders and which becomes wary of Cassandra's spiritual gifts. Her twin brother Paul has a gift of his own, which he experiences more as a curse: He can see and communicate with the dead, who follow him around and can appear at any time.

At the time of Mercredis' arrival, the Band is destabilised by a crisis of leadership after their chief, Arthur Eagleson, went missing. His teenage son Bran and Cassandra develop a romantic relationship, which Bran's mother Grace, a non-Indigenous woman and a former scholar of mythology obsessed with the subject, disapproves of. She has her own plans for Bran, whom she believes to be destined for greatness in a mythic sense and who, in her opinion, therefore needs an equally exceptional partner by his side. Bran's ex-girlfriend, Avalon, is also not impressed. As the Mercredis strive to settle in and Bran and Cass build their relationship in the face of considerable opposition, the community is shaken by various disasters, from an earthquake to an

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attack by the government forces which becomes possible due to an unexplained weakening of the boundary. Meanwhile, Cassandra apprentices herself to Madda, the community's healer and medicine woman, who becomes her guide personally and vocationally. She also becomes friends with Helen, a shy girl with a troubled past who lives with Madda. When Cassandra is attacked in the lake by what turns out to be the legendary sea serpent sisiutl — a powerful spiritual being of the Coast Salish Indigenous stories — Madda explains that he claimed Cassandra as his own and will from now on act as her guardian. When Madda unexpectedly dies, Cassandra has to prematurely assume the responsibilities of a medicine woman for the community, as well as deal with a disappearance of her brother and Bran. Through all this, the Raven, the Coast Salish trickster, keeps hounding her.

As is evident from this summary, *Shadows Cast by Stars* facilitates a conversation between several distinct story cycles, grounded both in Indigenous and Eurowestern narrative heritages. There are references to the Trojan cycle, the Arthurian cycle, and to story cycles of the Indigenous peoples of Coast Salish territories. The novel is thus embedded into a rich referential and intertextual framework that cannot be adequately explored in its entirety in one chapter — even the preceding summary offers but a simplified version of the plot. In an interview, Knutsson herself points out this complexity: 'I decided to draw on myth from a variety of cultures, and weaving all that together was a bit of a task, especially since I needed to keep protocol in mind' (Knutsson 2013b).

In what follows, I will focus on the dialogue between Indigenous stories and references to the stories of Greco-Roman antiquity that the novel stages. In particular, I will trace how the novel utilises these links, interweaving themes of prophesy and heroism which acquire a more complex and differentiated meaning when considered through the intersecting lenses of Indigenous storytelling and classical reception. I will argue that the novel's critical exploration of the idea of heroism in this dialogical manner serves to position Cassandra as a special kind of hero.

Some Thoughts on Indigenous Classical Reception

Classical reception studies is a highly dynamic field that is growing fast, but the aspect of Indigenous classical reception has so far rarely been addressed, comparatively speaking. Meanwhile, attending to the dialogue between the heritage of Greco-Roman antiquity and contemporary Indigenous thought, literature, and other forms of cultural expression is an issue of some critical and political import, as Cree/Mètis scholar Emma LaRocque's remarks suggest:

> [W]e cannot keep giving power away by acquiescing to the popular but mistaken notion that all things belong to Europeans!! […] As far as I am concerned, Shakespeare is as much my heritage as a human being as is *Wehsakehcha*, the central Cree comic-psychologist, shape-shifting

> character in the numerous stories my mother entertained her children with. To believe otherwise or to in any way limit ourselves in our use of theory or terminology is to fall into the colonizer's model of the world, which is exactly where neo-imperialist thinkers would contain us. Moreover, we have our own tools. We have our languages, our literature, our concepts, our theories, our ways of knowing and of discovering and arranging knowledge. […] Our knowledges are transcolonial, expansive, unsedimented, and both ancient and contemporary. In many ways, Indigenous scholars can speak many languages; we too can exercise flexible positionality!
>
> (LaRocque 2015, 16)

LaRocque's argument concerning Indigenous scholars can easily be expanded to include Indigenous writers and the multiplicity of narrative repositories on which they draw in their stories as they 'arrange knowledge', including classical reception. The latter is evident in the creative enlistment of narratives and cultural codes of classical antiquity in Indigenous literary texts such as *Shadows Cast by Stars*, or the recent play *Antikoní* by Beth Piatote (Nez Perce) which uses Sophocles' tragedy *Antigone* as a source material.[1]

In considering Indigenous classical reception, it is important to bear in mind that, historically, classical references and allusions have been a tool of colonising narratives throughout North America, and were also employed in the territories of the Pacific Northwest where Knutsson's novel is set. In the US American literature produced in this region in the second half of the 19th and at the turn of the 20th century there emerges a tendency to compare the colonial strife in the Pacific Northwest (with the territory's Indigenous nations as well as between colonial powers) to the Trojan war. In his *Life amongst the Modocs: Unwritten History*, first published in 1873, Joaquin Miller uses the Trojan war as a rather sensational narrative and symbolic frame for the mining camps in California:

> I shall picture that camp as it was, and describe events as they happened. Giants were there, great men were there. They were very strong, energetic and resolute, and hence were neither gentle or sympathetic. They were honourable, noble, brave and generous, and yet they would have dragged a Trojan around the wall by the heels and thought nothing of it. Coming suddenly into the country with prejudices against and apprehensions of the Indians, of whom they knew nothing save through novels, they of course were in no mood to study their nature. Besides, they knew that they were in a way, trespassers if not invaders, that the Government had never treated for the land or offered any terms whatsoever to the Indians, and like most men who feel they are somehow in the wrong, did not care to get on terms with their antagonists. They would have named the Indian a Trojan, and dragged him around, not only by the heels but by the scalp, rather than have taken time or

> trouble, as a rule, to get in the right of the matter. I say that the greatest, the grandest body of men that have ever been gathered together since the siege of Troy, was one there on the Pacific. I grant that they were rough enough sometimes. I admit that they took a peculiar delight in periodical six-shooter war dances, these wild-bearded, hairy-breasted men, and that they did a great deal of promiscuous killing among each other, but then they did it in such a manly sort of way!
>
> (Miller 1873, 3–4)

This passage is worth quoting at length not only for the sake of pointing out its Homeric allusions, but also for the conception of heroic masculinity evident in it. The peculiar mixture of grandeur and brutality Miller sees as characteristic of the mining camps in California finds its illustration, he seems to suggest, in the figure of Achilles. The greatest hero of the Greek camp during the siege of Troy as told in Homer's *Iliad*, Achilles is also one who commits an outrage that appals even the gods when he purposefully defiles Hector's body and denies his enemy a proper burial. Achilles dragging Hector's body by the heels behind his chariot, first from the walls of Troy to the Greek camp as the city is watching, and later periodically around the tomb of Patroclos, whose slaying in battle by Hector Achilles is avenging through these deeds, are among the most brutal and unhindged scenes the *Iliad* has to offer. The fact that Miller chooses these scenes as a point of comparison to the kind of activity and culture cultivated in the mining camps is very telling. It is no wonder at all that, from the perspective of the Indigenous people of the region, these and other events associated with the spread of colonialism are told in apocalyptic terms. Hupa, Yurok, and Karuk scholar Cutcha Risling Baldy writes:

> California's postinvasion history is framed by genocide with the aim of total annihilation of California's Indian peoples. The population of California Indians was reduced by 90 percent during this period and resulted in what many of the California Indians referred to as 'the end of the world'. Hupa scholar Jack Norton refers to California at this time as a 'deranged frontier'. In the face of any perceived threat to the settlers' access to gold, land, and right-of-way, settlers responded with violence and murderous rampages, burning of villages, and indiscriminate attacks.
>
> (Risling Baldy 2018, 13)

Although the California Gold Rush is arguably the most enduringly present event of this kind in collective memory, similar occurrences took place in the Northwest region on the Canadian side of the colonial border in the 19th century, for instance the gold rushes on Fraser River (1857) and the Cariboo (1862) (Dickason and Newbigging 2010, 175). In the course of the latter, settler miners 'interfered with Native salmon weirs, raided villages, and even looted graves' (ibid).

Joaquin Miller obviously understands the cost and the damage of the colonial 'heroics' he describes, and yet his critique of the miners' conduct hovers somewhere in between criticism and valorisation. It is significant that the vehicle he uses to carry and articulate this tension is the *Iliad*. It is significant, because it demonstrates an important point: That classical references and allusions, depending on how they are framed, have the potential to become carriers of colonial apologetics as well as anticolonial critique.[2] As Helen Morales notes, '[classical] myth may affirm oppressive ideologies, but it also has the capacity to provide spaces beyond them. In this way, classical mythology was and is an instrument of subversion and a force for change' (2007, 116).

Classical reception framework, a theoretical and methodological approach increasingly prominent in the Classics departments and beyond, clears the path for moving away from iterations of classics as cultural hegemony. Reception approach looks to continuities of relevance rather than promoting notions of cultural superiority which, historically, positioned literature and cultural heritage of Greco-Roman antiquity as a universalist yardstick of cultural sophistication and aesthetic achievement. The very word 'classics' itself is steeped in these connotations, as Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz explains: 'Classics, derived as it was from the Latin word *classicus*, meaning "top rank, the best", used to connote just that' (2008, 1). Such hierarchical notions are problematic to say the least; they have a historically documented propensity to be used; they have a long history of being used as tools of colonialism, imperialism, and violent nationalism that has to be acknowledged and addressed.[3] But the necessary efforts to overcome them should not deter us from recognising that Greco-Roman cultural, intellectual, and narrative heritage informs contemporary societies in diverse ways, and that its reception is not confined to Eurowestern art and thought. 'Classical texts, images and ideas are culturally active presences', Lorna Hardwick notes (2009, 112); what is more, they are transculturally active presences. To once again refer to Emma LaRocque's argument,

> [Indigenous people] not only have dynamic cultural heritages but we also have a birthright to this contemporary world. And these two aspects, cultural heritage and contemporaneity is a matter of imbrication, not a matter of absolute ontological or fathomless chasm. We all have blended heritages, Europeans no less so, but it has obviously been to the advantage of colonizers to emphasize the differences, those real and those imagined or constructed.
>
> (LaRocque 2015, 15)

Considering the critical directions increasingly evident in classical reception studies, Hardwick observes:

> A model of engagement with classical texts and images as a vehicle for various kinds of cultural exchange and development is perhaps unusual but the direction now being taken by reception studies is revealing precisely that kind of activity. In enabling the seriously inquisitive to

> distinguish between (for example) the values of a particular appropriating text and society and those of the ancient context of production and to probe the cultural and ideological baggage associated with translational practices, reception studies has had an effect of liberating classical texts and images for a diversity of further refigurations, some of them surprising.
>
> (2009, 109)

Hardwick's words highlight the principle articulated by another scholar of classical reception, Charles Martindale, who stresses the fact that 'texts mean differently in different situations. […] The complex chain of receptions has the effect that a work can operate across history obliquely in unexpected ways' (2006, 4). Invoking Derek Walcott's creative engagements with Homeric epics, Johannes Haubold speaks of 'the Homeric reception in the twentieth [and, we might add, the twenty-first] century as a process of complex and often radical textual and cultural realignment' (2010, 28). The same is true of classical reception in general, and of Indigenous classical reception. These realignments frequently work from a place of decentring notions of Eurocentric universalism and cultural superiority with which classics have been invested while maintaining what may be conceptualised in Brooke Holmes' terms as 'elective sympathy', understood as 'any resonant relationship" vis-à-vis the classics (2016, 280). This is relationality that is not top-down restrictive, but dialogical and generative of meaning. It is such a realignment that can be observed in *Shadows Cast by Stars*.

(Not) Believing the Prophetess: Cassandra and the Idea of Heroism

The most obvious connection to classical stories evident in *Shadows Cast by Stars* is the character profile of Cassandra, the novel's protagonist. She carries the name of one of the princesses of Troy who is mentioned in the *Iliad* and given a larger role in Aeschylus' tragedy *Agamemnon* (458 BC), for one. The Trojan Cassandra is the daughter of King Priam and Queen Hecuba, and a twin sister of Helenus. Both twins are endowed with the gift of prophecy by Apollo. But while Helenus is hailed in the *Iliad* as one of the greatest seers, 'far the best auger of birds' (Homer 2015, 6.75), respected and heeded by those in power, Cassandra has a very different standing. In the *Iliad* she is celebrated as 'the most beautiful of Priam's daughters' (13.366), 'like to golden Aphrodite' (24.699), but with no mention of a gift of prophecy. In later tradition she, too, acquired a prophetic voice, albeit one that is cursed never to be believed:

> Cassandra […] refused to have intercourse with Apollo, although at first she had consented, when Apollo, while wrestling with her, 'breathed grace' upon her. But then she 'played him false' in regard to 'production of children' (*Agamemnon* 1206–8). As a result of Cassandra's refusal, she lost both the prospect of famous children and her gift. The god had

> already given her what she asked for, the gift of prophetic power, and could not take it away again, but he fixed it so that she would not be believed.
>
> (Lefkowitz 2007, 67)

Once possessing the gift of prophesy, Cassandra began to predict the suffering that was to befall Troy (Aeschylus 2008, 145). But because of Apollo's intervention, her words were never given credence and she was considered mad and 'being roundly and unanimously mocked by friends who acted like enemies' (155).

Catherine Knutsson's Cassandra, or Cass, as she is nicknamed, is a 16-year-old Métis girl with a gift of sight and a connection to the spirit world, and a twin brother who is also close to spirit, but in a different way. While Cassandra can see people's 'shades', or totems — in other words, their guardian spirits — and can cross over into the spirit world, Paul is 'haunted by those who have died and yet not passed over' (Knutsson 2013a, 26), as well as by visions of the future that neither himself nor Cassandra can decipher:

> *Vision* doesn't really describe what happens to Paul. […] These encounters [with the dead] leave Paul worn and grim, but it's the other visions, the ones that foretell the future, that trouble us both. We decode them together, trying to make some sense of the bizarre symbols, the totems, the omens. Most times we don't decipher what they mean until afterward, when it's too late, but we still try hoping that one day we'll unlock the code. This is what torments Paul, that he has the power to stop things, terrible things, if he could only decipher what he sees. I understand how he feels. What good is a gift when you don't know how to use it?
>
> (16)

Making sense of their respective gifts, finding a way to make them useful to the community and their loved ones, is what preoccupies Cassandra and Paul for the duration of the novel. Like the Trojan Cassandra, they both start out estranged from their spiritual powers, unable to use them to any real advantage, indeed fighting not to become utterly overwhelmed by them as she, in some iterations, eventually was. But once they reach the Island, they both look for guidance to the community, and especially Cassandra finds it in Madda, the Band's medicine woman who takes her on as an apprentice and teaches her to ground her gift in the land and Indigenous ancestral stories and to use her power for healing. Meanwhile, Paul enters the circle of warriors of the Band and throws himself with abandon into their lifestyle and values.

Here the connection to stories of the Trojan War activates additional layers of meaning. The Trojan Cassandra had warned her people and her royal family repeatedly against taking or supporting actions that would lead to the outbreak of the conflict and the fall of the city; in some versions of her story,

she urged them not to allow Paris to bring Helen to Troy, among other things. Knutsson's Cassandra disapproves of the Band's militaristic tactics, disingenuous recruiting practices, and their 'ways that prize violence over temperance, ways that mirror the UA tactics more than they'd care to admit' (28). The Band, who in the past also signed away Cassandra's family's land in the Corridor to the colonial UA government, attempts to recruit Paul even before the Mercredis come to the Island:

> It's not the boasting or the drinking, or even the guns they brought into our house, though I hate all of them, too. It's that the Band men filled my brother's head with dreams, dreams of being a warrior of the Old Way, when what they really want is to use my brother as cannon fodder. They don't tell him about the boys who die when they raid the facilities where they hook us Others up to machines and drain us of our blood. They don't tell him about those who return home broken, those who take to drinking rather than face a day sober. But I know. My mother told me. (28–9)

What Cass is questioning here is the notion of heroism that is based on violence and glory won in battle. Significantly, it is not the warriors she is objecting to, but the glorification of war without acknowledgement of its cost that the Band employs in order to recruit young men. Cass' mother was a medical professional, and in this world in existential crisis she would have seen both soldiers physically torn in battle and combat veterans whose lives have been wrecked by trauma of what they have seen and lived through. As a result, Cassandra holds strong anti-violence views and does not condone any discourse that attempts to glorify militarism. Like the classical Cassandra who saw all the horrifying details in her visions, she knows exactly the cost of war, and she does everything in her power to protect her people from it. The classical referentiality in this context directs the interpretative attention towards the heroic images that we have observed being built up in Joaquin Miller's text, for example, images that purport to take their cue from the Homeric story cycles.

But heroism in ancient Greek literature and some later critical work that reflects on its genres is a much more complex affair than an easy celebration of military glory encoded as a masculinist ideal. As D. C. Feeney points out, 'it is a critical common-place that the essence of heroism is put to test by Homer, Apollonius, Virgil, Lucan, Statius, and Tasso' (1986, 157). Michael Clarke argues that, as much as their heroic behaviour and personality is defined by '*menos*, the force of onrushing energy that is manifested in swift physical and mental movement' (2004, 79) and is characterised by an 'extreme level of male energy' (80), Homeric heroes are caught up in a fundamental conflict:

> Seen in this light, the exalted version of human nature represented by the Homeric warrior becomes fraught with half-hidden tensions. The men of the heroic race command wonder because of their strength,

> their fierceness, their superhuman force, in some cases their heightened wisdom or skill in the arts of speech: to that extent they are models to be imitated by young men, especially young soldiers, and praise is part of what the epic poet communicates to his audience. By the same token, however, the energy that underlies such excellence is liable to push the hero to dangerous extremes of anger, passion and recklessness: so that his exalted status makes him deeply problematic if one tries to take him as a model of moral excellence.
>
> (Clarke 2004, 80)

Interestingly, as Clarke points out, in the *Iliad* it is Helenus who 'warns his comrades against trying to face one in such a[n unbalanced] state' (81), one who 'rages beyond all bounds"' (Homer 2015, 6.100). Robert Emmet Meagher argues that such themes, which were carried over into the ancient Greek drama of later centuries, problematise easy valorisations of war and a heroic warrior ideal (2006, 7, 17), while Nancy Felson and Laura Slatkin contend that 'the *Iliad* encourages us to see war both as the noblest venture and the most destructive endeavor, as — in more contemporary terms — a masculinist tragedy inflicted on both sexes' (2004, 96).

Read through such a lens, Cass' objections to both the military machine of the UA and the Band's attempts to counter it by mobilising the heroic warrior ideal align with critical revaluations of such ideals in ancient Greek literature as well as with contemporary Indigenous thought that calls for liberation of 'the warrior ethic' as an expression of Indigenous masculinity from patriarchal impositions (McKegney 2014, 162–163). Unfortunately, in her advocacy along these lines more often than not Cass' voice is ignored. Moreover, the novel offers Cass herself as an alternative model of heroism grounded in Indigenous relational paradigms as well as in female figures of the Homeric storyworld (and other sources). In a chapter tellingly titled 'Heroic Women of Greek Epic', Mary R. Lefkowitz, although acknowledging that 'the Greek term *heros* applies only to men, and the female equivalent, *heroinē*, is used for semi-divine creatures, like springs and nymphs' (2007, 36), nevertheless calls for a revaluation of the role female characters play in those stories and the wisdom they provide. If, as Clarke notes, male heroism in the *Iliad* lacks moral grounding, Lefkowitz argues that women offer precisely that:

> [B]ecause they understand the full consequences of what is going on around them, they can remind the men and the audience of where all of the fighting ultimately will lead them, and, thus, they provide a balance and a moral tone that would otherwise be missing. In the end, the surviving men accept the women's view of the nature of war.
>
> (2007, 36–7)

This intervention is crucial both for maintaining balance in the story and for giving it a critical edge that looks to assuring futurity. As Lefkowitz's chapter

title suggests, in this reading, working on behalf of maintaining balance becomes a heroic act. Maintaining balance is a central societal value for many Indigenous cultures of North America, and it is crucially important to the vision of Knutsson's novel.

Additionally, such reading calls into question the underlying assumptions of the representation of the colonising enterprise on the West Coast through the Homeric heroism understood as a masculinist ideal that Miller expresses. Knutsson's use of Homeric allusions and intertextual references reconfigures the relationship between the classics and the region, reframing it in dialogical rather than domineering terms. All the while, Knutsson gives prominence to Indigenous worldviews and grounds this discussion in the cosmology and storyworld of the territory on which the novel is set — the Salish Coast. This is accomplished by different means; one of the most prominent is Cassandra's relationship to the sea-serpent sisiutl.

Claiming and Being Claimed: Cassandra and Sisiutl

In his article 'Do You See It Too? Relationality in Pacific Northwest Sea Serpent Lore', Matthew Teorey demonstrates the importance of the sea serpent stories for the Indigenous cultures of the Coast Salish territory, where Knutsson's novel is set. It is therefore not surprising that Knutsson affords such a central role to the serpent, a figure who has different names in different Indigenous languages, but who is 'better known by its Kwak'wala name Sisiutl' (Kinkade 2008, 103, n. 4). Once relocated to the Island, Cass begins to encounter sisiutl in the lake next to her family's allotted house, first from a distance as a shadow in the water, and finally up close and personal when the serpent attacks her in the lake one day and drags her to the bottom — an experience that reenacts one of Cass's worst nightmares, since she has been afraid of water ever since the episode in her childhood when she had a vision seizure in the water and almost drowned (Knutsson 2013a, 26). However, in the encounter with the serpent she taps into her strength and courage and fights back (196–7). In the course of the fight, sisiutl bites Cass in the stomach and leaves thirteen pearls in the wounds. When she lies in bed recovering from this underwater wrestling match, Madda explains to her the meaning of what has happened:

> [Sea serpents] are the meanest of the mean in the spirit world. Looks like you're one of the lucky ones, though. It marked you — that means it will never harm you again, sort of like choosing you as its own. […] My people believe that sisiutl chooses the most powerful warriors to fight alongside it. […] Sometimes, people call us healers 'spiritual warriors'. Sounds about right, don't you think?
>
> (202)

Here, the recalibration of the idea of heroism and a warrior to which the novel's classical allusions also point comes full circle as healing, not killing, becomes the value on which heroism turns. Incidentally, Achilles in the Iliad is not only

a great warrior, but also a skilled healer who learned the healing arts from the centaur Chiron - an aspect of his character that is often overlooked in favor of military heroism (Sigel 2024, n.p.).

Being marked and chosen by sisutl cements Cassandra's heroic status. Teorey explains:

> The serpent-like figure […] reveals life lessons, exciting self-realization about one's strength of character and commitment to the community. In Kwakwaka'wakw stories, the Sisiutl gives strength to the warrior and healing power to the shaman, yet it will turn the unworthy and faint-hearted to stone with a glance.
>
> (2019, 130)

Teorey further quotes

> Shannon Thunderbird, an Elder of the Coast Tsimshian First Nations in northwest British Columbia, [who] expresses that snake medicine is 'about change, about creativity […] about healthy sexual, physical, spiritual, and emotional energy. It is the energy of wholeness, spiritual knowing, and the ability to experience anything willingly and without resistance'.
>
> (135)

Cassandra's encounter with the serpent, therefore, is a pivotal step in her finding her own identity as a young woman and a healer. As one with a natural spiritual gift and a medicine woman in training, Knutsson's Cassandra, like her Greek namesake, runs up against doubt in her abilities, as some of the community members on the Island question her fitness for being a spiritual guide and a healing influence for the people. In addition, she is frequently being dismissed by men in power because she is 'just a girl'. But, when it comes to the question of trusting the prophetess, the one who needs to learn to do that most of all is Cassandra herself, emphasising the fact that she is a young girl and that *Shadows* is a coming-of-age novel as much as speculative fiction. As the sisiutle connection demonstrates, the idea of heroism the novel explores has to do with the search for self-worth, self-trust, and self-belief — all preoccupations common and central to young adult literature that focuses on challenges and contradictions of the process of coming of age.

Unlike Apollo in the case of the classical Cassandra, sisiutl remains true to his pact with Cass and does not demand any other payment for his allegiance beyond sufficient strength of character to withstand contact with him. Like Cassandra with Apollo, Cass wrestles with sisiutl, but she gets to keep the favour won in this wrestling match. It is instructive to reflect on the Greek Cassandra's story in this light, for the sexual contract with Apollo is not the only version of the events that came down to us. There is another story, told by the Hellenistic historian Antikleides, that involves Cassandra coming into contact with Apollo's sacred animal — the serpent (Neblung 1997, 105):

> According to probably archaic tradition, H[elenus] received his gift of prophecy when he was still a child in the temple of Apollo Thymbraeus, where he and Cassandra had fallen asleep. When their parents returned the next morning, they saw the sacred snakes cleaning the 'entrances to their sensory organs' with their tongues.
>
> (Bremmer 2023b, n.p.)

Like her twin brother Helenus, in this version Cassandra also received her prophetic gift through this encounter (Neblung 1997, 105). Whatever happened next that led to her losing her credibility with the people (if she did), this version changes perspective on the relationship between Apollo and Cassandra and at least complicates the circumstances of him claiming her as an oracle. In any case, the significance of a sacred snake in this version of the story forges another link between Cassandra and Knutsson's Cass. In Greek, the name Cassandra (Kassándra) means 'who stands out among men' (Bremmer 2023a, n.p.). When it comes to the clarity of their vision, both of them do stand out.

Both Cassandras finally come together in a scene that is pivotal to an understanding of classical referentiality in Knutsson's novel. It occurs when, towards the end of the novel, Cassandra enters the spirit world and meets Raven, the trickster:

> *But you and I* [Raven] *have been friends for a long time, Cassandra. There was a time when no one would listen to you except for me. Have you forgotten that time? Should I help you remember?*
>
> I am about to tell him that I don't understand when he flies at me. Before I can cover my eyes, his wings strike my face and a flood of memory washes over me. I see a world torn to pieces by fire and war. I stand apart, watching as the gates to a mighty city open, admitting a wooden horse taller than the firs of the forest. I scream and scream to stop, to burn the horse where it stands, but no one listens to me, for I have no tongue.
>
> (Knutsson 2013a, 387, italics in original)

As the two Cassandras merge in this passage, the novel postulates direct correspondences between their experiences of being ignored and overlooked, and the consequences it brings to the community. Because Cassandra's vision of the future is disbelieved, the future of Troy is lost; if her predictions had been heeded, perhaps Troy could have been saved. In Cass's own reality, she has to withstand pressure and resistance from the Band council as she works to secure the future for the community in desperate circumstances.[4] Like classical Cassandra, she is the carrier of futurity. But where Apollo abandoned Cassandra, Cass is supported by sisiutl, who turns out to be her totem, and even by the Raven, in his peculiar trickster manner.

It is significant that, rather than being a disembodied vision, Cass understands what she sees as 'a flood of memory'. She literally merges with Cassandra and other female figures, feels what they feel, tapping into a form

of archetypal embodiment. The boundaries of spiritual and mythological worlds become blurred and entangled and time bends in on itself. The overlapping of temporal planes allows different cultural figures to co-exist in a dialogical way, building a kind of community of prophetesses and medicine women across time, space, and culture, in accordance with Indigenous understanding of time as 'one vast circle' (Highway 2003, 43). Cass emerges from this experience a stronger, more mature individual who trusts her own judgement, ready to help forge a better future for her family, community, and the wounded world.[5]

Conclusion

As this article has shown, mythology, legend, and storytelling in dialogue is one of the central concerns of *Shadows Cast by Stars*. By creating relational links between times, contexts, characters, and old stories the novel fosters an exchange that includes ancestral Indigenous stories, Greco-Roman stories, and contemporary coming-of-age stories, among other references. Given the ideological baggage that comes with the very concept of the classics, this conversation is not always easy or effortless (as exemplified by the storyline of Grace Eagleson which I had no space to explore here) but nevertheless productive and vastly creative. Speaking of mythology in particular, Helen Morales asserts that the processuality and dialogism are not an exception, but the rule:

> Classical mythology only happens when the stories become active agents. When people use them. As such, classical myth is not an object or a series of objects to be known. Rather, it is a continual process of telling and retelling, of provoking and responding, of critiquing and revising.
>
> (2007, 115)

Most importantly, 'myths operate relationally: in relation to other representations of the same story, and in relation to other myths' (ibid).

This understanding of classical myth echoes the relational matrix of Indigenous storytelling. Significantly, some Indigenous thinkers see connections between classical and Indigenous thought and cosmological understanding: 'Viola Cordova (Mescalero Apache) suggests that we would have to look to Classical Greece and Rome to find something that truly approximates Aboriginal thought in Europe' (DiNova 2005, 6). One of the most prominent contemporary Indigenous philosophers, Cordova points out that, similar to Indigenous worldviews that postulate 'the dynamic model of the universe' — that is, a model where 'something is always happening without an agent having to cause anything because that is what the universe, by its very nature, does', — '[t]he ancient Greeks and Romans also occupied a dynamic universe, despite the existence of thinkers within their ranks who denied that there was any motion at all, or any substance' (2007, 111).

Similarly, in his lecture *Comparing Mythologies*, Tomson Highway (Cree) finds relational points between Indigenous mythologies and the mythology of ancient Greece.

But in *Shadows Cast by Stars*, Cass also points out how our relationship to these stories can be deeply personal. This is the conviction that sounds in her closing words:

> This is the story of the way things once were, and now are, and how they will be, for if there is one thing I've learned, it's that we are not bound by the myths created for us. It's time for my own myths […]. These are my truths, my myths, my lies. This is my story.
>
> (Knutsson 2013a, 456)

As an Indigenous young woman protagonist, taking ownership of her story is a gesture of affirming futurity; taking ownership of the way she builds relationships to other stories is a gesture of resistance through creativity. Whatever people believe.

Notes

1 A subtler example of this is Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers' short film *A Red Girl's Reasoning*, in which the protagonist's name, Delia, cites the byname of Artemis, the ancient Greek goddess of the hunt (Hargreaves 170). This creates an associative correspondence between Artemis' divine profile, and especially her punishment of Akteon for his transgressive voyeurism, and Delia's vigilantism in the service of protecting Indigenous women from abusive men where the justice system fails them.

2 An example where classical references are used to celebrate American nationalism, expansionism, and the ideology of manifest destiny is Eva Emery Dye's historical novel *The Conquest: The True Story of Lewis and Clark*, published in 1902, and 'written for the Lewis and Clark centennial' (Baym 2011, 46). In her short Foreword to the novel, Dye frames the tale that follows in heroic and Homeric terms that celebrate the fact and process of colonisation through manifest destiny: 'No Indian now lays tribute on these roads: the wayworn emigrant has made them ours' (1903, n.p.).

3 In *Classical Reception*, Lorna Hardwick recounts the following episode, which can serve as an example: 'On 30th January 1943, Adolf Hitler's close associate Goering made a radio broadcast to the beleaguered Sixth Army at Stalingrad on the eastern front. He compared the German army to the Spartan soldiers at Thermopylae in 480 BCE when they stood, fought and died to prevent the advance of the Persians ("the barbarians") into Greece' (2009, 1). The contributors to Kim Beerden and Timo Epping's recent edited collection *Classical Controversies: Reception of Graeco-Roman Antiquity in the Twenty-First Century* provide a number of examples of contemporary right-wing discourses that instrumentalise classical references.

4 Here, a connection can be made to the history of the Métis Nation and the marginalisation of women and women's organisations in its political organising, which Jennifer Adese draws attention to: 'In spite all of the challenges that Métis women face, they have never relinquished their role in ensuring that the Métis Nation is balanced — even in the face of the complicity and overwhelming

silence of Métis men and, at times, outright suppression by them. Métis women have also labored to ensure that everyone is equally respected within the Nation' (2021, 138).

5 Catherine Knutsson has planned a sequel to the novel which, however, at the time of this writing has not yet been published.

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Part III

Resistance, Revenge, Reimagining

11 Coralie Fargeat's *Revenge* (2017) and the Rape-Revenge Action Hero

M. Keith Booker

Introduction

Coralie Fargeat's *Revenge* (2017) gives the rape-revenge film an important update by adding a heavy dose of feminist consciousness, as well as a significant upgrade in production values. Indeed, while a rough outline of the plot of the film seems to conform to the conventions of the rape-revenge film fairly well, the film ultimately subverts most of the conventions of the genre in subtle ways. Ultra-violent and spectacularly bloody, *Revenge* is also extremely (and self-consciously) clever in its play with its cinematic predecessors, delivering a significantly upgraded female protagonist but also questioning or even parodying the attitudes and assumptions upon which the classic form of the genre is based. In so doing, the film helped to open the way for several subsequent interventions in the rape-revenge genre (especially via films by female directors), suggesting a renewal of the genre for a new era, almost half a century after its beginnings in films such as Wes Craven's *The Last House on the Left* (1972) and Meir Zarchi's *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978).

The Set-Up: Jen as Object of the Male Gaze

Revenge begins as rich-and-handsome Richard (Kevin Janssens) helicopters to his posh modernist desert villa, accompanied by his nymphet-like mistress, Jen (Matilda Lutz). From the very beginning, it is clear that, visually and stylistically, *Revenge* has very little in common with its rough-hewn predecessors in the rape-revenge genre, which had made a virtue of low-budget necessity by using their grainy cinematography and amateurish acting to create atmosphere for their scenes of abject violence. From its beautiful opening shot of a panoramic desert landscape to the views of the gorgeous ultramodern villa, to the presentation of the scenes of bloody violence themselves, *Revenge* itself is exquisitely shot (by award-winning Belgian cinematographer Robrecht Heyvaert), well-acted, and well-crafted in every way. Moreover, the film self-consciously foregrounds its glossy style, thus Alexandra Heller-Nicholas' reference to the 'slick, fashion magazine gloss of

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Fargeat's film — drenched with seemingly conscious echoes of the French *cinéma du look* tradition' (Heller-Nicholas 2021, 275). Fargeat's film also shows the clear influence of the New French Extremity movement in the extreme gore of its bloody violence but also presents this violence with more attention to aesthetics than in the typical rape-revenge film.

While viewing that opening panorama, we gradually hear the whirring of helicopter blades, almost like the opening of *Apocalypse Now*. Then we see, in the far distance, an approaching dot that gradually resolves into a helicopter that flies straight toward and then over the camera, which shoots it from below. A strangely tinted shot of the landscape gives it an almost surreal feel — reinforced by the eerie opening music. Then the camera pulls back a bit to reveal that this new shot is a reflection in the mirrored sunglasses of the man who will turn out to be Richard. Sitting just behind him and to his right, also in sunglasses, is Jen, sucking on a lollipop, which emphasises her youth. She looks, in fact, very much like Lolita when she is first spotted sunbathing by Humbert Humbert in Stanley Kubrick's *Lolita* (1962), a shot that was memorialized on the film's poster (see Figure 11.1).[1] The lollipop, though, is also clearly meant to be suggestive of oral sex, and it is no coincidence that Jen performs fellatio on Richard literally within a minute after he enters the villa to which they are flying in the helicopter. As it turns out, Jen is a grown, sexually experienced woman, not a little girl.

The next shot, carefully composed from inside the astonishing villa through a glass wall, shows the helicopter landing on the ground outside. Green fields in the background suggest that the setting is not quite as arid as

Figure 11.1 Jen (Matilda Anna Ingrid Lutz) appears Lolita-like early in the film (left). Publicity shot of Lolita (Sue Lyon) for *Lolita* (right). *Revenge*, directed by Coralie Fargeat (Rézo Films: 2017); *Lolita*, directed by Stanley Kubrick. (Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer: 1962).

it first appeared, while we see enough of the villa to make it clear that this is a luxurious abode of the rich. The view through that glass wall looks almost like a painting. As Jen descends from the copter in her short, sexy skirt and bare midriff top, the camera lingers sensually on her smooth, tanned thighs, already announcing the way in which Jen will be the focus of a textbook case of the male gaze in the opening segments of the film. She gives Richard a flirtatious smile over her shoulder as she heads inside the villa, looking around her with approval, while Richard says farewell outside to the pilot, who slips him some peyote before flying away. Both sex and drugs have already been introduced into the equation, and it appears that Richard and Jen are in for the kind of decadent retreat that only the very wealthy can afford; or, to be more precise, Richard is in for that kind of retreat; Jen is merely another of the luxuries that his wealth allows him to have.

When Richard goes inside the villa, Jen is already waiting in a sensuous pose, half Lolita and half Barbarella. She immediately presents herself to him for sex. He spins her around, lifts up her skirt, and gives us our first good look at her ass — which will in many ways be the star of the film's first half hour. It is clear that she is playing her expected role, and one might wonder at this point if she is a high-class prostitute. However, he tells her, in French-accented English, that she drives him completely crazy, which makes her seem more like a girlfriend. Without a word, she drops to her knees, unzips his pants, and begins to perform fellatio — before she has even spoken a word in the film. A cut to the very next scene shows Richard, naked, talking that night (in French) on the telephone with his wife. Jen lies alone in the bed that Richard has clearly just left to take his wife's phone call, looking decidedly unhappy. It is a classic moment: The cheating husband goes away for a romp with his beautiful young girlfriend, but remains moored to his wife and children, leaving the girlfriend in a precarious situation.

It could be a setup for a romantic comedy, though everything about the film's first few moments suggests that it will be more serious. When Richard returns to bed, Jen remains turned with her back to him, pouting. He exhales in frustration at the situation. 'Everything would be so simple if the kids weren't there,' he says, suggesting that, were it not for the children, he would leave his wife for Jen in a heartbeat. But then he follows that statement with an addition that perhaps tell us more about his real attitude toward Jen: 'And if you didn't have such a nice ass', he says.

We might expect her to smack him at this point. Instead, she seems pleased when he starts to fondle the body part in question, and she smiles and giggles when he calls it 'my little, juicy, peachy ass', apparently glad that Richard's attention has shifted back to her and away from his family. Then, Richard adds a bizarre bit of extra objectification by suggesting that her ass is 'like a little alien coming from another planet'. She then turns towards him and they start to kiss. Their faces are encircled on the screen by a disc of light that sets their faces apart from their darker surroundings, then the disc fades into a

shot of the full moon. It is a self-consciously romantic bit of cinemagic — so self-conscious that it seems contrived, suggesting that their relationship might not exactly be one of true love.

Cut to the next day. A shot of a robot vacuum cleaning the villa's striking pool is followed by a shot of the pool itself, showing that it overlooks tilled fields, with a stunning mountainscape in the distance. It becomes more and more clear just how luxurious this setting really is. The film was, as it turns out, shot in a real villa in Morocco, but the exquisite house, as shot in the film, looks almost too perfect to be real (see Figure 11.2). The effect is to give the film the air of a parable, set in a sort of alternate reality that does not necessarily correspond to any specific place on earth. Indeed, the film carefully avoids any mention of place names, thus enhancing this fairy-tale effect. The impeccably decorated house, with its expensive furnishings and sleek, modern electronics, is like a consumerist paradise, filled with emblems of wealth, almost like hunting trophies (a connection that is reinforced by the fact that additional men will soon arrive, having come there for a hunting trip in the surrounding desert).

These consumerist resonances also help to emphasise the way in which Richard and the other men who arrive at the villa regard Jen as just another commodity, just another perk of Richard's obvious wealth. Richard and Jen are, after all, already in their second day at the villa when the other men arrive, and we have yet to hear her speak a word, yet to see her display any real qualities except a self-conscious awareness of just how sexy she is (which is, of course, the only thing that Richard cares about). Jen, in the film's early scenes, seems extremely comfortable with her body and her sexuality, very much aware of her effect on men and more than willing to participate in her own sexual objectification. Yet she seems very much unaware of the implications of that objectification.

Figure 11.2 The posh villa where much of the action takes place. *Revenge*, directed by Coralie Fargeat. (Rézo Films: 2017).

In the next sequence, we see Jen strutting about the villa in a red bikini bottom and pink cutoff T-shirt, imprinted with the slogan 'I ❤ L.A.' The camera virtually fondles her buttocks as she walks jauntily about the villa, still not having spoken. Her first utterance is a gasp as she bites sensuously into an apple, Eve-like, then turns to look outside and is surprised to see an armed man looking at her through the glass wall. Then a second armed man arrives, and Jen calls out for Richard, so that her first utterance in the film involves a cry for help, signaling her feminine vulnerability and weakness. Richard walks in, sees the men, and is clearly exasperated, but not alarmed. The men turn out to be his friends Stan and Dimitri (Vincent Colombe and Guillaume Bouchède), who were supposed to join Richard after Jen had left. Richard introduces the young woman to them, in English: 'Jennifer. Just a friend'. Stan and Dimitri exchange glances that suggest they know just what kind of friend she is. Richard introduces Stan and Dimitri as 'my associates', to which Jen smiles at them and says, 'Hi'. Her first actual word in the film, more than eight minutes in, is a mere platitude. Then, she finally speaks in sentences, though still ones with little content: 'I'll leave you guys to it. I'm gonna go take a shower'. As she walks away, the camera clearly assumes the gaze of Dimitri and Stan as they stare at her receding ass, no doubt imagining what she is going to look like in that shower. And she knows it.

Now that Jen has finally spoken, we realise that she speaks essentially unaccented American English, though there might be just a hint of an unidentifiable accent there, and there are other hints in the film that she is not from America, preserving the indistinct geographical indications of the film.[2] For example, she indicates later in the film that her dream is to fly away to Los Angeles, because 'everything is possible there. Everything goes faster. And you can be noticed in no time'. It is clear that she wears the T-shirt, not to indicate that she is from L.A., but to indicate that L.A. is her dream locale, and that she hopes to go there to 'get noticed', as so many young women—like Naomi Wattss[3] young Betty at the beginning of David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2001)—have headed there in the hope of being discovered. That the film is roughly half in English and half in French also reinforces the fable-like quality of the film, joining with the nonspecific nature of the characters' names to contribute to the sense that this film is not taking place within the reality of any particular national or cultural setting. It should be noted, though, that the three men speak almost exclusively in French among themselves, even in front of Jen, suggesting their lack of regard for the young woman, who appears to understand only English — which all of the men are perfectly capable of speaking.

The nonspecific geography of this film, by the way, is perfectly appropriate and has a thematic function: The film is not set within any particular geographic milieu but is instead set within the world of contemporary consumer capitalism. That world, at this point, is entirely global. Jen's early objectification can be taken as a comment on age-old patriarchal attitudes toward women. But her portrayal also has a specifically consumerist slant, especially

given her surroundings in the luxurious villa, where she becomes just one more element of the expensive décor. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that Stan ultimately rapes her. He does not regard her as a person, but as a thing; and, within the ideology of consumerism, things are to be desired and then possessed.

Whether or not Jen means to imply that she hopes to become an actress in L.A., she is clearly presented as something of a performer. And she makes very sure that all three men notice her performance as she flounces about the villa for the next ten minutes or so. It is clear that Jen has no interest in seducing Richard's friends. In general, though, her performance is overt enough, especially given subsequent events, that it can clearly be taken as a parody of the notion that women who dress and act in certain ways are 'asking for it'. The camera does its best to emphasise the effect, lingering on her scantily clad body as if mimicking the gazes of the men. It should be emphasised that there is nothing in the least bit slutty about the way Jen carries herself during this segment of the film. Jen trusts Richard and is comfortable with him; she is also happy to be on display for his friends, assuming that Richard will be pleased and proud to have his friends see his prize possession. It is clear at this point that, while Jen might be a sexually experienced would-be 'home-wrecker', she is also quite innocent in some ways. She knows men like to look at her, but she does not seem to fully realise what is behind those looks. She will receive a rude awakening soon enough.

The Rape: Objectification Turns Violent

For his part, Richard seems proud to have Jen on display, like a trophy from a hunting trip like the one his friends have to come to the villa to undertake with him. Her role as trophy is further emphasised in one scene in which Dimitri, though sitting ten feet away from Jen beside the villa's pool (see Figure 11.3), looks at her through his hunting binoculars so that he can get a close-up view, especially of her lips, but also casting her in the role of one of the animals they are preparing to hunt. Meanwhile, the fact that the men are on a hunting trip at all suggests that they are in a mood to demonstrate their masculine power over weaker creatures. In addition, the fact that American professional wrestling plays on the television while the three men party with Jen suggests the way in which the villa is at this point drenched in testosterone, while the fact that one of the wrestlers is dressed as a gladiator emphasises that such masculine contests have a long cultural history (as well as the fact that there is something inauthentic about them, given the reputation of professional wrestling).

Jen entertains the men during their party by dancing seductively for them beside the pool, even enticing Stan to dance with her after Richard declines. Stan clearly regards the invitation as a sexual one, though Jen just as clearly sees it as innocent fun. He stands there, grinning, while she undulates around him like he's a stripper pole. She likes that men notice her and has no idea

Figure 11.3 The camera lingers on Jen's body early in the film. *Revenge*, directed by Coralie Fargeat. (Rézo Films: 2017).

how thoroughly these three men, at least, are objectifying her, partly because she trusts Richard to respect her. The song (played on the villa's deluxe sound system) to which she and (ultimately) Stan dance is a high energy mix of hip hop and electronic dance music called 'Dance Like Machines', by the French DJ Brodinski. This song has the kind of high energy for which French DJs have become famous in recent years, though it also has an international flavour. Vocals are supplied by Dutch rapper Faberyayo, who sounds very American, while the music itself would be equally at home in clubs in Paris, London, Amsterdam, New York, or West Amman. In addition, the music has a very manufactured quality, which fits in nicely with the exploration of consumerism in the film. Finally, the music is designed simply to be danced to, its minimal lyrics (including lines such as 'Cyborgs and androids dance like machines') being very much beside the point — though one line ('shit's about to go down') does seem prophetic given what is about to happen in the film.[4]

Finally, Stan starts to dance as well, while Jen rubs against him, which finally causes Richard to intervene. He grabs Jen and throws her over his shoulder, carrying her off to their bedroom, caveman-style, as the film cuts back to the professional wrestling on the television. It is a clear declaration of ownership on the part of Richard, and it clearly makes Stan envious. The next morning, Jen wakes up alone and finds that Richard has gone away to present Stan's and Dimitri's passports to the gamekeeper, while a close-up of the apple bitten into by Jen earlier, shows the exposed flesh turning brown, while an ant crawls onto it, suggesting (maybe a bit *too* symbolically) that all is not right in this seemingly Edenic world.

As Jen is dressing, Stan walks in and gets a look at her entirely naked. She handles it gracefully, but she is clearly embarrassed. Stan, clueless, does not seem to realise that he has crossed a line. He sits on the bed beside her and

starts creepily hitting on her, even giving her his business card so that she can perhaps call him some time so they can 'do a thing or two' together. As she tries to fend him off, he gets more and more aggressive and insulting. He very crudely suggests that she had been 'dying for it' the day before, 'coming on to be like a pussy in heat'. When he starts to rape her, she is so stunned and terrified that she hardly resists. Nothing has prepared her for this moment, and Fargeat has carefully crafted the scene to ensure that any non-pathological viewer will strongly sympathise with Jen and be revolted by the disgusting Stan. The decidedly non-erotic nature of the rape sequence also emphasises that the rape is a matter, not of succumbing to desire for sex, but of succumbing to the desire to exert masculine power over a woman. There is no question at all of her having 'asked for it' despite her behaviour the night before. She screams as Stan rapes her; Dimitri turns on the television (now a car race, another masculine image, is on the screen) to drown out her screams so he can relax in the pool in peace. But even the rape scene is artfully shot: From outside the villa, we see Jen's anguished face pressed against the window, which reflects the beautiful landscape — and Dimitri diving into the gorgeous pool. The contrast between the beauty of the exterior scene and the horror of the interior makes the shot all the more powerful. Meanwhile, the actual rape last less than one minute of run time and takes place mostly off screen — as opposed to the brutally graphic and protracted gang rape scene for which *I Spit on Your Grave* became so notorious.

Jen, while she has contributed to her own commodification, has clearly not realised how thoroughly this phenomenon has led the men to dehumanise her. The film makes it clear that she has a right to act however she wants without being raped for it. When Stan rapes her, she is shocked and humiliated, but she still assumes that Richard will avenge her when he returns. It is only when he appears merely to be mildly annoyed with Stan for raping her that she begins to understand the truly low regard in which the men, including Richard, hold her. When Richard tries to buy her off to keep her quiet about the attack, transferring cash into an account for her and offering to set her up with a job in Canada (which, he points out, is 'practically in Los Angeles'), she begins further to awaken to the true situation. Shockingly, he urges her not to be selfish: 'Think about me', he callously tells her. He clearly believes that she, like any commodity, can be bought for his convenience. But it is only when she refuses his offer and threatens to tell his wife everything that he shows the full extent of his lack of regard for her. He slaps her, knocking her to the floor, then calls her a 'little whore', which is, of course, pretty much how he has thought of her all along.

The shocking nature of the film then continues to build as Jen tries to run away but is chased down by Richard and pushed off a high cliff. She lands, impaled on an upward pointing tree branch that passes completely through her midsection, thus symbolically re-enacting her rape (but now emphasising violence). As she lies there, skewered, there seems no chance that she will survive. Richard, appearing more and more despicable, returns to the villa

and burns Jen's things to destroy all evidence of her having been there. Then he calmly calls his wife 'just to hear her voice'. When Stan tries to apologise about Jen, Richard says he never heard of her.

The Revenge: Jen as Formidable Action Hero

Heller-Nicholas singles out *Revenge* as an illustration of the fact that the rape-revenge film is always about fantasy, noting that such films generally tend to involve 'a fantasy about getting even, and, more importantly, a fantasy about finding justice when there are no other options available' (Heller-Nicholas 2021, 275). After the seeming murder of Jen, *Revenge* takes a literal turn toward fantasy, departing from the limitations of verisimilitude altogether, moving toward the supernatural. Jen virtually rises from the dead in a sort mythic rebirth, and Jen has moved into the realm of the superhuman, or at least into the typically masculine realm of the action hero. Later, when she removes the tree branch that is still protruding from her abdomen like a grotesque penis, the moment serves as a sort of symbolic castration of the men.

Jen then proceeds to hunt down the men one-by-one, beginning with Dimitri, whom she dispatches in high slasher fashion with a swift stab of a hunting knife into his right eye socket. This scene anticipates the graphic violence with which the men will be killed, standing in stark contrast to the subtle handling of the rape. Meanwhile, during the revenge sequence Jen remains scantily clad, but her body no longer serves as fodder for the male gaze, while the film is now clearly shot from her point of view. Scarred, burned, and bloodied, her body has become a formidable killing machine, and the camera emphasises its power, rather than its sexuality. She still wears the large, pink, dangling, star-shaped earrings that had earlier served to highlight her youthful sexuality, but that now serve as an ironic reminder that those days are behind her, the change being further emphasised when Stan shoots off part of her right ear, taking the earring with it.

We already realise that Stan is a coward and an idiot, so it certainly comes as no surprise that she vanquishes him easily, though Fargeat does present us with some surprising set pieces along the way, beginning with a moment when Richard appears to blow Jen's head off with a shotgun, followed by an entire sequence of other nightmarish images, only to have her awake from an actual nightmare. Also notable is the prolonged (and preposterously gory) scene in which Stan pulls a shard of glass out of his foot (put there via a booby trap set by Jen), which is both stomach-turning and oddly comic in its excess. It is only one of several wounds Stan suffers, blubbering and crying the whole time, before Jen finally blows out his brains with Dimitri's rifle.

All of the action in the desert is gorgeously photographed, yet we also know that the desert is a dangerous place, much like the Terrible Place described by Clover as a typical site of slasher killings. 'The desert is sublime, but merciless with the careless', Richard says at one point. Interestingly,

though, the final showdown between Jen and Richard occurs not in the desert, but back in that pristine villa, surrounded by the trappings of consumerism. This, too, we realise, is a Terrible Place. Richard returns to the villa, washes his face in the beautiful pool, then goes inside and plops down, still filthy, on the fancy couch, placing himself, ironically enough, just below a painting of the Virgin Mary that hangs on the wall.[5] He calls his helicopter pilot and orders a pickup, then goes to take a shower, preparing to return to civilization. Jen's reappearance ruins his plans, leading to a lengthy (and incredibly bloody) battle as they move about the villa, fighting to the death and leaving the exquisite abode smeared with what looks like impossible amounts of Richard's blood. As if it were not already clear that consumerism provides a crucial context for the events of the film, throughout the last battle, a U.S. shopping channel plays on the villa's television during this sequence. Their frequently repeated motto — 'Shop Club USA, where deals are simply irresistible' — describes the attractions of their offerings in clearly sexual terms, capping off the links between consumerism and sexuality that have run throughout the film.

Jen's first shot of this sequence wounds the naked Richard (who has just stepped out of the shower) and sends his blood flying across the couch and onto the painting of the Virgin Mary, who now looks like blood is oozing from her mouth, cleverly (but possibly blasphemously) quoting the long legacy of Virgin Mary statues and paintings that have been rumoured to weep blood or other liquids. This moment can also be taken as a slap at the patriarchal legacy of Catholicism and all it has contributed to what Jen has endured in this film. There is also a moment verging on humour when Richard wraps his wounded abdomen in plastic wrap from the kitchen to staunch the bleeding, but in general these last few moments are extremely tense as the two combatants slip and slide through the labyrinthine villa, now lubricated with Richard's blood. Richard finally gets the upper hand and seems on the verge of killing Jen, but first he has to stop to give her a lecture on what a pain in the ass women are, which gives her a chance to turn the tables and blast him with Dimitri's rifle. In the end, he lies dead, his bare ass exposed in an obscene reversal of all those ass-shots of Jen in the first part of the film. For her own part, Jen, bloody but victorious, walks slowly out of the villa as the helicopter arrives, presumably to take her back to safety. As the film ends, she looks directly into the camera, reversing the male gaze one last time (see Figure 11.4).

Updating the Rape-Revenge Film

Most negative reviews of *Revenge* seemed to misperceive it as just another version of films such as *The Last House on the Left* or *I Spit on Your Grave*. Hannah Woodhead, for example, 'rather than breathing life into a stagnant subgenre, *Revenge* disappointingly offers more of the same' (Woodhead 2018). Most critics, though, recognised that *Revenge* was something new.

Figure 11.4 By the end of the film, the gaze is controlled by Jen, not directed at her. *Revenge*, directed by Coralie Fargeat. (Rézo Films: 2017).

For Manuela Lazic, the film insists that 'Jen isn't a doll, all beautiful surface and flexible limbs, but a real, live person susceptible to pain'. Indeed, Lazic sees *Revenge* as 'the revenge movie to end all revenge movies' (Lazic 2018). Similarly, Max Weinstein highly praises the film, which he sees as a triumph, marked by a number of brilliant touches:

> Apart from *Revenge*'s intriguing gender and sexual politics, what shines through are Fargeat's clear feel for the heft and weight of expertly crafted action sequences, absurdist sense of timing that steers the horrific into the realm of the comedic, and discerning visual design that makes star attractions of neon-tinted wardrobe accessories, dust-blown cat-and-mouse chases, and an all-white living room that, when soaked in gallons of blood, turns into a sanguinary Slip 'N Slide.
>
> (Weinstein 2018)

Aline Dolinh was also effusive in her praise for the film, which she sees as being all the more powerful for the way it carefully remains within the boundaries of the rape-revenge movie, at the same time subtly subverting it. For her, the film 'provides a stunning validation of female rage and retribution in a way that our culture rarely does' (Dolinh 2018). That Jen exacts her revenge in a way typically reserved for male film characters would seem to validate Dolinh's claim.

Reading *Revenge* directly against earlier rape-revenge films shows just what a remarkable departure it is, moving beyond the exploitative nature of the 1970s films, including their sometimes-lurid focus on the rapes themselves. Notable films in or adjacent to this subgenre — such as Takashi Miike's *Audition* (1999) and Gaspar No'és *Irréversible* (2002) — have enriched it along the way, and remakes of *The Last House on the Left* (2009) and *I Spit on Your Grave* (2010) have provided only slight updates. However,

it was not until the appearance of such female-directed films as Anna Biller's *The Love Witch* (2016), Natalia Leite's *M.F.A.* (2017), and *Revenge* that the subgenre as a whole began to move in genuinely new directions.

These directions become clear when *Revenge* is compared with a classic rape-revenge film such as *The Last House on the Left*, which is quite typical of the genre in the way it employs an avowedly crude grindhouse aesthetic through which its exploitative narrative is presented as a spectacle of violence. Granted, there are elements within the film that might respond to serious analysis, such as the way its rape victims are clearly coded as aligned with the counterculture, attacked by a criminal gang that seems to have emerged from the dark side of the 1950s, much in the way Fredric Jameson has seen characters in Jonathan Demme's *Something Wild* (1986) as coded by decade, with the character Ray Sinclair (Ray Liotta) emerging as a 1950s villain who threatens the free-spirited Lulu/Audrey (Melanie Griffith), a product of the 1980s via the counterculture of the 1960s. According to Jameson, though, Ray 'is not staged demonically, as a representation of evil as such, but rather as the representation of someone playing at being evil', which tells us a great deal about the postmodern nature of the film (Jameson 1991, 290). One might say the same thing about the criminal gang that rapes and murders the '1960s' girls in *Last House*, suggesting that the rape-revenge genre can potentially be used for serious cultural commentary. Indeed, multiple critics have read the film as a sort of allegory of the death of 1960s idealism.[6] On the other hand, Craven seems to have no interest in constructing a telling historical allegory of the kind Jameson finds in *Something Wild*. *Last House*, in fact, goes out of its way to remind us that none of its motifs are to be taken seriously, even going so far as to make its criminal gang rather bumbling and comical. This aspect of the film can seem jarringly inappropriate to viewers in the 2020s (though it does potentially make the sudden violence of the actual rapes seem more shocking). Moreover, the film even adds a more purely comic motif in its representation of the local sheriff and deputy who seem at first to offer a possible counter to the criminals until it becomes clear that they are too clownishly incompetent to be of any use at all. That these figures of authority are specifically opposed to the counterculture of the 1960s (as when a carload of hippies jeeringly calls them 'pigs' and then drives off when the cops try to bum a ride) also offers potential political readings. Again, though, the representation of the cops is all in 'fun', as is emphasised by the comic soundtrack that plays whenever they are on screen. In contrast, *Revenge* can be quite clever with its use of visuals and music, but it never suggests that there is something comical about the action.

The villains of *Revenge* are not a criminal gang but a group of seemingly regular guys, with all that this motif implies, just as Jen is much more of an ordinary adult woman than the inexperienced girl victims of *Last House* — who are *simply* victims and extract no revenge on their own. In her 2021 update to her book-length study of the rape-revenge film, Heller-Nicholas

thus notes that *Revenge* has been seen as a rape-revenge film for the #MeToo generation, even though it was released before that movement was fully underway (2021, 275). But *Revenge*, as Heller-Nicholas also notes, did seem to mark the beginning of a global wave of rape-revenge films (mostly directed by women) that have updated and reinvigorated the genre, adding a number of new elements, such as supernatural horror — as in Anvita Dutt's Indian rape-revenge film *Bulbbul* (2020) — or other forms of social commentary — as in the crucial role of aging in Lim Sun-Ae's Korean rape-revenge film *An Old Lady* (2020). The latter might also be said for the plight of migrants at the U.S. southern border in Gigi Saul Gerrero's *Culture Shock* (2019), which also adds an important virtual reality motif of a kind that would subsequently be central to Olivia Wilde's *Don't Worry Darling* (2022), another out-of-the-ordinary rape-revenge film. Meanwhile, Emerald Fennell's *Promising Young Woman* (2020) has expanded the rape-revenge genre into the social media era. By adding an emphasis on aesthetics and the development of a strong action hero–like female protagonist, *Revenge* can be seen as an important forerunner of all of these films.

The appearance of all of these films in such short order is obviously no coincidence, building as it does on the #MeToo movement and other aspects of fourth-wave feminism. But these films, with the high-gloss aesthetics and the impressive action-hero protagonist of *Revenge* leading the way, have also reinvigorated the rape-revenge genre as a whole, thus driving the appearance of more and more such films, which have now established their ability to serve as vehicles for serious feminist commentary. That these films have branched out in such creative directions suggests that more and more are still to come, promising to make *Revenge* increasingly significant in the history of films with female heroes as time goes on.

Notes

1 Fargeat has stated in an interview that *Revenge* is 'about the transformation of the character of this girl who'd been a totally Lolita-ish, Barbie-girl (character) who is very at ease with her body, her sensuality, and that is gonna be seen by those guys as weak' (Pugh 2018).
2 Some reviewers interpreted Jen as being an American, though I think that is inaccurate. For example, Jim Slotek, who (wrongly, I think) calls *Revenge* a 'French feminist grindhouse movie', sees her as an American 'and a stereotypical American at that'. However, I think she is stereotypically American because she acts out American characteristics learned from popular culture (and perhaps *wants* to be an American, not because she is literally American).
3 Ironically, Lutz in this film was just coming off a starring role in the lackluster horror film *Rings* (2017), the second sequel to *The Ring* (2002), which had starred Watts (who was just coming off her career-making performance in *Mulholland Drive*). *Rings*, incidentally, is a supernatural rape-revenge film, though the character played by Lutz is involved in neither the rape nor the revenge.
4 The official music video for the song (found at https://youtu.be/ZHcT33gb9bY) is built around scantily clad female dancers undulating on an actual stripper pole, which gives some idea of the resonance of the music.

5 The painting is a version of the 1859 work *The Virgin with the Crown*, by French Neo-classical painter Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, though the colours appear to have been altered, making it a sort of postmodern pastiche that commodifies the Virgin Mary.
6 See, for example, Brashinsky (1998, 169). See also Lowenstein for an extended discussion of the film as a reflection of the impact of the experience of Vietnam on American society (2005, 110–44).

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12 'What about you, Maxine? What's your American Dream?'

X and *Pearl* Radically Refit the Final Girl with an Axe and Hack Apart the American Pastoral

Stephanie Schoellman

Traumatised and bloodied, Sally Hardesty jumps through a window of the Sawyer family's farmhouse, then limps down the dirt road, screaming as she's pursued by the cannibalistic 'Leatherface', with his chainsaw smoking. Through a series of chance events, she evades him, escaping in the bed of a passerby's truck. She laughs frenziedly into a red dawn while a frustrated Leatherface swings his chainsaw around and 'The Blue Danube' plays. She's the only survivor out of her group of friends, one of the first Final Girls in slasher horror franchises.

Fast-forward to 2022, a similar scene splatters across the screen. In Ti West's *X*, Maxine boot-scoots out of the farmhouse, the last one standing out of anyone — the film crew she was a part of and the farmhouse's homicidal inhabitants. She walks past the killer, an elderly woman named Pearl, splayed outside on the driveway with a broken hip from being jettisoned backwards after firing a shotgun at Maxine and missing. Pearl screeches 'whore' at Maxine as Maxine gets into a truck and backs up over Pearl's head, exploding it like a ripe summer melon. Putting the truck in gear, she heads down the road, crucifix swinging on the rearview mirror. She snorts coke and exclaims, 'Praise the fucking lord', as she drives into the sunrise, exhaust fumes and carnage in her wake.

Sixth months after *X* was released, its prequel, *Pearl: An X-traordinary Origin Story*, premiers, offering a yet more complicated rendition of the Final Girl in Pearl, a female who's the killer as well as the one left alive to carry on her story. With the actress Mia Goth doubling as both Pearl and Maxine in *X* and reprising her role as a younger Pearl in the self-titled film, coupled with the echoing lines and ambitions that connect Maxine and Pearl's arcs in both films, these Final Girls are unconventional ones, to say the least. The chronology further complicates them, with *X* being released first and set in 1979 and the prequel following set in 1918. These Final Girls in both films serve a role that many Final Girls before them have also served — as cautionary tales — but, again, not with the conventional, chiding lesson at the end. These films and their Final Girls are parables, not proverbs.

Their unconventionality demonstrates how the Final Girl trope has evolved over the past nearly 50 years. Our 21st-century Final Girl is *finally* fed up with

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her stereotype — seemingly powerful, yet ultimately pandering to patriarchal gender role expectations (morally superior with a plot that forces her into action, rewarding her Mary Sue qualities as defined by systems of power in which she lacks representation). Now, though, she is going on the offensive, starting the fires, confronting — even hunting — any who get in her way, and all the while rewriting those inherited good girl scripts. She is angrier, more aggressive, and more overtly political because she's responding to the kairotic moment,[1] as the directors of *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* and *X* and *Pearl* did.

Texas Chain Saw Massacre (1974) is an apt comparison since it, too, is set in Texas in the 1970s on a forlorn farm and contains political subtext concerning the horrors of Vietnam and the distrust Americans had developed towards the government due to the war and Watergate, generating a national identity crisis that hinged on the clash between the opposing mythos of a lawful and orderly land versus the reality of a hypocritical and degenerate one (Russell 2022).[2] The director Tobe Hooper stated, in regards to the gritty and provocative spectacle, that he thought horror had become boring; it no longer accomplished its aim — to disturb (Gross 2017). West had similar aesthetic impulses for his films, explaining in an interview with *Collider*, 'Horror movies had gotten a little soft'. Moreover, just as Hooper presented *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* 'as a "true story" as per the film's introduction' in order to 'ridicule[e] the lies of the American government by purporting that his clearly fictional film was also based on fact' (Russell 2022),[3] West, too, instills metacommentary into *X* and *Pearl*, intending to 'put the craft of filmmaking into the story' itself (X Interview 2022). These films were designed in the spirit of Theater of Cruelty and Stephen Berry's weirding method[4] to inflict a coming-to-consciousness through shock treatment, achieving poignancy through horror's repugnancy: It interjects when other genres lyrically nullify. Where these films diverge is in the inflections they utilise to portray the Final Girl, due to the different stimuli to which they were responding for their perspective times.

Obviously, the term Final Girl had not even been coined yet when *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* was made, but the film does pointedly show a female youth on a mission to preserve her heritage (restoring her grandfather's vandalised grave) in the heartland where she harshly discovers more than she ever could have imagined about the area and its inhabitants and suffers for it. Sally barely escapes. Reading into this depiction, the sociopolitical annotations on the victimhood of women by masochistic men and maligned family values is apparent. Future Final Girls who follow in her bloody footsteps likewise represent gendered ideologies about womanhood; thusly, Maxine and Pearl enter the corpus, their tragicomedy and satirical inflection in this role, setting, and genre rudely awakens the viewer from the national commercial narratives designed to gaslight Americans into complacency, mindlessly repeating the franchise that is the American pastoral. The manner in which these films accomplish this is what I term femmeslay interjection. In doing so, they liberate the Final Girl from her heroism and

gender apologetics. Her cape — or more accurately, cami — has been returned; she is donning an axe and a maladjusted attitude and is ready to rage.

Final Girls Growing Up over the Decades

In *Men, Women, and Chain Saws* (1992), Carol J. Clover coined the term *Final Girl*, defining this character as intrinsic to the slasher, as being 'the one girl who has survived' a psychotic antagonist, often killing the killer herself. More characteristics include that she's 'presented from the outset as the main character […] She's the Girl Scout, the bookworm, the mechanic. Unlike her girlfriends […], she's not sexually active […] boyish, in a word,' and typically having a masculine-sounding name (39, 40). Clover also observed that the slasher genre 'lies by and large beyond the purview of the respectable (middle-aged, middle-class) audience', noting its low-brow registry, which will be important to this analysis (21). They are popular, as their lucrative results prove, but Clover asserts that this popularity is revealing, 'not despite but exactly because of its crudity and compulsive repetitiveness, gives us a clearer picture of current sexual attitudes (22–3). Those sexual attitudes and gender expectations shape the femme characters' fates. Clover covers some of the key moments in the genre's history that explicate how narratives implied explicitly how women should behave, naming the first phase as starting with Marion in Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), who was a sexually active, voluptuous woman and was, therefore, butchered in the shower. The second phase is ushered in by *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974), *Texas Chain Saw Massacre II* (1986), and *Halloween* (1978), which 'responds to the values of the late sixties and early seventies' (26). With the onslaught of slashers produced in these two decades, some unspoken but understood rules became clear: Sexual transgressions mark a character for 'early destruction' (33). The iconic scene in *Scream* (1996) even humorously, yet accurately, addresses this rule when horror buff explains to friends who are watching a slasher how to survive a horror movie: 'You can never have sex. Sex equals death, okay?' Other taboos are also listed: 'You can never drink or do drugs. It's a sin; it's an extension of number one'.[5] Furthermore, Clover points out that when male victims' deaths are shown, the camera does not get as close or linger as long on their demise; hence, the consequences of their sexual forays are not given equal chastisement visually. In the analysis, we will see how Maxine and Pearl break all those rules with aplomb.

In the Preface to the Princeton Classic Edition (2015), Clover reflects on the Final Girl's evolution, stating:

> [she] has in her wanderings become a rough sketch of her former self. […] she now circulates in these mostly cleaner and more upscale venues as a 'female avenger,' 'triumphant feminist hero,' and the like. This is […] only to point out that in much of the wider discourse, the sketch version more or less hijacked […] the character of the Final Girl.
>
> (x)

Clover even bemoans how the Final Girl trope she identified and named eclipsed her scholarly work as a whole, attesting to this particular archetype's popularity in the cultural imagination.

She further defines the Final Girl characteristics, as they were established in the 1970s and 80s:

> As a sketch, at least, the Final Girl does look something like a female hero […] […] but consider how she spent a good hour of the film up to then […] 'Tortured survivor' might be a better term than 'hero.' Or […] 'accidental survivor.' Or, as I call her, 'victim-hero,' with an emphasis on 'victim'.
>
> (x)

She gives a rather scathing, however accurate, summary that emphasises the familiar plot: The Final Girl is usually not the hunter, but the hunted; the one on the defense, not offense; she's deemed worthy to live because she has played by the rules. However, if these indeed are the requirements set forth by the scholar who christened this '*victim*-hero' into a beloved and recurrent character, then Final Girls in *X* and *Pearl* definitely carve out a space for a different kind of Final Girl with an axe, and one who actually has no interest in heroism, but rather stardom.

In *Final Girls, Feminism, and Popular Culture* (2020), Katarzyna Paszkiewicz and Stacy Rusnak ruminate over the Final Girl's evolution in the late 1990s and early 21st Century, noting that Final Girls were becoming increasingly violent and that that ferocious acceleration was framed as empowering in films like *Kill Bill* (2003) as part of the neoliberal Girl Power movement, which elevated 'a postfeminist discourse centered on apolitical, individualistic and capitalist celebration of a violent woman' (2, 22). They questioned this propensity and noted the failure of cultural critics to address other discursive factors of Final Girls' subjectivity that are enmeshed with their perceived heroism and celebrated as superlative, such as their cissexuality, whiteness, able-bodiedness, middle-class status, and (Eurocentric) attractiveness. However, they avidly contest that the allure of the Final Girl has not abated, that she's undeniably responding to 'the socio-political backdrop of their time', (3) and that she has escaped, not just the killer, but the slasher genre itself, migrating into other genres and media, including young adult literature, superhero comic books, and video games.

Paszkiewicz and Rusnak as well review the challenges to Clover's original theory on how the Final Girl functions in slashers, namely that she is masculinised for the benefit of male teenagers, giving them a relatable character. While Clover asserted slashers and Final Girls were male fantasies, Barbara Creed countered that they were male fears. Both Clover and Creed seem to concur though that 'horror film remains centered on the male psyche and male experience and tells us nothing about women's experience of watching horror' (Paszkiewicz and Rusnak 2020, 5). Paszkiewicz and Rusnak do not

agree, contending that scholars are locating new iterations of the Final Girl whose identifications are more definitively about and for a female viewership by exploring specific aspects of the female experience, like the Final Moms in *Hereditary* (2018) and *Babadook* (2014).

Vitally, Paszkiewicz and Rusnak explain why the Final Girl persists and why studying her is imperative: 'The differences and continuities […] of the slasher heroine […] opens up a space to rethink the negotiated meanings of gender, politics and power and allows for assessing how these stories contribute to remaking cultural imaginaries'(9). They also add how queer readings and Critical Race Theory have necessarily diversified and critically assessed Final Girls and the undercurrents of white feminism they champion — and for which they are often indiscriminately praised (6–7). Paszkiewicz and Rusnak emphasise Kinitra Brooks' scholarship about Black Final Girls, which notes how when the Final Girl is coded differently than what the genre and culture have trained viewers to expect and revere, such as changing her race from white to black or her socioeconomic status from middle-class to working-class, her 'pluckiness' becomes a threat, not a positive trait (6). Thus, alterations to the Final Girl can easily be met with a fear, the fear surrounding the question: What if she sharpens her blade and goes after the macrosystems that put her in this precarious position to begin with?[6] There goes the hegemony.

X and *Pearl*

X opens on a forlorn country house in 1979 Texas surrounded by cop cars. The sheriff arrives and walks past bodies covered in bloody blankets on the lawn and an axe planted in the porch. In the foreground a TV evangelist preaches. The Sheriff descends into the basement where he exclaims, 'My God' before the plot flashes back to reveal how the carnage came to be. The association to *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* is due to the setting and setup is obvious. However, the expectation it primes, which is to be introduced to the wholesome Final Girl, is subverted when the next scene shows Maxine backstage at a strip club, snorting coke and passionately kissing a man. She gazes in the dressing room mirror, reciting an affirmation: 'You're a fucking sex symbol'.

She gets into a van with an ensemble cast and crew, and they leave the urban decay of Houston's factories and head into the impoverished countryside to film a low-budget porn project, *The Farmer's Daughters*, and get famous. In the van, they excitedly talk about how, 'These type of pictures turn regular folks into stars', and Bobby-Lynn, one of the actresses, asks, 'What about you, Maxine? What's your American Dream?' Maxine replies, 'I'm ready for the high life. I want the whole word to know my name like Linda Carter or some shit'. Wayne, the director and her paramour, agrees adoringly, saying, 'You got that X factor'. The settings and dialogue set up *X* to have pronounced socioeconomic themes and situate these characters as hopeful and ambitious, enthusiastically doing what they need to in order to make it.

They stop at a gas station along the way where they begin filming some scenes, and Bobby-Lynn asks R.J. the cinematographer, 'How come you don't have to film all of this in order?' He explains, 'Once I have it all in the can, I can rearrange it however I want'. In this way, West makes the audience hyperaware about the structure of the film as well as the trilogy.[7] They are nonlinear; therefore, timelines are subject to curating for market demands and artistic merit. As they drive away, the preacher on the gas station TV warns 'perverts and sex fiends' to 'repent before it's too late'. Considering the genre, the viewer may assume that this sermon is foreshadowing, that the porn film crew will be subject to fire and brimstone judgment before the credits roll.

When they arrive at the farm where they plan on filming, some instances of note occur: The old man, Howard, who lives on the farm is cantankerous and trigger-happy, has health issues, is a World War I vet, and insists they use 'discretion' for his wife's sake; his wife, meanwhile, is mysterious, only seen through an upstairs window by Maxine. A brief exchange between Howard and Jackson also reveals more about the political atmosphere when Howard asks if any of them had served. Jackson replies, 'Two tours in South Vietnam. Had enough farmers trying to shoot me for a lifetime'. The fact that the porn crew is staying at a boarding house that was built for soldiers during the Civil War and that Jackson is a black man and that Howard (and everyone else) are white further intensifies the significance of the setting, the characters' subjectivities, and the systems within which they are all trapped.

Returning from her swim where she's nearly eaten by an alligator (but blissfully unaware of it), Maxine sees Pearl beckon her from the porch. Maxine ventures into the farmhouse where they share lemonade and awkward moments, clearly signifying different meanings to each of them. At one point, Pearl looks at a picture of a young couple on the wall, her current reflection in the glass, reminiscing, 'I was young once, too. There wasn't anything he wouldn't do for me back then. I was a dancer in those early years. Then the war came. Not everything in life turns out how you suspect'. This theme of aging is apparent narratively and visually, with the grotesque SFX makeup used to age the actors (which took six to eight hours to apply) and in the elderly couple's frustrated yearning — wanting to be intimate with each other but not being able to due to health issues. The fear of aging is a common motif in horror, and the treatment of aging in *X* harkens back to hagsploitation, but in a more sympathetic way, with several shots showing Pearl longingly, not rebukingly, watching the porn crew from windows as they relish being young and agile. Jack Halberstam proposes that 'fear and monstrosity are historically specific forms rather than psychological universals' ([1995] 2012, 24); thus, aging is not the basis for the fear, but rather aging in the context of a capitalistic society, which the film has highlighted, is the basis since it devalues and even vilifies bodies that are no longer productive.

Before Maxine films her porn scene, she snorts a line of coke and recites an affirmation at the mirror: 'I will not accept a life I do not deserve'. These almost manifesto-type orations during the film, externalise her motivations. They seem to work, too, because they captivate the crew as well as Pearl who watches her performance from a window. Maxine's performance is so effective that even Lorraine, R.J.'s prim girlfriend and sound person, loosens up, deciding she wants to be in the porn film, too, to R.J.'s supreme consternation. Called a 'prude' and a 'church mouse' by others, traditionally, she would probably be the Final Girl, given her timidity and scruples; however, after questioning the crew's view on porn and life, she's convinced she wants to try it. As Maxine declares, 'Take it from me, letting outdated traditions control how you live your life will get you nowhere. I don't know about you, but I've got better places to be then where I came from'.

R.J., on the other hand, tries to talk Lorraine out of it, arguing, 'We've already shot half of it. The story just can't change half-way through'. She questions why, reminding him about *Psycho*, a movie he loves. He rationalises, '*Psycho* is a horror film, and that plot was a MacGuffin to build suspense, and I'm not making that kind of movie'. The intertextual link and the self-conscious reference to horror plot device cues the audience, yet again, to pay attention to these allusions and how this film is in conversation with other movies.

His pleas and arguments fail, and Lorrain takes off her crucifix necklace and straddles Jackson, wearing her underwear with *Sunday* embroidered across the backside. The audience might not know what to think at this point if the standard horror movie rules are still operational since all of the crew is tainted now by illicit activity. Until, that is, Lorrain's porn cameo turns into a MacGuffin that sends R.J. over the edge and packing, leaving in the van in the middle of the night, propelling the action from flirting with dread to fully embracing it. The magnitude, though, of relegating Lorrain's fall from grace to that of a MacGuffin in a genre that has historically prized female purity cannot be overstated, even while it deliberately understates it as a plot point.

R.J. nearly runs into Pearl who's in the middle of the driveway in her white nightgown. He gets out to check on her, and she makes advances, clearly desiring intimacy after watching the crew film erotic scenes. He rejects her, and this spurn begins the slasher spree. A notable melisma[8] inflection to the genre is that this slaughter is triggered not by disapproval but by jealousy and rejection and something else that is explored in Pearl's prequel. Although Pearl calls Maxine and Bobby-Lynn 'whores' in hostile moments, Pearl's actions disclose that she would join in enthusiastically if she could. Bobby-Lynn also diagnoses the underlying cause of Pearl's disdain when she tells her, 'It ain't my fault you didn't live the life you wanted'. Pearl desperately wants to be wanted, but when R.J. tells her that he 'doesn't want to see *that*,' meaning her naked, she stabs him repeatedly then dances in the red tint of the blood-splattered headlights.

The death count quickly accrues. Wayne, dressed only in his underwear,[9] is pitchforked in the barn by Pearl; Jackson is shot by Howard as he helps Howard look for Pearl; Pearl pushes Bobby-Lynn into the pond where the alligator eats her; and Lorraine is shot in the back by Howard. Howard suffers a cardiac event when he tries to drag Lorraine's body inside, leaving the Final Girl to faceoff with Pearl.

In the climatic showdown, Maxine screams at Pearl, 'I'm nothing like you. You're a kidnapping, murdering, sex fiend. I'm a fucking star. The whole world is going to know my name. I will not accept a life I do not deserve'. These lines exude subtext. Maxine's claim that she's nothing like Pearl is paradoxical since both characters are played by the same actress in both films, and they share many commonalities, foreshadowing a possible self-fulfilling prophecy for the third film yet to be made which continues Maxine's story. The positive manifestation mantras take on an infamous timbre fueled by their capitalistic philosophy in the mind of a woman determined to achieve her American Dream and whose character arc, if her antecedent in Pearl is an indicator, seems to be warping.

Amidst the annihilation, the TV evangelist preaches, but interestingly, the television is never watched by Howard or Pearl; it serves as background noise, an intruding voice from outside the home broadcasted inside, not as a reflection of their personal beliefs. It also delivers a cheeky Greek chorus effect when the congregation sings 'It's Well with my Soul' after the mass homicide takes place, and when Maxine tries to shoot Pearl but the gun jams. Similarly, when Pearl tries to shoot Maxine and the rifle misses and injures her instead, the evangelist proclaims, 'Now that's what I call divine intervention', preemptively pointing out the near-unbelievability of this *deus ex machina* before viewers can roll their eyes at its convenient serendipity. In addition to providing situational and cosmic irony, the final narrative service that the TV evangelist does is to reveal that Maxine is the preacher's daughter.

Before the credits crawl, the film recalls the metanarrative at work, returning to the beginning when the cops arrive at the crime scene. They find the camera that had been used to film *The Farmers' Daughters*, and one of the officers asks the Sheriff what he thinks is on it, to which the Sheriff replies, 'Well, by the looks of everything, I'd say one goddman, fucked up horror picture'.

X is filmed to mimic 1970s horror cinema (Mulcahey 2022) and explores the connection between horror and porn films, especially how these genres could be filmed cheaply, sell well, and gain aspiring talent an entry into Hollywood.[10] *Pearl*, likewise, is filmed to mimic the Golden Age of cinema, complete with sweeping orchestra tracks and technicolor brilliance and is co-written by West and Goth. Set in 1918, on the same farm but before time had ravaged it, the style of this film is idyllic agriculture imagery contrasted startlingly with Southern grotesque, giving the film a harmoniously unhinged frequency. Seeing the *Before* after seeing the *After* makes the theme of time's

passage more demonstrative, and the backstory more compelling because it establishes 'causal relationship of the past to present' (Robertson 2018, 38), an integral part of this soon-to-be trilogy's throughline. This causal relationship ultimately defines the role of the Final Girls in *X* and *Pearl* and how their fates function as cautionary tales, but in the form of a parable about the American pastoral and not a proverb about gender etiquette. In this way, the narrative's chronology and the prequel's placement in this trilogy accentuate how the past is prologue, especially when considering national histories and how the narratives about those histories, often sanitised, fail to teach the lessons needed to keep them from repeating.

Pearl is a young, attractive, and spirited woman who feels trapped on the family Powder Keg Farms waiting for her husband, Howard, to return from the war, while pining to be a professional dancer. She's presented adjacent to Dorothy in the *Wizard of Oz* in manner and dress. Juxtaposed to this dreamy farm girl is her dark side, killing a goose with a pitchfork and feeding its carcass to the alligator — all within the first five minutes of screen time. Thus, her malady is not a slow reveal. She's also contiguous to Stephen King's *Carrie* with an absentee-through-injury father and a strict German mother, but one who's more concerned with Pearl's 'selfish foolish fantasies' about becoming a dancer than with any sexual capers. Later the audience learns that Pearl's mom is also trying to protect the world from Pearl because she senses that Pearl is mentally unwell. Pearl's illness may be psychotic, which seems to be substantially confirmed by her antics in her origin story as well as *X*, but since horror lends itself to metaphor and the home is a microcosm for larger narratives and systems abroad, what else could be ailing Pearl? This question is answered by considering the two films together.

Key contextual connections between *X* and *Pearl* include the wars, the economic hardship, the advent of new technology and entertainment (picture films and VHS), and the friction between generations. While the metacommentary is allocated mostly to intertextual visual allusions, the edited nature of narrative is still present when the picture show's projectionist snips a clipping of *Palace Follies* from the reel for Pearl to keep. He tells her not to worry, that after he glues the strip back together, the audience will not even notice its absence.

While Pearl parallels Maxine in many ways, nipping her father's morphine (Maxine snorted coke) and not being satisfied with life as a farmer's daughter (Maxine not being satisfied with life as a preacher's daughter), one of her key traits is how she burns with sensuality. Pearl's scene involving an unsuspecting scarecrow cements that trait and is also reminiscent of the barn scene when Maxine rides Jackson in a transcendent performance that moved Pearl into action. This scene is not just noteworthy because of the secondhand trauma and graceful cinematic exhibitionism, but it is consequential, a catalytic cataclysm in the plot. This tattie-bogle tryst is caused by her losing the reel clipping on her bike ride home and by her gaining a top hat as a souvenir from her cornfield conquest, which the mother finds stashed under her bed.

This leads to lectures about how 'times have changed, Pearl. […] It's is up to you and I, and only you and I, to survive. You have seen the way people treat German farmers. The only reason we are not sick or famished is because we are mindful of the way we conduct our lives'.The mother's take on how to be a Final Girl in this influenza-ridden, war-ravaged world involves respectability, decorum, and good hygiene. Moreover, the Dorothy/Scarecrow fanfiction ship scene causes a spiral of events: Pearl killing both her parents then having a fling with the projectionist, hoping he would take her with him to Europe to make stag films; pitchforking the projectionist when he discovers the parents have been murdered; pivoting her plan by auditioning for a traveling show troupe; falling apart when she is not selected because the judges want someone 'more all-American, younger and blonde. Someone with X factor'; then confessing all in a seven-minute monologue with some truly astounding acting by Goth to her sister-in-law Mitsy, who of course, must be axed to death afterwards because she knows too much.

Pearl is the Final Girl in this tale, but she does not escape. She stays. Pearl chops Mitsy up and feeds the alligator, does her chores, cleans up the house, sets the table and says grace with her decaying parents seated there, and waits for Howard to return. Howard does return to this grizzly last supper, and he also stays, speaking to his devotion to her. The audience surmises he turns into her accomplice as well. The final image is of Pearl back in her overalls and braids, smiling forcefully. She holds the strained smile throughout the credits as the music turns from symphonic harmony to deranged strings about to snap. Tears trickle down her cheeks, her face reddens, her neck tendons protrude as the screen contracts into an iris shot. The audience knows the rest.

X and *Pearl* do not provide simplistic proverbs at the end of conventional cautionary tales; instead, they complicate the female characters' roles by refocusing the source of the horror. Pearl's story cautions against succumbing to inherited and manufactured scripts, such as domesticity and gender roles. She is not a feminist role model per se, but her rampage, raw emotion, and failure are a relief to feminine exhaustion. Constantly existing amidst contradictions that are expected to be dealt with demurely, it's satisfying to have a hysterical woman who's taken seriously — and I do use *hysterical* intentionally with its full troubled gendered history. The hysterics are shown to be from external agitators, not just internal ones. The strained look she has at the end may be the strain of fitting back into a mold after being feral, but it also is the look of someone who has peered behind the curtain and seen that the wizard is not actually a wizard; it's a man pulling the strings and manipulating an entire population. To have a narrative centred around a female character who is violently and even humorously exploring what happens when the American Dream is made into a type of tulpa and let loose in cornfields and farmhouses is validating because it demonstrates the logical conclusion of the madness that ensues when a character is shaped by the incongruences between national mythology and lived reality, especially for

subjectivities who lack privilege. Narcissism and delusions of grandeur are given flesh that then sprays across the screen, reminding us of the tangible horror resulting from incarnated ideologies of American exceptionalism, Puritanicalism, prejudice, class warfare, and militarism, to name a few. The messaging then becomes a stylistically hyperbolic catharsis for female rage and disappointment. It is not progress in the traditional sense, but it is affirming and refreshing. The sense that something is amiss in the Emerald City is validated, and while one might not agree with Pearl's methods, one can at least understand her fury and disenchantment.

Maxine delightfully and with delight thwarts societal propriety. Unlike Pearl, however, she doesn't seem to have the sadistic element, killing animals and murdering people (who are not trying to murder her), but she does echo Pearl's beliefs about herself — about doing whatever it takes to manifest her dreams and be recognised for how special she believes she is. Her tale, though threaded with sexy and lively composition, cynically cautions against cycles and trajectories foregrounded by past generations, whether that be in the form of policies that cause inequity or genres that reproduce these inequities. The fact that her next chapter is unknown at the moment but the prequel and the audience's knowledge of history seem to foretell a certain outcome creates much narrative tension — will Maxine succeed where Pearl failed? Will she escape the system and truly be a Final Girl of the American experiment? Will we?

A Prequel: Conceptual Framework for Femmeslay Interjection

Just as Ti West released the prequel *Pearl* after *X*, this chapter proposes a concept after the analysis purposefully because it is most useful here as a reflection. *Femmeslay*[11] *interjection* is a term deployed to describe a type of inflection unique to horror that opens a space[12] — like a mouth to laugh maniacally or to scream delightfully — with dual literary and sonic etymologies as homage to the genre's emotive effect. Horror interjects into the imagination and provokes a physiological response in the brain and body. It involves carnality in the interpretation practices and reception of a narrative in a way that other genres do not, which makes it particularly keen at explicitly addressing fleshy topics and identity subjectivities bound by sinew and bone.

Like a jump scare, interjections function rhetorically to abruptly interrupt and/or externalise strong emotion. One way they operate is as syntactical screams, and screams, whether audible or internal, express a range of exigences: Primal fear, power, and pleasure. A scream gets one's attention, releases emotion, transmits alarm, expresses what language fails to convey, and most importantly, disrupts in a way only it can. According to neuroscientists, screams 'occup[y] a "privileged acoustic niche" — completely separate from the frequencies found in speech and gender-associated modulations', meaning 'that that region of sound […] is not used by other communication signals', allowing 'screams to have a high degree of specificity, and therefore efficacy, in eliciting a fear response' (Dussault 2015).

Screams transfer straight to the emotional centre of the brain, the amygdala, triggering a response; they have a physiological and rhetorical purpose. As a *Time* article covering scream science[13] points out: 'Screaming serves not only to convey danger but also to induce fear in the listener and heighten awareness for both screamer and listener to respond to their environment' (Basu 2015). Exclamation marks indicate it in prose; all-caps announce it in screenplays and heated social media exchanges; prominent metal voice coach and classically trained singer Melissa Cross, 'The Queen of Scream', describes it as a combination of pitch and pressure, 'the function of the voice, not necessarily […] the sound' (Roars 2021). Screams, as horror inspires, can interject an instant reframing of one's priorities and worldview, rupturing an interstitial space in the air, the lungs, and the head; and interjections, like screams, have range and require context to interpret (Wilkins 1992, 120), making femmeslay interjection an appropriate, if campy, concept to intellectualise how *X* and *Pearl* alter the Final Girl's characterisation and role.

Femme is derived from *The Rainbow Center's LGBTQIA+ Dictionary* (2019), meaning 'a person who identifies with concepts of femininity', and *slay*, while having a canonical definition of violently annihilating someone or something, also has a well-known slang definition of 'killing it' (slay) but in a good way.[14] The portmanteau encapsulates femininity and fierceness while the wordplay provides dynamism because *X* and *Pearl* are anything but single notes on the scream-o-meter. The deliberately discordant cadences can then be more fully noted and appreciated for what they are — not a progression, but a candid, somatic, jarring liminal space rent by a shriek.

As parables for the American Dream and its induced psychosis — requiring one to believe in upward mobility to pursue life, liberty, and happiness despite the systems being designed only in favour of the few wealthy elite — *X* and *Pearl* insert into feminist discourse, genre theory, and film studies a scream of recognition and relief in that recognition, interrupting narratives of national consensus.

Conclusion

To reference a currently popular film that could not be more different in genre and style than *X* and *Pearl*, I conclude with a comparison to *Barbie*. In the movie *Barbie* (2023), has an epiphany: In order to break the patriarchal spell in Barbie Land she must literally voice the cognitive dissonance out loud. By airing the ludicrous double standards and grievances, the dream doll personifying Western femininity is able to snap out of the mesmerising reverie created by the patriarchy. Horror does this work, too, just more loudly with femmeslay interjection.

When Pearl snaps in her prequel as well as in *X*, other characters (and embryo alligators) disappear. Pearl's vicious shenanigans and the graphic panache of the film snap the viewer out of their trances too, disrupting female characterisations of good girls and angry women (justified or not) as well as disrupting plots that only allot them X amount of screen time to flip out before reasserting order. The parable: The fruition of national daughters

— decked out in red dresses and blood, blue bows and eyeshadow, and white nightgowns and skin — whose dreams, when actualised with the rigour of a Follies kick routine and the cold-bloodedness of industrial exploitation, are the stuff of nightmares.

Notes

1 The crisis that feminism is undergoing, particularly in the United States, with the conservative backlash countering progressive legislation (e.g., overturning *Roe v. Wade*, abortion bans in numerous states, repealing no-fault divorce, rise of men-emism, incel violence, etc.). Worldwide, other movements are addressing sexism and violence, such as South Korea's 4B Movement, Spain's Solo Sí Es Sí outcry, and #MeToo trending in more than 85 countries, according to Laura Strum on PBS NewsHour in 2017. Regression being met with the aggression of Final Girl energy feels like horizontal justice, a form of horizontal action, Associate Professor of Women's Studies at University of Maryland Ashiwini Tambe's term, describing how, when vertical action is not obtainable, such as seeking restitution or justice from higher forms of power above one's station, oppressed populations will find other ways to address their sense of injustice–horizontally–such as going after wrong-doers more on their level and within reach.

2 As the movie poster touted: 'American's most bizarre and brutal crimes!' (Harrigan 2014). Metaphorically, the bizarre and brutal crimes in the film reflect the ones perpetrated by politicians and their minions.

3 The movie poster at the world premiere also boasted this claim: 'What happened is true. Now the motion picture that's just as real' (Harrigan 2014).

4 *Weirding* is a way to, through narrative, intentionally disorient in order to reorient our imaginations about, in the case of the book, the Civil War and what it means to American consciousness and identity, but it can be applied to any other narratives that have taken terminal root in our minds, especially those that have been romanticized, when in actuality, they should be rendered as they are — stark, sobering, and ruthless (Berry 2011).

5 This meta-moment also illustrates the hypermodernism strategy of 1990s slashers, especially in the *Scream* trilogy, 'characterized by a heightened, self-conscious degree of intertextual referencing and self-reflexivity' (Wee 2005, 44).

6 This fear is perhaps one of the reasons why *Get Out* perturbed so many (white) viewers. As Paszkiewicz and Rusnak point out: 'Jordan Peele's Oscar-nominated *Get Out* (2017, USA/ Japan) […] renovated Clover's model by replacing the conventional Final Girl with the final black male character, Chris (Daniel Kaluuya), and by locating the horrors of racism in white suburbia' (2020, 7).

7 A third film *MaXXXine* is currently in post-production at the time of writing.

8 A musical term denoting when pitch shifts on single syllable.

9 A reversal of the typical costuming (or lack thereof) for the female characters.

10 As noted by West in an interview (Crow 2022).

11 Note that a popular Instagram account called Femislay exists, created and run by social worker, feminist, blogger, unlearner, and digital advocate Kelsey Anne Hatchitt (of Muslims for Progressive Values), which focuses on 'intersectional feminism, selfcare, and community care' and is meant to 'creat[e] serotonin and feminist knowledge', according to her patreon. I was definitely inspired by this account and follow it, but I did not want to use the term *femislay* for two reasons, one being I do not know if Hatchitt would appreciate the appropriation for this context, and secondly, I also felt that *femme* would be more inclusive.

12 Similar in concept to Third Spaces and liminality, but these concepts lack the levity that is I wish to inscribe here.

13 A combination of neurology and psychology.
14 Jeremy Maron (2015), suggests the term Final Subject, instead of Final Girl, to widen the discussion of the category of the character as a 'conceptual figure' beyond the gender binary; I concur to this sentiment in a way but want to still emphasize the feminine aspects at work while opening up those aspects to any character who identifies with them.

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13 After the Credits Roll

Jade Daniels, Trauma, and the Postmodern Final Girl

J. Simpson

Introduction

Jade Daniels is the ultimate millennial Final Girl. She embodies the horror genre in the 21st-century, as a whole, in all of its fascinating convolutions. She also represents the horror fandom itself, in its increasing diversity and cultural impact, in one messy shoe polish–haired misfit. She characterises the evolution of the genre since the turn of the century, in its self-referential meta-self-awareness, illustrated in the encyclopedic knowledge of the obsessive fan. She is also a shining example of a Classic Final Girl, worthy of standing alongside Sally Hardesty (*Texas Chainsaw Massacre*), Nancy Thompson (*Nightmare on Elm Street*), and Alice Hardy (*Friday the 13th*), even if she does not feel like it. In this way, she is a stand-in for the modern horror community, revealing some fascinating insights into the genre at the moment, and the function it fills in the new millennium.

Her character also sheds further light on some of the most enduring questions leveled at the horror genre, which have troubled everyone from Aristotle to Stephen King, namely — why horror? As an iconic 'horror herd', she casts a floodlight on the role of the horror fandom since the first Golden Age of slasher movies, allowing us to speculate about where the genre might be heading in an increasingly networked age. While she may be iconic and more than worthy of inclusion in the Final Girl canon, there are some aspects of her character that are uniquely Jade, most notably her identity as a young Indigenous woman, providing some essential and invaluable insights into the function of monsters among marginalised communities.

Taken together, Jade offers an illuminating insight into the current state of horror — as a whole, and of slashers in particular; into feminist discourse and racial discussions, particularly regarding indigenous communities; the function of media in a postmodern society and some aspects that are unique to our particular moment; and our increasingly mediated existence.

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Meet Jade, Final Girl

Jade Daniels, real name Jennifer, is the main character of the first two books of Stephen Graham Jones' Indian Lake Trilogy, *My Heart Is a Chainsaw* (2021) and *Don't Fear the Reaper* (2023). Jade is a young woman of mixed indigenous descent, contributing to her role as a misfit and social outcast in the small town of Proofrock, Idaho. Like so many misfits, both real and fictional, Jade takes refuge and solace in horror movies, *slashers*, as she is quick to correct those willing to bend an ear and indulge her eccentricities.

When we first meet Jade, she is a 17-year-old high school student turning in extra credit essays on her special interest topic to her history teacher, Mr. Holmes, in a bid to graduate after a career of outlandish pranks and delinquent behaviour. As a true horror devotee and initiate, she is the first to suspect there is something bigger and more sinister at work as bodies begin to turn up, along with a new student, Letha Mondragon — a glamorous resident from the new upscale subdivision being built across Indian Lake, Terra Nova. With the introduction of Letha — the purest and most perfect embodiment of Final Girl there ever was in Jade's astute assessment — it is all but certain that there is a new Slasher Cycle beginning and she, the genre's most devoted acolyte, is right at its bloody heart.

According to Jade, she's just not Final Girl material: 'Final girls are good, they're uncomplicated, they have these reserves of courage coiled up inside them, not layer after layer of shame, or guilt, or whatever this festering poison is', as she puts it. 'Real final girls only want the horror to be over. They don't stay up late praying to Craven and Carpenter to send one of their savage angels down, just for a weekend maybe'. She views herself as too damaged, too complicated to be a Final Girl, largely due to some trauma that underlies much of *My Heart Is a Chainsaw* and its plot, serving as an icy undertow, waiting to pull you down in to its inky black depths.

Most of the first novel in the Indian Lake Trilogy unfurls like a standard slasher, including a third-reel body dump for the ages, with Jade desperately trying to unveil the killer while covertly preparing Letha Mondragon for what is inevitably in store. There is simply no preparing for the carnage at the end of *My Heart Is a Chainsaw* when Indian Lake transforms into a meat grinder when the killer is revealed to be Stacey Graves, the Lake Witch, the disembodied spirit of a mixed Native American girl from local folklore. Letha Mondragon's purity is no match for Stacey Graves' undead fury, however, resulting in her having half her face torn off, leaving it up to Jade to save the day, which she does, dragging the Lake Witch down to 'Ezekiel's Cold Box', another local legend. And then she saves the day, again, extinguishing a wildfire with the local dam, saving the town that has forsaken her.

When we meet Jade again at the beginning of *Don't Fear the Reaper*, now going by her birth name of Jennifer, it is four years later and she has just been released from prison after being accused of her father's, Tab Daniels, murder during the bloody frenzy that has since been dubbed 'the Lake Witch

Massacre'. She may have saved the town and inherited the Final Girl mantle, but she is far from given the Hero treatment, no doubt in part due to her identity as a young, poor woman of Indigenous descent.

As things unfurl, Jennifer turns out to be up against not *one*, not *two*, but *three* different killers, counting the apparition of a ghostly white stag. The predominant slasher of this cycle, the excellently monikered Dark Mill South, is more in keeping with the hulking, brutish antagonists of Golden Age slashers but with a unique Native American twist. Retribution for colonial genocide is at the heart of Dark Mill South's origin story, exacting vengeance for 36 executed Dakota men in the winter of 1862. Their shared ancestry allows Jennifer, now once again Jade, to survive, fully and properly coming into her own as a Final Girl now that she has had her sequel.

Jade Daniels, Final Girls, and the Spectres of Trauma

Describing the archetypal role of the Final Girl in his equally excellent Slasher novel *The Final Girl Support Group*, Grady Hendrix, speaking as the protagonist Lynnette Tarkington, observes:

> She's the one who said they shouldn't party at this deserted summer camp, break into this abandoned lunatic asylum, skinny-dip in this isolated lake — especially since it's Halloween, or Thanksgiving, or Arbor Day, or whatever the anniversary is of those unsolved murders from way back. The killer's got a chainsaw/boat hook/butcher's knife and this girl's got zip: no upper body strength, no mass, no shotgun. All she's got is good cardio and an all-American face. Yet somehow she kills the killer, then stares numbly off into the middle distance, or collapses into the arms of the arriving police, or runs crying to her boyfriend, makes one last quip, lights one last cigarette, asks a final haunting question, gets taken off in an ambulance screaming and screaming like she's never going to stop.
>
> (2022: 4–5)

She goes on to ask

> Ever wonder what happens to those final girls? After the cops eliminate them as suspects, after the press releases their brace-faced, pizza-cheeked, bad-hair-day class photos that inevitably get included on the cover of the true crime book? After the candlelight vigils and the moments of silence, after someone plants the memorial shrub?
>
> (5)

It is a question that's increasingly preoccupied the horror genre since the sunset of the Golden Age, becoming especially prevalent in the last 20 years when horror movies, especially Slashers, seem intent on showing what

happens after the credits roll, when the Final Girl undertakes the impossible task of *just living*. Books like Hendrix's *The Final Girl Support Group* show the devastation of enduring such a hideous trauma, particularly in the character of Lynette Tarkington, whose life is reduced to a series of tics and routines in a bid to stay alive. David Gordon Green's spiritual sequels to the original *Halloween* likewise show Jamie Lee Curtis' Laurie Strode taking a similarly survivalist stance, turning her small home into a kill chamber for when the Beast inevitably returns. After witnessing 16 people brutally executed, who can blame her?

Media like *The Final Girl Support Group*, David Gorden Green's *Halloween* films, and Jones' Indian Lake Trilogy suggest that horror is no longer so easily contained on the page and screen. Instead of fading to black after a joke and a smoke, it follows the action to include the insomnia, cold sweats, paranoia and agoraphobia and throbbing, burning scars as the Final Girl learns to try to live with the perennial nightmare of PTSD.

While Jade does not seem as haunted by her encounters with her 'savage angels', at least in *Don't Fear the Reaper* (maybe because she had not had her sequel yet), the spectre of trauma still lingers beneath the surface of *My Heart Is a Chainsaw* and *Don't Fear the Reaper* — most notably the ghosts of racism, colonialism, and physical and sexual abuse from her father, Tab Daniels.

One of the most enduring mysteries throughout *My Heart Is a Chainsaw*, along with the identity of the slasher, is whether or not Jade had been sexually abused, a fact which seemed all-too-obvious to everyone except her. Over the course of the novel, it is eventually revealed that Jade encountered her holy copy of *A Bay of Blood* in a gas station bargain bin outside of Twin Falls, Idaho, bringing the bloody engine of her imagination to roaring life. In Mario Bava's 1971 starting gun for the slasher genre, Jade found twin deliverance — an angsty, dark persona to ward off the outside world that shuns her, and inside, a vengeful prayer that one of these savage angels might descend and deliver the justice that society had denied her.

The echoes and trauma ripple across The Indian Lake Trilogy's surface in more oblique ways as well. The long shadow of colonialism and intergenerational trauma against Indigenous populations are the dark, secret engines powering both *My Heart Is a Chainsaw* and *Don't Fear The Reaper*. Stacey Graves, the Lake Witch and shadowy killer of the first novel, was outcast in her time due to her mixed Native American ancestry, causing both she and her mother to be treated as outcasts and villains. This culminated in an episode where some locals terrorised the girl with a pretend game of 'witch trial' throwing her into the lake, where she skidded instead of sinking, as the lake would not accept her due to her Native American blood.

While it is not stated directly how much or in what ways Tab Daniels had been shaped and sculpted by both covert and overt racism, it is no stretch to assume his life had been coloured by the shadow of racism and white supremacy. His ongoing alcoholism, the lingering after-effects of the accident that

left him permanently maimed, and a lifetime of under-achievement again, no doubt, contributed in some ways to his physical, emotional, and sexual abuse.

Indigenous themes are further implied with the presence of Terra Nova, the luxurious, exclusive new development threatening to turn Idaho into a playground for the rich and fabulous, leaving the long-standing residents of Proofrock to play the role of a less technologically advanced society. The residents of Terra Nova are even called 'The Founders' as a not-so-subtle reminder of the Founding Fathers. With Jade's Final Girl journey, while far from giving the town a neat and tidy resolution, it seems Proofrock, Idaho is at least beginning its journey of racial reckoning.

Jade's preoccupation with horror movies in the books does beg the question of why on Earth someone would want to indulge a genre whose main purpose is to induce negative emotions. It invokes what philosopher Noel Carroll calls 'the paradox of horror', which further demands 'how people can be attracted by what is repulsive' (Carroll 1990, 160). He goes on to cite everyone from Edmund Burke to David Hume to H. P. Lovecraft in a bid to answer this paradoxical riddle.

Recent research suggests another possible answer, though. In October 2022, the *New York Times* ran an article titled 'How Horror Stories Help Us with Real Life' in their *Wellness* section. In the piece, author Melinda Wenner Moyer (2022), talks to numerous researchers to try and settle the debate scientifically while pondering horror's skyrocketing popularity during the pandemic. Surely a global pandemic, when we were all surrounded by unimaginable terrors and incomprehensible anxiety on a daily basis, would not be the time for a horror renaissance? One study, 'Mood Management and Video Rental Choices', for the journal *Media Psychology*, found that more nervous individuals were *more* likely to watch horror movies. Likewise, another study, 'We Are What We Watch: Movie Plots Predict the Personalities of Their Fans', finds horror movies to be surprisingly popular among individuals diagnosed with anxiety. These studies posit another potential drive for indulging in horror media — *preparedness* and *risk prevention*, which is especially relevant for Jade and other members of marginalised and vulnerable communities. There is some truth to the sentiment, as that same *New York Times* article concludes, that horror fans fared better during the beginning of the pandemic, especially if they watched movies depicting mass chaos.

These findings are in line with the theory that Jade, along with many others who have been bullied and abused, tormented and outcast, turn to horror in order to be ready for *anything, at any time*. Jade, like so many troubled individuals before and since, took refuge and solace in the identity of an edgy outcast, the 'horror chick', as she describes herself, noting 'It's good being the horror chick, sure, always standing away from the rest of the crowd, smoking bitter cigarette after bitter cigarette.' Unfortunately, the events of *My Heart Is a Chainsaw* and *Don't Fear The Reaper* reveal the limits of this theory — and why Jade is not *just* a Final Girl.

Jade Daniels, The Postmodern Final Girl

Jade occupies a strange, meta realm between fact and fiction that is unique to postmodern media as a whole, with some aspects particular to postmodern horror. Since at least the late 1990s, it has been *de rigeur* for horror movies to be self-aware. Maybe it is just an increased sense of irony. Maybe it was just another way to forward the plot. Perhaps 50 years of slasher movies have simply made it impossible to suspend disbelief enough to suggest that the characters live in a world with simply *no* Slasher flicks. Whatever the motivation, starting with Wes Craven's *Scream*, the chances are good that there is a character that has seen some horror movie and knows the tropes. In fact, they have probably seen *a lot* of them.

As a survivor of abuse and incessant bullying, it does not seem a stretch to imagine Jade, survivor that she is, boning up on slasher lore with one goal, *survival at all costs*, which she acknowledges directly towards the end of *Don't Fear the Reaper:* 'Call it morbid fascination, or, really, just call it what it is: compulsion, or genre awareness. In slashers, you die because you don't know stuff. Therefore, the more knowledge you can collect and piece together, the better your survival rate'.

And yet, despite having received a doctorate-level education in video nasties, Jade finds her preparation failing:

> Finally, after all these years, she understands Laurie Strode: you cringe, you fall, you shriek and you cry. Never because you want to, not because you intend to, but because it's scary shit. The body's gonna do what the body's gonna do, and screams aren't at all voluntary.

She screams and she falls because *life isn't a horror movie*. The terrors she tried to keep contained, locked away in a safe cathode ray prison, have escaped. All of her preparations have been for nothing. Except they have not. Because Jade *is* a Final Girl, just not like one from the Golden Age. The defining characteristic of a Final Girl, Jade finally concludes, is their overwhelming will to live. In the same introductory 'Slasher 101' essay from *My Heart Is a Chainsaw* quoted earlier, she goes on to cite Constance, the insurmountable Final Girl from the hillbilly slasher *Just Before Dawn* (1981):

> But the best ever example of a real and actual final girl is from *Just Before Dawn* where Constance finally turns to face her mountainous hillbilly slasher, who's already carved through the rest of her friends. She's had enough. Being attacked over and over, it hasn't weakened her, it's cut away her restraints. The slasher thought he was tormenting her. He thought he was the one in charge. Wrong. He was fashioning his own death. He was building the perfect killing machine.

She continues:

> What this Final Girl does is turn around, scream into his face that she's so sick of this, that this is ENOUGH, that this is over. And then, in a move not matched in all the years since, not even by Sidney Prescott, not even by slow motion Alice when Pamela Voorhees won't stop coming at her, not even by Jamie Lee Curtis in that long dark night of Haddonfield, Constance climbs up her slasher's frontside and because she has no weapon, because she IS the weapon, she forces her hand into her slasher's mouth, down his throat, and then she reaches in deeper, and comes out with his life pulsing in her fist.

Jade Daniels is a postmodern Final Girl as she fluctuates between the cinematic mode and 'real life' — or almost, anyway. Despite her protestations to the contrary, Jade *does* qualify as a Final Girl as per the tenets originally laid out by Carol Clover in the essay 'Her Body, Himself' (1987), that established the figure of the Final Girl in the public fascination. She is *far* from passive, with complete agency throughout both novels. She is prosocial, despite her humble protestations that '[S]he wasn't trying to save any lives, be any kind of hero — that's not what she does'. She sports an androgynous name and appearance, particularly in *My Heart Is a Chainsaw*, with shorn peroxided hair and living in janitor coveralls.

Jade Daniels hints at a Final Girl not shackled by misogyny and the rules of the patriarchy. Golden Age slashers are notoriously conservative, reinforcing the mores and values of their time by bloody axe and machete. Drink, do drugs, have sex, or dare to not be white and you are as good as dead. This understandably caused many feminist film scholars to declare slasher movies irredeemably misogynistic. Feminist film critic Majdoulin Almwaka cites the work of film theorist Laura Mulvey in her concept of the 'male gaze', to compare slasher movies to little more than pornography, writing for the *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 'Feminist film scholars identify how onscreen cameras shadow women as sexual objects, a notion called the "male gaze"' (2022). Laura Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975), which draws on French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, developed the theory of the male gaze in film. Mulvey states that a gender analogy is present between the theatre screen and the viewer. The screen acts as the passive female — the object of 'the look' or 'the gaze' — while the viewer operates the part of the aggressive male — as the wielder of 'the look' or 'the gaze'. Within Mulvey's theory, there is a 'sexual imbalance'. Women 'are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness'. Thus, slasher films function as a prospect of voyeuristic pleasure for the audience. The theater's darkness combined with the disregard for the audience's presence by the actors within the film 'gives the viewer an illusion of looking in on a private world' (Mulvey [1975] 2016).

She goes on to establish the nearly universal negative critique leveled against slasher films, 'Moreover, Feminist film criticism of slasher films proposes that viewers — the majority of which are males — frequently view the film through the killer's perspective as he chases after either the female victim or the final girl'. For Mulvey, 'slasher films mainly attract a male audience due to the slasher film's contents and cinematic medium, which reinforces patriarchal values and desires while assuaging male fears of castration' (Mulvey [1975] 2016). Alternatively, the basic premise of Clover's theory is that in slasher films, the audience identification is fluid across gender lines. Clover challenges the claim that male audiences identify with the onscreen male and suggests that the woman is necessarily the object of this gaze. Instead, in these films, the Final Girl operates as 'an agreed-upon fiction [for] male viewers to use as a vehicle for their sadomasochistic fantasies' (Clover [1992] 2015).

In the same essay, Clover goes on to unpack some of the loose threads and contradictions with that viewpoint — namely, the problem with the fact that a lot of women like slasher films too, and the assumption that male viewers are automatically identifying with the killer. Clover cites William Schoell and his book *Stay Out of the Shower: 25 Years of Shocker Films* (1985), one of the few theoretical books available at the time:

> Social critics make much of the fact that male audience members cheer on the misogynous misfits in these movies as they rape, plunder, and murder their screaming, writhing female victims. Since these same critics walk out of the movie house in disgust long before the movie is over, they don't realize that these same men cheer on (with renewed enthusiasm, in fact) the heroines, who are often as strong, sexy, and independent as the [earlier] victims, as they blow away the killer with a shotgun or get him between the eyes with a machete. All of these men are said to be identifying with the maniac, but they enjoy his death throes the most of all, and applaud the heroine with admiration.

She goes on to comment on the Final Girl's androgyny as a stand-in for adolescent masculinity:

> The Final Girl is, on reflection, a congenial double for the adolescent male. She is feminine enough to act out in a gratifying way, a way unapproved for adult males, the terrors and masochistic pleasures of the underlying fantasy, but not so feminine as to disturb the structures of male competence and sexuality. The question then arises whether the Final Girls of slasher films — Stretch, Stevie, Marti, Will, Terry, Laurie, and Ripley — are not boyish for the same reason that female 'victims' in Victorian flagellation literature — 'Georgy', 'Willy' — are boyish: because they are transformed males.
>
> (Clover 1992)

Clover spends much time evaluating the question of 'identification' prevalent to film analysis of that time, with its preoccupation with psychoanalysis and cinematic 'gazes', which is particularly pertinent to the slasher film with its whodunnit structure and first-person killer POV cam. As noted in the earlier Schoell quote, the character of the Final Girl subverts the cliché that male viewers are unable or unwilling to empathise with women. It also hints that there is something larger at work here than simply gender politics.

The slasher, after all, is not *necessarily* male (although they usually are). The main antagonist of *My Heart Is a Chainsaw* is a woman, albeit an undead one. Rather than simply embodying basic, banal gender war clashes, the slasher and the Final Girl activate more metaphysical themes. The slasher represents nameless, faceless, unstoppable, unkillable forces that aim to make us all into chopped meat. The Final Girl is an individual, just an individual, who is bold and pure of heart who stands, fights, and *lives*.

Final Words

The increasing popularity and resonance of the Final Girl, both in works of art and in theoretical and academic discussions, suggests that there are more people than ever who are feeling small, weak, and *powerless*. With Jade Daniels, Stephen Graham Jones is telling us we do not need to be a Sunday school teacher or a girl scout to be worthy of living. That you can dye your hair with gaudy colourant and wear thrift store clothes and watch cheap, messed-up movies and still be worthy of life. Jade Daniels tells us that, even if we are not a virgin or we are queer or BIPOC or otherwise dismissed by society, that the most important thing is turning around to confront what we are afraid of:

> with everything she's been holding inside for the last six years, with every ounce of anger and rejection, all the unfairness and resentment, and she hears herself screaming exactly like a final girl when she does it, and it's not even on purpose, it's just coming, it's pure rage, it's having so much inside that it's got to come out, she's Constance in *Just Before Dawn*, she's finally turning around to fight, is insisting on her own life, is refusing to die, isn't going to take even one more moment of abuse'.

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14 Killer Girls

Red Riding Hood, Girlhood, and the Final Girl

Cristina Santos

The traditional *Red Riding Hood* fairy tale is often discussed as the fairy tale heroine's coming of age journey — this chapter however investigates what can happen when the female protagonist experiences 'an extreme rite of passage' (Short 2015, 117) in her adolescence. Films such as *Hard Candy* (Slade 2006), *Freeway* (Bright 1997), and *Ginger Snaps* (Fawcett 2001) provide a retelling of *Red Riding Hood* in which the 'normal' expectations of the fairy tale are subverted to reveal the passive heroine as an adept killer/vigilante. In these 'de-Grimmed' fairy tales (Short 2015, 157) the Final Girl (to borrow Carol Clover's term) versions of Red Riding Hood depict young girls able to not only face the monster, but also able to survive their encounter with it. The 'monsters' these girls face are not the ones typically expected from horror — but rather the greater systemic 'monster' of patriarchy. The killer girls in these films challenge the monster (patriarchy) by exposing misogyny and men who abuse their male privilege — and they do so in order to seek social justice not just for themselves but also for other girls and/or women. As a result, these films point not only to character flaws and the worst in humanity, but also towards a patriarchal system that permits and/or harbours the existence of such monsters. Ultimately, killer girls refuse to be the damsel in distress but rather choose to take the path through the woods that allows them to not only confront the injustices in the world but to heroically fight back.

In *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, Carol J. Clover comments on the similarities between folklore and horror in that they share:

> … hallmarks of oral narrative: the free exchange of themes and motifs, the archetypal characters and situations, the accumulation of sequels, remakes, imitations. … [This is] what has made ghost stories and fairy tales crucial enough to pass along: its engagement of repressed fears and desires and its re-enactment of the residual conflict surrounding those feelings.
>
> (1992, 10–11)

James B. Twitchell observes a similar correlation: 'Like the fairy tales that prepare the child for the anxieties of separation, modern horror myths

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prepare the teenager for the anxieties of reproduction' (1985, 7). Thus, the iterations of the killer girl in this chapter explore the maturing adolescent female body as a site of abject horror: Female embodiments that exist outside 'the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable' and with a corporal leakiness that is the site of abjection, of desire, and of fear of the other (Kristeva 1982, 1, 53). When viewed through a feminist lens, a pattern emerges in these re-imaginings of the killer girl that also incorporates Barbara Creed's concept of the transformative and empowering 'journey into the dark night of abjection' as an embodied and weaponised confrontation with the inherent gendered violence of an institutionalized patriarchy (2022, 4). As such, the archetype of the killer girls analysed in this chapter demonstrate traits of the monstrous-feminine and the Final Girl in their perceived deviance that challenges and destabilises the heteropatriarchal status quo.

Contemporary fairy tale revisions seek to give their readers a narrative space to: (1) make sense of their world and their place in it; (2) question predetermined gendered/socialised roles that exist within their environment; (3) challenge the status quo and its hierarchical systems of power, and (4) establish the transition from girlhood to a matured selfhood via a personal (heroic) quest. Moreover, this storytelling of female adolescence integrates a dialectic of gender politics within which the hero's journey involves both spiritual and psychological growth while the heroine's quest includes 'knowledge, justice and social connection' (Tatar 2021, 22, 290). The killer girls of the reimagined *Red Riding Hood* fairy tale discussed in this chapter situate the Red Riding Hood killer girl within plausible lived experiences of the emerging self-realised individual with a feminist social conscience. This chapter acknowledges that the lack of representation of independent and active heroines/killer girls in traditional fairy tales can give way to reactionary trends in contemporary retellings portraying a new active heroine who does not comply with established female stereotypes. Yet, as Maria Tatar reminds us:

> As heroines emerge with new faces and features, and as they begin to put themselves on display, they inevitably provoke a backlash in the form of antiheroines, specters that haunt us and become a palpable and present feature of the cultural landscape, reminding us that fashioning new heroines is always shadowed by the project of inventing new villains.
>
> (2021, xxiii–xxiv)

So, though the reimagined heroine may emerge into the public sphere as an agentic participant, her transformative potential remains circumscribed by and/or (re)inscribed into hegemonic roles. Moreover, considered alongside Anna Kérchy's statement that 'postmodern fiction has recycled fairy-tale tradition for the sake of youngsters' empowerment' (2018, 237), this chapter explores the relationality between fairy tales and the development of the character of the killer girl hero.[1]

Horror films, like fairy tales, tend to explore socio-political anxieties and fears of a given time and place by reflecting shifting social value systems. This chapter investigates the juncture of the fairy tale and its grotesque qualities with horror or terror to expose persistent androcentric anxieties concerning girls that disrupt socio-cultural stereotypes in the pursuit of personal and/or collective justice. In his work on horror cinema, Robin Wood has observed that to protect civilisation, 'a surplus of sexual energy … will have to be repressed; what is repressed must always struggle to return, in however disguised and distorted a form' (2018b, 57). Though Wood posits this version of the monster as the return of the oppressed, I would extend the concept to the killer girl versions of Red Riding Hood discussed here, since they too seek to disrupt accepted norms that continue to repress and oppress female sexuality within a heteropatriarchal context. As such, the killer girl can be considered as the polar opposite of the damsel in distress and is characterised as: (1) like Clover's final girl, a 'tortured survivor' (1992, x); (2) the hero of the story; (3) a girl who fights back against her male nemesis; (4) a girl who is street smart and resourceful; and (5) a girl who stands for justice for a female collective. These killer girls are mutations of the fairy tale girl where life experience and/or trauma awakens her wolf/vigilante within — not as a sexual awakening but as a politicised becoming where she stands up not only for herself but can also act out on behalf of a broader sisterhood. As Wood states: 'social revolution and sexual revolution are inseparable linked and necessary to each other' (2018a, 73) — thereby setting the stage for the collaborative and collective (female) reactionary activism of the *Red Riding Hood* re-visions such as the films *Hard Candy*, *Freeway*, and *Ginger Snaps*.

Historically, female sexual development within a heteropatriarchal context has propagated an oppressive socialization process for girls to safeguard the status quo, even to the detriment of their personal psychosocial development. Jack Halberstam in *Female Masculinity* remarks that:

> Female adolescence represents the crisis of coming of age as a girl in a male-dominated society. If adolescence for boys represents a rite of passage (much celebrated in Western literature in the form of the bildungsroman), and an ascension to some version (however attenuated) of social power, for girls, adolescence is a lesson in restraint, punishment, and repression.
>
> (2019, 6)

But what happens when the protagonist chooses to disrupt these systems of repression as part of her maturation process? In the case of the killer girl, this may result in the mobilisation of female solidarity for personal and collective justice — the girl in the red hoodie is no longer the prey but the predator. Considered alongside the postmodern tendency to dismantle binary oppositions, a clear delineation between good and evil is rarely possible when discussing the killer girl's confrontation with the 'monster' of institutionalized

patriarchy. Isabel Pinedo adds that 'the postmodern horror film revolves around ordinary people's ineffectual attempts to resist a violent monster … a deviant transformation from within' (1996, 19). *Ginger Snaps, Hard Candy*, and *Freeway* each depict a deviant transformation that comes from untamed elements within the girl who, when no longer repressed, has the power to disempower the virile cis-male figure (a stand-in for the patriarchy) by subjecting him to uncontrolled, yet focused, female violence. Furthermore, Cristina Bacchilega underlines that '[t]he strategy of merging fairy tale and horror, and then making them the emotional and thematic partners of historical realism, insists upon the intellectual seriousness of these forms of popular cultural production that have been conventionally trivialized' (2013, 120–1). As such, the interconnectedness of fairy tale and horror in this chapter's selection of *Red Riding Hood* re-visions depicts a trend of empowered killer girls as reactionary heroic figures to the gender-based violence of their respective societies.

That is, these examples feature Red Riding Hood as an independent, unruly, and out of control girl — a girl who refuses to conform to the passive female heroine trope by disrupting social patterns assigned to 'good' girls. The killer girl can be interpreted as one of the outcomes of *untaming* girl(hood)s — an ontological becoming and self-empowerment not constrained by concerns of how she *should be* according to socio-cultural scripts, but rather the result of resisting limitations imposed by the dominant heteropatriarchal discourse of her environment. Thus, the killer girl emerges as the product of her violent reaction to being confined to restrictive scripts that can also be impacted, in some cases, by previous personal or collective trauma. It is not to condone violence, but rather consider that killer girls have pivoted from being victims to proactive defenders against the perpetrators of gendered violence. Overall, there is a narrative arc of the passive heroine trope — a traditional Red Riding Hood just following the path laid out for her by others — to (heroic) girl power and, ultimately, to the girl empowered.

The films in this study consider girls' violence not as uncontrolled desires, madness, or hysteria, but as acts of personal vengeance and/or revenge justice. Considering Janice Loreck's parameters of violent women in film, *Ginger Snaps* could be classified as 'female sexuality as ontological danger', while *Freeway* and *Hard Candy* would fall under the 'seduce and destroy' plot in which a girl's sexuality is used to trap the male protagonist (2016, 54–5). It is a 'bloody mess' of killer girl subjectivities that merge heteropatriarchal anxieties of the girl's sexual maturation vis-à-vis Sigmund Freud's concept of castration anxiety and Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject.

Blood and Bestial Urges: The Killer (Wolf) Girl in *Ginger Snaps*

At the beginning of *Ginger Snaps*, the audience is introduced to two teenage sisters rebelling against a heteronormative 'cookie cutter' existence in the suburbs of a Canadian city by not conforming to dominant normative

discourse — or what Wood calls 'the repressed' state. Categorised within the teen horror genre,[2] *Ginger Snaps* presents a filmic adaptation of *Red Riding Hood* that focuses on a coming-of-age narrative alongside female puberty as a source of uncontrolled female monstrosity. The werewolf curse in *Ginger Snaps* is transmitted as a virus and is linked explicitly to the full moon; moreover, Ginger's (Katherine Isabelle) werewolf transformation mirrors pubertal body changes in posture, voice, and body hair that are psycho-emotionally alienating and monstrous. *Ginger Snaps* portrays pubescent corporal confusion via Ginger's pronounced teenage angst and her rebellion against her society's normative discourse. Her feelings of losing control over her body's physiological changes are juxtaposed with her new 'bestial' urges, such as her new appetite for raw flesh and her intensifying sexual desires. *Ginger Snaps* is also part of a filmic tradition of linking adolescence with the werewolf and, in the case of female werewolves, a transformation often linked with their first menstrual cycle (Miller 2005, 2889). In effect, both the start of menstruation and its correlation with the werewolf genesis symbolise the girl's psycho-physical mutations as she negotiates the impact of her bodily changes not only on her psycho-emotional well-being but also on how these changes affect how others perceive her. Yet, as the title suggests, Ginger actually 'snaps' and even her sister Brigitte (Emily Perkins) suspects it is 'More than you being just … female' that torments Ginger.

Ginger Snaps adds a supernatural transformation to the trope of Red Riding Hood's journey through the forest — here the girl's body is the site of pubescent bodily and psycho-emotional trauma that is transposed onto a monstrous hybridity of girl and wolf. Even though Ginger's menstrual cycle begins just before the wolf's attack — her menstrual blood is initially mistaken as blood from the dead dog she found — it is the violent act of the wolf's bite that permanently marks her body. As part of the *Red Riding Hood* intertextuality, the violence of the wolf attack scene can be read as a rape: Ginger is pinned to the ground by the wolf while he viciously slashes her thighs and abdomen, to then penetrate her forcibly with his wolf's fangs. Though Ginger does not wear Red Riding Hood's quintessential red hood, she does have red hair (hence her name, Ginger), and she experiences a life-changing walk through the woods involving a metaphorical rape. Furthermore, the close-up shot of the blood running down Ginger's inner thigh can thus be read as what it is, menstrual blood, but also as rape trauma and even virginity loss (via the wolf's bite). Ginger's gradual transition into wolfhood not only highlights the relationality between the pain of the werewolf metamorphosis with pubescent corporal changes but is also presented as intrinsically linked to her fatalistic view of the normative patriarchal cultural coding of the female body as vulnerable and needing to be policed — to be tamed. The film is an example of Kristeva's concept of abject and 'leaky' bodies, and also what Erin Harrington classifies as 'gynaehorror': A sub-genre of horror that 'deals with all aspects of female reproductive horror, from the reproductive and sexual organs, to virginity and first sex' (2018, 3). That is, the 'reproductive body-in-process' as

intrinsically uncontrollable, 'unruly and disordered' embodies a female monstrosity (the female wolf) that, because of its corporal hybridity, causes 'disease' (a combination of unease and disease) in the phallocratic order (2018, 6, 8, and 16). Thus, Ginger's hybridity symbolises the 'body horror' of female adolescence, the fear that menstruating girls are 'possessed by dangerous spirits', of female sexuality as 'both monstrous and menstruous', and women's paradoxical positioning as both 'life-givers and life destroyers' (Miller 2005, 289, 300). During an interview, John Fawcett expressed his initial concerns of not only connecting 'menstrual blood and [the] werewolf connection' but also that *Ginger Snaps* would be 'saying thematically … that to go through adolescence and become a woman was like becoming a monster' (qtd. in Barker et al. 2006, 71). But if considered alongside Twitchell's observation that '[t]here is nothing more frightening than power without knowledge, unless it is knowledge without control' (1985, 68), then Ginger's realisation of the power of her hybrid body becomes the site not only of self-realisation (as the killer 'wolf' girl) but also of male castration anxiety. Ginger declares to her sister Brigitte: 'A girl can only be a slut, a bitch, a tease, or the virgin next door' — labels of female abjection enforced by (a sometimes violent) patriarchal order. For Ginger, it is not the wolf bloodlust that is a killable offence, but rather the acquiescence to a normative role that unavoidably circumscribes her within a restrictive psycho-social space.

While Ginger derives pleasure from her werewolf transformation and its sexual power, her increased bloodlust distances her from her humanity (and her sister) as she becomes consumed by the wolf within. Thus, by losing control of her body and sexual desires, Ginger's monstrous becoming exemplifies the historical belief that unrestricted female sexuality can only lead to monstrosity. Furthermore, her deviant nature and propensity for violence subscribe to socio-medical narratives and superstitions about: (1) female madness, rage, and hysteria; (2) the monstrous female as the source of disease not just for herself but also for her community; and (3) unrestrained female sexuality can lead to violence. Ginger embodies dis-ease (discomfort) and the threat of contagion (the wolf's bite as a viral disease) for the dominant androcentric social order. Since she is not only sexually attractive to males, but her newfound sexual liberation is also the site of the male fear over the loss of power and the risk of being dominated by the female. To safeguard the status quo and patriarchal sensibilities of emasculation, Ginger must be tamed or eliminated. Therefore, as much as the sisters attempt to control their own identity they cannot avoid how blood, both menstrual and wolf blood, imposes its will on them. In *Ginger Snaps* the menstruating female body is doubly cursed: Menstruation is the 'woman's curse' and the curse of the werewolf's bite — both curses emanating from within the female body and are ruled by the cycle of the moon, and both incorporate beliefs of uncontrolled female sexual desire and its potential for violence.

In their suburban existence, Ginger and Brigitte feel oppressed by the constant surveillance and coding of the female body within a context that

continues to posit rationality and authority as male, while positioning the female other as flawed and less than the male norm. Moreover, when the malleable, ever-changing female body does not conform to strict societal boundaries it becomes the source of phallocratic social unease. Thus, when Ginger attempts to rebel against the norm, she is unavoidably reinscribed into the normative discourse that pathologises the female body as the site of female hysteria, madness, and deviance. In the end Ginger *snaps* — psychologically, emotionally, and even physically because she can no longer deny her fragmented self — the self is *snapped* in two.

Unlike one of the foundational versions of the source text of *Red Riding Hood*, Ginger does not emerge safely from the wolf's belly but rather she dies consumed by the wolf that she has become. Though over 20 years have passed since its release, the intertextuality of *Ginger Snaps* and *Red Riding Hood* continues to speak to the dangers and difficulties of the maturing female body within a context that still frames a girl's sexual becoming as a dangerous process that needs to be enclosed within restrictive social parameters for her own protection and to safeguard the sensitivities of the phallocentric status quo. But what happens when Red Riding Hood is envisioned as physically capable of retaliating against gendered violence and injustice? In some cases, it is not the inner wolf that emerges — but the vigilante killer girl.

Female Rage and the Heroic Vigilante Killer Girl

Hard Candy and *Freeway* approach the depiction of the killer girl by portraying a Red Riding Hood narrative that combines elements of horror with plotlines from pedophile crime films that present 'the thrill of criminal or sexual transgression' in which 'the pedophile is rooted out, morally condemned, and punished dearly for his transgressions in the end' (Greenhill and Kohm 2009, 41). Pauline Greenhill and Sidney Eve Kohm remark on the shared social messaging between the fairy tale and the pedophile crime films:

> Pedophile crime films have evolved over the last eighty years to reflect, reinforce, and, at times, challenge conventional understandings of the child-sexual-abuse problem. That imagery and narratives adapted from 'Little Red Riding Hood' have recently been inserted into, or have framed, pedophile crime films suggests that filmmakers seek new ways to shift the lens through which we present this social issue.
>
> (2009, 47)

The pedophilic predator has become the 'new wolf' of the reimagined Red Riding Hood horror/terror tale in which the female hero takes on a vigilante role, seeking not only personal vengeance, but also hoping to prevent the victimisation of other girls. *Freeway* is Vanessa's (Reese Witherspoon) [Red Riding Hood] story as she runs away from her social worker to get to the safety of her grandmother's house while being chased by a pedophilic serial

killer (the bad wolf). On the other hand, Hayley (Elliot Page) in *Hard Candy* is a version of Red Riding Hood who hunts down pedophiles (the bad wolves) in the woods of online chatrooms. These re-visions feature an unrestricted expression of female anger and rage as a possible catalyst for personal transformative empowerment — though with a murderous violence. In so doing, the girls' anger risks being pathologised since, as Jane Ussher notes, pathologising female anger as mental illness is another way that patriarchy seeks to control women into submission (1991, 14). By reappropriating and owning female anger as a form of empowerment, the killer girls examined here show the girl *in* power that incorporates a personal consciousness raising that can give rise to activism in solidarity — a sisterhood. The killer girl emerges from the aftermath of experiencing or witnessing violence or injustice — it is a reactionary transformation of powerlessness into action: A vindication and/or vengeance for the person and/or the collective. The killer girl then becomes a violent response to violence committed to the self, but also challenges the cultural permissibility of committing violence on the collective female body. As a result, girls' anger in both *Freeway* and *Hard Candy* cannot be dismissed as a hysterical female response, but rather is a calculated response to how girls continue to be victimized based on their gender and fetishised by their stage of sexual maturation.

Though released in 1996 and 2000 respectively, *Freeway* and *Hard Candy* (just as *Ginger Snaps*) remain relevant to current issues that girls and women face such as: (1) sexual violence, sexual assault, and harassment as exposed by social movements such as #MeToo and #TimesUp; (2) the sexualisation and predation of prepubescent and adolescent girls; and (3) the hypersexualisation and fetishisation of young girls' bodies. What emerges is a growing presence and mobilisation of girls and women to tell their stories that not only legitimises their anger and/or trauma but gives rise to a heroic sisterhood and allyship. Luce Irigaray acknowledged that, by joining together, women would be able 'to begin to escape from the spaces, roles and gestures that they have been assigned and taught by a society of men' (1985, 164) and it is this empowered female collective that leads to disrupting the dominant gendered power hierarchies. In the end, this sense of empowered sisterhood proposes an alternate lived experience that scrutinises dominant discourses of power that give way to an untamed expression and application of girl power as reactionary, participatory, activist — and heroic.

The opening credits of *Freeway* consist of a series of illustrations from what seems to be an adult version of a *Red Riding Hood* fairy tale book, where various Red Riding Hood figures are overtly hypersexualised via the male gaze. The cartoon images combine common tropes from the horror genre (the girl being chased by the predator) alongside depictions of Red Riding Hoods who are vulnerable, sexually attractive yet, somehow, still retaining an air of innocence. The film reconsiders the fairy tale as a rape revenge featuring a pedophilic serial killer, Bob Wolverston (Kiefer Sutherland) who works as a counsellor for 'troubled boys' at an all-boys school when he

meets up with the 16-year-old runaway, Vanessa Lutz, whose car has broken-down and left her stranded on the side of the highway. When she meets Bob (the big bad wolf), Vanessa is trying to avoid returning to the foster care (system by running away to her grandmother's house where she has already been sexually abused by both her grandfather and her stepfather). After Vanessa reveals that her stepfather tried to 'fuck her', the extreme close-up of Bob's face reveals that he gets sadistic pleasure from hearing about her victimisation. Unable to open the car door to escape (Bob has removed the interior door handle), Bob attacks Vanessa and chops off her braid — cementing Vanessa's loss of innocence and a childhood left behind. *Freeway* exchanges Red Riding Hood's virginal cape for a red-leather-jacket-clad, non-virginal (yet somehow innocent) female hero, not on the path through the woods, but on a modern-day freeway. No longer the innocent little girl (whom society prizes and protects), Vanessa's abused and defiled body, her low class, and her uneducated status mark her out as not only vulnerable but also as disposable. When Vanessa is later arrested for shooting Bob, she is similarly stereotyped by Detective Breer (Wolfgang Bodison) during questioning when he mutters under his breath: 'Just doing what came natural'. Though he is verbally disciplined by his partner, Vanessa stands up for herself and retorts by stereotyping the black detective by using a racial slur — emphasising that, the same way he does not like being referred to by that racial slur, she does not 'like being called a natural born whore'.

The police detectives who take Vanessa into custody after she shoots Bob are not capable rescuers as is the hunter in the *Red Riding Hood* source fairy tale. Instead, they are part of the corrupt law system that further abuses female victims of sexual assault: 'I've [Vanessa] been in the system and once you've been in it once, ain't no one never going to believe you again'. Even though Vanessa is basically illiterate, she knows, from personal experience, that misogyny and sexism exist within a justice system that is stacked against her — a system that privileges the male attacker while reassigning the blame and responsibility of sexual violence back onto the girl's body. It also calls attention to the need to shift the discourse from victim blaming to calling out the institutions and social systems that propagate a culture of gendered violence, male privilege, and misogyny. Despite facing off against a far-reaching culture of victim blaming, Vanessa stands her ground for her truth because she 'knew if I let him go, he would just go out and kill some other girl and that would have been my fault. And I couldn't live with that! Never! No way!' Therefore, what begins as her journey for personal justice transforms into a vigilante justice for the broader female collective. While in prison Vanessa becomes part of a broader community of girls/women and when she breaks out of jail, her fellow prisoner, Mesquita (Alanna Ubach), remarks: 'You think I sound all feminist and shit. It's like, the one thing I learned in jail is that girls gotta help out other girls, you know? Especially convict girls, because if they don't, they ought to be fucking dead.' What arises is an awareness of a female solidarity that stems from a shared experience of social

vulnerability and personal trauma. Vanessa's relationship with the slightly older female convicts further substantiates that the struggles she has faced are not unique, but rather part of the mechanisms of an institutionalised patriarchy.

Vanessa's experiences of abuse and trauma by family members, Bob, the police detectives, and the judicial system illustrate the pervasive nature of misogyny in her society. Even though Vanessa finally makes it to her grandmother's house, the big bad wolf (Bob) has already been there and killed her grandmother. The police eventually determine that Bob is the serial killer, they are too late, and it is up to Vanessa to defeat the big bad wolf waiting for her in her grandmother's house. Though Vanessa vanquishes the big bad wolf hoping to protect other girls and women from his predation, her heroic actions are diminished by allegations of insanity, and in so doing Vanessa's personal narrative of self-empowerment is undermined by replacing it with a story of a girl gone crazy.

David Slade's *Hard Candy* (tagline: 'Strangers don't talk to little girls' [IMDb.com]) depicts a different kind of angry killer girl: Hayley Stark is the 14-year-old Red Riding Hood seeking sexual predators through the 'woods' of online chatrooms. To hunt down online predators Hayley uses the online identity Thonggrrrl14 — a name that combines a reference to the Riot Grrrl feminist movement, her pubescent age of 14, and sexy thong underwear. Hayley first meets up with Jeff Kohvler (Patrick Wilson) in a local coffee shop presented with a mise-en-scène consisting mostly of red backgrounds and close-ups of Jeff with a red wall as the backdrop. At this first meeting Jeff tells Hayley: 'you look older than you are, you certainly act older than you are', and proceeds to buy her a new t-shirt that she tries on in the 'women's' bathroom—just after Jeff calls her a 'little girl'. The double entendres continue when Hayley agrees to accompany Jeff to his house; she tells him that: 'Four out of five doctors agree that I'm actually insane'. At first the audience, and Jeff himself, interpret Hayley's revelation as one made in jest and referring more to her naïveté in accepting Jeff's invitation to his house, than as a hint of her true state of mind. Unlike *Freeway*, where the roles of 'innocent' girl and big bad wolves are obvious, in *Hard Candy* the roles are blurred: Following traditional portrayals of predators as males, one may assume that Hayley is the prey being lured into the predator's lair. Jeff's presumed predatory nature is emphasised by the camera pans of the interior of his apartment showcasing a collection of photographs of young girls, all in different stages of undress and sexualisation. In effect, the camera's movement provides the audience with a visual narrative that configures Jeff as the predatory wolf and Hayley as his unsuspecting prey. As Jeff collapses unconscious from a drink secretly drugged by Hayley, the camera continues to privilege his point of view, and the shot ends with a blurry extreme close-up of Hayley's face from Jeff's perspective, as it fades to a black screen.

As Jeff regains consciousness, the mise-en-scène changes from a red backdrop to blue grey tones backlit by a sunlight source that also blurs his vision.

When Jeff finally awakens, he finds himself tied to a chair and Hayley telling him that '[p]lay time is over. Now it's time to wake up', while questioning him whether he has ever killed anyone in his apartment. *Hard Candy* positions Hayley as Red Riding Hood within a rape-revenge narrative not as the passive victim, nor the damsel in distress, not even as the little girl following the path laid out for her. Instead, Hayley is the Red Riding Hood who has taken on the role of a justice-seeking vigilante — not just to survive, but to protect other girls. Like *Freeway*, *Hard Candy* presents a reimagined Red Riding Hood that focuses on identifying the dominant patriarchal ideologies that label girls who circumvent normative discourse as deviant, out of control, and even insane. Yet, Hayley is a girl *with* power seeking retribution for girls who have lost their lives to big bad wolves like Jeff. By strategically positioning herself as a 'girl', Hayley plays to the socio-cultural stereotype used to control her — as a child is controlled by their parents— and uses it as cover for her vigilante role to bait predators like Jeff. Like Vanessa in *Freeway*, Hayley epitomises Freud's theory of castration anxiety — since both hold the power to literally castrate their predator — Vanessa with a bullet and Hayley with a 'scalpel'. In *Hard Candy*, the castration scene is set up as a medical procedure and is filmed from Jeff's psychological positionality: The audience experiences the 'castration' scene and Hayley's 'pathological cruelty' from Jeff's point of view. The scene highlights Hayley's manipulative prowess while positioning the male body as vulnerable to the suggestion of a psycho-physical castration at the hands of a capable killer girl. In essence, Hayley is the proverbial wolf in sheep's clothing, who is hunting wolves to protect the sheep, that is, seeking vengeance not for herself but for past and future victims.

Although presented as a version of Red Riding Hood — Hayley wears a red hoodie that emphasises her youthful innocence — she emerges as the true predator, thereby subverting preconceived gendered expectations inherent in the *Red Riding Hood* fairy tale. The encounter between Red Riding Hood and the wolf ends here with the young girl convincing the would-be wolf to punish himself and avenge his victims' lives by taking his own life. But before he does so, Jeff asks Hayley:

Jeff: Who the hell are you?
Hayley: I am *every little girl* you ever watched, touched, hurt, screwed, killed.

The film ends with a long shot of Hayley in her red hoodie heading through the woods, on her way home — or onto her next victim?

Violence, trauma, and a pronounced imbalance of power continue to be common threads binding these revisions to current issues that girls and women face today, both as individuals and as a collective. The killer girl is, much like Clover's Final Girl, pursued by a 'killer' (the patriarchy and its sexist ideologies) and she survives, not just for herself but for her sisterhood. In some cases, like Vanessa in *Freeway*, she is the victim-hero, but like Hayley

in *Hard Candy* she is a killer girl — a vigilante, an avenger. Ultimately Ginger, Vanessa, and Hayley emerge as empowered killer Final Girls that respond to the challenges, restrictions, and trauma of contemporary intersectional politics of *being* in a society that fetishises, hypersexualises, and victimises young girls. The killer girls here depart from Clover's definition of the Final Girl but with an update; an update that considers and responds to new socio-political contexts that incorporate a politics of survival — not in solitude, but as a collective social movement of heroic girls who fight back.

Note

1 I prefer the term 'female hero' as opposed to 'heroine' since it avoids, in my opinion, the implication of a diminutive that constructs a binary opposition where the female version is positioned as 'less than' the male norm. Furthermore, while scholars such as Leah Phillips (2020, 124) and Pipher and Gilliam (2019, 374) have noted the use of the term 'sheroes' or '(s)heroes', I prefer to use either 'female hero' (much like Phillips), or specifically the 'killer girl' for the archetype examined in this chapter.
2 Martin Barker et al. further classify the film as a "hormonal-teen-horror" but "references to puberty, growing up, menstruation and bonding" also link it to coming-of-age films (2006, 70 and 76).

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15 *The Witcher* and Ciri of Cintra as the Heroic Final Girl

Agnieszka Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska

Introduction

By the time she reaches the age of 16, Cirilla of Cintra — the central heroine of *The Witcher*'s storyworld — will have endured countless harrowing ordeals.[1] Before the end of the saga, fans will have seen Ciri fleeing from monsters; chased by psychopaths; dragged by her feet and hair; locked in cellars and alternative universes; threatened with death, torture and rape; wounded; possessed; 'hideously disfigured'; and' 'wailing like the damned' (Sapkowski 2016, 17, 70) — ever-pressed to the mane of her fleet-footed horse in a desperate, never-ending attempt to escape. Young Ciri lives through the fall of her kingdom, the massacre of her people, the schemes of myriad villains, and the trauma of losing nearly all her loved ones — to be the one left standing on the saga's final page.

Ciri's journey is located at the heart of *The Witcher* (*Wiedźmin*), the internationally acclaimed transmedial universe originating from the bestselling literary series by Andrzej Sapkowski. Described as "a tribute to the Polish language and to Polishness" (Blacha and Kubiński 2016) and permeated with Slavic aesthetics, *The Witcher* phenomenon has proved to be translatable into diverse cultural contexts and media. Sapkowski's literary world has shapeshifted and expanded, among other things, into blockbuster videogames (CD PROJEKT RED 2007–15) and a popular Netflix fantasy show (Schmidt Hissrich: 2019–present), inspiring devotion in millions of fans worldwide.[2]

In the new millennium, the universe of *The Witcher* has become a dynamic terrain of academic critique. Several Polish-language volumes have been published in the last two decades, including literary analyses by Katarzyna Kaczor (2006) and Magdalena Roszczynialska (2009), and two edited collections investigating the series' diverse media iterations (Dudziński et al. 2015; Dudziński and Płoszaj 2016). Stemming from a variety of disciplines, scholarly works have interrogated the saga through the lens of otherness, postcolonialism, monstrosity, and 'race', and investigated its representations of memory and history (Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska 2024; Uniłowski 2017;

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Cieśliński 2015; Majkowski 2013); delved into its intertextuality with reimagined literary and fairy-tale motifs (Zastępska 2016; Kostecka 2014; Deszcz-Tryhubczak and Zarzycka 2012); examined its language, highlighting translation challenges (Drewniak 2016, 2020; Najman 2012; Koszarska 2009); and analysed *Witcher*-themed LARP events and tourism (Jaworowicz-Zimny 2020).

This chapter contributes to the growing body of scholarship on *The Witcher* by examining the figure of Ciri as the heroic habitual Final Girl. Introduced in 1987 by Carol J. Clover, the trope of the Final Girl — the solitary female protagonist who, hunted, bloodied, and traumatised by the death of her friends, manages to survive the fury of the psychopathic killer — remains relevant for understanding the cultural representations of women today. A critical concept primarily applied in horror film studies, the figure of the Final Girl has long reached beyond its traditional horror/slasher territory, crossing over into other media and genres, such as dystopian Young Adult stories (Martín 2020), superhero comics (Ruthven 2020), or the fantastic. Reconfigured within the theoretical frames of feminism, postfeminism, Girl Power, posthumanism, queerness, critical race theory, and more (Paszkiewicz and Rusnak 2020), the contemporary Final Girl departs in many aspects from Clover's formula. The new cultural narratives often mobilise more empowered female characters, moving away from 'woman-as-victim to woman as both protagonist and antagonist', a transformation likely stemming from the late 20th-century upsurge in the numbers of women writers, directors, and a 'demanding female audience' (Hague 2019, 218–20, 224).

Seen through the framework of the Final Girl, the storyline of Ciri offers a productive space in which to explore the popular culture representations of female empowerment, agency and victimisation, monstrosity, and the resolution of trauma. Although *The Witcher* does not belong to the horror/slasher category, it employs the tropes characteristic of its aesthetics: A fast-increasing body count, graphic displays of violence and bodily mutilation, the plotline featuring an adolescent heroine hunted by homicidal maniac(s), the narrative dwelling on her suffering and fear, and the ultimate confrontation between the Final Girl and the villain. Drawing on Andrzej Sapkowski's literary series and Lauren Schmidt Hissrich's television show, this chapter explores the ways in which Ciri responds to the trope of the Final Girl, following the path trodden out by Clover's model — only to stray from it in conclusive moments. Ciri refuses to remain contained within the convention and pushes against its boundaries in search for more-rewarding resolutions; a development all the more distinctive when juxtaposed with the figure of Renfri, another Final Girl of *The Witcher* world. Engaging with the complexities of the critical trope demarcated by Clover and expanded in later scholarly works, this chapter explores Ciri as a vulnerable victim, heroic survivor, triumphant victress, death-bringer, avengeress, murderess and monstress, and eventually — a figure of hope, resistance, and futurity.

The Ordeal of the Final Girl

The storyworld of *The Witcher* invites its fans into a fantastic universe, torn apart by wars between the Empire of Nilfgaard and the Kingdoms of the North. These conflicts provide a turbulent background — and a driving force — behind the adventures of the three core protagonists: A contract killer of monsters, witcher Geralt of Rivia (played in the series by Henry Cavill); a powerful enchantress and Geralt's beloved, Yennefer of Vengerberg (Anya Chalotra); and their foster daughter Cirilla of Cintra (Freya Allan). As the story progresses, Ciri displaces the eponymous witcher as the central character, increasingly charting the 'plot axis of the … saga' (Deszcz-Tryhubczak and Zarzycka 2012, 193). Entangled in power games of which she fathoms little, and prophesied to save, or destroy, the world, she is both the Chosen One and the object of quests — the equivalent of the Arthurian Graal (Majkowski 2013, 376, 382, 385). The heiress to the Cintran throne and the last carrier of elven Elder Blood, the heroine occupies a precarious position of 'the key to *everything*' (Season 1, Episode 6)[3] — 'a magical *wunderwaffe*' (Sapkowski and Bereś 2019, loc. 3647) and 'a fucking tinderbox' (Season 2, Episode 6) — whom not one but multiple villains strive to possess and/or extinguish. Cahir, the Black Knight of Nilfgaard; bounty hunter Bonhart; sorcerer Vilgefortz; Nilfgaardian emperor; wizard Rience; Stefan Skellen, called Tawny Owl; elven Alder People; evil Deathless Mother; and eventually, the enigmatic forces of Chaos occasionally embodied in monsters — to name but a few — all relentlessly hunt the young heroine who lives in a perpetual sense of endangerment.

In comparison to Ciri, Renfri, the princess of Creyden, is but a marginal character, featured in the first episode of the show and Sapkowski's short story 'The Lesser Evil' (Sapkowski 2010, 75–113). Like Ciri, however, Renfri can be read as the Final Girl. Born during a solar eclipse, the Creydenian princess is considered one of the 60 monster-girls, cursed under the Black Sun and prophesied to bring the end of humanity (Sapkowski 2010, 83; Season 1, Episode 1). These girls become exposed to brutal experiments and then murdered by unscrupulous wizard Stregobor and his associates. When the story begins, Renfri — now grown and driven by revenge — is the only 'cursed' outcast who remains alive.

In the course of their adventures, both Ciri and Renfri are subjected to extreme physical and psychological pain, violence, and the trauma of losing their loved ones — and both undergo a transformation from being a hunted child into a warrioress. For Ciri, this cycle of persecution, pain, terror, loss, and confrontation with (one of) her psychopathic pursuer(s) constantly recurs, casting her in the role of the habitual Final Girl. The narrative focuses on Ciri's vulnerability and isolation, and she is often portrayed feeling powerless and abandoned. 'Alone, weak, helpless – I can't move, can't force a sound from my constricted throat. Why does no one come to help me?' she wonders, reliving the massacre of Cintra in disorienting nightmares

(Sapkowski 2014, 3–6; Season 1, Episode 1; Season 1, Episode 7). 'I'm helpless … Everyone has betrayed me, abandoned me, left me all alone', she despairs in subsequent volumes (Sapkowski 2017, 257, 280; Sapkowski 2013, 255, 364). Although she is promised — and promises in return — to never be separated from those she holds dear (see e.g., Sapkowski 2012, 348; Sapkowski 2014, 324; Sapkowski 2016, 48–9; Sapkowski 2017, 382), Ciri's deepest fear — of being alone — becomes realised time after time.

Witnessing the systematic slaughter of all to whom she matters, Ciri begins to believe that she herself is death (Sapkowski 2016, 18; Season 2, Episode 1). 'I have known people who said that … from the very first encounter, they sensed the foretaste of death striding behind the girl', reminisces one of her friends — '[A] harbinger of those subsequent, tragic events. Events caused by her very existence. And those she caused by her actions' (Sapkowski 2013, 47). Ciri is placed at the root of the deadly conflict between Nilfgaard and the North as the Nilfgaardian emperor, her biological father, intends to kidnap and force her into incestuous marriage. In the show, the Ciri-centred disaster is enhanced with the element of magic as her grandmother Queen Calanthe (Jodhi May) denies the enchanted bond between Ciri and Geralt — the defiance of Destiny which is bound to 'unleash true calamity upon us all' (Season 1, Episode 4; cf. Season 1, Episode 7). It is already too late when the mortally wounded queen chooses to surrender to Destiny's wishes ('If I can bring him here… to Ciri… destiny may yet side with us'; Season 1, Episode 7), and Cintra will not be spared.

Ciri's connection with death is repeatedly accentuated throughout her story. 'Something is ending. It's because of you…You will destroy us all', sobs sorceress Triss, recoiling from Ciri's touch (Season 2, Episode 5; cf. Season 1, Episode 4). 'Whoever encounters your Ciri, it's as though they've put their head on the block… That girl brings misfortune… Misfortune and death', confirms Geralt's friend Milva (Sapkowski 2012, 212; cf. Sapkowski 2013, 95; Sapkowski 2016, 394). Wherever Ciri goes, death follows; and while she is rarely the one to deliver the fatal blow, a string of corpses is left in her wake. Ultimately, as Sapkowski points out (Sapkowski and Bereś 2019, loc. 3652), Ciri does bring a cataclysm upon her universe as her magical interworld travels cause a break-out of the Red Plague pandemic resembling the Black Death of the 14th century (Sapkowski 2017, 277–278, 336, 446).

The Survival of the Final Girl

In the course of her story, Ciri demonstrates intelligence, resourcefulness, and an unbreakable will to live, which allow her to survive what others consider unsurvivable. 'I can't give up', she says resolutely over and over again — 'I have to get up… fight, suppress the pain and weakness inside me… No, I won't die here' (Sapkowski 2013, 258, 260). Enduring exhaustion and despair, Ciri refuses to give in, repeatedly escaping, fighting, and outmanoeuvring her enemies. A princess with '[d]elicate skin, slight build, light bones…

a girl!', as sorceress Triss exclaims, urging the witchers to treat her gently (Sapkowski 2012, 87), Ciri throws herself into brutal witcher-training in Kaer Morhen, convinced that 'less than perfect means death' (Season 2, Episode 3). Responding to Triss' reservations, Geralt recognises his foster daughter's resilience and strength:[4]

> That girl… that petite, delicate princess lived through the Massacre of Cintra. Left entirely to her devices, she stole past Nilfgaard's cohorts. She successfully fled the marauders who prowled the villages… survived on her own for two weeks in the forests of Transriver… [L]ife has tried, seasoned and hardened her… And her gender? What difference does that make?
>
> (Sapkowski 2012, 87–8)

The first female to train in Kaer Morhen — and to wield a witcher's sword — Ciri is often shown to inhabit a space of gender liminality, articulating resistance to normative gender frameworks. When the audience first meets her, the heroine is dressed as a boy, her hair bound under her hat, playing knucklebones with street-boys in Cintra. The princess's displeasure at being compelled to return to the palace suggests her preference for comfortable male clothing over ball gowns, and for play and adventure over royal ceremonies (Season 1, Episode 1). In fact, sporting male attire and braving the spaces conventionally restricted to males, both on page and screen Ciri is repeatedly taken for a boy (Sapkowski 2012, 58; Sapkowski 2016, 11; Season 1, Episode 4).

At the same time, however, the heroine moves away from the idea of the Final Girl's gender as 'compromised by her masculine interests', appearance, or her isolation from other female characters (Clover 1987, 210) — and daringly draws from diverse gender repertoires. The first two seasons of the show often present Ciri as emphatically feminine — gracefully dancing, wearing beautiful dresses, the camera focused on her long luxuriant hair. While her weapon of choice is traditionally construed as phallic, Ciri's deadly sword becomes feminised through its lightness, reduced size, and the etchings of flowers and a swallow — the symbol of hope and her own name (Sapkowski 2016, 137–8). Aware of the 'things a lady always ought to have', Ciri carries a set of beautification and feminine hygiene products. In time of need, however, she will convert them into a survival kit, consuming moist hand ointment and creating a protective headband out of an unfurled linen tampon (Sapkowski 2013, 259). Ciri refuses to abide by patriarchal rules and strives not to let others regulate her body. In Kaer Morhen, she insists on full training — clearly *not* 'afraid to break a nail', as one of the witchers taunts her (Season 2, Episode 3) — but also learns to refuse it if feeling indisposed (Sapkowski 2012, 89–90). When the witchers mock Ciri's attempts at beautification, she brings up 'Lioness Calanthe', whose own gender-fluid performance worked to destabilise the regimes of masculine authority: 'My

grandmother fought battles and wore dresses. You can do both', she says (Season 2, Episode 4).

Ciri is surrounded by many extraordinary women who help her on her path: Her mother Pavetta, her grandmother Calanthe, her girlfriend Mistle, and her foster mother Yennefer. A far cry from traditional marginalised victims inevitably marked for downfall from the onset of the story — the 'one-dimensional female characters created as disposable targets of aggressive, crazed males' (Hague 2019, 224; Doyle 2019, 34) — these non-Final women are strong, capable, and agential, compelling both fear and devotion. Ultimately, however, their powers prove insufficient for those heroines to survive.[5] One by one, they suffer and/or die in a violent way, at the hands or by order of those who pursue Ciri. Contemporary popular culture increasingly allows for a shared survival of multiple Final Girls, or even Final Subjects (Clúa 2020) or Final Collective — a transformation likely engendered by the new millennium fourth wave of feminism and its emphasis on the power of the collective (Rusnak 2020, 126–27; Paszkiewicz and Rusnak 2020). At the conclusive moment of Sapkowski's novels, however, Ciri is standing alone.

Drawing on Clover's argumentation, Sadie Doyle points out that in slasher movies 'female sexual desire, experimentation, or trust is punished with violation, mutilation, and death', and the Final Girl manages to live 'only by erasing her own sexuality' (2019, 34, 37, 53). Doyle draws attention to 'a potent symbolic charge' of a hymen, accentuating cultural connections between female promiscuity, monstrosity, and demise (2019, 47, 53). Today, the survival of the Final Girl rarely depends any longer on sexual abstinence — a shift that likely reflects the increasingly relaxed social attitudes towards premarital sex (Hague 2019, 218–9; Gustafsson 2015). In fact, in the new millennium, 'being sexually active has become almost a common place for the Final Girl' (Clúa 2020, 49). In the literary world of *The Witcher*, female sexuality appears to be celebrated rather than feared. This conclusion, however, becomes troubled by the death of the heroines who are erotically experienced or display fiery sexual temperament. The one who survives is the one who remains a virgin.

Cultural texts marketed to young adults have often linked the loss of virginity with pain, and sexual maturation with imminent danger (Smith and Moruzi 2018; Kokkola 2013). Tapping into the conventional slasher and YA formulas, the narratives of Ciri's erotic explorations are saturated with images of peril, violently spilled blood, and 'overpowering fear' (Sapkowski 2013, 323). Ciri's sexual debut with Mistle, her girlfriend-to-be, occurs the night after the battle in which Ciri performs her first human kill (Sapkowski 2013, 324). Their final (and second mentioned) encounter happens mere hours before Mistle's gruesome death. Ciri's later erotic interludes with men, while pleasurable, are similarly narrated within the context of violence and fear. The first attempt occurs in the woods, where Ciri and her acquaintance Hotspurn are hiding from a gang of murderers (Sapkowski 2016, 55–9); the second takes place

when the imprisoned heroine is offered freedom in exchange for conceiving a child with the elven king Auberon (Sapkowski 2017, 165).

The contemporary horror genre, as Karen J. Renner argues, has replaced chastity as a path to the heroine's survival with a rule of '"meaningful" sex' (2016, 31). Ciri — who intends to explore her desires outside of the romantic context — becomes 'spared' from both the loss of her virginity and 'meaningless' sex by the rapid demise of her would-be lovers. The severely wounded Hotspurn expires during their foreplay, his blood pouring over Ciri's exposed chest; and ancient Auberon fatally overdoses on an aphrodisiac that was intended to ensure his potency (Sapkowski 2016, 55–9; Sapkowski 2017, 197–8). Both men die before intercourse takes place, and in the conventional sense of the term, the heroine remains a virgin.[6]

The Final Girl as a Monstress

While at times *The Witcher*'s Final Girls are saved through the agency of others, those who are duty-bound to protect them often fail in their task. In order to survive, the young heroines need to become the very thing that torments them: A ruthless killer, a monster. The outcast-princess Renfri chooses to steal 'rather than starve' and kills 'to avoid being killed' (Sapkowski 2012, 100). In turn, Ciri recoils from drawing her blade even in self-defence, and briefly contemplates killing herself to avoid killing others (Sapkowski 2016, 156). 'I don't think you'll live long', she hears when she stops short of delivering the fatal blow to her adversary — a moment of indecision that nearly costs her life and stands in sharp contrast to the performance of her ferocious companions from the Rats gang (Sapkowski 2013, 313–5). Soon, however, the heroine realises that '[t]o survive, you have to know how to kill', and assumes the name—and the persona—of her ancestor, the savage murderess Falka (Sapkowski 2013, 320–2).

Before long, Ciri and Renfri become known as ruthless killers, who learn to find delight in violence and vengeance (Sapkowski 2014, 238; Season 1, Episode 1). The Creydenian princess vividly describes this development as she reminisces about slaying the man who abused her: '[A]s I listened to him gurgle and choke, watched him kicking and flailing, I felt the marks left by his feet and fists fade, and I felt … so joyful, so happy. And it's the same each time. If it wasn't, who'd waste time on revenge?' (Sapkowski 2012, 103).

Similarly, in her Falka-persona, Ciri begins to crave the rush of the kill (Sapkowski 2014, 42, 257–8). The heroine appears to be more distressed by dropping her candyfloss than murdering a man — the sharp dissonance between her childlike and murderous selves dramatically accentuated when she calmly sheaths her bloodied sword yet nearly cries at the loss of her treat (Sapkowski 2014, 224–6). In future legends, Ciri-Falka will be described as a girl filled with 'fury and cruelty', in whom '[t]he worst of everything that hides in a person emerged' (Sapkowski 2014, 287). Although cautioned to avoid the path that would 'drown the world in blood' by her friend Vysogota

(Sapkowski 2016, 366), the heroine chooses violence as '[a]n infallible remedy' for evil:

> I know what Evil fears. Not your ethics, Vysogota…. Evil fears pain, impairment, suffering, death, the end! … An eye for an eye? No! Both eyes for an eye! A tooth for a tooth? No! All its teeth for a tooth! Pay Evil back! … And then, looking at the floor, you may confidently say: what's lying there won't harm anybody any longer.
>
> (Sapkowski 2016, 366–7)

From hunted, vulnerable girls, Ciri and Renfri transform into huntresses. When Renfri's story begins, nearly all of her foes are already dead. Her last standing enemy, the wizard Stregobor, is cornered in a magical tower, with Renfri prepared to slaughter the whole town to get him.

Ciri's transformation into a monstrous huntress happens most vividly in the finale of *The Tower of the Swallow*, when the heroine is being chased onto a frozen lake by a group of mercenaries led by Skellen and Rience. The men's hunting frenzy over picking up her trail is soon replaced with abject terror. Shrouded in fog and ominous silence, the lake transforms into the Terrible Place from which the killer emerges and into which they stalk their prey: '"She's there, in the fog," [one of the men] said softly. "… But the devil knows where. The devil knows whence she'll strike …"' (Sapkowski 2016, 421).

Referring to Clover's characterisation of the slasher villain — 'recognizably human, but only marginally so' (1987, 196) — Victoria Madden highlights the near-invisibility of the killer figure who 'only appears in glimpses, always obscured by shadow' (2020, 141–2). Seen through the eyes of the horror-stricken men — a conspicuous departure from the conventional Final Girl's perspective that accentuates the reversal of positions — Ciri appears both nearly invisible and only marginally human both to her stalkers-turned-prey and readers. In a futile attempt to overcome their terror, the men try to belittle her verbally as 'just one girl!' rather than a supernatural monster (Sapkowski 2016, 421, 425). Soon, however, they come to see her as exactly that — a 'she-phantom' against whom it is impossible to win (Sapkowski 2016, 425).

From an image of a lone girl with murderers hot on her trail, the scene shifts to cast Ciri in the role of the huntress: As her footprints disappear, the men realise they walked into a trap. The atmosphere of terror and impending danger is built up through the sense of hearing as the eerie silence of the fog-blanketed landscape becomes punctuated by the sound of skates: "Grating. Grating. Grating. Quick. Rhythmic. And more and more clearly" (423). A masterful skater and swordswoman, Ciri appears spectre-like from unpredictable direction — "a blurred, flickering shadow," face masked and bloodied blade flashing (424, 426–427) — dealing a fatal blow and retreating into the fog. The scraping sound is unerringly followed by the howls of the dying, futile cries for help, and the feeling of crushing defeat: "Death! That wench is death! We'll breathe our last here! … We shall never get off this ice"

(424–425). The scene concludes with Ciri slowly approaching the few remaining men, smiling at Rience who clings to the edge of the shattered ice begging for his life. "You were going to teach me pain…. With those fingers … those ones you're holding the ice with?", the huntress asks before cutting off Rience's fingers with one swift movement of her skated feet (427). The roles become temporarily reversed: In order to defeat the psychopathic killers, Ciri needs to assume, if only for the time being, that very identity.[7]

The Final Girl as the Figure of Futurity and Hope

Of all the maniacs who pursue her, the Black Knight Cahir and bounty hunter Bonhart are the ones whom Ciri fears the most — and whom she feels unable to confront: 'I'm surrounded by demons, by nightmares from my dreams. Bonhart behind me, him [Cahir] in front of me', the heroine despairs (Sapkowski 2017, 367). 'An epitome of the Gothic phantom-like monster that stalks their victim through reality and dream' (Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska, 2024), the Black Knight in his winged helmet is Ciri's traumas incarnate — the embodiment of the massacre of Cintra and her own fear (Sapkowski 2012, 5–6; Season 1, Episode 4). While Cahir's role is transformed into that of an ally who ultimately lays his life down for Ciri's,[8] Bonhart remains an inhumane predator, the 'Devil incarnate' and 'whoreson like no other', who 'truly and honestly' enjoys violence (Sapkowski 2014, 279; Sapkowski 2016, 40, 131). Unlike any other villain, Bonhart has no interest in Ciri's throne or power. His only desire is to be her 'lord and master' (Sapkowski 2016, 354) — and to satiate his monstrous gaze which craves to see her crushed and dying: 'I'll do what I want with you!', he shouts, '[N]o one will stop me from doing it! Not people, not gods, not devils, nor demons! … You are mine, witcher girl!' (Sapkowski 2016, 430).

In a gruesome scene described in graphic detail, Bonhart slaughters all of Ciri's comrades from the Rats gang, murdering Ciri's wounded lover Mistle in front of her eyes. He forces the defeated Ciri to look at Mistle's mutilated body and to watch as he decapitates the corpses of her friends (Sapkowski 2016, 70–2). Afterwards, the villain coerces Ciri into gladiatorial combat (Sapkowski 2016, 145–55). A warrioress unmatched in the arena, Ciri feels incapable of challenging Bonhart and lowers her sword on his demand (Sapkowski 2016, 136, 429). Ultimately, the bounty hunter surrenders the heroine to the wizard Vilgefortz solely to watch her subjected to new sorts of torture — the sadistic 'kind of voyeurism [he prefers] to all other pleasures' (Sapkowski 2016, 376–7).

The wounds that Bonhart inflicts on Ciri are, as she confides, graver than any physical injury (Sapkowski 2016, 18). Imagining herself as 'a wooden doll, insensitive and lifeless' appears to be the only attainable strategy of survival: '[S]o what if they were kicking me, putting a collar on me like a dog? For it wasn't me, it wasn't me at all …' (Sapkowski 2016, 125). Eventually, however, Ciri must — and chooses to — confront the men whom she considers her nemeses; and in doing so, she overcomes the traumas of the past. As Cahir attempts

to seize her, Ciri's terror morphs into ire: '*This is Cintra no longer!* … You will not touch me again!', she screams (Sapkowski 2013, 94). It is not until the end of the saga that Ciri faces her other arch-enemy. In the scene of the ultimate confrontation between the Final Girl and the psychopath-killer, Bonhart himself announces 'the grand finale': 'I must feel your life flowing down my blade…. You are mine. And you'll die mine' (Sapkowski 2017, 365–6).

Reflecting upon Ciri's brief captivity at the court of King Auberon, Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubczak and Agata Zarzycka read their relationship as 'concluded with the position of power completely occupied by Ciri' (2012, 199). This conclusion could be extended to other ultimate encounters between the heroine and her pursuers. Ciri does not leave the frozen lake until the mercenaries are utterly defeated — fleeing from under her skates and sword, perishing under the ice, or awaiting the fatal blow sobbing, their teeth rattling 'like a ghoulish overture to some infernal *danse macabre*' (Sapkowski 2017, 424–6). Having beaten Bonhart, Ciri towers over the wounded hunter who lies on the floor and pleads for his life (Sapkowski 2017, 376, 377). Similarly, her swordfight with Cahir ends with the man defeated, his winged helmet knocked off — and the threat of the faceless Black Knight removed from the wounded figure kneeling before the heroine.

Ciri's triumph, however, consists primarily in emerging victorious out of her inner battles — from heroically overcoming her trauma and hatred and retaining her humanity. Both Ciri and Renfri are groomed into the role of monsters by their persecutors. 'I ordered her … to kill people to the screams of the public', Bonhart brags. 'Slowly, slowly, I transformed her into a beast. I prepared her for that role with whip, fist and boot heel' (Sapkowski 2017, 48). '[I]t wasn't possible to turn me into a beast. And it won't be possible', declares Ciri as though in response to her nemesis's statement (Sapkowski 2017, 395). While Renfri refuses to renounce her monster-identity, determined to exact vengeance at all costs, Ciri chooses a path of futurity and healing. She allows several of the men on the lake to survive — including Skellen who permanently disfigured her face. Ciri begins her warrior-training motivated by hate and desire to kill those who have wronged her (Season 2, Episode 2; Sapkowski 2012, 136). Once she has defeated her arch-enemies, however, the heroine chooses to withhold the final blow: Her victory is complete and does not require the physical death of the villain who no longer has any power over her:

> The black knight of Cintra had fallen beneath the blows of her sword, had ceased to exist…. The terrified, cowering young man bleeding profusely was no one…. She wasn't afraid of him, nor did she hate him. And neither did she want to kill him.[9]
>
> (Sapkowski 2013, 189–90)

'I knew you'd prevail', rejoices Vysogota when Ciri refrains from ultimate revenge (Sapkowski 2016, 434). It is this act of self-control rather than her efficient obliteration of the psychopath-killer(s) that represents her final

victory and shows she has 'emerge[d] unharmed' (Sapkowski 2016, 434). At the end of her story, Renfri remains unable to resolve her traumas and forsake revenge. Consequently, she fails to emerge triumphant, or even alive, and evil Stregobor gloats over her corpse. The outcast-princess falls under the sword of Geralt who, futilely seeking the lesser evil, tries to both rescue Renfri and protect the town (Season 1, Episode 1). Ciri, however, leaves, free to embark on new adventures. Her position as a figure of hope and futurity is highlighted by the conclusion of the saga, in which she rides 'straight into the setting sun' with the newly encountered knight Galahad, leaving the past behind — with 'everything ahead' (Sapkowski 2017, 530).

Conclusion

The Witcher's storyline establishes Ciri as the habitual heroic Final Girl, capable of surviving an endless cycle of ordeals and defeating not one but multiple psychopathic foes. While to an extent Ciri adheres to the conventions of the Final Girl trope, she also boldly pushes against its boundaries, expanding and redesigning the figure of the Final Girl with regard to female agency, empowerment, and the resolution of trauma.

Ciri eschews the script which, as Madden explains, depicts the Final Girl as 'merely fighting to survive', unable to make agential choices (2020, 146). Although at times *The Witcher*'s heroine may be read as merely an 'object of quests' rather than an 'active protagonist fulfilling a historical mission' (Majkowski 2013, 382), in the key moments of her story she proves capable of exhibiting heroism and strong agential behaviour, not only effectively confronting the villains, but also her own demons. Clover defines the Final Girl as the 'monstrous hero — hero insofar as she has risen against and defeated the forces of monstrosity, monster insofar as she has herself become excessive, demonic' (2015, 4). The more recent discourses turn to the 'glorification of the Final Girl … as an agent of violence' — a development that could cast doubt on the narrative of her empowerment (Paszkiewicz and Rusnak 2020, 2; cf. Rowe Karlyn 2011, 116–7). The transformation of the Final Girl into an assassin, Sara Martín (2020) contends, can leave her monstrosised, resulting in the restriction rather than expansion of her agency.

While at times Ciri assumes a monstrous persona, ultimately she forges a path that will salvage her humanity. It is not the violence she performs but the heroic decision to withhold the final blow that speaks of her empowerment, and which allows the heroine to shift from the figure of monstrosity and victimisation into the figure of futurity and hope.[10] Rather than through the death of the villain, the catharsis is produced through the heroine's recognition of violence and hatred as inadequate responses to evil (Sapkowski 2017, 395; 462–3). Ciri realises that 'the slit throats' of the villains does not equal 'the triumph of good over evil' (Sapkowski 2017, 488); evil cannot be erased and will need to be confronted again.

At the end of her story, Ciri — whom many have sought to possess — belongs to no one but herself, taking control over her narrative and identity. The heroine chooses, as Majkowski points out, to 'remain a private person'. Reversing the conventional trajectories of the fantasy genre, she eschews the role and responsibilities of the Chosen One (2013, 382, 385) and 'successfully evades all further attempts on her female sovereignty' (Deszcz-Tryhubczak and Zarzycka 2012, 194). Increasingly assuming a position of autonomy and power, Ciri 'grows from an innocent and feeble child into an active and self-sufficient person' (Deszcz-Tryhubczak and Zarzycka 2012, 199). Overcoming her lifelong terror of being alone, she finds strength to part ways with the significant adults in her life, stepping onto the path of independence and self-determination. In the Netflix show, the heroine resists the temptation to remain in the magically restored illusion of the Cintran court and — having witnessed her parents and grandmother literally turn to ashes — she returns to Yennefer and Geralt (Season 2, Episode 8). In the literary finale, however, Ciri relocates her foster parents into another universe, in which they can live on, and ventures forth by herself, allowing the story to end on a hopeful note (Sapkowski 2017, 527–8). On the final pages of the saga, Ciri's ashen hair turns white (Sapkowski 2017, 385) — a symbolic rite of passage compared to the metamorphosis of Tolkien's Gandalf (Sapkowski and Bereś 2019, loc. 1071). Ciri's change, however, signifies neither purification nor the acquisition of power; instead, it reinforces the saga's indeterminate conclusion. At the end of her story, as Sapkowski himself suggests (Sapkowski and Bereś 2019, loc. 1071), the Final Girl becomes a 'blank slate', to be filled with yet-undiscovered stories.

Notes

1 The publication has been supported by a grant from the Faculty of International and Political Studies under the Strategic Programme Excellence Initiative at Jagiellonian University.

2 For examples of *Wiedźmin*'s franchise, see Dudziński et al. 2015; Dudziński and Płoszaj 2016; Jaworowicz-Zimny 2020.

3 All 'Season' and 'Episode' references in this article refer to *The Witcher* (Schmidt Hissrich: 2019–present).

4 When, in the show, Geralt himself demonstrates reservations against admitting Ciri into more dangerous parts of the training, Ciri solicits the help of other witchers (Season 2, Episode 3).

5 The only one who survives is Triss, whom Ciri leaves behind, departing for another universe.

6 For the complexities of the notion of virginity, see Farrimond 2016.

7 In the show, Ciri literally becomes a monstress when, possessed by evil Deathless Mother, she murders witchers in their sleep (Season 2, Episode 8).

8 He does so, however, for disturbing reasons. Cahir confesses ashamedly that he fell in love with child-Ciri, remembering her 'as a woman: comely, aware, provocative'. He describes his captive as trembling in fear as he undressed and washed her — a traumatic experience that 'haunted her in her nightmares' (Sapkowski 2016, 224–5).

9 However, when Bonhart makes one final attempt on Ciri's life, trying to stab the departing heroine in the back, the Final Girl does not hesitate to strike. Her position of power is foregrounded as she stands over the dying villain '[w]ithout a word. But allowing him to see her clearly. So as to take her image, her image alone, with him where he was going' (Sapkowski 2017, 337).

10 That nearly all the other significant female characters are defeated and die — along with the unsettling connection between sex and death — troubles the saga's message of female empowerment while possibly exploring the challenges faced by powerful women within the constraints of patriarchy.

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Part IV
Into the Future

16 Persephone Distorted

From Teen Witch to Queen of Hell — The Evolution of Sabrina

Karen Graham

Introduction

The *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2014–20) offered a dark recasting of the bubbly comic (and later TV) series *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, with the Netflix series debuting Halloween 2018. While the setting is moved from the 1960s of the comic to the present day, Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa keeps the comic's established aesthetic by replicating the artwork in the title sequence, as well as the costuming and sets mimicking 1960s style while the characters interact with modern technology and popular culture references.

As per established canon, Sabrina is half mortal/half witch struggling to reconcile the mundane and the magical within herself. As the narrative evolves from establishing the world and rules to questions of theology, truth, and the nature of evil, Sabrina becomes the heroic centre for the mortal and witch realms. The *Teenage Witch* series (1996–2003) focused on Sabrina's need to keep her witch half secret while navigating the perils of High School; this, coupled with the teen audience and episodic nature, meant for little scope for character development within a set narrative arc. In contrast, *Chilling Adventures* takes its cue from female-fronted supernatural dramas [*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Charmed*] where the weekly Big Bad storylines build to epic season finales, affording deep character and plot development as well as expansive worldbuilding. It is telling that Sabrina in *Chilling Adventures* chooses to eschew the secrecy and instead embraces her dual nature by revealing her witch-hood to her mortal friends.

However, the reimagining of Sabrina in *Chilling Adventures* moves further than its predecessors. Taking *Buffy*'s central premise of the Final Girl becoming the central heroic figure who hunts rather than is hunted and expanding it towards the uprising of a powerful and underrated youth challenging the corruption of the establishment, this Sabrina is a radical force for change because she did not grow up fully immersed in the diktats of the Church of Night. Indeed, it is Sabrina's hybrid nature that allows her to critique and change the Church of Night and (eventually) the structure of Hell itself.

This chapter will explore the evolution of Sabrina from teen witch to Queen of the Underworld and examine how those journeys to Hell situate her as a truly heroic girl for the 21st century.

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Which Witch Is Which?

Repeatedly reworking and reimagining the same story builds a history of the narrative that exists both within and without the text. We see this phenomenon with fairy tales, but also with other iconic narratives such as *The (Wonderful) Wizard of Oz*. While we may or may not be able to identify a singular origin for these types of stories, there usually is an agreed parent text that the reimagined versions spring from. These offspring texts carry the familial resemblance of the parent and often refer back to details of character or plot points from the parent. This intertextual referencing has grown as the same types of narrative are reworked and reimagined, building to create a textual history for the audience. One example is the popular film and TV culture of Easter egg hunting for hidden references, notably in Disney's Marvel Cinematic Universe, but this is observable across multiple franchises.

Along with this intertextual referencing, we also see a building of shared generational markers that become distinctive parts of the narrative. To continue with an MCU example, the recent introduction of the Multiverse through the Avengers-related spin-offs *Loki* and *Wandavision* (both 2021) leading to the convergence of Spider-man and his various villains in *Spider-man: No Way Home* (2021). While many on-screen reboots prior to *No Way Home* had included references to earlier versions of a character through cameos from former actors or the merging of old and new footage,[1] the MCU was in a somewhat unique position with Spider-man in that it had access to three different incarnations of the same character within a relatively short time frame, and it also had an established plot device to bring them together in the Multiverse. Unlike earlier examples where the generation gap was large and the cameos only for hardened fans, Toby Maguire[2] played the character as recently as 2007, and 2014 for Andrew Garfield.[3]

In this example 'my' Spider-man is Toby Maguire and my MJ is Kirsten Dunst. The prospect of seeing my actors back onscreen as those characters brought me back to a franchise that I had tired of. It may be a slightly cynical ploy from MCU executive producer Kevin Feige, but it works because it taps into this generational community building. This may be the reason behind Russell T. Davies bringing back David Tennant and Catherine Tate for the 60th Anniversary special of *Doctor Who*.

And with that example, I would push this argument further to say that it is not only applicable to narrations as a whole but certain characters as well. The Doctor is one example where a particular depiction of the character is seen as belonging to a certain generation due to changing the actor for the lead role being built into the structure of the show, but other texts deploy this technique as well: The Bond franchise, Batman, Jack Reacher, the Addams Family.

With a similar metatextual narrative history, the character of Sabrina the Teenage Witch also displays this generational phenomenon. Sabrina as a character first appeared in Archie comics in 1962 as a five-page story titled

'Sabrina the Teenage Witch' (*Archie's Mad House* #22 October 1962), a designation that she would keep up until her pivot into horror in 2014 in the *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* comics and later live-action Netflix series. In between she would have her animated TV debut in 1977, a live action movie starring Melissa Joan Hart 1996 that would then spawn the ABC sitcom (1996–2005), an animated series spin-off from the show (1999), and numerous comics runs and re-runs with crossover covers featuring images of both live action and illustrated Sabrinas side by side.

Like all characters with a history of multiple transmedial adaptations, which version of Sabrina is considered the 'original' is generationally dependent. To again interject with a personal reflection, 'my' Sabrina is Melissa Joan Hart, whom I first encountered as equally iconic teen character Clarissa from the Nickelodeon sitcom *Clarissa Explains It All* (1991–94) — the *Blossom* for 90s kids. But by this point the character and narrative world had been well established following her spin-off from *Archie*. While this chapter will predominantly focus on the journey of Sabrina in the live-action Netflix series *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* from fledgling witch to Queen of Hell and her crusade to overthrow the establishment of the Church of Night, in order to understand the impact of some of Aguirre-Sacasa's narrative and stylistic choices it is necessary to give a brief textual history of Sabrina's other incarnations.

While the character has jumped from page to screen and back again, the evolution of Sabrina can be roughly divided into three phases: Comic Sabrina (1960s/70s), Millennial Sabrina (1990s/2000s), and Horror Sabrina (2010s/20s).

Comic Sabrina

As previously mentioned, 'Sabrina the Teenage Witch' originated from a one-shot Archie comic in the 1960s that developed into a dedicated run. This parent text established the parameters for magic and witchcraft within the wider world building of the Archie comic world. This allowed for magic-related high jinks in keeping with the overall feel of the original setting. It also establishes the wider cast of the stories and creates many of the characters that will become pivotal to the later adaptations such as the aunts, cousin Ambrose, boyfriend Harvey, and feline familiar Salem. Sabrina's main narrative drive was hexing her classmates under the watchful eye of her Head Witch Della while keeping her witch identity secret. Her magic skills were haphazard and unpredictable, often going wrong with amusing consequences. From early on in the series, Sabrina shows a reluctance to being a Bad Witch and tries to use her powers to help her friends, much to the chagrin of her aunts and other fellow witches.

As with other witchcraft-related media, Sabrina's first appearance establishes which aspects of witch lore are valid within the confines of the world and which are inaccuracies driven by mortal superstition. In this case the text

emphasises that modern witches are neither physically repulsive nor do they live in dusty old castles. They do possess real magic that they use to alter reality and they are repelled by water so they cannot drown or cry. Although these aspects of Sabrina's supernatural identity may seem odd to a current day audience, these are firmly established signs of a witch that the comic's contemporary audience would have been familiar with, and in fact stem from actual 18th-century witch trials.

Additionally, much is made of the differences in witch and mortal beauty standards with Aunt Hilda frequently commenting on Sabrina's 'unfortunate' appearance for comedic effect. This sets up the differences between the witch and mortal realms that later adaptations expand upon. As the series progresses it also reveals a generational divide within witch society with Sabrina's Aunts Hilda and Zelda representing the traditional ways. This is visually depicted by the aunts resembling the traditional fairy tale witch with warts, hooked noses, and black pointed hats. In contrast, Sabrina and her peers are attractive and fashionable, with normal teenage interests in music and dancing. Very much a product of her era, by the 1970s Comic Sabrina is a regular member of Archie's gang. However, the audience for *Sabrina*, given the narrative focus on romantic escapades and appearance, is more likely to be predominantly female.

Following Julia Round's analysis of the American Gothic Horror Comic of the 1950s, the development of the EC formula and its subsequent influence on the British girls' comics of the 1960s, I would argue that even at this early stage *Sabrina*'s supernatural focus sets the text and the character apart. The format resembles the hosted horror tales of Sabrina's British counterparts (*Diana*, *Tammy*, *Jinty*, etc.) but with the title characters as the host who directly addresses the audience. Round describes the 'shared elements' within these types of comics as 'includ[ing] directive framing from a host figure, an oral style of telling, content that includes shallow or two-dimensional characters and an ironic or unexpected plot reversal, and a narrative structure that drives exclusively towards this final point' (Round 2021).

Many of *Sabrina*'s issues deploy a similar, although not identical, framework with Sabrina's own shallow intentions shown to lead to a 'Just Desserts' pay-off or an ironic twist of fate. In this case, Sabrina is both the supernatural other and the subject of those universal forces that maintain order and justice. But occasionally the series goes even further, as for example in *Giant Sabrina the Teen-Age Witch #8: Sabrina in 'Bride and Gloom'* where Sabrina's Head Witch Della is telling Sabrina a bedtime story that enfolds as an exemplar of the EC formula with Della as the host directly addressing the audience and the titular bride bearing an uncanny resemblance to Sabrina (Gladir 2020). In *Giant Sabrina the Teen-Age Witch #15: The Haunted Helmet* this conceit is taken further with Sabrina hosting the gothic mystery issue (ibid). This was a popular enough format that in 1976 the Archie Horror imprint published the *Chilling Adventures in Sorcery as Told by Sabrina* anthology.

The horror elements in Sabrina's regular issues are, however, downplayed in favour of the slapstick tone of the Archie setting. Where these juxtaposed aspects of the character come into conflict, the comedy wins out. The consequences never leave Sabrina or her friends with lasting harm and high jinks resume in the nest episode. The Gothic horror potential of the narrative nevertheless remains.

Millennial Sabrina

Just as Comic Sabrina introduced the supernatural to the previously mundane setting in *Archie* in a way that would be familiar to its audience, Millennial Sabrina took those now outdated depictions of witchcraft and gave them a modern twist. This new version of the character first appeared in 1996, in a Showtime made-for-TV movie played by Melissa Joan Hart. Sabrina was specifically selected as a vehicle for Hart, rather than the other way round:

> I had this success that was still gaining heat after it wrapped. And my mother was handed a comic book on a playground in New York City and it was the Sabrina the Teenage Witch, which is an Archie comic. And they said we think this would be a great next role for Melissa. My mom took it, went to Archie Comics, bought the rights to it for a dollar.
>
> (Smith 2020)

The film introduced the idea that Sabrina was half witch, half mortal and that as such Sabrina did not receive her powers until she came of age on her 16th birthday. This conceit gave an explanation for her lack of magical acumen, as established by the parent test, as well as serving as a guide for the audience in the narrative world as Sabrina learns about the witch realm along with us. Following the success of the film, ABC commissioned a TV series, keeping Hart as the lead. This turned out to be a resounding success like its comic book predecessor, running for over 160 episodes across seven seasons between 1996–2003, establishing Sabrina as the embodiment of the witch in Millennial pop culture.

Taking on the stylistic elements of Hart's previous long-running sitcom *Clarissa*, *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* is also a clear successor to *Bewitched* (1964–72). All witches need an iconic gesture that indicates to the audience that magic is being done, and while not quite as impressive as Samantha's nose twitch, Sabrina keeps her signature finger point to hex from the comic series, but this time she gets some TV CGI magic to add some sparkle to her spell casting. Aunts Hilda and Zelda are no longer old hags in pointed hats, but match Sabrina in adhering to modern beauty standards. Salem is given an expanded backstory to explain why Sabrina has a talking cat — something that was taken as a given in the comic series — which introduces the concept of witch law and justice to the narrator as the audience learns Salem has been

transformed into a cat by the Witches Council for magical crimes. Millennial Sabrina is a good witch, not in aberration of witch nature but as part of it. Like mortals, witches are capable of good and bad.

As one would expect of a series with such a long run, characters within the entire show are somewhat inconsistent. However, what the show does establish with consistency is the blueprint for a young heroine's journey in finding herself and her identity, growing with the audience from high school teen into adulthood. This is, at least in part, influenced by Hart's previous role as Clarissa, and in many ways Sabrina is just Clarissa with magic powers at first. However, much of the narrative drive is inherited from Comic Sabrina with the focus on the protagonist's relationships with her friends and family and the tension created by being a witch trying to live a normal teenage life.

Unlike Comic Sabrina, Millennial Sabrina is allowed some character development. After discovering that she's a witch, Millennial Sabrina is depicted studying magic alongside chemistry and had an opportunity to improve over time that Comic Sabrina was not afforded. Indeed, Millennial Sabrina's narrative arc includes studying to obtain her witch's licence and subsequently mentoring another young witch to help her gain her own licence (Seasons 2–5) before following Sabrina as she moves out of her home with her aunts to go to college. The final season ends with Sabrina reconciling with Harvey and riding off into the proverbial sunset, with Harvey fully aware that Sabrina is a witch.

It is in this, as noted by Bernice M. Murphy in her exploration of suburban American gothic TV, that Sabrina and other female-led supernatural series from the late 1990s to early 2000s like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Charmed* move on from the depiction of the witch as perpetually in conflict with her own nature: 'It is also seldom suggested that she will forsake her powers once she meets the right guy. It may be difficult, shows such as *Sabrina*, *Buffy* and *Charmed* seem to suggest, but today's young witch truly can have it all, so long as she uses her powers for benevolent purposes' (Murphy 2009). Millennial Sabrina displays the feminist ideals of her time period and is the embodiment of 90s Girl Power. Along with her fellow TV witches, she functions as a metaphor for the specific complexities of female maturation in modern society (Rockwell 1999). Indeed, Hart's decision to go from the preteen Clarissa to the teenage Sabrina was a calculated career move to carry her existing audience with her to her next project. Hart credits the quick success of *Sabrina* to the audience's reception (Smith and Hart 2020).

The problem with this type of feminist progress, as hinted at by Murphy's caveat in the preceding quotation, is that this progress comes at a price. In her drive to have it all, something not an option to her predecessor, the teen witch ends up restricted to using her power 'for the purpose of good'. Not in and of itself an issue, but as Sabrina's repeated clashes with the diktats of the Witches' Council shows, the arbiters of good are external to the self. Full self-determination is still curtailed by society, and I would argue that it is not coincidental that as the teens of the late 90s matured into 21st century women

they grappled with the fact that second-wave feminism did not quite manage to deliver the liberation it strove for. While Millennial Sabrina's clashes with the Witches' Council is generally played for laughs — in the early seasons Drell, the head of the Council, is played by real-world magician Penn Jillette and the impending punishment for ever seeing her mortal mother after her 16th birthday is for her mother to be turned into a ball of wax — Millennial Sabrina nevertheless tries to keep these two opposing aspects of her life in equilibrium but by following the rules.

Horror Sabrina

Into this context steps a new X-rated *Archie Horror* comic and hot on its heels a new incarnation of Sabrina to match. Aguirre-Sacassa's Horror Sabrina first debuts, fittingly, in comic form but with a distinct change in style from Comic Sabrina and her offshoots with one exception — *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2014) takes its stylistic lead from its namesake comic anthology *Chilling Adventures in Sorcery as Told by Sabrina* (1976) with a more realistic, sketchy style than the heavy cartoon line work of *Sabrina the Teen-Age Witch*. Horror Sabrina keeps her status as half witch, half mortal but in this reimagining we meet her in advance of her 16th birthday with her very much aware of her hybrid nature and magic powers. In contrast to Millennial Sabrina, Horror Sabrina has not been raised in ignorance of her nature and is depicted as powerful from the depiction of her first magical acts in issue #1 and as willing to use her powers to defend (and even avenge) herself against school bullies as her aunts Hilda and Zelda are (Aguirre-Sacassa and Hack 2014).

As Aguirre-Sacassa transposes his Horror Sabrina from page to screen in the Netflix adaptation (2018–20), some of the out-and-out horror of the comic is initially dialled back and some of the naiveite from Sabrina's previous incarnations is reintroduced. As with the character's origins, Horror Sabrina follows on from the success of Archie and the gang aired on CW the previous year in *Riverdale*. Fans had anticipated at least a Sabrina cameo, but Netflix stepped in to capitalise on the resurgence in interest by launching Chapter 1 of *Chilling Adventures* on Halloween in 2018. The series cast Kiernan Shipka in the lead role, an already award-winning actress for her role in *Mad Men*, which she started working at the young age of eight. There is a striking resemblance between Hart's and Shipka's acting career, with both having grown up on screen to an extent. In many ways, Shipka is an obvious and worthy successor to Hart.

Coming of Age and Defining the (Female) Self

What can be seen from the preceding review of the development of this character is that at the heart of Sabrina's lasting popularity is the way she creates space for girls to explore their identity and self-image as they mature into

womanhood. As Dianca London Potts observes in her 2018 review of the first season:

> The character of Sabrina has always served as something of a role model for young women navigating the perplexing and often unfair imperatives of teen girlhood, but Netflix's update is much more than that. Like Hecate, Lilith, Isis, and Persephone, Sabrina is divine in her own right, and the voice of this dark, provocative, and unnerving show sounds to me like a call to arms.
>
> (Potts 2018)

Here Potts identifies the character's ability to act as a guide for young teens but goes on to point out that particular incarnation of the character as having more power than her predecessors by likening her to the goddesses of Greek myth Hecate and Persephone.

Chilling Adventures is painfully aware of its place within an established cannon, not only of the various incarnations of Sabrina but within wider pop culture, and frequent allusions and homages can be found throughout the show's run. At first these are focused on horror films and other contemporary supernatural shows, but as the characters (and actors) mature and develop, these expand to more literary and mythical allusions such as the appearance of Dorian Grey and the Fair Folk. Sabrina has a love for classic horror movies and our introduction to her is a fast pan in on her laughing at a jump scare during a screening of *The Evil Dead* while the rest of the audience is visibly disturbed. During this scene Sabrina reveals to the audience by voiceover that she is half witch, half mortal living between two worlds and on her 16th birthday must choose between them, and by signing her soul over to the Dark Lord she will forsake her mortal life. Framed at first as an act of teenage rebellion against the loss of her free will, Sabrina's decision sets off a cascade of events that uncover secrets and lies within the Church, revealing that all is not well in the coven, or within wider witch society.

This choice is something that Sabrina riles against as she resents the requirement to sign over her free will. In 'Chapter Two: The Dark Baptism', an exchange between Sabrina and Prudence reveals something of the tension between the witches and their Dark Lord. Sabrina reveals her reluctance to sign her name in the Book of the Beast because she wants both freedom and power. Prudence responds that the Dark Lord will never give her both as the thought terrifies him because 'He's a man, isn't he' (Aguirre-Sacassa 2014). In this small exchange the show introduces the issue that its entire narrative arc interrogates, and it is at its core a feminist interrogation of the position of woman in a society governed by patriarchy. Regardless of whether this interrogation comes to a successful conclusion or falls short of proposing a viable route out of a subjectivity defined by men, the depiction of the women in *Chilling Adventures* as unwilling to maintain the status quo, to push the boundaries of not only the male leaders in society but also each other,

represents an important development in the way the figure of the teen witch can be a guide for the actual trials and tribulations of adolescence. In this endeavour the show builds female relationships that are not idealised but shown with authenticity. An early episode that does this successfully is 'Chapter Seven: Feast of Feasts', where Sabrina and Prudence again debate the will of the Dark Lord. Sabrina attempts to persuade Prudence that her crowning as Queen of the Feast, a cannibalistic ritual within the Church of Night where the congregation devours the flesh of the girl chosen by the Dark Lord via lottery, is barbaric and that she has the freedom to choose not to go through with it. Interesting in its own right as a Gothic inversion of the holy sacrament of communion, the plot in this episode also opens up a wider discussion on faith and who has the ability to judge. At the episode's conclusion it is revealed that Lady Blackwood rigged the selection of Prudence as Queen because she is Father Blackwood's illegitimate daughter and thus a risk to his legitimate unborn heir. In parallel, Sabrina is forced to confront the realisation that Harvey is descended from a line of witch hunters. Both girls have to confront the reality that the men in their lives exert power over them that they cannot resist, and that is susceptible to corruption. Even the seemingly good men, like Harvey, can be complicit in the systematic oppression of women.

Sabrina's questioning of the Church's hypocrisy as well as her outsider view of its traditions not only makes her a proxy for the audience but marks the Church of Night as an able stand-in for conservative American Christianity. The patriarchal structure of the Church of Night makes even less sense in this context with witches generally more powerful than warlocks. It is here that Sabrina's humanity and her upbringing in the mortal realm seemingly clashes with the tenets of the Church of Night. However, it is important here to distinguish between Sabrina's nature as a witch and the teachings of the Church. While Sabrina is shown fighting against the Church and against the Dark Lord, the show is careful not to conflate the Church with the coven's magic. Sabrina is conflicted, not about being half witch/half mortal, but about the price that the Dark Lord extracts in the same way that she is critical of the sexual politics of the mortal realm. In the persecution of Susie (later Theo) Putnam by the jocks at Baxter High, Sabrina recognises a policing of gender and sexual identity that is at odds with the more progressive sexual mores of the Church of Night. While the scene where Sabrina, Prudence, Agatha, and Dorcas trick the jocks who are bullying Susie into engaging in sexual acts with one another has evident homophobic undertones, a more generous and forgiving reading could identify this as only problematic because the boys hold their heterosexual masculinity so tightly. Were they less rigid in their propping up of patriarchal gender norms, the threat from the witches would not be so effective.[4]

Crucially, it is therefore Sabrina's position as Other, as the outsider in both worlds, that affords her the perspective to challenge the different societal structures that are accepted by her peers. In recognising herself as outside of the subjectivity of both male-centric cultures, Sabrina (and the audience with

her) is at the stage of understanding that subjectivity in Western culture is constrained by what it is not (male), in accordance with Luce Irigaray's theory of sexual difference and female identity. In this potential, then, the early seasons of *Chilling Adventures* are an opportunity to explore what the female self could be outside of a male-defined subjectivity — specifically what the teenage female identity could be. The show explores this in a very different way to the failed 'having it all' of second-wave feminism evidenced by Millennial Sabrina. Whereas Millennial Sabrina attempted to find balance between her two opposing identities and appease the authorities in each of her two worlds, Horror Sabrina actively fights to challenge the established order, whether that is within the Church of Night or Baxter High. As Potts observes, 'Sabrina's rebellion and willingness to question authority cracks the Church's veneer, brings truth and secrets to the surface, and shifts her own definitions of community and solidarity in both of the realms she inhabits' (Potts 2018). Horror Sabrina's strengths lie in this community building, with the found family that crosses the cultural borders of mortals and witches. In the context of the current U.S. political climate, the real magic of the show is in this radical depiction of a diverse community able to come together and enact seismic change to the oppressive structures.

Despite bending to the Dark Lord's will at the conclusion of Part 1 in exchange for the power to save both the witches and the mortals from the return of the Greendale Thirteen,[5] Sabrina continues to chafe against the constraints the Dark Lord places on his followers. She continues to question his authority, even as it is revealed that she is his daughter and thus a Morningstar actively fighting against him. This father/daughter battle for power leads Sabrina to the revelation that she cannot kill her father, but she can contain him if she can create a demon trap complex enough. With Nick — a warlock — volunteering as tribute, the entire coven bands together to trap Lucifer in Nick's body.

It is from here that Sabrina's duality begins to start pulling her apart. The more she continues to try to live her life divided between her mortal and witch communities, the fracturing of her identity begins to have consequences. This culminates in the conclusion of Part 3 with two separate Sabrinas living separate lives thanks to a 'wibbly-wobbly-timey-wimey' paradox as Sabrina refuses to choose between her birthright as Queen of Hell and the life she has as a (mostly) normal teenager. This affords the show a delightful sequence with Sabrina Morningstar and Sabrina Spellman bopping along to Billy Idol's 'Dancing with Myself'. This splitting of the self is unsustainable, but the show's attempts to address this in Part 4 sag in the middle before ultimately killing off both Sabrinas by the finale.

Like the protagonist, as the expanded supernatural world moves into Lovecraftian horror, *Chilling Adventures* begins to spread itself too thin. Sabrina Spellman is banished from Hell and from ever seeing her other self again by the second episode, seemingly putting an end to the overabundance

of Sabrinas without them ever managing to get up to much in the way of mischief. The show then takes on a predictable Monster of the Week as we cycle through Lovecraft's Eldrich Terrors. These are disappointing, with the tentacular Weird seemingly defeated by little more than an internal rendition of 'Sixteen Going on Seventeen' from *The Sound of Music*, and even 'Chapter Thirty-Two: The Imp of the Perverse's' take on a *The Man in the High Castle*–style alternate reality cannot get the show back on track. By this point, it begins to feel like the show has lost its identity. However, the move to Lovecraftian horror fulfills a purpose that is not immediately evident, and the replacing of the clearly patriarchal threat from the Church of Night and the Dark Lord in Parts 1–3 with the amorphous and unstable Eldrich Terrors is a natural progression into postmodernism and the after-effects of breaking down authoritarian structures.

While it is in some ways disappointing that the direction of Sabrina as Persephone, high school teenager by day and Queen of Hell by night, does not come to fruition, this is in fact Horror Sabrina learning the lesson that Millennial Sabrina did not. The show feels like it has lost its identity in part because its protagonist has. In trying to be both Spellman and Morningstar by segregating her opposing desires, Sabrina takes the easy way out. However, she cannot sustain this and finds meeting up with her other self irresistible. Spellman and Morningstar try to maintain the separation of their realms by creating a pocket universe, but when that has to be repurposed into a prison for The Uninvited — the eighth Eldritch Terror — all the risks return.

Sabrina's fractured self kick-starts the apocalypse and she faces a reckoning with the family and friends she has been lying to since her separation into Sabrina Spellman and Sabrina Morningstar. Forced to confront the destruction she has caused by trying to maintain the dichotomy, Sabrina ultimately takes responsibility. Lovecraftian horror is, then, the perfect medium for the narrative of the final Part of Horror Sabrina's story. Buried secrets finally surface through the Eldrich Terrors as Sabrina confronts the consequences of maintaining her divided self and separating herself from her community and her identity. Sabrina's divided self is more reminiscent of Millennial Sabrina's failed second-wave feminism than the intersectionality of progressive 21st-century feminism. Considering the show's approach to found family, equality, and cross-cultural cooperation, it is perhaps no surprise that the Sentinels — three witches with the ability to Foresee — are black women.

Like Buffy before her, Sabrina Spellman sacrifices herself to save the world, but more importantly to save the people that she loves. Unlike Buffy, this apocalypse is personal. These are not external forces bent on destruction or domination, but crises of the individual. For the climate change generation, Horror Sabrina is the ultimate 21st-century heroine representing both the rebellious spirit of youth and the power of the community.

Notes

1 See Lou Ferrigno's appearance as a security guard in *The Incredible Hulk* (2008) or the archive footage of Arnold Schwarzenegger used in *Terminator: Salvation* (2009).
2 *Spider-Man* (2002), *Spider-Man 2* (2004), *Spider-Man 3* (2007).
3 *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012), *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* (2014).
4 This is a very forgiving reading, and not one that has a strong argument given the boy's evident lack of consent.
5 The witches who were sacrificed in the wake of the Salem witch trials by the coven's ancestors.

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17 'The Witch Forever Lives'

Redefining the Path for Empowered Final Girls in the Trilogy *Fear Street*

Bruna Foletto Lucas

Emerging as a distinct and enduring subgenre of horror in the latter half of the 20th century, slasher films have managed to both terrify and enthral audiences worldwide, captivating their imagination with a potent blend of suspense, gore, and psychological intrigue. With their roots reaching back to classic horror tales and folkloric narratives, these films have evolved into a distinct subgenre, characterised by a unique set of narrative tropes, visual aesthetics, and thematic explorations. In essence, the formula of the slasher film can be distilled to a straightforward premise: The slasher formula typically involves a masked killer stalking and systematically murdering a group of young characters, often teenagers, one by one (Dika 1987). Analysing the lens through which slasher films are interpreted, some perspectives cast this subgenre as profoundly misogynistic and socially regressive, particularly due to its tendency to dispatch young adults post their involvement in sexual activities and substance consumption (Dika 1987). This concern over the devolution of the genre is articulated by Wood (2003), who laments the trajectory of horror cinema. While horror cinema thrived as a vehicle for social commentary during the late 1960s and early 1970s, it later devolved into a formulaic framework during the late 1970s and the entirety of the 1980s, a shift that, in Wood's (2003, 170–3) view, demonstrated reactionary tendencies. Wood's argument underscores the role of the antagonist as an 'avenging superego', imposing traditional values upon rebellious adolescents, thereby enforcing societal conformity (Wood 2003, 173). The gender of the favoured victims and the visceral portrayal of their demise ignited discussions around gender dynamics and feminism, centring on whether slasher films propagate a harmful representation of female sexuality, and male animosity towards it. Indeed, Wood (2003, 173) categorises the initial wave of slasher films as either exemplifying 'violence against women' or falling into the 'teenie-kill pic' classification, effectively encapsulating the divisive discussions sparked by this subgenre's thematic and visual content.

Central to the discourse on slasher films, Clover's ([1992] 2015) contributions emerge as highly pertinent within the realm of horror scholarship, chiefly due to her formulation of the concept of the Final Girl. Corresponding to Wood's critical evaluation of 1980s horror cinema as endorsing conservative

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ideologies, Clover's perspective on slasher films bears similarities to this regressive outlook. She contends that these films align with a conservative political agenda, utilising the menacing figure of the superego-driven killer to punish defiant youth through violent acts. Building on the insights of several theorists, Clover's (2015, 42) analysis rests on the premise that the psychopathy of the antagonist is deeply intertwined with sexuality, both in its origin and its manifestation. This suggests that the killer, usually having suffered sexual abuse in their formative years, channels their rage towards women symbolically, often through acts akin to metaphorical rape. Unsurprisingly, Clover identifies the murder weapons wielded by these killers as phallic symbols, serving as 'personal extensions of the body that bring attacker and attacked into primitive, animalistic embrace' (Clover 2015, 32). Furthermore, Clover characterises the victims, regardless of their gender, as 'sexual transgressors' (Cover 2015, 33).

The chapter will navigate through these thematic landscapes, embarking on an exploration of the pivotal roles embodied by the Final Girls within the *Fear Street* trilogy (Janiak 2021a, b, c). Anchored by an analysis of the gaze in slasher films, the discussion will trace the transgressive and virginal attributes of characters, while also delving into the intriguing concept of killers as manifestations of the superego. As the analysis unfolds, the essay will propose that the *Fear Street* trilogy undertakes a purposeful reimagining of established slasher conventions. By interweaving these conventions with novel narrative elements, such as intra-female relationships, the trilogy meticulously engineers the preservation and triumph of the Final Girls. Through this unique blend of traditional and reconfigured elements, the essay contends that the *Fear Street* trilogy ingeniously reshapes the slasher paradigm, resulting in the ultimate survival and empowerment of its resilient protagonists.

Survival Mode: Behavioural Dynamics in Slasher Narratives

As previously mentioned, the late 1970s and 1980s marked a significant turning point for the horror genre, characterised by a pronounced regression that seemed to push back against the societal progress of the 1960s and early 1970s (Wood 2003). Wood notes that this shift was accompanied by the resurgence of traditional and patriarchal values (2003, 168). Similarly, Magistrale (2005, 149) contends that slasher films of this era functioned as a vehicle for asserting masculine dominance in a world perceived to be disrupted by women. Wood's analysis of 1980s slashers concurs, depicting these films as conservative narratives that intentionally safeguarded the virginal teens while concurrently punishing transgressive behaviour.

Within the realm of slasher film scholarship, Clover's writings contribute to a larger body of work that aligns with psychoanalytical and conservative interpretations of the genre. Despite criticisms of her psychoanalytical and general approach, her work adds weight to these readings. The concept of the

Final Girl emerged as an enduring archetype within slasher narratives. This figure, often the sole survivor, embodies the horrors she faces, demonstrating resilience and courage against the onslaught of violence. As described by Clover (2015, 35), she encounters the gruesome aftermath of her friends' deaths, experiences peril, and fights back against her assailant. Clover (2015, 35) identifies two distinct categories of Final Girls: Those who rescue themselves and those who require rescue. This distinction informs her nuanced perspective on the character's feminist implications.

Clover's characterisation of the Final Girl raises questions about her gender identity, role, and behaviour. She argues that the Final Girl, despite being the focal point of the film and a relatable figure, is notably distinct from her friends. Unlike her sexually active peers, the Final Girl often remains celibate, in line with conservative readings that reward good behaviour while punishing transgressions (39). However, Clover introduces an intriguing complication, asserting that the Final Girl is not fully feminine due to her boyish demeanour and active disposition. This masculine aspect serves to ease male viewers' identification with her, presenting a dual role that complicates her place in the genre (40).

Moreover, the portrayal of the Final Girl intersects with the dynamics of gender identification within the audience. Clover inadvertently assumes a predominantly male audience, overlooking potential sources of identification for female viewers. This oversight adds to her scepticism about the Final Girl's feminist potential, as she dismisses the subversive and empowering aspects that the character might offer to female spectators. Her conclusion, that the slasher film serves a predominantly male exercise rooted in phallocentrism, underscores her critique of the genre's gender dynamics.

Classic slasher films like *Halloween* (Carpenter 1978) and *Friday the 13th* (Cunningham 1980) exemplify the narrative dynamics analysed by Clover, wherein the central tension revolves around the preservation of the morally good Final Girl, Laurie Strode in *Halloween* and Alice Hardy in *Friday the 13th*, in contrast to the punishment of transgressive victims, such as Annie and Lynda from *Halloween* and Marcie Stanler and Brenda Jones from *Friday the 13th*. In these films, the Final Girl, often portrayed as sexually abstinent and morally upright, emerges as the lone survivor amidst a group of transgressive characters who engage in sexual activity, substance use, and rule-breaking. As the terror unfolds, the Final Girl navigates the unfolding violence, showcasing resourcefulness, intelligence, and an ultimately chaste demeanor that sets her apart from her ill-fated counterparts. This stark contrast reinforces the conservative undertones embedded within these narratives, suggesting that adherence to traditional norms and the avoidance of transgression are rewarded with survival, while deviations from such norms lead to the characters' gruesome demise.

Clover's theories, however, have been highly critiqued. Short (2006), for example, adopts a more positive view of the Final Girl. Departing from the sexist and misogynistic readings, Short (2006, 46) celebrates the character's

role as a symbol of authenticity and self-reliance. Short sees the Final Girl's refusal to succumb to drugs or sex as encouraging the message of remaining true to oneself instead of conforming to regressive notions of femininity. In contrast to the disappearance of male rescuers in recent films, the Final Girl's self-sufficiency and solo heroism emerge as significant themes in this revised interpretation, especially in the later instalments of the *Halloween* franchise, namely *Halloween H20* (Miner 1998) and *Halloween* (Green 2018) where Laurie Strode saves not only herself, but also others.

The portrayal of female transgression in slasher films is intricately connected to dynamics of seeing and desire. Scholars such as Williams (2015), Wood (2003), and Mulvey (2009) assert that the act of seeing and desire are closely intertwined. Characters adhering to sexual purity often find their vision deliberately constrained, with transgressive characters facing additional punishment as their ability to see is denied (Williams 2015, 18). The woman's gaze, consequently, becomes a subject of punishment as the narrative transforms her curiosity and desires into masochistic fantasies (Williams 2015, 19). In films like *Black Christmas* (Clark 1974), including its first remake (Morgan 2006), for example, when the female characters attempt to unravel the identity of the killer by searching for clues, their determination to gaze into the unknown only leads to their tragic demise. Despite their efforts to confront the threat, their pursuit of knowledge through vision becomes a catalyst for their ultimate downfall. On the other hand, the antagonistic slasher killers often cast their gaze upon their soon-to-be victims before the fatal strike, intensifying the sense of victimisation by reducing them to objects awaiting their demise. However, this objectification takes on an even more oppressive dimension when directed towards female characters. Frequently depicted as objects of sexual allure, these women's bodies become subjects of the gaze, adding a layer of titillation that compounds the oppressive nature of their impending doom. This is perfectly illustrated in Morgan's 2006 *Black Christmas*. In this film, the victims experience a heightened level of objectification and vulnerability before their demise. For instance, one scene features Lauren taking a shower, during which Billy, one of the killers, fixates his gaze upon her exposed body, amplifying the sense of sexualisation before the impending violence. Interestingly, the killers in this narrative retain their power of sight, using it to their advantage by puncturing holes in the walls and floors, allowing them to observe and manipulate the other characters without their knowledge. This strategic use of vision grants the killers an upper hand, accentuating the asymmetry of power dynamics and intensifying the sense of surveillance and control. Ultimately, this framework reduces the female character's agency and transforms her into a 'perfect object', devoid of her desires and agency (Williams 2015, 17). This notion perpetuates the idea that the woman, through her expression of curiosity and assertion of self, becomes complicit in her victimisation.

Evolving within the horror genre, Williams (2015, 33) identifies an increasing attribution of responsibility on women for the dangers they face, evident

in their heightened punishment for transgressive behaviour. Taylor (2010) presents an alternative view, framing female transgression as a challenge to societal norms of femininity rather than a straightforward corrupt act. Taylor (2010, 142) argues that such acts are perceived as immoral only when they deviate from society's notion of 'normal' female behaviour, maintaining existing gendered power dynamics. Through this lens, female transgression becomes synonymous with a violation of norms, particularly those that uphold gender-based power structures within society (ibid). Taylor's interpretation situates women who transgress as monstrous figures, disrupting established patriarchal roles. Such transgressions manifest through the rejection of conventional feminine duties, resistance to motherhood and wifehood, expressions of queerness, rebellion, and vocal opposition to injustice. This notion highlights the subversive potential of female transgression, challenging norms and destabilising traditional gender hierarchies (see also Creed 2022).

Having explored the intricate interplay of gender, societal norms, and power dynamics in the depiction of behavioural dynamics in slasher films, wherein the preservation of virginal characters and the punishment of transgressive figures serve as focal points, the chapter will now turn its attention to the *Fear Street* trilogy. In doing so, the chapter will delve into the three films of *Fear Street*, exploring how it reworks slashers' established conventions, ultimately shaping a new trajectory for the portrayal of Final Girl within the slasher subgenre.

Fear Street: New Avenues for the Final Girl

Transitioning beyond the foundational concepts laid out by Clover, it becomes evident that while her theories on the virginal Final Girl and the regressive nature of slasher films have greatly contributed to our understanding of the genre, they are not without limitations. The prevailing notion that slasher films are predominantly male-focused, characterised by female nudity for titillation, requires a critical re-evaluation to unveil the constraints these ideas impose on the subgenre's evolution and the nuanced portrayal of its characters. To comprehend the future trajectory of the slasher genre and the evolving potential of Final Girls, it is imperative to reconsider these established frameworks. A wave of feminist-infused slasher films, such as *It Follows* (Mitchell 2014), *Ready or Not* (Bettinelli-Olpin and Gillett 2019), *Black Christmas* (Takal 2019), *Slumber Party Massacre* (Esterhazy 2021), and the new *Halloween* trilogy (Green 2018, 2021, 2022), is actively challenging these conventions, reimagining and revitalising the role of Final Girls, infusing them with complexity, empowerment, and agency. The following will delve into the *Fear Street* trilogy as a case study, particularly focusing on the character of Sarah Fier (Elizabeth Scopel/Kiana Madeira), as it propounds a transformative paradigm for the Final Girl that liberates her from the confines previously delineated by Clover. This exploration will extend beyond Clover's singular perspective, drawing inspiration from theorists like Irigaray, whose

philosophical and feminist ideas have been embraced and applied within the realm of film studies, and Creed (2022), who revises and empowers her seminal ideas on the monstrous-feminine, thus offering a more inclusive and empowering framework for analysis. This exploration will involve probing the emerging importance of female transgression in ensuring character survival, while also re-evaluating traditional notions associated with the killers. Furthermore, this examination will spotlight the essential role of intra-female relationships, demonstrating their pivotal importance in forging a path towards the enduring triumph of the Final Girls, effectively becoming the bedrock of their survival and empowerment.

Embracing Transgression

According to Taylor (2010), the woman becomes monstrous as she overcomes the roles enforced upon her by the patriarchal order. This can manifest through her abandonment of conventional feminine duties, rejection of the roles of mother and wife, display of queerness, rebellion, and vocal opposition against injustices. She writes:

> That their acts are deemed criminal and pathological only insofar as they violate what society considers 'normal' behavior for women indicates that the true violation, the violation that matters, is not that the laws of society (i.e., murder), but of norms that, precisely because they are construed as immutable laws of nature, function to maintain prevailing (gendered) power relations within society.
>
> (142)

In films such as *Friday the 13th*, a recurring pattern emerges wherein female characters face dire consequences once they deviate from societal norms or transgress established roles. This pattern solidifies what has become known as the 'sex equals death' trope, a narrative motif that intertwines sexual expression with impending doom. Irigaray (2000, 122) writes that patriarchal culture inherently assumes the naturally and culturally different others to be of lower standing. Consequently, this cultural context fosters a collective political system marked by subjugation and hierarchy that is enforced through male control (Kristeva 1982, 70). Violence against female transgression is seen as male retaliation to ascertain male dominance and secure male power. Indeed, Taylor (2010, 125) writes that patriarchal societies have their own 'extra-legal mechanisms such as rape, domestic violence, sexual harassment, and gender itself in managing women's behaviour in ways that enforce their subordination'. This recalls Lurie's (1981–2) assertion of patriarchal threat of the non-phallic power. Lurie argues that patriarchy's response to the fear of woman's non-phallic power is to castrate the woman, thus Freud's theory of the castrated woman is not natural but constructed. She writes that in order to diminish the woman's power, men castrate/tame them and shape

them into fragile beings. According to Lurie (1981–2) the idea of the castrated woman is twofold: To magnify men's powers and in turn enlarge the importance attached to the phallus, and also to shape the woman into a domesticated and obedient version of herself to lessen male fears.

These attacks from patriarchy against women, Creed (2022, 13) argues, are precisely what have strengthened women's determination to instigate transformation. Creed explores this by drawing on Kristeva who writes on the idea of revolt. Kristeva's writings delve into the psychological and cultural dimensions of rebellion against established norms and structures. In the context of female transgression, the idea of revolt aligns with women's acts of defying societal expectations and challenging oppressive patriarchal systems. She writes that 'revolt is completely within being' (1982, 45). Therefore, it is through self-questioning (Creed 2022, 68) and through intimate revolt (Kristeva 2002, 5) that the woman undermines patriarchy and discovers her own subjectivity.

Female transgression, in its essence, involves the courageous act of breaking free from the confinements of prescribed roles and societal boundaries that have historically curtailed women's agency and autonomy. Transgression marks a deliberate departure from patriarchal limitations, a declaration of autonomy that challenges the very foundations of a patriarchal society. This notion finds a compelling embodiment in the narrative of the *Fear Street* trilogy, where transgression not only serves as a means for Sarah Fier and other characters to assert their subjectivity but also stands as a pivotal determinant of survival for themselves and those around them.

Looking Back

Within the realm of horror cinema, the portrayal of female transgression exhibits a recurrent framework, intricately interwoven with the complexities of looks and desire, as previously elucidated. As a result, it is hardly surprising that Sarah Fier defies conventional boundaries by venturing to assert her gaze. However, the shift in narrative trajectory here is profoundly compelling, for in contrast to earlier paradigms where such an audacious act could signify the character's downfall, *Fear Street* portrays this reclamation of gaze as a pivotal catalyst for the character's redemption and empowerment. Moreover, *Fear Street* employs the feminist gaze, as explored by Creed (2022):

> The feminist gaze is not a reversed male gaze, nor is it a disembodied look. The feminist gaze invokes all senses. It is compassionate and empathetic; it invites the spectator to situate herself in the place of the protagonist on the screen, to experience what the other is experiencing through affect. It is an all-embracing sensory gaze, one that understands the protagonist's daily life, emotions, relationships, bodily states, and desires. It sees and feels the whole person-details about the woman's life not

> normally presented to the male gaze: her contemplative moments, desires, scenes of intimacy, and moments of self-recognition. The gaze draws an intimate connection between the spectator's act of looking and internalization of what they are seeing and feeling in their bodily responses.
>
> (17)

Fear Street deftly harnesses the tenets of the feminist gaze, imbuing their narratives with a distinct transformative potency. In stark contrast to the traditional slasher film paradigm, where the killer's perspective often objectifies characters into mere instruments of horror, the feminist gaze operates as a counterforce that endeavours to restore subjectivity to the female characters. By inviting the viewer to empathetically position themselves within the protagonist's shoes, the feminist gaze fosters a profound connection through affective engagement. It transcends the limitations of a mere visual encounter, embracing a multi-sensory journey that explores the complex fabric of the character's everyday life — her emotions, relationships, bodily sensations, and aspirations. This gaze transcends the confines of the male-centric visual dynamics as it steers away from phallicised female representation, as previously advanced by Clover, and instead manifests an embrace of the character's interiority. Where earlier cinematic approaches may have reduced women to mere objects of fascination, this newfound perspective amplifies their humanity, affording them agency, depth, and authenticity.

Intra-female Relationships

Irigaray (1985) asserts that women cannot be effectively portrayed within frameworks established by men. She emphasises the need for women to reject the self-centred and repressive nature of the masculine symbolic (see also Cixous 1976). Irigaray, similarly to Mulvey (2009), argues that in the male symbolic realm, women are relegated to symbols devoid of agency, demoted to the role of the male other (Bainbridge 2008, 19). Irigaray (1985) maintains that society is a between-men arrangement and wilfully excludes between-women culture, separating women from one another and erasing the possibility of women having a culture of their own. Elaborating on Irigaray's concepts, Bainbridge writes:

> The feminine has been trapped within a mirroring function within phallocentrism, women have come to represent the reflection of the masculine to the masculine subject so that women and the feminine are denied, not in their own terms, but in relation to specifically masculine attributes such as the phallus. Women serve only to reflect back an image of the male subject to himself. The woman, then, never sees herself and representations of femininity depict elements of the feminine that reinforce notions of the masculine.
>
> (2008, 18)

Thus, Irigaray's argument revolves around the recognition that societies structured around male dominance have suppressed authentic connections between women, and emphasises the privilege of relationships between women, both vertically (mother-daughter) and horizontally (women with diverse identities). Irigaray contends that between-women relationships offer a significant avenue for women's empowerment, allowing them to establish their individual identities independent of male-centric norms. She argues that patriarchal societies have suppressed women's genuine communication and connection and that intra-female relationships provide a platform for women to share experiences and perspectives, subverting male-centric norms and promoting authentic self-expression. For Irigaray, between-women connections are instrumental in challenging the objectification and marginalisation of women within male-oriented frameworks, as they offer solidarity, validation, and support, enabling women to reject patriarchal constraints and assert their agency.

In essence, Irigaray highlights between-women relationships as pivotal in forging a new cultural landscape where women can define themselves on their own terms rather than as reflections of male norms. By nurturing bonds rooted in shared experiences and values, women contribute to the creation of a female symbolic realm that disrupts traditional power dynamics and nurtures a distinct female culture. As it will be illustrated next, *Fear Street* serves as a cinematic exemplar that aligns with and reinforces Irigaray's perspectives on the significance of intra-female relationships.

Sarah Fier: The Witch Forever Lives

The *Fear Street* trilogy presents an intriguing proposition, deeply interwoven with the essence of transgression, the feminist gaze, and intra-female relationships. The journey through the trilogy's portrayal of Sarah Fier's enduring journey unveils a collective feminist perspective that sheds profound light on the significance of female transgression as a pivotal survival mechanism. Departing from the established patterns set by prior Final Girls, who often derived their empowerment from conformity to societal norms, the trilogy constructs a fresh narrative — a canvas where transgression emerges as an empowering beacon, a crucial element for unlocking resilience and enduring strength. The following examination will delve into the transformative impact of Sarah Fier's transgressive actions, redirecting her trajectories and enabling her to confront oppressive forces while asserting her agency. Furthermore, the inquiry extends to the evolving perspectives of antagonists, the Goode characters, offering a reassessment that uncovers how transgression evolves into a disruptive force within the realm of horror. Shining a more focused light on the trilogy's significance, the essential role of intra-female relationships is illuminated. These bonds establish a refuge where shared transgressions find validation and amplification — a space in which the collective resilience of women fuels their perseverance against the constraints

imposed by patriarchal norms. Ultimately, the *Fear Street* trilogy heralds the emergence of a new era for the Final Girl — one that embraces transgression as a cornerstone of survival. Guided by a collective feminist perspective, the narrative reveals the empowerment of characters who challenge societal norms, cultivate bonds rooted in shared transgression, and emerge as an indomitable force against the horrors of patriarchal society. Sarah Fier, a central figure in the trilogy, is introduced as a victim of her community's witch hunt, unjustly accused and persecuted. Set across different time periods (part 1 is set in 1994, part 2 in 1978, and part 3 in 1666), the films explore the ripple effects of Sarah Fier's story on modern-day characters, binding events and perspectives across eras.

From the perspective of Deena (Kiana Madeira), in the first instalment, the curse of Sarah Fier haunts the town of Shadyside, with the possessed wreaking havoc by going on a killing spree targeting fellow residents. Sarah Fier's presence is introduced as that of an evil spectre, casting the townsfolk into a state of helplessness. However, this portrayal merely scratches the surface of her complexity, as the subsequent films delve deeper into her character and actions. The second film transports the viewer to a different time period, shedding light on a single instance of the town's ongoing struggle with the curse in 1978, from the perspective of Ziggy (Sadie Sink). It is in the third film that the trilogy's focus on transgression reaches its zenith. The year 1666 serves as a pivotal point, unveiling Sarah Fier's life and the circumstances that led to her persecution. Within her own community, rumours about her lesbianism circulate, leading to unjust accusations of causing misfortunes. Here, the concept of transgression becomes multidimensional — Sarah Fier's defiance against societal norms is compounded by her queerness, making her a target of oppressive forces.

Amidst this exploration, Creed's notion of the feminist gaze finds resonance in the *Fear Street* trilogy. The trilogy redefines the gaze as a powerful mechanism for understanding and challenging the status quo. Unlike the traditional horror film paradigm where the gaze is often used to objectify or victimise, the trilogy empowers the gaze as a means of revelation and empowerment. In the context of the films, Sarah Fier's gaze takes on a transformative role, as she channels her perspective through Deena, guiding her towards a profound understanding of her own identity and the historical events of 1666. By channelling her knowledge and experiences, Sarah Fier empowers Deena to transcend surface-level perceptions and delve into the hidden truths that shape their reality through their shared feminist gaze. As a result, Deena is equipped with the insights necessary to confront the antagonist in the film, ultimately becoming the catalyst for saving herself and the other characters from danger. This dynamic underscores how Sarah Fier's gaze serves as an instrument of revelation, not only unveiling the past but actively shaping the course of events and the characters' agency in the present narrative. In a genre known for punishing the act of looking, the *Fear Street* trilogy embraces the feminist gaze as a way to subvert the norm and reclaim the narrative power of sight.

In slasher films, the antagonists have consistently assumed the form of patriarchal monsters whose motives extend beyond mere brutality and terror (Wood 2003; Magistrale 2005). These figures are symbolic embodiments of a patriarchal order seeking to uphold its dominance by eradicating those who dare to deviate from its norms. This is strikingly evident in the modus operandi of these antagonists, who target teenagers engaging in behaviours that challenge traditional values — be it indulging in sexual encounters or experimenting with substances. Their murderous actions are not solely driven by a thirst for violence, but rather, they serve as a chilling enforcement of patriarchal control, erasing those who threaten the status quo. The recurring cycle of these monsters surviving or resurrecting in sequels further solidifies their role as custodians of patriarchal oppression, perpetuating a narrative where deviation from the norm becomes synonymous with death. However, the *Fear Street* trilogy disrupts this pattern by presenting an alternative trajectory. In a notable departure from the traditional horror narrative, the killers within the *Fear Street* trilogy do not attain the status of glorified, enduring villains. Instead, their eventual defeat marks a significant departure from the sustained malevolent presence seen in the likes of Michael Myers (*Halloween*) or Jason Voorhees (*Friday the 13th*). This shift in narrative structure holds profound implications, reflecting a conscious effort to break free from the cyclical pattern of patriarchal violence that has long pervaded the horror genre. The *Fear Street* trilogy, in particular, peels back layers to unveil the insidious nature of male dominance, often achieved through the scapegoating of women. Across generations, the male members of the Goode family perpetuate a demonic pact to further vilify Sarah Fier, utilising her as a means to maintain their own authority. This calculated manipulation underscores the fragile nature of the masculine order, echoing the insights put forth by Kristeva (1982) and Creed (1993). The film illuminates how the maintenance of patriarchal control hinges upon the vilification and victimisation of women, a strategy intended to reinforce male dominance. By neutralising these killers and dismantling their hold, the *Fear Street* trilogy confronts the deeply entrenched narrative of patriarchal power dynamics. This disruption of the cycle of violence signifies a profound shift towards a narrative where the monstrous is vanquished, and the overarching theme becomes one of empowerment, unity, and the reclamation of agency.

Lastly, central to this narrative are the intra-female relationships that serve as sources of strength and empowerment. The *Fear Street* trilogy underscores the critical significance of recognising and nurturing a shared female heritage, where collective experiences and shared struggles contribute to the resilience of women as they confront the constraints imposed by a patriarchal society. Deena emerges as a central figure whose connections span time and circumstance. As Deena seeks to expose the truth and confront the oppressive forces at play, Sarah Fier endows her with knowledge of the real events of 1666, and Deena must also unravel the events surrounding Ziggy in 1978, whose understanding of the past, similar to Sarah Fier's, becomes instrumental in

shaping the present. This intergenerational bond echoes the necessity of fostering connections that bridge the past and present, merging shared experiences to construct a more empowered future.

Moreover, Deena's reconnection with her ex-girlfriend, Sam (Olivia Scott Welch) takes centre stage, showcasing how relationships among women are not only crucial for survival but also for personal growth and empowerment. The very element — lesbian relationships — that led to Sarah Fier's vilification in 1666 finds its redemption in the narrative of 1994. Deena and Sam's relationship becomes emblematic of this evolution, reiterating that the support and strength garnered from these relationships transcend adversity, bridging the gap between generations and forging an unbreakable bond.

In essence, the narrative's emphasis on fostering existing relationships and kindling new ones speaks to the power of unity and shared knowledge. Just as Deena's understanding of Sarah Fier's and Ziggy's perspectives and historical insights are crucial, so too is the collective understanding of women's pasts, their struggles, and their triumphs. It is through this synergy that the *Fear Street* trilogy asserts the significance of nurturing both current relationships and historical awareness, a journey that reflects the continuous evolution towards a future where women stand united, their collective strength driving them towards liberation and empowerment.

From the ashes of traditional Final Girls emerges a new archetype — one that embraces transgression, queerness, and difference as sources of power. This new type of Final Girl is not confined by patriarchal norms; rather, she thrives on challenging them. She understands the significance of intra-female relationships and ensures the victory of herself and her fellow Final Girls in the face of adversity. This empowerment extends beyond individual films, as she is aware of her sisters' struggles throughout time and becomes the beacon that guides them towards triumph.

The *Fear Street* trilogy masterfully constructs a narrative where transgression becomes a driving force for survival, empowerment, and change. Sarah Fier embodies this spirit of defiance, her gaze and actions reshaping the horror genre's conventions. By dismantling traditional notions of evil, elevating female relationships, and ushering in a new era of Final Girls, the trilogy empowers characters to break free from patriarchal shackles and embrace their own agency, ultimately securing their victory over the oppressive forces that seek to define and control them.

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18 Last Jedi, Final Girl

Rey, Resistance, and the Future of *Star Wars*

Cathleen Allyn Conway

Introduction

The *Star Wars* franchise is not horror; it is not a series designed to elicit visceral responses of disgust or fear. But that is not to say that the tropes and conceits of the horror genre cannot be more widely applied. There are many intersections with science fiction, and as *Star Wars* is largely a hybrid science-fiction series incorporating elements of the space opera and family saga, with heavy nods to its influences of the works of Akira Kurosawa and J. R. R. Tolkein, a horror reading of the text is appropriate. In terms of the character Rey and her journey in the final three episodes of what has become known as the 'Skywalker saga' — *The Force Awakens, The Last Jedi*, and *The Rise of Skywalker* — a horror reading is necessary in determining how her character presents as a Final Girl.

The Skywalker Saga is influenced by Joseph Campbell's monomyth, or 'hero's journey', from his 1949 work *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, which uses Jungian archetypes in a template of storytelling that deals with a hero's transformation through adventure, crisis, and success. However, according to Payal Doctor: 'The shift towards female and other gendered protagonists in films, TV shows, and other media reveal that Campbell's model is male-centric and not truly universal':

> Rey's journey in *The Force Awakens* creates a revised heroine archetype that mirrors the diversity and isolation faced by people in modern society. Charting her own path, the contemporary heroine does not and cannot rely on society to help her on her journey, as in the case of Campbell's hero's journey, where the path for the hero is laid out by the extant myths and symbols of a society. These stories serve as guidelines on successfully navigating personal transformations and external challenges. Myths and symbols from the past no longer exist as guides for society due to the new challenges that diversity and technology bring. Contemporary hero myths must reflect modern challenges and choices in order to represent contemporary society.
>
> (Doctor 2017)

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Rey's journey in the *Star Wars* universe is both similar to and divergent from the series' previous protagonists, specifically, Luke Skywalker. They have similar origins in that Luke is left to his uncle Owen on Tattooine to be raised far from the Empire; Rey is left on Jakku in the Western Reaches ('That really *is* nowhere', as Luke Skywalker says in *The Last Jedi* [*Star Wars: The Last Jedi*, 2015]) to evade detection by her grandfather, Darth Sidius, the Emperor Sheev Palpatine.

And while Luke seeks out Obi-Wan Kenobe to deliver Princess Leia's message, Rey seeks out Luke at the end of *The Force Awakens*, only to be refused. She cannot rely on society to aid her on her journey — the Jedi Order is considered a myth during Rey's lifetime, and the only recognised Jedi master has disappeared. When Rey encounters Han Solo on the *Millennium Falcon*, she recognises his name as a smuggler, not the 'Rebellion general' or 'war hero' that Finn recognises (*Star Wars: The Force Awakens* 2015).

Rey cannot walk Luke Skywalker's path — she must chart her own, resisting the various calls to adventure and insisting she has to return to Jakku (*The Force Awakens*), allowing herself to be pulled to the Dark Side of the Force (*The Last Jedi*) and eventually reaching Exegol for the concluding battle (*The Rise of Skywalker*) on her own terms. When she encounters Luke's lightsaber for the first time, she hears Obi-Wan Kenobe call 'Rey … these are the first steps'. She is told by Maz Katana: 'Close your eyes. Feel it. The light … it's always been there. It will guide you' (*Star Wars: The Force Awakens* 2015). Luke was handed his father's lightsaber by Obi-Wan Kenobe and told: 'You must learn the ways of the Force' (*Star Wars* 1977). Luke benefits from two Jedi Masters before facing Darth Vader and the Emperor; Rey has only herself before Luke, and then Leia, take up the mantle as her Jedi Master (although there is an argument that Kylo Ren also functions in this role).

As Ann Larabee writes in the *Journal of Popular Culture*, 'with the recent boom in girl heroes, the hero's journey is undergoing renovation in the intersections among gender identities, narrative structure, and other formal patterns. Each iteration offers a way for us to think of myth anew' (Larabee 2016); therefore, as a character, Rey must also be examined on her own terms. Larabee writes:

> *The Force Awakens* introduces a girl hero, Rey … and places her in the milieu of the hero's journey, with similar dramatic actions and surrounding characters. The question is what happens when girl social identities meet typically male narratives. It's not enough to simply identify elements of *Hero of a Thousand Faces* in the cinematic story, but to see how these work for and against other structures like gender identity.
>
> (Larabee 2016)

It is not enough to examine Rey through the lens of the hero's journey, because the hero's journey does not account for women. Instead, we can look

to other genres to consider how Rey intersects with other theories, such as horror — a genre Star Wars occasionally borrows the language of — and trope that is the slasher film's Final Girl.

'You Have No Place in This Story': Locating Rey as Final Girl

In *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, Carol J. Clover coins the term 'final girl' and provides definition for the last survivor of the 'slasher' film, a subgenre of horror that was popular in the 1970s and 80s:

> The one character of stature who does live to tell the tale is in fact the Final Girl. She is introduced at the beginning and is the only character to be developed in any psychological detail. We understand immediately from the attention paid it that hers is the main story line. She is intelligent, watchful, levelheaded; the first character to sense something amiss and the only one to deduce from the accumulating evidence the pattern and extent of the threat; the only one, in other words, whose perspective approaches our own privileged understanding of the situation. … Her momentary paralysis in the face of death duplicates those moments of the universal nightmare experience — in which she is the undisputed 'I' — on which horror frankly trades. … She is by any measure the slasher film's hero.
>
> (Clover, 2015)

Rey embodies many of the Final Girl characteristics as outlined by Clover: She is young and virginal, she is the mechanic, she has a masculine name, and she repeatedly proves herself intelligent and resourceful:

> The Final Girl is boyish, in a word. Just as the killer is not fully masculine, she is not fully feminine — not, in any case, feminine in the ways of her friends. Her smartness, gravity, competence in mechanical and other practical matters, and sexual reluctance set her apart from the other girls and ally her, ironically, with the very boys she fears or rejects, not to speak of the killer himself. Lest we miss the point, it is spelled out in her name. … Not only the conception of the hero in *Alien* and *Aliens* but also the surname by which she is called, Ripley, owes a clear debt to slasher tradition.
>
> (Clover 2015)

So while Luke learned to fix used droids on Tatooine and harvest moisture while shooting womp rats with his friends, Rey learned how to speak multiple languages, survive from childhood alone on a desert junk planet, scraping together a living and developing skills as a pilot and mechanic through scavenging the nearby Graveyard of Ships (see Figure 18.1), Imperial war

Figure 18.1 Rey (Daisy Ridley) at her home on Jakku. *Star Wars: Episode VII — The Force Awakens*, directed by J. J. Abrams. (Lucasfilm Ltd.: 2015).

tech that crashed onto the planet. Her journey is not a boy hero's journey, and as such she requires examination through another lens. The shared characteristics of the slasher film's Final Girl provides a unique means of interrogation.

While she is not the girl who we follow from beginning to end in the Skywalker Saga — there is no female character that lasts the entire ten films — she does define the final trilogy, ensuring the survival and continuance of the Jedi Order. As Clover explains about the Final Girl, 'She's the character whose story we follow from beginning to end, and the one from whose vantage, even through whose eyes, we see the action; and it is she who, at the end of the film, brings the killer down (though more often by chance than intention)' (Clover 2015).

Locating Rey as Final Girl means examining the tropes Clover outlines. Clover says that 'the Final Girl of the slasher film is presented from the outset as the main character. … She is the Girl Scout, the bookworm, the mechanic' (2015), and Rey portrays these characteristics on first meeting, when the audience meets her 'at work', scavenging an Imperial wreck. Rey lives alone, near Niima Outpost but not within the settlement. She rides a repulsorlift speeder made of salvaged parts and lives in the troop compartment of an AT-AT Imperial walker wreckage. She has no friends or acquaintances beyond Unkar Plutt, who she sells parts to in exchange for food.

Clover also explains that 'the Final Girl is also watchful to the point of paranoia; small signs of danger that her friends ignore, she registers. Above

all she is intelligent and resourceful in a pinch' (2015), and these are characteristics Rey regularly displays. While eating alone outside her home — wearing a Rebellion pilot helmet — she rescues BB-8 from the net of Teedo, another scavenger, who she says just wants BB-8 'for parts' and 'has no respect for anyone'. Rey argues with Teedo in his alien language and does not need to fight him in order to claim BB-8, despite Unkar Plutt offering '60 portions' for the droid, causing others in the Outpost to gasp. Later in *The Force Awakens*, she impresses Han Solo and saves Finn from rathars by tinkering with the *Millenium Falcon*.

Clover argues that 'unlike her girlfriends [the Final Girl] she is not sexually active', describing other Final Girls as 'not available' and 'pointedly turn[ing] down a date, and we are given to understand that she is … she is unattached and lonely but declines male attention' (2015). When Finn meets Rey on Jakku, he grabs her hand when the stormtroopers spot them, and she shouts: 'What are you doing? Let go of me! I know how to run without you holding my hand!' Later, when Rey insists she has to return to Jakku, Finn says: 'Hey, Rey. … Why go back? You got a family? You got a boyfriend? A cute boyfriend?' to which she replies, 'None of your business, that's why' (*Star Wars: The Force Awakens* 2015). When Rey and Ren unexpectedly communicate via the Force, her voice catches when she sees he is half-dressed, and cannot meet his eyes as she says, 'Do you have something, a cowl or something you could put on?' (*Star Wars: The Last Jedi* 2017). She scoffs when he refuses. It is not enough that she declines the romantic male attention she receives — she actively scorns potentially sexual intimacy.

When she does embrace even the slightest touch, it is only after passing through the Dark caverns on Ahch-To, where she was faced with the Dark within her. As Jude Ellison Doyle writes in *Dead Blondes and Bad Mothers*, 'Women are still drawn to the black mirror of violence — trying to puzzle it out, to inscribe a narrative on its troublingly opaque surface' (Doyle 2019), and this is what Rey literally encounters in the Ahch-To caverns. In a moment of vulnerability, she discloses to Ren that she has 'never felt so alone'. He responds, 'You're not alone' (*Star Wars: The Last Jedi* 2017), and it is this moment of emotional vulnerability and trust that prompts her to reach out through the Force to take Ren's hand, resulting in Luke Skywalker catching them and destroying her shelter.

In *Fourth Wave Feminism in Science Fiction and Fantasy Volume 1: Essays on Film Representations, 2012–2019*, Fernando Gabriel Pagnoni Berns, Canela Ailén Rodrigues Fontao, and Maria S. Zárate write that the Final Girl is 'beautiful but modest in appearance, strong, resourceful, virginal, and friendly, with no vices of any kind', and 'she survives not only because she is strong, but also because she is … good', (Berns *et al*. 2019) and this argument is evidenced in Rey's behaviour. This moment of romance and sexual tension is earned through her desire to not seduce Kylo Ren, but to save Ben Solo from the Dark Side, because Rey is 'good'. But as Doyle writes, 'The Final Girl survives, but only by erasing her own sexuality. It's when a girl leans into

violence of desire, goes out to let a stranger eat her in the pale moonlight, that she becomes a monster' (Doyle 2019), and we see this the more Rey engages with Kylo Ren.

'You Know I Can Take Whatever I Want': Surviving the Unsurvivable

Rey has demonstrated repeatedly through her skills and general 'good'-ness that she can survive the unsurvivable: From her murderous grandfather, Emperor Palpatine; her childhood alone on Jakku; and the many encounters she has with Kylo Ren, the 'killer' in this scenario, who later sacrifices himself for her survival. But it is this Rey-Ren relationship that most echoes the symbiotic dynamic between the killer and the Final Girl, and where the final three episodes of the franchise borrow most heavily from the language of slasher films.

We know there is gendered violence in the *Star Wars* universe. The lack of engagement with the reality of the violence women endure is a reflection of how women, in general, are not seen as part of the audience for this franchise, or seen in-universe beyond sexualised objects for the male gaze (Leia as slave to Jabba the Hut, who she later strangles with her own chains) or victims whose deaths cause characters to self-actualise (Padme, who dies in childbirth; Shmi, who as a freed and married slave is later murdered where her former master-husband lives).

The filmmakers' failure to eliminate or even acknowledge this violence is shown by Rey failing to exhibit any fear being the one woman among her various ragtag groups of men. Men outnumber women in the *Star Wars* universe: 'Not counting Leia's lines, in the 386 minutes of the three films, there are 63 seconds of female speech' (Silva, 2022). Han Solo's ham-fisted yet predatory pursuit of Leia in *The Empire Strikes Back*, which we are to read as 'flirting' despite Leia's reluctance and retreat, is the most female unease in these male-dominated spaces that we as audiences see, and in this regard it is played for laughs — until Kylo Ren captured Rey in *The Force Awakens*. This is at odds with the slasher film, which, as Doyle says, is:

> a vision of the universe in which women and female bodies are everywhere, and female sexual desire experimentation, or trust is punished with violation, mutilation, and death; where only a few exceptionally lucky, paranoid, and resourceful women can go for long without being attacked, and even those women are emotionally traumatised by the nonstop violence they're forced to witness.
>
> (Doyle 2019)

We as audiences come to expect certain tropes of women on-screen, one of which is the Final Girl. The on-screen wish fulfillment that male audiences experience in watching Luke become a hero is long overdue by the time Rey appears, and the decades of violence against women in reality and in cinema adds a layer of complexity to her journey in this franchise.

Kylo Ren first encounters Rey as prey: She is running from him as he hunts her in the woods on Takodana, threatening her with a lightsaber to the neck before trespassing her thoughts (see Figure 18.2). It is here that Kylo Ren is established as 'the killer'. As Clover describes: 'The killer is often unseen or barely glimpsed during the first part of the film, and what we do see, when we finally get a good look, hardly invites immediate or conscious empathy. He is commonly masked' (2015). The mask for Ren is highly symbolic, an indication of his insecurity and fragility, and a telegraphing to the audience of all the things he wishes to be but cannot ever achieve — 'his own fragility is shown to haunt him with the fear that he will never be as strong as his grandfather, whose melted, deformed mask he turns to for guidance' (Veneto 2017) — but it also indicates the possibility that Ren, too, will 'turn' and overthrow his evil master, as Darth Vader did in *Return of the Jedi*.

It is when Rey wakes in captivity in the interrogation chamber on Ren's ship that the subversion of the tropes begins, when 'Kylo Ren's violently unstable sense of entitlement takes its most grotesque form' (Veneto 2017). 'You still want to kill me', he observes, to which she replies, 'That happens when you're being hunted by a creature in a mask' (*Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, 2015). Ren responds by taking his mask off and exposing his face to Rey, again subverting expectations outlined by Clover as 'hardly invit[ing] immediate or conscious empathy', because Kylo Ren is not monstrous--*looking*. This is a moment that is as disarming and confusing for her as it is for the audience, which is used to seeing a monster until the man reveals himself, not the monster in fact being *the man*. The man in question, with his full hair and lips; soft, low voice; and soulful eyes, is not entirely unattractive; Rey's intake of breath indicates she, too, has noticed this, and afterwards has difficulty meeting his gaze.

Figure 18.2 Kylo Ren (Adam Driver) hunting Rey in the woods on Takodana. *Star Wars: Episode VII — The Force Awakens*, directed by J. J. Abrams. (Lucasfilm Ltd.: 2015).

Nicole Veneto writes that:

> the relationship between Ren's inner-self (his fears of failing to achieve an idealized masculinity) and the mask he wears are important to understanding how he views himself within the Oedipal dynamic … the falseness of this mask runs deeper for Kylo Ren. It simultaneously serves to hide his weaknesses, shielding his vulnerabilities behind a masquerade of masculinity.
>
> (2017)

So his removal of it in this scene suggests he thinks he has nothing to fear from Rey.

Clover writes that in slashers, there exists an 'assumption that the sexes are what they seem: that screen males represent the Male and screen females the Female; that this identification along gender lines authorises impulses toward violence in males and encourages impulses toward victimisation in females' (2015), and the moment before Ren begins to invade Rey's mind, when he states, 'You know I can take whatever I want', is the first time in the *Star Wars* universe that male violence has been enacted by a human male. Doyle writes that 'this is how sex looks in a world that views male desire as a form of dominance and violence. Virgins are untouched like a toy still in its original box … there to be used, played with, emptied, consumed' (Doyle 2019) — and this is how Ren approaches Rey in the interrogation scene (see Figure 18.3).

The sound design suggests the invasion, and Ren's lines, uttered so close to Rey's ear while she is trying to squirm away from him as much as the restraints allow — 'You're so lonely.… At night, desperate to sleep' — are uttered as a caress before she forces him out of her consciousness. The scene's 'eerily [resemblance to] the dynamics of sexual assault' (Veneto, 2017) is furthered

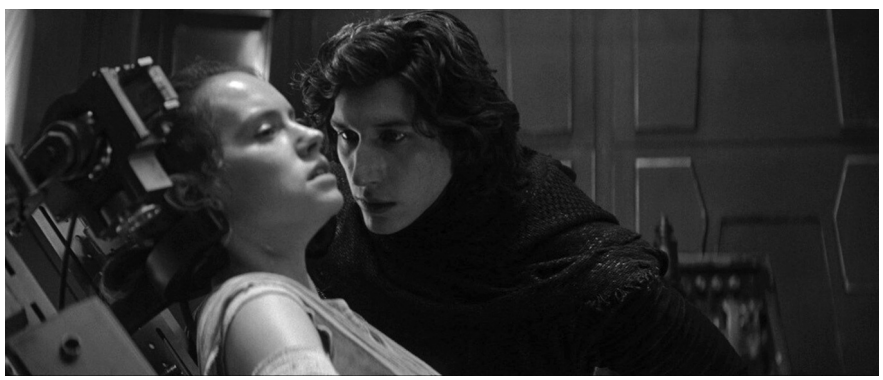

Figure 18.3 Kylo Ren interrogates Rey. *Star Wars: Episode VII — The Force Awakens*, directed by J. J. Abrams. (Lucasfilm Ltd.: 2015).

when Ren says 'don't be afraid. I feel it too' before Rey is able to reverse his power and penetrate *his* mind instead.

Doyle says the Final Girl is appealing 'because she's able to rise above all the sexual humiliation meted out to other, lesser characters' (Doyle 2019), and this humiliation is hinted at in the interrogation scene, but with a twist: As Ren attacks, he teaches Rey how to use *her* own Force powers, inadvertently empowering her to defend herself, and eventually free herself from his custody. She humiliates *him*. Doyle argues that 'the vision of sex put forth by slashers' is that 'men penetrate, women are penetrated; men are predators, women are prey; men desire and pursue sex, women flee or become victims of men's desires' (Doyle 2019), but in this scene, despite Ren penetrating, and Rey being penetrated, his desires are thwarted, and she penetrates him *back*.

Veneto writes that 'at times, Ren bears more likeness to a hot-tempered teenage boy than a fearsome villain, particularly when he feels his power has been threatened' (Veneto 2017), but this is what makes him so dangerous. As Kayti Burt argues:

> Kylo Ren is a character who is easy to make fun of (which also happens to be his worst nightmare), but that doesn't take away from his power as a villain. He is scary because he reminds us of the real-world men whose anger and frustration and sadness have curdled into something ugly inside of them, causing them to lash out at those they perceive to have robbed them of what they deserve.
>
> (2018)

What Ren feels he deserves, throughout, is 'possession of [The Force Awakens'] phallic symbol, Luke Skywalker's lightsaber' (Veneto 2017), and as Veneto further writes:

> As a white man caught within a distinctly racialized and gendered Oedipal dynamic, Kylo Ren's turn to the dark side is depicted as an attempt to reclaim his lost patriarchal right to the Phallus through fulfilling the Oedipal cycle. In his attempts to do so, Kylo Ren embodies the fragility of white men's masculinity through his actions — largely, his immature sense of entitlement to power — and his failure to possess the Phallus itself — Luke Skywalker's lightsaber.
>
> (2017)

Except it is not Luke's saber so much as it is Anakin's. In *The Force Awakens*, 'that lightsaber was Luke's. And his father's before him. And now it calls' to Rey, who, alongside Finn, uses the lightsaber in a battle with Kylo Ren, each landing a blow to disfigure him. As Veneto writes:

> Despite killing his own father at the film's climax, Kylo Ren still fails to possess the phallic, patriarchal power he desires, as Luke Skywalker's lightsaber — which should be his under traditional patriarchal

> inheritance — not only falls into the hands of the Black, renegade Stormtrooper Finn, but ultimately chooses Rey, a force-sensitive female scavenger, to wield it.
>
> (2017)

It was not enough for Ren to penetrate his own father with the phallus he made, the one representing a new patriarchal order — he had to have the one made by his grandfather, Anakin Skywalker: 'Ren's desire to reclaim his lost patriarchal right over the galaxy places him within a distinctly racialised and gendered Oedipal dynamic, reasserting his entitlement to phallic power through challenging those he deems unworthy of wielding it: faulty father figures, men of color, and women' (Veneto 2017).

Doyle writes that 'Losing your virginity is equivalent to losing your life in [slashers], because penetration is seen as a means of conquering or humiliating the penetrated; to open your body to another person is to bleed, suffer, and die' (Doyle 2019) — and we see a mimesis with Kylo Ren. He impales his father, he impales his mentor — even entire celestial bodies do not escape being 'penetrated' by the First Order in these films — and eventually, he is impaled by Rey with his lightsaber. In this way, the 'Reylo' dynamic is the Final Girl/murderer relationship played in reverse, in which the murderer is redeemed even as he sacrifices himself to save her, even after she penetrated him with 'his own' weapon.

Surviving Ever After

Doyle tells us that 'slashers are the place where sex becomes death becomes sex becomes death, where a knife is never just a knife… [slashers] envision a world in which every girl is a sacrifice on her way to the altar; whole, sealed, and unbloodied … until a man comes along to break her open' (2019), and Rey's story in *Star Wars* shows us how she functions as Final Girl.

Just as a knife is never a knife, and sex becomes death, so too does the climactic battle scene in *The Last Jedi*, when Kylo Ren frees Rey through killing Supreme Leader Snoke with Rey's lightsaber, the Skywalker saber that Ren considers to be his birthright — it is the only time Ren ever handles the lightsaber in this form. This scene takes place in a red throne room, not unlike a womb, and we as an audience get a sense of this being not only a consummation of the relationship between Ren and Rey — the 'enemies to lovers' trope, because fighting is never just fighting — but also the potential conception of something new, something that will eventually 'birth' as a new matrilineal Jedi line.

Rey and Ren battle for the Skywalker lightsaber, and climatically break it, including the kyber crystal inside. Each lays claim to this saber: Ren by birth and Rey because it chose her. As Veneto writes: 'Positions of power in the First Order are primarily held by white men, subjects whom psychoanalysis designates as the traditional holders of power, represented by the Phallus'

(2017). In context of this argument, we see in the aforementioned scene that neither of them possess the Skywalker phallus after this battle — as Ren lays unconscious in the throne room, Rey grabs the pieces and escapes in Ren's father's ship, the Millennium Falcon, and returns to Leia, Ren's mother.

The fact the saber broke — right down to the crystal — is symbolic in the break of the patriarchal line. At the end of *The Last Jedi*, safely aboard the *Millennium Falcon* escaping Crait and Ren, Rey asks, 'How do we build a Rebellion from this?' Leia touches her wrist, holding the broken remains of Luke's lightsaber, and says, 'We have everything we need'. From this moment, Leia takes on the role of Jedi Master and assumes Rey's training.

Rey later discovers that not only did Leia know Rey was a Palpatine, but also that she chose to stop her own Jedi training because she saw another path, one that hinges upon Rey, the start of a new, matriarchal Jedi line, and the redemption of her son Kylo Ren. When Kylo Ren says 'You have no place in this story', he does not realise that his mother ensured that not only does Rey have a place, but also that the story will *become* Rey's.

Between *The Last Jedi* and *The Rise of Skywalker*, Rey rebuilt the Skywalker saber in its original form rather than crafting her own, which is part of the Jedi training. And Luke Skywalker, as a 'Force Ghost', confers Leia's lightsaber onto Rey. Veneto argues that:

> This flow of power is illustrated by the Oedipal nature of lightsaber inheritance, which sees this phallic Jedi weapon passed down from father to son or from master to apprentice. Furthermore, the way Jedi inherit these signifiers of masculine, phallic power — the Phallus — determines which side of the Force they align themselves with.
>
> (2017)

Rey, who struggled with the pull to the Dark while aboard the wreckage of the second Death Star, now holds both blue Skywalker sabers, signifying not only her rejection of the Dark Side, but also bringing balance to the Force through the power of the masculine and the feminine.

As Veneto argues: 'Tasked with either overthrowing or implicating themselves within the patriarchal regime of the dark side, protagonists and antagonists alike are faced with having to confront their own father figures in the process' (2017). Rey's 'father figures' are Han Solo, who bequeathed his ship to her, and Luke Skywalker, who gifted her his sister's lightsaber. Rey's assumption of the lightsaber is an assumption of the phallus, an affront to the Emperor, the Empire, the first order, and the Final Order, and the fact that in *Rise of Skywalker* she wields two further complicates this. When communing with 'all the Jedi', standing to face Palpatine a final time, Rey uses both 'Skywalker' sabers — the rebuilt Anakin/Luke saber and Leia's saber. Crucially, she reaches for Leia's saber first, the gift of the patriarchal power symbol of this franchise, but it was passed from woman to woman to literally overthrow the patriarchy of the Sith and the Final Order. As Palpatine blasts

Figure 18.4 Rey fights Kylo Ren in his quarters, destroying the mask of Darth Vader. *Star Wars: Episode VII — The Force Awakens*, directed by J. J. Abrams. (Lucasfilm Ltd.: 2015).

Rey with the power of 'all the Sith', she reaches for Luke's saber, crosses both like the shared chromosome X, and proclaims herself 'all the Jedi' — striking down her grandfather not out of hate, but out of sacrifice (see Figure 18.4). After all, Palpatine is the only living blood relative she has, one she has spent her entire life hoping to find. She has also sacrificed herself in the process.

Clover writes that with regards to slashers, 'The tale would indeed seem to be one of sex and parents. The patently erotic threat is easily seen as the materialized projection of the viewer's own incestuous fears and desires. It is this disabling cathexis to one's parents that must be killed and rekilled in the service of sexual autonomy' (2015). In the case of Rey and *Star Wars*, her own parents hid her on Jakku to avoid Palpatine, as they also wanted him dead. In order for Rey to grow up, indeed, in order for Rey to *live*, she must kill her 'father' — her grandfather — which she does through not only the Force and the combined power of all the Jedi, but also through the bond she forged with Ben Solo. And in this way, Ben Solo finds his own redemption.

During the battle on the remains of the Death Star, Rey impales Kylo Ren with his own lightsaber, exactly how Ren impaled Han Solo in *The Force Awakens*. She has, as Clover writes, 'not just manned herself; she specifically unmans an oppressor whose masculinity was in question to begin with' (2015). They move from a confrontation in the remains of the throne room, where Luke spared the life of his father, Darth Vader, in defiance of Emperor Palpatine and a turn to the Dark Side in *The Return of the Jedi*, to the open expanse of the oceans of the Kef Bir moon where the wreckage floats, and as Clover writes, 'by the time the drama has played itself out, darkness yields to light (typically as day breaks) and the close quarters of the bam (closet, elevator, attic, basement) give way to the open expanse of the yard (field, road, lakescape, cliff)' (2015), we see that once again, darkness does yield to light: Rey uses her life force to save Kylo Ren's life, which, mirroring Darth Vader's

return to Anakin Skywalker a generation before when he also rejected the 'mask' of the killer, returns Kylo Ren to Ben Solo. And through this return, Rey passes Luke's lightsaber to Ben Solo through the Force, which allows him to defeat the Knights of Ren — eliminating the last of the dark within him and the dark he created — before stepping forward to stand at her side in the final battle against Palpatine. And in an act of petty revenge, Palpatine flicks Ben, 'the last Skywalker', off the cliff, just as Darth Vader threw the Emperor down an air shaft on the Death Star, and just like the Emperor, this is not the end to Ben.

When Doyle said slashers 'envision a world in which every girl is a sacrifice on her way to the altar', within the *Star Wars* universe, the Sith Citadel on Exogol is the altar on which Rey is sacrificed when she briefly dies in the final battle of *The Rise of Skywalker*. And it is here where Ben Solo's redemption is complete, as he returns the life force to Rey that she gave him on Kef Bir — she is saved by the 'killer' who tormented her. Rey is revived with Ben Solo's life force, and through his sacrifice, and the death of his mother, Rey becomes the head of her own, matriarchal, Jedi line.

This new Jedi order is an example of Clover's comments about the Final Girl moving from 'passive' to 'active' defence. She writes: 'Given the drift in just the four years between *Texas Chainsaw* and *Halloween* — from passive to active defense — it is no surprise that the films following *Halloween* present Final Girls who not only fight back but do so with ferocity and even kill the killer on their own, without help from the outside' (2015). In *The Force Awakens*, the Force was something done *to* Rey, as science fiction author Charlie Jane Anders explains: 'Kylo Ren teaches Rey a lot about using the Force. Every time she gets better at using it in this film, it's right after Kylo Ren has tried to use it against her. She sees what he's doing and copies it. I thought it was fairly explicit that Kylo Ren is Rey's "teacher" in this movie' (2015).

As Rey's learning progresses, we see in *The Last Jedi* a combination of Snoke's influence, who has been invading her mind and bridging it with Kylo Ren's, with the traditional training from Luke Skywalker that allows her self-discovery and self-actualisation within the Force. By *The Rise of Skywalker*, Rey is actively training with Leia, stretching and challenging herself to achieve a level in which 'a thousand generations live' in her, and through this, she has turned active, both confronting Kylo Ren and cutting a wing off his approaching TIE whisper as well as blowing up a First Order transporter using her first known burst of Sith lightning, an offensive power stemming from the Dark Side of the Force, largely associated with Emperor Palpatine.

But as Clover says, 'to focus on just who brings the killer down, the Final Girl [is] to miss the point. The last moment of the Final Girl sequence is finally a footnote to what went before — to the quality of the Final Girl's fight, and more generally to the qualities of character that enable her, of all the characters, to survive what has come to seem unsurvivable' (2015), and it is Rey's growing power and usage of the Force, and her move from passive to active defence, that allows her to truly make the connection with the Jedi, who

provide her the strength to stand after Ben Solo has fallen, using the combined powers of the Force and Leia's lightsaber to defeat Palpatine and the Final Order. As Clover writes, 'The difference is between past and present and between failure and success. The Final Girl enacts in the present, and successfully, the parenticidal struggle that the killer himself enacted unsuccessfully in his own past — a past that constitutes the film's backstory. She is what the killer once was; he is what she could become should she fail in her battle for sexual selfhood' (2015). Rey and Ren trade these places repeatedly throughout *The Rise of Skywalker* in particular as the climax builds. But it is Rey's character that has helped her survive the fact that she has faced the worst of herself and the worst of the history that haunts her. While Ren eventually atones to the point he merges with the Force when he dies, Rey did not take out her parenticidal rage on entire star systems — she faced the Dark within her and made the right choices. The quality of the Final Girl's fight is earned.

Conclusion

At the end of *The Rise of Skywalker*, Rey lands the Millenium Falcon on the old Lars moisture farm on Tattooine, Luke Skywalker's childhood home. She wraps the Skywalker lightsabers of Luke and Leia and buries them, as she has 'appropriated "all those phallic symbols"' and now, according to Clover, 'comes the dispelling of the "uterine" threat as well' (2015). But Rey has now built her own lightsaber.

Using the quarterstaff she built of salvage on Jakku, Rey's lightsaber flashes green and blue — because she is 'all the Jedi' — before the plasma blade emerges in yellow, posing an entirely different kind of 'uterine' threat. This lightsaber takes on the yellow hue of Jedi Temple Guardians, demonstrating that a new dawn has arrived for the Jedi, and it is run by women now — it is run by the Final Girl. To emphasise this point, an old woman appears and asks Rey's name. With the seeming blessing of her Jedi Masters, who appear as Force Ghosts, Rey declares herself a Skywalker, reconstituted as 'masculine'. As Clover argues:

> The tale is no less one of maleness. If the experience of childhood can be — is perhaps ideally — enacted in female form, the breaking away requires the assumption of the phallus. The helpless child is gendered feminine; the autonomous adult or subject is gendered masculine; the passage from childhood to adulthood entails a shift from feminine to masculine. It is the male killer's tragedy that his incipient femininity is not reversed but completed (castration) and the Final Girl's victory that her incipient masculinity is not thwarted but realised (phallicisation).
>
> (2015)

The symbolism of Rey's lightsaber suggests she has brought balance to the Force, but Rey is also the Skywalker who rises, she is the Last Jedi; the future

of the Jedi Order is up to her. Having been trained by both Luke Skywalker and General Leia Organa, she is both the future of the Resistance and the Jedi Order as well as responsible for the destruction of the patriarchal Sith, the last remnants of the Empire, and the First Order and the Final Order.

Indeed, the final image of the final film in the *Star Wars* Skywalker saga is of Rey, alone, having claimed the family name Skywalker, standing at the Lars Homestead in Tatooine. She is 'all the Jedi', and having buried the lightsabers of Luke and Leia, forged her own lightsaber, one with a yellow hue. The sun sets over the Lars homestead on Tatooine with Rey and her yellow lightsaber staring at the suns. As Clover says, 'The moment at which the Final Girl is effectively phallicized is the moment that the plot halts and horror ceases. Day breaks, and the community returns to its normal order' — but in this case, we see the sun set on the patriarchy of the Skywalker saga, while the matriarchal future of the Jedi is ready to ascend with the Final Girl as its leader.[1]

Note

1 **Post-credit sequence**: The Star Wars Celebration convention happens every few years when Lucasfilm has announcements and new projects to launch. The most recent Celebration was in London over Easter weekend in 2023, where Kathleen Kennedy, president of Lucasfilm, announced that the *Star Wars* franchise would continue with a new film set 15 years after *The Rise of Skywalker*, which will 'tell the story of rebuilding the New Jedi Order and the powers that rise to tear it down' (Pulver, 2023). The hero of this film, the one who rebuilds the Jedi Order and fights the powers that try to tear it down? Rey.

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19 The Environmental Context for Hope and Heroism in Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* Trilogy and M. R. Carey's *The Girl with All the Gifts*

Ildikó Limpár

Introduction

Young Adult (YA) literature, even when its story is set in a dark, disturbing dystopia, tends not to discard hope (Sambell 2003, 164). After all, this type of fiction shares the didactic undertones that children's fiction has; it more often than not tries to openly educate its readers about their futures, whether that future is focused on coping with family or romantic matters, tragedies and traumas, or a system that has to be made livable. By reading or watching films about characters who are pushed into situations in which they need to choose how to act, we learn about how decision making is linked to a moral and emotional context, and we may draw our conclusions about the inspected behavioral patterns (that may prompt us to act similarly or differently from the character we observed). As research based on filmic narratives demonstrates, this phenomenon is true for 'meaningful fictional narratives' in general since they 'fulfill important psychological, cognitive, and even existential needs via the meta-emotions that they generate may prompt the viewers to transform their own life' (Dill-Shacklefold et al. 2016, 636). But YA narratives that are concerned with social or civilizational crises to be solved are especially interesting from the viewpoint of what they teach and what hope they express because of the usual generation gap between the fictive ages of the protagonists and the actual age of the author that writes them.

These fictions expose the writers' hope and hopelessness concerning our present and future. They have their hope in the next generations and hope to educate them about making the right decisions, thinking morally, transforming into activists who stand up for the values that we cherish in rhetoric but fail to protect in our lives. This hope, however, uncovers the underlying hopelessness, passivity, and impotence that the adult generation feels in the present concerning our futurity. As the various crises (political, economic, and ecological alike) grow in our world, the more evident it becomes that placing the future in the hands of children or teenagers is not only a symbolic act that equates youngsters with the future (although traditionally this is a significant aspect of the phenomenon) but an acknowledgment that we keep postponing

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solving problems even when we see what decisions we should make. The generation in power seems to be incapable of stopping an impending disaster, while to ease their conscience, they produce a plethora of educational fiction that may be turned to when the apocalypse emerges.

These narratives transfer power to the next generation — a gesture, which beyond an expression of trust in the future is also an expression of a belief that the power structures that seem to define our corrupt and collapsing world may be changed, even reversed. YA fiction hands over power to the weak; so, when the heroic act is performed by someone who is especially disprivileged in our contemporary society due to any reason, let it be race, sex, disability, or anything else, the hope expressed by that heroism doubles if not triples. As a result, the heroic girl has become an emblematic protagonist of various kinds of fictions and garners popularity for the divergences she demonstrates from the traditional, more masculine forms of heroism (even when we have the tomboy action-heroine version). Her ubiquitous presence highlights a paradigm shift from earlier conceptualisations of heroism, which was a masculine playfield (or rather arena) due to firmly established patriarchal social structures (Allison et al. 2017, 2). Heroism, however, may come in various forms, and it is shaped not only by the character's personality traits but also by the crisis to be managed. This phenomenon will be demonstrated by two contemporary YA works that have enjoyed considerable popularity amongst young adults.

Both Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* trilogy (2008, 2009, 2010) and M. R. Carey's *The Girl with All the Gifts* (2014) rely on the concept of hope embodied by a teenage girl, but they interpret hope — and as a result the means to reach it, that is, heroism — in fundamentally different ways because of the exigencies these girls face. This chapter argues that examining how the crises relate to the environmental contexts reveals anxieties and attitudes that allow us to interpret these two works as mirrors of two stages in the Anthropocene, which also indicate how hopeful we are concerning a post-Anthropocene turn.

The Anthropocene Space and Its Heroine: Katniss in the Arena

In Collins' fictional world, the Hunger Games are organised around the idea of tying together the deaths of many and the survival of one from many, suggesting that one person's annual, symbolic triumph over death may ensure hope for survival even in the harshest circumstances; such an arrangement, however, also reveals the reality that allows a person to hope for no more. When, thanks to Katniss and Peeta's shared victory in the 74th Hunger Games, hope becomes extended and promises change instead of mere survival, being the last tributes to survive in the arena becomes a symbolic achievement, which earns Katniss Everdeen a public role she must embrace to help a whole society return to a more democratic politics and discard the artificial lifestyle of the Capitol.

The *Hunger Games* series thus primarily focuses on the mechanism and possible subversion of dictatorship, connecting its discussions to the context of governmental politics, that is, democracy versus dictatorship. In the centre of running Panem's autocratic regime is the institution of the Hunger Games, for which an annually redesigned and constructed artificial place, the arena, gives space. This symbolic place reflects the monstrosity of the Capitol's autocratic regime: Like the Minotaur,[1] it annually takes the lives of tributes by its seemingly natural, yet artificially induced behaviour that the mind of the arena-monster, the Control Room operated by Gamemakers, regulate (Limpár 2021, 184). Since artificiality, a state that is defined by a lost connection to nature and one's natural condition, is one of the key factors in turning the Capitol's residents into bloodsucking monsters who are fed by the blood shed during these games, the constructedness of the arena in itself references the Capitol society's beastly nature. When Katniss forces a triumph of two tributes in the 74th Games from the Capitol, it is an emblematic victory over a complex system whose structures seemed to be stable and unchangeable. She hacks the system by refusing to be the last tribute in the arena on her own. She becomes a last girl with a last boy and the support of the Districts; she builds a community in a system that serves the purpose of reinforcing isolation in Panem and a detachment from a sustaining nature by manufacturing an artificial, hostile arena-space.

Katniss' winning is assured by her acts of deconstructing and reconstructing part of the system. Her success in the Games comes from her sense of connectedness — her attachment to her family that gradually extends to a larger community, and a close relationship to nature, which helps her win not only because she has acquired the necessary skills to hunt and survive in the wilderness but because she appreciates her connectedness to the world. Katniss values life; she rejects the idea of dehumanising her opponents in the arena and therefore seeks alliance rather than opportunities to kill others. She feels at home in a natural surrounding and benefits from this familiarity even in the artificially built arena simulating a natural environment. She is one with nature, as her name, derived from the edible katniss plant, reminds her (Coatney 2012, 185), and she fights against a system that disguises its artificiality with a simulated, natural-looking battlefield that mirrors the regime's corrupted nature — which stems from its detachment from nature.

This separation, or 'the Severing', to use Timothy Morton's terminology, 'is a foundational, traumatic fissure between, to put it in stark Lacanian terms, reality (the human-correlated world) and the real (ecological symbiosis of human and nonhuman parts of the biosphere)' (Morton 2017) — a process that has resulted in mankind's defining itself against the very ecosystem that it lives in. In *The Hunger Games*, this detachment manifests in the high-tech and spectacle-based culture of the Capitol (Limpár 2021, 188). This is observable on the level of the individual as well as of the community that revels in shows, embraces superficiality, and lives for entertainment at the cost of human lives that it considers subhuman. It is a culture of

distractions: Allowing no space for critical opinions, it fills every moment with something that pleases the eye and needs no use of the mind. It cherishes an aesthetic that does not respect what is natural and culminates in body modifying surgeries. The human body itself becomes a spectacle in the Capitol, and the hedonist, capitalist lifestyle of eye-catching parties and shows is epitomised by the broadcasted Hunger Games that stages the tributes' bloody fight for survival as an exciting entertainment to please the desensitised many.

The institution of the Games embodies and makes a show of the capitalism that maintains the unjust power division of Panem with the Capitol exploiting the Districts, relying on their natural resources and manpower alike to secure the welfare of the thin, elite layer. It evokes Marx's idea of vampiric capitalism[2] when it shows how the pleased Capitol audience consumes the blood of the working class, whose lives are valueless unless they bring profit to the social elite. The Hunger Games is the staged and screened version of the reality in which hunger always takes a central position. Those who are kept hungry in the Districts work to quell the hunger of those who live in the Capitol either by providing them the over-abundance of food, a part of which they cannot even consume — or by becoming food. The tributes become offerings in effect, and their blood, together with the violence that was needed to shed it, is the cohesive force that keeps Panem together: it quenches the blood thirst of the privileged, which is a prerequisite to keep the Capitol not only entertained and thus distracted but desensitised enough to not care about human lives and nature.

Capitol culture is defined by the carelessness and ignorance that has created the Anthropocene. The daily distractions of a spectacle culture that supports shallowness and the appreciation of what is on the surface without the desire to look deeper produce controllable people who are 'Unthinkingly obedient to the rules of their society' (Van Dyke 2012, 225) and are therefore unthinking in general, refusing to question the necessity or the beneficial nature of the system that privileges them. This loss of a critical mindset is what allows these people to immerse in *schadenfreude* — the practice of drawing enjoyment from seeing the suffering of others — which, as Andre Shaffer points out, is exactly what the arena offers (2012, 87).

Losing its critical faculty is a major contributing factor to shaping the Capitol into a high-tech world that embraces a hedonistic lifestyle at the expense of the suffering of others. The Capitol's technophilia and hedonism are antithetical to the poverty that characterises Katniss' district, where forbidden adventures into nature may be the only way to assure survival. The Capitol, severed from the natural world (Baker 2014, 198), is a future, nightmarish vision of our world. It exemplifies how the Anthropocene is brought about by mankind's lack of respect for other life forms (including otherised humans), a hubris-driven, distorted anthropocentrism (not even caring for the whole of humanity) that feeds on ignorance and carelessness, leading in the end to a mindless exploitation of our natural environment and an

unsustainable lifestyle. The Anthropocene is thus presented as the result of two interrelated phenomena, the lack of critical thinking and the lack of empathy, implying that intellectual and emotional maturity are vital for a harmonious co-existence with one's ecosystem as well as democracy, as both should be built on the idea of equality and the feeling of empathy and solidarity.

The arena is a projection of the post-Severing world, which, as a technologically manipulated, constructed space, gives the illusion of a natural environment but hosts man-made monsters — 'mutts' — that are genetically engineered to intimidate or kill others. It is a space controlled by the privileged few, who hazard with the lives of the disempowered and the marginalised. It is a system run by the old, forcing the young to suffer and die, jeopardising the future of humankind. Just like the present Anthropocene world that we live in, it turns hostile due to the actions of the elite and kills almost everyone at surprising speed. In this arena, no one wins, not even the one who becomes a champion, since triumph secures only an elongated suffering in the real world, which is just too reminiscent of the arena.

The arena is the simulation of the Anthropocene world: to ensure continued attention, it turns more spectacular — more deadly — each year. The space that man designs and builds to be a killing monster and yet calls a space of games offers bitter criticism about mankind's practice of systematically destroying its environment while enjoying the show, believing that what is seen and broadcast will not have consequences beyond the screen. In a world where the politics of a few have planetary effects, third-world arenas come into being while Western powers play the game of outsourcing the most environmentally damaging industries to faraway, economically struggling, and dependent places. In the meantime, the economically powerful may pretend that the transformation of the biosphere is 'fine' because it is, for the time being, hurting only 'others'. Ultimately, the broadcasting of the Games, from this perspective, mediates the absurd endgame of humanity by re-enacting the apocalyptic survival game every year and turning it into a spectacle from which only the disprivileged may learn bitter lessons. As for the privileged, they refuse to look at it as part of their reality. Broadcasting turns the events into a narrative that is easily thought of as fiction due to its mediated nature. Masses die because of terrible earthquakes, floods, tornados, and such; it is shown in the news but not felt real by those who live in areas that have not been that spectacularly affected yet. The carefree audience keeps watching the bloody show and does not realise that watching is contributing. They feel safe because the horror is isolated. But even though they created a separate, severed space for the bloodshed, they are part of the system even if they are in the Control Room. And nature takes revenge.

The Hunger Games unveils the truth that tyrannical governmental politics and careless ecological politics share the same roots: the lack of an ethical stance that comes from respecting life on a universal level. Resistance to this complex system, therefore, is a political act that not only aims at overthrowing

the government but also inevitably recognizes the need of redefining humankind as symbiotic with the ecosystem. Presenting Katniss as a mockingjay to revitalise the resistance reclaims the relationship between humans and the natural world while identifying the girl with the bird that already is an emblem of defiance. The mockingjay is the naturally evolved version of the genetically engineered jabberjay that was supposed to spy on District people but failed to fulfil the function it was designed for, as the surveilled people could manipulate the messages it carried. So, jabberjays disturbed the otherwise smoothly operating control over the Districts and proved useless and thus valueless to the Capitol.

This capitalist attitude, however, had its consequences. Knowing that jabberjays were unable to reproduce within their artificially created population, they were let free to die out but were able to reproduce with the mockingbirds and mutate into mockingjays. Mockingjays thus became emblems of defying a system that dooms the 'valueless' to death. Katniss, whose dress catches (safe, controlled, artificial) fire in the broadcasted interview before she is sent to the arena for the second time, turns her moment of near defeat by fire in the previous Games into a moment of triumph, a reminder that she defied death against all odds (and manipulations). As she becomes identified with the mockingjay, the bird on fire associates the phoenix resurrecting from its ashes — the ultimate emblem of defying death and carrying on.

The mockingjay image in the resistance's propaganda as well as the closure of the trilogy attest to a fundamentally optimistic view concerning humanity's chance of undoing or at least repairing some of the harm that has been done. *Mockingjay* decidedly ends with a scene that provides hope concerning the possibility of restoring the world, and therefore it is set in nature and focused on the unit of the family and the unity between man and nature, accentuated by the lyrics of the song Katniss remembers. The lines confirm nature as one's home in a world where the arenas are torn down: it is 'safe' and 'warm' in the meadow, where one may lie down on 'A bed of grass, a soft green pillow' (Collins 2010, 389). This reconnection to nature is the basis of a better world, as it provides safety for the new generation and reshapes nature as a space of love ('a place where I love you') (Collins 2010, 390) and not hatred and horror.

Stepping out of the Anthropocene: Melanie in the Infected World

If we can perceive Katniss' arena as a simulation of the problematic world in which mankind has tried to gain control over and thus has considerably harmed nature, then the space outside the military-research base in *The Girl with All the Gifts* may easily be seen as an arena — a combat area where one must fight both their opponents and a horribly hostile nature for survival. This environment, the product of the irreversible Anthropocene, is fungus-infected and riddled with zombies, who had brought about 'the Breakdown' and transformed the world in a blink of an eye. Accordingly, the kind of

heroism that this world calls for or allows at all is fundamentally different from the one that Katniss Everdeen needs to perform so as to ensure a better future for mankind.

Katniss' heroism, which gives a new surge to the resistance, may come from her appreciation of life and nature, but her world is still an anthropocentric one, where the central fight is among people for power since the welfare of the masses still depends on the form of government. Therefore, Katniss' heroic trajectory is linked to the context of politics, which puts human relations and interactions in the limelight and educates us about the opportunities we may take to reorganise ourselves as a human community against oppressive *social* forces. Melanie, on the other hand, lives in a world where the form of government is no longer an issue. People do not compete for power; instead, they fight for survival against the ecosystem. The final objective of the introduced military dictatorship is not to gain control over other people but to use that control to co-ordinate humanity in a desperate fight to regain some power and maintain anthropocentrism in a cataclysmic world whose biosphere has turned against mankind. But while *The Hunger Games* firmly believes in the reversibility of man-made destruction, *The Girl with All the Gifts* suggests that we are past the point of no return, and therefore what hope constitutes needs to be reassessed, too.

What kind of hope may someone have in a world that suddenly turns too hostile for humanity to keep under control and fight back? Carey's post-apocalyptic world was shaped by the mutation of a fungus, and it is reminiscent of an environment rife with pollution and disease. In a modern (contemporary) pandemic world, where a new virus may appear and take millions of lives in a short period of time, hope is primarily placed in the invention of an effective vaccine, and/or the development of natural immunity, and/or the natural course of virus mutation that leads to a weakening effect on human population. All these hopes reveal the inherent belief that once the virus stops killing people in great numbers, life may become renormalized — the belief that such a hostile biological crisis has nothing to do with the fact that we have been destroying our ecological system in irreparable ways. The fungus-infected world of *The Girl with All the Gifts* promises no vaccine (as there is no such thing as vaccine for fungus infection) and forces us to face the ecological disaster that is inseparable from the spread of the disease but still has hopes for finding the key to the genetic immunity that second-generation hungries (as zombies are called in the novel) have developed.

Mutated hungries constitute hope in this world, but this very idea seems to contradict the literary tradition of pandemic fiction. As Elizabeth Outka explains, after the sweep of the 'Spanish Flu', the pandemic atmosphere of the 1920s spawned two reactions in fiction to cope with the idea of the new, unstoppable threat, 'making visible and material the penetration of the dead' into the domestic space (2019, 201): spiritualism and zombie tales. While the former indicated an optimistic approach to this penetration (ibid), these post-plague protozombies embodied the monstrosity of the threat and expressed

'explosions of anger and guilt, a paralyzing fear of contagion, and the terror and destruction of a flesh- eating monster' (Outka 2019, 216) — which is natural, considering that monsters are the products of the culture that bring them about (Cohen 1996, 4) and zombies specifically indicate 'prevailing social anxieties' (Bishop 2010, 207). These early post-pandemic zombie tales are the origo of the viral zombie narrative that re-emerged with Romero's famous movie *The Night of the Living Dead* in 1968 (Outka 2019, 217) and has had its renaissance since the 2010s. Thus, the zombie as the site of hope subverts our notions concerning 'positive futurity — the future as the locus of desired transformation' (Elliot 2022, 150).

Threatening transformation is the key phenomenon in zombie narratives, as a bite or a scratch may turn a human into an undead monster; what is more, humanity's inability to stop the infectious spread changes the population of the world and hence how the world operates. In Carey's vision, the zombie invasion is already the result of ecocide, that is, 'human activities that contribute to a lethal degradation of the planet's biosphere of humankind' (Oziewicz 2022a, 59). This ecological crisis is an ongoing, unstoppable one in a zombie apocalypse, which makes it impossible to envision positive futurity in a traditional, anthropocentric fashion especially because the catastrophe itself was induced by mankind's anthropocentrism.

This anthropocentric attitude is best exemplified in the novel by Dr. Caldwell, a 'mad scientist' type of character who is as much obsessed with the idea of finding a cure for the zombie infection as she is the embodiment of the human attitude that brought about the Anthropocene. She believes in the necessity of saving humanity at all costs, so she has no ethical concerns about experimenting on second-generation hungries and does not even refrain from vivisecting infected children, as all she sees in them is biocapital for medical research. Paying no respect for life other than what she considers to be 'human', she lacks what Rosi Braidotti terms 'posthuman ethics' (2013, 49) and ignores mankind's interconnectedness to other life forms in the global ecosystem. But privileging human life above all else results in a detachment from the natural world — the Severing that symbolically manifests in the enclosed military research base that tries but does not manage to keep the first-generation hungries and their wild hunters away. When the people living and serving in the research base are forced back to the re-wilded space outside the base, they have a mission to accomplish in a limited time: survive in the wilderness until they find another safe space, and find the cure to ensure the survival of the human race. Mankind, however, proves powerless in its new ecosystem, and agency is transferred to the representative of the new generation, Melanie, who happens to be a second-generation hungry.

Melanie seems to be not only a walking dead but a walking oxymoron. She is a zombie with a unique personality even though zombies, as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen claims, are 'never individualized' (2012, 403); and as a second-generation zombie, she has outstanding intellectual qualities although zombies are considered to be deprived of a 'unique, human consciousness' (Boon

2007, 36). The special qualities of the zombie girl give hope for humanity: the first-generation hungries are mindless killing machines, but second-generation hungries show partial immunity to the effect of the infectious fungus. Their hunger for human flesh is hard to control when they are close to human scent, but they can think rationally, and they are capable of deep emotions — something that Dr. Caldwell is not able to manifest any more (if she ever could).

The evolution of this second generation of hungries, however, is not the outcome of a generally observable weakening effect of the pandemic on humans but results from special circumstances: These peculiar zombies were conceived by hungries. Acquiring embryonic immunity is a recurrent motif in contemporary science fiction zombie narratives, as to our scientific knowledge, this is the most plausible explanation for exhibiting immunity in a pandemic where the infection has no cure or vaccine. A similar idea is employed in Daryl Gregory's *Rising Stony Mayhall*, in which Stony, who was born as a zombie, becomes capable of controlling and taking advantage of his condition (see Limpár 2021, 39–48 and Limpár 2023, 234–9), and in the Netflix show, *The Last of Us*, in which the protagonist Ellie gets infected while she is still connected to her mother's zombie-bitten body via the umbilical cord. In all of these narratives, the protagonist embodies hope because their body reacts to the zombie-infection differently from what is expected, offering a new, unexpected path of narrative for those around them — for the whole of humanity, in fact. This unique reaction to the infection usually promises the survival of mankind; the path that Melanie chooses, however, changes the whole paradigm in which we usually discuss heroism in a post-apocalyptic setting because its aim is not to save mankind (in its present form) for the future.

Melanie's decision to set the fungus wall on fire and accelerate the spread of the zombie infection poses a curious ethical dilemma. She dooms mankind to extinction, making her seem villainous — in fact, as despicable as Dr. Caldwell's decision not to care about hungries but the survival of humans alone. However, this comparison becomes more nuanced once we examine motives and circumstances because while both characters believe in the rightness of saving their own kind (while leaving others to die), only Melanie has a vision of a positive futurity. Dr. Caldwell's legacy is the climate catastrophe that her race has caused; her vision of the future is about ensuring the survival of humanity at all costs in order to continue existence. She is the worst version of humanity that Melanie may think of, since she is ruthless, lacks empathy, and does not respect non-human life. And while Melanie shows as much arrogance as Dr. Caldwell when she decides to kill off mankind and save the community of second-generation hungries instead, her decision is motivated by her desire to shape the world in a positive direction. She does not simply prefer her own kind to humanity on a racial basis; she makes her decision based on the ethics that she is armored with, thanks to Miss Justineau's teaching. She wants to have a better world, in which there is more compassion and more empathy. She has hope in the future, believing that the

other second-generation hungries are also capable of the kind of emotional and intellectual evolution that she herself has demonstrated. In fact, she is the very embodiment of hope, as she trusts her new family because of her own trajectory. All she needs is the same facilitator, so she decides to save the best version of humanity she can think of, her teacher Miss Justineau, who taught her about heroes and heroines in various myths, and who 'embodies compassion, mercy and connection between living beings despite their differences' (Trombin 2023, 193).

The kind of hope Melanie has about the future aims to save the idealised, crystallised form of what she considers human — the best part of humanity, which is the ability to care. Yet this mission is entangled with the idea of purging the Earth from the evil that humankind collectively represents to the girl. From a classical humanist, anthropocentric perspective, it relies on what Roger Davis calls a 'monstrous hope' (2018, 32), but the post-apocalyptic setting that has turned into an arena in which humans and mutated humans — that is, first-generation hungries, and second-generation hungries — fight against one another 'challenges regnant views of humanness and humanity' (Hale and Dolgoy 2018: 345), calling for a post-humanist interpretation of what it means to be human. Melanie's actions remind us that 'there is viable life in non-human entities, and that the human itself is not easily defined as living organic matter separate to the inorganic or discursive philosophical' (McCormack 2009, 112). From this post-humanist perspective, humanity is not a stable, unchanging concept, and this is what Carey's novel gives a testimony to when Melanie accelerates the process whereby humanity may evolve into a race that is not only more empathetic and caring but also able to coexist with Earth's transformed ecosystem without the need to continuously exploit, hurt, and kill 'others' and thus incessantly exploit, hurt, and kill part of the biosphere one needs to exist in.

The prerequisite for such a harmonious coexistence with the ecosystem is the quick extinction of mankind in its present form, which Melanie facilitates. Her action, monstrous and horrendous from our human perspective, seemingly prevents her to rise to the status of a heroine. But heroes and heroines are curious constructs of a society. They usually have some special abilities (which Melanie certainly has) that help them slay enemies (which Melanie certainly does) or overcome other types of challenges. According to the Campbellian model, the hero's adventure in an unfamiliar, threatening world, in which she is to overcome various obstacles including villains, bestows her with a special knowledge about herself and the world, which she then utilises when she returns to her original world, improving the life of others (Campbell 2008). While the Campbellian model by now is hardly seen as a monomyth, it is still useful to realise that Melanie's trajectory is, in fact, a hero's journey in a cataclysmic world, where we need to reconsider traditional concepts, such as mankind and improvement. Even the very idea of one having an opportunity to return to an 'original world' becomes questionable. But of course, the most difficult part of interpreting Melanie as a heroine comes

from the realisation that in this narrative the reader is also antagonised and made part of the enemy as a person belonging to Anthropocene humanity; or the reader is antagonized because she rejects our world and those — us — who have created it.

While Melanie is positioned as a Pandora character (see Limpár 2021, 54–5 and Limpár 2023, 230–1), she does not accidentally bring about all the calamities to the world, as the mythological character did. Melanie is not a god-shaped means to an end, she is not someone's tool of vengeance but vengeance itself: She has agency and makes a conscious decision when she decides to push, metaphorically speaking, the restart button on the planet. She leaves much of the fight to the fungus spores and concentrates on the positive work that awaits her: training (with the help of Miss Justineau) the next generation intellectually and, through the intellectual work such as reading, emotionally as well — reclaiming humanity via a return to the humanities but discarding anthropocentrism to make a step towards the post-Anthropocene.

Conclusion: The Heroic 'Bettering' of the World

The Hunger Games trilogy and *The Girl with All the Gifts* share several motifs and themes, such as people's disrespect for nature, the transformation of the human body and humanity, children's suffering for the older generations' sins, the extended family, the motif of the arena that highlights how survival is dependent on hope, and even the theme of monsterisation/zombification. In Collins' work, political oppression results in the conscious monsterisation, otherisation of the District people, as well as the metaphorical zombification of the people in the Capitol, which causes their habitat to become increasingly unnatural. However, the narrative presents these processes as still reversible. The heroic girl that hacks the game played in the arena embodies hope that can come with a change of regime, promising a more democratic social structure in which political equality and freedom are the most desired goals. But when the 'game' is not a fight between two groups of people but between mankind and an environment that threatens humanity's extinction, the whole world becomes an arena — and the fight for a better world becomes a problematic idea, destablilising the very concept of a 'better world'. In this post-apocalyptic setting, the zombie girl signifies hope of various kinds. For mankind, Melanie's body is a hope for medicine to stop humanity's zombification and to return to an idea of 'normalcy', the (failing) state of the world before the zombies appeared; but instead, Melanie chooses to reinterpret hope from a post-humanist position, discarding the anthropocentric view that people have and that also Collins' fiction maintains. As a consequence, in Carey's novel the fight for equality promises a post-Anthropocene world without mankind as we know it now. This narrative confronts us with the by-now unavoidable and terrifying realisation that 'The stories we have been telling ourselves about human exceptionalism

(we're the image of God), human entitlement (we're masters of this planet), and human identity (we're separate from and above "nature") … are not true' but constituted the shaping power of the Anthropocene (Oziewicz 2022b, 1). As the return to a pre-Anthropocene period is impossible, and the climax of the Anthropocene promises mankind's demise, the notion of a better world needs a fundamental reconceptualisation, which comes through from the closure of Carey's novel. Melanie's decisive action does not only secure a future for her new, extended family of second-generation hungries, but promises a 'better' world in two senses: for one, this is going to be a world devoid of people, whose ignorant behaviour would further ruin the ecosystem; secondly, this is going to be a world from which a heroic girl has removed human evil to replace it with empathy, care, and solidarity.

Notes

1 Admittedly, the Greek myth of 'Theseus and the Minotaur', which draws heavily upon the theme of 'political punishment' (Martin 2014, 222), was a major inspiration for Collins for writing her trilogy (Margolis, 2010).
2 This aspect was first introduced in the discussion of *The Hunger Games* by Mark Thomas (2013, 377). For the elaboration of what this vampiric capitalism implies in the context of Collins' trilogy, see Limpár 2014.

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