Generic Subversions:

De-Formations of Character in the Popular Imagination

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Genres rely on audience expectation—its implicit "contract"—to do their narrative work, particularly concerning the identity of the protagonist; yet, when generic expectations are overturned by the assertion of difference, the space is made for re-imagining the social field through alternative characterizations. This dissertation explores the critical implications of the subversion of the "generic contract" in popular film and television by analyzing the style and narrative meanings of contemporary popular texts, such as action blockbusters, sci-fi television episodes, and Japanese film noir, in terms of the history and function of film genre. Developed in this study is a theory of film genre criticism that can account for and explain the ideological work of generic subversion, and the interventions into the popular imagination these subversions take. Generically subversive popular texts contest the dominant conceptions of sexuality, gender, race and nationality that are frequently advocated in Hollywood film and television. My particular intervention revises film genre theory from the perspective of queer epistemology, arguing that genre's repetitive and performative structures make textual subversions of dominant ideology possible. Genre texts rework cultural and historical material but, in doing so, make this material open to mediation and critique. Specifically, dominant conceptions of sex, gender, race and nation are textually foregrounded in the explicit counter-casting of conventional genre characters like "action hero," "noir detective" and "sci-fi alien."

Generic subversion, as it is identified in my project, is focalized through anomalous characterizations. In doing so, anxieties about social and cultural difference are thematically reassessed through popular genre film and television. I prove this by presenting a new model of film genre criticism informed by postcolonial, feminist, and queer theories that provide the necessary terms for a more radical approach to textual analysis. Therefore, I redefine genre criticism as a set of reading practices attuned to textual manifestations of difference. This methodological approach identifies the ways popular genres contest, threaten and indeed subvert existing paradigms of textuality and their prevailing norms in order to envision other forms of embodiment and ways of being in the popular imagination.

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<u>Introduction</u>

Film Genre and the Question of Subversion

We find many movies belonging to genres that are often dismissed as escapist and alienating. While this may be true in the majority of cases, it nevertheless remains that escapism can also be used as a device for criticizing reality and the present state of society (Jean-Loup Bourget 52).

In "Generic Subversion as Counterhistory," one of the few instances where generic subversion is theorized as both a critical term and film practice, Alexandra Keller outlines generic subversion in terms of a set of textual concerns: "myth, history and identity are proposed as deeply imbricated, complex and problematic categories, all of which can be worked through by appealing to, critiquing, and subverting the generic imaginary…and its conventions" (44). Since Keller's hypothesis lays the groundwork for a new definition of subversion in genre studies, I want to begin by unpacking its central precepts, particularly the notion of "the generic imaginary" and how it is "appealed to," "critiqued" and "subverted." The project of this dissertation, to this extent, is to construct a theoretical edifice and critical practice on this foundational, albeit brief, claim. Girding this edifice is the notion of the generic imaginary. The generic imaginary conceptualizes the function of patterns in genre (film) and the horizon of expectation to which they give rise. As Janet Staiger asserts: "Patterns do exist. Moreover, patterns are valuable material for deviation, dialogue, and critique. Variations from patterns may occur for making a text fresh or for commentary about the issues raised within the standard pattern, and both aesthetic and ideological functions of variations make no sense without a notion of some pattern or order" ("Hybrid" 186). In this way, the identification and elaboration of generic subversion entails the (often unspoken) affirmation and substantiation of patterns

in genre. Generic patterns and their subversions co-exist and are mutually substantiating, but this symbiotic relationship has yet to receive much critical attention beyond a highly circumscribed frame of reference, that is, as a rarified version of ideological analysis. "Generic Subversions" poses an intervention into the ideological study of film genre, specifically reframing the generic imaginary as it has come to be understood in film genre criticism by rethinking its particular relationship to subversion. In other words, my dissertation aims at the critical articulation of a theory of generic subversion, formulated as a much-needed response to the question of how to theorize genre—what Fredric Jameson describes as the grasping of "the ultimate relationship between genre and representation (or the illusion of reality)" (*Signatures of the Visible* 175).

My dissertation attempts to answer this question by exploring the implications of the subversion of the generic imaginary. It is safe to say that the relationship between genre and representation (much less "reality") is impossible to grasp in its totality; therefore, the following chapters aim at comprehending a particular facet of this relationship by attending to the subversive practices of a delimited number of contemporary genre films. As Jameson points out: "the atomized or serial 'public' of mass culture wants to see the same thing over and over again, hence the urgency of the generic structure and the generic signal"—a structure and signal that, taken together, gird the generic imaginary (Jameson, *Signatures* 19). The subversion of the generic structure and signal offers important insights into the relationship between the generic imaginary and representation broadly conceived. Barry Langford, in *Film Genre and Beyond,* posits that the formal analysis of genre films requires a consideration of the ways the generic

imagination is challenged as much as it reinforced. "The task of film genre studies," as he

defines it:

> Must be to establish the particular *kinds* of genres that are characteristic of
> commercial narrative cinema, the varieties of assumptions and expectations that play
> around and through them…. One approach might be to emphasize the relatively
> concrete and verifiable aspects of the film-industrial process that historically subtend
> genre production…. At the same time, one might want to look at the ways in which
> individual films seem either to conform to or to confront and challenge the (assumed)
> expectations of the spectator (Langford 7).

While the field has been dramatically transformed by recent studies of film genres in

terms of actual film-industrial practices, particularly in the cases of film noir (discussed

in Chapter Three) and melodrama (discussed in Chapter Two), the latter text-based

approach has received much less critical attention. This is due in no small part to the

fraught history of textual analysis in film genre studies.

While film genre historians have paved the way for a "radical film genre

criticism," as Alan Williams names it, the analysis of individual films has yet to undergo

an equal transformation. My aim in this project is to update, or "reinvent," film genre

theory precisely by radicalizing the interpretive approach in much the same way genre

film historians have uprooted some of genre criticism's most cherished precepts (Gledhill

and Williams 1). The task of contemporary film genre studies requires that the

assumptions underlying both historical claims about genres and the interpretive

framework(s) brought to bear on individual texts be scrutinized. Nowhere is this more

clear than in the significant strides made by film historians who have come to show,

through the examination of film-industrial and audience practices, that even the most

basic critical terminology—such as "melodrama"—may not accurately reflect actual

usage by the industry and film-goers. Yet, the underlying (and often unconscious)

assumptions brought to bear on individual genre texts have only begun to be approached

with the same level of incredulity. My dissertation, therefore, begins by critically examining the history of textual analysis in film genre criticism, scrutinizing some of its most salient claims through the topic of subversion. The question of subversion in film genre theory affords a unique lens to review the critical terminology that has come to delimit the practice of textual analysis in film genre studies.

In the history of film genre criticism, analysis has tended to favor the interpretive practice of constructing genre categories by the adumbration of iconographic features. The analysis of individual films, within this methodological approach, played a much less significant role. Textual analysis, however, has been the central concern of film *theory*, expressed most often in the practice of ideological critique. What subversion, as a specific category of investigation, offered film theory was a way to begin to read for difference rather than sameness, but more than this, it began with the question of ideology rather than the question of how a body of films reflects certain genre traits. No longer bound to a procrustean project of genre systematization, the investigation of generic subversion, specifically, opened the door to closer readings of individual texts, which were of interest for their exceptionality rather than sameness—the typical approach to genre criticism up to that time. To this extent, ideological critics borrowed from the approach of *auteur* studies, who tended to frame their discussions in terms of the exceptional or transcendent textual qualities associated with a chosen *auteur*. Ideological criticism promoted "the variability of textual politics within mainstream production," hypothesizing that, "while firmly entrenched within the system," subversive genre films "display certain features that are critically deemed as combative to the conventions governing the 'typical' classic text" (Klinger 75). The implicit opposition at the heart of

genre theory nonetheless suggests a paradigmatic dichotomy, not so much between genres, but in the binary and hierarchal split between genre film and non-genre film, with the latter generally more esteemed for escaping the ideological constraints implicit to all genre films.

It is this implicit bias that points to a conservative mindset girding critical approaches to film genre, even when they embrace its most subversive incarnations. I want to be careful here in developing an idea of subversion that does not perpetuate this hierarchal thinking. A *radical* genre criticism, I aver, cannot rely on the straw man argument of a monolithic and totalizing generic imaginary against which subversion takes place. Instead, subversion, as a critical tool in textual analysis, affords a way to think through film genre's conflicting discursive practices, as I show in the following chapters. Generic subversion then, for me, names a "sincere social criticism" within mass culture, challenging the "profoundly disturbing elitism" inherent in the standpoint that bifurcates aesthetic social criticism into the camps of mass culture, where critique cannot occur due to its mass-produced status, and the avant-garde, which is the only "authentic" form of "a poetics of resistance" (Jim Collins, *Uncommon Cultures* 14).[1] The first chapter, therefore, is structured as an intervention into the more conservative theories of genre, forwarding instead an alternative model radicalized by the insights and aims of feminist-queer epistemology since its thorough-going analysis of subversion (of gender) has taken place outside the purview of aesthetic judgment. Proposing a form of methodological assessment, I outline a theoretical approach to generic subversion, radicalized by the insights and aims of feminist/queer theory, which identifies the ways popular media invoke generic structures to challenge contemporary ideological, cultural

and aesthetic paradigms. At the heart of a queer theory of subversion is the question of what compels a radical rethinking of the social and its regulatory norms; I retrofit this question to film genre criticism to explicate the role of ideological critique in contemporary film studies.

Generic subversion arises out of the "frustration" produced by the imperatives for "homogeneity and predictability considered the prerequisite for 'genericity'" (Jim Collins, "Genericity in the Nineties" 256). For this reason I draw on the insights of queer theory, particularly the notion of gender performance forwarded by Judith Butler, to establish conceptual parallels to the social imperatives of gender norms and how they give rise to something more than predictable gender performance (or pastiche), but rather subversive gender enactments may arise from the frustration of some with (hetero)normative gender practices. Of the range of citational responses to *genre* norms, my focus is on the ways genre films resist the imperatives of generic sameness and how this resistance comes to be articulated. Genericity implies a delimited field of "norms" but, as in gender's citational imperatives, "these norms can be significantly deterritorialized through the citation. They can also be exposed as non-natural and nonnecessary when they take place in a context and through a form of embodying that defies normative expectation" (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 218). It is through the crucial questions of embodiment and expectation that generic subversion is theorized in my project. That is, the central trope of characterization, and the expected patterns of embodiment it entails, is often the narrative structure through which the subversion of the generic imaginary takes place. "Narrative action," as Collins argues, "now operates at two levels simultaneously—in reference to character adventure and in reference to a

text's adventures in the array of contemporary cultural production" (Jim Collins, "Genericity in the Nineties" 254). I argue that these are not two levels as much as they are a nexus point through which generic subversion is mapped. Strongly conventionalized types of characters can be said to constitute the generic "signal" while certain specific thematic motifs or ideological strains structure the conventions of film genre. Yet, their complex interrelation has yet to be critically examined. In short, it is the thesis of "Generic Subversions" that genre conventions are critiqued through the non-normative embodiment of generic characterization, which in turn disrupts larger genre expectations, or its constitutive "structure."

It is through the function of character that the question of the *generic* comes to the fore. Notably, at the center of Keller's essay on generic subversion is the examination of the deterritorialization affected by non-normative, non-*generic* characterization in the contemporary Western: "If it is not always foregrounded that the subject of westerns is an Anglo-Saxon male—and that this is therefore what is meant by American identity—it is almost always taken for granted. And it is impossible to offer up such a subject without also displaying what the subject is *not*: female, non-Christian, nonwhite, and nonheterosexual" (38). Although Keller speaks to generic subversion in the specific, her example points to a much broader application. Evident across genre films, including the western, is the generic terms by which "the hero" is assumed to be white, male and all the other invisible markers of "the norm…the natural, inevitable, ordinary way of being American," that is, the *generic* in the other sense of the word (38). She defines generic subversion in *Posse* (1993) not simply as an act of "stunt" or counter-casting in a Western, but contends that such unexpected casting exposes the normative conventions of

the Western through the film's generic citation: "a black hero…problematizes whiteness without making that the central focus of the diegesis" (Keller 39). In this way, characterization stands as a privileged marker of genre, and by setting generic markers against established expectations of characterization, the status of the generic—both as a way of describing the non-marked, non-specific subject and an kind of imaginary—is called into question. I propose that film genre becomes critical, or even subversive, when it compels a radical rethinking of the social by drawing attention to the discursive modalities governing who can speak, what kinds of speakers are valid and which are not.

Generic subversion is most often focalized through anomalous characterizations, which disrupt both the narrative and visual registers. A primary example of this is when a social Other becomes the locus of identification through the camera's alignment of the spectator's gaze with the film's protagonist. What follows is an assertion of difference— racial, sexual, cultural and/or ideological—that is less pluralistic multiculturalism than an agonistic critique of the interlocking structural hierarchies from which "difference" takes its meaning. In this way, social anxieties about alterity are critically re-evaluated through the subversion of generic conventions. Put another way, dominant conceptions of sex, gender, race and nation, I hypothesize, may be critically reworked in the explicit counter- casting of conventional types. Generic subversion, therefore, occurs when a character that anchors, or signals, a genre film, such as "action hero," "private eye" or *femme fatale*" is specified, destabilizing the "generic" in both senses by bringing to the surface of the film the multivalent and competing discourses of race, sex and nation. Of foremost importance to the mode of ideological critique of genre films I employ here is the recognition that characters are not "models of individual subjectivity" but rather allow "popular

representations" to "elaborate social anxieties through fantasmatic structures that are apparently 'private.' Collective or public fantasies about social difference, then, take shape through representations that seem to draw on private or subjective intensities" (Sharon Willis 279). To this end, deformations of character (expectation) re-view such "public fantasies of social difference" from the position of those who signal social difference in the particularity of their embodiment. The subsequent filmic intensities that emanate from this deformation of the generic signal point away from "private" experience and instead shed light on the social systems or public origins of these various anxieties and their political implications.

The films I discuss in the following chapters acknowledge the politically shifting terrain of representation from which characterization takes its meaning in the context of cinematic verisimilitude. As Nichols avers: "The importance of *visual* culture corresponds to the importance of *multi*culturalism, or identity politics, where the struggle to bring diverse, potentially incompatible, identities into being entails an effort to give visual representation to what had been previously homogenized, displaced or repressed" (39). It is this struggle to bring certain identities into being in cinema, precisely through the intensities generated by their alterity, which I define as the *de-formation* of character. The inherent incompatibility that is evident in placing the specificity of multiculturalism in genre films that normally center on the expected (generic) protagonist presents an active deformation of film characterization. The textual analyses developed herein track these deformations in certain instances of contemporary film genre to examine their discursive function in the popular imagination. Film genre, in its continual reiteration of the generic "signal" and "structure," is able to shed significant light on the intersections

of visual culture and multicultural critique by challenging the homogeneity—or generic status—of the characters it commonly represents, such as casting the implicitly masculine action hero with a woman, or hybridizing the *femme fatale* of film noir with the yakuza gangster of transnational East Asian cinema, or undercutting narrative configurations of monstrosity/alien-ness in serial television.

While the first chapter establishes a "radical" theory of generic subversion by contextualizing it within the history of film genre criticism, the later chapters offer textual analyses of specific generically marked films, which are also contextualized within their respective historical frameworks. To be clear, the model of interpretive genre criticism I develop in this dissertation is self-consciously transhistorical and transnational as generic subversion is inherently a dialogical process on every level. This immanent dialogism necessitates a comparativist framework of analysis since subversion entails a relational production of meaning. The comparative analytic of my project is evident in the first chapter in which I put into conversation Jacques Derrida's "The Law of Genre" and Judith Butler's concept of gender subversion, speculating on the coincidence of "the mark" of genre/gender. The following chapters situate a discussion of a specific film text, or set of texts, within the particular genre—action film, science fiction, hard-boiled detective, horror—from which the film, films or television episodes take their meaning, while figuring in that genre as a crucial counter-formation. The second chapter, for instance, discusses the intersections of genre and gender in the action film by tracing its history from the serial-queen films of early melodrama, through the male (re)action(ary) films of the eighties to the "tough chicks" of the nineties. The second chapter, in this way, introduces a comparative methodology of "grouping genres into pairs" in order to

represent "the complex relationships of generic ideas to one another…or rather the

ideational conflict between them" (Beebee 257). The third chapter expands this pairing in

the form of a cross-cultural and transnational comparative analysis of film noir,

problematizing (or "unthinking") the Western bias that girds its place in film

historiography (Stam and Shohat 3). The final chapter extends this comparative approach

to an altogether different understanding of genre—the idea of "Black film as genre"—as

well as a different medium, television.

Informing the broader project of textual analysis undertaken here is Jameson's

parenthetical aside: "the enumeration [of genres] must be closely and empirically linked

to a specific historical moment" (Jameson, *Signatures* 176). The genre films I discuss are

limited to a very specific historical moment, that is, the 1990s. The most recent decades

of filmmaking are marked by a destabilization of the generic imaginary arising from the

changing technologies and economics of mainstream American cinema. Jameson

elaborates: "The other feature of the end of Hollywood…can be formulated as the

repudiation of the genre system itself…. The introduction of the 'wide screen' in 1952,

with its overdetermined technological and economic situation (end of the studio system,

introduction of television), is also emblematic of the mutation in aesthetics itself, which

renders the modest on-going practice of the traditional genres somehow uncomfortable, if

not intolerable" (*Signatures* 177). Film history, to this extent, certainly demands to be

fore-grounded in the on-going practice of genrification, but it also suggests specific

problems for what Schatz refers to as "New Hollywood," or what Staiger calls "post-

Fordist" genre studies. Traditional genres in the current historical period are destabilized

by the imperatives of postmodernism, which involve among other things the refutation of

master narratives. This significant historical shift, as Jameson avers, transforms film genre: "the dissolution of filmic realism, the 'end' of genre or of Hollywood, is already implicit in the tense and historically and structurally unstable constitutive relationship between genre and its conventions, or, what is another way of saying the same thing, between the individual genre and the system as such" (*Signatures* 177). It is in the interstitial spaces opened by the "end" of genre that subversive textual practices take shape, making the comparative analysis of a specific instance of a genre and its horizon of (generic) expectation all the more imperative.

Interpretive genre criticism now resides in the unstable relationship between genre texts and the conventions adumbrated in the generic imaginary. The dissolution of realism catalyzes a change in focus from genre's relationship to "reality" to a genre film's place in the process of genericization. Put another way, "the function of genre films, which, if they can still be said to be engaged in symbolically 'mapping' the cultural landscape, must do so now in reference to, and *through* the array that constitutes the landscape" (Jim Collins, "Genericity in the Ninties" 247). Contemporary film genre dialogically engages the genre system through citational practices, intertextually referring to the generic "structure" and "signal" from which they draw their meanings. It is in the citational practices of contemporary film genre that subversion becomes a critical practice—and analytical framework—as not all genre films allude to the same generic structures, nor are these citations employed in the same ways or to the same ends. The historical context of the films discussed is limited to a circumscribed historical moment— all within the last decade of the twentieth century. Following the explicitly critical genre films of the late sixties and early seventies such as *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and

MacCabe and Mrs. Miller (1971), a more mainstream process of citation took hold in the popular imagination in which generic referencing became less pointed but more systemic. "The genre texts of the late 1980s—early 1990s," as Collins describes it, "demonstrate an even more sophisticated hyperconsciousness concerning not just narrative formulae, but the conditions of their own circulation and reception in the present, which has a massive impact on the nature of popular entertainment" (Jim Collins, "Genericity in the Ninties" 248). This impact, however, is neither totalizing nor unilateral, as earlier ideological genre criticism might have suggested.

The radical genre theory I advance in this project provides an alternative critical model for naming the subversive possibilities that accompany this hyperconsciousness of film genre. Genre films and their audiences respond to (and find pleasure in) the array that is constitutive of the popular imagination. Collins defines contemporary genericity accordingly: "the cultural terrain that must be mapped is a world already sedimented with layers of popular mythologies, some old, some recent, but all co-present and subject to rearticulation according to different ideological agendas" (Jim Collins, "Genericity in the Nineties" 262). Contemporary meta-generic films are postmodern to this extent because they comment on the instability of generic forms, an instability signaled in a challenge to generic character expectation. In the act of generic rearticulation (such as *Posse's* African American cowboy), these differing agendas find expression, challenging and even subverting the implicit assumptions of extant mythologies. The re-citation of cinematic mythologies can take the form of genre pastiche but is not limited to this because of the complex and contradictory nature of discursive activity. Indeed, contemporary genericity is defined in terms of this activity: "the features of conventional genre films that are

subjugated to such intensive rearticulation are not the mere detritus of exhausted cultures past: those icons, scenarios, visual conventions continue to carry with them some sort of cultural 'charge' or resonance that must be reworked according to the exigencies of the present…retaining vestiges of past significance reinscribed in the present" (Jim Collins, "Genericity in the Nineties" 256). This reinscription can take a variety of forms—from uncritical mimesis to open subversion. The goal of this project is to forward a model of interpretive practice attuned to the subtle and contextual variances in such intensive rearticulations of genre, particularly as they rework, intervene into and, at times, subvert genericity itself, and the field of cultural meanings it comes to signify.

In this way, the dissertation maps out a specific mode of film genre theorizing in line with what Bill Nichols calls "the third, contemporary, moment of cultural study" in which cinema "comes to be regarded as a socially constructed category serving socially significant ends" (not unlike gender), and with this noteworthy conceptual change, "the goal of providing explanations for cultural forms and social practices loses its appeal in favor of an emphasis on the (preferably thick) interpretation of specific forms, practices and effects" (36-8). If we are to say something more precise about genre, something beyond the fact that genre patterns are mixing (or mixed), or that the meta-generic films index generic instability, what is necessary is a highly nuanced interpretive praxis built on a methodology of thick description. The ideological textual analyses developed in the later chapters represent such an interpretive praxis by contextualizing the respective film interpretations in terms of the theoretical, historical, and socio-cultural frames that inform the representative genre, its critical reception past and present (particularly in terms of film genre historiography), and the specific intervention performed in its (subversive)

rearticulation as represented by the film text being addressed. Indeed, the chapters are structured to reflect this framing, beginning with the broader historical context and critical questions through which the genre itself has been figured in order to foreground the intervention that is the central purpose of the individual chapter. The generically subversive film text only comes into play in the last section of each chapter to highlight the reading practice itself as a model of thick genre criticism appropriate to a range of texts, as it stands as a template for a reconfigured ideological criticism, radicalized to fit the contemporary concerns of film studies.

Generic subversion is defined in my project as a concept that points to a critical disturbance in the popular imagination. Because it is a cultural form that must constantly mix its codes just enough to draw new audiences while still meeting certain narrative expectations (e.g., heroes, villains), cinema can introduce stories that actually trouble the most common, "generic," stories of the (hegemonic) national imaginary. The second chapter, "Queering Hollywood's Tough Chick," pinpoints one such disturbance, a disturbance, notably that has a long history in American cinema. The mixed genre of action-melodrama exemplifies dominant cinema's utility in the orchestration of discourses that shore up the nation-state and its preferred subjects (white, male, Christian, heterosexual, etc.). Indeed, melodramatic characterization continues to this day, in the genre of the postmodern action blockbuster, as the primary mechanism through which the myths of the nation are so frequently figured. Thus, I argue, by replacing the action hero with a woman, it becomes possible for the assumptions accompanying the idea of the action hero, such as its reactionary politics, to shift. My second chapter maps this shift in *The Long Kiss Goodnight* (1996) and *The Matrix* (1999) by explicating how these films

trouble the genre in their antipathetic characterizations. The "tough chick" offers forms of

identification and desire that can direct spectators to critically question the ideologically

conservative plot to which the contemporary blockbuster usually adheres. Generic

subversion is evident in the tropes that define the "tough chick" as transgressor of the

complex social forces of a racialized hetero-patriarchy—the linked imperatives of

heterosexuality and patriarchal gender asymmetry that function to ensure racial purity.

The subversive embodiment of generic expectation exposes the ideologically

conservative plot—typically employing some combination of misogyny, racism, and

xenophobia—to which the genre of the action film usually adheres because, although

they share the iconography of the action film, the narratives in which these actions are

situated are radically reconfigured.

In this way, generic subversion, as a critical practice, troubles national

frameworks for mapping genre citation in contemporary cinema. Indeed, the "popular

imagination" transcends national cinemas, and therefore the discussion of contemporary

film genre is transnational by necessity. Central to the multicultural critique I undertake is

not simply adding the genre films of other national film industries to the list of

Hollywood genres, but an attendance to "the vexed issue of Americanism, the question as

to why and how an aesthetic idiom developed in one country could achieve transnational

and global currency, and how this account might add to and modify our understanding of

classical" and post-Fordist cinema (Hansen 333). To this end, the third chapter discusses

the subversion of film noir, challenging extant Eurocentric theorizations of the genre. My

goal in this chapter is to build on recent claims that "film can provide an alternative

public sphere" by moving beyond an inclusionary model of cross-cultural analysis to a

thoroughgoing transnational redefinition of genre (Gledhill, "Rethinking Genres" 241).

Current definitions of the "popular imagination" must take into account the fact that

"almost all national cinemas have been influenced to some degree by American genre

movies" (Grant, *Film Genre Reader III* xx). And yet, the question of film genre as a

geopolitical phenomenon has only begun to be explored. In order to better understand the

proliferation of what David Desser has referred to as "global noir," the third chapter

reconceptualizes film noir from a less nation-bound standpoint in order to sketch out the

genre's recent (and not so recent) transnational applications. By taking a comparative

approach to a range of films constitutive of the genre, from "borderless" Japanese

Nikkatsu Action films to the "border cinema" of American postwar noir and neo-noir, I

will show that global noir, understood as a uniquely transnational genre, presents a

cognitive map of the shifting terrain of globalized postmodernism. Hayashi Kaizo's *The*

Most Terrible Time in My Life (1994), exemplifies this, appropriating postwar cinema's

existential uncertainty, embodied by the hard-boiled detective, to reflect on the

disorientation of contemporary geopolitics. By resituating noir sensibilities in

contemporary Japan, Hayashi's postmodern neo-noir presents a non-Western example of

critical mimicry that is an intervention into—and subversion of—an "American" film

genre.

 While the previous chapters seek to intervene into constructions of classic film

genres, the fourth chapter engages with a non-normative, and only partially accepted,

"genre" that is itself an intervention into the notion of the generic. Thomas Cripps and

others have forwarded the idea of "black film as genre," which in turn relies on concepts

of the "black aesthetic" to support its status as an identifiable generic category. The

critical intervention that this chapter attempts is to rethink the way race and ethnicity have been bracketed in genre criticism by questioning the circumscribed—and essentialized—terms through which they have been articulated. Instead of analyzing race as something assigned to a text because of the bodies represented on screen, or behind the camera, I develop a demystificatory interpretive practice as a response to the challenge raised by the idea of black film as genre. In other words, positing the focus on race/ethnicity in film as a self-evident characteristic of certain films, specifically of "black film," has only a limited application. I counter that it may be more effective to understand race and ethnicity in cinema as a transitive activity, like genre generally. Rick Altman makes the argument that genre is more of a verb than a noun, changing its designation with the addition of new (adverbial) terms; if so, this chapter asks, what follows when the term "black" is added (to any genre or medium), and how does that constitutes a new genre? The critical practice performed by "black film" that I identify in the chapter—and one which by definition calls upon a specifically demystificatory practice—is what can be conceived as, for lack of a more precise term, *haunting*. For my purposes, haunting is one exceptionally salient "performance" of black film as genre. Haunting, as a conceptual metaphor, challenges the range of texts understood as "ethnic," expanding the field of analysis to all forms of visual representation. By examining the much more submerged ethnic and racial implications of the television series, *The X-Files*, I argue that the trope of haunting works to trace systems of signification that excavate race and ethnicity, even in supposedly racially-neutral visual texts.

These chapters, taken together, constitute a dissertation aimed at the subversion of film genre criticism itself. The textual and contextual thick description of individual

genre texts and the genre conventions they call up (reinvent and, at times, subvert)

constitutes an ideological approach to interpretive genre criticism informed by queer,

feminist, postcolonial and critical race theory. I replace mono-cultural and hetero-

normative frameworks with a methodological approach attentive to the heteroclite

subjects emerging in contemporary film and media. This specifically multicultural

approach to film analysis has concrete aims, as Nichols enumerates:

> Lesbian desire may mark out a terrain and a trajectory at odds with male quest
> narratives; ethnic identity may only sustain its vitality when assimilation becomes an
> acute form of the paradox of identity on the other's terms and ethnographic forms of
> realism may serve more as a point of departure than as a universal. In pursuing such
> issues the study of visual culture serves less as a universalizing glue than as a
> particularizing tool, cracking open myths of commonality based on abstract principles
> of equality to examine the specific operations whereby subcultural identities and
> subjectivities take shape around the concrete principles of racially, socio-
> economically and gender-specific forms of social relationship (41).

In other words, embodiments marked by the specificity of gender, sexual, racial, class,

ethnic and national difference challenge myths, like those typically reiterated in film

genre, by bringing to light the status of the generic itself, and its implicit orchestration of

social relations of power (and powerlessness).

Félix Guattari argues, "The themes of cinema—its models, its genres, its

professional castes, its mandarins, its stars—are, whether they want to be or not, at the

service of power. And not only insofar as they depend directly on the financial power

machine, but first and foremost, because they participate in the elaboration and

transmission of subjective models" (146). But by examining the de-formations of

character in the popular imagination from a specifically multicultural perspective, I assert

that genre cinema has the potential to challenge the rules of its participation in systems of

power. Thus, it is through contemporary commercial cinema's subjective models (more

than even its economic origins) that subversion becomes critically important. For

example, not all commercial cinema "entertains a latent racism in its Westerns," as Keller

makes clear in her discussion of generic subversion (Guattari 146). Through the

deformations of the generic "signal"—its characterizations, to be exact—certain

contradictions in the generic "structure" come to the surface of the contemporary genre

film text that disturb expectation and the cultural meanings on which they are founded.

The disturbance of subjective models that certain individual genre texts (film and

television) foreground calls for what Stam has named, "a radical cultural critique…a

cultural critique precluding neither laughter, pleasure, nor subversion" (238-9). Generic

subversion, as I will show in the following chapters, names a specific take on this (multi-

)cultural critique that maps the subversive citational practices of film genre. In this way, I

present an ideological genre criticism, but "dusted off," aimed at identifying the "soft

subversions and imperceptible revolutions" taking place in the popular imagination today

(Guattari 111).

<u>Introduction</u>

Film Genre and the Question of Subversion

We find many movies belonging to genres that are often dismissed as escapist and alienating. While this may be true in the majority of cases, it nevertheless remains that escapism can also be used as a device for criticizing reality and the present state of society (Jean-Loup Bourget 52).

In "Generic Subversion as Counterhistory," one of the few instances where generic subversion is theorized as both a critical term and film practice, Alexandra Keller outlines generic subversion in terms of a set of textual concerns: "myth, history and identity are proposed as deeply imbricated, complex and problematic categories, all of which can be worked through by appealing to, critiquing, and subverting the generic imaginary…and its conventions" (44). Since Keller's hypothesis lays the groundwork for a new definition of subversion in genre studies, I want to begin by unpacking its central precepts, particularly the notion of "the generic imaginary" and how it is "appealed to," "critiqued" and "subverted." The project of this dissertation, to this extent, is to construct a theoretical edifice and critical practice on this foundational, albeit brief, claim. Girding this edifice is the notion of the generic imaginary. The generic imaginary conceptualizes the function of patterns in genre (film) and the horizon of expectation to which they give rise. As Janet Staiger asserts: "Patterns do exist. Moreover, patterns are valuable material for deviation, dialogue, and critique. Variations from patterns may occur for making a text fresh or for commentary about the issues raised within the standard pattern, and both aesthetic and ideological functions of variations make no sense without a notion of some pattern or order" ("Hybrid" 186). In this way, the identification and elaboration of generic subversion entails the (often unspoken) affirmation and substantiation of patterns

in genre. Generic patterns and their subversions co-exist and are mutually substantiating, but this symbiotic relationship has yet to receive much critical attention beyond a highly circumscribed frame of reference, that is, as a rarified version of ideological analysis. "Generic Subversions" poses an intervention into the ideological study of film genre, specifically reframing the generic imaginary as it has come to be understood in film genre criticism by rethinking its particular relationship to subversion. In other words, my dissertation aims at the critical articulation of a theory of generic subversion, formulated as a much-needed response to the question of how to theorize genre—what Fredric Jameson describes as the grasping of "the ultimate relationship between genre and representation (or the illusion of reality)" (*Signatures of the Visible* 175).

My dissertation attempts to answer this question by exploring the implications of the subversion of the generic imaginary. It is safe to say that the relationship between genre and representation (much less "reality") is impossible to grasp in its totality; therefore, the following chapters aim at comprehending a particular facet of this relationship by attending to the subversive practices of a delimited number of contemporary genre films. As Jameson points out: "the atomized or serial 'public' of mass culture wants to see the same thing over and over again, hence the urgency of the generic structure and the generic signal"—a structure and signal that, taken together, gird the generic imaginary (Jameson, *Signatures* 19). The subversion of the generic structure and signal offers important insights into the relationship between the generic imaginary and representation broadly conceived. Barry Langford, in *Film Genre and Beyond,* posits that the formal analysis of genre films requires a consideration of the ways the generic

imagination is challenged as much as it reinforced. "The task of film genre studies," as he

defines it:

> Must be to establish the particular *kinds* of genres that are characteristic of
> commercial narrative cinema, the varieties of assumptions and expectations that play
> around and through them…. One approach might be to emphasize the relatively
> concrete and verifiable aspects of the film-industrial process that historically subtend
> genre production…. At the same time, one might want to look at the ways in which
> individual films seem either to conform to or to confront and challenge the (assumed)
> expectations of the spectator (Langford 7).

While the field has been dramatically transformed by recent studies of film genres in

terms of actual film-industrial practices, particularly in the cases of film noir (discussed

in Chapter Three) and melodrama (discussed in Chapter Two), the latter text-based

approach has received much less critical attention. This is due in no small part to the

fraught history of textual analysis in film genre studies.

While film genre historians have paved the way for a "radical film genre

criticism," as Alan Williams names it, the analysis of individual films has yet to undergo

an equal transformation. My aim in this project is to update, or "reinvent," film genre

theory precisely by radicalizing the interpretive approach in much the same way genre

film historians have uprooted some of genre criticism's most cherished precepts (Gledhill

and Williams 1). The task of contemporary film genre studies requires that the

assumptions underlying both historical claims about genres and the interpretive

framework(s) brought to bear on individual texts be scrutinized. Nowhere is this more

clear than in the significant strides made by film historians who have come to show,

through the examination of film-industrial and audience practices, that even the most

basic critical terminology—such as "melodrama"—may not accurately reflect actual

usage by the industry and film-goers. Yet, the underlying (and often unconscious)

assumptions brought to bear on individual genre texts have only begun to be approached

with the same level of incredulity. My dissertation, therefore, begins by critically examining the history of textual analysis in film genre criticism, scrutinizing some of its most salient claims through the topic of subversion. The question of subversion in film genre theory affords a unique lens to review the critical terminology that has come to delimit the practice of textual analysis in film genre studies.

In the history of film genre criticism, analysis has tended to favor the interpretive practice of constructing genre categories by the adumbration of iconographic features. The analysis of individual films, within this methodological approach, played a much less significant role. Textual analysis, however, has been the central concern of film *theory*, expressed most often in the practice of ideological critique. What subversion, as a specific category of investigation, offered film theory was a way to begin to read for difference rather than sameness, but more than this, it began with the question of ideology rather than the question of how a body of films reflects certain genre traits. No longer bound to a procrustean project of genre systematization, the investigation of generic subversion, specifically, opened the door to closer readings of individual texts, which were of interest for their exceptionality rather than sameness—the typical approach to genre criticism up to that time. To this extent, ideological critics borrowed from the approach of *auteur* studies, who tended to frame their discussions in terms of the exceptional or transcendent textual qualities associated with a chosen *auteur*. Ideological criticism promoted "the variability of textual politics within mainstream production," hypothesizing that, "while firmly entrenched within the system," subversive genre films "display certain features that are critically deemed as combative to the conventions governing the 'typical' classic text" (Klinger 75). The implicit opposition at the heart of

genre theory nonetheless suggests a paradigmatic dichotomy, not so much between genres, but in the binary and hierarchal split between genre film and non-genre film, with the latter generally more esteemed for escaping the ideological constraints implicit to all genre films.

It is this implicit bias that points to a conservative mindset girding critical approaches to film genre, even when they embrace its most subversive incarnations. I want to be careful here in developing an idea of subversion that does not perpetuate this hierarchal thinking. A *radical* genre criticism, I aver, cannot rely on the straw man argument of a monolithic and totalizing generic imaginary against which subversion takes place. Instead, subversion, as a critical tool in textual analysis, affords a way to think through film genre's conflicting discursive practices, as I show in the following chapters. Generic subversion then, for me, names a "sincere social criticism" within mass culture, challenging the "profoundly disturbing elitism" inherent in the standpoint that bifurcates aesthetic social criticism into the camps of mass culture, where critique cannot occur due to its mass-produced status, and the avant-garde, which is the only "authentic" form of "a poetics of resistance" (Jim Collins, *Uncommon Cultures* 14).[2] The first chapter, therefore, is structured as an intervention into the more conservative theories of genre, forwarding instead an alternative model radicalized by the insights and aims of feminist-queer epistemology since its thorough-going analysis of subversion (of gender) has taken place outside the purview of aesthetic judgment. Proposing a form of methodological assessment, I outline a theoretical approach to generic subversion, radicalized by the insights and aims of feminist/queer theory, which identifies the ways popular media invoke generic structures to challenge contemporary ideological, cultural

and aesthetic paradigms. At the heart of a queer theory of subversion is the question of what compels a radical rethinking of the social and its regulatory norms; I retrofit this question to film genre criticism to explicate the role of ideological critique in contemporary film studies.

Generic subversion arises out of the "frustration" produced by the imperatives for "homogeneity and predictability considered the prerequisite for 'genericity'" (Jim Collins, "Genericity in the Nineties" 256). For this reason I draw on the insights of queer theory, particularly the notion of gender performance forwarded by Judith Butler, to establish conceptual parallels to the social imperatives of gender norms and how they give rise to something more than predictable gender performance (or pastiche), but rather subversive gender enactments may arise from the frustration of some with (hetero)normative gender practices. Of the range of citational responses to *genre* norms, my focus is on the ways genre films resist the imperatives of generic sameness and how this resistance comes to be articulated. Genericity implies a delimited field of "norms" but, as in gender's citational imperatives, "these norms can be significantly deterritorialized through the citation. They can also be exposed as non-natural and nonnecessary when they take place in a context and through a form of embodying that defies normative expectation" (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 218). It is through the crucial questions of embodiment and expectation that generic subversion is theorized in my project. That is, the central trope of characterization, and the expected patterns of embodiment it entails, is often the narrative structure through which the subversion of the generic imaginary takes place. "Narrative action," as Collins argues, "now operates at two levels simultaneously—in reference to character adventure and in reference to a

text's adventures in the array of contemporary cultural production" (Jim Collins,

"Genericity in the Nineties" 254). I argue that these are not two levels as much as they

are a nexus point through which generic subversion is mapped. Strongly conventionalized

types of characters can be said to constitute the generic "signal" while certain specific

thematic motifs or ideological strains structure the conventions of film genre. Yet, their

complex interrelation has yet to be critically examined. In short, it is the thesis of

"Generic Subversions" that genre conventions are critiqued through the non-normative

embodiment of generic characterization, which in turn disrupts larger genre expectations,

or its constitutive "structure."

It is through the function of character that the question of the *generic* comes to the

fore. Notably, at the center of Keller's essay on generic subversion is the examination of

the deterritorialization affected by non-normative, non-*generic* characterization in the

contemporary Western: "If it is not always foregrounded that the subject of westerns is an

Anglo-Saxon male—and that this is therefore what is meant by American identity—it is

almost always taken for granted. And it is impossible to offer up such a subject without

also displaying what the subject is *not*: female, non-Christian, nonwhite, and

nonheterosexual" (38). Although Keller speaks to generic subversion in the specific, her

example points to a much broader application. Evident across genre films, including the

western, is the generic terms by which "the hero" is assumed to be white, male and all the

other invisible markers of "the norm…the natural, inevitable, ordinary way of being

American," that is, the *generic* in the other sense of the word (38). She defines generic

subversion in *Posse* (1993) not simply as an act of "stunt" or counter-casting in a

Western, but contends that such unexpected casting exposes the normative conventions of

the Western through the film's generic citation: "a black hero…problematizes whiteness without making that the central focus of the diegesis" (Keller 39). In this way, characterization stands as a privileged marker of genre, and by setting generic markers against established expectations of characterization, the status of the generic—both as a way of describing the non-marked, non-specific subject and an kind of imaginary—is called into question. I propose that film genre becomes critical, or even subversive, when it compels a radical rethinking of the social by drawing attention to the discursive modalities governing who can speak, what kinds of speakers are valid and which are not.

Generic subversion is most often focalized through anomalous characterizations, which disrupt both the narrative and visual registers. A primary example of this is when a social Other becomes the locus of identification through the camera's alignment of the spectator's gaze with the film's protagonist. What follows is an assertion of difference—racial, sexual, cultural and/or ideological—that is less pluralistic multiculturalism than an agonistic critique of the interlocking structural hierarchies from which "difference" takes its meaning. In this way, social anxieties about alterity are critically re-evaluated through the subversion of generic conventions. Put another way, dominant conceptions of sex, gender, race and nation, I hypothesize, may be critically reworked in the explicit counter-casting of conventional types. Generic subversion, therefore, occurs when a character that anchors, or signals, a genre film, such as "action hero," "private eye" or "*femme fatale*" is specified, destabilizing the "generic" in both senses by bringing to the surface of the film the multivalent and competing discourses of race, sex and nation. Of foremost importance to the mode of ideological critique of genre films I employ here is the recognition that characters are not "models of individual subjectivity" but rather allow "popular

representations" to "elaborate social anxieties through fantasmatic structures that are apparently 'private.' Collective or public fantasies about social difference, then, take shape through representations that seem to draw on private or subjective intensities" (Sharon Willis 279). To this end, deformations of character (expectation) re-view such "public fantasies of social difference" from the position of those who signal social difference in the particularity of their embodiment. The subsequent filmic intensities that emanate from this deformation of the generic signal point away from "private" experience and instead shed light on the social systems or public origins of these various anxieties and their political implications.

The films I discuss in the following chapters acknowledge the politically shifting terrain of representation from which characterization takes its meaning in the context of cinematic verisimilitude. As Nichols avers: "The importance of *visual* culture corresponds to the importance of *multi*culturalism, or identity politics, where the struggle to bring diverse, potentially incompatible, identities into being entails an effort to give visual representation to what had been previously homogenized, displaced or repressed" (39). It is this struggle to bring certain identities into being in cinema, precisely through the intensities generated by their alterity, which I define as the *de-formation* of character. The inherent incompatibility that is evident in placing the specificity of multiculturalism in genre films that normally center on the expected (generic) protagonist presents an active deformation of film characterization. The textual analyses developed herein track these deformations in certain instances of contemporary film genre to examine their discursive function in the popular imagination. Film genre, in its continual reiteration of the generic "signal" and "structure," is able to shed significant light on the intersections

of visual culture and multicultural critique by challenging the homogeneity—or generic

status—of the characters it commonly represents, such as casting the implicitly masculine

action hero with a woman, or hybridizing the *femme fatale* of film noir with the yakuza

gangster of transnational East Asian cinema, or undercutting narrative configurations of

monstrosity/alien-ness in serial television.

While the first chapter establishes a "radical" theory of generic subversion by

contextualizing it within the history of film genre criticism, the later chapters offer textual

analyses of specific generically marked films, which are also contextualized within their

respective historical frameworks. To be clear, the model of interpretive genre criticism I

develop in this dissertation is self-consciously transhistorical and transnational as generic

subversion is inherently a dialogical process on every level. This immanent dialogism

necessitates a comparativist framework of analysis since subversion entails a relational

production of meaning. The comparative analytic of my project is evident in the first

chapter in which I put into conversation Jacques Derrida's "The Law of Genre" and

Judith Butler's concept of gender subversion, speculating on the coincidence of "the

mark" of genre/gender. The following chapters situate a discussion of a specific film text,

or set of texts, within the particular genre—action film, science fiction, hard-boiled

detective, horror—from which the film, films or television episodes take their meaning,

while figuring in that genre as a crucial counter-formation. The second chapter, for

instance, discusses the intersections of genre and gender in the action film by tracing its

history from the serial-queen films of early melodrama, through the male (re)action(ary)

films of the eighties to the "tough chicks" of the nineties. The second chapter, in this

way, introduces a comparative methodology of "grouping genres into pairs" in order to

represent "the complex relationships of generic ideas to one another…or rather the ideational conflict between them" (Beebee 257). The third chapter expands this pairing in the form of a cross-cultural and transnational comparative analysis of film noir, problematizing (or "unthinking") the Western bias that girds its place in film historiography (Stam and Shohat 3). The final chapter extends this comparative approach to an altogether different understanding of genre—the idea of "Black film as genre"—as well as a different medium, television.

Informing the broader project of textual analysis undertaken here is Jameson's parenthetical aside: "the enumeration [of genres] must be closely and empirically linked to a specific historical moment" (Jameson, *Signatures* 176). The genre films I discuss are limited to a very specific historical moment, that is, the 1990s. The most recent decades of filmmaking are marked by a destabilization of the generic imaginary arising from the changing technologies and economics of mainstream American cinema. Jameson elaborates: "The other feature of the end of Hollywood…can be formulated as the repudiation of the genre system itself…. The introduction of the 'wide screen' in 1952, with its overdetermined technological and economic situation (end of the studio system, introduction of television), is also emblematic of the mutation in aesthetics itself, which renders the modest on-going practice of the traditional genres somehow uncomfortable, if not intolerable" (*Signatures* 177). Film history, to this extent, certainly demands to be fore-grounded in the on-going practice of genrification, but it also suggests specific problems for what Schatz refers to as "New Hollywood," or what Staiger calls "post-Fordist" genre studies. Traditional genres in the current historical period are destabilized by the imperatives of postmodernism, which involve among other things the refutation of

master narratives. This significant historical shift, as Jameson avers, transforms film genre: "the dissolution of filmic realism, the 'end' of genre or of Hollywood, is already implicit in the tense and historically and structurally unstable constitutive relationship between genre and its conventions, or, what is another way of saying the same thing, between the individual genre and the system as such" (*Signatures* 177). It is in the interstitial spaces opened by the "end" of genre that subversive textual practices take shape, making the comparative analysis of a specific instance of a genre and its horizon of (generic) expectation all the more imperative.

Interpretive genre criticism now resides in the unstable relationship between genre texts and the conventions adumbrated in the generic imaginary. The dissolution of realism catalyzes a change in focus from genre's relationship to "reality" to a genre film's place in the process of genericization. Put another way, "the function of genre films, which, if they can still be said to be engaged in symbolically 'mapping' the cultural landscape, must do so now in reference to, and *through* the array that constitutes the landscape" (Jim Collins, "Genericity in the Ninties" 247). Contemporary film genre dialogically engages the genre system through citational practices, intertextually referring to the generic "structure" and "signal" from which they draw their meanings. It is in the citational practices of contemporary film genre that subversion becomes a critical practice—and analytical framework—as not all genre films allude to the same generic structures, nor are these citations employed in the same ways or to the same ends. The historical context of the films discussed is limited to a circumscribed historical moment— all within the last decade of the twentieth century. Following the explicitly critical genre films of the late sixties and early seventies such as *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and

MacCabe and Mrs. Miller (1971), a more mainstream process of citation took hold in the popular imagination in which generic referencing became less pointed but more systemic. "The genre texts of the late 1980s—early 1990s," as Collins describes it, "demonstrate an even more sophisticated hyperconsciousness concerning not just narrative formulae, but the conditions of their own circulation and reception in the present, which has a massive impact on the nature of popular entertainment" (Jim Collins, "Genericity in the Ninties" 248). This impact, however, is neither totalizing nor unilateral, as earlier ideological genre criticism might have suggested.

The radical genre theory I advance in this project provides an alternative critical model for naming the subversive possibilities that accompany this hyperconsciousness of film genre. Genre films and their audiences respond to (and find pleasure in) the array that is constitutive of the popular imagination. Collins defines contemporary genericity accordingly: "the cultural terrain that must be mapped is a world already sedimented with layers of popular mythologies, some old, some recent, but all co-present and subject to rearticulation according to different ideological agendas" (Jim Collins, "Genericity in the Nineties" 262). Contemporary meta-generic films are postmodern to this extent because they comment on the instability of generic forms, an instability signaled in a challenge to generic character expectation. In the act of generic rearticulation (such as *Posse's* African American cowboy), these differing agendas find expression, challenging and even subverting the implicit assumptions of extant mythologies. The re-citation of cinematic mythologies can take the form of genre pastiche but is not limited to this because of the complex and contradictory nature of discursive activity. Indeed, contemporary genericity is defined in terms of this activity: "the features of conventional genre films that are

subjugated to such intensive rearticulation are not the mere detritus of exhausted cultures past: those icons, scenarios, visual conventions continue to carry with them some sort of cultural 'charge' or resonance that must be reworked according to the exigencies of the present…retaining vestiges of past significance reinscribed in the present" (Jim Collins, "Genericity in the Nineties" 256). This reinscription can take a variety of forms—from uncritical mimesis to open subversion. The goal of this project is to forward a model of interpretive practice attuned to the subtle and contextual variances in such intensive rearticulations of genre, particularly as they rework, intervene into and, at times, subvert genericity itself, and the field of cultural meanings it comes to signify.

In this way, the dissertation maps out a specific mode of film genre theorizing in line with what Bill Nichols calls "the third, contemporary, moment of cultural study" in which cinema "comes to be regarded as a socially constructed category serving socially significant ends" (not unlike gender), and with this noteworthy conceptual change, "the goal of providing explanations for cultural forms and social practices loses its appeal in favor of an emphasis on the (preferably thick) interpretation of specific forms, practices and effects" (36-8). If we are to say something more precise about genre, something beyond the fact that genre patterns are mixing (or mixed), or that the meta-generic films index generic instability, what is necessary is a highly nuanced interpretive praxis built on a methodology of thick description. The ideological textual analyses developed in the later chapters represent such an interpretive praxis by contextualizing the respective film interpretations in terms of the theoretical, historical, and socio-cultural frames that inform the representative genre, its critical reception past and present (particularly in terms of film genre historiography), and the specific intervention performed in its (subversive)

rearticulation as represented by the film text being addressed. Indeed, the chapters are structured to reflect this framing, beginning with the broader historical context and critical questions through which the genre itself has been figured in order to foreground the intervention that is the central purpose of the individual chapter. The generically subversive film text only comes into play in the last section of each chapter to highlight the reading practice itself as a model of thick genre criticism appropriate to a range of texts, as it stands as a template for a reconfigured ideological criticism, radicalized to fit the contemporary concerns of film studies.

Generic subversion is defined in my project as a concept that points to a critical disturbance in the popular imagination. Because it is a cultural form that must constantly mix its codes just enough to draw new audiences while still meeting certain narrative expectations (e.g., heroes, villains), cinema can introduce stories that actually trouble the most common, "generic," stories of the (hegemonic) national imaginary. The second chapter, "Queering Hollywood's Tough Chick," pinpoints one such disturbance, a disturbance, notably that has a long history in American cinema. The mixed genre of action-melodrama exemplifies dominant cinema's utility in the orchestration of discourses that shore up the nation-state and its preferred subjects (white, male, Christian, heterosexual, etc.). Indeed, melodramatic characterization continues to this day, in the genre of the postmodern action blockbuster, as the primary mechanism through which the myths of the nation are so frequently figured. Thus, I argue, by replacing the action hero with a woman, it becomes possible for the assumptions accompanying the idea of the action hero, such as its reactionary politics, to shift. My second chapter maps this shift in *The Long Kiss Goodnight* (1996) and *The Matrix* (1999) by explicating how these films

trouble the genre in their antipathetic characterizations. The "tough chick" offers forms of

identification and desire that can direct spectators to critically question the ideologically

conservative plot to which the contemporary blockbuster usually adheres. Generic

subversion is evident in the tropes that define the "tough chick" as transgressor of the

complex social forces of a racialized hetero-patriarchy—the linked imperatives of

heterosexuality and patriarchal gender asymmetry that function to ensure racial purity.

The subversive embodiment of generic expectation exposes the ideologically

conservative plot—typically employing some combination of misogyny, racism, and

xenophobia—to which the genre of the action film usually adheres because, although

they share the iconography of the action film, the narratives in which these actions are

situated are radically reconfigured.

In this way, generic subversion, as a critical practice, troubles national

frameworks for mapping genre citation in contemporary cinema. Indeed, the "popular

imagination" transcends national cinemas, and therefore the discussion of contemporary

film genre is transnational by necessity. Central to the multicultural critique I undertake is

not simply adding the genre films of other national film industries to the list of

Hollywood genres, but an attendance to "the vexed issue of Americanism, the question as

to why and how an aesthetic idiom developed in one country could achieve transnational

and global currency, and how this account might add to and modify our understanding of

classical" and post-Fordist cinema (Hansen 333). To this end, the third chapter discusses

the subversion of film noir, challenging extant Eurocentric theorizations of the genre. My

goal in this chapter is to build on recent claims that "film can provide an alternative

public sphere" by moving beyond an inclusionary model of cross-cultural analysis to a

thoroughgoing transnational redefinition of genre (Gledhill, "Rethinking Genres" 241).

Current definitions of the "popular imagination" must take into account the fact that

"almost all national cinemas have been influenced to some degree by American genre

movies" (Grant, *Film Genre Reader III* xx). And yet, the question of film genre as a

geopolitical phenomenon has only begun to be explored. In order to better understand the

proliferation of what David Desser has referred to as "global noir," the third chapter

reconceptualizes film noir from a less nation-bound standpoint in order to sketch out the

genre's recent (and not so recent) transnational applications. By taking a comparative

approach to a range of films constitutive of the genre, from "borderless" Japanese

Nikkatsu Action films to the "border cinema" of American postwar noir and neo-noir, I

will show that global noir, understood as a uniquely transnational genre, presents a

cognitive map of the shifting terrain of globalized postmodernism. Hayashi Kaizo's *The*

Most Terrible Time in My Life (1994), exemplifies this, appropriating postwar cinema's

existential uncertainty, embodied by the hard-boiled detective, to reflect on the

disorientation of contemporary geopolitics. By resituating noir sensibilities in

contemporary Japan, Hayashi's postmodern neo-noir presents a non-Western example of

critical mimicry that is an intervention into—and subversion of—an "American" film

genre.

   While the previous chapters seek to intervene into constructions of classic film

genres, the fourth chapter engages with a non-normative, and only partially accepted,

"genre" that is itself an intervention into the notion of the generic. Thomas Cripps and

others have forwarded the idea of "black film as genre," which in turn relies on concepts

of the "black aesthetic" to support its status as an identifiable generic category. The

critical intervention that this chapter attempts is to rethink the way race and ethnicity have been bracketed in genre criticism by questioning the circumscribed—and essentialized—terms through which they have been articulated. Instead of analyzing race as something assigned to a text because of the bodies represented on screen, or behind the camera, I develop a demystificatory interpretive practice as a response to the challenge raised by the idea of black film as genre. In other words, positing the focus on race/ethnicity in film as a self-evident characteristic of certain films, specifically of "black film," has only a limited application. I counter that it may be more effective to understand race and ethnicity in cinema as a transitive activity, like genre generally. Rick Altman makes the argument that genre is more of a verb than a noun, changing its designation with the addition of new (adverbial) terms; if so, this chapter asks, what follows when the term "black" is added (to any genre or medium), and how does that constitutes a new genre? The critical practice performed by "black film" that I identify in the chapter—and one which by definition calls upon a specifically demystificatory practice—is what can be conceived as, for lack of a more precise term, *haunting*. For my purposes, haunting is one exceptionally salient "performance" of black film as genre. Haunting, as a conceptual metaphor, challenges the range of texts understood as "ethnic," expanding the field of analysis to all forms of visual representation. By examining the much more submerged ethnic and racial implications of the television series, *The X-Files*, I argue that the trope of haunting works to trace systems of signification that excavate race and ethnicity, even in supposedly racially-neutral visual texts.

These chapters, taken together, constitute a dissertation aimed at the subversion of film genre criticism itself. The textual and contextual thick description of individual

genre texts and the genre conventions they call up (reinvent and, at times, subvert)

constitutes an ideological approach to interpretive genre criticism informed by queer,

feminist, postcolonial and critical race theory. I replace mono-cultural and hetero-

normative frameworks with a methodological approach attentive to the heteroclite

subjects emerging in contemporary film and media. This specifically multicultural

approach to film analysis has concrete aims, as Nichols enumerates:

> Lesbian desire may mark out a terrain and a trajectory at odds with male quest narratives; ethnic identity may only sustain its vitality when assimilation becomes an acute form of the paradox of identity on the other's terms and ethnographic forms of realism may serve more as a point of departure than as a universal. In pursuing such issues the study of visual culture serves less as a universalizing glue than as a particularizing tool, cracking open myths of commonality based on abstract principles of equality to examine the specific operations whereby subcultural identities and subjectivities take shape around the concrete principles of racially, socio-economically and gender-specific forms of social relationship (41).

In other words, embodiments marked by the specificity of gender, sexual, racial, class,

ethnic and national difference challenge myths, like those typically reiterated in film

genre, by bringing to light the status of the generic itself, and its implicit orchestration of

social relations of power (and powerlessness).

Félix Guattari argues, "The themes of cinema—its models, its genres, its

professional castes, its mandarins, its stars—are, whether they want to be or not, at the

service of power. And not only insofar as they depend directly on the financial power

machine, but first and foremost, because they participate in the elaboration and

transmission of subjective models" (146). But by examining the de-formations of

character in the popular imagination from a specifically multicultural perspective, I assert

that genre cinema has the potential to challenge the rules of its participation in systems of

power. Thus, it is through contemporary commercial cinema's subjective models (more

than even its economic origins) that subversion becomes critically important. For

example, not all commercial cinema "entertains a latent racism in its Westerns," as Keller makes clear in her discussion of generic subversion (Guattari 146). Through the deformations of the generic "signal"—its characterizations, to be exact—certain contradictions in the generic "structure" come to the surface of the contemporary genre film text that disturb expectation and the cultural meanings on which they are founded. The disturbance of subjective models that certain individual genre texts (film and television) foreground calls for what Stam has named, "a radical cultural critique…a cultural critique precluding neither laughter, pleasure, nor subversion" (238-9). Generic subversion, as I will show in the following chapters, names a specific take on this (multi)cultural critique that maps the subversive citational practices of film genre. In this way, I present an ideological genre criticism, but "dusted off," aimed at identifying the "soft subversions and imperceptible revolutions" taking place in the popular imagination today (Guattari 111).

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[1] Fred Pfeil's discussion of action films such as *Lethal Weapon* (1987) and *Die Hard* (1988) demonstrate the level of equivocation that is the outcome of juxtaposing the pleasures of popular culture with a Marxist-based critique of cultural production: "If the results of all these constructions and operations [of the eighties action film] are scarcely to be extolled as examples of radical or liberatory cultural production (and who would have ever thought they could be, given the economics and social relations of blockbuster filmmaking?), they nonetheless suggest a new and vertiginous psycho-social mobility, a moment of flux" (32).

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Chapter One

Genre Trouble: A Queer Epistemology of Subversion

Whatever the issue—title, reference, or mode and genre—the case before us always involves the law and, in particular, the relations formed around and to the law (Derrida 242).

If subversion is possible, it will be a subversion from within the terms of the law, through the possibilities that emerge when the law turns against itself and spawns unexpected permutations of itself (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 119).

Is A Radical Genre Theory Possible?

Recent scholarship in film genre criticism has effectively replaced long-standing concerns with what constitutes film genre (as a framework of analysis) or differentiates distinct film genres (Western, musical, comedy, melodrama) with the compelling question of what *troubles* genre and the claims made in its name. The concern with what might trouble the concept of genre and the criteria by which it is understood, particularly within Film Studies, can be seen as a long-gestating response to Alan Williams question: "Is a radical genre criticism possible?" (1984). Although Williams himself never actually defines what he means by "radical," in a critical review of Thomas Schatz's book, *Hollywood Genres,* he argues against what he sees as the field's conservative tendencies, such as its formalistic approach to film genres that assumes clearly defined subsets generalized "from a list of agreed-upon masterpieces," and the belief that these genres evolve teleologically over time (122, 124). The move away from the consolidation of genres to a more radical critique has come to a head with the publication of several interventions into extant theories of genre, within film studies and literary studies alike.[1] The range of critical reappraisal and rethinking taking place in the field of genre studies spans detailed historical work (Janet Staiger, Rick Altman, et al.) to poststructuralist

theories of genre (Thomas O. Beebee, Adena Rosmarin, et al.); these poles also generally align with film studies on the one hand, and literary theory on the other.

In Williams' own recommendations for a radical genre criticism, he clearly suggests the direction it should take:

> There seems to be two directions to go in search of a new approach to film genre. One might, perhaps, attempt to construct a new theory and methodology for the field and then later apply these to a list of films (itself presumably generated by the new method). I am personally dubious about this approach, but this has more to do with my opinion of current fashions in film theory than with the abstract possibility of an *a priori* genre theory. The more promising possibility, for the moment at least, is to return to film history and try to produce individual genre studies (124).

Although much excellent historical research has been done since this pronouncement, the question of the possibility of "a new theory and methodology for the field" remains unanswered. Since the "current fashions," both in film theory and in broader theories of representation generally, have changed over the years, I would like to return to this question to suggest that an *a priori* genre theory is not only possible but needed to radicalize genre criticism. If Williams is correct that "something more radical can be attempted" in genre studies, it will need to be informed by radical (interpretive, critical and theoretical) practices taking place in other disciplines, such as Cultural Studies, Feminist Studies and Queer Theory (124).

To construct a new, *a priori* theory and methodology for the field of film genre studies must begin (again) with the question of genre itself. Indeed, a radical film genre criticism, it seems to me, must address the "relatively neglected…question of *genre*: it being understood that genre criticism does not properly involve classification or typology but rather that very different thing, a reconstruction of the *conditions of possibility* of a given work or formal practice" (Jameson, *Signatures* 101). These conditions are inherently ideological but not in the ways it has come to be defined and used in genre

criticism, that is, determined solely by the institutional origins of mass cultural production and distribution. This clear-cut definition of ideology founding much interpretive genre criticism is problematic on several fronts, especially as it tends to assume in advance the uniformity of mass culture—both its products and its audiences. This uniformity refers to the specific conceptualization of the alienated masses—an alienation maintained and perpetuated by popular forms such as the cinema. As Jim Collins insists, the adoption of "the alienation scenario wholly within the heart of mass culture…suggests that that critique is in need of serious reconsideration regarding function, homogeneity, and overall orchestration of mass culture" (*Uncommon Cultures* 15). Because the alienation scenario is so totalizing, the question of subversion has remained relatively mute. Interpretive criticism has most often supported the alienation scenario, at times refuting the ideological complexity of popular cinema. To make the space for a different theoretical approach, this chapter presents a sustained reconsideration of that critique, countering it with an alternative—specifically queer— theory of film genre. I contest the terms by which ideological criticism has been defined in film genre criticism in order to map out a more radical interpretive genre criticism. Specifically, I want "to attempt something more radical" by dialogically challenging film genre criticism in terms of queer theory's thoroughgoing analysis of subversion.

The notion of subversion raises immediate questions in terms of its usage and definition, which requires some discussion. Elizabeth Grosz addresses the central quandary of the study of subversion: "What is distinctive about it such that we can say that it is subversive or transgressive of its representational milieu?" (10) Some form of policing or adjudication takes place in making such claims—in naming the terms of

subversion as well as defining a "representational milieu"; therefore, these claims reflect

an array of critical and institutional investments. As Grosz asserts, "*any* text can be

read…from the point of view that brings out a text's alignment with, participation in, and

subversion" of cultural and social norms (16). There is nothing essential about a text that

guarantees its politics, resistant or otherwise. This, however, does not mean that

interpretive textual analysis, including the task of classification, is untenable. In the

context of feminist textual studies, for example, "The question of the status and

categorization of feminist texts is central to how feminists proceed in their various

strategic battles within the university and its peripheral apparatuses, as well as in cultural

studies" (Grosz 10-11). The identification and interpretation of film texts, especially as it

dovetails with the concerns of cultural studies, has similar implications for the

institutional practices of film and media scholars.[2] Tessa Perkins addresses the

pedagogical stakes for film studies:

> In recent years it has become difficult to pursue critical paths which engage students about the political work of media representations or to discuss how criticism and research may, if only by circuitous routes, influence representational practices. This implies that films…play an important role in forming ideas about, and attitudes to, the world, in setting agendas, in enabling (or not) other ways of envisaging the world…in short that they do political work. This is not to argue that films have the same 'effects' on everyone…or that individual films have immediate or identifiable effects *à la* hypodermic syringe model, or that all films do the same political work or that films have a privileged role. It is, however, to claim that films contribute to the circulation of meaning within the public sphere and thus the continued importance of a critical textual analysis (76).

It is in order to better understand the political work of film genre that I attempt to

formulate a more radical theoretical approach to genre studies. Because of the continuing

importance of critical textual analysis, I will want to show that a radical genre theory is

not only possible but necessary to an ideological criticism freed from the constraints of

the alienation scenario and other similarly deterministic frameworks. Despite Williams'

doubts, genre criticism requires an *a priori* genre theory to found an ideologically subtle and complex interpretive practice able to parse the ways genre films "contribute to the circulation of meaning in the public sphere".

As Williams' predicted, recent historical research has overturned some of the most basic tenets of genre criticism, producing cogent critiques of genre that have made it all the more pressing (and prickly) to attempt "to construct a new theory and methodology for the field".[3] If film history has been more amenable to radicalization it is because film genre theory has been more conservative in its purview: "taken in the widest sense, genre concerns delimitations, the drawing of lines of demarcation and separation, forming types, kinds, classes or categories in general" (Jeff Collins, "The Genericity of Montage" 56). While genre theory has attended to these lines, film genre history has recently gone about rethinking the legitimacy of such claims in terms of actual historical materials, such as publicity and studio documentation. Genre theory has been, in general, less amenable to radical reconfigurations, responding slowly to the implications of recent film histories. Another factor inhibiting the development or rethinking of genre theory within film studies has to do with the desire to retain its utility as a concept. "The very vitality and popularity of genre as a concept," as Tom Gunning has pointed out, "partly relies on its polysemic vagueness, the way so many concerns can be accommodated within its borders while maintaining a general sense that we are somehow talking about the same thing, even if we can't agree on what its borders and definitions are" (49). This vagueness has helped it maintain a useful plasticity but also postponed the necessary parsing of genre's terms and effects.

The fungible nature of the concept, as Gunning implies, tends to frame discussions of genre in terms of debates around borders and definitions. Genre's conservative effects can be traced to its interests in establishing and maintaining borders. Christine Gledhill notes the common use of boundaries as a theme in genre study: "like cartographers, early genre critics sought to define fictional territories and the borders which divided them" ("Rethinking Genres" 221-2). This boundary motif makes genre similar to geo-politics, indeed Gledhill compares genre critics to "cartographers," while Altman dedicates a chapter in *Film/Genre* (1999) to the comparison between nations and genres. Altman is in fact quite clear about the stakes of this comparison: "genres are regulatory schemes facilitating the integration of diverse factions into a single unified social fabric. As such, genres operate like nations and other complex communities" (195). If genres operate like nations in this way, then a radical approach to film genre theory would turn its attention to the margins, specifically to the exclusions that are constitutive of (the fiction of) "a single unified social fabric". Implicit in the comparison of the operations of the nation-state to genre—though rarely commented on—is that the rhetoric of the nation polices this "social fabric" by naming its inassimilable factions "subversive." By attending to its margins—its subversives—the conservative aims of *genre criticism* come to light. This chapter will develop a radical film genre theory by shifting focus away from "drawing lines of demarcation" to critically examining the exclusionary practices this entails.

Film genre studies, specifically, arose as a branch of Cinema Studies in the mid-seventies, gaining ground on both sides of the Atlantic. One branch of the field emerged in Britain as a way to organize the larger theoretical, mostly structuralist, concerns of the

authors and editors of *Screen* magazine in the seventies, while more historically-oriented genre studies were concurrently taking place in the States, especially at the University of Iowa.[4] Together, film genre criticism offered an alternative interpretive framework to the "*auteur* policy" (*le politique des auteurs*) promoted by the editorial board of *Cahiers du Cinema*: "early genre critics stressed auteurism's inability to explain such important questions as why genres flourish or decline in particular cycles; how spectators relate to generic texts; how genre artifacts shape the world into more or less meaningful narrative, moral or ideological patterns—in other words film genre's history, its aesthetic evolution, its social contexts" (Langford 10). However, genre criticism's ability to answer these questions was problematized by the elusiveness of the concept of genre itself, often shifting definitions depending on context and the ends to which it was put.

The most prominent and earliest form of film genre criticism is referred to as "systematic genre criticism," which "attempts to define the structures of genre, mark out their boundaries and their forms of combination, largely through an exploration of iconography, narrative patterns and essential structural oppositions" (Gunning 53). This approach is marked by the tendency to treat each genre "as a distinct and unique conventionalized system, as a bundle of formalized elements that individual filmmakers animate in the course of production"—a tendency which sidesteps the task of commenting on what genres share in common, and their collective phenomenon as a widespread cultural and aesthetic system (Schatz, "The Structural Influence" 93). Systematic genre criticism, in this way, employs a methodology that is geared towards taxonomy, grouping films according to shared generic markers. This attention to the development of a corpus of films that comprises a given genre, however, elides

significant questions of the phenomenon of difference, both within and between genres. The limitations of the systematic model have come under a great deal of scrutiny in recent years, as genre criticism has undergone a thoroughgoing reassessment. As Langford observes, "Questions of definition eventually became somewhat discredited as insufficiently critical and inertly taxonomic, and genre studies started to focus increasingly on the functions of genre" (17). This move to the study of the function of genre most often employs textual analysis, or "interpretive genre criticism," which provides an alternative methodological approach in the form of ideological criticism.

Since this project falls squarely under the rubric of interpretive genre criticism, I discuss its history, methodology and problems here in order to intervene into and reformulate its central precepts and practices. While the systematic approach has been revitalized by the provocative research into the film industry, research that has had a profound impact on genre studies by overturning some of the most basic assumptions about film genre, interpretive genre criticism is only now undergoing extensive reconsideration.[5] This delay in critical "reinvention" is due in no small part to the fact that when genre critics turn from categorizing genre texts to interpreting their content, by far the most common approach is ideological. Interpretation has meant (and continues to mean in several quarters) reading the ways genre films reflect dominant ideology—ideology defined in highly rarified terms. These terms are bound up with (because they originate from) a leftist critique (Marx, Gramsci, Althusser, Adorno among others are influences) of mass culture and its mode of production. Once interpretive criticism became synonymous with a certain mode of ideological criticism, textual criticism quickly settled into a few circumscribed analytical concerns. As Langford neatly sums

up: "Ideological criticism's view of genre is both too reductive—in that all genre films are held to relentlessly promote a singular message of conformity—and not reflective enough—in that it seems not to allow for the possibility of interference in core genre propositions by changes in social and cultural context such as those powerfully at work in American society from the late 1960s onwards" (22). It is this latter shortcoming that is especially salient to the project of mapping generic subversion and to my own position as a film genre critic.

Historically, film genre criticism has been, for all intents and purposes, a project concerned with inclusions and exclusions. These critics, charged with the responsibility of generic taxonomy, decided "whether particular films fell into a particular genre and whether deviant films were valid variations or decadent corruptions" (Gledhill, "Rethinking Genres" 223). While these decisions were more passively executed in film genre histories, reflected in the choices of certain films over others as examples of the genre to which they belong, film genre *theory* actively enforced these divisions. In arguing for the "important socio-cultural functions of genre," theorists developed two approaches to the understanding of genre films—"the ritual approach" and "the ideological approach". I want to briefly outline these approaches to examine their implicit affinities, and to argue that these limitations do not necessarily spell the demise of socio-cultural approaches to genre, as some have suggested, but rather make the radical rethinking of socio-cultural theories all the more urgent.[6]

The ritual approach in film genre theory was heavily influenced by the structuralist analysis of myth, spearheaded by the work of Cawelti (1970), Schatz (1981, 1983), Braudy (1976), Wood (1975), Wright (1975), and T. Sobchack (1982). As a form

of social ritual, genre film was understood to privilege certain conflicts and certain

resolutions over others, when examined diachronically. Its aim was to provide an

understanding of film genre as a cultural phenomenon, accounting for the intersections of

audience expectations with factors of institutional production. Schatz contends, "Genre

film is…a product of a commercial, highly conventionalized popular art form and subject

to certain demands imposed by both the audience and the cinematic system itself. On the

other hand, the genre film represents a distinct manifestation of contemporary society's

basic mythic impulse, its desire to confront elemental conflicts inherent in modern culture

while at the same time participating in the projection of an idealized collective self-

image" (Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* 100). The ways in which the nation-state is idealized

is echoed in the idea of a "collective self-image," implicitly excluding or even

demonizing that which fails to cohere. This particular monolithic view of both the

audience and the cinematic system alike, much less "modern culture," was not limited to

Schatz (see T. Sobchack below) and has since been challenged on several fronts.

The parallels between the phobic discourses of the nation-state and the with-us-

or-against-us overtones of ritual genre theory is conveyed explicitly in Thomas

Sobchack's "Genre Film: A Classical Experience":

> It has become the fashion for some directors to use the elements of the genre film—
> the plots, characters, and iconographies—to create an antigenre film. That is, they
> will use everything according to the normal pattern, but simply change the ending so
> as not to satisfy the audience's expectations of a conventional group-oriented
> conclusion. If the detective finally gives in and takes the money and the girl, if the
> crook gets away with it, if an individual solves his problems so as to enhance his
> position vis-à-vis the world, that is, to increase the distance between his values and
> the values of the group—then the film has turned its back on genre. It violates the
> basic principle of the genre film: the restoration of the social order. Instead of
> justifying the status quo, these films intend the opposite (112-3).

If genre film is conceived as supporting the status quo then anything less than, or divergent from that, is seen as subversive. Interestingly, this ritual approach does not simply allow for a range of approaches to generic plots and conventions but points rather to an antagonistic relationship, which hints at the power of the subversive within generic forms. Sobchack's insistence on the classical experience intimates the radical political tenor of undermining it: "The genre film, like all classical art, is basically conservative, both aesthetically and politically. To embody a radical tenor or romantic temper in a classical form is to violate that form at its heart. One can parody the conventions, one can work against the conventions, one can use the conventions with great subtlety and irony. To hold up individual ideals as superior to group ideals, however, changes the whole frame of reference" (113). The conflation of generic markers, such as conventions, with "group ideals" points to the integral relationship of form and content, which work together to reinforce the presumably ideologically conservative ritual affected by genre film. I am concerned, however, with the change in the frame of reference, exploring the ways generic subversion embodies such a radical tenor and to what ends.

Because the ritual position is informed by Aristotelian aesthetics, the conclusion of the genre film is particularly susceptible to subversive strategies. If a genre film refuses in its conclusion to provide adequate closure, "it induces in the audience a kind of irrational radicalism as opposed to a reasonable conformism…. This is not what ordinary people—fated to a life in a society in which they are relatively powerless to change the course of things—like to comfort themselves with and not what a true genre film provides" (T. Sobchack 113). This totalizing conception of catharsis is profoundly out of touch with a postmodern social order, highlighting the ways the ritual or mythic

hypothesis of genre film leans implicitly on what Jean-François Lyotard deems "grand

narratives" of modernity. These narratives assert a top-down and unitary model of power

that a "true" genre film supposedly reflects in its plot structure. The ritual theory, in this

way, turns on a description of genre film that is inherently conservative, always working

toward social conformity with (and for) "ordinary people." The excommunication of

films that do not comply with such conformism from the categorization of "genre film"

suggests that "the ritual approach" does not simply "downplay the contentious and

coercive aspects of Hollywood and its genres," it actively forecloses the genre label to

any film that diverges in even the smallest ways—such as an incongruent conclusion

(Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* 226-7).

That genre film can in fact be radicalized, and not simply parodied or tweaked,

has been acknowledged now for some time. Accordingly, the ritual approach has been

recently revised, specifically in Altman's theorization of the "generic economy" and

"generic crossroads". These terms name the ritualized processes available to audiences in

the repetitive experience of genre films: "Contrary to appearances, generic crossroads are

not simple textual structures (which by themselves would be insufficient to determine

audience reaction), but a specific mode of processing textual structures…a film's

repeated invitations to generic processing train those who accept them both to enjoy

generic pleasures and to disdain the cultural positions presented as alternatives" (Altman

151). The ritual of genre films, according to Altman, has less to do with catharsis than "a

locus of conflict between generic and cultural values, [in which] each generic crossroads

is a work site, a place where cultural labor is performed" (152). This definition opens

genre films to conflict, positing generic values against cultural values, which "of course

reign supreme" (Altman 153). Within this framework, the ritual is tied to pleasures derived from counter-cultural experiences. No longer anchored to a classical model, Altman emphasizes the genre film's processional qualities over its narrative containments: "the repetitive nature of genre films tends to diminish the importance of each film's ending, along with the cause-and-effect sequence that leads to that conclusion. Instead, genre films depend on the cumulative effect of the film's often repeated situations, themes and icons" (Altman 25). Yet, however much enjoyment genre films grant to audiences as "an alternative to cultural norms," they nevertheless ultimately end—despite the diminished importance of the ending—by seducing "us into celebrating culture's very values" (Altman 156). It would appear that whatever subversive pleasures genre films offer, according to the ritual model, "a definitive restoration of cultural values" is eventually required of them (Altman 155).

While the ritual approach rejects subversion, constructing an understanding of genre films as necessarily (or eventually) conformist, the other socio-cultural genre theory—the ideological approach—acknowledges the possibilities of generic subversion. The editors of *Cahiers du Cinema* took up the taxonomic project, expanding it to cover the entirety of cinematic products, subdividing films into a system of ideological categories made famous by Jean-Luc Narboni and Jean Comolli. These categories are well-known by now, ranging from "Category A," made up of "those films which are imbued through and through with dominant ideology in pure and unadulterated form, and give no indication that their makers were even aware of the fact" to "Category G"—the most critical filmic strategy, attacking "the basic problem of depiction" (685, 688). Genre

critics, motivated by the possibilities for political analysis and ways to differentiate genre films this template offered, sought out the "progressive text":

> The catalyst for this frantic search [in the 1970s] was the famous "Category E" in the Althusserian taxonomy of cinema's ideological effects…. Their category of the 'progressive text' contained those mainstream films whose relationship to ideology was ambiguous or slyly critical…. The notion of *progressiveness* was always pretty fatuous. It suggested a calibration of ideological complicity, ranging from servility through subversion to militant opposition. The progressive text was roughly at the midpoint on this scale, offering a formalist get-out from the "dominant ideology" (Donald and Hemelryk Donald 122).

The "Category E" film allowed genre theorists to differentiate between genre films, initiating one of the first major shifts away from the accepted methodological approach of identifying a genre's shared features to establish the traits of a genre piece and the narrative work it undertakes.

The existence of the subversive film and the interpretive practice of ideological criticism have generated a good deal of debate. David Bordwell insinuates that the subversive or progressive film cannot exist within the classical model: "Genuine breakdowns in classical narration are abrupt and fleeting…. In Hollywood there are no subversive films, only subversive moments" (81). Grant, countering Bordwell's totalizing claims, argues that subversive genre films "gain considerably from their very nature as generic instances, from their position within a clear tradition" (Grant, "Experience and Meaning in Genre Films" 122). Interestingly, these debates tend to focus on the possibility and parameters of subversive texts—reflecting an unwavering commitment to the taxonomic project—rather than on the political efficacy of a film genre theory centered on subversion. Describing the predominant methodological approach to film genre studies, Altman remarks: "It is not by chance that most genre studies close with a list of films, for it is that very corpus that constitutes the author's object of study…. The

entire history of genre theory has trained us to expect critics to start with a predefined genre and corpus" (24). Ideological criticism offered a way to reverse this order—to start from a theory to build a corpus. Since film genre is generally held "as a way of formulating the interplay between culture, audience, films, and filmmakers," reading for subversion troubles the neat alignment of these components (Tudor 8). However, the ideological approach shares with the ritual approach a conservative and coherent worldview within which genre films neatly fit. In this way, subversive genre films were labeled "progressive," implying a politically evolutionary spectrum (not surprising as it was grounded in the teleological aims of Marxist critique).

Jim Collins has since challenged the concept of the "progressive" text on just these grounds: "Despite their rejection of most of its premises, 'progressive' popular culture critics have often held onto the Frankfurt School's notion of culture as a coherent, centered master system" (*Uncommon Cultures* 20). In other words, while the "progressive" category allowed defendants of popular cinema to avoid the condemnation of mass culture spearheaded, in different ways, by Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht, the political efficacy of the progressive text was nonetheless measured on a continuum from ideological compliance through resistance to those exceptional films "productive of meaning" (Comolli and Narboni 688). The original continuum emerged from a body of thought grounded in the split between mass and avant-garde culture, and the appellation of "progressive" reinforces that Manichean division with the appropriate value judgments intact. Thus, "Art films" or those films associated with the artistic vision and integrity of an *auteur* are somehow less ideological, held in regard as the deconstructive "margins" of genre cinema with neither category fundamentally changed.[7]

Although originating, at least in film studies, with the *Cahiers du Cinema* collective, the terminology of ideological theory was reworked by feminist film critics, epitomized by Laura Mulvey's infamous call for the refusal of visual pleasure (757). Although much of feminist film criticism has revitalized the study of mass media, there remains a bias towards avant-garde or experimental filmmaking as the privileged site of feminist intervention. Despite the fact that "the avant-garde is largely male-dominated," the style of a text is often held as the determinate of a feminist work; thus, "fluid, ambiguous, experimental writing [and filmmaking] is commonly advocated by many theorists" (Grosz 17). For example, Kaja Silverman, speaking of *Sans Soliel, Looking for Langston,* and *Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges,* proclaims "we need more films of this kind," after laying out the ways, she argues, these films open up "the unconscious to otherness" (193, 185).[8] Silverman's psychoanalytic film criticism is not, as the back of her book suggests, "an entirely new set of formal parameters for political representation," but falls well within the school of thought that believes that the stylistic qualities of avant-garde film inherently subvert the rules governing Hollywood productions. Implicit in the advocacy of experimental style is the idea that avant-garde textual production is outside the rules of genre.[9] Silverman, "indebted to Benjamin," argues "the aesthetic work is a privileged domain…for encouraging *us* to see in ways not dictated in advance by the dominant fiction" (247 note #27; 184—emphasis mine). It is clear she is not just speaking of any "aesthetic work," but rather certain works wherein "such texts" present the conditions "under which the eye can resist the solicitation of the screen" (185, 175). However, this claim requires a monolithic, undifferentiated "us" that presumably will be affected by these texts in similar ways. Already circumscribed by "dominant fiction" and

"visual pleasure," some feminist film theories invested in parsing the feminist from the

patriarchal have tended to replicate the exclusionary processes of genre theory in their

own specific taxonomies of the cinema.[10]

Silverman is far from unique; several cultural critics have expressed a pronounced

ambivalence towards popular culture, often in terms that assume a shared cynicism

towards the political efficacy of mass culture. Jane Gaines posits: "If the articulation of

the 'ideological' has been the most important contribution cultural studies has made to

film studies…. It should be no surprise that the experience of popular genre films for

many viewers is one of doubleness—the doubleness of enjoying diversion that is so

despised, or the doubleness of hating what gives so much pleasure" (107). Implicit in

such a statement is a set of problematic assumptions, such as, why are these films

"despised" and by whom? Certainly hating "what gives so much pleasure" is not the way

many filmgoers would describe their relationship to cinema. Yet, when the texts

themselves are addressed—delinked from the securing difference of sovereign subjects—

they appear to be marked as (politically) abject in critical discourse. That this resonates

with other supposedly abject pleasures, such as (perverse) sexuality, is in fact typical of

this ambivalence. Indeed, Rick Altman employs the coming out story to describe his

generic pleasures: "Because genres engender 'secret appetites,' public revelation of genre

tastes always takes on the nature of a 'coming out.' Not just body genres, 'grossout' films

and exploitation horror, but much less controversial genres as well participate in this

phenomenon. Thanks to my own published work, I have been 'out' for years as a musical

aficionado" (158-9). The appropriation of the coming out story is discomfiting in several

ways, not the least of which is the glib appropriation of a political discourse that has very

real consequences (especially to talk about a pleasure the majority of the world takes,

most without any "shame" attached to it).[11]

These claims are less descriptive than they are productive of a certain critical

position towards genre films and their purported ideological complicity. The apparently

natural relationship to genre films these statements convey perpetuate an attitude towards

popular culture that remains relatively unchallenged in critical circles. One of the few

outspoken critics of this attitude, Jim Collins asserts:

> Popular films, especially Hollywood genre films, have had, for at least the last twenty
> years, the reputation of being the strongest advocates and exemplars of a centralized,
> homogenous culture. According to film theory since the late 1960s, the enormous,
> widespread popularity of these films and their origins within the industry have made
> them the purest manifestations of how the American public has been led to think
> about itself by a highly sophisticated capitalist system. Popular film is allegedly the
> dominant or hegemonic ideology writ in celluloid. Nowhere has the failure to
> recognize the competition between narrative discourses for an ever-shifting audience
> been more apparent, nowhere have the ramifications of a monolithic conception of
> the State and its cultural production been so damaging (*Uncommon Cultures* 90).

Genre criticism can either continue to reaffirm this position or it can intercede into this

story, challenging the terms by which genre comes to be understood (as "closeted" and

"despised"). There is nothing inherent in genre films that call forth attitudes of guilt,

shame or aversion. This position, rather, is thoroughly historical, emerging as a specific

reaction, albeit unacknowledged, to the 'crisis' of modernity. Jameson sums up: "The

waning of the realistic moment…constitutes a historical crisis in which the consumption

of genre films becomes increasingly a matter of guilt, and in which some new

legitimation must be sought for movie-going, a legitimation which will be constructed

from out of the arsenal of the now traditional ways in which high modernism in the other

arts dealt with analogous situations in an older cultural past" (*Signatures* 182-3). This

legitimation manifests itself in genre criticism in the subtle and not so subtle exclusions

and value-laden terms articulated by genre critics. Historicizing genre criticism, in this way, paves the way for contravening its implicit abjection of popular film (and its genres), refuting the totalizing notion of ideology on which this abjection is based.

As Fredric Jameson has shown, neither the "Brecht-Benjamin position" with its hope for a political art in the face of mass-culture's aesthetic bankruptcy nor "the *Tel Quel* position which reaffirms the 'subversive' and revolutionary efficacy…of formal innovation" adequately address "the specific conditions of our own time" (*Signatures* 23). Definitions of culture as a unified system fail to address the complexity of these conditions. Jim Collins concurs: "The lack of hard and fast differences between dominant, oppositional, and alternative practices suggests that we need to reconsider the basis of such distinctions if we are to come to terms with the complexity of cultural production in decentered cultures" (*Uncommon Cultures* 92). This reconsideration begins with jettisoning the presumption that genre films—even in Hollywood's most over-determined products—are inherently the *a priori* bastion and expression of dominant ideology. Recent theoretical interventions have troubled this central tenet of traditional genre studies by reframing genre in terms of the broader analysis of decentered cultures: "So where genres, modes, and cultural formations were once viewed as in the service of an overarching dominant narrative, we can now relocate them in a more complex matrix of cultural forms, practices, and effects that do not necessarily add up to 'master narratives' but which have political purchase" (Gledhill and Williams 2-3). This, however, does not mean that genre is no longer a cogent critical tool for understanding mass culture in decentered societies. In fact, Gledhill suggests that genre "is particularly useful now for its potential to fill a gap left by the fragmenting of grand theory, which

once promised to grasp films as part of a totalizing 'social formation' or 'historical conjuncture'" (221). If genre is well suited to the analysis of the fragmentation of "grand theory" and the decentered sociality that emerges from this fragmentation, it is because genre is a privileged site for the intersection of mass cultural sameness and the polyphony implicit in the fragmentation of the public sphere(s).

A radical take on genre theory, in this way, replaces the question of what a genre film is with an examination of the theoretical assumptions on which the concept of genre (and its subversion) is predicated. I suggest the move from the exclusionary function of genre to seeing the trouble of these exclusions (and their ultimately phantasmatic claims) affords a radical approach to film genre criticism.[12] What is required is a paradigm shift from the Adorno/Althusser thesis condemning mass culture to a theoretical framework more congruent with, and supplemental to, the insights of contemporary film historiography. These insights hone in on the processional qualities of genre that make it open to a myriad of institutional and spectatorial re-configurations. As Collins insists, "Once the popular becomes…an ongoing process (nowhere more obvious than in Hollywood), the orchestration of all genres according to the needs of a master system can only be a structuralist fabrication that downplays fundamental differences in pursuits of universal laws or paradigms" (Jim Collins, *Uncommon Cultures* 100). Film genre theory becomes something quite different when these differences are placed at the center of its analysis. Yet, these differences cannot be seen simply as pluralistic "difference" because, as explicitly articulated by Sobchack above, difference within the generic system is frequently regarded as subversion, actively produced by exclusionary processes that are part of the ongoing "orchestration of all genres," and therefore placed in critical relation

to generic norms. In this way, foregrounding fundamental differences in the operations of genre may subvert the "universal laws" of dominant ideology and expose the specious "single unitary mass consciousness" it assumes, but subversion cannot escape the *law of genre* itself.

(Dis)Obeying the Law of Genre/Gender

Contemporary film genre criticism is centrally concerned with the interrogation of generic differences. These differences are most often referred to as genre or "pattern mixing." Janet Staiger describes this mixing thesis as one of two challenges to film genre criticism today—"films produced in Hollywood in the past forty years or so are persistently instances of genre mixing" and "genre studies has been handicapped by its failure to sort out just exactly what critics are doing when they think about 'genre'" ("Hybrid" 185). She goes on to persuasively argue against the purity thesis on both theoretical and historical grounds, but it is her critique of the hybridity thesis that is particularly instructive. Stressing the importance of maintaining the political and cultural specificity of the term hybridity, she avers: "Despite all the theoretical and historical problems associated with categorizing films, perhaps the most valuable critical contribution that can be made is to analyze the social, cultural, and political implications of pattern mixing" ("Hybrid" 197). While Staiger and others have effectively overturned the purity thesis within film genre studies, they have left the mixing thesis relatively untouched. The use of the term "hybrid" aside, contemporary genre studies tend to agree on this as a central descriptive term, not only for contemporary film but in early cinema as well.[13] However, claims to the mixing of genres do little to address the theoretical (if

not historical) problems of categorizing films; in fact, it alters genre criticism very little. What genre or pattern mixing points to—though never quite arrives at—is the precariousness implicit in any naming or categorization. It seems to me that these are related concerns, that the theoretical "problems" of categorizing films are ultimately connected to the "failure" denoted in the second thesis above.

Film genre theory bears the burden of sorting out just what it is genre criticism is doing when it talks about genre. When genre is referred to as a stable and self-identical category, the conservative tendencies of film genre theory become clear. Claims of "mixing" genres, however, do not move far enough away from this way of speaking about genre, in that they continue to imply discrete genres, which are then intermixed. This does not articulate the ontological grounds of genre itself. To speak directly to this ontological question, a few genre critics have turned to Jacques Derrida's "The Law of Genre," a seminal piece that continues to revise genre theory across disciplines.[14] Derrida's radical critique of the function of genre deconstructs the purity thesis and, in doing so, throws into relief the problematic notion of "mixing genres". Recent film genre studies, such as Neale's, have acknowledged Derrida's crucial insight: "A text or an instance of discourse might be able to 'flaunt' a particular 'genre system', but they could never flaunt the 'law of genre' as such, for the simple reason that all texts, all utterances, all instances of discourse are always encountered in some kind of context, and are therefore always confronted with expectations, with systems of comprehension, and in all probability with labels and names" (*Genre and Hollywood* 24).[15] However, film genre critics have recognized the law of genre only to the extent that it affirms the dismantling of the purity thesis undertaken by film genre historiographers. I propose, rather, that the

law of genre points to new directions for film genre theory that make a radical critique of film genre possible.[16]

Genre critics, particularly in film studies, have tended to skirt the more radical implications of "The Law of Genre," reducing the complexity of its argument to explain the commonality of mixed genres: "Any film can participate in several genres at once. In fact, it is more common than not for a film to do so" (Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* 25).[17] This "translation" of Derrida's law of genre to a theoretical explanation of genre mixing is effected to make the law conform to extant theories of film genre rather than take on its deconstructive implications. Derrida's thesis concerning genre is in fact much more intricate, or in his terms, "invaginated." To reiterate Jeff Collins' retort to Neale and others who have opted to identify the law of genre as the inherent mixing of genre's— Derrida's "formulation is not easily reducible, as if it announced no more than the existence of mixtures and hybrids" ("The Genericity of Montage" 56).[18] For "The Law of Genre" to have any transformative effect on film genre theory, it cannot be construed as "genres are mixed"; rather, what is significant for my purposes is that Derrida's essay poses an epistemological challenge to genre critics to reconsider the very practice of genre formation. The Derridean insight that questions the very nature of genre critically reevaluates "what critics are doing when they think about 'genre.'" Derek Attridge neatly summarizes Derrida's central premise:

> The question of genre…brings with it the question of law, since it implies an institutionalized classification, an enforceable principle of non-contamination and non-contradiction. But genre always potentially exceeds the boundaries that bring it into being, for a member of a genre always signals its membership by an explicit or implicit mark…Derrida sees this not as an occasional and optional possibility but as a constitutive property of genre; and the crucial feature of any such mention, or possibility-of-mention, is that it cannot be said to belong to the genre it mentions (221).

This "law of the law of genre" is more than a refusal of the purity of a genre or generic

text—"it is precisely a principle of contamination, a law of impurity, a parasitical

economy" (Derrida 227). If this principle has been little acknowledged within genre

theory, it is because such a deconstructive position renders genre (as a coherent, self-

evident concept) "untenable" (Brunette and Willis 45). Film genre criticism is challenged

to acknowledge the implications of this "principle" while nevertheless maintaining

genre's critical valence. Indeed, because a text cannot escape the law of genre, there

needs to be an analytical foregrounding of its effects on texts. That is to say, in the

formation of an *a priori* set of theoretical tools for the analysis of film genre, one must

obey the law (of the law) of genre.

I contend that this law, with its "parasitical economy," does not necessarily

depose genre as much as it points to a deconstructive practice for film genre theory.

Generic subversion is redefined in a deconstructive framework not as an (ideologically)

aberrant exception that proves the rule but rather the site where the rule, or law, comes to

be engendered. Although not explicitly named, Jeff Collins has mapped out the

methodological approach a theory of generic subversion might take:

> In creating and designating aberrant cases, genre theories constitute themselves as
> proper theories of genre properly speaking. Yet we might ask, how would it be if the
> procedure was at least reversed, to take as the necessary case that which is usually
> designated non-standard or secondary…. This draws attention to generic limit-cases,
> and does so not in order to colonise them, to assimilate them to an improved genre
> catalogue, but to allow them their exhibition of the play between law and the counter-
> law ("The Genericity of Montage" 65).

This theoretical approach to subversion is crucial to contemporary film genre criticism if

it is to shed the (conservative) constraints of its previous applications discussed above.

However, this altogether different framework for analysis has yet to gain a significant

foothold in critical approaches to cinema.[19] In taxonomies of genre a certain policing of

generic boundaries is undertaken to assert a stable set of iconographic markers, securing

generic forms and categories; as Altman points out, "because genre critics… have a

vested interest in stability, they depend heavily on myths of distant origin, continued

coherence and permanent inviolability" (204). Since genre is a way to name identities and

types (of films), its relationship to other taxonomies is salient. Gender has received a

great deal of critical attention for similar reasons, perceived as a system of categorization

aimed at the naming (and production) of bodies. Because feminist/queer epistemology

has developed an entire theoretical apparatus attuned to the study of gender "limit-cases"

(such as butch, drag and transgender embodiments of various kinds) and sexual

subversion, as well as the difficult and troubling mixing inherent to the sex-gender

system, it lends films studies important terms for the elaboration of generic subversion as

it has established a critical understanding of the politics of subversion generally.

The ontological question at the heart of Derrida's argument speaks directly to the

law of gender: "The question of the literary genre is not a formal one: it covers the motif

of the law in general, [of]…sexual difference between the feminine and masculine

gender…of an identity and difference between the feminine and masculine" (Derrida

243). Whereas Derrida explores this relation in the narrative of a specific text, *La folie du

jour*, queer and feminist theories explore the law's operation in sexual difference,

suggesting a more radical methodology for film genre studies. Derrida's statement,

"Genres are not to be mixed," is frequently referred to by genre critics; however, the

second part of his observation—"genders/ genres pass into each other. And we will not

be barred from thinking that this mixing of genders…may bear some relation to the

mixing of literary genres"—is much less often addressed (Derrida 245).[20] The question

this raises for me is how may the mixing of genders bear some relationship to the mixing of film genres.

Butler's critical genealogy of the sex/gender system is indebted to Derrida's sustained analysis of the function of the law, specifically the thesis that there is no genre or gender before the law. Yet what Butler and others since her have developed from this thesis is a radical critique of the law (of genre/gender), observing its constitutive function while nevertheless making the space for its subversion. In other words, feminist/queer theory "obeys the law" by articulating the "disruptive 'anomalies'" engendered by it; in this way, queer epistemology attends to the "essential disruption" of the law that is caused by its "internal division" (Derrida 226). Indeed, Derrida suggests that this division is akin to a kind of degeneracy of which sexual perversion is a part. The epigram from *Gender Trouble* beginning this chapter illustrates the productive possibilities of the law, echoing Derrida's thesis that the law is both determining and inescapable: "all the infinitesimal subversions that may captivate you are not possible except within this enclosure for which these transgressions and subversions moreover maintain an essential need in order to take place;" in short, "subversion…needs the law in order to take place" (Derrida 240). The lesson provided by Derrida, as Grosz has pointed out, is "the *always already* implication of feminism or any oppositional mode of political struggle in the law it undertakes to subvert or displace" (Grosz 62). This is not, however, the same thing as an affirmation of that law, as feminist and queer epistemologists are quick to point out. "Derrida demonstrates how the Law of Genre that defines textual categories encompasses, but also denies, gender differences;" Shari Benstock sees this as the very

grounds of its productive force—"Derrida's law defines its inevitable violation: the law that declares gender/ genre difference cannot help but trespass its own limits" (6).

Butler insists, "subversion is possible," and the "unexpected permutations" generated by the law pave the way "to an open future of cultural possibilities" (*Gender Trouble* 119). As a sustained discussion of subversive practice, Butler's critical framework may be productively reworked to fit the needs of film genre studies, especially in terms of a theory of generic subversion.[21] Generic subversion as a theory of film genre asks: how do non-normative textual practices call into question the stability of genre as a category of analysis (Butler, *Gender Trouble* xi)? Because genre and gender are forms of repeated discursive production, subversions are borne out of anomalous repetition. For this reason, the central premise of gender subversion can be readily recast as the question of generic subversion: "What constitutes a subversive repetition within the signifying practices of" genre (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 185)? My aim is to retool Butler's explication of gender subversion for film genre criticism to suggest a methodological approach formulated to ask the (open) question: how may genre texts "enact and reveal the performativity of [genre] itself in a way that destabilizes" both its own generic terms and the cultural material it is said to represent (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 177).

The salient connection here is not to equate generic film practice with the political determinants that have very real effects on living beings, but rather to borrow some of Butler's terminology and critical insights to put a new and updated spin on the understanding of genre as ritual: "As in other ritual social dramas, the action of gender requires a performance that is *repeated*. This repetition is at once a reenactment and

reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation" (*Gender Trouble* 178-9). This set of meanings can be understood as the "gender contract," functioning much like what is often referred to as the generic contract—the set of expectations audiences bring to each encounter with a genre film. For example, Jim Kitses, Will Wright and others take a structuralist approach to what they consider the ritual or mythological aspects of Westerns, emphasizing the repetition of a specific set of meanings, such as repeated trope of civilization versus the wilderness. But rather than take these meanings as given and self-evident, Butler's post-structuralist genealogy is interested in the intervals or ruptures that disrupt the ritual enactments of gender.[22] Like gender, genre congeals over time, but only to the extent that it works as a set of cultural expectations, in the repeated citation of themes, icons and motifs that come to signify a given genre.

It has been argued, "the only twentieth-century art that has consistently reenacted the ritual of reaffirmation of group values has been the genre film…the form of the genre film, its repetitive quality, its familiarity, and violent plotting that has made this work" (T. Sobchack 111). This conservative impulse in generic repetition is akin to the (sometimes violent) ascription of gender hetero-normativity queer theory aims to challenge. A central premise of queer epistemology specifically holds that the law (of genre/gender) is the condition of possibility for its subversion, and that this subversion, moreover, is effected through repetition or citational strategies. To this extent, it could be argued that queer-feminist epistemology takes as its object of study not the law in its functioning state but rather the production of anomalous disruptions and "the lot or site they share—by *repetition*. One might even say by citation or re-citation" (Derrida 226).

Theorists such as Butler and Benstock turn to Derrida to found a theory of the contamination of genders, that the divide between the sexes is constitutively 'mixed' and that this mixing is its undoing.

The queer methodological project is aimed at mapping out that which troubles the law—a project particularly sensitive to the law's subversion. Deborah P. Britzman avers: "the queer in Queer Theory anticipates the precariousness of the signified: the limits within its conventions and rules, and the ways in which these various conventions and rules incite subversive performances, citations, and inconveniences" (153). Queer epistemology is attuned to these sites of resistance, exposing the ways ritual practices reveal the grounds for their own undoing. As ritual "reaffirmations," gender and genre alike are "open to splittings, self-parody, self-criticism, and those hyperbolic exhibitions…that, in their very exaggeration, reveal [their] fundamental phantasmatic status" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 187). Pushed to their logical conclusions, these arguments point not to the irrelevance of genre but instead challenge genre theorists "to locate strategies of subversive repetition enabled by those [generic] constructions, …and, therefore, present the immanent possibility of contesting them" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 188). A queer epistemology of generic subversion sees resistance as not outside of but rather constitutive of the ritualized repetition of genre films. Subversion, in this way, becomes a critical concept to interrogate the very (generic) "group values" genre films are said to reaffirm, exposing their discursive effects along with their generic conditions.

If, as Andrew Tudor asserts, "genre…is a term that can be usefully employed in relation to *a body of knowledge and theory*," then placing this term in relation to a body of knowledge outside the purview of film studies proper produces new and unexpected

permutations in genre terminology that make radical criticism possible (12; emphasis mine). The debates concerning film genre, specifically subversion, change dramatically when placed in the context of queer theory because it clearly maps out the implications of the law of genre/gender and its productive (and political) possibilities. A queer methodology for film genre criticism is not the same, to be clear, as the study of queer cinema or even the aims of queer cultural studies, although much great work has been done in these areas.[23] These areas of film criticism take as their object of study queer films (a genre in itself) and/or the reclamation of lesbian and gay film cultures, whether they entail queer forms of reception, textual encodings, or star performances. Yet, the understanding of "What's queer about queer studies?" has shifted in the last several years to a less metaphysical (post-positivist) praxis: "What might be called the 'subjectless' critique of queer studies disallows any positing of a proper subject *of* or object *for* the field by insisting that queer has no fixed political referent. Such an understanding orients queer epistemology, despite the historical necessities of 'strategic essentialism' (Gayatri Spivak's famous term), as a continuous deconstruction of the tenets of positivism at the heart of identity politics" (Eng, et al. 3). Queer studies challenges systems of knowledge production, including those that present identity—including sexual identity—as static and self-evident.[24] Because queer epistemology takes as paradigmatic this very ontological instability, it can revise genre studies accordingly, undoing all claims to generic identity and exposing the destabilizing effects inherent to all citational, performative social forms. Retaining the idea of film genre as a ritual cultural formation, (a queer version of) an *a priori* film genre theory starts from the question: "what interventions into this ritualistic repetition are possible" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 186)? A corpus of films might then

emerge organized around anomalous or subversive textual practices. In this way, queer epistemology provides film genre theorists the terms for re-conceptualizing genre's citational practices. The following section defines these terms, extrapolating a set of radical reading practices directed towards the subversions of film texts and their political implications.

Undoing Genre; Or, Subverting the Dominant (Generic) Paradigm

It is now generally descriptive of genre texts to say they "affirm a given discourse by writing within it, yet simultaneously critique its limitations and demonstrate their differences from other texts within the genre. The desire [is] to do both—perpetuate and transgress" (Jim Collins, *Uncommon Cultures* 10). This process of genrification, its system-descriptive vacillation, has impelled contemporary film and literary critics to re-define genres as fundamentally incoherent. Thomas O. Beebee's poststructuralist approach, in fact, suggests that a good deal of genre criticism is intrinsically flawed because it is premised on "the suppression of generic instability" (254). Accordingly, ideological criticism is directly affected by the paradigm shift from generic coherence to incoherence: "As a form of ideology, genre is also never fully identical with itself, nor are texts fully identical with their genres. Furthermore, if genre is a form of ideology, then the struggle against or the deviations from genre are ideological struggles" (Beebee 19). As Beebee insists, "not genre so much as generic instability now offers itself as the key to understanding the text" (268). This suggests that in order to produce a radical genre criticism what would appear to be needed is a theory and body of knowledge that can address what generic instability means, or *why* generic instability occurs.

Notably, film genre criticism emerged as a way of thinking the incoherency of texts to the extent that it arose in opposition to *auteurism*, which had been favored generally by film scholars as an analytic system guaranteeing the coherency of the meaning of a text grounded in the intentions of its director (although more recent returns to the *auteur* have approached the concept to designate certain set of stylistic phenomena). Genre studies in this way embraced the incoherency of texts as it already aimed to accommodate the intersectional interests of studios, filmmakers and audiences. This foundational instability was quickly obfuscated, however, in the drive to produce a unified set of analytical terms. Rather than address these incoherencies, "genre theorists have typically assumed that texts with similar characteristics systematically generate similar readings, similar meanings, and similar uses" (Altman 12). Film historians have disproven this overdetermined methodology, and recently genre theorists have begun to extrapolate from the historical counter-evidence. Beebee argues "that the truly vital meanings of a text are often contained not in any specific generic category into which the text may be placed, but rather in the play of differences between its genres…such play is a result of the fact that genre is a system constituted by differences" (250). Yet, all differences are not equal.

With the acknowledgement of generic instability, the question of subversion has all but disappeared. This has to do with the move away from a unitary definition of ideology towards a more poststructuralist perspective concerning the play of differences inherent to a postmodernist worldview. However, this has worked to perpetuate the impulse in genre criticism that has taken the "mass" in mass culture too literally, often not differentiating between films. I want borrow the concept of subversion, as queer

theory defines it, for to map out a more radical approach to genre criticism—one attentive to the ideological work of film genre. Generic subversion, therefore, entails two companion projects—to trace the ways genre films test the limits of (normative) generic structures and their implicit meanings through metageneric and parodic citation, and to produce a subversive genre theory by deploying critical reading practices that attenuate these textual strategies.

This approach to film genre theory retains the notion of ritual but not as the affirmation of group ideals. Rather, the repetitive nature of ritual performances of all kinds gives rise to enactments that violate the purported norms or laws that occasion their appearance. For both genre and gender, "norms do not exercise a final or fatalistic control, at least, not always" (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 15). This does not mean there are 'escapees' from genre. I take as instructive the advice of Butler: "it is necessary to take into account the full complexity and subtlety of the law and to cure ourselves of the illusion of a true body [or film] beyond the law" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 119). But if no aesthetic work can be free of all generic constraints, then the question becomes how, when and why do generic subversions take place? Moreover, what are the conditions that occasion subversion? These questions work to bridge ritual and ideological genre criticism since these conditions are ideological in nature. Ideological film genre criticism has tried, historically, "to realize and quantify the internal textual objectification of ideology produced by art's peculiar epistemological character" (Klinger 77). Post-modernist critiques have troubled such clear-cut aims in the face of fragmented cultures and the disintegration of "grand narratives".[25]

The overturning of the purity thesis and the attention to generic instability have shown that genre films "continually redefine what a genre is by altering their intertextual relations with earlier works within the genre and works outside the genre. A genre text does not *have* norms, it continually remakes norms which are then remade again" (Jim Collins, *Uncommon Cultures* 46). Yet, Collins himself has argued that the way genre texts are remade vary, having significantly different ideological implications. His examples of two types of responses to the contemporary media landscape (of the eighties) are that of "eclectic irony" and "the new sincerity" in genre films: "they represent two divergent types of genre film that co-exist in current popular culture. One is founded on dissonance, on eclectic juxtapositions of elements that very obviously don't belong together, while the other is obsessed with recovering some sort of missing harmony" (Jim Collins, "Genericity in the Nineties" 242). These descriptions are in many ways comparable to Butler's two responses to the incarnation of gender norms—parody and pastiche. Gender pastiche is the rote performance of gender norms without the critical distancing and/ of humor; its generic counterpart is the uncritical return and repetition of generic norms exemplified by Collins' example of *Dances With Wolves* (1990). On the other hand, eclectic irony shares with gender parody its camp qualities; although both participate in and reflect the genre/ gender norms that shape them, both "are nevertheless denaturalized and mobilized through their parodic recontextualization" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 176).[26] In short, this recontextualization is the starting point for a subversive practice.

What makes queer epistemology particularly important to revising ideological genre critique is that it provides an account of these recontextualizations and their origins

in the flaunting of the law of genre. Genre, like gender, deploys a range of "cultural meanings…through both the operation of norms and the peripheral modes of their undoing" (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 15). Because queer theory is specifically invested in the undoing of norms, it has attended to these violations in great detail, while film genre critics have tended to focus on the operations of norms and the cultural meanings they signal. Gender subversion and generic subversion involve a particular critical relation to the law of genre. The tensions within generic texts are akin to the parodic performance of gender subversion in that both evoke norms in order to de-naturalize their operations. Butler's work exemplifies a political engagement with the law of genre: "As Lyotard points out, there is no political genre; politics, he argues, is the name for what takes place when genres and the phrase regimes which they comprise are at variance with one another" (Dowd 14). Butler demonstrates this by detailing the ways the norms of masculinity and femininity are constitutively subverted by gender statements at odds with them. Her famous example is of the drag performance: "…drag fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of true gender identity" (*Gender Trouble* 174).[27] Drag, to this extent, can be said to indicate how—according to Lyotard, Butler and Derrida—the processes of citation and re-citation make room for such critically deconstructive variances.

Along these lines, the generically subversive film is defined by "the play of generic signals" orchestrated into "meaningful juxtapositions" between generic norms and cultural meanings (Jameson, *Signatures* 23). The pattern mixing of genres then becomes a way to understand the ideological implications of genre, if we take the mixing

of genres to be similar to the embodiment of feminine discourses in otherwise masculine bodies or vice versa. That is, when discourses and signifying texts, or genres and their cultural meanings, *don't* line up neatly, a revelatory subversion is enacted. It is specifically the generic "signature" that "is the condition for a text's endless repeatability, its perpetual openness to repositioning, its capacity to be continuously re-read, rewritten…its fundamental plasticity and its material contingency regarding its own political status and effectiveness" (Grosz 23). Yet, this malleability renders it impossible to make any lasting claims to the subversiveness of a film, or even an entire genre.[28] As Butler herself asserts, "subversive performances always run the risk of becoming deadening clichés through their repetition and, most importantly, through their repetition within commodity culture where 'subversion' carries market value. The effort to name the criterion for subversiveness will always fail, and ought to" (*Gender Trouble* xxi). For Butler, drag is less a model of subversive behavior as it is performance of gender that exposes the constructed nature of (what passes for) sexual identity. A similar hypothesis can be posed in terms of generic subversion: "with those genre films that incorporate generic expectations into their meaning, the result can be an experience that illuminates the nature of genre itself and thus its function within ideology" (Grant, "Experience and Meaning in Genre Films" 127). Yet, this result cannot be guaranteed or predicted in advance, nor can its ideological implications be determined apart from the context in which they are presented.

Genre, like gender, can be understood as a politically complex set of discourses that, because of its repeated iteration, is open to political contestation. However, unlike theories of subversion in film studies, gender studies has formulated (and continues to

amend and re-formulate) accounts of subversion in critically nuanced terms resistant to totalizing and ahistorical gestures. Butler insists: "judgments on what distinguishes the subversive from the unsubversive…cannot be made out of context, …[and] they cannot be made in ways that endure through time" (*Gender Trouble* xxi). I suggest that theories of filmic subversion are equally impelled by this caveat. Because both genre and gender are dependent on the law of genre, their strategies of resistance are determined by it. Yet, the law is equally dependent upon these transgressions: "The terms of violation are not only, or merely, a reaction *against* the law but are productive of it, generating effects through the categories whose controlling forms and norms they also displace" (Benstock 4). The key to understanding this dynamic between the law and its subversion is naming these effects and extending their aims in the process. This is why I contend the possibilities for a radical genre theory lie in an ideological critique suited to the subtle transgressions of the law, which in turn reveal the ideological functions of genre itself.

Because queer epistemology is specifically geared to the analysis of socially constructed categories, it has been developing a similar critique for some time now. Indeed, Butler insists, "Parody by itself is not subversive, and there must be a way to understand what makes certain kinds of parodic repetitions effectively disruptive, truly troubling, and which repetitions become domesticated and rearticulated as instruments of cultural hegemony" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 177). This need to understand gender subversion has given rise to what Britzman refers to as "queer pedagogy"—"pedagogies that call into question the conceptual geography of normalization" (152). This methodological approach is not simply poststructuralist but specifically queer in that it is part of "an ethical project that begins to engage difference as the grounds of politicality

and community" (Britzman 152). Queer pedagogy's ethical engagement with difference has much to offer film criticism. The law of genre/gender, its inherent impurity or perversity, demands reading strategies that refuse to get either "straight." Instead, queer pedagogy privileges difference as its starting point, suggesting a way of reading genre that is not about "constructing resemblances" (among films categorized by a particular genre, for example) but begins "with an acknowledgement of difference as identity and not reduce interpretation to a confirmation of identity" (Britzman 163). In other words, film genre theory can work from the hypothesis of the inherent impurity of genre classification, a position that has already greatly influenced current film genre historiography. If "the queer and the theory in Queer Theory signify *actions*, not actors, [than] it can be thought of as a verb"; accordingly, to *queer* film genre is to not read for moments of identification of traits but for the gaps, transgressions and subversions of these (Britzman 153). Queer pedagogy gives rise to reading practices aimed at fomenting rather than suppressing the instability at the heart of gender (and genre).

Generic subversion, for my purposes, names a methodological assessment of specific textual arrangements, by specifically articulating their ideological tensions and effects. In Grosz' words, while "no text can be classified once and for all," subversive texts (which can be expressed as "feminist" but also include other modes of social critique) "contest the limits and constraints currently at work in the regulation of textual production and reception" (23). This critical relation to such regulations has been of interest to those attentive to filmic subversion but has tended to be the baby thrown out with the bath water of ideological criticism. As Klinger's overview of the progressive genre details: "Vital to and constant within this primarily textual focus of the

cinema/ideology inquiry are the twin interrogatives of what constitutes dominant cinematic practices and what deconstitutes them" (75). What "deconstitutes" cinematic practice has only been of interest in film genre criticism to the extent that it differentiated the progressive film texts of experimental, avant-garde cinema from "dominant cinematic practices." The textual focus of generic subversion centers on the deconstitutive film practices available in film genre. Film genre theory, radicalized by the insights and aims of queer epistemology, gives rise to an interpretive praxis that specifically identifies the ways genre films are able to contest and even subvert existing paradigms of textuality by deconstituting generic structures and their prevailing (ideological, cultural and aesthetic) norms.

In terms of generic subversion, the parameters for recognizing and attributing the political status of texts lay in "the relations between a text and the prevailing norms and ideals which govern its milieu (the way it affirms, extends or problematizes existing paradigms of textuality)" (Grosz 22). Generically subversive texts use recontextualized and decontextualized genre patterns reflexively to create a critical distance from generic norms. Because of genre's requisite reiteration, deviations from that repetition produce critical commentary on that text's discursive framework. This is what Beebee implies when he suggests that the ideological effects of genre are to be found not in generic classification but in "tensions *within* texts between contradictory generic features" (256). These tensions indicate metageneric textual practices that at are odds with the inherited genre structures inflected in the text, denoting a "queer" (in both senses) response to those very structures. At the heart of a queer theory of subversion is the question of what compels a radical rethinking of the social and its regulatory norms; the subsequent

chapters answer this in terms of film genre by looking to the material of characterization,

its textual (and narrative) determinants, and the critical and cultural effects of its

subversion (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 177).

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Chapter Two

Queering Hollywood's Tough Chick:
Reading Race, Sex and Gender in the Postmodern Action Blockbuster

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As popular films increasingly activate fantasies that bind pleasure to aggression, they
frequently remain preoccupied, as the culture is, with crossings, displacements, and
ruptures that defy or challenge social borders and with the definitions of identity and
of 'proper' place that those borders support (Willis 2).

These blockbuster hits are, for better or worse, what the New Hollywood is about,
and thus are the necessary starting point for any analysis of contemporary American
cinema (Schatz, "The New Hollywood" 10-11).

Daughter of the Serial-Queen: The Film History of the Female Action Heroine

A terrified woman is strapped to a watermill while the male villain submerges her

in icy water. The audience is encouraged to experience this perilous situation along with

the protagonist with each sadistic turning of the waterwheel. Because the actress is filmed

for long durations under water (in real time), "there is a mimetic connection between the

scene and the viewer in the sense that the 'time' of this episode is the same as that which

the viewer experiences as the images unfold" (Gormley 11). The simultaneous experience

of time is conveyed by fewer cuts and longer takes, increasing both our apprehension for

the victim and anticipation for the reviled villain's comeuppance. Yet this is only one of

several graphic scenes of violence against a woman whose physical prowess, acts of

derring-do and skill with a gun will facilitate her escape. Indeed, her capabilities as a

female spy are showcased in thrillingly detailed athletic stunt work including firing a

pistol at a moving vehicle while ice-skating![29] Because the film involves "violence and

intense action—abductions, entrapments, brawls, hazardous chase sequences, and last-

minute rescues—in narratively stark conflicts between a heroine or hero-heroine team

and a villain and his criminal accomplices," it could be as easily *The Wheel of Death* (1912) (or *The Adventures of Dorothy Dare*, *A Daughter of Daring*, *The Girl Spy*, *The Girl Detective*, *A Daughter of Uncle Sam*, *Pearl of the Army*, or any episode of *The Hazards of Helen* series) as it is *The Long Kiss Goodnight* (1996) (Singer, *Melodrama* 198). In many ways, the over eighty years difference in these films' releases barely registers in their plot points if not their execution: "the conflict between the heroine-hero team and the villain expressed…in a back-and-forth struggle for the physical possession of the heroine…the daughter (for some reason, often an adopted one) of a powerful man…who… is… murdered by the villain" (Singer, *Melodrama* 208-9). The revivification of the serial-queen sensational melodrama in the form of the female action hero of the postmodern action blockbuster raises questions as to the central fascination of female characters usurping what has commonly been assumed as male prerogative in cinematic narration. Since both operate within an action-adventure story of the sort that continues to be associated with male heroics, what explains the continuing appeal of the gender reversal, what are the implications of challenging genre expectation in this way, and how have they changed over time?

Both early serial-queen melodramas and contemporary action films foreground social anxieties about the destabilization of traditional gender roles, specifically anxieties about sexual independence, the abandonment of domesticity and its requisite responsibilities including child-rearing, and the general refusal of passivity, both physical and emotional. As Singer argues, "portrayals of female prowess functioned as a reflection of both real social change in gender ideologies and, paradoxically, of fantasies of female power betraying the degree to which traditional constraints still prevailed" (*Melodrama*

14). The degree to which this characterizes the women of contemporary action film attests to the continuing role cinema plays in negotiating social, specifically sexual, arrangements in the popular imagination. The constitutive ideologies of both masculinity and femininity no doubt figure across genres, but their substantial role in defining the melodramatic imagination makes it crucial to map the work of sexuality and gender in these films, especially since it is this imagination that drives the flagship of contemporary Hollywood film production. Barry Langford stresses the import of critical analysis of the melodramatic imagination, in its current form as action blockbuster, in political terms: "a renovated melodramatic mode combining aspects of both blood-and-thunder and modified melodrama characterizes the most important contemporary Hollywood genre, the action blockbuster. Moreover, an understanding of the melodramatic imagination may indeed prove an essential tool for comprehending and responding to the political climate of twenty-first century America (of which the action blockbuster is itself an important gauge)—which is to say for citizens of every nation of the world" (49). This chapter seeks to add to the understanding of the melodramatic imagination by mapping the ways its embodiments of gender not only structure the pleasures of the action blockbuster, but also characterize anxieties about race, sex and nation that permeate the political climate.

The significant work of Singer, Bean, Neale and others to redefine melodrama in terms of its historical origins in theater and early cinema has dramatically changed the current definitions of the action blockbuster, a.k.a., action-spectacle, -adventure or –thriller. This is because their historical research has shown that the practice in film criticism of associating melodrama with the woman's film—the "weepies" in particular—obscured the industrial and press usage of the term melodrama to describe the

spectacular and action-filled films of early cinema. Accordingly, film genre critics have

since redefined critical usage of the term to reflect this history. Langford, for instance,

suggests re-titling the action-spectacle film in this light: "the genre can best be

understood…as 'action melodrama,' a form that synthesizes both the blood-and-thunder

and the domestic/pathetic melodramatic traditions" (23). This renaming reflects the

central defining principle of sensational melodrama—action—while retaining a key

thematic preoccupation with "the domestic." Indeed, it might be more accurate, and less

redundant, to refer to the dominant contemporary genre as "blockbuster melodrama" to

reflect these historical roots while acknowledging its contemporary distinctions, since the

blockbuster is a uniquely post-Fordist phenomenon. The iconography of the postmodern

action blockbuster reflects advances in technology and firepower with its "sky-high

orange fireballs…and large-caliber portable weaponry like grenade launchers," but, on

the whole, a good deal of the fundamentals have remained constant, such as "vehicles and

bodies pitching, often in slow-motion, through plate-glass windows; characters diving

and rolling across wrecked interiors, …pistols; death-defying stunts," as evident from the

film description above (Langford 234). Renaming the genre aims at drawing attention to

the pronounced similarities between early film melodrama and today's action film,

despite the latter's explicit proclivity towards genre mixing.

I contend, however, that the meaningful correspondences between the

contemporary action-adventure film and the sensational melodramas of early cinema are

to be found less in tabulation of shared generic traits than in the thick description and

contextualization of these traits and the social arrangements they index. Identifying

genre-specific traits (what Altman identifies as the semantic approach to genre analysis)

provides an organizational rubric for defining the action-adventure genre as, as in this

example from Steve Neale:

> [U]sed to describe what was perceived in the 1980s and 1990s to be a new and
> dominant trend in Hollywood's output…encompass[ing] a range of films and
> genres—from swashbucklers to science fiction films, from thrillers to westerns to war
> films…'action-adventure' has been used…to pinpoint a number of obvious
> characteristics common to these genres and films: a propensity for spectacular
> physical action, a narrative structure involving fights, chases and explosions, and in
> addition to the deployment of state-of-the-art special effects, an emphasis in
> performance on athletic feats and stunts (*Genre and Hollywood* 52).

Notably, in both Langford and Neale's by now standard characterization of the genre,

"performance" and "action" are referred to while performers and actors are not. On one

hand, this is clearly a tacit acknowledgement of the openness of the genre to a

multiplicity of embodiments. Yet, on the other hand, it does not account for the changes

to the action-adventure film that occur when specific subjects embody its iconography.[30]

A semantic approach cannot adequately contextualize the melodramatic imagination, but

a syntactic approach can, because "where attention to semantic concerns produces little

more than a label…syntactic analysis offers understanding of textual workings and thus

of the deeper structures underlying generic affiliation" (Altman 89). A syntactic analysis

of action-blockbuster and its generic affiliations with early sensational cinema,

particularly of the serial-queen melodramas, yields a more nuanced understanding of the

action blockbuster within the framework of postmodernism. And, as Thomas Schatz

stresses, the ubiquity of this genre makes it a crucial starting point in the analysis of

contemporary American cinema.

Singer ends his study of early melodrama with the provocative inquiry: "What are

the relationships between the contemporary action-adventure thriller and the kinds of

sensational melodrama I have examined? How has the genre changed over the decades,

and how directly do these changes reflect their different historical contexts?"

(*Melodrama* 296). These questions follow from the historical revisions of Singer and other film critics who have demonstrated the uncanny similarities between the sensational appeal of early melodrama (and the "cinema of attractions" generally) and what Linda Ruth Williams designates "popular modern cinema"—denoting its distinction from classical Hollywood narrative (356-8). If defined solely by iconography—action situations, iconic villains and heroes, visceral audience response—film critics are hard-pressed to locate critical differences between them. As seen in the opening description, the differences in generic traits are difficult to parse; the historical revisions of the definition of melodrama challenge extant claims concerning not just the "woman's film" but also ahistorical descriptions of the postmodern action film. For example, Paul Gormley states: "postmodern blockbusters… attempt to renegotiate and reanimate the immediacy and affective qualities of the cinematic experience within commercial Hollywood…assault[ing] the body of the viewer and mak[ing] the body act involuntarily," imitating "the bodies that the viewers experience on the screen" (8). To aver these qualities are uniquely postmodern, as he does, fails to acknowledge the striking similarities the blockbuster shares with early sensational cinema.

If the sheer excess of spectacle characterizes the postmodern blockbuster, what does action actually do or, at the very least, what is the relationship not only between narrative and spectacle but also between character and spectacle? Tasker points out that, "to the extent that action is a mode, it is clearly a melodramatic one" ("Introduction" 4). Yet, the melodramatic mode is irreducible to action, as it entails a level of interaction among elements such as pathos, moral polarization, overwrought emotion, nonclassical

narrative structure, and sensationalism, as Singer details (*Melodrama* 44-49). For Singer,

"a form of melodrama" minimally requires some combination of its most basic building

blocks, specifically "moral polarization and sensational action and spectacle"

(*Melodrama* 58). Narrativizing moral polarization requires short-handing social codes

and conflicts in immediately recognizable and experiential forms. One significant form

for the analysis here is the melodramatic "situation." A "situation" might be understood

as a moment or scene in a given film when moral polarization is translated into

sensational spectacle. As Singer describes it, a "*situation* is a…striking and exciting

incident that momentarily arrests narrative action while the characters encounter a

powerful new circumstance and the audience relishes the heightened dramatic impasse"

(Paraphrasing Lea Jacobs, *Melodrama* 41). Notably, melodrama's Manichean oppositions

take shape in such "situations" most often in terms of the clashing of boundaries. As

Gledhill asserts: "Melodrama…works at western culture's most sensitive cultural and

aesthetic boundaries…courting the excitement and novelty of sometimes violent,

sometimes startling, encounters at the boundaries—giving us, for example, the serial

queen…as today's action heroine—and orchestrating proceedings in an eruption of moral

and emotional consequences staged in terminal conflicts and clarifying resolutions" (238-

9). The specific boundary concerns of the serial-queen melodramas and today's action

blockbusters are obviously those that push at the seams and semes of gender.

    Judged solely in terms of iconography, the action genre would appear open to a

range of social actors, as Neale summarizes: "there is nothing inherent in the structure

and the stereotypes of the adventure film to specify its central protagonists as either male

or female. The same is arguably true when it comes to ethnicity and race" (*Genre and*

Hollywood 57). Yet, on the previous page, Neale argues that "space, the control of space, and the ability to move freely through space or from one space to another are always important" in the action-adventure film (*Genre and Hollywood* 56). In these terms, the action film is generically available to a variety of protagonists; however, if these protagonists require freedom of movement to be meaningful within the context of the genre, then attention to difference might suggest that all action heroes are not equal. In the broader context, women and people of color are less able to move freely through space due to social, historical and ideological constraints on their freedom of movement. I would suggest that the "syntax," or contextualization of iconography, of the action film can be traced to this very struggle over the control of space. In this way, the action heroine inherits from the serial-queen not simply her death-defying actions but more precisely her "defying the ideology of feminine domesticity. The genre celebrated the pleasures and perils of a young woman's interaction with a public sphere traditionally restricted to men…heroines transgressed the conventional boundaries of female experience" (Singer, *Melodrama* 226). It is this thematic of transgression that is key to understanding the syntactic production of meaning in the postmodern action blockbuster.

Ben Singer identifies the female protagonist of early cinema as "an intrepid young heroine who exhibit[s] a variety of traditionally 'masculine' qualities: physical strength and endurance, self-reliance, courage, social authority, and freedom to explore novel experiences outside the domestic sphere" (*Melodrama* 221). Singer's definition neatly consolidates the issues that bridge sensational melodrama to contemporary action spectacles, that is, the way the construction of gender is configured in spatial terms. The relatively recent return of the female protagonist to sensational action cinema suggests

that a foremost social question continues to be the role of women in the public sphere.[31] Although "serial-queen" is no longer the term in circulation, the genre's particular focus on "the basically paradoxical nature of female experience" aimed at a "repudiation of domesticity," replacing it with a "fantasy of empowerment…celebrat[ing] the excitement of the woman's attainment of unprecedented mobility outside the confines of the home" continues as a central thematic feature of the popular genre film that is now recognized as the action blockbuster (Singer, *Melodrama* 258). Indeed, it is not surprising that Gledhill's above examples are of the serial-queen and today's action *heroine*. With their similar (female) protagonists similarly imperiled, the serial-queen provided the narrative foundations for today's female postmodern action hero.[32] Yet, as tempting as it is to draw one-to-one correspondences between the female action hero and her predecessor, the serial-queen, the fact is the contemporary action blockbuster predominantly focuses its action and violence through male characterizations.

A central motif linking the historically distant genres of early sensational cinema and postmodern action is the concern with boundaries, particularly gender boundaries. However, if the serial-queen was embraced as an expression of the changing roles for women at the turn of the century, the action-blockbuster reflects the intense anxieties concerning the destabilization of those roles by century's close. While early film melodrama often associated the undoing of traditional gender roles under modernity with women, contemporary action films have presented the destabilization of gender boundaries in postmodernity as the threat to white American *males*.[33] Through the figure of the white male action hero, the melodramatic preoccupation with boundary encounters is multiplied, presenting a complex reconsolidation of identity in response to a plurality

of differences. No wonder then that moral polarization is reconfigured as the hero facing a conspiracy of forces, as Pfeil sums up: "Each film…followed the same basic narrative formula: a white male protagonist…triumphs over an evil conspiracy of monstrous proportions" (1). Accompanying the aesthetic parallels of short, staccato action sequences that define early melodrama and the action blockbuster is the central thematic that links gender to moral conquest. In the early serial-queen melodramas, moral righteousness was explicitly linked to femininity because casting women as the genres' protagonists highlighted the moral polarization of melodrama, "showcasing emotional excess" in positing "a truly evil villain that victimizes an innocent, purely good soul" (Singer, *Melodrama* 39). Yet, in the postmodern incarnation, white masculinity (John Rambo, John McClane, 'D-Fens' Foster, Indiana Jones, etc.) comes to embody this victimization in order to transform it into heroic patriarchal justice.[34]

In the postmodern incarnation, the threat to white masculinity is more capacious than a single "evil villain," including (independent) women, ethnic minorities and global challengers to U.S. hegemony; yet, the sex/gender system remains the central organizing principle through which these threats are screened.[35] Early cinema imagined the anxieties of modernity in the form of new freedoms but also new threats to women entering the public sphere; the action-blockbuster, particularly in the eighties with phenomenal successes such as *Die Hard* and *Lethal Weapon*, mirrored this by articulating anxieties about masculinity and its imagined loss of dominance (to social and cultural others) in the public sphere. This latter position sums up most film-critical approaches to the cycle, as it holds much explanatory power.[36] Yet, this thesis was formed (rather ahistorically) in response to the glut of male action blockbusters emerging in the late seventies and

dominating in the eighties. The historical precursor of the early film melodrama is only now beginning to change the frame of reference for critical work on the action genre. To begin to explain how the serial-queen of the early twentieth century became the hard male body of the action hero by its last decades—and in turn gave rise to the female action heroine—a more precise historical account of the intersections of sexuality and gender is needed. I contend the postmodern difference between the two genre cycles can be ascribed to the historical changes in the discourses of sexuality, and the impact these changes wrought on the American cinema and its modes of reception.

Postmodern Action and the Destabilization of Heterosexuality

If, as Singer persuasively argues, modernity is marked by dramatic changes to the place and understanding of *gender*, and this cultural context is reflected in the serial-queen, then postmodernity is marked by the dramatic change in *sexuality,* reflected in the history of film in the new shock cinema of the 1960s. Linda Ruth Williams argues that the postmodern turn took place in cinema with the release of Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960): "*Psycho* is the film that first linked an erotic display of sexual attractions to a shocking display of sexualized violence. But its attractions were no longer deployed within a *stable heterosexual framework* or within the hegemony of an exclusive masculine subjectivity. This new twist…is at the heart of postmodern gender and sexuality in popular cinema" (358; emphasis mine). The destabilization of a presumptive heterosexuality cannot be overstated. Although both sensational film melodrama and action cinema are clearly directed at the evocation of bodily thrills and shocks, the boundary instabilities they plumb have changed. While the serial-queens turned on the thrills of women trying out

new (male) roles and (masculine-coded) spaces, Williams links "the thrill producing

visual attractions" of the high concept cinema of an emergent post-Fordist Hollywood to

the destabilization of "masculine and feminine altogether" (360). By detouring the film

history of melodrama through the postmodern transformation of film semantics and their

accompanying modes of reception (what Williams' refers to as "disciplines") it is

actually the destabilization of the heterosexual frame that can be seen to shape the "new

intensification and destabilization of the gendered components" of cinema's "sensually

based thrills and pleasures" (354-5).

For my purposes here, it is the ways these spectatorial disciplines intersect with

the sexual disciplining of the body that are most suggestive. The postmodern shift that

Psycho catalyzes is "a new level of gender play and destabilization…a founding moment

of the greater awareness of the performativity of gender roles increasingly ushered in by a

postmodern, 'post-classical' reception of cinema" (Williams 372). While Williams does

not address the social changes that made such performativity possible (and appealing) in

film, I posit that the broader historical reconfigurations of bodies and desires taking place

in the early- to mid-twentieth century eventually retooled the melodramatic imagination.

Specifically, the move from "true womanhood" and "true manhood," still in sway at the

turn of the century (and girding the melodramatic mode in film and theater), which

anchored gender to heterosexuality was displaced by newly "invented" sexual subjects

and desires transforming the linkages between gender, sexuality and desire.[37] Although

the serial-queens entered male spaces and usurped male-defined activities, even donning

men's clothes, they remained unquestionably "true women" because they carried on in

the tradition of early theatrical melodrama, which reflected Victorian conceptions of

gender and sexuality. "In this era, the human body was thought of as directly constituting the true man and the true woman, and their feelings. No distinction was made between biologically given sex and socially constructed masculinity and femininity" (Katz 45). To this extent, the postmodern shift registered most explicitly in the "slippage between masculine and feminine poles of an identity," delinking masculinity from (essential) maleness and femininity from (essential) femaleness (Williams 361).

The fluidity of gender, with its concomitant instability of sexuality, names a preeminent historical influence underpinning the postmodern relationship of spectacle to narrative, of action to characterization. The change in the correspondence of gender to sexuality provides a frame of reference that disrupts the apparently straightforward lineage from modern film serial to postmodern action blockbuster. One crucial midpoint in the film history of action melodrama is the advent of the postmodern horror film, signaling "an important turning point in the pleasurable destabilizing of sexual identity" which Williams links to *Psycho*, as "the moment when the experience of going to the movies began to be constituted as providing a certain generally transgressive sexualized thrill of promiscuous abandonment to indeterminate, 'other' identities" (362). For this reason, the contemporary action hero might be better understood as the postmodern legacy of the serial-queen but by way of the slasher-horror genre's "final girl," who anchored that genre's "formula for reproducing, and refining, the various sexual and gendered elements in ways that would not lessen the attraction of violence against women but which would empower [her] to fight back and invite spectators to identify alternately with her powerless victimization and the subsequently empowered struggle against it" (Williams 361). In Williams description, the bleed between horror and action

film is already evident in the description of the "fight" against the forces that victimize

her, a fight reminiscent of the serial-queen's own morally polarized battles. Yet, the

sexual transgression ushered in by postmodern horror that allowed male spectators to be

feminized in the spectatorial disciplines eventually allowed for gender fluidity to translate

to the bodies on screen.

This history from serial-queen to final girl begins to point to a process of

feminization (not necessarily connected to female bodies) that is instrumental to the

melodramatic modality, which challenges the assumption that film action is by definition

male. However, what makes the contemporary action film precisely postmodern is its

fluid slippage between gendered poles of identity that Williams describes. This gender

play allows the male action hero to be feminized so that he can access the emotional

excesses of victimization once reserved for the serial-queen and final girl. Even the most

"masculine" films of the action genre, such as *Die Hard* (1988) and *Rambo* (1985),

derive their action from the re-masculinizing process affected by their action-oriented,

roller-coaster ride scenarios. The intensities of these films derive from the ways hard

bodies are penetrated, violated and made targets for sexualized violence; and, in doing so,

the male leads are feminized and eroticized for the gaze.[38] This has led to notable

contradictions in the criticism of the action film; on one hand, when women are cast in

the role of the protagonist, they are typically seen as phallic women, "in which questions

of gender identity are played out through, in particular, the masculinization of the female

body" (Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies* 139). Yet on the other hand, "the muscular body of

the [male] action star seems to provide a powerful symbol of both desire and lack"

(Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies* 80). Implicit in both statements is, however, a resistance to connect the transgression of gender to transgressive sexualities.

Pfeil concludes that, despite the protagonists' "feminization and spectacularization," the postmodern male action hero is nonetheless "specifically white/male/hetero" (29, 32). I contend that the spectacle of male bodies made vulnerable by not only their frequently wounded and fetishized hard bodies (frequently glistening with sweat) but also their affective ties to other men, as well as the "male-acting" action heroine cannot be simply (read as) straight. If film history is revised in the way I suggest here to incorporate the postmodern turn, then the action film might be seen instead to place men at the center of melodramatic narratives, once the domain of female protagonists, in order to articulate a set of sexual instabilities that reflect the larger insecurities of heteropatriarchy, insecurities about fluid sexuality that (pleasurably) destabilizes heterosexuality itself. Although she never directly addresses the question of sexuality (beyond acknowledging lesbian sub-cultural reception), Sharon Willis acknowledges: "The spectacle of women acting like men works to disrupt the apparent naturalness of certain postures when performed by a male body. But it is equally important to understand this spectacle in terms of sexuality" (108-9).
Indeed, when the spectacle of the postmodern blockbuster is framed in terms of sexuality, even the performances of male bodies become just that—gender performances of a de-naturalized masculinity. In its emphasis on gender performativity, the binary of masculine and feminine is destabilized in the postmodern action film, troubling the heteronormative readings into which they tend to fall. In other words, the destabilization of the heterosexual framework that accompanied the postmodern change in cinematic

representation tethers gender inherently to sexuality to the extent that "our configurations as masculine or feminine carry with them the expectations about who does what with whom" (Phelan 131). However, these sex-gender configurations have very different implications for men and women.

The male action hero is feminized by the citational practices that recall the sado-masochistic spectacles of the serial-queen only to lay claim to the moral certitude of her victimization. The spectatorial disciplines of postmodernism allow for pleasure to be taken in the re-assertion of masculinity in the face of such effeminizing threats to his bodily integrity. Tacit transgressions of gender are rewarded with a reaffirmed masculinity in line with the male body of the performer, re-securing their supposed natural correspondence. That the male action hero is often placed in an affective relation with another man only underscores the reification of the homosocial patriarchy perpetually vulnerable to feminizing forces (the grounds for the form's usual serialization). More significantly, the male protagonist of the postmodern blockbuster often performs a synechdochic function representing the state and, "the site of the State…is weakened by both its domestication and by the subversion of patriarchal-male authority that contemporary domestication brings in its wake," as Pfeil persuasively suggests in his readings of both *Lethal Weapon* and *Die Hard* (25). In this way, the male-centered postmodern blockbuster does not only cite sensational melodrama's spectacular action but does so in ways that evoke its central thematic concerns with domesticity, subjectivity and affect. In this case, both female bodies and femininity itself must be sidelined to reaffirm masculine homosociality as the paradigmatic organization of relations of power in the national imaginary, even if that homosociality is across racial

lines. To this end, the sexual instabilities of the genre remain within a heteropatriarchal worldview, in that its tautological aims are the contiguous alignment of gender, sexuality and identity in the bodies of its male protagonists.

For the male action hero, his feminization within a homosocial narrative works to ultimately reinforce the very foundations of heteropatriarchy. Lynda Hart asserts, "masculinity is as much verified by active desire as it is by aggression" (x). While the logic of heteropatriarchy affirms male action, and aggression specifically, it requires a disavowal of these same activities for women because "the active female body disturbs cultural definitions of gender and collapses the inside/outside boundary that constitutes the social division into female and male" (Creed 91). Although this was true for the serial-queen as well, the active female body of the postmodern blockbuster evokes specifically sexual instabilities because her transgression of gender categories entails a questioning of the system of compulsory heterosexuality that produces and, more importantly to the discussion below, *enforces* rigid binary divisions into disjunctive gender behaviors, meanings and identities. In the female action heroine's violent and aggressive behavior—in her constitutive *toughness*—specific cultural meanings are activated that in turn point to the subversion of sexual identity itself. To understand the subversive implications of the gender inversion of the female *hero*, however, requires a brief examination of the qualities of the (male) hero character in American cinema—qualities distinct from those of the serial queen.

The "tough chick"—the name I give to the contemporary incarnation of the female action hero—is a clear descendent of the serial-queen, indicative of a generic continuity between early sensational melodrama and the contemporary action film.[39] Both

the serial-queen and the tough chick take their meanings from the "hero" function of the

action-spectacle genre, repeating tropes expected for that genre but in the unexpected

form of a woman—a repetition of generic expectation with a (sexual) difference. The link

between these historical film cycles is the self-assured and assertive female character that

transgresses hegemonic gender codes. I specifically borrow, however, from an altogether

different cycle to delineate the historical difference of the female hero of the postmodern

action blockbuster from her early cinema forerunner. What distinguishes the

contemporary popular female action heroine from the serial-queen is the particular

quality of affect she inherits from the generic male hero—toughness. The tough,

distinctly American characterization of the hero is most often associated with the film

noir cycle.[40] Indeed, founding the subversiveness of the "tough chick" is the disjunction

of toughness from masculinity she represents, that is, the "tough, cold, steel-like

characters" of the tough chick film do not "reflect an underlying, essential masculinity," a

masculinity anchored to a male body (and the possession of a penis) (Chopra-Gant,

Hollywood Genres 167).[41] This pivotal de-essentializing of the figure of tough heroism

from the ground of (anatomical) gender problematizes the gender specificity of the hero-

function as masculine.

Toughness, or hardness (as in the hard bodies of the postmodern action film),

names a specific filmic performance of masculinity, which anchors "the realism and

authenticity" of much American cinema—from the "tough" noir and the Western, to this

summer's action blockbusters, *Batman Begins* (2008) and the aptly named *Iron Man*

(2008) (Chopra-Gant, *Hollywood Genres* 167). The "noir" hero and the action hero both

suggest a toughness forged in the face of "an inchoate yet pervasive sense of injury on the

part of patriarchal white males" (Langford 249). This sense of injury has to do with the

perceived threat to the phallic citizen that "others" provoke, particularly women. In fact,

Chopra-Gant suggests this in how he frames the definitive split between the popular

postwar film and the "tough" film: "the general direction of 'tough' movie narratives is

more clearly pointed towards anxieties about women and the threat they represent to

masculinity, than towards any of the concerns of early postwar discourse…in relation to

the popular films" (*Hollywood Genres* 173). The tough film depended on its containment

of the woman, characterized by the *femme fatale*, to achieve some semblance of narrative

closure and to shore up the identity claims that found the tough hero, particularly his

reconsolidation of masculinity. It is precisely through the abjection of the female figure

that the tough protagonist established his (authentic) masculinity.[42]

Chopra-Gant asserts that "the performances of gendered identity" embodied by

the tough Hollywood film "involves well-known qualities of a star character to give an

authenticating ground that endows diegetic characters with a sense of masculinity as an

essential condition" (*Hollywood Genres* 167). In the postmodern action film this

authenticity is not just endowed by the star qualities of the performer, like Sylvester

Stallone, Jean-Claude Van Damme and Arnold Schwarzenegger, it is well endowed by

the added authenticity of the hyperbolically masculinized bodies of actual body-builders.

However, when the generic "tough guy" is a woman, the masculinity of the heroic is de-

realized in a critical and subversive film genre citation. Indeed, most common-sense

approaches simply see the tough chick as a casting gimmick, as an actress impersonating

the ("real") action hero of the postmodern blockbuster. I contend, rather, that these films

stress gender *as* performance: "pulling performance always toward 'impersonation'

marked explicitly as such, [the films] constitute the cultural field in which 'the parodic' is situated in relation to 'the authentic.' In this way, gender trouble reflects genre trouble: such 'trouble' accrues from [these] films uncertainty about the site of the authentic" (Savoy 159-60). The "genre trouble" of recasting the action hero with a woman draws attention to the generic qualities—including toughness—of the heroic function in these films, effecting a transgression of gender and genre expectation alike.

Notably, this gender transgression is expressed in visual spectacle rather than psychological depth. The heroine's "self" is mapped out in the visual excesses of spectacular feats and tension-filled dilemmas rather than through the expression of character profundity. Jennifer Bean argues that the early serial-queen films' appeal "hinged on a cinematic register that sensationalized, agitated, and unsettled the very ground of meaning on which distinctions between male and female, and beyond that the logic of subjectivity more broadly, traditionally depends" (19). This undoing of the logic of subjectivity continues to evince itself in the auto-dynamics of bodies—their speed, prowess, and gravity-defying acrobatics—that stand in for the subjectifying qualities of emotional interiority frequently associated with filmic realism. In effect, the terms by which these genre films tend to be disregarded or derided outright, specifically, their notable disregard for character development, is reinterpreted as a derealization of the logic of subjectivity itself. Bean specifically names the serial-queen films "early action cinema" because their "risky maneuvers by definition imply a non-normative domain, the category of mistake…. These descriptions get at the excesses of risk, its propensity to gamble with cultural scripts, to mock stability in any form" (19). In this way, the fantasy of a human body outside the domain of physical laws articulates a desire to exceed the

other bounds that restrict and delimit both body and subjectivity. The serial queens exemplify a melodramatic mode of characterization that equates gender instability with "sensation"; this affective register is triggered when what the body is capable of exceeds or is even at odds with (gender) expectation.[43] This powerful sensation continues to found the pleasures of action cinema.

Action films center on hyperbolic bodies and therefore provide rich visual and narrative terrain for imagining the fluidity of gender and sexuality alike. With its special effects and CGI, the action genre frequently employs the transformation of bodies, which makes it particularly labile for queer visions of reconfigured bodies and desires. Indeed, if the tough chick and her serial-queen predecessors show us anything, it is that gender is always outstripped and subverted by what *bodies can do* or imagine doing, that what queers them are the very "energies, excitations, impulses, actions, movements" that are indexed in their spectacular feats, bypassing both physical laws and social norms (Grosz 182).[44] It is these impulses that move the spectators, producing what has been referred to as "the 'wow' response—often seen as a 'dumbed-down' version of the diminution and liminality of the self expressed in Romantic theories of the Sublime" (Langford 244). Yet, the "wow" factor may figure as part of the semantics of the postmodern blockbuster to differing syntactic ends. Part of the spectatorial disciplines of postmodernity is this very "wow" factor, connected to the thrills experienced by bodies. Such thrills, according to Linda Williams, "could probably best be called a form of ecstasy" because they produce "direct or indirect sexual excitement and rapture" (143-4). It is typical that these sexual thrills aim at the reconsolidation of gender and sexuality in the face of

destabilizing thrills and spectacles, as in the example of the male action hero of the postmodern blockbuster.

I argue, however, that it is by placing the tough chick at the center of the postmodern blockbuster that both gender and genre are subverted in their sublime resignifications. T. Benjamin Singer has posited that the category of the sublime, in that it "surpasses bounded meaning and remains resistant to easy interpretation," names the encounter with transgender subjects ("Medical Gaze" 614). I propose that the sublime thrill of watching the tough chick in her spectacular scenarios intersects with T. Benjamin Singer's conception of the sublime encounter "with a vision of potentially infinite specific possibilities for being human" ("Medical Gaze" 616). Indeed, all the various names given to this figure, including "tough chick," might in fact point to the sublime rupture, when critics are at a loss to account for non-normative bodies outside of binary terms. The performance of gender in these films borders on the sublime because it points to "the non-binary range of bodies, genders and sexualities" (T. Benjamin Singer, "Medical Gaze" 616). In this way, these films take advantage of the fact "that the blockbuster encourages the spectator to relinquish the adult capacity for critical discrimination in favor of an undiscriminating rapture," to make the space for imagined embodiments not available in a culture that is violently "discriminating" of gender and sexual subversives (Langford 244). By situating their sublime scenarios as rapturous responses to the violence directed against the tough chick, these films link gender performance to a political critique of the social order that condemns and criminalizes gender transgression.

If "instances of reanimating…codes and genres in contemporary mainstream cinema are rarely naïve, indiscriminate, or perhaps even avoidable," as Needeya Islam points out, then we are led to see in the female action heroine "where the traditional hero figure and genre itself are enlisted in their own critical questioning" (96, 106). For me, this critical questioning is directed at the ways gender performance reifies (hetero)sexuality; therefore, the following textual analyses are specifically informed by the insights of queer and feminist theory. In the cumulative analyses produced by feminist-queer theory, a central concern with the complex social forces of heteropatriarchy—the linked systems enforcing heterosexuality *and* patriararchal gender asymmetry—has come to the fore. The tough chick film re-cites the action-spectacle genre only to refuse its sex-gender alignment, with its broader political implications. What follows then is a specifically queer theorization of the tough chick that articulates the critique of heteropatriarchy available in these films. The gendered de-formation of the action hero of the postmodern blockbuster, I propose, potentially "queers" both genre and gender in its discursive work. The critical practice employed here follows from Biddy Martin's suggestion to "make gender identities and expressions the site of close readings that work to expose the infinitely complex and shifting dynamics, both psychic and social, that such identities and expressions both obscure and illuminate so that gender— and 'femininity,' in particular—becomes a piece of what feminist and queer theories together complicate and put into motion" (33). My aim is to produce a piece of ideological genre criticism that challenges assumptions about both genre and gender (and their discursive intersections). In providing a "thick description" of two paradigmatic film texts from the vantage point of queer and feminist textual analysis, I argue that the tough

chick may very well characterize a subject position antithetical to social laws, embodying forms of gender and sexual transgression that are celebrated for heroic narrative purposes.

Queerying Gender and Genre: Tough Chicks as Sexual Strangers

By addressing two film texts, *The Matrix* (1999) and *The Long Kiss Goodnight* (1996), I will examine the generic characterization of the tough chick and the narrative function she performs. These two films are touchstones in the plethora of tough chick films generated by Hollywood in the last decade or so (*Aeon Flux, Catwoman, Charlie's Angels, Kill Bill, Wanted, Resident Evil, Lara Croft,* etc.); they are among the most watched films in which the tough chick plays a crucial role, setting the precedent for the emergence of a substantial millennial subgenre.[45] Charly Baltimore (Geena Davis) of *The Long Kiss Goodnight* and Trinity (Carrie-Anne Moss) of *The Matrix*, with their short haircuts, black cat suits, and physical prowess, exemplify the tough chick of the contemporary action-spectacle genre. In fact, *The Long Kiss Goodnight* stands apart because it was the first action-thriller written for a woman by the leading screenwriter at the time in the genre, Shane Black (and the highest priced script sold in Hollywood up to that point), who also wrote the *Lethal Weapon* series, but extended his *auteur* stamp on this film by signing on as a producer as well.[46] Trinity also has become a touchstone figure in popular culture, albeit this has more to do with the impact *The Matrix* has made on millennial culture on the whole.[47] My goal here is to parse out the significance of these characters by reading their respective films in conjunction to understand more clearly the

phenomenon of the cinematic tough chick and to map the constellation of meanings
attached to her.

The diegesis of *The Matrix* introduces a world generated by an artificial
intelligence (A.I.) that looks like and is taken for the historical moment of 1999. On the
level of plot, it is the story of Neo's (Keanu Reeves) induction into "the resistance"—a
collective of people who are aware that the "world" as it is known is simply a computer
program that masks the "truth" that human beings are grown in tanks to generate power
to run the machines of the A.I. The "resistance," led by Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne),
covertly travels the actual future earth that has been decimated by war. His crew consists
of Trinity, Switch, Cypher, Mouse, Apoc, Tank, and Dozer, who travel in and out of "the
matrix" through a computer link-up system. They are seen as criminals by the avatars of
the machines—its "agents." The film centers on Neo's consciousness-raising, but key to
his transformation are the figures of Morpheus and Trinity. In its final moments, the film
indicates the development of a romantic relationship between Neo and Trinity, which is
significantly developed in the sequels. Although the film does not center on Trinity, it
should not be construed that she is simply a love interest for the male protagonist; the
film opens with her, she is the sole protagonist of the first action sequence, and she is the
first to kill an agent (while coining the catchphrase, "dodge this").[48]

While it may be impossible to claim Trinity as the central figure of *The Matrix,*
despite the pivotal role she plays in the narrative, this is far from the case for
Charly/Samantha in *The Long Kiss Goodnight*. The movie, which "pairs Geena Davis and
Samuel L. Jackson in a wildly and explicitly ironic reading of the action-buddy genre that
foregrounds race and gender," does so through a plot concerning her self-discovery and

transformation (Willis 221, note 1). At first, she is living as Samantha Caine in the suburbs of Pennsylvania as a schoolteacher and a single mother. As the story unfolds, we are told she suffers from focal retrograde amnesia, having only her last eight years of memories.[49] The film opens with the moment at which the contacts from her previous life discover her existence; those who know her true identity as a former United States government assassin catch sight of her on a local news segment. Samantha herself also begins to remember her previous life through a series of violent "situations."[50] She eventually teams up with Mitch Henessey (Jackson), a low-rent detective Samantha has hired to find out about the former existence she cannot recall. With Mitch, she undertakes a road trip that leads her to past figures in her life such as the father of her daughter (a violent, covert operative, Timothy) and her boss at the state department, Perkins. She eventually discovers that Perkins, the head of her former black ops organization, Chapter, is planning to set off a chemical bomb and pin the blame on Muslims (by planting a dead, frozen Arab man at ground zero) in order to generate support for hawkish extremists within the United States government. Samantha eventually transforms back into Charly, enabling her to stop the right-wing terrorists' plot while simultaneously rescuing her daughter. Mitch accompanies her, advises her, and is instrumental in saving Charly and her daughter at the film's conclusion.

Both films, as these two brief synopses imply, place their central figures in complicated narratives that entail politically motivated character development. The differences between the two films reflect their respective sub-genres: "Movies of crime or urban action [*Long Kiss*], for instance, are more likely to explicitly address questions of racial identity and ethnic conflict in the U.S. Fantasy settings, whether utopian or

otherwise may lend themselves more easily to an experimentation with established social hierarchies [like *The Matrix*]" (Tasker, "Introduction" 4). What they share, however, is a certain "narrative unwieldiness" which is attributable to "the generic legacy of melodrama, which tolerated a high degree of narrative intricacy and discontinuity" (Singer, *Melodrama* 209). Yet, no matter how intricate or convoluted the plot may be, the generic determinants of melodrama continue to be anchored in the genre's protagonist, from serial-queen through "final girl" and male action-hero to the tough chick. Because popular film focalizes its pleasurable work through structures of identification, not just in terms of character-driven plots but also with more subtle reinforcements such as filmic close-ups, the ideological determinants underpinning such narrative unwieldiness are focalized through the processes of characterization. What is most salient to these characterizations is that both films posit a tough chick at odds with the diegetic social order. This antagonistic dynamic between the female protagonist and the law allegorizes the transgression of dominant ideologies of sex and gender, and the ways such transgressions are policed by the heteropatriarchal forces of the state.

For example, *The Matrix* begins with the spectacle of Trinity's escape from the forces of state control. When the police attempt to capture her within the first few minutes of the story, we are told that the police, in arrogant bravado, "can surely handle one girl." So, when the film cuts back to Trinity systematically killing every officer in the room with little effort, we are forced to speculate on the status of "girl" in this film. Marked as girls, these "tough chicks" refuse gender expectations (such as those of the police), but because they are the heroes, these films refuse to stigmatize the ways the tough chick deviates from normative gender roles. Rather, they carry on the tradition

established in early serial-queen melodrama that, "without exception, placed an overt polemic about female independence and mastery at the center of its thematic design. This depiction of female power self-consciously dissolved, and sometimes even reversed, traditional gender positions as the heroine appropriated a variety of 'masculine' qualities, competencies, and privileges" (Singer, *Melodrama* 224). However, the tough chick's historically situated post-feminist incarnation colors such appropriations of masculinity as enactments of sexual autonomy, an autonomy that provokes both patriarchal and heterosexual panic in other characters in the film, particularly those representing the law, a panic mobilizing the violent actions taken against these protagonists.

The incipient meanings that accompany the tough chick's violence intersect at a nexus of sexual and gender anxieties that threaten heteropatriarchy. Hart suggests that the image of the violent woman in popular culture conveys certain tacit implications about female sexuality since, "the production of violent women in representation depends on a dis-articulated threat of desire between women" (x). Within the semiotics of violence that defines the tough chick is a critical relation to heteropatriarchy that is signaled as a structural refusal rather than as a static identity. Hart explains in *Fatal Women*: "one ghost in the machine of heterosexual patriarchy is the lesbian who shadows the entrance into representation of women's aggression…. It is not a matter, then, of looking for the lesbian *behind* representations of violent women, but rather an understanding how the lesbian functions in a structural dialectic of appearance/disappearance where the aggressive woman is visible" (x). Mobilizing the violence brought to bear against the tough chick (in spectacular scenarios and melodramatic situations) is a heterosexual panic that is a response to this very dialectic. Although these characters are not lesbian, and

therefore any attempt to locate the lesbian "behind" the tough chick would be futile, I nevertheless propose that a queer reading of these films foregrounds the operations of this structural dialectic, as these are the very terms that define the tough chick's subversive characterization.

It is how these tough chicks embody gender, mixing the codes of masculine and feminine, that mark them as sex-gender deviant, a deviance (mis)read within the Manichean definitions of sexuality as lesbian: "women are identified as lesbian because they fail to dress and behave according to their gender identity…. They are made to feel out of place by the hostility of others who identify them as outsiders through their dress, body language, and disinterest in men" (Valentine 292). There is a correspondence between the hostility with which they are met and the emphasis the films' put on dress and body language, exemplified by the dramatic alteration of both image and carriage by Geena Davis in the change from Samantha to Charly (especially the cutting short and dying of hair, the drastic change from passive to assertive behavior).[51] The female action hero, as it is often acknowledged, "challenges gender boundaries in terms of the active/passive dualism, a dichotomy which is crucial to the definition of gender in patriarchal culture" (Creed 93). Yet, how the active female body of the postmodern blockbuster subverts this very dichotomy cannot be fully theorized within heteronormative interpretive practices. The formal analysis presented herein is part of a queer analytic practice which seeks to contest and protest "the persistence and pervasiveness of heterocentric cultural fantasies that, at best, allow most lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer understandings of popular culture to exist as appropriative of and subsidiary to taking things straight" (Doty, "My Beautiful Wickedness" 140). Trinity and

Charly clearly threaten the sexual, racial and gender boundaries asserted by a white

heteropatriarchy and are willing to kill (often to protect their Black male companions)

with little remorse.[52] Such aggressive actions re-cite the iconography of the male action

hero but with the critical intervention of sexual difference.

Tough chicks can be understood, in their perverse gender crossings, as what

Shane Phelan refers to as "sexual strangers," queerly configured by the visual and

narrative codes of their respective films (5). As strangers, these characters "subvert the

hierarchies of the hegemonic order, pointing out the gaps and contradictions in that

order;" indeed, their actantial function is located precisely in "removing the privilege of

innocence from the dominant group" or its stand-in, whether that is another character

altogether, as Trinity does for Neo, or in her own process of dis-identification, as in the

case of Sam/Charly coming to terms with her fantasmatic suburban "mommy" existence

when confronted with the "truth" of her past life as the black ops "spy" (Phelan 32). Both

films, therefore, tell stories of subjects at odds with the ruling forces that have, to all

extents, created (and estranged) them. Whether at war with the A.I. that produces and

polices the "world" of *The Matrix*, or hunted by intergovernmental terrorists in *The Long

Kiss Goodnight*, these films' protagonists resist the social hegemony of their respective

diegeses. These postmodern blockbusters animate the action genre's iconographies in a

narrative syntax that turns on the ways the tough chick claims erotic autonomy and

therefore "has no part in the national imaginary except as threat" (Phelan 7).

The violence they receive from the forces of the state points to a queer insurgency

that is rooted in their refusal of gender norms and the presumptive heterosexuality they

reinforce. As Butler asserts: "To say…that gender is performative is not simply to insist

on a right to produce a pleasurable and subversive spectacle but to allegorize the spectacular and consequential ways in which reality is both reproduced and contested. This has consequences for how gender presentations are criminalized and pathologized" (*Undoing Gender* 30). These films set the tough chicks' performance of gender within stories that unequivocally contest the construction of reality—as in the allegory of the "matrix" or in the open condemnation of the ideologies and covert activities of the U.S. government. We are directed to reject this reproduction of reality *because* it criminalizes the gender performance of the protagonists, whose subversive relation to gender norms, and thus the state, are expressed in rapturous spectacles of contestation with its representatives. The violence directed at these women takes its cue from the broader discursive systems that shape the national imaginary, constructing the terms by which citizenship is bestowed and withheld. Put another way: "The desire to kill someone, or killing someone, for not conforming to the gender norm by which a person is 'supposed' to live suggests that life itself requires a set of sheltering norms, and that to be outside it, to live outside it is to court death" (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 34). The tough chick actively rejects gender norms, which in turn leads to the (melo)dramatic spectacle of what it means to "court death." Indeed, living outside the sheltering norms of national citizenship is starkly depicted in the final fight scene in *The Long Kiss Goodnight* when Charly, battered and bleeding, begs a C.I.A. agent to help her and her daughter and the agent coldly refuses to come to her aid; rather, he gives her location to those agents of the state trying to kill her. That such hyperbolic aggression is unleashed on a mother and child exposes the lie behind a citizenship organized around "the family," connecting the refusal to abide by gender norms to a broader rejection of presumptive heterosexuality.

The narrative arc of *The Long Kiss Goodnight* begins with Samantha living well within the nation's sheltering norms. Yet, as Charly "comes out," she is marked by the state as "dangerous" to its interests. The threat is not simply that tough chicks refuse to conform to the gender norms but that this refusal is an act of erotic autonomy antipathetic to the needs of heteropatriarchy. Samantha loses the shelter of citizenship when she opts for the non-conforming embodiment that characterizes Charly. On the other hand, *The Matrix* opens with Trinity pursued by police and agents alike. The threat to her is immediate, making it clear from the outset that she is an enemy of, and stranger to, the nation-state. Her choice has been made outside the frame of the diegesis; it is implicit that she has taken the red pill and therefore rejected the sheltering norms of the matrix. Both tough chicks, "having refused the heterosexual imperative of citizenship, according to the state, pose a profound threat to the very survival of the nation" because the nation conceives of itself as heterosexual (Alexander, "Not Just Any Body" 6). Whether Trinity in the hotel by herself (which seems to call for scores of police) or Charly walking alone at night, the forms of violence these bodies receive "reflects men's attempts to police independent women's behavior, and hence reflects patriarchal power relations" (Valentine 294). Yet, because spectator gratification is generated by these female heroes' ability to (physically) resist the State, viewer identifications shift away from a reaffirmation of the state's power to an alignment with those outside the law. Both films, in this way, present gender subversives as sympathetic sites of identification, and because they are explicitly identified as enemies of the state, we are given a critical perspective on the state and its heteropatriarchal claims. In other words, confronting the constitutive

strangeness of the tough chick "inevitably turns us back toward a reconsideration of the American polity as a whole" (Phelan 32).

The critique of the social "matrix" that takes place in *The Matrix* has been commented upon by a wide range of philosophers, film critics and movie reviewers, though few have traced the critical work of the film to a specifically gendered reconsideration of the polity, much less figuring this critique in terms of a potential queer insurgence. However, a sustained critique of gender is encapsulated in the heightened CGI effect of the "loading program" (a computerized version of a Chicago financial district), which is cast as a sea of white people dressed in black and white, including a nun and a bride. The one exception, of course, is the memorable "Woman in Red." The loading program is simulacral, which makes the Woman in Red a simulacrum of the second order whose function in the film is to expose desirable heterosexual femininity for what it is—a simulation. The "Woman in Red" is repeatedly referenced as "a program" (notably, *not* "a person"). When Neo is first tested in the loading program, it is his attraction to the "Woman in Red" that is his weakness, distracting him to allow time enough for her to morph into Agent Smith, who points a gun to his head. The scenario has feminist import, as it metaphorizes the national and sexual interests of heteropatriarchy at work in the fetishized (and phantasmatic) simulacrum of Woman. The projected images of women in the loading program—nun, bride and "Woman in Red"— represent versions of acceptable embodiments of femininity (specifically, Madonna/whore) within the heteronormative matrix, but precisely because they are in "the matrix" they are regarded as problematic fabrications.

The "Woman in Red" is contrasted with the actual women on board the Nebuchadnezzar, Trinity and Switch (whose names suggest split or multiple subject positions). These characters are visually marked queer figures—both in the sense of being "odd" and two women together, dressed in fetish gear nonetheless. Indeed, the visual exceptionality of Switch (in white instead of all black) underscores the implications of her name, playing on its double meanings, both as slang for bisexuality as well as someone who can be a top or a bottom in the SM dynamic.[53] By transgressing gender boundaries, these two women are cast as sexual strangers, at home, literally, under ground with the subterranean (subcultural) "Others" of the resistance. Trinity and Switch are the only two women of "the resistance" on board the multiracial ship—a ship "bound for Zion" (referencing a history of diasporic spiritual responses to slavery). This spatial metaphor of racial difference is juxtaposed with the world of the matrix, signified through images of a U.S, which is markedly white.[54] Such contrasting mise-en-scène point to the various ways the tough chick's rejection of sexual norms is inseparable from her cross-racial affiliations, which, taken together, define these characters as outlaws of the nation-state.

The tough chick fights back against the embodied heteropatriarchal forces that attack her and, in so doing, points to the possibility of resistance to these forces. To this extent, these action heroines offer "the possibility of appearing impermeable, of repudiating vulnerability itself…of becoming violent" (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 30). The queer reading presented here suggests that these films use the violence endemic to the action spectacle genre to critique a state that would not see crimes against gender violators "as legible or real crimes against humanity" (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 34). The

danger, however, with this subversive citation of the postmodern action blockbuster is that the equivalency between masculinity and aggression on which the genre depends creates an overdetermined interpretive frame for coding the violence of the tough chick as a masculine response. These tough chicks cannot take their meaning simply from their "virile display" because, as Grosz has argued, "while they do have the effect of unsettling or disquieting presumptions about the 'natural' alignment of the penis with social power and value, they do so only by attempting to appropriate what has been denied to women and to that extent remain tied (as we all are) to heterocentric and masculine privilege. Such modalities remain reactive, compensatory" (170). I suggest then that it is only by contextualizing her actions within the frame of a racist national imaginary that the critical implications of the tough chick as an *action* heroine come to the fore.

Racialized Sexuality and the (Melodramatic) Critique of Heteropatriarchy

To move beyond the reactive register, I extend the queer-feminist reading of the tough chick of the postmodern action blockbuster beyond the terms of her destabilization of gender categories. Her transgressive presence only becomes a sign of political subversion when "the destabilizing pressure unruly bodies and genders exert on other recognizable categories and institutional practices" is prioritized in feminist and queer reading practices (T. Benjamin Singer, "Transgender" 615). That is, the unsettling effects of the tough chick's gender (mis)alignment and subsequent destabilization of presumptive heterosexuality becomes subversive when such effects work as part of a larger critique of racialized sexuality and the national interests it serves. Producing a queer critique, then, does not mean inscribing these characters into a system of sexual

binaries, but rather pinpointing the narrative and cinematic work which are constitutive of the tough chick as transgressor of racial, national, and gendered boundaries simultaneously. In its most recent incarnations, some queer theorists have attempted to redefine queerness in relation to such larger social forces. Rosemary Hennessy, for one, posits a definition of queer, which "embraces a proliferation of sexualities and the compounding of outcast positions along racial, ethnic, and class, as well as sexual lines—none of which is acknowledged by the neat binary division between hetero-and homosexual" (34).[55] Although the binary still plays an important role in the process of self-identification, Hennessy's definition opens up queer (and feminist) analysis and reading practices to a wider field of inquiry. The fact that historically situated images of violence against Black men and the violent imperialism of the nation-state generally are embedded in films that on the surface appear to be about white women indexes a larger set of critical questions that lead to an understanding of the social reproduction of a racist heteropatriarchy and its function within the national imaginary.

The postmodern action blockbuster, with its immense global popularity, is a privileged venue for the articulation of a conservative national imaginary, especially through its central characterization. Cinematic characterization, to this extent, most often works to reify a narrowly circumscribed version of the body politic in the attributes and actions of its preferred protagonists. Michael J. Shapiro describes the significance of characterization in the analysis of cinematic political thought: "The continuous process of constructing affiliations, necessary to reproduce a coherent national imaginary, produces a mythic connection between nationhood and personhood in the form of a story of how the nation arises naturally from the character of its people" (47). The action film in

particular works to represent a masculine stand-in for the nation-state, defending its

borders from foreign threats, exemplified by the several installments of films like *Rambo,*

Die Hard, True Lies and *Lethal Weapon*. For example, *Rambo* re-imagines the United

States winning the Vietnam War through Sylvester Stallone's embodiment of American

"neurotic resentment" (Ryan and Kellner 214-5). This is just one instance of how generic

characterization operates as a central apparatus through which the myths of the nation are

figured. The action films from the eighties and nineties, as Fred Pfeil argues, tend to

"depict a very specifically white/male/hetero/American capitalist dreamscape…in which

the interracial is eroticized even as a sharp power line is reasserted between masculine

and feminine, in which, indeed, all the old lines of force and division between races,

classes, and genders are both transgressed and redrawn" (32). Yet, this is far from unique

to the postmodern action blockbuster. It suggests, rather, the continuing role of the

cinema, particularly melodrama, in reflecting and shaping the myths of the nation-state in

the popular imagination.

What is evident in action melodramas from *The Birth of a Nation* to *Die Hard* and

Lethal Weapon (as well as several postmodern sci-fi and horror action films from

Jurassic Park (1993) to *Predator* (1987)), is the reiteration of a certain powerful

teleological story of the nation bound up with the central crisis of white masculinity,

frequently threatened by those others perceived as incongruent with the nation's long-

held (albeit phantasmatic) self-image—male, white, heterosexual, Christian, middle-

class.[56] The melodramatic film form remains particularly amenable to narratives

promoting a singular national imaginary in its starkly opposed characterizations and

moral dichotomies. *The Birth of a Nation's* plot, for instance, of threatened white

womanhood and the defending Klansmen riding to the rescue by terrorizing (with the explicit threat of lynching) former slaves and free Black men (whom the film pointedly accuse of rending the national fabric), explicitly aims at producing a very circumscribed "coherent" story of the nation.[57] That this is in fact a story, and a melodramatic one, is highlighted by the fact that its narrative elements are embodied in Manichean characterizations that have little or nothing to do with the (gendered, sexed, and raced) subjects they claim to represent. As Richard Koszarski asserts, the film "could hardly be described as anything more than a super-melodrama, offering the same heroes and villains, the same image of the family endangered, and the same inevitable victory of good over evil" (181). Melodrama's repetitively one-dimensional characterizations do nothing to mitigate the truth claims that the genre's stylistic verisimilitude, or filmic "realism," implies, but rather provides a template of moral polarization employed to this day.

Melodrama's "thinness of characterizations" and "habitually polar narrative and moral schemas" present a well-established "oppositional structure" that is nevertheless open to appropriation and re-citation (Langford 246). As Shapiro has argued, there exist "identity claims, expressed within national societies, [that] do not aid and abet the coherent project of the state," yet these claims most frequently anchor characterizations of villainy in melodrama's constitutive moral polarization (48). The tough chick can be read as one such claim that subverts the genre by placing the question of "incoherency" at the narrative core of the postmodern action blockbuster. By positing a woman in the expected role of action hero, the representation of the state as coherently masculine (and heterosexual) is troubled, if not parodied outright. There are certainly versions of the

tough chick, especially more recently (for instance, *Lara Croft*), which announce the incorporation of women into the operations of the nation-state. Yet, other figures, such as Trinity and Charly, suggest intertextual interventions into the "generic" character at the center of the eighties action genre, appropriating their melodramatic configurations as a mode of narrative and political contestation. Asserting a counter-hegemonic identity claim crucially intervenes into the myths of the nation, because Hollywood asserts the myth of the coherent nation in the personhood of its most favored protagonists. I contend that by challenging the terms of personhood—conveyed specifically through film characterization—on which the coherent national imaginary depends, the affiliations between the nation and the supposed character of its people are potentially disarticulated. By placing women at the center of the postmodern action blockbuster, a series of inversions are instigated that are embodied by its heroes *and its villains* in mutually constitutive fashion.

For example, *The Matrix* situates the woman as the site of the heroic—a reversal that simultaneously sets up certain corresponding definitions of villainy embodied by white masculinity. The characterization of Cypher, contra Trinity, figures as an embodiment of villainy precisely in terms of a thoroughgoing critique of (the violence of) normative heterosexual masculinity. He epitomizes the excessively evil villain typical of serial-queen melodrama, down to the twirling mustache (e.g., Snidely Whiplash). As the figuration of melodramatic villainy, he "portrays emotional excess in [his] expressions of hatred, envy, jealousy, spite, or malice" (Singer, *Melodrama* 39). Cypher's jealousy leads him to kill Trinity's rhizomatic "family" and his hatred and spite towards Morpheus motivates his treachery. Yet, notably, his betrayal is rarely (if ever) commented on when

the film is discussed critically, and never in terms of melodrama. For example, in Joshua

Clover's BFI book, *The Matrix,* he opens by suggesting that Cypher is sympathetic—

"We save a spoonful of sympathy for Cypher; he wants it back, the sensual world of

stuff" (83). Clover asserts that the character "requires only the basic things," such as

being "rich," and women (83).[58] Clover not only opens the book with the monologue in

which Cypher describes how he "sees" not women per se, but their metonymic hair

colors, but misreads the exchange to give Cypher even more power of the gaze over

women: "Cypher, and perhaps this is how he acquired his name, has become so adept at

decoding on the fly, in *real time,* that he no longer sees the code itself" (6). But, in fact,

Cypher's words actually mean the opposite; in responding to Neo's inquiry if he always

looks at the matrix encoded, Cypher replies, "Well you have to. The image translators

work for the construct program [the implication being *only* for the construct program but

not onboard the ship; there is no other way to read the matrix except as encoded]. But

there's way too much information to decode the Matrix. You get used to it. I don't even

see the code, all I see is blond, brunette, redhead…" (Cited in Clover 6).[59] Cypher is not

decoding the matrix but rather *projecting* onto it. His name derives not from de-

ciphering, as Clover proposes, but rather from the religious framework of the film. He is

the Lu-Cypher figure, whose name situates him both as a cipher, whose intentions remain

inscrutable, and places him in the larger (extremely morally polarized) religious

symbolism of the film.[60] Cypher is hardly a sympathetic figure in the film; indeed, he his

named for the most extreme melodramatic villain known, Satan.

Yet, Clover is not the only critic drawn to Cypher: "One character eventually

betrays the heroes, his price being a return to unconscious acceptance of the illusion.

Who could blame him?" (King 191). Cypher's duplicity is conveyed in a complex network of social discourses, most notably his possessive resentment of Trinity's erotic autonomy, along with his rage at Morpheus and what he represents. He doesn't simply assassinate his comrades to be returned to the matrix, as most critics argue; he coldly kills them off one by one while addressing his vitriol to Trinity. Cypher's monologue conveys the quintessential emotions of melodramatic villainy: "You know for a long time I thought I was in love with you, Trinity. I used to dream about you… (He nuzzles his face against hers, feeling the softness of it.) You are a beautiful woman. Too bad things had to work out like this" (Wachowskis 357). His melodramatic dialogue—in the classical definition of women's melodrama—dovetails a love triangle theme with his desire to re-enter the matrix. Through Cypher, the film's critical condemnation of the world of the matrix is grounded in a thoroughgoing critique of the fetishism (in the Marxist sense) of "things," as Clover puts it, but also of an ideological regime which (mis)takes women for things (in the psychoanalytic sense).

Cypher's rage is directed at Trinity for desiring Neo, for appropriating the masculine right to desire, which is more complex than her simply refusing to be his compliant object of desire. In fact, this triangle is introduced by the first dialogue in the film, even before the establishing shot: "You like him, don't you? You like watching him?" (Wachowskis 273). This dialogue is conducted over a phone line that Cypher has arranged to be traced so that agents can track her. It also sets up an analogous relationship between the villains, Cypher and Mr. Smith. Cypher's monologue of betrayal is matched with Mr. Smith's dialogue addressed to the bound Morpheus; in fact, both actors maliciously rub the heads of their victims in near identical staging. The fact that Cypher

stands in the narrative as the nemesis of Trinity and not Neo highlights the equivalency

between the heroine and hero. In this way, the function of villainy is divided in *The

Matrix*, denoted in consecutive monologues, one literally following on the heels of the

other, to address the multivalent discourses that define the power structure of the matrix.

Indexed in the banality of Cypher's desires—to have the "basic things" that are the

quotidian privileges of white Western heterosexual men, such as being "rich," enjoying a

good steak, and "blonds, brunettes, and redheads"—are the cliché rewards of successful

interpellation into the "matrix," blissfully "ignorant" of its workings and the costs it has

on others without the same privileges. The script drives this point home, as Cypher tells

Trinity: "They're going to reinsert my body. I'll go back to sleep and when I wake up, I'll

be fat and rich and I won't remember a goddamned thing. It's the American dream"

(Wachowskis 358). Thus, the matrix *is* the national imaginary, and a right-wing version

at that. Indeed, in the screenplay, Mr. Smith refers to Cypher as "Mr. Reagan" more than

once as Cypher asks to wake up "Someone important. Like an actor," signaling

correspondences between the arch-villain character and the (fictional) U.S. President, and

the reactionary discourses that cohere under the sign of his name (Wachowskis 331).[61]

Barry Langford sums up these discourses and their influence on the action blockbuster:

"the new male action heroes of the 1980s seemed to…embody in barely coded form some

of the prevailing political orthodoxies of the Reagan era, such as rampant individualism,

hostility to 'Big Government' and the valorization of 'traditional values'…the restoration

of white patriarchal power after the challenges of the 1960s" (247).[62] *The Matrix* indicts,

through the Reaganite Cypher, those very ideologies of rampant individualism,

patriarchal masculinity, and the vilification of all things feminine that were exalted in

typical male-centered action films, signaling an explicit intervention into the action genre.

That Cypher's request is made to Agent Smith highlights the symbiotic relationship between the discourses each represent. The price of his "American dream" is "suffering and misery" as pronounced by Agent Smith, who neatly allegorizes what is at stake in his description of the unending, ant-like colonial practices of humans, whose rabid imperialisms are likened to a virus. Taken together, these discursive positions within *The Matrix*, marked as morally villainous, map social matrices of heteropatriarchy, racism, imperialism and capitalism that operate in conjunction against those heroic figures whose identity claims do not necessarily reflect the putative "American dream." By casting the tough chick as heroic, against a villain who is aligned with the most salient characteristics of the nation-state, a more subversive melodramatic narrative is made possible. As Shapiro points out, "American cinema [has] provided important interventions in the dominant national stories that construct the culturally dangerous alien-other," and it has done so by establishing characters whose "modes of selfhood have already incorporated various forms of otherness" (66-7). The tough chick's troubling of assigned gender roles, and the refusal of the proper performance of heteronormative femininity this entails, marks her as a dangerous alien-other. Yet, her disruption of gender expectation cannot be read as separate from other identity claims (national, racial, sexual) that determine her characterization, by representing various forms of otherness incorporated by her. Cypher's villainy, for instance, is directed at a white woman but enacted in the taking of the lives of both men of color and another white woman, Switch, who is both "butch" and living with non-white men This conveys

a complex network of intersecting discursive modalities that link violence against women to violence against non-Western men in ways that suggest the inseparability of heterosexual panic from the fear of miscegenation.

The tough chick's gender performativity is crossed by race; her defiant identity is signified through a specific embodiment of white femininity in constitutive relation to Black masculinity. Through depictions of Samantha leaving her white boyfriend to join Mitch or in Trinity's unambivalent loyalty to Morpheus (explicitly reiterated, unlike her love for Neo), these films challenge the spectator's comfort with the taboo of miscegenation, a taboo particularly strident against white women "romantically or sexually linked to racial minority men" (Omi 118). This taboo has, in fact, played a key role in Hollywood's reproduction of the coherent national story, as *The Birth of a Nation* exemplifies. The portrayal of Black masculinity and white femininity in erotic or even friendly terms remains proscribed cinematic territory.[63] I hypothesize that the figuration of the tough chick as transgressive is rooted in the history of racialized sexuality in the U.S. According to Abdul R. JanMohamed, racialized sexuality is "a set of *allegorical* discourses…saturat[ing] every social relation" (105). In this way, a specifically queer reading of these films—indeed, as sexual allegories—requires the analysis of gender as intersecting with, and transected by, a set of racialized discourses. It is through the history and meanings of racialized sexuality that the tough chick film moves past a reactive response to the dominant story of the nation, specifically signaled in the postmodern action genre, and towards a subversion of it. To map this move or subversive gesture, "a discussion of racialized sexuality, and, in particular, how taboos against miscegenation (and the romanticization of cross-racial sexual exchange) are essential to

the naturalized and denaturalized forms that gender takes" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* xxvi).

Within the parodic citation of the action hero embodied by the tough chick is an

immanent critique of racialized sexuality, specifically as a set of filmic allegories

mobilized to shore up a mythically coherent national imaginary.

By focusing the narrative through white female characters who reinvent

themselves outside the terms of state-sanctioned heteropatriarchy, these tough chick films

"explore the question of whether a white [female] who…challenges the system of

[hetero]patriarchal male power" does not "give up [her] white privilege" as a result,

making the "struggle against racism" hers as well (hooks 361). This complicates and

expands the reasoning behind the violence these women receive throughout the films,

defining it as the price of challenging gender norms, heterosexual imperatives, and racist

power structures simultaneously. Her exponential "distance from cultural membership

makes her continually prey to renewed exclusion, scapegoating, and violence," violence

that is also directed at Black men (Phelan 5). Yet, when this scapegoating and violence is

played out in the films' diegeses, the narrative impels the spectator, through camera work

and characterization, to identify (and even desire) the "dangerous alien-other" body on

whom this violence is wrought, and when she conquers her oppressors the ideological

lines are clearly drawn against the racist, hetero-oppressive State apparatus.

Re-Viewing Black Masculinity

The tough chick refuses heteropatriarchy and the normative gender roles it

requires, and this refusal brings her into relation with other "unruly" subjects, specifically

African American men. The "tough chick" masculinizes a body not socially coded as

male; the Black male body as well occupies a socially perverse location in its "monstrous" or threatening masculinity to the white hegemony.[64] Both embody forms of alterity toward which the dominant social order is openly hostile. What tethers these abject subject-positions to each other is their historical position as Other vis-à-vis a white, heteropatriarchal order: "women, children, savages, slaves, and criminals were all alike insofar as their Otherness affirmed 'his' identity as the subject at the center of logocentrism" (Mercer 206). However, this need for affirmation is unassailable, as it is founded on anxieties about the boundaries of identity that are never assured. As Iris Marion Young suggests, "the habitual and unconscious fears and aversions that continue to define some groups as despised and ugly bodies modulate with anxieties over loss of identity" (122). Thus, melodrama's proclivity towards boundary conflict often highlights these anxieties, which in turn present violent responses to (temporarily) resolve them. These films, however, reverse the dynamic by centering its narrative on "despised bodies" rather than affirming "his" identity. The tough chick film constructs narratives in which social others join together to fight against the very structures of power that ostracize them, and, in doing so, turn a critical eye on the habitual fears and aversions that catalyze the violence directed against them.

While the traditional male action hero triumphs as a stand-in for the state, "with the aid of a more domesticated semi-bystanding sidekick," the tough chick must actually triumph over the violence and repression of the state, reconfigured as the monstrous enemy itself (Pfeil 1). Accordingly, the sidekick is not domesticated, but rather the central locus of criminalization and national threat. Morpheus is introduced in *The Matrix* through newspaper photos declaring him a "terrorist" and the object of a police manhunt.

Similarly, Mitch is first seen extorting money from a white man, and even his own wife will not allow their son to accept Mitch's gifts because she believes they are stolen. However, the placement of these scenes at the beginning of the films serve to critique such cliché images, constructing stories that undo such assumptions not only to understand the tough chicks' affiliation with these characters but to build our own identification with figures otherwise alien to the white imaginary. Through filmic work such as continuity editing and point-of-view shots, the films rely on our identifications with these figures for the movies to be successful, to do their affective work—especially through the bonds formed between the cast of abject characters. The movies create character trajectories that challenge the racist imaginary and expose its violent underpinnings by generating sympathies for characters usually reduced to cultural stereotypes ("criminal," "terrorist"). These films knowingly evoke the "racially saturated field of visibility" to comment on the "racism that pervades white perception, structuring what can and cannot appear within the horizon of white perception" (Butler, "Endangered" 15-16). Through the associations of the tough chick to criminalized Black men, these films put into question the social definitions of criminality, in terms of Black masculinity as well as feminine sexuality, underscoring the links between the two. Their social status as inassimilable women begin to explain how these white female protagonists "do not necessarily see the Black male as patriarchal antagonist, but feel instead that their oppression is 'shared' with [Black] men" (Gaines 180).

By re-scripting scenes of national violence, particularly against Black men, as in the scene in which Morpheus is beaten in the hotel bathroom or in the striking image of Mitch naked and bound, we are encouraged to intensely sympathize with these vulnerable

characters and despise the people who enact such brutality (the police in the former, the covert operators of the United States government in the latter).[65] We are not granted the comfort of the national, racist mythology that the police have our interests at heart and are "protecting" the national good when they terrorize Mitch or Morpheus. The most evident filmic critique of the repressive racism required of a coherent national story is allegorized in the characterization of Morpheus, of whom the Oracle says, "without him we are lost," before he is captured, beaten and brutalized. The highly publicized image of the Rodney King beating is directly referenced in *The Matrix* when "a wall" of cops (not the agents) descends upon Morpheus, kicking and beating him before taking him into custody. Yet, embedded in this reference is a critique of the racist system that imposes such violence, since we are clearly meant to empathize with Morpheus by this point in the story, reinforced by the foreknowledge of this situation conveyed by the Oracle to Neo.[66] By placing Morpheus in a scenario that evokes a range of well-publicized incidents of racist police brutality, from Rodney King to the more contemporaneous case of Abner Louima (1997) in which New York City cops brutalized and raped the young Haitian man in a police station bathroom (the scene with Morpheus takes place in a men's bathroom), the spectator is encouraged to rethink those "real" events from a perspective wholly empathic to the victim of such social injustice. In fact, in the scene in which Morpheus is caught and beaten by anonymous police officers, there seems to be an aggressive rebuttal to a culture that can label victims of state-sanctioned terrorism as the agents of violence, vilifying such "racist modes of seeing" that cast Morpheus as a "terrorist" (and allow a Simi Valley jury to see the visibly beaten man in the King video as a physical and social threat) (Butler, "Endangered" 16).

The Matrix takes its critique even further, situating these racist modes of seeing in their larger social context, that is, connecting them to the imperialist discourses from which they emanate. The capture of Morpheus by the police leads to the melodramatic situation of his imprisonment and torture by the agents of the A.I. That this scene directly concerns discourses of race and power is not only evident in the three white male agents surrounding and above him, but in the winking aside that introduces the scene: "Morpheus, I am Agent Smith" to which Morpheus replies, "You all look the same to me" (The Wachowskis 352). The scene builds to Smith's vitriolic monologue, with its central metaphor grounded in the eugenic and racial implications of Darwinian science. Indeed, Smith's insistence that "your time has past" and "our time is now" intimates an evolutionary narrative that is literally embodied in the film in black and white. Agent Smith's diatribe to Morpheus, along with Cypher's proclaimed hatred of Morpheus to Trinity in the preceding scene, articulate quite succinctly both the intensity of affect and ideological stakes of the supremacist imaginary: "in the fantasmatic space of supremacist imaginary, the big black phallus is a threat not only to the white master (who shrinks in impotence from the thought that the subordinate black male is more potent and sexually powerful than he), but also to civilization itself, since the 'bad object' represents a danger to white womanhood and therefore miscegenation and racial degeneration" (Mercer 177). This supremacist fantasy haunts the affiliation between the tough chick and her African American partner; mutually constituted through her queer refusal to be pliant to a white heteropatriarchy and his inherent threat to "civilization" in his very corporeality, perceived as all the more dangerous in his proximity to the white female protagonist.

The Long Kiss Goodnight engages even more directly the ways in which "controls on sexuality link up with racism," because its female lead, in overcoming the controls on her sexuality and becoming erotically autonomous, must confront the hostility she bears towards African-American men and eventually redirect it towards the racist social order that is its origin (Frankenberg 54). *The Long Kiss Goodnight* is uniquely concerned with these dynamics because it is a parodic repetition of a specific subset of the action blockbuster, that of the buddy film, using its particular configurations of Black sidekick and white action hero to comment on issues of race and gender. It is self-consciously structured around the "'buddy' relationship," a narrative trope frequently used to represent "patriarchal continuity," but does so in such a way as to challenge that very correspondence (Chopra-Gant, *Hollywood Genres* 149).[67] It should be recalled that *The Long Kiss Goodnight* came out just one year after *Die Hard: With A Vengeance* (1995). As it has been noted, *Die Hard: With A Vengeance* stands as a "significant exception" to the "general silence about racial difference" particularly through the role of Zeus Carver, played by Samuel L. Jackson (Willis 30).[68] Wherein race tended to be diffuse but unspoken in the *Lethal Weapon* series of films, Zeus Carver gives direct voice to "that race shit" in *Die Hard: With A Vengeance*.[69] The characterization of Zeus Carver is remarkably similar to that of Mitch Hennessy; yet, the latter is pressed to deal with that "gender shit" in *The Long Kiss Goodnight*.[70] Because *The Long Kiss Goodnight* is clearly a buddy/road/action film, with its citational references to both *Thelma and Louise* and *Die Hard: With a Vengeance,* the interrogation of racialized sexuality is much more pronounced than in *The Matrix*. In doing so, the suppressed homoerotics of the male buddy film come to the surface in the specter of cross-racial sexuality.

Samantha's leaving the white suburbs with an African American man already marked as vaguely criminal begins her trajectory as social outlaw. In three separate hotel rooms, rooms notably shared with Mitch, the pivotal scenes of transformation from Samantha to Charly take place. In the first hotel room, Samantha sees Mitch, shirtless, smoking, and drinking, through their adjoining doors while she is on the phone with her daughter. He sings, "I'm a Man" by Muddy Waters, a recurring habit of his throughout the film. This blues song asserts the specificity of desire the situation presents; Samantha must confront the sexuality of Black masculinity. Samantha, uncomfortable with the closeness of Mitch, closes the door to his adjoining room as he stands in the doorway. It is just subsequent to this that she finds "Charly's" rifle and assembles it. In an ambiguous edit, Samantha dreams that she is confronted by her other self, Charly, who slashes Samantha's throat in the reflection in the mirror. Samantha wakes startled and picks up the rifle, then nearly shoots Mitch with it when, after hearing her scream, he comes in to check on her. This scene of the white woman (accidentally) shooting at the intrusive, sexualized Black man is complicated not only by the film's portrayal of Mitch as sympathetic and non-threatening in his comedic role but by the intrusive dream of Charly, who is the actual threat. In other words, in the moment of confrontation with the forbidden, threatening, and desirable Other embodied in the Black man, a fundamental disturbance takes place within the white woman. The combination of a refusal of white male sexuality, which transpires through a series of preceding events in Samantha's suburban town, and the activation of desire for the Black man gives rise to Charly. That is, dissociation from white heteropatriarchy and re-identification with social Otherness

(i.e., Mitch) is mapped out in a narrative arc of melodramatic situations of increasing

frequency and intensity until Charly permanently returns.

Signaling the literal return of the repressed, Charly surfaces in a scene of

confrontation with white heteropatriarchy. Bound to a water wheel, Samantha, the

quintessential helpless female victim, is submerged in freezing water. Close to death, we

witness Charly gain consciousness through the transformation of the female lead from

victim to powerfully phallic "tough chick." Struggling from her bonds, Charly takes the

gun from the crotch of her dead father figure (under the water near her), emerges from

the water, and shoots her white male torturer. This is no doubt the pivotal scene in the

film, which finally turns what starts as an innocent-on-the-run melodrama into a full-on

action-adventure spectacle. Significantly, her torture, the punishment wrought on her "not

knowing anything" (what the hapless Samantha cries between submersions to plead for

her life), and simply being a woman, is inseparable from the tortured body of the Black

man; in fact, it could be said that it is not *what* she knows but *who* she knows that puts

her in jeopardy since she is tortured subsequent to her leaving, and traveling alone with,

an African American man. Indeed, the fact that both Charly and Mitch are bound and

sexualized (she in a wet slip, he naked), insinuate their sexual connection, which calls up

this sadistically hostile response from the white, homosocial forces (Charly's two former

lovers chat about her punishment just before she is submerged in the water). It is Charly's

first (and constitutive) act to rescue Mitch, who is shown (in cross-cutting between

Samantha's torture sequence) stripped, tied up and thrown into a cellar in a setting much

like the hull of a slave ship. That the complete emergence of Charly, the action hero of

the film, is built on two simultaneous melodramatic situations speaks to the film's central

concern with the intersections of gender and race. Indeed, most of the sensationally

melodramatic moments in the film that give rise to spectacular action sequences are built

around a violent act of racial and sexual repression effected by a figure (usually Timothy)

of white patriarchy. Although it is quite common that the male action hero endures

intense masochistic suffering before he exacts cathartic revenge, the catharsis of *The*

Long Kiss Goodnight is structured as a specific response to (rather than enactments of)

racist and misogynist acts of violent repression.

As these several scenes in *The Long Kiss Goodnight* indicate, dire images of both

racial and sexual injustice are evoked to create a cathartic scenario. For example, at the

New Jersey train station, Timothy flirts with Samantha to see if she recognizes him and

when she rebuffs him and returns to Mitch what appears to be every other man in the

station turns on her and opens fire, as she and Mitch barely escape with their lives.[71] The

punishments for white women and Black men's affective commitments appear to escalate

in the film. By the climax in Niagara, Mitch is once again tied to a chair, though this time

clothed, while Timothy threatens him implicitly with castration (a historically common

practice for the trumped up accusation of looking at a white woman), throwing a knife

directly at Mitch's crotch. But in calling up these racially and sexually charged images,

the question is raised as to whether these films' fetishize and spec(tac)ularize images of

violence against both white women and men of color. In contrast to the condemnatory

readings of the tough chick film, I read these films as productively ambivalent

articulations of racialized sexuality. In doing so, I am indebted to Kobena Mercer's

rereading of the "stereotype" and his own critique of the images of Black men in the

photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe. In his rereading, he posits that the "articulation of

ambivalence…can be seen as a subversive deconstruction of the hidden racial and gendered axioms…in dominant traditions of representation" (Mercer 181). Even when racial stereotypes are directed toward a presumably white spectatorship, "different practices of racial representation imply different positions of identification on the part of the white subject" (Mercer 207). By displacing the white male subject, the filmic structures of identification and spectatorial pleasure turn on the dialogic relationship formed at the juncture of tough white femininity and criminalized Black masculinity, which are antipathetic to the dominant story typically affirmed in the postmodern action blockbuster.

One of the most ambivalent stereotypical symbols used in these films is that connoting slave imagery: "the image of Samuel Jackson naked and chained seems too strikingly similar to slave imagery. The scene would have played out just the same if Charly has found Mitch dressed and sitting handcuffed to a chair—but the film instead resorts to an image loaded with racist symbolism. This reveals the extreme lengths to which the film goes to racialize the Black man who is paired with the violent white woman" (Neroni 195).[72] Yet, it is exactly this stress on the history of race, particularly slavery, which makes the question of "racist symbolism" significant to the analysis of the film. Neroni's discomfort in fact registers the critical discomfort the film text seeks out by evoking the historical underpinnings of racialized sexuality that continue to inform the white racist imaginary to this day, an imaginary that condemns the alliance specifically between a white woman and a Black man. The slave imagery in both films, but most notably in *The Long Kiss Goodnight*, mobilizes a range of allegorical discourses that contextualize and give meaning to the gender expressions of the tough chick.

Nowhere is this more clear than in the explicitly sexualized scene that is Charly's "coming out," which follows her rescue of Mitch from his slave-like confines and bondage. Charly is never seen untying Mitch's naked and wounded body. Instead, the film cuts from Charly, viewed from his perspective, backlit, at the top of the cellar stairs, high above the bloody and hog-tied Mitch, to him lying on a bed in an expensive hotel room in Atlantic City while Charly is naked in the shower. This scene cues the audience with by a range of visual signifiers (such as her showering with no curtain to her cutting off and dying her hair) that Charly is now the present consciousness, replacing Samantha. Yet, even before we see Charly, we are made aware of her presence through the soundtrack, using the song "She's Not There," by the Latino band Santana to segue between scenes and locations.[73] This song not only signals Samantha's departure but also further suggests the cross-racial affiliation that will come to define Charly (Charly's section of the film is underscored with hip hop music and urban dance music by African American artists while Samantha's story-line is scored by white musicians and more nostalgic songs). By exposing the gap between performance and identity with Charly's emergence, the film denaturalizes Samantha, exposing the ways her supposedly "natural" womanliness is a performance (of gender ideology). The emergence of Charly reframes Samantha's domestic, suburban P.T.A. femininity as a kind of drag performance itself—what the character Nathan Waldman calls a "goddamned fantasy."[74]

Charly articulates her presence to Mitch (rather than Samantha's) through her sexual temerity. Her sexuality is marked by a plethora of *femme fatale* iconography—she smokes, swears and drinks.[75] Opposed to Samantha's earlier reticence, Charly does not hesitate to aggressively come on to Mitch. Mitch, with Charly pressed against him,

notices the ripped up picture of the white fiancé and daughter in the trashcan. Charly's rejection of the heteropatriarchal family is enacted in her sexualization of Mitch. Yet, as he implies, this desire remains tied to the social order, which defines such a liaison as taboo; he confronts her with the idea that she still sees him as "the help." Certainly the sexually aggressive *femme fatale* is referenced in Charly's behavior, for example, talking with Mitch about tricks to deflowering virgins. Mitch's quip, however, points to a counter-reading of the scene that draws attention to another set of meanings this has in the context of racialized sexuality: "racialized sexuality is a product of stereotypic, symbolizing, and condensing discursivity…. Such a system functions by first reducing the colonized or racialized subject to a generic being that can be exchanged for any other 'native' or racialized subject" (JanMohamed 106). Charly's desire for Mitch is as objectifying as Mitch's earlier catcalling at women when he and Samantha set out on the road.

The film challenges the "condensed discursivity" of the "black buck" by intertextually referencing *Mandingo* (1975), a specifically cinematic touchstone of racialized sexuality. Mitch's rejection of Charly can be seen as a rebuttal to this history of racialized sexuality in the cinema that, on the one hand, forbids the erotic relationship between a white woman and a Black man, while, in the same move, constructs that very relationship as illicit and exotic. Instead, the relationship between Charly and Mitch develops beyond the terms of the white racist imaginary—she as the eroticized object of his gaze, evoked early in the film when he comments on and compares her body to a female jogger he ogles, or he, the object of a specific history of racialized sexuality. The film, in fact, explicitly establishes dialogue between the two characters when such

moments arise. In doing so, it challenges racist and misogynist assumptions, "problematiz[ing] them by foregrounding the intersections of difference where race and gender cut across the representation of sexuality" (Mercer 179). It is through a critical and parodic citation of Hollywood film stereotypes, I suggest, that racial and sexual ideologies are destabilized and exposed as inauthentic, allowing for forms of identification (and incorporation) to emerge that are no longer objectifying or static. The characterizations of both Mitch and Charly move in the direction of pushing stereotypes to their breaking point rather than making gestures toward positive images or anti-stereotypical embodiments. *The Long Kiss Goodnight* self-consciously refers to this in its intertextual references; Mitch, when given orders by Charly, replies, "Yes, Miss Daisy, I be honkin'." This reference, spoken in the "Black dialect" popularized in films such as *Driving Miss Daisy* (1989) and *Fried Green Tomatoes* (1981), mimics Hollywood portrayals of Black men and white women together, indexing a distance between those problematic representations and *The Long Kiss Goodnight*. The critical re-citation performed in these films, in fact, destabilizes both heteronormative and racist modes of seeing by undermining (film) expectations of race and gender.

In this way, *The Long Kiss Goodnight* narrativizes the following questions: "Under what conditions does eroticism mingle with political solidarity? …When does identification imply objectification, and when does it imply equality?" (Mercer 210). The specter of miscegenation in *The Long Kiss Goodnight* has a critical function, to this extent, in that its "ambivalent racial fetishization of difference actually enables a potential deconstruction of whiteness" (Mercer 190). For example, Charly's bleached blond hair emphasizes her hyperbolic whiteness next to Mitch while simultaneously indexing a long

history of cinematic *femme fatales*. Chris Holmlund has argued that the blondness of

seductresses from Barbara Stanwyck to Sharon Stone signal a fetishization of "*Female*

whiteness:" "bleached, tinted, frosted, and dyed blondes are everywhere, in the past as in

the present…caught up with…anxieties regarding racial origins and ethnic lacks" (83).

However, the excessive spectacle of the bleached blonde, from *Double Indemnity* (1944)

to *Basic Instinct* (1992), could be argued to signal a predatory, dangerous sexuality that

subverts the demands of white patriarchy in ways that invoke a critical relationship to

racialized sexuality through its very performative whiteness.[76] Her blondness and de-

naturalized femininity makes whiteness visible, revealing it "as a culturally constructed

ethnic identity historically contingent upon the disavowal and violent denial of

difference" (Mercer 206). No doubt the intensely violent responses imagined in these

films (Charly is especially brutalized) marks the body of the tough chick in specific ways

determined by a social order that produces certain forms of subjectivity, such as the

femme fatale, as deviant.

The tough chick's erotic autonomy subverts a racist heteropatriarchy because

racial purity can no longer be secured through her sexual containment. One way these

films inscribe both Trinity and Charly as iconic sexual outlaws is in spatial (rather than

identificatory) terms by placing them in hotels, which "are effectively surrogate

bedrooms having specific (hetero)sexual associations as a site for adultery and 'dirty

weekends'" (Valentine 401). *The Long Kiss Goodnight* sets its pivotal interrogatory

scenes of racialized sexuality in hotel rooms. Yet, Trinity too is placed in a series of

hotels, because like the characters themselves, "hotel rooms…are literally and

semiotically incoherent—a threat to the very language of patriarchal and capitalist culture

(even as they are its perverse production)" (V. Sobchack 159). These hotel scenes emphasize the connection between race and sexuality, because the women's affiliations with their African American counterparts are most clearly evinced in these incoherent but sexualized spaces. The repeated *mise-en-scène* situating these charaters in hotel rooms connotes the way tough chicks are "dispossessed, displaced from…social place and function;" and therefore, "their actions are temporalized as socially problematic, ambiguous, and dangerous (and, of course, often for those qualities, extremely attractive)" (V. Sobchack 159). Thus, the tough chick's subversive embodiment is highlighted by the several ways she is disciplined and punished by the synechdochic forces of the national imaginary, without narrative recourse to name the precise terms of her ambiguous sexual danger—except for the ubiquitous presence of Black masculinity.

In the racial imagery produced in these films, whether as "third world worker" (*The Matrix:* in terms of Dozer and Tank), or noble savage (the image of Morpheus breaking his manacles in slow-motion) or as comic relief (as Mitch is portrayed), "the undecidable question that is thrown back on the spectator—do the images undermine or reinforce racial stereotypes?—can be compared to the highly ambivalent aura of fetishism that frames the female body" (Mercer 190). The films' explicit ambivalence toward the fetishism of the female body cannot help but bring the activity of fetishism to light generally. Therefore, a chain of identification is set into motion that begins with the main female character but leads to these Black men, allowing the spectator to see that the central lead's enemy is not simply patriarchy but rather a racist heteropatriarchy that polices women's affective allegiances to African American men. Because stereotypical images are contextualized by a temporal narrative, and even more to the point, by *moving*

images, these scenarios are indeed dialogical, in relation to the images preceding and following them, which presents the opportunity to challenge the static and unchanging nature of stereotypical imagery. To this extent, both films can be said to mobilize familiar images from the racist imaginary (with its very real effects) to subvert the racist modes of seeing with which they are met, interrupting "a repeated and ritualistic production of blackness," to expose its profound epistemological and literal violences (Butler, "Endangered" 16).

Queer Kinship and the Subversion of the Nation-State

According to JanMohamed, "the juridical prohibitions that determine life on the racial and sexual borders are not ontological but socio-political constructs, which demarcate major divisions in a potential continuum of kinship" (102). The tough chick breaches these demarcations, and in doing so, calls attention to their actual socio-political origins and effects. In this way, they are targets for the counter-insurgent forces of the nation-state because they threaten the extant system with forms of being antithetical to the male action hero and, by extension, the attributes of the nation-state with which he is conflated (masculine, white, heterosexual and the like). It is this particularly powerful version of the national imaginary that these tough chick films critically re-cite in their generic practices. In other words, as "sexual strangers," these characters "disrupt seemingly natural boundaries and borders…present[ing] a challenge to identities, including national identities" (Phelan 29). Both films figure national resistance as central to the production of the tough chick by having her form alliances with one or a set of subjects who openly expose the limits of the mythic discourses of the nation. What is

witnessed in Charly's turning towards Mitch and from the State (that once incarcerated him) or Trinity's aligning with Morpheus and his ship of social Others is an explicit refusal to abide by the "national stories" that "must create boundaries between a people and its others" (Shapiro 48). In the pointed reference to terrorism—a particularly aggressive discursive boundary formation—directed against Morpheus and utilized as a cover story in *The Long Kiss Goodnight* for the neoconservative agenda of CIA fund-raising, a critical distance is established within the narratives of these films toward national myths, which assert such boundaries against "others."[77]

It is the tough chick's strangeness that estranges the dominant story of the nation-state, specifically through the postmodern blockbuster genre. By re-casting, literally and metaphorically, this (mixed) genre, the tough chick film provides a critical commentary on the tropes of the action film. *The Matrix* and *The Long Kiss Goodnight* effect an inversion of the myths of the nation-state by refusing the ideological terms through which the nation is figured in the character of the (re)action(ary) white male hero. The typical hero narrative of the American dominant story requires "a narrative direction which involves movement from marginality to mainstream of society, which is achieved through the vindication of the hero's unwavering self-belief" (Chopra-Gant, *Hollywood Genres* 158). Underlying this "self-belief," I contend, is the assurance of their identity claims as white, heterosexual, patriarchal subjects of a "coherent" nation-state. This guarantee is made possible by "the history of demonology in American politics," which is "racial, pitting whites against peoples of color and placing race at the center of the most important divisions in American political life" (Rogin 236). However, within the narrative operations of both films a reversal of this system of demonology is effected,

rendering (hetero)normative embodiments of masculinity as explicitly racist and subsequently repulsive. In *The Matrix*, it is precisely the version of masculinity identified with the eighties male action hero that Neo must reject in his transformation. Neo must abandon his "self-belief" defined by the film in terms of believing in the nation-state, and its myths—that Morpheus is a terrorist, Trinity is a criminal, and the Woman in Red is real and for him. Neo's self-belief is exposed as false consciousness, and he must choose to reject the privileges bestowed on him by the matrix, in effect, moving him from mainstream to margin by placing his affective lot with social marginals. In fact, Neo only becomes "the One" once he has affected a notable reversal in the history of film—he must choose to sacrifice himself for the life of an African American man, the only belief left to him is that he must save Morpheus, that his life is less important than Morpheus' (The Wachowskis 366).

Key to both these films' subversions of the male action hero blockbuster (and the dominant story of the nation-state in the broader history of film) is the intervention into the construction of the projected enemy. Once typically conceived as racial or ethnic Other, international terrorist, or communist threat, these films resignify the enemy as the Reaganite zeitgeist itself, revisioning its enemies as a sympathetic cohort of insurgents against a corrupt nation-state. To do this, these films evoke all three moments, as Rogin names them, in American demonology, from the race-baiting of the first moment through the class and ethnic conflict of the second to the red scare of the cold war in the third (236-7). Ethnicity and racial difference, and even communism, inform the several ideological reversals effected by both *The Matrix* and *The Long Kiss Goodnight*.[78] In *The Matrix,* for instance, the project is to destabilize the very ontological grounds on which

the dominant story, and its demonological mythmaking, is founded. The film's structural

affinity with Trinity, Neo and Morpheus reveals that the State's countersubversive

machinations, as embodied by the A.I., are bankrupt. The "resistance," personified by the

protagonists, articulates an outside to the concepts of "truth" and "reality," concepts on

which any coherent national story relies. This overt deconstruction of "(the desert of) the

Real" of the matrix, with its explicit citation of Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and*

Simulations (the book is an actual prop in the film), challenges the myths which

characterize the nation-state, exposing its supposed "demons" as a cast of simulacra:

woman as object of desire (the "Woman in Red"), the Black man as criminal (Morpheus),

the Black woman as "welfare queen" or "mammy" (the Oracle), and "resistance" to the

national order as "terrorist" Other (Neo's transformation into an insurgent, epitomized in

the final scene of his threatening phone call to the "State").[79]

　　The Long Kiss Goodnight aims even more directly at the critique of the legacy of

Reaganite cultural and social politics by centering its political thriller narrative on the

figure of the mother, exposing the conservative nation-state's most-favored myth, that of

"the family," as a ruse for its counter-subversive activities. Both Trinity and Charly

engage in violent transgressions of cultural law, which point to a level of "sexual agency

and erotic autonomy" that challenges heteropatriarchy's "ideological anchor of an

originary nuclear family, a source of legitimation for the state, which perpetuates the

fiction that the family is the cornerstone of society" (Alexander, "Erotic Autonomy" 64).

These characters, then, take their meaning from a complex performance of gender, a

performance that subverts not simply dominant codes of femininity but the

heteronormative family from which they draw their meaning. These films, to this extent,

rework the usual syntagmatic patriarchal meanings of the postmodern action blockbuster, commenting instead on the ways "nations are frequently figured through the iconography of familial and domestic space" (McClintock 353). Indeed, *The Long Kiss Goodnight* is part of a handful of films that repeat the action film's tropes to challenge the dominant discourses on motherhood. Like *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991), Charly's physical and emotional hardness, "along with her obsession with weapons technology, code her as a threat to conventional maternity" (Willis 119). One way to read the Charly/Samantha split is along the lines of this ambivalence towards reproductive culture; as Charly says, "no one asked me if I wanted the kid." Samantha "wakes up" pregnant simultaneous to being "born" eight years ago, metaphorising the ways motherhood figures not just as a "natural" fact of a woman's life but as the social imperative to reproduce. Because Charly rejects her daughter, "she suggests a brutal incarnation of women's reproductive autonomy" (Willis 119).[80] Thus, the logical outcome of the female action hero's erotic autonomy would necessarily be reproductive autonomy. While a figure such as *Terminator 2*'s Sarah Connor is a "brutal incarnation," she is nonetheless motivated to fight "for the children," as is Ripley in *Aliens*, however, Charly and Trinity are not.

At first, Charly rejects motherhood outright, a refusal that some have argued is constitutively queer because whoever "refuses this mandate by which our political institutions compel the collective reproduction of the Child must appear as a threat not only to the organization of a given social order but also, and far more ominously, to the social order as such, insofar as it threatens the logic of futurism on which meaning always depends" (Edelman 11). The tough chick is tough in this way; in dis-identifying from the softness of the maternal (and its implicit futurity), she figures as a threatening incarnation

of a broader "cultural fantasy that conjures homosexuality…in intimate relation to a fatal, and even murderous, jouissance" (Edelman 39). I contend that this threatening queerness defines the current (or fourth) moment in demonology in American politics, bringing Rogin's above list up-to-date.[81] Indeed, the queer menace implicit in Charly's refusal of maternity cannot be sustained in a film text that casts her as sympathetic. The character is made less severe by assuming her role as mother, with its investments in the future—as the film cleverly indicates by having Charly/Sam ask her daughter Caitlin, as they are left to die in a freezer, "Do you think we should get a puppy?" However, this very question is followed by the explosive razing of the Niagara Falls hotel they are in, and subtly suggests that such futurity need not take place within the frame of the heteronormative married family structure.[82] The plot, in this way, simultaneously reconfigures Charly as a tough mother (rather than returning to the "fantasy" of Samantha), as well as impelling the daughter to become tough, while escalating its critique of the "naturalness surrounding the heterosexual nuclear family…[which] provide[s] the only template for sexual order in our society" (Phelan 62). Charly and her daughter are threats in the eyes of the nation-state because they hint at an altogether different form of family, one that rejects this very template. For this reason, even when Charly re-embraces her role and responsibility as mother, the film does not conclude but in fact ramps up the violence, leading to a showdown not only with Caitlin's father but also with the representative of the conservative nation-state itself.

The spectacular violence brought to bear against both Charly and her daughter at the climax of the film suggests that the alternative family they come to form is intensely threatening to the heteropatriarchy. Their threat brings together two very different

"genres": "fully intentional childbearing outside of heterosexual unions represents one of the only new, truly original, and decidedly controversial genres of family formation and structure to have emerged in the West during many centuries" (Stacey 119-20). In *The Long Kiss Goodnight*, this controversial genre of family seems to inform the conflict at the heart of the action film genre. Phelan proposes that, "although sexual minorities are not the only people participating in this new genre, they are the most visible and are perhaps the most troubling to advocates of traditional family arrangements" (72). It is this very trouble that transforms "women and children" from ideological myth to actual threat, in the form of Charly and her daughter. However, because we are meant to identify with them, the nation is debunked as a protector and shown to be "monstrous" in its self-interest. This is pointedly demonstrated through the embodiment of conservative, Reaganite patriarchy claiming to act in the nation's interest.[83] At the penultimate scene in the film, Perkins, about to bomb a white, suburban community like that of Samantha's at the film's beginning (a holiday parade is taking place there, too), brings Caitlin a doll, claiming, "I'm not a monster."[84] This monstrous incarnation of patriarchy is reiterated soon after when Charly finally tells her former cold-war enemy that he is the father of the little girl he is about to kill. The film emphasizes the fact that he believes this to be his daughter; yet he gives the order to kill her anyway after referring to her as "my little bitch." In this way, the film sustains an intense critique of patriarchy by casting the spectacular action as a fight between national *and* domestic enemies, recoding the tough chick as an avenging single mother whose thrilling feats are in defense of the alternative family.[85]

The Long Kiss Goodnight articulates this subversion of heteropatriarchy and its requisite nuclear family as a rejection of national identity. Indeed, the final, bloody battle between mother and father takes place on the border between the United States and Canada, with a giant banner portraying the mythic image of the white nuclear family (smiling father placed slightly above and with arms around mother and child) as the demarcation between nations. At the crescendo of the climactic battle, Charly dramatically rides up a tangled string of Christmas lights that are draped over an electrical wire. Caught in the lights, on one side, is a burning corpse of one of the Chapter men. Choreographed as one fluid action, Charly cuts the wire suspending the dead man, using the weight of the corpse as it falls to the ground to hoist her own body up the other end of the lights. Rising to the level of Timothy's hovering helicopter, Charly dramatically kills the father of her daughter (while uttering, "die screaming, motherfucker"). In doing so, she simultaneously sets ablaze the banner flying behind her of the smiling, white patriarchal family with the shorted out bulbs from the shattered Christmas lights. Remarkably, such an over-the-top anti-patriarchal act is set up as the height of pleasurable excess, capped with a massive fiery explosion that finally destroys Timothy—the (nearly) un-killable monster to Charly's final girl. The monstrosity of a racist patriarchy is underscored by the extremes needed to finish him off and, when he is, the spectator is encouraged to experience this scene as an ecstatic catharsis, particularly in terms of the pleasurable destruction of the sadistic embodiment of white paternity.

George Lipsitz has commented that "generic pleasures…contribute to an ahistorical view of the world as always the same; the pleasures of predictability encourage an investment in the status quo" (208). However, the tough chick film disrupts

the generic status quo by critically queer(y)ing some of its most sacred tropes. By focusing the action of the postmodern blockbuster on women, the genre's foremost concerns with masculinity and patriarchal continuity are effectively reworked to different ends. As I proposed at the beginning of this chapter, the dominant discourses informing the national imaginary are encapsulated in Griffith's paradigmatic action-melodrama, *The Birth of a Nation*, which "mobilizes patriarchal heroism in defense of white supremacy on behalf of patriarchy, underscoring the threat to the family and the need for patriarchal authority by making the threat racial" (Lipsitz, paraphrasing Rogin, 212). The threat, however, is not simply racial but in the form of racialized sexuality, which describes the constitutive relationship between racial constructs and the perceived endangerment of the patriarchal family. In policing the tough chick's affective affiliations it becomes clear that the nation-state depends on the woman's role in the heteropatriarchal family to reproduce the nation as white. The tough chick film, in re-presenting these issues as they have been metaphorized in the tropes of the melodrama blockbuster, is able to raise "the question of how racial and reproductive relations become articulated through one another" (*Bodies That Matter* 229). In these films' refutation of white patriarchal heroism, the mythologies that work to justify its actions are contested, specifically that of racialized sexuality with its taboo against miscegenation and the subjugation of women and children to patriarchal authority, which, taken together, work to ensure racial purity and demarcate strictly delimited kinship structures.

Although both films articulate a deep ambivalence towards the eroticized connections these tough chicks have with Black men, they nevertheless envision solidarity, even kinship, as a viable response to the racist, heteropatriarchal culture. So,

despite the fact that both Trinity and Charly end up romantically joined with white men (or at least Neo is read as such), it is nonetheless the transgression of sexual and racial borders with African American men, and the hostility it brings within the nation-state, that mobilizes the tough chick story. Because the tough chick in these films is empowered by processes of incorporation, "it is no longer possible to make sexual difference prior to racial difference or, for that matter, to make them into fully separable axes of social regulation and power" (Butler, *Bodies That Matter* 182). The identification of her interests with the nation's Others, leads to alternative generic pleasures that trouble the conventional correspondences between the postmodern action blockbuster and a coherent national imaginary. By reconfiguring heroism as the domain of sexual strangers and racial outsiders, the tough chick postmodern action-melodrama affords new ways to envision (and narrate) the nation from the character of its *other* people.

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[1] See Thomas O. Beebee, *The Ideology of Genre: A Comparative Study of Generic Instability*; Christine Gledhill, "Rethinking Genres"; Tom Gunning, "'Those Drawn with a Very Fine Camel's Hair Brush'"; Barry Langford, *Film Genre: Hollywood and Beyond*; Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*; and Rick Altman, *Film/Genre*.

[2] Although, film studies does not share the systematic and quotidian power inequities and discrimination that is unique to explicitly politicized fields such as Women Studies, Africana Studies and others of its ilk.

[3] These histories have, in effect, "undone" genre, exposing the fallacies in claims that genres are distinct, cohesive systems, and that these genres originated coherently in institutional practices, such as the studio system. For example, Mike Chopra-Gant's work on post-World War II Hollywood films points to "the problematic relationship between conventional film genre scholarship and film history," in its detailed history of film publicity, which shows that the industry itself avoided generic terms, or that their generic terms were at odds with the generic classes often identified by genre critics, preferring more capacious generic categories as "quality narrative films" and "'sensuous' spectacular films" (132, 131). This new historicism, elaborated by several film genre historians (Steve Neale 2000, Rick Altman 1999, Janet Staiger 1997, Ben Singer 1990, Richard Maltby 1995), has affected a radical de-centering of genre studies, overturning "the apparently objective, trans-historical categories which have characterized it in the past" (Chopra-Gant 133).

[4] Rick Altman speaks of the "future genre theorists" gathered at the University of Iowa in the mid-seventies, including Jim Collins, Jane Feuer and Thomas Schatz (ix).

[5] See *Gender and Genre*, edited by Christine Gledhill (forthcoming from University of Illinois Press, 2008).

[6] Williams is not alone in his skepticism towards socio-cultural theories of film genre. Steve Neale, too, has argued that the work of film history, or "the production of culture perspective is much more likely than ritual or ideological theories to provide convincing accounts of the socio-cultural significance of genres and cycles" (*Genre and Hollywood* 229).

[7] Of course, "art film" is, today, a well-recognized genre in its own right, although it is originated as a loosely organized (often simply by where these films were exhibited) collection of French New Wave films, Italian neo-realism and the like. The other implied split is within the Hollywood product—between genre films and the classical narrative feature; see Bordwell, et al. (1985).

[8] See Jim Collins critique of this position: "Listing oppositional films *ad infinitum* is not the solution because it continues to posit the dominant as a given to be opposed, not moving beyond the confines of Comolli and Narboni's classifications" (*Uncommon Cultures* 92).

[9] On one hand, as Collins pointedly avers: "To argue that only certain stylistic features constitute *real* differences (thereby rendering all else identical) reveals a profound elitism that fails to acknowledge the diverse functions a narrative may have for various audiences" (*Uncommon Cultures* 12). And, on the other, experimental cinema, often exhibited in circumscribed venues such as the art house or museum theater, is not immune from the law of genre, met with a specific set of interpretive frames. "The avant-garde" is in fact a well-established genre whose constitutive trait or frame is its long-held "accepted place as the tolerable boundary of coherence for the mainstream, a safety valve for handling its own excesses" (Grosz 18). Avant-garde and experimental cinema can be esteemed as the aegis of leftist aesthetic protest only by refusing to recognize what Derek Attridge refers to as "the law of the law of genre," and then at the cost of both the polyvalency of texts and the heteroglot constituency of audiences.

[10] Some excellent work, however, has been done on feminism and film genre; two exemplary collections are Christine Gledhill's anthology, *Home is Where the Heart Is* (1987) and Barry Keith Grant's, *The Dread of Difference* (1996).

[11] Martin Jay argues that the overwhelmingly male "intellectuals distrustful of the visual pleasures provided by modern mass culture" may very well imply a resistance to what appears as the feminine popular, suggesting that abstract forms of conceptual art do not seem to offer the threat of overly affect-generating popular art; "Only those who think themselves above the lust of the eyes," he hypothesizes, "resist the delights of the spectacle. For isn't there a covert asceticism in the denial of the pleasures of the gaze, even accounting for its gendered bias?" (590). Jay himself promptly brushes off such speculations, yet they are worth pondering. Interestingly, when the feminization of aesthetic forms is *promoted* as a desirable effect, it is ascribed to the seduction of postmodern avant-garde forms like the *nouveau roman* in which the characterization works to decenter, and in Thomas Docherty's words, "feminize' and "marginalize" the

reader (1996; 40). Still, it might be extrapolated from Altman's language, his "outing", that mass culture is less feminizing than queering.

[12] If genres are indeed like nations, then the radical critique of the nation-state from the position of its "subversives" (taking place now for sometime in postcolonial, geopolitical and critical race theories) is paradigmatic of the kind of genre theory I am suggesting. The parallels and intersections of the function of the national imaginary and genre in the popular imagination will be discussed in the later chapters.

[13] Altman spends a great deal of time in *Film/Genre* discussing the essentially mixed nature of genre films, detailing the history of "adjectival genre labels" as part of the larger on-going process of genrification; see, particularly, Chapters Four through Eight.

[14] As Peter Brunette and David Wills contend, "the work of French philosopher Jacques Derrida has already had a profound influence on literary studies in the English-speaking world…. Yet Derrida's influence on film studies has so far been minimal" (3). Brunette and Wills are the only film theorists who have engaged in a sustained "translation" of Derrida's writings to film theory, although their project is directed towards a deconstructive film theory and not genre theory specifically (ix).

[15] Notably, Neale brackets Derrida's contribution to genre theory in his section on "Literature, Linguistics and Genre;" in it, Derridean deconstruction stands as a corrective to speech-act theorists who claim: "texts 'belong' to genres…[or] that any text or discourse could ever escape being generic" (*Genre and Hollywood* 24).

[16] Jeff Collins has explored a new direction in his recent article, "The Genericity of Montage: Derrida and Genre Theory" (2006), looking to Derrida's thesis to argue that montage might be re-conceptualized in terms of film genre.

[17] That Derrida's intervention into the field of genre theory is significant to cross-disciplinary study is evident in that the many recent attempts to theorize genre in both film and literature have referred to his article. Yet, the fact remains that these engagements, particularly within film genre studies, tend to be quite brief and in passing, i.e. Neale (2000; 2, 24, 25); Langford (2005; 29, 261-2); Beebee (1994; 278-9); while Altman (1999), only refers to Derrida in a epigram introducing his chapter, "Why are genres sometimes mixed?" (123).

[18] Neale's very brief gloss is particularly troublesome in this regard because he introduces "The Law of Genre" as Derrida's critique of speech-act theories only to suggest on the very next page "that there remains a degree of common ground between speech-act oriented theorists like Pratt, Hirsch, *and Derrida* and theorists like Tudor and Ryall. All agree that genre is a multi-dimensional phenomenon…," which seems to me (and Jeff Collins), as an egregious (and rather glib) summation of Derrida's complex argument (*Genre and Hollywood* 25; emphasis mine).

[19] Although Jeff Collins does set out the terms of this approach, his argument remains skewed towards the aesthetic conservativism of Walter Benjamin (68), presenting an analysis of montage in line with Eisenstein and Deleuze but not readily translatable to the study of popular culture.

[20] See Shari Benstock (1991), Annamarie Jaglose (1994), and Mary Gerhart (1992). Some of the critical work in the general area of gender and genre studies includes: Charlotte Brunsdon, "Pedegogies of the Feminine: Feminist Teaching and Women's Genres"; Annette Kuhn, *Women's Pictures;* and the several publications of both Linda Williams

and Christine Gledhill. However, most of these are concerned with women's genres and/or feminist textual studies.

[21] It is very interesting that the epigram Butler uses to start off her section, "Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions," is from Parker Tyler's quip about Greta Garbo and her roles in film as a kind of drag performance. Film stands as a privileged site in the interrogation of gender constructs even in non-film studies related writing.

[22] For further discussion on the application of Butler's argument concerning the temporality of gender performances and its implicit (disruptive) intervals, and the parallels to Deleuze's film-philosophy of the interval, see Geller, "The Cinematic Relations of Corporeal Feminism".

[23] See, for instance Chris Straayer (1996); Patricia White (1999); Alexander Doty (1993); Lee Edelman (2004); Brett Farmer (2000); Harry M. Benshoff (1997); and the edited collection, *Outtakes* (1999), particularly the chapters by Eric Savoy, Ellis Hansen, and D.A. Miller. Notably, this field of research continues to be dominated by men and specifically gay readings.

[24] See Eng, et al., for their persuasive critique of queer liberalism (11-14).

[25] See Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* and Scott Lash, *Sociology of Postmodernism*.

[26] For these reasons, the texts addressed in the following chapters can be said to fit the description of "eclectic irony".

[27] It must be remembered that Butler takes her account of gender parody from Jameson's original article, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," which was directed at contemporary popular culture and not gender.

[28] See Robin Wood, "Introduction to the Horror Film," on the subversiveness of the horror genre.

[29] Ben Singer asserts that skill with a pistol is one of hallmarks of the serial-queen films, exemplified by the *Girl Spy* series (1909). Indeed, *The Long Kiss Goodnight* is a direct descendent of this series—when Charly fully emerges to consciousness, she introduces herself: "I'm Charly, the *spy*."

[30] Singer's thick description of sensational melodrama within the context of modernity highlights the shortcomings of identifying a genre only by its iconic traits.

[31] Women have been cast as leads in mainstream action films between the time of the serial-queen and her re-emergence, which can be dated to 1979 with the Lt. Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) in *Alien*. However, most of the films that cast women as violent, action-oriented lead characters tended to be pulp and "B" movies, exemplified by blaxploitation films such as *Coffy* (1973) and *Cleopatra Jones* (1973), and sexploitation films such as those directed by Russ Meyer.

[32] It should be said that there remains a great deal of work to be done to fully understand the impact of the serial-queen in the history of film. For example, research concerning the serial-queen in Indian cinema has lead the way in understanding the serial-queen phenomenon outside of the West. Specifically, Bombay cinema's first and only stunt queen, Fearless Nadia, was immensely popular, although she was not Indian but actually Greek. Her films, much like those of the early serial queens, involved death-defying stunts performed to correct injustice and triumph over evil. Not only did these films, produced by the Wadia Brothers studios, share with U.S. serial-queen melodramas an explicitly foregrounded feminist polemic, but the former films had a continuing obsession

with trains, having Nadia perform the larger portion of her stunts on moving trains. These films were popular in the thirties and forties, and even had a brief resurgence in the fifties. At the same time, the Fearless Nadia films were gaining popularity in India, Hollywood was also continuing the sensational melodrama stories, although with much less emphasis on physical feats of skill. In the 1930s and early 1940s, other series involving intrepid women were on the rise, For example, the Torchy Blaine series centered on the "adventurous blond" reporter, played by Glenda Farrell. These fifty or sixty minute 'B' movies—sometimes several filmed in one year—centered on the dangerous situations Torchy would get herself into to get a story. And, of course, the Nancy Drew series, starring Bonita Granville, were also popular in the mid- to late-thirties.

[33] The status of the contemporary action film as a specifically *postmodern* phenomenon has been well established by several authors, including Gormley (2005), Pfeil (1997), and Willis (1997).

[34] Notably, many of these eighties action films borrowed heavily from the blaxploitation "B" movies of the seventies starring African American men, such as Fred Williams, as action heroes mobilized against criminal forces, usually of the Black community but often with white men at the center of a criminal conspiracy. However, these were far from mainstream Hollywood fare, and when African American actors were cast in these action roles, like Denzel Washington in *Ricochet,* the films rarely found an audience.

[35] Pfeil, especially, argues for the overarching gendered associations that define all aspects of these films. See his chapter, "From Pillar to Postmodern: Race, Class, and Gender in the Male Rampage Film" in *White Guys* (1995).

[36] See Willis (1997), Pfeil (1995), Tasker(1993), Langford (2005), Holmund (2002) and Kellner and Ryan (1988).

[37] For further discussion, see Jonathan Ned Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (1995).

[38] Nowhere is this more evident than in the "rough trade" photo of Jean-Claude Van Damme on the front and back covers of Tasker's *Spectacular Bodies* (1993).

[39] Part of my interest in promoting the "tough chick" film as a sub-genre of the postmodern blockbuster is not only to re-signify what has been defined as the "chick film" through a process of adjectival change as Altman suggests, adding the term "tough" to alter its meaning, but also to attempt to dislodge other critical designations in an overt bid for terminological hegemony (1999; Chapter Four). I prefer the adjective "tough" to modify the concept of the "chick flick" (which has derisive implications) because chick flick is already in generic parlance. But more than this, it also resurrects the historical concept of the "tough" film, described in detail in Chopra-Gant (2006). In sketching the "tough chick" film's geneology from both early film melodrama, as discussed here, and the "tough" film of the postwar period, my desire is to displace (and critique) obliquely heteropatriarchal catch-phrases that may in fact demean the female leads and perpetuate the position that the genre is not to be taken (like women themselves) seriously. Marc O'Day's "action babe" name for the sub-genre, for instance, projects a notable tone of male heterosexual panic, referring to these characters over and over again as "beautiful" and emphasizing these women as (his) projections of male fantasy. In doing so, he elides the female viewer almost entirely, even though these characterizations have a strong

appeal to women, dating back to the early serial-queen, whose "aggressive heroine" (epitomized by Pearl White) had women fans worldwide (Koszarski 273). While the term "babe" has immediate heterosexual implications, suggesting (only) a male viewer, "chick" is more open to feminist appropriation, embraced by the Riot Grrl movement and other third wave feminist groups. Moreover, "chick"—as in "chick flick"—speaks to the (supposed) proclivities of a female audience. The "tough chick flick" therefore speaks of alternative generic interests (action, for example, rather than romantic comedy) for female film-goers.

[40] This tough characterization has since been recast in non-American films from *À bout de souffle* (1960) and *Le Samorai* (1967) to the "borderless cinema" of Japan, discussed in Chapter Three. However, most of these tough protagonists are explicitly based on their American forerunners, a transnational appropriation and homage that many non-American film directors openly acknowledge.

[41] Chopra-Gant parses popular movies from "tough" movies, pointing to the critical or "pessimistic" tone of the latter films. He uses the term "tough" to describe films usually categorized as *film noir* of the post-war period, citing John Houseman's coinage of the term in 1947 to describe the lurid tone and "neurotic personality" conveyed in what is now referred to as film noir (146). The distinctions Chopra-Gant delineates are instructive: "Overall, the ideological concerns of these 'tough' films are at variance with those evident in popular films" (Chopra-Gant 173). As evidenced by this summation, "tough" films are understood comparatively, recognizable from inter-generic analysis.

[42] "The 'abject' designates that which has been expelled from the body, discharged as excrement, literally rendered 'Other.' This appears as an expulsion of alien elements, but the alien is effectively established through this expulsion…. The repudiation of bodies for their sex, sexuality, and/or color is an 'expulsion' followed by a 'repulsion' that founds and consolidates culturally hegemonic identities along sex/race/sexuality axes of differentiation" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 169-170; summarizing both Kristeva and Young).

[43] The relationship of expectation to performance is described by Ben Singer in specific terms, as in his example of public press suggesting women did not know how to gracefully board and de-board a trolley car. Interestingly, the first scene in *The Matrix* originally had Trinity jumping from a moving subway train into a small window of a building. The tough chick films here explicitly highlight moments in which gendered expectations are challenged, like Mitch laughing off the idea that Samantha is a spy or the police sergeant's inability to see Trinity as a threat because she is "just a girl" in his mind.

[44] Keanu Reeves has described in several interviews how the Wachowskis had him read Nietzsche to prepare for the film and the role of Neo. Commentators on the film, and the Wachowskis themselves in interviews and DVD commentary, have proposed that *The Matrix* aims at transforming philosophical concepts into visual or cinematic language, using special effects and CGI to highlight the possibilities of bodies. I contend that it is this very aspiration towards a poststructuralist cinema that has led to the many descriptions of the film as "hard to follow" in terms of plot.

[45] It is well known that *The Matrix* has topped DVD sales lists and is ranked among the top grossing films of all time. *The Long Kiss Goodnight*, on the other hand, opened to

only a mediocre box-office draw, yet as a recent *New York Times* article pointed out, films starring Samuel L. Jackson are immensely popular with DVD purchases, giving this film a new and wider audience than once thought. Indeed, Jackson ranks number one among actors whose films are coveted by DVD collectors (Wilson Rothman, "I Don't Rent. I Own," *New York Times*, February 26, 2004, sec. 1G). To be clear, "blockbuster" is not just defined in terms of box office take but in the excessiveness of production values and the monies invested, such as Shane Black's huge paycheck for his script of *The Long Kiss Goodnight*. The action-spectacle is also apt, as it does not refer to actual monies. Yet, the blockbuster phenomenon continues to this day to describe fiscal investments and projected profits, if not actual.

[46] Moreover, the character's iconic status has since taken on a life of its own, not only in the explicit intertextual referencing (down to re-using a significant song from the soundtrack) in Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill Vol. 1* but in the appropriation of the name by hip hop/ rap artist "Charly Baltimore."

[47] Trinity's significance in the film should not be underestimated; in interviews and DVD extras, the filmmakers speak of how the rushes from Trinity's opening sequence so pleased the executives at Warner Brothers that the Wachowskis and Joel Silver were thereafter given complete artistic control over the film.

[48] The film's characters and plot are quite similar to early serial-queen melodramas, which teamed hero and heroine together and frequently showed the heroine saving the hero.

[49] Sam Caine is an anagram for "amnesiac."

[50] An excellent example of a *situation* is exemplified in *The Matrix*. When Neo wakes up for the first time after being flushed from the AI system, Morpheus introduces him to the crew and explains the new world/ reality he is in. Neo, when confronted with this dramatically different "reality" experiences "momentary paralysis" which Cypher comments on—"he's going to pop"—at which point Neo gets physically sick (Singer, *Melodrama* 41).

[51] This emphasis in dress and carriage plays a significant role in *Thelma and Louise* as well; see Griggers (1993), Hart (1994), and Tasker (1993).

[52] In fact, Mitch, at one point in the film, chastises Charly for shooting men dead instead of simply wounding them; this is a citation of *Terminator 2* in which the terminator is commanded by his programmer/charge to only wound his attackers.

[53] One possible way to queer these characters is to see them as bisexualized, as the film presents an alternative relationship (Switch) alongside the Neo/Trinity love story: "it combines both opposite sex and a same sex narrative…the two narratives co-existing in the text…to construct bisexual main characters in a bisexual text, as well as encourage bisexual (or queer) positions and pleasures in spectators" (Doty, *Making It* 106, note #12).

[54] Implicit in the differences between the world of the matrix and the world of the Nebuchadnezzar, and later Zion itself, is a critique of Hollywood's whitewashed screen image, particularly of urban areas. Besides the green hue of the matrix, the film contrasts the "unreal" matrix with the "real" world by representing the latter as a multi-racial society in which whites are in the minority—more accurately reflecting the polycentric multiculturalism of global populations. See Shohat and Stam (1994) for further

discussion of the history of race in Hollywood representations, and the elision of racial difference in mainstream cinema.

[55] The rest of Hennessy's citation lays the foundation of the usage of the term "queer" that informs the critical standpoint here: "'Queer' not only troubles the gender asymmetry implied by the phrase 'lesbian and gay' but potentially includes 'deviants' and 'perverts' who may transverse or confuse hetero-homo divisions and exceed or complicate conventional delineations of sexual identity and normative sexual practice" (34).

[56] Notably, *The Birth of a Nation's* heroes are figures of the law/military but stand outside of it, literally "rebels" in their roles as confederate soldiers, setting a template for contemporary male action heroes who continue to triumph "by eschewing the support and regulation of inept and/or craven law-enforcement institutions" (Pfeil 1). Although representing the Klan's organized system of violence as heroic is no longer acceptable in contemporary films, the postmodern blockbuster certainly draws narrative power from individual acts of vigilantism, exemplified by the '70s *Dirty Harry* films but also apparent in most contemporary action heroes from John McClane to Batman. For my purposes here, I want to simply draw attention to the fact that the narrative conventions of *The Birth of a Nation*, "function…as nodes in a network of a gender-racial-economic system built on what it prohibits as much as on what it permits," providing the foundations for the legacy of the action film genre to this day (Lipsitz 212).

[57] A notable correspondence between Griffiths' film and the tough chick film's at the end of the century is to be found precisely in their intense focus on the erotic specter of femininity. The significance of *The Birth of the Nation* is due in no small part to its pivotal role in imagining "the birth of a new nation…in the cinematic image and camera eye," described by Michael Rogin as "the filmmaker's appropriation of a power experienced as female" (201). As he asserts: "the erotics of voyeurism and the fetishization of women lie at the origins of the cinematic form, and Griffiths' films as a whole connect the founding moment in American cinema to a particular political, sexual, and racial content" (Rogin 202-3). In their refusal to abide by the sexual and racial borders imposed by the nation-state, the tough chick figure points to the limits of this content and its function in the national imaginary. For an extensive and thorough discussion of this film and its place in the national imaginary, see Michael Rogin (1988); also see Susan Gubar (2000), James Snead (1994), and Janet Staiger (1992).

[58] I would argue that there are implicit politically conservative implications in sympathizing with Cypher, who not only betrays Trinity from the outset of the film, but shows contempt for all the protagonists, calling Neo an "asshole" and turning Morpheus over to the agents. In these ways, his character would seem to incarnate the moral extreme of the melodramatic villain, there to arouse our hatred. Certainly, his murder of the helpless crew, "represents extreme moral injustice" meant to inspire "outrage when we see vicious power victimizing the weak" (Singer, *Melodrama* 40).

[59] Lending this even more credence is the fact that the film's climax is the moment when Neo is actually able to read/see/decode the matrix for what it is—seeing not agents but simply code. This is the very skill that makes Neo "the One."

[60] The actor who plays Cypher, Joe Pantoliano, was in fact cast as the arch-villain in the Wachowskis previous film, *Bound*, brutalizing the (lesbian) protagonists in that film as well.

[61] For a fascinating discussion of Reagan's rather unreal presidency, see Brian Massumi, "The Bleed: Where Body Meets Image" (46-67).

[62] See Susan Jeffords (1989), Pfeil (1995), Langford (2005), Kellner and Ryan (1988).

[63] Interestingly, as Biddy Martin has suggested, this is not the case for lesbian portrayals, which often use racial difference "problematically in the effort to mark sexual differences between women and make lesbian desire visible" (23).

[64] See Mercer's discussion of Robert Mapplethorpe's photo, *Man in Polyester Suit*, 1980, for an excellent example of the issues at stake in the construction of Black masculinity (175–77).

[65] *Harold and Kumar Go To White Castle* (2004) also references Rodney King and the whole constellation of racial profiling informing the social nexus that defines police violence and the (mis)perception of Black criminality, including its prominent paranoid homoerotic imaginary. However, the film critiques this racist episteme through a highly critical and subversive laughter.

[66] Morpheus is sympathetic not only because of his relationship to Neo and Trinity but also because of his physical appearance and movement throughout—sheathed in black leather, donning frameless black glasses, and often appearing as if floating rather than walking (his feet are actually rarely seen, hidden by his full length coat). Additionally, he is given the position closest to omniscient narrator, functioning as the arbiter of "the Real."

[67] Although several critics have emphasized the buddy relationship in the action film of the eighties and nineties, Chopra-Gant argues its relevance in terms of popular postwar films, pointing to a much longer history of the buddy trope in American cinema.

[68] As much as Davis' character is an explicit citation of her role in *Thelma and Louise,* Mitch Henessy can also be interpreted in light of the characterization of Zeus Carver through Jackson's star performance. Mitch should also be read as Shane Black's critical rewriting of his own earlier version of the African American sidekick, epitomized by the supportive family man and Martin Riggs stable partner, Roger Murtaugh (Danny Glover), in the *Lethal Weapon* series, also scribed by Black. That Mitch's back story is as a bad cop, thrown out of the force, put in prison, and separated from his wife and child certainly suggests Murtaugh's life having taken a bad turn. *Die Hard: With a Vengeance* openly contrasts Murtaugh's happily assimilated paternal head of a nuclear family, figured as the "rational" representative of the state, with Carver's position as figurative head of the Black community.

[69] Carver is introduced in the film running his own business in the heart of Harlem and advising the kids that come in to his store to stay in school, get an education, and not to take help from "the white man"—a mantra the kids recite in unison. That race is the central ideological concern of the film is obvious from how Carver and McClane meet— with McClane, forced by the vaguely Germanic villain, walking in Harlem wearing only a sandwich board with the sentence "I hate niggers" written on it.

[70] In both films, the central protagonists are impelled to tell Jackson's character, "I need you;" in fact, McClane is pressed to say to Carver, "Alright, I need you more than you need me."

[71] One of the first action scenes with the both characters, Samantha does not remember afterwards how they escaped; so Mitch tells her, "I saved your ass, you should have seen

it." Yet, by the end of the film, he says he'll be waiting for her to rescue him. This has been too quickly read as his emasculation rather than taken as a transformation in Mitch that has come to reject misogynist patriarchy and take women as active subjects. I would propose that this transformation is highlighted by the fact that the sexist joke Mitch makes on Larry King at the end of the film rings hollow, no longer suited to his transformed character. In fact, it highlights the performative Black masculinity of the character retroactively.

[72] Neroni's critique of *The Long Kiss Goodnight* refuses to recognize the complex interrogation of *racialized sexuality* that is immediately invoked in the film' pairing (of gender *and* race). Geoff King, along these lines, suggests Mitch is akin to the Black "mammy" (112), while C. Richard King and David J. Leonard enumerate the allegedly racist stereotypes of *The Matrix* (38-41). I find it telling that what the actor, Samuel L. Jackson, brings to his role is rarely taken into these accounts (of racism). How, for example, does Jackson subvert the more racist and/ or stereotypical shadings of his character in his performance? Jackson has, in fact, publicly announced in several interviews that Mitch stands out as his favorite role in his career; so it might be assumed that the actor does not necessarily consider the part "stereotypical" or racist. It is rather commonplace to discuss film characterizations without factoring in the agency of the actor. My concern with this is that another form of racism may be effected in designating certain characterizations as racist or "negative;" it carries the implication that the actor has no agency in his/her performance or worse, is oblivious to the supposed racism of a role. For example, Bogle suggests Danny Glover's role in *Lethal Weapon* is as a male "mammy;" how does Glover's own political activism against racism and apartheid resonate with this? I believe that a more negotiated line of argument should be followed if critics are to avoid the Manichean traps of "positive" and "negative" images as well as making claims that imply the political ignorance of intelligent, informed and often politically active actors in the pursuit of their careers.

[73] This song is also used in Tarantino's *Kill Bill Vol. I*. There is some debate on IMDB and other fan sites around Tarantino's choice of this song to signify the awakening of The Bride as homage to, or simple appropriation of, the soundtrack in *The Long Kiss Goodnight*.

[74] The multiplication of selves allegorizes the instability of feminine subjectivity that is the ground of its infinite performances, nowhere more ironically evident than when Charly says to Mitch, "Look what she did to my ass!"

[75] In a gesture that indicates she is "experienced," she fills a shot glass, rolls is across her lips, drinking the shot and dropping the glass in her other hand in a single fluid movement

[76]Although certainly not all dangerous blondes are lesbian icons, there tends to be something queer about the dangerous blond, from the camp of Mae West, and the common knowledge of Stanwyck's lesbianism, to the pro-*Sex* icon, Madonna.

[77] I find the cynical position of *The Long Kiss Goodnight* toward the neoconservative forces within the United States government remarkably prescient. In fact, the film mentions the first bombing of the World Trade Center as an example of a collusion of interests that seem even more relevant to the current administration. For example, the movie's suggestion of "CIA fundraising" takes on a frightening realism with the

emerging reports that the now executive director of the CIA, "Buzzy" Krongard, headed the firm that benefited economically from the suspicious jump in airline stock trading, which was sixty times the normal amount the day before the 9/11 attacks. For further discussion, see Gary Indiana, "No Such Thing As Paranoia: Disorganized Conspiracy," *Village Voice,* June 8, 2004, Part 3 of 3.

[78] Both movies obliquely reference communism as a central antagonist in the legitimation of American late capitalism but do so to challenge its consolidation of state power. In fact, much of Morpheus' dialogue is laced with Marxist rhetoric of false consciousness and top-down politics (the A.I., as the bourgeois stand-in, exploits the masses, turning them into "batteries"), but he is clearly sympathetic and placed narratively on the side of "truth."

[79] Although the Oracle, as the all-knowing character to which the members of the resistance turn for guidance is "not what you expected," she is at the same time exactly what is expected in a racist culture: the mammy figure, attending to children not of her own race (not born to her). White women, in the guise of the "tough chick," may be able to transcend the confinement of the family in spatial terms in ways not available to women of color, as in the Oracle or Mitch's wife, whom we only ever see at home with her son. The Oracle, as maternal caretaker confined within the domestic space, baking cookies and tending to her "children" is the gendered counterpart to Morpheus' father figure, who is out fighting to protect the proverbial motherland of Zion. Still, the deconstructive force of her powerful role as seer and advisor destabilizes the racist mythologies of "welfare queen" and "mammy" evoked by her surroundings (indeed, the final scene of *Revolutions* insinuates she orchestrated the overthrowing of the machines and the architect—the quintessential old white man). A split along racial lines nevertheless exists for women in these filmic worlds, which confronts the construction of the nation as domestic sphere but ultimately cannot escape its powerful iconography.

[80] To this end, Charly is closer in characterization to Ripley of *Alien 3* (who kills herself rather than give birth) than to the tough mother Sarah Connor. I agree with Willis' argument that these films enact the fraught debates around abortion and reproductive technologies that were hysterically pronounced by the right in their frenzy to quash reproductive freedom. However, I also would point out that the non-reproductive figure is a particularly cogent site of homophobic anxiety, particularly as a film characterization, as insightfully argued by Lee Edelman in his groundbreaking book, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004).

[81] Both Edelman (2004) and Shane Phelan (2001), in very different disciplinary contexts, argue in great detail the extent of contemporary queer "demonology" and its social affects.

[82] Where this terrorist act takes place reveals the gendered and sexual stakes of the national interests Perkins represents. The covert terrorist operation is referred to as "Project Honeymoon" throughout the story because it is to take place in Niagara Falls, a well-known honeymoon destination for several decades now, and therefore synonymous with appropriate, State-sanctioned heterosexuality.

[83] Notably, Charly resurfaces as a government agent who, because of her amnesia, is not aware that the "old enemies have become new allies" with the end of the Cold War. *The Long Kiss Goodnight* builds its narrative around the revelation that being useful to the

State entails policing its discursive borders. The film insinuates that Charly was able to identify "them," our national Others, because the codes were clear; a masculinized United States, defined by Republican leadership and the hawk politics upon which it was founded, was defined in opposition to the feminized Soviet Union. But with a democratic president (the film was made during Clinton's first term), the lines between "us" and "them" are no longer recognizable. Samantha's brief existence, tellingly, is eight years—the length of two presidential terms, and, in fact, Charly's life as a spy effectively ends right before the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989. To emphasize this political change, the president is filmed in the White House kitchen, wearing a bathrobe, making a sandwich—there is no woman doing this domestic task for him. While speaking with his duplicitous staff member (Perkins), the president dismisses the cold-war military activities as ridiculous, claiming the money could better serve specifically domestic interests ("can you say health care?"). It is this domestication of the nation-state that Chapter director Perkins plans to overthrow by committing an act of terrorism within United States borders and blaming it on "the Muslims."

[84] This is subtly underscored by the detail that Caitlin's teddy bear, referred to throughout the film, is named "Perkins." A nod here is given to the fact that Theodore Roosevelt, whom the Teddy bear was named for, was one of the most imperialist presidents in the Twentieth Century.

[85] The latest incarnation of this theme, and indeed its immense popularity, can be seen in the recent box-office success of Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill, Vols. 1* and *2*.

<u>Chapter Three</u>

Transnational Noir: World Cinema and the Reinvention of Genre Studies

Transnationality and its shared features are expressed as never before via the mass media that span the globe and penetrate all communities, necessitating the formulation of not only one but a series of transnational genres (Naficy 122).

<u>Transnational Genre Studies: Rethinking Film Noir</u>

In the preceding chapter I outlined the subversive possibilities of contemporary

Hollywood film genre and attempted to map such filmic subversions to a critical relation

to the dominant discourses of the nation-state. Racial and sexual configurations, in these

subversive genre films, trouble totalizing claims that would present Hollywood cinema as

a politically bankrupt or inherently conservative cultural formation. However, to speak of

the "popular imagination" and Hollywood's decisive role in it, requires a broader scope

of analysis for, as Hamid Naficy suggests, mass media, particularly mainstream

Hollywood cinema, "spans the globe and penetrates all communities" (122). It is beyond

the purview of this project—if at all possible—to address the various Hollywood genres

and the series of transnational genres (critically) related to them. If, however, as I have

argued in the previous chapters, genre criticism can be "radicalized," it must come to

terms with the transnationalism of contemporary popular culture. In fact, the impact of

"global Hollywood," has mandated the "reinvention" of film studies, as Gledhill and

Williams make clear: "As mass media break down national barriers and national attempts

to reinvent discrete cultural identities, the reviewing of film studies from positions

outside the West forces the field …[to] remak[e] itself as a site of international exchange"

(3). This chapter seeks to add to the project of remaking film studies in this way,

forwarding a specific intervention into genre criticism by undertaking a comparative and non-Eurocentric approach to the analysis of film noir.[1]

I want to examine film noir and its significance as an exemplary transnational genre, one that can help us to better formulate the series of transnational genres emerging in the global mass mediascape.[2] Film noir originated as a term used by French critics, borrowed from their own *series noire* line of novels, to describe films of the American interwar and postwar years but released in France as a group after the war. Produced mostly as "B" movies and frequently referred to by the industry and press as variations on melodramatic themes and styles, their pessimistic tone allowed them to be loosely categorized at the time as "tough" films. As Mike Chopra-Gant discusses in detail, these films were significantly less successful at the box office than their more optimistic counterparts (*Hollywood Genres* 11-20). In fact, their lack of popularity has girded claims to the subversive nature inherent to the "tough" films that came to be identified as noir.[3] Film noir, due in part to its subversive potentialities, stands as a significant transnational film genre, one that has received a good deal of critical attention as a "site of international exchange," although the vast majority of this attention has remained within a Western, specifically Euro-American, purview.

Film noir criticism's proclivity towards comparative analysis most often reflects its historical origins as a French term describing a body of films originating in the United States, with a notable percentage directed by German and French immigrants. In short, "film noir" emerged as a critical concept rather than as a categorical genre native to the film industry. Because of this—unlike the other genres addressed here—film noir has been extensively challenged as a genre, with much recent consensus that it should not be

treated as such, but rather better described as a kind of modality, sensibility, or mood that

shaped filmmaking practices across several genres. Indeed, even the claims to its

historical dominance as a mode of post-war filmmaking have been persuasively contested

on several fronts, while the position that it is a specifically *postwar* phenomenon has been

thoroughly routed by historians pointing to several films during and even predating

World War II that evoke noir themes and aesthetics.

While others have argued that even if the style of film noir coalesced at the war's

end, its key concerns, motifs and thematics were drawn from novels that significantly

predated the on-set of the war. As Steve Neale points out: "it is clear that the fundamental

features of hardboiled fiction preceded the 1940s. In so far as these features include

femmes fatales, fatal passion, social alienation, and a preoccupation with the masculine,

attempts to account for their appearance in 1940s films in terms of 1940s socio-cultural

conditions are thus rendered even more problematic than they are already" (*Genre and

Hollywood* 166). Other foundational assumptions about the genre have been

problematized such as the relatively recent challenge posed to the generally accepted

thesis that film noir defined a set of *popular* films. For example, Chopra-Gant shows that

the films that reflect noir's generic conventions make up only a scant percentage of films

released by Hollywood studios after the war (18). The aim of this chapter is not to enter

into these ongoing debates but rather to reframe the discussion of film noir from a

comparative perspective, and in so doing, show that film noir is effectively concretized as

a film genre at the moment of its "international exchange." In this way, film noir may not

have originated as an institutional American film genre; it nonetheless became a genre in

the dialogic process of its internationalization. Film noir, therefore, offers an exemplary model for the formulation of transnational film genres generally speaking.[4]

Although noir was, as Elizabeth Cowie has famously stated, "a fantasy," its modality of filmic expression penetrated global media consciousness, providing a set of filmic discourses open to cooptation and critical re-citation (121). The representational mode of noir quickly entered the popular lexicon as a highly identifiable film genre, evident in the short time it took for the "mode" or "mood" to influence non-Western filmmakers. Although its best-known influences are on the French New Wave, film noir had a noteworthy impact on postwar Japanese cinema as early as the mid-fifties, which I discuss in greater detail below. Throughout these transnational mediations, a well-codified and immensely popular film genre was concretely established, one that continues to impact other national cinemas as well as hybridize with other film genres, as the recent U.S.-Serbian animated co-production, *Film Noir* (2007), demonstrates.[5] This animated feature, with its Los Angeles detective and mysterious *femme fatale,* banks on the immediately recognizable features and continuing popularity of film noir as a set of generic expectations that the title quickly signals. Yet, this exemplary film is not simply more evidence that "noir is arguably as instantly recognized and influential in contemporary media culture as was the Western for the post-Second World War generation, liberally quoted, pastiched and parodied from television advertising to graphic novels" (Langford 210). Its Serbian (Risto Topaloski) and American (D. Jud Jones) co-creation points to the continuing internationalization of the mode and its ongoing reinvention as a transnational film genre.

What makes film noir particularly amenable to international exchange and transnational translation, I suggest, is its aesthetic expression of the socio-historical material informing its inception. Film noir is frequently described by its subversive relation to popular Hollywood film styles (Chopra-Gant), to historically-situated political discourses (Krutnick, Oliver and Trigo) or both (Belton). Indeed, film noir is commonly defined as a subversive mid-century trend—in contrast to Hollywood's style and substance alike—and therefore serves as a template for generic subversion generally. According to Frank Krutnik, "the 'noir phenomenon' describes a *series* of complex stylistic transformations which marked 1940s Hollywood cinema, particularly within the broad generic field of the crime thriller. It is important to stress here how these transformations affected not simply the standardized parameters of visual style, but also the normative conventions of characterization, narration, sexual representation, generic production and narrative development" (24). These transformations, often interpreted as subversions, have been read as an American cultural phenomenon, even when the international influences on film noir are acknowledged. This is because much of the film criticism addressing film noir links such subversive qualities to historical transformations during the war years and immediately following, such as the interwar emancipation of women, the intensified homosocial bonds between men, and the employment and housing crises.

Rather than rehearse these arguments, I want propose an alternative framework, one that starts from a theoretical and cross-cultural point of departure. In order to better understand the proliferation of what David Desser has referred to as "global noir," I will briefly explore the reasons why this particular genre has gone global. A preponderance of

noir criticism has argued the ideological and historical effects of American culture in, on and through film noir and has stressed the ways film noir fits within a bounded national U.S. cinema. Genre studies in general are frequently situated within the critical articulation of a national cinema, premised on the understanding that "there is a reciprocal relationship between genre formation and society. Each epoch creates its own narratives about itself and its own genres, and each act of self-narrativization and generic formation influences the perception of the age and the formation of its cultures" (Naficy 122). Certainly this reciprocal relationship is crucial to our understanding of genre—and its subversion—however, it does not necessarily speak to the cross-cultural and transnational potentials of generic formation and reformation. Kim Soyoung sums up the limitations of genre analyses circumscribed to nationalist terms: "territorial nation-bound claims (for Hollywood, in this case) about [a given] genre and [a given] mode bypass the trajectory of transculturation that genre encounters as it travels outside America. And such claims also fail to account for the incorporation of the non-Hollywood generic components" (102). What follows is a reconceptualization of film noir from a less nation-bound standpoint in order to sketch out the genre's recent (and not so recent) transnational applications.

Desser's groundbreaking work on "global noir" posits the question: "if classic film noir was said to respond to the then-contemporary issues in American culture and society, can we account for the transnational 'neo-noir' or global noir in terms of contemporary issues in global culture and society?" (516). This question is crucial for mapping the trajectory of transculturation specific to film noir, and I address it in detail below. Yet, the answer to this question must begin with its central supposition: that

classic noir responded to contemporary issues in America. Such a hypothesis is representative of an earlier period of film theory. According to Bill Nichols: "The historicist assumptions of earlier theorizing that proposed virtually causal links between Zeitgeist and cultural objects, between the dominant ideology and the most prevalent art" are no longer the central project of contemporary film theory (37). Noir criticism has not been immune to the recent transformations in film theory, and genre studies specifically, in which "idealist categories of holistic world-views, unitary Zeitgeists, and clear-cut periodizations fracture into more localized and materially based concepts such as gender, ethnicity, and class" (Nichols 37). Such new approaches to film noir studies have challenged the Zeitgeist hypothesis: in terms of the assumed influence and popularity of the genre (Chopra-Gant), of its direct correlation to historical events (V. Sobchack), as well as developing and deepening the historicist position by putting it in dialogue with theoretical models like psychoanalysis (Oliver and Trigo). Therefore, the question of situating global noir within the same Zeitgeist methodology once applied to classic film noir needs to be reframed in terms of the more recent developments in film theory.

The question—posed as an analogy—is further problematized by the implicit distinction that sets "classic film noir" as the origin—both historically and geographically—and global noir as its successor, echoing first and third world divisions. Rather than assuming a vast chronological and cultural divide between the two film movements, I will explore the ideological, aesthetic and conceptual grounds that "fracture" such self-contained periodizations and self-evident Zeitgeists that are implied in the parallelism, which equates (rather than *relates*) "American" film noir with global noir. Attending to the continuity between the "classic" and the "neo-" periods of film

noir, certain themes emerge that replace analogical correspondences with a deeper structural relationship that puts America back on the globe and in the world. That is, border anxieties, sexual instabilities, and insecurities about nationality and the nation-state's permeable boundaries pervade classic film noir, shaping its unique "geopolitical aesthetic," as Fredric Jameson succinctly phrases it (3). Kelly Oliver and Benigno Trigo describe noir's aesthetic thus: "The existential angst, moral ambiguity, and style of noir produce a sense of free-floating anxiety that [can be] anchored to a complex constellation of concrete anxieties over race, sex, and maternity often displaced onto an abstract angst over the fickle finger of fate or a nihilistic human condition. Anxieties over racial, sexual, and national identities work together in film noir to create a sense of free-floating anxiety or existential angst and a nihilistic worldview" (xiv). Indeed, the nihilistic mood of noir introduces a particularly anxious relationship to geopolitical space that will be productively mined in neo-noir.

Central to the relationship between American film noir and transnational noir is this mood, a mood conveyed through aesthetic codes. It is these very codes, however, that problematize the genealogical model that presents classic film noir as a subset of a national cinema, that is, as a specifically American phenomenon. Film noir is widely associated with specific generic markers of stylistic or aesthetic choices that are often credited for noir's bleak Gestalt. Yet, as Krutnik points out, "compositional imbalance, *chiaroscuro* lighting, night-for-night shooting, etc. are not specific to the film noir, nor to the crime film, nor even to the 1940s cinema" (19). These stylistic practices predate the emergence of film noir in American cinema, as several noir critics have readily acknowledged (Schatz, Neale, Belton, Silver and Ursini).[6] Historians of film noir have

written most notably on the European influences on American film noir, linking it to a range of international film movements, from the French Poetic Realist films of the 1930s (Vincendeau) to "the *Neue Sachlichkkeit* ('New Objectivity') and its preferred genre, the street film, [which] bequeathed noir its characteristic milieu: the night-time city" (Langford 216). The most often cited European influence on film noir is of course German Expressionist cinema, which has been credited for introducing such elements as skewed *mise-en-scène* and highly contrasted lighting schemes to cinematic practice.[7] In fact, Thomas Schatz, stressing the internationalism of the style, goes so far as to propose "American Expressionism" as another name for film noir, referencing the direct influence of German Expressionism on the cinematic style associated with the film of the thirties and forties in the U.S. Schatz defines American Expressionist cinema in terms of specific stylistic code: "the majority of scenes are lit for night, as in German Expression, oblique and vertical lines are preferred to horizontal, the actors and setting are often given equal lighting emphasis, compositional tension is preferred to physical action" (116). While these aesthetic devices find their own origin in the German art movement, *Die Brücke*, the Bridge group was itself informed by the practices of an international avant-garde art movement occurring all over the continent.

It is not a coincidence that film noir echoed German Expressionism, since actual German immigrants often directed these films. One of the best examples is Fritz Lang, whose remarkable film, *M* (1931), destabilizes nation-bound definitions of film noir and its usual periodization as a postwar (interwar at the earliest) movement. Indeed, several movie databases ascribe it to the genre of film noir as a matter of course, despite its German origins and release date over a decade before the U.S. entered World War II.

Lang personifies the international origins of American film noir in that he would go on to helm a staggering number of Hollywood-produced titles in the cycle, making films in this vein for the next twenty years.[8] What Lang's place in film history demonstrates, in this instance, is the fact that the film noir genre is born out of a history of international exchange—of people, stylistic principles and motifs. To the extent that German Expressionism has been recognized as a progenitor of American film noir, however, the discussion has remained overwhelmingly directed to historical and aesthetic congruencies, with less critical attention paid to their shared epistemological foundations. Krutnick speaks directly to this skewed critical approach: "Much of the critical work on film noir tends…to overvalue such stylistics as being in themselves subversive or transgressive of the classical norms of Hollywood-style film making" (19). It is in the incorporation of international film style, I propose, that the film noir cycle affects its epistemic transgressions. Classical film noir was precisely subversive because it posed an implicit international contrast to Hollywood's "norms" that manifested themselves in markedly nationalist forms. The genre's aesthetic transnationalism, in this way, is the very grounds of its subversion. That is, by foregrounding its international influences, film noir visually contrasted with the film aesthetics of more mainstream *national* cinema, indexing a divide between bordered and borderless film practices that informed noir's narrative concerns as well.

Contra Krutnik, it is indeed in the stylistics of Expressionist cinema—on both sides of the Atlantic—that its subversive potential is unleashed. This is because, in expressionist cinema, "style determines substance, mood overwhelms plot, narrativity (the *process* of storytelling) emerges as narrative, …form becomes inseparable from

content" (Schatz 115). The reasons for this, Schatz goes on to explain, are that the

aesthetic conventions of Expressionist cinema aimed precisely at the production of a

certain affective register, specifically, "feelings of hopelessness and lost time" (117).

These "feelings" are typically explained, however, in terms of historically grounded

causal relationships that are anchored in a specific worldview or Zeitgeist, most notably

the after-effects of the World War II. Chopra-Gant hypothesizes rather that noir

subverted the dominant Hollywood productions of the time (musical, comedy), which

also responded to the war but in a much more nation-building, nation-consolidating (and

masculinity-affirmating) way, conveyed in the reassuring realist style. Noir did not

embrace the reconsolidation imperative of "Hollywood norms," but instead excavated the

nihilism that war entailed by utilizing expressionist aesthetics. These aesthetics reflect not

a Zeitgeist but a set of anxieties that manifest themselves at critical moments in the

history of a nation—moments that destabilize national and personal identity alike.

Expressionist cinema is less a genre of a national cinema than a cinema about the

instability of the nation and its boundaries. Little wonder, then, that "the free-floating

existential anxiety of film noir is an anxiety of ambiguous spaces. Its heroes are

homeless, directionless, wandering travelers who unsuccessfully try to escape their past"

(Oliver and Trigo 217). Such wandering travelers, like Lang himself, are

epistemologically homeless as the result of international conflict and a generalized (and

often sudden) realization of the ambiguous space of the nation in relation to a shifting and

unstable internationalism.

If reframing film noir as an instance of international Expressionist cinema

troubles claims to well-defined periodization, the epistemic (rather than historical)

connotations of "postwar" culture remains a crucial analytical framework, whether it is

an aesthetic response to the unfathomable losses and dislocations of World War I in

Germany or a transgressive "self-narrativizing" arising from the similar events of the

Second World War and its effects in and on the American imaginary. "The dominant

worldview expressed in film noir," Janey Place proposes, "is paranoid, claustrophobic,

hopeless, doomed, predetermined by the past, without clear moral or personal identity.

Man has been *inexplicably* uprooted from those values, beliefs and endeavors that offer

him meaning and stability" (51; emphasis mine). Yet, this worldview is not inexplicable;

it emanates from the epistemic crisis of a nation whose borders (both real and existential)

have been deterritorialized by global conflict. Generally speaking, cinematic

expressionism emerged as a visual articulation of the German national crisis following

the devastation of World War I, then American Expressionism appeared in the wake of

the Second World War. Similarly, the French New Wave came to fruition, and openly

referenced, international conflicts with Indochina and Algiers, and American neo-noir of

the seventies is frequently perceived as a nihilistic reaction to the Vietnam War.[9]

Expressionist cinema, in other words, can be said to surface in the cultural history of a

nation when it is forced to confront its own liminality. In this way, film noir is subversive

because it is irreducible to a national cinema; rather, I identify it as a genre of *world*

cinema. "World literature," as Goethe once suggested, "arises from the cultural confusion

wrought by terrible wars and mutual conflicts" (Cited in Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*

11). In the twentieth century, world cinema arose along these lines, confronted with the

unimaginable realities of global war the scale of which was unprecedented.

As a generic mode of world cinema, noir and its expressionist "geopolitical aesthetic" is a privileged cinematic form for the mapping of the political unconscious, particularly when the anxieties of (trans)national dislocation are its central epistemic concern. This episteme manifests itself "behind the free-floating anxiety or existential anxiety of noir," conveyed as "a primal anxiety over borders and boundaries that manifests itself in specific fears and phobias of race, sex, maternity, and national origin" (Oliver and Trigo xiv). Expressionist cinema's subversive strain can be traced to this very preoccupation with borders and boundaries in that its nihilistic mood, and the stylistic choices that produce it, makes it nearly impossible for the plot to contain such anxieties with the comforting reconsolidation of origins and borders usually afforded by mainstream cinema.[10] For these reasons, I forward film noir as a transnational genre, one that requires a comparative methodology rather than a nation-bound approach. Barry Langford makes a similar point when he argues: "Noir's textual and generic instabilities, like those of horror, commend it to the attentions of postmodern cultural theory" (222). For my purposes here, it is the postmodern cultural theory of the "the geopolitical aesthetic" that best articulates the epistemological causes behind noir's instabilities and, moreover, reframes American film noir as an instance of, rather than analogous with, global noir.

Transnational noir exemplifies (as I demonstrate below), "the geopolitical unconscious…which now attempts to refashion national allegory into a conceptual instrument for grasping our new being-in-the-world" (Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* 3). Yet, this same unconscious is immanent in noir's earliest incarnations (such as *M*). Because Expressionist cinema affords complex aesthetic mediations of the cultural

confusion brought on by international—at times, global—conflicts and wars, it (re)fashions national allegories, at various historical junctures, by (subversively) foregrounding the instabilities of national and identificatory borders and the anxieties this entails. For example, classic film noir's transgressive stories attempted to narrativize the transformed "being-in-the-world" that was symptomatic of postwar America: "the films themselves were pervaded by themes of class difference, class power and the corrupting influence of money, by sympathetic portrayals of lower class characters and lower class milieux, and often also by warnings about the continuing presence of fascism and fascists both abroad and in America itself" (Neale 159). These themes, particularly the latter, begin to explain why film noir is often the preferred genre of international exchange.

Film noir is precisely a favored genre of world cinema because it attends to social antagonisms and the power inequities that anchor them. Homi Bhabha's definition of world literature, to this extent, is instructive for the study of cinema and its genres; according to Bhabha, world literature is "concerned with a form of cultural dissensus and alterity, where non-consensual terms of affiliation may be established on the grounds of historical trauma" (12). The historical trauma of WWII gave rise to a cycle of films often deemed "subversive" by critics because they were more anxious and unresolved about cultural dissensus and alterity than their more popular counterparts. Yet, if film noir and transnational noir are more relational than analogous because they can be read as generic cycles within the larger field of world cinema, this is not to imply that they signify this concern in the same way or to the same ends. Indeed, film noir's Freudian influences dissemble the (geo)political anxieties otherwise manifest in these films.[11] Oliver and Trigo contend that in classic film noir, "nationality and place can also be interpreted as a

type of condensation of several images or ideas into an idea that retains only the

repressed unconscious fears or desires that they have in common" (xviii). In other words,

the political unconscious of film noir is precipitously annexed by the subjective

unconscious in the genre's thematic tropes, due in no small part to the dissemination of

Freudian concepts taking place at the time. Indeed, much noir criticism reflects and

reinforces the Freudian paradigm by (re)producing psychoanalytic readings that foreclose

national and cultural alterity expressed in these films as anxieties about subjectivity.[12]

According to Trigo and Oliver, who employ a psychoanalytic methodology, "film

noir displays unconscious anxieties over the borders of identity" in its "condensations and

displacements" that resemble the Freudian dreamwork: "As in the dream-work,

condensations and *displacements* of various anxieties over race, sex and origin work to

camouflage the centrality of race and racism, sex and sexism, and nationality and

nationalism to film noir, sometimes behind the screen of an amorphous and free-floating

existential anxiety over fate or the human conditions" (xv-xvi). Yet, as I discuss in the

next section, in transnational noir these very condensations are unpacked and

disentangled. Contemporary transnational noir, specifically, recollects the anxieties of

classical film noir to reveal what it camouflaged. Rather than condensing such "anxieties

and fears about sexual, racial, or national differences or borders…onto minor elements in

a film," contemporary transnational noir (or global noir, since Desser defines it as a

recent phenomenon) recasts these fears and anxieties in major elements and themes (xix).

Indeed, global noir's explicit citation of other films, often across national borders,

involves allegorizing the insecure and fungible borders of the nation-state and its

attendant anxieties. This is the crucial shift from classic film noir to neo-noir, which brings such concrete anxieties front and center in their refashioning of the genre.

Globalized Postmodernism: Neo-Noir and the Rise of Transnational Border(less) Cinema

If film noir's free-floating anxiety signaled a nascent political unconscious, neo-noir brought this out into the open. In classical noir, as Oliver and Trigo stress, it is not fear of national difference but racial and national ambiguity that "is the real anxiety" (5). This anxiety is brought to the fore in neo-noir, rather than displaced as in classical film noir, as an aesthetic figuration of the concerns and preoccupations associated with postmodernity. Neo-noir arose as a definitive, industrially recognized form of genre film, and as such, some have suggested that it alone can be legitimately referred to as film noir in the proper sense of the genre. Dating from the seventies, neo-noir describes a body of films explicitly informed by the aesthetic and narrative qualities associated with "tough" cinema, most frequently produced by film school-educated and film-savvy directors enamored with the earlier cycle of melodrama, crime and other "B" films, in which these filmmakers were extensively educated. If, as Langford argues, film noir was "in the first instance a mood or even an attitude rather than a genre…it finally emerged as a durable and clearly defined generic presence in the disenchanted 1970s" (213).

This periodization is well established in Western film histories, with the seventies figuring as the accepted starting point for neo-noir. Part and parcel of this timeline is the argument that neo-noir originated as a subversive film genre: "if film noir was thought to be subversive in its classical mode, subversions of noir appeared to be even more subversive in their post-classical appearance" (Desser 517). Neo-noir's subversiveness is

frequently tied, like classical film noir, to historical factors, such as the "disenchantment" of the seventies, most notably, the broad social response to the Vietnam War. This awareness of the nation and its "fascism abroad" influenced neo-noir, which utilized the generic signifiers of classical noir—its implicit anxieties about national borders and boundaries—to subversive ends. "The newly established category of cinema called neo-noir," as Tom Conley describes it, is transgressive because its "unstated relation with history endows the genre with a stronger critical dimension…arch[ing] back to…paradigmatic traits in order to gain an affiliation before it puts forward other agendas designed to signify…a failed recurrence of the past" (194). This argument turns on a temporal framework, relying on a comparison between past and present that highlights some paradigmatic traits (such as style, characterization) while downplaying others.

I want to sketch out a supplemental approach to neo-noir that provides another way to conceptualize it by reframing neo-noir's citational practices in spatial, or geographic, rather than temporal terms. The latter model most often stays well within the history of American cinema for its comparison between periods (classical and neo-) and the claims to subversion predicated on it. However, if film noir is understood as a specific historical moment in the broader category of world cinema, neo-noir must be placed within this context as well. This expands the ground for comparison to include cultural and national difference as a central motivation for neo-noir's critical return to the classic mode. Indeed, the fact that neo-noir is a genre with clearly defined postmodern features makes a culturally comparative approach inevitable: "Jameson suggests that we must now analyze film comparatively—that we can only understand film politics when we place it both in its local political context and its global context as film" (MacCabe xv).[13]

The comparative analysis of film is crucial to the formulation of transnational genres. Moreover, these "emergent cultural forms/genres" demand modes of inquiry that recognize and extend their "challenge [to] centrist globalization or American-centric" perceptions of cultural and national difference and alterity (Rob Wilson 268). My aim here is to propose one possible response to this demand, forwarding an interpretive model that reflects the fact that "the very concepts of homogeneous national cultures, the consensual or contiguous transmission of historical traditions, or 'organic' ethnic communities—*as the grounds for a cultural comparativism*—are in a profound process of redefinition" (Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* 5). This redefinition, I believe, must be taken into account in the larger project of reinventing film studies and genre studies specifically.

Contemporary film studies needs to come to terms with this redefinition, rethinking its categorizations restricted by national borderlines. In genre studies, Desser has promoted this line of inquiry in terms of noir criticism, arguing that "neo-noir," in fact, may be more accurately described as "global noir," because neo-noir is in essence "a transnational genre" (516). Nevertheless, critical work on neo-noir has remained predominantly within a Eurocentric and, more often, strictly American perspective, even when non-Hollywood films are acknowledged. Langford's one page "Beyond Hollywood" discussion, which cites only European neo-noir*s,* is typical even though his *Film Genres and Beyond* was published after Desser's intervention, and (inexcusably) after the work of directors such as John Woo had gained recognition in the U.S. Others, however, have paid heed to the explicit transnationalism of the genre: "Walter Hill's *Last Man Standing* (1996)…is an American version of Akira Kurosawa's *Yojimbo* (1961),

which in turn owes a significant debt to Dashiell Hammett's 1929 novel *Red Harvest*"
(Ron Wilson 153). Yet, Wilson cites Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* as "the single
most important and influential noir crime film of the decade" (147). Interestingly, Desser
concurs: "For the success of *Pulp Fiction* not only influenced a British brand of noir, but
extended the noir vision *virtually around the world*" (519; my emphasis).[14]

This claim (from a critic promoting "global noir" no less) exemplifies the
American-centric reterritorialization and rewriting of film history that typifies the field.
The imperialism of the global imaginary Desser ascribes to *Pulp Fiction* is only possible
by effacing other national cinemas and their influence (an influence Tarantino himself
claims). I want to challenge this position by reframing the history of neo-noir from a
more expansive transnational purview, specifically by taking a non-Western tack. By
centering my analysis on a genre of non-Western cinema—and ultimately on a specific
Japanese film—the implicit hybridity of neo-noir is brought to the fore, yet this hybridity
is immanent to the postmodern return that is itself a translation of (and intervention into)
a historically situated transnational form of aesthetic refiguration, that is, classical film
noir. It seems to me essential to acknowledge the transnational influences that in fact
created a confluence of neo-noir from East to West, and back again with the hypothesized
global influence of *Pulp Fiction*. The emergence of neo-noir in the nineties in the West
owes much to the influx of films from the East, which emergent directors (notably
Tarantino) were both schooled in and from whom they openly borrowed. If *Pulp Fiction*
is to be seen as an exemplum of transnational cinema it is due in no small part to the
"noir vision" he gleaned from mid-century popular Japanese cinema—most significantly,
the films produced by the Nikkatsu studios.

Notably, early French film criticism—around the time the critical term "*film noir*" first came to light—lauded the "sex and violence" of mid-century Japanese cinema as early as 1967, as part of the same popular transnational culture in which American film noir was situated (Naremore 30).[15] That Japanese Nikkatsu cinema slipped from the Western consciousness is not surprising, considering that most of its titles were never released in the West, and the bootleg videos that found their way to the states and European cities were never dubbed or subtitled. It is very likely that the limited exposure these films received, inevitably by only a small cadre of film aficionados (like former video store clerk Tarantino), was only possible by watching the videos in the original language.[16] An account of popular Japanese postwar cinema is not only long overdue, but is mandatory if film noir and its aftermath are to be recognized as an influential forerunner to neo-noir. Including Nikkatsu Action cinema in the history of global noir, in fact, fundamentally destabilizes the currently accepted genealogy. Neo-noir is essentially routed considering that, chronologically, Nikkatsu action cinema was the first cycle of films to revisit and rework the codes and themes of film noir. Including East Asian cinemas into the study of neo-noir undercuts its periodization since Japan (and Hong Kong) produced recognizable noir films much earlier.

Little has been made of the fact that while both major U.S. studios and independents in the late sixties and seventies rediscovered "the seductive, subversive shadow-world of noir," the Nikkatsu studio had already established a large catalog of popular films that were often quite self-consciously informed by postwar American film noir (Langford 223). Indeed, as American neo-noir was just beginning to find its audience, the popularity of the Nikkatsu *Akushon*—the American term for "action"

translated into the katakana syllabary—was waning, with its own cycle of neo-noir and crime films coming to a close. Nikkatsu action cinema was a significant moment in the history of world cinema, as it knowingly acknowledged cinema itself, particularly its genres, as inherently transnational, and open to transcultural translation. "During their peak, from the late 1950s to the early 1960s, Nikkatsu action films evoked a cinematic world neither foreign nor Japanese, but a mix of the two, where Japanese tough guys had the swagger, moves and even long legs of Hollywood movie heroes" (Shilling 5). This cycle of films reflected the Western influences permeating Japanese culture after the war, including music, imported consumer goods, and of course, American cinema. Nikkatsu films were immensely popular at the time, and yet Western critical attention has paid almost no attention to this cycle of films, and when they have, it has been to criticize the studio's infamous termination of one of its stable of directors—Seijun Suzuki. This critical disregard is due in no small part to these films' internationalized aesthetic; their distinctive hybridity made it impossible to read these films as representative or reflective of (a unitarily defined) Japanese culture. They were in fact typically regarded as "un-Japanese" as Nikkatsu action directors borrowed a "glamorized view of national life" from Hollywood, as well as taking "cues from Duvivier, Fellini, Godard and other European models" (Schilling 7). In this way, these films represent one of the first instances of a thoroughly transnational aesthetic, producing an intentionally hybrid body of work.

The influence of film noir on Japanese cinema can be traced to the same sources as its impact on France, since both countries experienced the influx of Hollywood releases after the war's end. In fact, "Nikkatsu returned to prosperity in the early post-war

period by screening Hollywood films in its theatres. Starved for entertainment and wowed by Hollywood glamour and production values, Japanese audiences crowded in, doubling the box office for foreign films between 1951 and 1953" (Schilling 13). Nikkatsu studio immediately seized the opportunity to make similar films to sate the public's appetite, releasing its first title in 1956.[17] Its earliest titles utilized the generic codes of film noir, which were already perceived as transnational. For example, its 1958 hit *Red Quay* was conceived as a loose remake of *Pépé Le Moko* (1937), and was again remade by the Nikkatsu studio as *Velvet Hustler* (a.k.a., *Like a Shooting Star*, 1967) with the "impudent hitman modeled on Jean-Paul Belmondo's character in *Breathless*" (Schilling 23). Although *Red Quay* "set the pattern for the 'borderless' (*mukokuseki*) action films that would become a Nikkatsu mainstay," the studio's most obvious neo-noir*s* were its sub-genre films entitled *mood action*, "a sub-genre of the mid-1960s that combined elements of action and romantic drama, in a noir-ish setting. The best known example is Toshio Masuda's *Red Hankerchief* (1964)" (Schilling 154). Mood action films often revolved around star-crossed lovers, and/or the melodramatic troubles of a private detective. The films employed the trope of the hard-boiled detective or cop, who is made vulnerable by the events of the plot, frequently initiated by a woman. Yet, the "borderless" films were rife with noir details and *mise-en-scène,* exemplified by the *Tales of a Gunman* series (1960).

This specific example of transnational East Asian neo-noir is in fact not exceptional, as it also appeared almost simultaneously in Hong Kong, which in turn influenced the cinema of South Korea. The non-Western occurrence of neo-noir makes its categorization as an American phenomenon untenable. To claim Tarantino especially

as a progenitor of global noir rewrites film history from an (ahistorical) American-centric position. Such a gesture refuses to recognize the ways film noir had a near-simultaneous impact on several corners of the globe. This has significant repercussions, as it brackets some of the more important functions and effects of film genre. As the popularity of Nikkatsu action films imply, noir is a preferred genre of transnational translation. Kim Soyoung, for one, argues that genre operates as a contact zone between national cinemas of all kinds. Her example is of a particular contact zone between Hong Kong action film and Korean *Hwalkuk*: "The Hong Kong-Korea connection was formed in the late 1960s and has persisted to the present day. The 1970s were a pivotal time when two modes of connections were established: co-production (including funding, use of locations, co-directing, and mixed casts) and generic appropriation. Hong Kong action itself resurfaced in the Korean market toward the end of the 1980s with the release of… 'Hong Kong Noir'" (Kim 97). This example, along with the history of Nikkatsu action cinema, indexes a pan-Pacific occurrence of the genre that predates nineties American and British neo-noir and even stretches back before the release of some of the most frequently cited titles of seventies noir.

For these reasons, Kim argues that "genre theory based upon the Hollywood model is insufficient to cope with a non-Hollywood action genre like Korean *Hwalkuk*" because, as she stresses, it is "a composite form of colonial, semi-colonial, and post-colonial contacts" (Kim 101).[18] American genre criticism, or even theories of national cinema generally, fail to account for the ways the genre of noir operates as a transnational contact zone, one specifically instrumental in contesting colonial structures of power and their aftermath. To theorize this contact zone, I suggest neo-noir be redefined as a

transnational genre, one precisely subversive because of its global consciousness. Indeed, some of the most important analytical insights about American neo-noir reflect this global consciousness. For example, the historicist argument that neo-noir emerged from "post-Vietnam disillusionment, the rise of international terrorism, and the growing disparity between the very rich and the very poor" aptly describes these genre films, both East and West (Ron Wilson 151).[19] Wilson's thesis speaks to the reasons why neo-noir (American, Japanese, Hong Kong or Korean) is inherently transnational, addressing "contemporary issues in global culture and society" in its geopolitical aesthetic. Neo-noir, therefore, is not so much a genre of American cinema as it is a preferred contact zone of world cinema. Indeed, it is becoming more and more evident that genre films in general (wuxia, noir, action-adventure, martial arts and the like) are constitutive of world cinema because they tend to be "the most popular channel of transnationalism" as well as an archetypal mode of transnational production (Teo 191).

Therefore, the reinvention of genre studies involves taking the study of world cinema as its central project. Akin to the revised aims of literary studies, "the study of world [cinema] might be the study of the way in which cultures recognize themselves through their projections of 'otherness'" (Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* 12).[20] This emphasis on comparative cultural analysis is crucial to transnationalizing film genre criticism—and necessary to its radicalization. The realities of postmodernism and globalization make comparative criticism inescapable. For example, Stephen Teo underscores these structural factors in his discussion of East Asian cinema to counter the "postcolonial mentality that informs Western analysis of Asian genre cinema along the lines of the 'purity' of genres" (197).[21] A comparative approach demands critical

concepts that move beyond the more parochial terms (his examples include "Orientalist" and "un-Japanese") that hinder transnational film studies. To rethink film genre as a cultural contact zone, Teo proposes the concept of "globalized postmodernism," which refers "to the globalizing impulse of postmodernism, as opposed to a postmodernist strategy adapted from local consumption (which may be referred to as 'regionalizing postmodernism'). A globalizing postmodernism implies the process whereby narrative conventions of genre films are reconstructed to take account of a new global entertainment economy" (198). Neo-noir exemplifies such globalizing postmodernism because "in restaging the past," as its film noir codes do, "it introduces other, incommensurable cultural temporalities into the invention of tradition" (Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* 2). In order for film studies to take account of these very "incommensurable cultural temporalities," it has to both rethink the teleological project of film history and reinvent its "traditions," such as genre.

Neo-noir exemplifies the processes of globalized postmodernism, reconstructing classic film noir's border and boundary anxieties to articulate the cross-cultural tensions endemic to specific contact zones where a culture's projections of 'otherness' take place (such as the transnational entertainment industry). To this extent, global noir—as a genre of world cinema—might well be seen to originate in the late fifties with the phenomenon of the "border film." The prevalent anxieties over boundaries that were implicit to classical film noir come to the fore in neo-noir as constitutive of its aesthetic and narrative concerns; in other words, neo-noir brings film noir's geopolitical unconscious to filmic consciousness. Border films, especially, mine the national crises and confrontational neuroses born out of the sudden awareness of a nation-state's boundaries

made evident by wars and conflicts. Indeed, the advent of border cinema can be said to

have transformed film noir into neo-noir. The most famous of the American border films

is Orson Welles' *Touch of Evil* (1958)—a film Stephen Heath and William Anthony

Nericcio after him associate with the filmic emergence of border discourse (Nericcio 48).

This border discourse structures several neo-noirs—most explicitly *Chinatown* (1974)*,*

Blade Runner (1982)*, The Border* (1992)*, El Mariachi* (1992), and *Lone Star* (1996).

While Welles was plumbing noir anxieties about national borders, Nikkatsu

studios' were eradicating borders altogether on the other side of the Pacific. Its

"borderless" action films were exploding the borders of genres and nations alike, creating

oxymoronic Eastern (or "Miso") Westerns or pushing noir conventions to unimaginable

limits. In fact, Suzuki's "radical deconstruction of the hard-boiled genre," *Branded to Kill*

(1967), was produced by Nikkatsu studio (though it also got him fired) (Schilling 145).

What these transnational noirs share, however, is a critical reworking of noir conventions

expressed—either aesthetically or narratively or both—as a refutation of the sanctity of

national borders. Nikkatsu action cinema, for instance, refuses to abide distinctions

between "the East" and "the West," opting for a "borderless cosmopolitan style and

stance," "where the Tokyo streets, Yokohama docks and Hokkaido plains took on an

exciting, exotic aura, as though they were stand-ins for Manhattan, Marseilles or the

American West" (Schilling 5). Such borderless cosmopolitanism will also come to

describe several hybrid science fiction noir's, like *Alphaville* (1965), *Dark City* (1998)

and, of course, *Blade Runner* (1982). Science fiction allows transnational noir to explore

the limits of border discourse, imagining worlds without borders or remapping borders in

new ways.

Border discourse in transnational noir presents a cognitive map of the shifting terrain of globalized postmodernism. Cognitive mapping, as Colin MacCabe introduces it, is "the most crucial of the Jamesonian categories…for Jameson, cognitive mapping is a way of understanding how the individual's representation of his or her social world can escape the traditional critique of representation because the mapping is intimately related to practice" (xiv). That Jameson develops this hypothesis in the analysis of cinema makes it all the more pressing a concept for film studies. "The conception of cognitive mapping," according to Jameson, "has…the advantage of involving concrete content (imperialism, the world system, subalternity, dependency and hegemony), while necessarily involving a program of formal analysis of a new kind (since it is centrally defined by the dilemma of representation itself)" (*Postmodernism* 189). The mapping, remapping and un-mapping of borders that is a central preoccupation of transnational noir is an attempt to represent the inconceivable and borderless world system that is globalized postmodernity. Transnational noir, in other words, is a specific filmic manifestation of what Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake define as "the *transnational imaginary* [which] enlivens and molests the textures of everyday life and spaces of subjectivity and reshapes those contemporary structures of feeling" often referred to as postmodern (2). In this way, the appropriation of noir abroad is not surprising, as the genre offers established pathways for imagining these very structures of feeling, particularly through characterization and its various embodiments. Through noir's iconographic characters, "a situational representation on the part of the individual subject to that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of society's structures as a whole" is made available, if only in part (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 51).

The next section examines a specific example of global noir, undertaking a formal analysis of the transnational imaginary and its aesthetic articulation of cognitive mapping in the contemporary genre film.

Refiguring Noir: Style and Substance in *The Most Terrible Time in My Life*

On the cover of the recently released *Kino* DVD of Hayashi Kaizo's film, *The Most Terrible Time in My Life* (1993), is a black and white photograph of Japanese pop star Masatoshi Nagase standing in front of a movie theater with a hand covering one eye and above him a neon sign that beams "CinemaScope" high over his head. Filmed in glossy black and white, the movie is an homage to—and critical revision of—classical film noir as well as a tribute to its epigone, the French New Wave *and* Japanese Nikkatsu action cinema. Its appropriation of noir sensibilities moves beyond genre codes to naming its detective protagonist Hama Maiku, "my real name," as the character states in each installment of the Hama trilogy.[22] This allusion to Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer sets in motion a simulacral world where the style and substance of Hollywood "B" movies have gone global. Yet, in transposing noir motifs, such as the hard-boiled detective, corrupt police and the chaotic underworld of crime that eludes the law to contemporary Yokohama, the film presents a very different aesthetic response to the cultural and economic changes wrought by the Second World War and its aftermath. The affective intensities produced by the loss of the war, the West's enforced reconstructions of Japanese society, and the traumatizing impact of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki haunt Hayashi's noir sensibility, emerging from the subtext into the foreground of the narrative. Hayashi's film moves from—and through—both parody

and pastiche to *refiguration:* "refiguration takes formal elements of past styles and brings them forward into a contemporary context, resulting in a sometimes disquieting synthesis of past form and present context. At work is a process of refiguration, or conversion: the past form is converted into a sign of the present, while the present is historicized through its containment within a formal element taken from the past" (Barbiero 11). Refiguration, to this extent, can be said to name a specific aesthetic of cultural instance of cognitive mapping.

The trilogy's explicit intertextuality—significantly placing Hama's office in a movie theater—highlights cinema as a privileged forum for the refiguration of an epistemological crisis in modern Japan, a Japan, as the commentary on the DVD package makes plain, "with vanishing borders." These vanishing borders are the central thematic concern of the first film of the trilogy, *The Most Terrible Time in My Life*. The film is a distinctly transnational example of generic appropriation; a Japanese and Taiwanese co-production, it is the concrete manifestation of postmodern globalization. Its narrative is concerned with the relationship between Japan and Taiwan while aesthetically referencing American film noir and its specific generic properties. The fascination with American style—not just in Hollywood's glossy, wide-screen genre films but the generalized Westernization of Japanese culture that followed the loss of the war—is inseparable from the substance of transnational violence and disruption of cultural alliances the film represents. At first, the film appears a celebration of style, embracing a hip nostalgia for the "cool" aesthetic of American postwar film and the international, cosmopolitan sensibilities of Japanese Nikkatsu Action cinema. The first installment in the Hama trilogy is in fact openly marketed as pastiche, as the back of the second DVD

puts it, "a dazzling crime film dripping with retro gloss and irreverent post-modern cheek." Yet, the film's unique affective intensity quickly unseats the cool detachment that it, at first, seems to exhibit. In its retro-noir stylization, *The Most Terrible Time in My Life* aims at the substance of the cycle of films generally associated with postwar America, utilizing classic noir's "world of existential, epistemological, and axiological uncertainty" to cognitively map the disorientation of contemporary Asian Pacific geopolitics (V. Sobchack, "Lounge Time" 133). Hayashi resituates the generic signifiers of noir in a transnational imaginary from the other side of the Pacific to address the geopolitical aftermath of the war and its lingering instabilities. Subverting its apparent pastiche of noir style, the film places the historical and political substance of noir under scrutiny from the side that "lost."

The release of *The Most Terrible Time in My Life* was quickly followed by *Stairway to the Distant Past* (1995) and *The Trap* (1996). Despite their bleak tones, increasing surrealism and opaque themes, Hayashi's films were quite popular in Japan, and spawned a few made-for-television movies centered on the travails of "Mike Yokohama."[23] The trilogy's popularity, however, is less surprising when compared to the fame of other Japanese films, exemplified by the unsurpassed success of Hiyao Miyazaki's *Princess Mononoke* (1997), which refuse to "provide a happy form of closure"; Hayashi's Hama series falls in line with other films that reject a conventional approach to Japanese history and stand in "contrast to the idealized myths of harmony, progress, and unproblematic homogeneous Japanese people (*minzoku*) ruled by a patriarchal elite that held sway in Japanese textbooks and postwar Japanese history" (Napier 476-7). Hayashi's films, though a very different type of genre film than the

animated quest-romance of *Princess Mononoke*, echo its "vision of cultural

dissonance…. By confronting and even subverting traditional notions of the past…to

provide a provocative, heterogeneous, and often bleaker view than the conventional

vision of Japanese history and identity" (Napier 478). Notably, Hayashi's trilogy, though

quite popular at home, failed to garner attention in the West, no doubt due in part to its

un-Japanese themes and style. Unlike the neo-noirs produced elsewhere, the film remains

critically ignored, I would speculate, because it does not cohere to what has been

established as the conventions of Japanese national cinema. "Marginalized by any

consideration of cinema based on dominant characteristics of national style," Hayashi's

films exemplify "the way that visual and rhetorical figures cut across cultural boundaries

to generate new possibilities of meaning" (Nygren 222). Like the Nikkatsu action cinema

that it is modeled after, *The Most Terrible Time in My Life* eludes critical attention abroad

precisely because of its refusal to replicate the conventions of national style, preferring

instead a transnational aesthetic. The established practice of conflating Japanese art

cinema with Japanese national cinema continues to shape Western tastes, explaining the

dearth of criticism on Japan's popular films, like those of Nikkatsu studios as well as

Hayashi's films, which opt for a "borderless" aesthetic.

Hayashi's *neo*-noir returns to the plot and style of American noir to hybridize the

form, mining its ambivalences and disavowals. The film's intervention works, however,

not by speaking back to the West to assert Japan's national history, but instead by

subverting any totalizing claims to a unified, national culture. *The Most Terrible Time in

My Life* revisits film noir tropes, such as the hard-boiled detective, the f*emme fatale* and

the underworld, to personify the elusive forces of postmodern globalization. Yet, it does

so by anchoring it to the material effects of global conflict, specifically Japan's (and

Taiwan's) "terrible time" after the Second World War. Hayashi's film, in this way, is part

of a long tradition of Expressionist cinema, whose aesthetic experimentations inscribe the

psychic and concrete costs of war. *The Most Terrible Time in My Life* brings the past

mood or sensibility of noir into the present transnational context, suggesting an anxious

national allegory for Japan's new position in the first world economy. The film at first

appears to be obsequious in its self-conscious engagement with film noir, replicating "the

clearest manifestation of American Expressionism…the successful marriage of the film

noir style and the widely popular hard-boiled detective story" (Schatz 112). Indeed, the

film's debt to both generic and stylistic elements is overtly acknowledged in the photos

hanging in Hama's office: an image of Humphrey Bogart, signed "Sam Spade," a sketch

of Jô Shishido (who himself uses the symbol of the ace of spades to signify the name

given to him by audiences of his hitman films—"Ace Joe"), and a still of Jeanne Moreau

from *Elevator to the Gallows* (1957). Although each image indexes a cycle of

transnational noir—American Expressionist, French New Wave, and Japanese Nikkatsu

action cinema—taken together, they suggest the pre-existing internationalism of noir's

generic and visual language—a language, of course, indebted to early German

Expressionist cinema as well.

    The Most Terrible Time in My Life does not simply reflect but rewrites the

historical past in the present, transcribing noir's iconography within the terms of cultural

difference in the process. Bhabha argues,

> The enunciation of cultural difference problematizes the binary division of past and
> present, tradition and modernity, at the level of cultural representation and its
> authoritative address. It is a problem of how, in signifying the present, something
> comes to be repeated, relocated and translated in the name of tradition, in the guise of

a pastness that is not necessarily a faithful sign of historical memory but a strategy of representing authority in terms of the artifice of the archaic (*The Location of Culture* 35).

Hayashi's film appropriates the filmic structures of noir to translate and rehistoricize its

signs to fit the contours of cultural and national difference. Although the film is set in the

present day, it is intertextually presented as, literally, the flipside of *The Best Years of*

Our Lives (1946), William Wyler's Oscar-winning social realist depiction of post-war life

for the returning U.S. soldiers. The title sequence consists of a close-up on a movie

theatre sign that displays the title, "*The Best Years of Our Lives*," but the sign then flips

over to reveal the other title—"*The Most Terrible Time in My Life.*" Hayashi's film opens

with *The Best Years of Our Lives* to address the complex political relationship the war

produced internationally. The linguistic shift from "best" to "most terrible" points to

ways the cultural differences between the West and the East undercut any reading of the

film as simply homage or "faithful sign" precisely because historical memory intercedes

into the re-citation of the past (genre tradition) in the present (postmodern translation).

Hayashi's film is literally and figuratively the underside of *The Best Years of Our*

Lives: "the United States emerged from World War II with its industry intact, its political

influence paramount in every corner of the world, and its economic weight felt in

shattered nations from Japan to France. The sense of nearly limitless opportunity runs

through *Best Years* and serves as a balance to the otherwise bleak tone of the film"

(Jackson 156). *The Best Years of Our Lives* works as a counterpoint to and historical

frame of reference for *The Most Terrible Time in My Life*, presenting a dialogic relation

between the films that turn on the transnational, cross-cultural and trans-historical effects

of the war on the Asia/Pacific—the obverse of "limitless opportunity." *The Most Terrible*

Time in My Life specifically cites of *The Best Years of Our Lives*, even though the film

itself was not part of the noir genre. However, Hayashi's film cites the popular (and Academy Award-winning) film to challenge its iconic position in American film history and what it represents, since American film noir was, to a certain degree, critically distanced from mainstream cinema. *The Most Terrible Time in My Life*, rather, utilizes noir aesthetics to confront what the most subversive classic film noir could only insinuate—the dropping of the bombs on Japan and black shadow it cast around the globe (but especially on the future of Japan itself) (Jackson 160).[24] If, in other words, the war nostalgically becomes "the best years of our lives" within the American worldview, it certainly figures as "the most terrible time of my life" within the Japanese national imaginary.

The threat of atomic annihilation begins to explain why "a certain mode of hysteria and overwroughtness becomes the norm of…noir's everyday life" (V. Sobchack, "Lounge Time" 163). Although never articulated in the substance of its content, the horror of atomic devastation lurks as the historical undertow of film noir (and is even directly addressed in the "popular," non-noir *The Best Years of Our Lives*). In this way, transnational noir—dating back to the "mood action cinema" of the Nikkatsu studios—is defined not by taking noir abroad, but by the excavation of the genre's own global unconscious: "in the background, underlining each of the world's political and economic troubles, was the new force that had been released over Hiroshima in August 1945" (Jackson 160). Indeed, it has been argued that the film noir cycle ends with *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955), "the masterpiece of film noir," which comes closest to facing "the inhumanity and meaninglessness of the [American] hero," (notably, Mike Hammer, who is himself destroyed by the "great whatsit") (Schrader 168). Spillane's Hammer

personifies the ambivalence that troubles the authoritative history of the West and the violent ends to which it will go to consolidate its power. His violent persona, clearly threatened by every form of alterity, is synecdochic for the return of noir's repressed— the A-bomb itself and the xenophobic genocide it represents. *The Most Terrible Time in My Life,* with its central protagonist, Hama, dressed in vintage Western clothes and porkpie hat, is less homage than a critical mimesis of American noir. The film speaks back to the West, (subversively) citing its "tradition" to expose "the mote in the eye of history," the blind spot (of Atomic destruction) of classic postwar film noir that informed its bleak fatalism and hopeless mood (Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* 168).

Although set in Yokohama's historical present, *The Most Terrible Time in My Life'*s stylization evokes this particular past moment to stress the historical underpinnings that inform the contemporary socio-political scenario, a scenario of explicit cultural dissonance and contradiction that resonates with the free-floating boundary anxiety that is noir's affective register. The nihilism immanent to Japan's complex political culture is symbolized in the image of the neon "CinemaScope" sign, signaling a moment in Hollywood's past when films were meant to be "larger than life," and that sign is dwarfed by the even larger red title, "The Most Terrible Time in My Life." In "filmic works of trans-Pacific cultural production," epitomized by Hayashi's internationally funded global noir, "we can begin to see that…this fully uncanny Pacific of transnational globalization remains haunted by historical injustices, social unevenness, and racial phobias coming back from the postcolonial future" (Rob Wilson 268).[25] Yet, Japan's specific role in the Pacific makes Manichean claims to its victimization "by historical injustices" spurious. Scott Nygren makes this very clear: "Japan…violates postcolonialist models in several

respects: never a colony, it nonetheless suffered from Western domination; its resistance to domination translated directly into cultural isolationism, myths of ethnic superiority and neo-imperialist militarism; it survived nuclear attack and was transformed by the American Occupation paradox of forced democracy; and, as a non-Western culture, it is now a powerful participant in the 'First World' economy" (224). *The Most Terrible Time in My Life* is pointedly *transnational*, rather than postcolonial or global, because it attempts to map these very political contradictions and differentials of power endemic to Japan's complex place in global geopolitics.

Despite its dialectical relationship with the U.S. symbolized in the title sequence, the film itself centers on the belated return of a postcolonial, which in turn exposes Japan's own history of neo-imperialism. The film, in fact, introduces several Taiwanese characters, presenting an altogether different history of imperialism and domination, as Taiwan was once occupied by Japan only to be decolonized as an after-effect of the war. The proliferation of the nation's Others implies the endless "repetition or return of the postcolonial migrant" whose very presence works "to alienate the holism of history" (Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* 168). Yet, by centering the narrative of *The Most Terrible Time in My Life* on the ultimately doomed relationship between the Japanese detective and the Taiwanese gangster, a complex history of cultural affinities, postcolonial antagonisms and shifting international power relations are set in motion that are anything but black and white. In that the substance of Hayashi's film concerns Japan's own "history that happened elsewhere, overseas"—structured analogously with the American interwar occupation of Japan—the presence of Taiwanese immigrants in Japan "does not evoke a harmonious patchwork of cultures, but articulates the narrative

of cultural difference which can never let the national history look at itself narcissistically in the eye" (Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* 168). Masatoshi Nagase's covered eye on the front of the DVD, then, points to a myopic vision that characterizes much of Japan's ambivalent modes of national and cultural representation.

Still, the fact that these modes of representation are shaped by the structures and themes associated with the genre of noir suggests that the monocular vision of the film is not the same as the dominant perspective of the nation-state. Put another way, the noir conventions employed by the film redefine Hama's singular vision, precisely as a detective, the very character meant to personify and embody the "existential—the positioning of the individual subject, the experience of daily life, the 'monadic' point of view on the world" (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 53). This point of view may be blinkered but the monadic vision it creates reflects the genre's existential worldview, drawing attention to (without ever representing) the larger, ultimately inconceivable, world system. This is not to say that transnational noir functions as the political art Jameson hopes for but rather it poses a "representational dialectic" of postmodernity (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 54). In most film noir and neo-noir, this representational dialectic is personified in the characters of the detective and the *femme fatale*. Yet, in *The Most Terrible Time in My Life*, the "existential" is embodied in the characterization of the private eye and the gangster.

These two noir archetypes embody the essential qualities of the "tough" thriller: "driven by challenges to the mutually reinforcing regimes of masculine cultural authority and masculine psychic stability…[these archetypes] reveal an obsession with male figures who are both internally divided and alienated from the culturally permissible (or

ideal) parameters of masculine identity, desire and achievement. Regarded in this light,

film noir…emerges as a particularly accentuated and pressurized mode of hero-centric

fiction" (Krutnick xiii). That the doomed, disillusioned spirit of noir is embodied in the

character of Hama, the (vulnerable) hard-boiled detective, is crucial to the understanding

of the film as transnational allegory. Seen as the most significant generic incarnation of

noir style, "the hard-boiled detective film…assumed the viewpoint of the isolated, self-

reliant 'private eye.' Like the classic Westerner, the hard-boiled detective is a cultural

middle-man" (Schatz 123). It is in his role as cultural middleman that the refiguration of

the noir detective can be understood as a meditation on Japan's place in a changing Asia.

"Just as the detective must rearticulate concepts of justice, law, and order within the

diegesis and demonstrate that they are not the sole possession of the State," Jim Collins

suggests, "detective [cinema] must redefine those concepts discursively and demonstrate

that they are not the sole possession of any kind of 'official culture'…. The detective text

does not depoliticize socio-economic relations as much as it repoliticizes them according

to its own discursive ideology" (*Uncommon Cultures* 35). Within the transnational

imaginary, the detective (like Hama but also Dekker in *Blade Runner*, Sheriff Wade in

Lone Star, or Jake Gittes in *Chinatown*) repoliticizes justice by standing in for the state—

seeing in his monadic vision what it cannot—a long history of historical injustices

perpetuated in the name of the nation-state.

"Friendship Associations": The Gangster and the Detective

  The Most Terrible Time in My Life begins with an opening shot above and behind

a man, who is walking through the "Western Japanese Cinema Center," announced by the

sign framed in the establishing shot as he passes beneath it. This spatial designation takes on deeper meaning than simple geographical demarcation, as the conjunction of "Western" and "Japanese" names the fungible boundary between the East and West that the film examines. This boundary is ironically signaled as the man passes Hama's Nash Rambler, with California plates, parked in front of the movie theater that houses Hama's office.[26] Further underscoring the hybridity between the West and the East, the man is told by the ticket taker: "Today's movie is an American film." He enters the chiaroscuro lit office abutting the projectionist's booth, introducing himself as "Kim." Kim explains that he has turned to Hama because "the police are cold to foreigners." In response, Hama enters the frame in a two-shot, which appears to be lit from a single source except for the strobing effect of the projector bleeding into Hama's office, and offers Kim a cigarette, leaning in close to light both cigarettes. This intimate gesture recalls heightened film noir moments in which the protagonist is drawn in by the *femme fatale*, signaled in the lighting of her cigarette. Significantly, this act of intimacy with Kim introduces the central narrative structure of the film, that is, the critique of transnational politics through the queer intimacy established between Japan and its (national and cultural) Others.[27]

The film's beginning restages film noir's classic scenario of a client engaging a detective to set this film trope against the determinants of the present. This scene with Kim in the office is a prologue to the story, underscored by the fact that it precedes the title and its single credit, and the character does not reappear in the film again. It acts as a preface to the film proper to establish the noir terms the film will deploy, but in an ambiguous *mise-en-scène*. Hayashi's film juxtaposes this scene to the relationship Hama develops with Yang Hai Ping, which is clearly set in the present. The prologue sets in

place specific themes, however, which shape the narrative proper. Foremost is the short but pointed exchange that establishes Hama is not aligned with "the police," initiating an act of intimacy in opposition to the implied xenophobia of the law. Yet, because their intimacy is based on an economic exchange that grants the detective a cool detachment, the scene is citational rather than critical. Hama's position as a paid detective defines "his role as cultural go-between, of an individual willing to bridge the ideological chasm between the civilized and the criminal for whoever can pay his [fifty thousand yen a day]" (Schatz 128-9). The prologue announces Hama's primary function as a "cultural go-between" but does so by contrasting the central relationship between Hama and Yang that, explicitly, is not bought for a fee, replacing the cool detachment that fee grants with another set of (affective) ties altogether. Hama's cross-cultural relationship with Yang is not founded on economic exchange but rather is in the tradition of "the hard-boiled detective [who]…solves his cases with the personal commitment of somebody fulfilling an ethical mission" (Žižek 60). Notably, the difference between payment and "an ethical mission" motivating the work of a noir detective often turns on the presence of a *femme fatale*—a structural actant in the plot that I contend need not be filled by a woman.

The scene following Kim's office visit is in effect the start of the plot—at the mah-jongg parlor set clearly in today's Yokohama. Hama is gambling with his friends when he meets Yang Hai Ping, who is a waiter there. Yang takes their order, having trouble with the Japanese. The exchange is friendly, and Hama encourages his friends to help Yang with his Japanese after learning he is from Taiwan. This scene sets into motion the doubling conceit that is central to the noir thematics of the film. Yang doubles the groups' food order in his misunderstanding of Japanese. Their kindness in simplifying

their order, and encouraging applause when Yang eventually gets the order correct, is inversely reflected in the other occupied table's response to Yang's trouble with the language. As Hama's table looks on, the Japanese man (who is later revealed to be a yakuza member) at the other table, stands up from his table to confront Yang, threatening him, shouting, "You're in Japan; learn Japanese." Hama's friends comment that "things are heating up…better stay out of it," as the yakuza slaps Yang. As the scene unfolds, Hama's friends are talking among themselves, commenting on Hama's passivity—that he used to live "for this sort of thing"—and how he has changed since becoming a private investigator. Then, the yakuza draws a knife on Yang although he has apologized and despite the fact that, as he says, he has done nothing wrong. Hama, still sitting down, says to the Japanese man that Yang has apologized, literally acting as a cultural go-between to defray the situation. When Hama catches a glimpse of a hidden gun in Yang's waistband for which he appears to be reaching in response to the yakuza's escalating knife threats, he immediately jumps in between the men to stop Yang from using the gun only to turn around and have his pinky finger sliced off. The quick paced editing stops, brought to a halt by the stilled shot of the fallen finger lying on the floor, which is followed by what appears to be a jump cut to a shot of a panting but unmoving dog—only the voice of an out of frame little girl links the two shots. Following the dog who has run off with the finger down to street level, the friends are filmed from the dog's perspective as they coax the dog to drop the finger with a piece of meat. The scene ends with the sounds of the dog barking.

This scene sets the tone of the film as one that ricochets between intense violence and black humor, between homage and critical parody. Indeed, the castration metaphor of

the cut-off finger has such blatant psychosexual implications it tips over into parody. The actions that lead up to this employ psychosexual imagery inherited from film noir in which the circuit of desire is initiated by the appearance of the *femme fatale*. The entire scene in the parlor plays on fundamental noir tropes, as Yang is to all appearances the victim in need of rescuing by the detective hero. Yet, Yang, like so many gun-toting *femme fatales* before him, is armed, his demureness and subservience a screen for his phallic power. The hard-boiled detective is subsequently castrated in the attempt to rescue the presumed victim. The sexual anxieties manifest in classical film noir are frequently linked to the ideological wake of the war: "whether considered a genre or a style, the films circumscribed as noir are seen as playing out negative dramas of postwar masculine trauma and gender anxiety brought on by wartime destabilization of the culture's domestic economy" (V. Sobchack, "Lounge Time" 130). By invoking the postwar instabilities commonly associated with classical film noir, *The Most Terrible Time in My Life* traces contemporary anxieties about Japan's porous borders to the traumatic impact of the Second World War that continues to haunt Japan and its "friends." Noir's historical context as an aesthetic form that dealt with the anxieties produced by newly emancipated others, women specifically, is adopted in this film for the articulation of decolonization and the national anxieties this creates.

The relationship between Yang and Hama is overdetermined by the relationship between Taiwan and Japan, a relationship acknowledged throughout the film. The historical affinity between the two countries is grounded in "a shared history, which began when Taiwan became the first colony of Japan; common values; economic ties; strategic alignment; and political and social networks" (Lam and Chong 250). The film's

narrative arc is built around the characters' burgeoning friendship against the wishes of those aligned with national interests, either the corrupt Japanese police or the gang members who warn Yang, "friendship…can be dangerous." Indeed, this bond at the center of the film allegorizes strengthening transnational ties, particularly in the nineties when the "friendship associations…between Japanese and Taiwanese parliamentarians' strengthened despite protest from Beijing" (Lam and Chong 256).[28] Friendship between Japan and Taiwan is in fact dangerous to the precarious political alliances in the region because Mainland China has made it quite clear that Japan's involvement with Taiwan, especially in its ambition for independence, will jeopardize the bonds between Japan and China. That this film was made in cooperation with the government of Taiwan lends some credence to the thesis that the film functions as a transnational allegory refiguring these very political tensions. Although the film is set in the nineties, its critical citation of noir style links the film's substance to the years between 1945 and 1958 in which a dramatic restructuring of Asia took place, specifically the ascendancy of China's hold over Taiwan in the wake of Japan's decolonization and loss of the war.

Because the film utilizes most, if not all, of the features of film noir, from flashback and voice over, to investigative structure and *femme noire,* we are provided a proliferation of points of view (conveyed in these various features) that indicate a complex transnational context that is both cross-cultural and trans-historical. After the chance meeting of Hama and Yang, Yang feels guilty about Hama's pinky (now reattached), so he hires him to find his brother, Yang De Jian, who—unknown to Hama until much later in the story—is to be assassinated by Hai Ping for joining a rival gang. Hama's investigation uncovers a story of *yakuza*, "illegal aliens," and violent crime.

Hayashi's film borrows the private eye/gangster narrative from the history of classical

film noir to map out this investigation: "Gangsters feature strongly as antagonists in the

private-eye films, and noir clearly takes over the subject of organized crime and criminal

conspiracy from the gangster cycle of the early 1930s" (Langford 215-16). But what

makes the film a subversion of the noir form is that it indicts the origins of the corrupt

world of crime rather than demonize it in the figure of the gangster. Therefore, Yang is

not the antagonist but rather the co-protagonist, hybridizing the gangster with the role of

the *femme fatale*. The film implements multiple framing devices to constellate noir

themes in terms of the postwar restructuring of East Asia, which is embodied in the film's

doubled narrative of gangster and private eye.

Desser asserts: "Global noir insists on the unrelated nature of these multiple

characters. Chance, fate, or coincidence rules" (532). However, if such films are

interpreted as an aesthetic instance of globalized postmodernism, chance and fate are

motifs that stand in for, or are markers of, the inconceivableness of the world system. The

chance meeting of Yang and Hama instigates a plot that places two of film noir's genres

in dialogic relation—the hard-boiled detective and the gangster film—but their fates are

orchestrated by broader forces of transnationalism. No wonder then, "a transnational

syndicate of crime, drugs, and illegitimate profit haunt" the transnational genre film,

"where crime seems a transnational given," meant to convey "the masculinist *mise-en-

scène* of post-national globalization" (Rob Wilson 267). The fusion of the Yakuza

gangster genre with the hard-boiled detective genre specific to *The Most Terrible Time in

My Life* articulates the ways in which global monetary circuits have deterritorialized

national and cultural borders. Hama is told by his mentor how immigrants come to Japan

to join yakuza gangs, which is equated with cultural assimilation in the film, to become rich through criminal means (although, through the subversive characterization of the Yang brothers, this is shown to be a false accusation). The gangster film is hybridized with the noir detective in such a way as to have the gangster drama stand in for "the new multinational organization of late capitalism" which, in the form of a postcolonial allegory, "problematizes the framework of the nation state" (Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* 38).

After the detective is brutally beaten by De Jian's gang, Hama's mentor, Jô Shishido, chastises Hama for his close relationship to Yang. In a postmodern gesture, the famous Japanese actor goes by his real name in the film, blurring the lines between the actor and the Nikkatsu Action characters he has portrayed. Shishido informs Hama that Kanno, the South Korean leader of the gang, the "New Japs," has ordered the hit on their own assassin, De Jian, in order to "restructure Asia," in effect starting a gang war between the New Japs (Japan) and the Dragon Union (China). This intricate plot structure, and the explicit symbolism of the gang names, suggests the equally complex historical restructuring of Asia following the war, especially between the two powerful nation-states, Japan and China. Underscoring this transnational allegory is the scene in which Shishido provides the central exposition, which has the effect of framing the competing perspectives on the (gangland) restructuring of Asia as a generational issue. Shishido, himself an icon of early postwar Japanese crime films, tells Hama that "I am too old to play Dad," and warns Hama not to get involved, to which Hama angrily replies that he does not "need permission."[29] The two embody Japanese generational positions with regards to Taiwan. The scene ends with Shishido taking his leave with a military

salute with his cane. While Hama acts out of the younger generations's more sympathetic stance toward Taiwan, Shishido represents the immediate postwar position informed by the pacifism institutionalized in the country's 1947 Fundamental Law of Education, which continues to influence Japan's position of non-interference between Taipei and Beijing.

At first unknown to Hama, Yang Hai Ping is a member of the Dragon Union, come to assassinate his own brother for "turning his back on China." De Jian has left the Dragon Union to join the "Black Dogs." Although De Jian's gang is referred to by characters representative of Japan, like Shishido and the police captain, as the "Black Dogs," they call themselves the "New Japs," because the gang consists of Chinese and South Korean immigrants naturalized as Japanese citizens. This changeable transnational identity, provided by the flows of late capitalism and allegorized as international organized crime, is directly addressed when De Jian mentions he would like to visit Beijing, and a fellow gang member tells him he can now as a naturalized Japanese citizen. It is the concept of citizenship that underpins Hama's relationship to Yang, making the detective and the gangster "brothers." The detective's "ethical mission" he feels towards Hai Ping symbolizes Japan's debt to its former colony. As Yang Hai Ping and Hama grow closer, notably by going to that quintessential noir locale, the local bar, Yang tells Hama that his only family is De Jian, and Hama says all he has is his sister, "parents dead, same as you." Yang corrects him: "No, not the same," proceeding to tell him that his parents are not dead but rather they abandoned the brothers because of poverty, insinuating the traumatic history of compounded colonialisms. Yang's abandonment is not as much a metaphor for Japan's decolonization as it is metonymic of

the colonial effects of Japan's occupation, which aimed at providing an "agricultural surplus," but did so "in ways that destroyed traditional social bonds" (Armes 155). Indeed, the film's responsibility to this history is conveyed in the multiple points-of-view to which it is committed, providing not only the perspectives of the brothers, but also by filming in Taiwan to contextualize their own history against the xenophobic exposition provided by Shishido and others.

Neither of the Taiwanese gangster brothers is demonized, despite the fact that the film shows the extent of their violence, because Hayashi's film places their actions in a larger social context. Against the official explanations provided to (the audience stand-in) Hama is the brothers' narrative, which is literally cast (in filming techniques) as the negative of the official story. When Yang meets with his contacts and is told to kill his brother, De Jian, there is a close-up on his face and the film image fades to a negative still, reversing the black and white contrast. This cuts to an image of the countryside of Taiwan, where two young boys are shown hungrily eating food that they apparently stole. This is followed by another silent scene of the adult brothers, returning from a clearly more violent crime, fading out with an image of Yang remorsefully washing blood from his hands.[30] This flashback structure, situating a distinctly different story within the visual field of an altogether different space, allows for equivalence between place and character that underscores the transnational allegory. Yet, cinema, as I argue above, does not simply "reflect" historical material, but articulates its affective impact on a cultural psyche focalized through characterization. The parody and pastiche returns to film noir in the form of neo-noir has made it all too clear that noir was never simply a reflection of historical events, and that history's impact on the genre was never as direct as once

thought. Rather, "film noir's relations to its historical and social context can be best described not as metaphoric but as synecdochic and hyperbolic" (V. Sobchack, "Lounge Time" 146). The film utilizes the synechdochic qualities of noir to suggest the war's long-term effects in rearranging geographical and political space.

The flashback aligns the brothers with Taiwan itself in contrast to Hama's own synechdochic relationship to Yokohama.[31] Hama is metonymic of Yokohama itself—his name part of the whole—which is expressed in the first voice over, as he states: "I am a Yokohama detective," and reinforced through continual deep-focus shots that place Hama within, and equal to, the urban cityscape.[32] At first, Hama is aligned with Japan generally, as in the mah-jongg parlor, in which his commented on "changed" behavior—i.e., hesitance to fight—reflects Japan's own former aggressive, "neo-imperialist militarism," of which its colonization of Taiwan was a part. Yet, he is referred to more than once as a "stray dog"—the same term used to describe both Yang brothers—and, outside the immigration office, Lt. Nakayama scoffs at Hama referring to himself as a "citizen." Hama's metonymic relationship to Yokohama troubles his status as Japanese citizen, connecting him to the city's own syncretic history of occupation as far back as the nineteenth century when American warships arrived there, demanding that Japan open several ports for commerce. Yokohama's historical internationalism is the history of invasion and occupation, exemplified by its massive destruction in the Great Yokohama Air Raid, and its subsequent American occupation after the loss of the war. The history of the city does not require explicit reference but rather haunts the narrative, implied in the film's visuals of the city against which Hama takes his meaning. In representing the detective *and* the gangster, and the differing national geographies from which they glean

their meanings, Hayashi's transnational noir foregrounds a representational dialectic between Japan and Taiwan. In the case of *The Most Terrible Time in My Life*, however, this Asian/Pacific dialectic is queerly configured in the intense affectivity established between the detective, Hama, and the yakuza, Yang Hai Ping.

Queering the Noir Couple: The Detective and the *Femme Fatale* Redux

The film's focus on the bond between Hama and the Taiwanese "illegal" immigrant, Yang Hai Ping, translates the couple of forties noir into a figuration of postmodern geopolitical tension, but this tension does not substitute for the essential sexual anxieties that defined film noir. Rather sexual and geopolitical tensions coalesce; the critique of transnational politics is articulated through a seduction using film noir's generic codes. Throughout the film, Hama's closest companions ask: "why do you care so much" and "why are you so taken with this Taiwan guy," to which Hama responds vaguely, "there's something about him." By structuring the detective and the gangster not as antagonists but as "brothers," the film interlaces the generic codes of the *femme fatale* plot with the yakuza storyline. That is, Yang Hai Ping's bracketed narrative, including the flashback, occurs separate from his relationship with Hama; but in his growing friendship with Hama, the film evokes the classical noir trope of the seduction of the detective by the *femme fatale*. The appearance of the trope of the *femme fatale* is not too surprising, since "in many of the 'tough-guy' film noir thrillers…the generic story (of the crime or investigation) and the love story are often (con)fused" (Krutnick 4). What is notable is that this hybrid (in the postcolonial sense of the word as well as the "mixing" of genres) genre film centers on two men.

"Film noir," according to Patrick Fuery, "operates with a continuous undercurrent of seduction. Its entire narrative propulsion, character development, ideological perspective, and created world order circle around the one fundamental quality that people are seductive and seduced" (164). And yet the homoerotic enactments of such seduction have rarely been explored.[33] Indeed, without explicit, embodied gender difference, the *femme fatale* would appear to disappear from global neo-noir altogether. Desser suggests there are "three strands of neo-noir, only two of which, it seems to me, very much fit into global noir…. The first strand, which seems to me not a part of global noir…might be called 'The Stranger and the Femme Fatale.' Such films concern men who wander into situations where they come across a woman to whom they are immediately and fatally attracted" (521). However, I contend this strand is clearly present in global noir once a heteronormative framework is rejected. Hayashi's film, for instance, is more accurately described as "the stranger and the *femme fatale*" than it is "the couple on the run," or the "heist gone bad," but the former trope is unidentifiable within a hetero-presumptive interpretive model (Desser 522-3).[34] Indeed, in other contexts, it has been argued that "queerness" is a frequent component of contemporary Asian Pacific cinema. Hayashi's film returns to noir's generic features, including the *femme fatale*, dialogically from the present to connect the time of film noir to an altogether different space, that is, to the space of Asia/Pacific: "the space of Asia/Pacific cinema is the space of translation...In…the queer sights, the anachronistic temporality, and the inconclusive visions of the past and the present, films from the Asia/Pacific continue to disturb specularity" (Yau and Kim 285). If the codes of seduction are fundamental to film noir,

then the disturbance at the center of *The Most Terrible Time in My Life* is the seduction of the detective by the (male) gangster/*femme fatale*.

A critical mistake is made when one claims difference must always be scripted as sexual difference. This mistake has led genre critics to frequently overlook the queer connotations of classic film noir, much less its epigone. Such connotations, as both Chopra-Gant and Dyer point out, are evident in the peripatetic, often wholly unanchored, (mostly) bachelor heroes (certainly the private eyes), of the postwar cycle. The homosocial, if not homosexual, implications of the military restructuring of social space into all-male groups was in fact acknowledged after the war as a threat to the heteropatriarchal family. And this cultural anxiety translated to the screen (in films like *The Best Years of Our Lives*, for one). When the fluidity of sexuality is accounted for as a constitutive anxiety of film noir, the *femme fatale* plot looks quite different: "Film noir queerness suggests that the feminine is not coterminous with womanhood" (Dyer, "Postscript" 129). Indeed, this is what, for Dyer, makes film noir subversive—"most culture works to hold the line of sexual differentiation, but not film noir, or at any rate not always definitively" ("Postscript" 129). In this way, the *femme fatale* becomes a narrative figuration delinked from female bodies and is posited instead as a function of the noir plot in relation to the hero function (as the previous chapter discusses at length).

As noted above, the prologue to the film already introduces the *femme fatale* structure in the intimate act of Hama lighting Kim's cigarette. Moreover, this *mise-en-scène* places photos from other noirs, including an image of "Sam Spade" whose detective plots always center on the appearance of a *femme fatale*, usually in his San Francisco office. The film still of Jeanne Moreau also emphasizes the figure of *femme*

fatale, a favored figuration of the French New Wave. The films referenced in the photos on Hama's wall work to foreshadow the arrival of Yang Hai Ping, a mysterious figure to which Hama is inexplicably drawn. Yang is both narratively and visually coded in ways quite similar to noir's original *femme fatale*. Hama officially meets Yang outside the doctor's office, after having his finger reattached. They are filmed close together while Hama reassures Yang that it was not his fault, but warns him against using his "little toy" and taps Yang's gun, still hidden under his belt. By brushing off the danger of Yang's "little toy," Hama patronizes and, essentially, feminizes Yang (while actually touching the "gun" in his pants). The homoerotics of the exchange are underscored by the closing shots of the scene. When Yang asks his name, Hama looks directly into the camera in a shot-reverse-shot sequence, suturing the audience into Yang's position and thereby strengthening the empathy already established from his victimization in the previous scene. The return shot frames Yang's smiling face in close-up and soft key lighting, which mutes the edges of the frame. Such filming techniques are associated with sexual intimacy: "the closeness in the frame and intense, unspeaking shot, reverse-shot patterns, the musical surges and chromaticism…construct physical 'chemistry' in Hollywood cinema of the period" (Dyer, "Postscript" 124). Furthermore, these techniques are in stark contrast to the rest of the chiaroscuro lighting that predominate in the film and in noir generally.

The perfectly symmetrical framing of Yang in this scene is used only one other time, significantly in the narrative flashback to De Jian's meeting his wife, Huang Bai Lan, at the brothel. These analogous "romances" share visual and thematic qualities. Both Bai Lan and Hai Ping are almost always filmed smiling when interacting with their

constitutive partners. Moreover, both courtships are represented in scenes in which the characters try to speak to each other in the other's language. Bai Lan, who is Chinese but born in Japan, only speaks Japanese, so she and De Jian speak to each other through written words, since written Japanese utilizes characters adapted from Chinese. Mirroring this, Hama and Yang go out to a bar (or lounge) and as the night progresses, Yang teaches Hama some Chinese by writing words for him. The film posits Yang Hai Ping and Huang Bai Lin as doppelgangers, doubles of each other despite gender difference because their positions are relational. Gender difference is not as salient to these respective relationships as is their constitutive inscrutibility, which was tantamount to the characterization of the *femme fatale*: "It is not so much their evil as their unknowability…. Film noir thus starkly divides the world into that which is unknown and unknowable," and that which is known (Dyer 116). Both *fatales* are defined by this mystery; Huang Bai Lin states outright that she has no past, and Yang reveals little about himself, jeopardizing Hama's safety in the process.

Both Hama and De Jian are drawn into danger in parallel storylines, one following the formula of the detective and *femme fatale*, the other reiterating the classic noir plot of lovers on the run. What these noir tropes share is a seduction: "so heavily invested in seduction are the signs of noir film that almost anything [and anyone] can acquire this attribute. The codes of seduction permeate all actions, objects and exchanges; but for this to operate effectively there is also an unequal distribution of knowledge" (Fuery 164). Seduction, with its unequal distribution of knowledge, can be effected across gender and other differences (of which culture is key here), and this leads to a blurring of self, of identity, which is the crux of film noir and which is refigured in

transnational noir. In his relationship with Yang, Hama "loses the distance that would enable him to analyze the false scene and to dispel its charm; he becomes the active hero confronted with the chaotic, corrupt world, the more he intervenes in it, the more involved in its wicked ways he becomes" (Žižek 60). Hama's involvement escalates from loosing his finger, to a brutal beating, to almost getting killed by gang members (only to be rescued at the last minute by Yang Hai Ping riding in on a motorcycle). While for De Jian, his "seduction" leads him to switch gang allegiances, and as a "New Jap" he is renamed, becoming "Yamamoto-san", "the family man." Yet, this very change in "family" leads to the inevitable noir fate of both brothers.

The brothers' fate is their deaths, which is notably not at each other's hands despite the guns they aim at each other's heads. They are killed dishonorably by one of Kanno's lackeys. Hama races to save Yang Hai Ping—his beloved, in this context—only to arrive too late. This leads to an extended denouement in which Hama's melancholy is underscored by the silence of the soundtrack. The intense affective bond between the two is established by a seduction, but the film does not castigate the "*femme fatale*," Yang Hai Ping. Rather, it refigures his death to reflect the larger social order that caused it. The film's subversion of the *femme fatale* plot is not simply to queer it but to disavow the abjection of the woman that attends it. Hayashi's film instead gleans what is most subversive in the postwar cycle: "any film noir that allows us to 'know' the *femme fatale*…in the way we 'know' all major characters in novelistic fiction, is making trouble for itself. Once the woman is not the eternal unknowable, the hitherto concealed inadequacy of the hero is liable to become evident" (Dyer 116). By translating this to a transnational allegory, it is not the hero but the effects of postmodern globalization itself

that are shown to be inadequate. In this way, Hama's inability to rescue Yang Hai Ping has less to do with the hero's inadequacy than with an impotency to effect justice. "Most analyses of the genre," Jim Collins posits, "fail to recognize the crucial point that detective fiction as a discourse labors to intensify" the differences between "law and order" and "justice" (*Uncommon Cultures* 34). The private eye's position as a cultural go-between, and the ethical commitment to justice this entails, does, however, provide a critical perspective on globalized postmodernity, that is, "the most terrible" effects of our "time."

In the film's prolonged representation of Hama's grief, the vulnerability of the private eye—a quality typical of classical film noir—is appropriated to such ends. Hama is not seen as vulnerable to Yang's criminality and betrayal (as is commonly ascribed to postwar *femme fatales*), but instead utilizes the protagonist's vulnerability and grief to cognitively map the unspeakable grief (thus the silent soundtrack and absence of score) and inconceivable violence of the contemporary world system. To this end, *The Most Terrible Time in My Life* forwards a politics of affect in its critical revision of the bleak and nihilistic mood of classical film noir: "To grieve, and to make grief itself into a resource for politics, is not to be resigned to a simple passivity or powerlessness. It is, rather, to allow oneself to extrapolate from this experience of vulnerability to the vulnerability that others suffer through military incursions, occupations, suddenly declared wars, and police brutality" (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 23). This, I suggest, is a starting point for the formulation of contemporary transnational noir.

"The Time to Watch a Movie": The Chronotope of Transnational Noir

As Vivian Sobchack theorizes, "noir's characters are forever fixed in a transitional moment—stabilized negatively in space and time, double-crossed by history" ("Lounge Time" 166). That Hayashi's trilogy is directly concerned with historical temporality is immediately evident in his titles, both *The Most Terrible* Time *in My Life* and *Stairway to the* Distant Past. Notably, *The Most Terrible Time in My Life* does not situate itself in the historical period of classical noir, unlike other neo-noirs such as *L.A. Confidential* (1997) or the more recent Chinese example, *Blood Brothers* (2007). Rather it is the refiguration of noir's historicity that substantiates the film's stylistics, that is, its characters are forever fixed in a *transnational* moment, transforming the genre of film noir to fit a different time—and space. Cawelti, in his discussion of neo-noir, makes the argument that, "The present significance of generic transformation as a creative mode reflects the feeling that not only the traditional genres but the cultural myths they once embodied are no longer fully adequate to the imaginative needs of our time" (244). This is evident in the work of border films especially, as they exploit the dark tones and frequently brutal conclusions of classic noir to articulate the impossibility of easy (or even any) resolutions to cultural conflict. Like other border noirs such as *Chinatown* (1974) and *Touch of Evil* (1958), the storyline of *The Most Terrible Time in My Life* ends tragically, with consequences outside of the detective's control: his client/"brother," in the place of the *femme fatale* lover, "finally is killed and the villain gains control over the community" (Schatz 149).[35] These border films challenge the cultural myth that classical noir perhaps unconvincingly implied that justice is possible—often through the actions of the detective rather than the law—and order can be restored.

Like Orson Welles' *Touch of Evil*, Hayashi's film "is a true border text; it does not hide the wounds evident at the border" (Nericcio 57). Yet, how it conveys these wounds is particular to *transnational* border cinema, reformatting classic noir (and Japan's own border-less cinema) to expose the ideological sources of these "wounds." *The Most Terrible Time in My Life* transnationalizes noir by reworking the traditional genre's central conceit of the loss of home: "both wartime and the home front together come to form a re-membered idyllic national time-space of phenomenological integrity and plenitude" forming a "mythological chronotope" within the national imaginary (V. Sobchack, "Lounge Time" 133). The chronotope is an important concept for the "deep" analysis of film texts, particularly as it enables a way to talk about the discursive activity of films outside of reflectionist or Zeitgeist analytical frameworks. Sobchack and Robert Stam, among others, utilize Bakhtin's term to supplement the critical vocabulary of film theory, as it provides a way to map the conjunction of visual and thematic elements in narrative cinema. The concept of the chronotope, as Stam explains it, "with its suggestive linkage of typical décor…temporal articulations…and characteristic deployment of space," enables a critical examination of "time-space in the cinema, one that would simultaneously take into account questions of history, genre, and the specifically cinematic articulation of space and time" (*Subversive Pleasures* 41-2). A chronotopic examination of film noir addresses the historical and cultural contexts of the genre through its unique visual properties and frequently evoked geographies. "The baroque qualities of noir's visual style, the particularities of its narrative thematics and structure," Sobchack points out, "emerge as an intensified form of selection, foregrounding, and consequent exaggeration of actual cultural spaces charged with contingent temporal

experience" ("Lounge Time" 148). Global noir cites classical noir's chronotopes, reconfiguring the genre's original space-time to fit a transnational imaginary.

In traditional noir, the cultural mythology of the loss of home is figured in the filmic chronotope of the city. The cultural space of the city is particularly charged in classic film noir because it figured as the alienating other to the idea of home for which America supposedly fought. In the dialectics underpinning noir's ideological meanings is the contrast, often explicit, between the postwar period's myth of home and the alienating metropolis, a dichotomy particularly acute for the hard-boiled detective: "For the detective, the ideal social order is denied by the urban reality around him. The ideal represents not simply a promise, but a broken promise" (Schatz 128-9). This broken promise is underscored by the relationships formed in the city, specifically the detective and the *femme fatale*, who together form a non-reproductive couple signifying a failed affiliation, or the impossibility of "home." It is this complex cultural mythology—the loss of home and its metonymic couple situated in the urban landscape of the city—that is central to *The Most Terrible Time in My Life*. Hayashi's film returns to noir's chronotope dialogically from the present and from abroad to critique the "idyllic national time-space," revealing the international violence and un-homings that the American national imaginary worked to mask (such as the Atomic bomb, discussed above). In this postmodern and transnational refiguration of film noir, the felicitous chronotope of home is now denied by the alienating temporality of the nation-state, which is characterized by a "strange forgetting of the history of the nation's past: the violence involved in the nation's writ…the anteriority of the nation, signified in the will to forget" (Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* 160). In the classic form, this, in part, is the will to forget the

ramifications of international conflict, particularly the destruction of home epitomized by Hiroshima and Nagasaki. However, in Hayashi's film, it is expanded to address Japan's will to forget its imperialist past as well.

The Most Terrible Time in My Life returns to noir to comment upon its broken promise of home, translating it to fit "the perplexity of the unhomely, intrapersonal world" (Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* 12). The chronotope, therefore, can be understood as a signpost in cognitive mapping, because "the unhomely moment relates the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence" (Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* 11). The unhomely moment is exemplified by the film's denouement, with Hama's dialogue-free trip to Taiwan to visit the "home" where the abandoned brothers grew up—shown earlier in the film in Yang Hai Ping's flashback—and his subsequent silent return to the movie theater and his office (rather than his own home, which is never shown in the film). The traumatic histories these spaces evoke are the chronotopic indices of the "most terrible time," emblemized in the violent and tragic deaths of the transient Taiwanese brothers. Yet, the unhomely moment this ending represents is not simply "personal" but rather maps the "intrapersonal world" of Asian/Pacific spaces such as the serially colonized Taiwan and the forcibly internationalized Yokohama. Hayashi's film, to this extent, summons noir's time-space to interrogate the continuing geo-political affects of its cultural moment—that of international war and imperialist aggression.

In traditional noir, spatial configurations play a primary role in conveying postwar anxiety about the changing local/global social arrangements produced during and by the war. To this end, "the hero's search for a moral center, his concern over origins, his

purpose and end, have symbolic geographic coordinates" (Oliver and Trigo 212). These coordinates most often reflect the private/public split symbolized in the Manichaean division between home and city. Film noir frequently evokes the cityscape as a particularly potent chronotope signifying the loss of the home for the hero as well as the *femme fatale*.[36] Hama's association with the city space of Yokohama, underscored by the deep focus location shots of him in the city, is one of its more pronounced citations of classic film noir. However, Hayashi's film re-cites noir's urban mise-en-scène to subvert its central chronotope. Sobchack associates the geographic coordinates of the city in postwar cinema with the specific chronotope she names "lounge time"—"the spatial and temporal phenomeno-logic that, in the 1940s, grounds the meaning of the world for the uprooted, the unemployed, the loose, the existentially paralyzed" ("Lounge Time" 167). As a master chronotope of film noir, lounge time is the obverse of the mythological ideal of the home that haunts noir's baroque aesthetics and their significance. Lounge time, according to Sobchack, names the "dark and perverse" spaces of the "unfamilial, unfamiliar, and anonymous" city of film noir ("Lounge Time" 160).

The film's disturbing translation of American film noir's chronotope "captures something of the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world—the unhomeliness—that is the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations" (Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* 9). Yet, it must be stressed that this appropriation, while conveying the traumas of post- and neo-colonial un-homings of the global moment, refuses to be loyal to the genre's realist depictions, and the bleak and cynical tones that they invoke. In its postmodern revision, *The Most Terrible Time in My Life* conveys the "wounds" of global borders but rejects the overdetermined victimization that this would

seem to imply. In short, the film does not end with bleak tragedy of Yang Hai Ping and its synecdochic meanings but rather points to the possibilities produced by unhomely and cross-cultural experiences. "To be unhomed," as Bhabha clarifies, "is not to be homeless, nor can the 'unhomely' be easily accommodated in that familiar division of social life into private and public spheres" (*Location* 9). Transnational noir differentiates itself from classical noir along these lines, challenging the normative construction of "home" and its ideological implications in a post- and neo-colonial context.

The home is still absent in transnational noir but it has taken on larger meanings—to be un-homed in the world. In transnational noir's recitation of lounge time, the city and its representative spaces, such as the bar, the mah-jongg parlor and most significantly the movie theatre, are no longer "cold to foreigners." Rather, public and private spaces are reterritorialized to take on new meanings: "it is the city which provides the space [and spaces] in which emergent identifications and new social movements of the people are played out" (Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* 170). Indeed, the city in *The Most Terrible Time in My Life* is not alienating but rather makes possible the transnational brotherhood between Hama and Yang. Transnational noir, too, is nearly always set in urban locales but these spaces now carry a different affective charge. Lounge time in transnational noir, with its anonymous global cities, takes place in specific localities that register the "uncanny circulation and mix of locals, strangers, and non-locals; they are becoming 'translocalities' of semiotic interface all the more unbounded and open than the nation-state and its border-stalking citizenship criteria" (Wilson 250). In this way, home/city and private/public are reconfigured to fit a

transnational imaginary that defines home in ways incongruent with the definitions implicit in classical noir.

If "chronotopes are not merely descriptive but rather constitutive of what we apprehend as genre," than I suggest it is *cinema time* that constitutes transnational noir's generic chronotope (V. Sobchack, "Lounge Time" 151). In its cinematic self-awareness, transnational noir displaces "lounge time" with what I name *cinema time*, effecting a reversal of the meanings ascribed to noir's dialectic—lounge/home. It is by self-consciously referencing the movie as a movie that *The Most Terrible Time in My Life* substitutes film noir's master chronotope of "lounge time" with the chronotope of *cinema time*. In the cinematic practices of film noir, "the mind of its hero is often represented…as a room with symbolic architectural features;" in Hayashi's film, this room—specifically the detective's office—is clearly demarcated by the architectural features of the movie theater (Oliver and Trigo 212). Nowhere is this more evident than in Hama's last interaction with Yang against the backdrop of cinema itself. Played out in Hama's office as the sounds of an American western movie play in the background, he draws a gun on Yang to stop him from killing his brother. The two friends end up with guns aimed at each other as the recognizable sounds of a shoot-out bleeds into the office while the flickering lights of the projector from the film being projected for the movie audience beneath them strobes over the two-shot of the characters.[37] The intertextual framing presents a critical distancing from the inherited mythologies of the Western that mystify its imperialist history of violent conflict in the face of cultural difference. Hama's gun is aimed out of concern, out of the desire to *save* Yang Hai Ping from his noir fate— notably refusing the trope of the detective ultimately shooting the "criminal" and/or

femme fatale. Moreover, the "criminal" figure, Yang Hai Ping, has no desire to harm

Hama. The scene recodes the cliché of drawn guns as an act of love and "brotherhood"

rather than aggression and violence. By acknowledging the cinematic transformation of

this (film) mythology, the chronotope of *cinema time* transforms the movie theatre into

(literally) "the split-space of enunciation…conceptualizing an *inter*national culture, based

not on exoticism of multiculturalism or the *diversity* of cultures, but on the inscription

and articulation of culture's *hybridity*" (Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* 38).

    Cinema time in Hayashi's film stresses this hybridity by emphasizing its status as

a film, an emphasis that is ratcheted up with the intensification of the emotional stakes of

the narrative. While the film begins with clever, often tongue-in-cheek, references such

as the photos in Hama's office, it escalates the affective significance of these genre

citations as the story grows more critical of the violence underpinning transnational

hybridity. Thus, the narrative progresses from the confrontational scene in the movie

theater to the climax, which is punctuated by the assassination of Yang Hai Ping by his

"countryman" (if not his brother). The significance of Yang's death is conveyed in the

Baroque visuals that close; the glossy black and white image is washed over with red in a

non-diegetic visual effect that arrests the flow of the narrative.[38] This effect is one of

several the film employs in its self-aware neo-noir repertoire: "symptomatic of neo-

noir…is a Baroque self-consciousness imbuing it with an allusive force of citation…. As

a consequence the evocative force of the new movement can be said to depend on its

capacity to sift out degrees of cinematic consciousness among the viewing public"

(Conley 201). However, specific to transnational noir is the interlacing of filmic

citation—cinematic hybridity—with the concerns of cultural hybridity. The film's climax

exemplifies this as it brings together the Baroque realism of American film noir with the surrealistic, "Kubuki-esque touches" of a Seijun Suzuki film, specifically *Kanto Wanderer (Kanto Muchuku*, 1963)—the latter ending with "a climatic showdown, as primary colors flooded across the screen to express the hero's turbulent emotions" (Schilling 143). Such cross-cultural citational practices are definitive of transnational noir because they speak directly to an internationalized film community, which requires a polyglot film language.

Transnational genres, according to Naficy, often employ "spatial configuration in their films…driven…by structures of identification and alienation but also by eruptions of memory and nostalgia and the tensions of acculturation" (129). *The Most Terrible Time in My Life* foregrounds the cinema itself as the space for the expression and mediation of these very contradictions. It is significant then, that the conclusion of the film is not the conclusion of the plot. The bleak noir conclusion of the fade out from the blood red effect, which appears as if Yang's blood spatters the lens, does not end the film. Indeed, even the fade out on the long shot of Hama looking out over the landscape of Taiwan does not close the film proper. The movie ends instead with a crane shot through the Western Japanese Cinema Center, book-ending the opening, to dolly in once again on the movie theatre. The film's narrative ends with the fade out on Hama's office, with a close-up on the office sign flipping over to reveal the English words: "To Be Continued." This works as yet another layer of intertextual referencing, troubling any lingering sense of realism from the film's narrative conclusion. "To be continued" is almost Brechtian in its clever signal to the audience of the film's status as a film. Indeed, this shot of the door sign transitions to a Technicolor trailer for the next film, *Stairway to*

the Distant Past, in an illogical and unmotivated jump cut. This preview for *Stairway to the Distant Past* eventually closes with an extremely long-held image of Hama standing in front of the movie theater, with reflective confetti falling on him, highlighting the rich color cinematography. This magical image does not evacuate the traumatic power of Yang's death but rather draws attention to the power of cinema to both articulate this traumatic transnational unhomeliness and create an alternative "home" for the dislocated and uprooted.

Cinema time "speaks to the 'unhomely' condition of the modern world" through narratives of identification, recognizable generic characterizations, and images of cultural translation, frequently figured in iconography of film genre (Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* 11). By presenting images (and characters) of identification and cultural translation, the movie theater itself creates another "home" that brings together hybrid, dislocated subjects. *Cinema time*, therefore, stands as a felicitous chronotope in the transnational imagination. *The Most Terrible Time in My Life* employs the meta-generic qualities of neo-noir to celebrate this other home based on a love of film itself. Desser persuasively argues, "the ability and necessity of acknowledging the intertextual chain of references, borrowings, and reworkings—may be at the heart of global noir. For it involves filmmakers and film audiences in a circuit of acknowledgement—the ability of filmmakers to make references and their confidence in the audience's recognitions of them" (528). In Hayashi's film, the movie theater figures as the spatial representative of this cinephilia generally, although, as Desser points out, global noir is a privileged articulation of this as it "grows out of a specifically cinematic context" (527). In fact, I would suggest, that cinephilia is inherent to film noir because its own origins in the tough

crime thriller, particularly of the hard-boiled variety, were highly cinematic from the very beginning. As Krutnick points out, authors such as Hammett conceived of a writing style "heavily indebted to the representational force of the cinema…. The question of the 'hard-boiled' influence upon film noir should not, then, be conceived solely in terms of what the films drew from the books. Rather, it seems that 'hard-boiled' fiction was in itself a particular response to the influence of the cinema as the most innovative mode of storytelling in the modern age" (Krutnick 41).

However, while Desser stresses the generic properties of noir as especially conducive to the filmic expression of cinephilia, I would counter that emphasis might be placed on the global or transnational context of these films precisely because of the other "home" space carved out by *cinema time,* as a space-time specific to the transnational imaginary. According to Naficy, "the independent transnational genre…is driven by its sensitivity to the production and consumption of films in conditions of transnationality, liminality, multiculturality, multifocality and syncreticism"—a sensitivity not limited to a specific genre (120-121). Hayashi's film, to this extent, is more a paean to the cinephilia of global spectators than to a particular genre. Not only does it end with the blatant celebration of cinema, with confetti no less, but is opens by slyly chastising those who might not partake of *cinema time*. In the film's prologue, Hama's first client is told he must buy a ticket to see Hama; however, Kim insists he does not want to see the movie and therefore should not have to buy the ticket. As Kim leaves the theater, the ticket taker says disdainfully, to no one in particular: "to come to a movie and not watch it…if you can't take the time to watch a movie, why bother?" "The time to watch a movie," the film suggests, is of significant import. That this statement is directed in part to Kim (and, in

part, to us the viewers) particularizes this significance; *cinema time* takes place in the

movie theater, a uniquely globalized space that is not "cold to foreigners". Rather, it

provides an alternative home to global audiences, homed and un-homed alike. This is a

critical need in postmodernity, as Wilson asserts: "Uprooted into cosmopolitan flow, the

transnational self all the more longs for a sense of home, some psycho-geography of

postmodern belonging, and bond to a place" (260). Hayashi's *The Most Terrible Time in*

My Life pays homage to this time-space of the movie theater while simultaneously

critiquing the grounds for its necessity. The tension established between the two—

between international cinephilia and "the world system" that makes it possible (in other

words, its "global context") —underpins noir generally, but is uniquely available in the

transnational appropriation and refiguration of the classical genre.

The film's explicitly postmodern self-referentiality, in this way, remakes the

movie theater into a space of double articulation to critically subversive ends. If the

film's stylization plays on a complex and hyperbolic cinematic consciousness, its

substance depends on an altogether different consciousness, at once historical and

transnational. *The Most Terrible Time in My Life* exemplifies the myriad ways

transnational noir is, in every sense, a truly hybrid genre.[39] Yet, Hayashi's parodic

recitation of classic film noir (and the all other forms of Expressionist cinema that both

preceded and followed it, especially the visual and narrative excesses of Nikkatsu action

cinema) pushes the concept of "borderless" filmmaking into new conceptual and political

arenas. Wilson describes the terrain of such new cinematic geographies in terms of the

intersections of the global and local in the transnational imaginary: "the ghost of globality

(as it were) that haunts this uncanny localism may be a mode of deconstructive parody,

embraced inauthenticity, anti-essential secondariness, a kind of blessed belatedness to the

global popular culture that (in the transnational era) one can build something new upon if

not decenter, disturb, and topple" (264). By appropriating, deterritorializing and

subverting generic forms, transnational genres translate global popular culture into

cinema time, establishing another "home" for global spectators ("homed" and "un-

homed"), in the distinct time-space of the movies. However, mapping this new time-

space, and the refiguration of the popular imagination it entails, necessitates the

reformulation of genre studies at this juncture in world cinema studies.

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[1] The specific methodological approach I employ here is informed by the critical imperative to "unthink Eurocentrism" forwarded by Robert Stam and Ella Shohat in *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (1994).

[2] Here I am thinking of films such as the Chilean superhero martial arts film *Mirageman* (2007), or the (queer) ghost film from Thailand, *The Victim*, a.k.a., *The Spirit of the Victim* (*Phii khon pen*, 2006). These films share an awareness of the mediascape, including television representations, in their diegesis.

[3] See John Belton, *American Cinema/American Culture* (182), and Chopra-Gant, *Hollywood Genres* (Chapter Six).

[4] Examples of other transnational genres include: "J-horror" (U.S./Japan/South Korea/ Thailand) and martial arts action (France/U.S./Hong Kong/Chile).

[5] This film was shown at the recent Philadelphia International Film Festival (April 2008) as part of a larger film noir series that included the Nikkatsu action film, *Like A Shooting Star, a.k.a, The Velvet Hustler*.

[6] Oliver and Trigo point to Alain Silver and James Ursini's insistence on film noir as a distinctly American genre; however, in their book, *The Noir Style* (1999), Silver and Ursini dedicate an entire chapter to the various international influences that informed the noir style.

[7] Marc Vernet, however, is skeptical of this ("Film Noir on the Edge of Doom" 7-12).

[8] Lang's films that are commonly referenced as film noir by critics and film databases alike include: *You Only Live Once* (1937), *Ministry of Fear* (1944), *The Woman in the Window* (1944), *Scarlet Street* (1945), *Secret Beyond the Door* (1948), *House by the River* (1950), *Human Desire* (1954), *They Clash by Night* (1952), *The Blue Gardenia* (1953), *The Big Heat* (1953), *While the City Sleeps* (1956), *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* (1956).

[9] *Elevator to the Gallows* (1957) is a good example of a French New Wave film that openly comments on France's violent opposition to the independence movements of its (former) colonies as the political backdrop to the murders in the film. In it, the young character, Julien Tavernier, asks: "How many billions did the Indochina War bring you? And now Algeria, how much?"

[10] Indeed, this is a primary division Chopra-Gant points to, dividing "popular" cinema from film noir in the postwar years.

[11] See Krutnick (1998) and Neale (2000) for a discussion of the impact of Freudian psychoanalysis on film noir.

[12] An impressive exception to this is Eric Lott's essay, "The Whiteness of Film Noir," addressing the anxieties concerning blackness in the visual contrast endemic in film noir.

[13] Jameson's writings on film are emblematic of such a comparative standpoint. For example, in *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* (1992), U.S. films such as *The Parallax View* and *The Conversation* represent a certain politicized moment in American history; yet, his other chapters address non-Western films that embody a critical generic relation.

[14] *Pulp Fiction* came out the same year as of *The Most Terrible Time in My Life*—1994. Both filmmakers share not only an American noir sensibility but also one directly in line with Japanese cinema, for example, in shared references to Seijan Suzuki. From *Underworld Beauty* (1958) to the deconstruction of the hard-boiled genre, *Branded to Kill* (1967)—Suzuki can be said to have influenced Tarantino's work, from *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) to the *Kill Bill* films, most evidently in the naming of the killers in *Kill Bill*, who take their namesakes from *Branded to Kill*. In fact, both filmmakers, Taratino and Hayashi, refer directly to the influence of the pop cinema of Suzuki, most obviously in their shared intertextual casting, such as Shishido.

[15] Naremore cites a letter to the editor in *Motion* 6 (Autumn 1963), written by Noel Burch, which lauds the now defunct French film journal for reprinting "a piece on the Japanese cathartic cinema," referencing an earlier edition organized around the topic of "sex and violence" (Naremore, quoting Burch, 30).

[16] Tarantino's *Kill Bill Vol. 1*, in fact, explicitly references a film starring frequent Nikkatsu action actress, Meiko Kaji, *Lady Snowblood* (1973)—a period drama, which *Kill Bill Vol. 1* does not just allude to, but appropriates its "four-chapter plot structure," and uses two *enka* numbers on the soundtrack sung by the actress herself (Schilling 74).

[17] The studio's second release, *Crazed Fruit* (1956) "was enthusiastically praised by François Truffaut, who recommended its preservation in the *Cinémathèque Française*" (Schilling 31).

[18] "*Hwalkuk* ('living theater,' pronounced in Japanese as '*Katsukeki*'…) is the term used to indicate plays and movies driven by action sequences…. *Hwalkuk* is genealogically related to the Japanese Samorai action cinema introduced during the colonial period (1910-1945)…[it] is overlaid with swordplay films, Hollywood action, and Hong Kong action" (Kim 100-101).

[19] Two characters in *Velvet Hustler* discuss joining up to fight in the Vietnam War.

[20] This theme in neo-noir is expressed parodically in *Pulp Fiction* (1994). The famous "Royal with Cheese" monologue articulates, albeit ironically, the alienations of cultural translation.

[21] Hayashi's film was not released theaters in the U.S., and only recently released on DVD despite its explicit referencing of several American films and despite the fact that the director had worked in American television. This could be because the film was not Orientalist, refusing to subscribe to the expected markers and narratives of Japanese-ness.

[22] The trilogy becomes increasingly surreal, similar to the dystopic noir of David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986) and *Mulholland Drive* (2001).

[23] The film series proved popular enough to spawn a Japanese television spin-off, *The Private Detective Mike Yokohama* (a.k.a., *Shiritsu Tantei Hama Mike*, 2002). Masatoshi Nagase plays his (Yoko)Hama character in the twelve-episode series, each featuring a different director, including

the finale by British director, Alex Cox. So far only one episode, *Mike Yokohama: A Forest With No Name* (*Shiritsu Tantei Hama Maiku: Namae No Nai Mori*) has been released in the West.
[24] In fact, in the second installment, *Stairway to the Distant Past* (1995), Hama's implied father, a killer who "received his orders directly from G.H.Q." during the occupation, and who is referred to only as either "the man in white," or, notably, "the white man," is played by the actor who came to semi-fame as the Japanese lover in Alain Resnais' *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* (1959). Hama, to this extent, is the direct, and intertextual, descendent of the violent atrocities of the war.
[25] A transnational contact zone is in evidence as Japanese directors appropriate "the action code of Hwalkuk" to articulate actions taken by the subaltern against their oppressors in genre film (Kim 98). The example of South Korea and its transnational genre films is instructional to understanding the motives driving the Japanese-Taiwan co-production: "*Hwalkuk* laid the grounds for comparison in/between Imperial Japan and colonized Korea" (Kim 99). However, whereas South Korea could embrace Hong Kong, Taiwan's relationship to China makes the traumatizing past of Japanese occupation much more ambivalent. Such analyses are significant to Inter-Asian cultural studies, but also transnational genre studies.
[26] The Nash Rambler, widely acknowledged as America's first modern compact, was eventually replaced by the influx of Japanese imports as its economy was rebuilt after the war. The irony of driving an American compact car in Japan is not lost on Hayashi.
[27] These Others are notably former colonies of Japan—first with the Korean "foreigner," Kim, and later with the Taiwanese gangster, Yang.
[28] Notably, the deregulation of Japanese imports that occurred in the nineties created an influx of Japanese movies and television melodramas to Taiwan, helping to build much stronger affinities between the countries through a shared language of popular culture.
[29] In the sequel, *Stairway to the Distant Past,* this generational gulf is explicit. The film traces Hama's father to a mythic figure, referred to as "Mr. White," who survived during and after the war by exploiting the suffering caused by the war. The film in fact is structured after, and visually reminiscent of, *Apocalypse Now* (1979).
[30] Whereas Hama points to other detective films before him, specifically the influence of Nikkatsu "mood action" cinema, the flashback to Taiwan hints at certain references to Taiwanese crime film, such as the postmodern film, *Terrorizer* (1986), which Jameson has discussed in detail. Its symbolic image of the washing of bloody hands (*Geopolitical Aesthetic* 135) and reference to barking dogs (136) suggest a possible intertextual relation; indeed, the characters of the Yang brothers may be named for *Terrorizer's* director, Edward Yang (117).
[31] This metonymic relationship to the city is literalized in the television shows inspired by the films; in them, his name is "Mike Yokohama."
[32] As in earlier film noir, the city takes on qualities of a character itself, which is highlighted in the contrast of the conclusion when Hama is in Taiwan.
[33] An exception to this is Patricia White's work on *The Haunting* (1963), although not a noir per se, her discussion is collected in *Women in Film Noir* (1998). Indeed, seduction is central to queer noirs such as *Bound* (1996) and *Swoon* (1992).
[34] In fact, Desser himself cites the example of *Mulholland Drive* (2001) even though it is not a "man" who is seduced, but clearly a lesbian relationship (as is *Bound*).
[35] Notably, Kanno becomes an elected official in *Stairway to the Distant Past*.

[36] The best example of this is Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), in which George Bailey's absence turns the town into Pottersville—the incarnation of the blight-ridden noir city—one that transforms its women into either dowdy librarians or *femmes fatale*.

[37] David Desser suggests that a classic image of global noir is the scene of two—often more—characters with guns aimed each and every other character. I agree that this is a highly identifiable image, even one that can be understood to be the very mark of the genre, in the Derridean sense, of global noir. This is proven by the fact that several books use this exact image on their covers to signal the topic of global noir, including the collection, *East Asian Cinemas: Exploring Transnational Connections on Film*, in which an earlier version of this chapter appears. Mark Schilling's book, *No Borders, No Limits,* has, instead, the notable image of two Nikkatsu Action Cinema characters pointing guns outwards towards the reader.

[38] The use of red in a black and white film, especially as a signal for historical trauma, links Hayashi's film to Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993), which came out the previous year.

[39] See Janet Staiger's discussion, "Hybrid or Inbred: The Purity Hypothesis and Hollywood Genre History," in *Film Genre Reader III* (185-199).

<u>Chapter Four</u>

Haunting the Screen: Demystifying Black Film as Genre

Rather than the norms of life, the black genre should be expected to depict deep within its syntagmas, its value-laden images, its allegories, its icons, the outlaw, the obsessed, the deviant, the heroically fantastic (Cripps 156).

<u>Black Film and Genre</u>

Generic subversion, as it has been developed thus far, is defined in relationship to extant generic categories—historical, institutional and critical. However, film genres are also formed in relation to broader cultural categories that reflect less on the films themselves than on the social field in which cinema functions. One example of this is the category of "Black film," which Thomas Cripps identified as a specific film genre almost thirty years ago. Since then, other terminology has been introduced in order to add to, challenge or specify Cripps' nomenclature. "Black American Cinema" (Mathia Diawara), African American film (Mark Reid) and subsets of these such as "Black Independent Cinema" (Clyde Taylor, James Snead, et al.), the "Womanist" film (Mark Reid), and even the "race films" of early cinema all attempt to organize a group of films according to shared, repeated and identifiable traits. Only Cripps, however, explicitly acknowledges the aim of constituting a definable genre. "'Black film' may be defined," according to him, "as those motion pictures made for theater distribution that have a black producer, director, and writer, or black performers; that speak to black audiences or, incidentally, to white audiences possessed of preternatural curiosity, attentiveness, or sensibility toward racial matters; and that emerge from self-conscious intentions, whether artistic or political, to illuminate the Afro-American experience" (Cripps 1). Cripps recognized from the outset the complicated task of identifying "black film genre" based on the racial

identity of those involved, which he demonstrates in the example of the critically

embraced early films of the Colored Players Company of Philadelphia who "were

actually white, save for their front man, Sherman 'Uncle Dud' Dudley" (5). Because of

such complex and unpredictable correspondences between producers and texts, Cripps

quickly mitigates his own definition of black film. Pointing to the self-evident limitations

of identifying a film's politics or themes by the race of the subjects involved in its

production, he argues: "Black film must be seen as a genre, then, for what it says and

how it is said, rather than who is saying it" (Cripps 9). Cripps' emphasis on genre is

impelled by this desire to prioritize "what" and "how" over "who."

    This is in line with the broader history of genre studies, which promoted genre in

opposition to the *auteurism* that attributed what a film said to the voice, or vision, of the

filmmaker. According to Cripps, black film "can, and should be studied as a genre,"

because it has established patterns, points-of-view and identifiable characters (154). Yet,

the ambivalence towards essentialism at the heart of Cripps' project is rarely recognized

in later reappraisals of his contribution to film studies. Several critics criticize Cripps on

the grounds of the first part of his definition, which defines "black film as genre" by the

identity of a film's producer, director, or writer.[1] This has left the anti-essentialist

implications of his project—to constitute black film specifically as a genre—relatively

unexamined. In this chapter, I return to Cripps' concept of black film as genre to explore

the subversive potential of a genre criticism focalized through the lens of race and

ethnicity. Cripps' definition of black film as genre continues to function as a intervention

into established genre criticism in its insistence on the significance of racial meanings as

a function of film genre. By reframing black film as genre, a mode of analysis is

introduced that can begin to veer away from essentialist readings of race and ethnicity in film. For example, as much as Cripps has been attacked for his original definition, he in fact claims Eric Roemer's *Nothing But a Man* (1964) for the genre of black film. This move is possible because of the rhetorical work of "or" in his definition, which leaves room for a number of different approaches to understanding the function of "blackness" in film. This chapter multiplies these approaches to insist on the centrality of race and ethnicity to a radical genre criticism. In fact, the foregrounding of race and ethnicity in genre studies troubles the boundaries of established genres, including "black film."

What is notable about Cripps' argument is its shift from black film *as* genre to black genre films, a shift which emphasizes the reappropriation of genre formulas to convey a specific set of sociological and anthropological meanings: "the viewer may see the black genre exemplified in social drama, cautionary tales, musicals, documentaries, religious tracts, and romances featuring both urbane and pastoral heroes" (10). In this way, black film as genre overrides previous genre categorizations with another set of organizing traits or principles, insisting on the prioritization of race as the prinicple lens through which films are screened and categorized. For black genre films, the trait of "blackness" becomes the key organizing principle, even if where and how this "blackness" is identified remains amorphous. No longer necessarily anchored in the racial identity of a film's *auteur,* black film as genre nevertheless relies on a "concept of the black aesthetic or a specifically black form of filmmaking," which has much to do with how a film is perceived as an art object—how it is marketed, funded, distributed, interpreted, and received (Williamson 177). This is true for mainstream films as well as independent or "art" films, as both are frequently (implicitly and explicitly) marketed as

"black film" to (assumedly) black audiences. This elides significant differences between independent and more mainstream fare; nevertheless, identifying black film as genre is a strategic gesture that foregrounds the shared characteristics of diverse films when "black" is employed as an adjectival modifier at any stage of its production, exhibition and/or critical reception.

Organizing a body of films around the shared characteristics implied by the term "black" raises serious questions about how one defines a black film and what precise characteristics such films might share. According to Cripps, "we must seek black film as a special case of genre film" because while "we are told genre film has been conservative in its ideology," black film in fact "demands change" (156). This implies black film as antithetical to typical genre fare, constitutively anti-conservative, defined in opposition to a coherent, unitary mainstream genre cinema. Indeed, film genre has been asserted as inherently conservative (addressed in the first chapter), and when race is made the focus of genre criticism, this conservatism is presented as all the more self-evident. George Lipsitz demonstrates this position: "Race plays a crucial role in generic representations. Hollywood westerns, war movies, detective stories, melodramas, and action-adventure films often rely on racial imagery, underscoring the heroism of white males…. They use racial differences to signal zones of danger and refuge; they move toward narrative and ideological closure by restoring the white hero to his 'rightful' place" (209). Implicit in this argument is the assumption that it is not simply characterization (white) but the operations of the narrative that together create film genre's ideologically conservative (i.e., racist) meanings. Opposed to this, black film is perceived as an equally unitary

aesthetic response to this totalizing field of film genre, antithetical and antagonistic to this supposed center.

Such a Manichean division is hardly supportable, as I have argued in previous chapters. In fact, it works to transfer racial essentialism from the identity of the *auteur* to the dividing line between genres, black and white, margin and center. This very divide has influenced the forms black cultural politics has taken, often impelling aesthetic choices that appear anti-generic. As Paul Gilroy points out, "The constant subversive desire to escape genre" is part of "the problem of genre," signaled in "the desire to transcend key Western categories: narrative, documentary, history and literature, ethics and politics" (46). Clearly, following Derrida, the goal of transcending genre represents a problem indeed. Approaching black film as genre, then, challenges such oppositional categorizations and the implicit assumption that genre is by definition a white representational system. Defining black film as genre, therefore, suggests not a unitary genre but rather a series of appropriations of generic forms and tropes to rework, displace and problematize extant genre conventions. Gilroy describes such appropriations in terms of "adventurous black borrowings from and adaptations of a preformed Western canon" (45). These borrowings and adaptations are evident in the recitation of generic tropes black film undertakes, but also points to the instability of racial meanings present in preformed Western genres. For this reason, several scholars attempting to categorize "black film" do so through the adumbration of motifs rather than limiting their analysis in terms of casting. Genre critics of black film, to this extent, are pressed to find ways to articulate shared characteristics expressed in the films themselves. For instance, James Snead emphasizes the structure of repetition in both "black music" and "black

filmmaking" practices, while Teshome Gabriel points to "The Journey theme," among others, that define his very anti-essentialist concept of "nomadic cinema" (403).

These examples reflect the complex counter-discourses proposed to move away from the essentialist conundrum implicit in the title "black film," which points to an epidermic criterion in the categorization of films. Gabriel's "nomadic cinema" and Snead's "Black film as Repetition" represent theoretical attempts to complicate, and countermand, the concept of "blackness" as a shared trait among films. They represent an anti-essentialist critique, which recognizes that the "black" in "black film" is in need of reconsideration since it implies identity is the natural ground of race and/or ethnicity. Preceding the film text (and ultimately conflated with it) is the authorial subject, who is recognized in terms of authenticating "identity" narratives. To this extent, notions of what constitutes a "black film" continue to connote a modernist concern with authorial intention. For example, a film theorist such as Robert Stam can make it his point "to abandon the language of 'authenticity'" while, in the same piece, claim Spike Lee's *School Daze* (1988) as an example of an "audacious black perspective" (257-8). In the example of Stam, it is specifically the authorial presence of Spike Lee, as bearer of a concatenation of signs signifying "blackness," which creates such an "audacious black" experience. The dominant paradigm behind such a claim is that of "thinking identity as an already accomplished historical fact, which the new cinematic discourses then represent…[this] position defines 'cultural identity' in terms of the idea of the one, shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self'…which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common" (Hall, "Cultural Identity" 210-1). Of course, this entails specific definitions of "shared history and ancestry" that automatically foreclose other

possible, multiple, and conflictual definitions. Like semantic approaches to genre, the notion of "black film" relies on an *a priori* conception of race and ethnicity, which organizes film texts in terms of the "black experience," and their reflection of this experience, almost always anchored to the visible identity of the African American filmmaker (or Black British director and/or writer). As Reece Auguiste demonstrates, while a film like *Handsworth Songs* (1986) may "attempt to problematise…the parameters of black aesthetics and in particular the racial economy of signs," the film is nevertheless circumscribed by the canonical terms of "black independent film culture" (216).

This contradiction has been and continues to be a particularly troublesome conundrum for those pursuing and promoting Cultural Studies approaches to film genre criticism. Questions of ethnicity in terms of film analysis have delineated objects of study as well as modes of address. A canon of films has emerged by designating "black film" in terms of the racial or ethnic difference of the filmmaker. Certain films are often addressed, in this context, by the ethnicity of the *auteur* such as Spike Lee or Isaac Julien. Despite "plainly" asserting "films are not necessarily good because black people make them" (166), Hall, for instance, nonetheless circumvents the influence of the (white) director—on which the history of *auteurism* in film theory is based—to establish *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) as "one of the most riveting and important films *produced by a black writer*" ("New Ethnicities" 171; emphasis mine). This is a complicated maneuver that depends upon the elision of Stephen Frears as director as well as the representation of the white working class (Daniel Day Lewis' character) in order to forward the film as a representation of "black experience in Britain," albeit in terms neither "monolithic" nor

"self-contained" (Hall, "New Ethnicities" 171). A similar argument can be made with regards to the film *White Masks, Black Skin* (1996), which is rarely attributed to both co-creators, Isaac Julien *and* Mark Nash. Such examples speak to the reticence of film criticism to move away from essential notions of identity that continue to shape approaches to the question of race and visual representation.[2] Cripps, in fact, promotes black film as genre to complicate this commonsense methodology that founds its claims for black cinema on the extra-textual grounds of the filmmaker's identity, especially since genre represents a historical intervention into *auteurist* film criticism generally.

Equivocations concerning the identity of a filmmaker, and concomitant hair-splitting over a film's origin, point to the inherent problems of utilizing ethnicity and race as analytic tools for film studies. Shohat's tentative wording highlights the difficult paradox for film and cultural studies scholarship: "Without falling into essentialist traps and yet without being politically paralyzed by deconstructionist formulations, we may argue for provisional ethnic and racial identities at particular moments in history, articulated in relation to parallel and opposing collectivities" (217). Yet, even when provisional qualifiers are employed, one glaring concern is the perpetuation of whiteness as an invisible placeholder, leaving "white film" (and filmmakers) unexamined as equally crucial to the discussion of race and ethnicity in representational practices. That is, "the disciplinary assumption that some films are 'ethnic' whereas others are not is ultimately based on the view that certain groups are ethnic whereas others are not. The marginalization of 'ethnicity' reflects the imaginary of the dominant group which envisions itself as the 'universal' or the 'essential' American nation, and thus somehow 'beyond' or 'above' ethnicity" (Shohat 215). Indeed, part and parcel of this monolithic

(and monochromatic) vision is the repeated assertion of characterization in terms of ethnically unmarked white characters, supposedly universal and therefore "generic." To this extent, the study of black film as a genre may in fact reaffirm the generic (unmarked) status of other genre films, which has the effect of eliding whiteness as a racial category in need of critique.

Shohat makes it clear that the essentialist foundations underpinning the study of ethnic/racial films ultimately obscure the fact that "filmic images and sounds come inevitably saturated with ethnic and racial resonances" (219). These resonances, moreover, are not simply narrative but structural, tied to the historical formation of the cinema. The origins of cinema were shaped in part by the imperialist drive of Anglo-European interests at the *fin-de-siècle*, exemplified by the glut of ethnographic cinema popularized in cinema's earliest stages.[3] In the film history of the U.S., the stylistic tropes of "the Institutional Mode of Representation," that is, the conventions in the service of filmic realism, quite often emerged in the context of narratives aimed at consolidating "the nation" post-reconstruction and in the throes of mass immigration, for example, in canonical films such as *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), and, later with the advent of sound in *The Jazz Singer* (1927) (Burch 2). As Third Cinema scholar Robert Crusz asserts, "the technology of filmmaking has developed within the specific Euro-American context. As such it carries with it the particular history of that context…[it is] a technology which is not neutral" (111). For these reasons, it would appear imperative to expand, or even overturn, the extant modes of analysis to better recognize this history and address the mutually illuminating relationship of race, ethnicity, and visual media. Film and media present "a cut in the race-relations narrative that reveals the potential productivity of the

historical collision of cultures which Homi Bhabha (1988) describes in terms of

'hybridity,' and which Paul Gilroy (1987) discusses in terms of 'syncretic' forms of

cultural expression" (Mercer 90). Moreover, these syncretic forms are not limited to what

is defined as "black film." In light of this, film and cultural theorists are left "to explore

whether a more adequate model of criticism might not be derived from the critical

practice performed in the films themselves" rather than from the essentialist claims of

auteurist approaches and critical models based on the relations of representation (Mercer

56).

Central to genre studies is "the critical practice performed in the films

themselves." Indeed, genre criticism emerged as a way to foreground textual practices

against the meta-textual concerns of *auteur* studies. The text is unquestionably the

privileged site of genre analysis, often over other significant questions such as reception,

production and funding. Although these are equitably important area of research, the

dominant arguments produced in genre studies focus upon the question of textual

representation. These arguments frequently rely on semiotic systems of analysis,

beginning with the structuralist readings of the western produced by Will Wright, with

other genre theorists following suit by explicating the ritual function of genre. Similarly,

semiotic terminology plays an important role in cultural studies and critical race theory to

better understand systems of signification of race and ethnicity. However, the central

question of race/ethnicity tends to anchor semiotic textual criticism to an implicit subject

despite its anti-essentialist gestures. The conflictual subtext contained in Kobena

Mercer's following argument exemplifies this contradiction:

> The semiotic conception of signification at work in new modes of black film
> discourse…offers new perspectives on the *realpolitik* of race by entering into a

struggle with the means of representation itself. Foregrounding an awareness of the decisions and choices made in the selection and combination of signifying elements in sound and image, the new films are conscious of the fact that the reality effect of documentary realism is itself *constructed* by the formal tendency to regulate, fix, contain and impose closure on the chain of signification (58).

Here, Mercer himself enacts "the formal tendency to regulate, fix, contain and impose closure on the chain of signification" by ascribing, albeit implicitly, authorial intention. As much as he wants to find "the critical practice performed in the films themselves," he still evokes the sign of blackness, and the "awareness" or intention of subjects constituted under this sign to ground his analysis. Moreover, as much as the language "of signification at work in new modes of black film discourse" struggles to eschew the rhetoric of identity and representation, the recourse to an "awareness of decisions and choices made" evokes a stable (black) self-knowing agent behind the film's signifying codes. The argument, to this extent, anthropomorphizes "new films," ascribing to them a consciousness in order to avoid the complicated practice of explicitly invoking authorial intent.

Such convolutions, as evident in the linguistic machinations of Mercer's argument, or the convenient removal of Stephen Frears, Mark Nash, and others, reflect the desire to maintain some semblance of a consistent category when naming "*black* (independent) cinema." For Mercer, it is the "black" in "black film discourse" that is reified in the sub-textual referencing of a *cogito* or a subject as the bearer of knowledge. For Cornel West:

> Black cultural workers must constitute and sustain discursive and institutional networks that deconstruct earlier modern black strategies for identity-formation, demystify power relations that incorporate class, patriarchal and homophobic biases, and construct more multi-valent and multi-dimensional responses that articulate the complexity and diversity of black practices in the modern and postmodern world (29).

Inherent in these phrasings, either "black film discourse," "black cultural workers," or "black strategies" is the haunting of "the essential black subject" who refuses to stay in his "coffin" (West 29). Notably, part of the anxiety that informs such discussions of the *what,* "black film discourses," or *who,* "black cultural workers," is not simply an Enlightenment subject (or human agency) but an anxiety that that subject may already be compromised by hybridity. That is, these various claims turn on an "unambivalent, uncompromised link-up between Africa and the 'New World' in which Euro-American influences are superfluous and negligible" (Wallace 46), or, "dangerous" (Hall, "New Ethnicities" 165).

The deployment of the signifier of blackness in cinematic discourses, such as genre, is troubling not so much for who or what it does not represent but rather for its desire to represent at all. This desire to represent, critically termed the "relations of representation" by Stuart Hall, aligns bodies (authorial), images (cinematic), and themes (textual) into a (falsely) coherent system referred to as the "black aesthetic," which works to represent the "black experience" ("New Ethnicities" 164). However, in addressing the "relations of representation," film scholars remain trapped in what seems to be a critical and political tautology. Mercer zeroes in on the problem: "the idea of speaking as a 'representative of the race' reinforces the myth, on which ideologies of racism crucially depend, that 'the black community' is a homogeneous, monolithic, or singular entity defined by race and nothing but race" (250). The terms of analysis that emanate from the relations of representation, therefore, cannot help but lend themselves to reproducing the Manichean dialectics of the racist imaginary in its assignation of black film and its unitary aesthetic. The question is whether it is possible to conceive of a framework in

film studies that would produce analyses that can sustain the sticky, interstitial "politics

of representation" without recourse to Manichean terms (Hall, "New Ethnicities" 171).

These terms have the double-edged effect of reifying "the black community" and its

constitutive experience expressed in "the black aesthetic," while, in this very move,

rendering whiteness invisible and universal.

What is at issue is the extreme difficulty in grasping "the profoundly hybrid

character of what we mean by 'race,' 'ethnicity,' and 'nationality'" and the complications

that follow when "these inquiries must transverse those of 'male/female,'

'colonizer/colonized,' 'heterosexual/ homosexual,' et al." (West 29). In terms of the

transversal of heterosexual/homosexual, male/female, previous chapters employed queer

analytical practices to develop a framework for genre theory radicalized by contemporary

theorizations of sexuality and gender. However, *racial* and ethnic representation is the

key concern of contemporary multicultural criticism. Shohat is among those theorists

who have challenged the foundational claims underlying understandings of ethnicity and

race and how these claims in turn impact analyses of representational practices,

particularly in the discipline of Cinema Studies. In hopes of expanding the terms of

analysis of film and challenging the emerging canonization of certain "ethnic" and "

black" films, Ella Shohat proposes an alternative epistemological framework:

> The debates over ethnicity and race tend to be regarded as having only limited
> significance, or as being relevant only to a specific corpus of films. But ethnicity and
> race inhere in virtually all films, not only in those where ethnic issues appear on the
> "epidermic" surface of the text. I propose that ethnicity is culturally ubiquitous and
> textually submerged, thus hoping to challenge the widespread approach to ethnicity as
> limited to "content" analysis, as well as reconsider the critical approaches toward the
> (informal) canon of cinema studies from a multiculturalist framework (215).

Shohat's multiculturalist challenge has yet to be fully realized due in part to the continued

debates that have taken place concerning the question of ethnicity. While this framework

implies its own limits, which will come to the fore in the following discussion, it nevertheless provides the ground for a methodology attuned to the ways race and ethnicity gird visual media. To this extent, I want to build upon Shohat's proposal that "ethnicity is culturally ubiquitous and textually submerged" by exploring a wide, and at times incongruent, array of generic manifestations in the latter part of this essay.

Genre criticism and cinema studies generally can be counted among those "critical theories [that] are just beginning to recognize and reckon with the kinds of complexity inherent in the culturally constructed nature of ethnic identities, and the implications this has for the analysis of representational practices" (Mercer and Julien 195). Shohat's multiculturalist framework names a mode of analysis that moves away from essentialist tropes when discussing the critical practices of cultural forms such as cinema. Still, multiculturalism (like queer), as a critical category, suffers from over-application, frequently used in ways that no longer describe interstitial subjects and contradictory politics. "A portmanteau term for anything from minority discourse to postcolonial critique, from gay and lesbian studies to chicano/a fiction," multiculturalism, according to Homi Bhabha, "has become the most charged sign for describing the scattered social contingencies that characterize contemporary *Kulturkritik*" ("Culture's In Between" 31). In this way, forwarding a multicultural genre criticism may simply connote a concern with difference, and an attention to stereotypical images, rather than reflect a break with such relations of representation. Indeed, the largess of the term has motivated multiculturalists, such as Henry A. Giroux, to modify the term, defining *insurgent* multiculturalism as precisely disinterested in the project of "romanticizing…minority voices," but rather needs to be "about making whiteness

visible as a racial category.... An insurgent multicultural[ism]…must shift attention away from an exclusive focus on subordinate groups…to one which examines how racism in its various forms is produced historically, semiotically, and institutionally…" (191). Such is the challenge of a multicultural film genre criticism as well.

There is much agreement that multiculturalism, with its pluralistic overtones, would appear to be in need of extensive qualification to clarify the terms and goals of its critique. Indeed, the desire to challenge essentialist models has led some cultural critics to move away from the terminology of multiculturalism altogether. Cornel West, for example, outlines a specific model of critical practice that is in line with the aims of an insurgent multiculturalism—demystification:

> Demystification is the most illuminating mode of theoretical inquiry for those who promote the new cultural politics of difference. Social structural analyses of empire, exterminism, class, race, gender, nature, age, sexual orientation, nation and region are the springboards—though not landing grounds—for the most desirable forms of critical practice that take history (and herstory) seriously. Demystification tries to keep track of the complex dynamics of institutional and other related power structures in order to disclose options and alternatives for a transformative praxis; it also attempts to grasp the way in which representational strategies are creative responses to novel circumstances and conditions (West 31).

West is clearly trying to move away from the history of "relations of representation" and towards a practice attentive to the political significations implicit in texts; his demystificatory criticism is an attempt to outline a critical methodology fitting the *politics* of representation. In this way, demystification proposes a form of inquiry appropriate to the study of generic subversion in its attention to representational "options and alternatives," such as cinema.

Still, as West himself points out, "few cultural workers of whatever stripe can walk the tightrope between the Scylla of reductionism and the Charybdis of aestheticism—yet demystificatory critics must" (32). It is this very tightrope I want to

walk in positing a demystificatory methodological practice as way of radicalizing genre studies. This practice, I aver, allows genre theorists to parse out the critical, specifically subversive, performances in film genre. More precisely, demystificatory praxis is an effective response to the challenge raised by the idea of black film as genre. Rather than posit the focus on race/ethnicity in film as a self-evident characteristic of certain films, specifically of "black film," I counter that demystification opens genre studies to a mode of inquiry attentive to the ubiquity of racial and ethnic configurations—including whiteness—across media and not limited to the content analysis of certain films based on the racial and/or ethnic difference embodied by the filmmaker. The following section discusses the implications of demystificatory practice for the analysis of established "black film," which has the affect of revising the existing terms defining and delimiting the genre while expanding the field of inquiry beyond essentialist frames.

Haunting as Demystification in Black Independent Cinema

If there can be no "such thing as a homogeneous black aesthetic," indeed, if there is nothing "essential to gender or race about either a gaze or an aesthetic," on what foundations can black film be grounded, especially as a genre (Williamson 179)? Films such as Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), Isaac Julien and Mark Nash's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1996), and Stephen Frears and Hanif Kurieishi's *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (1987) have all been held up, to differing degrees, as representatives of "black film." They each engage with a specific crisis moment in history—the Algerian war of decolonization, the reconstruction era in the United States at the turn-of-the-century concomitant with the institutionally sanctioned deployment of lynching in mass numbers,

and the "riots" of urban London that defined the Thatcherite administration of the eighties. Yet, these films are less concerned with "official" history than the silences that accompany these events. Although these films concern themselves with disparate historical junctures, they all nonetheless "reach for historical depth, creating a space of critical reverie which counteracts the active ideological forgetting" of each film's specific colonial past "in order to articulate an alternative, archeological account of the contemporary crisis of race and nation" (Mercer 60). In presenting a demystificatory analysis of the critical practices performed by these texts, I contend these films share a set of syntagmas that cohere into a transformative—and subversive—system of signification that need not be grounded in essentialism.

The films employ formal practices that aim at reviving the historical past rather than simply replicating it. In *Daughters of the Dust,* the (silenced) history of the transatlantic middle-passage and its termination at Ibo Landing is evoked through the representational codes of the film's locale as well as by the characters themselves. For instance, "the hand signals given by two of the men in *Daughters of the Dust* is a reference to the non-verbal styles of communication of ancient African secret societies which have been passed across thousands of years and through hundreds of generations. Today these forms are expressed in the secrets of fraternities and in the hand signals of youth gangs" (Dash 6). This history is brought into the present by the excess of the spectacle itself—the quality of the film stock, the use of slow motion, the technological critique of 24 frames-per-second effected by the camera work. Also using technology to defamiliarize history, a similar argument can be made of Isaac Julien and Mark Nash's *Black Skin, White Masks*. Their aesthetic approach stems from the Black Audio Film

Collective's criticisms of documentary or ethnographic film, which employed the camera to efface the power relations underlying those film forms. All three exemplary texts of black independent cinema engage history through experimental forms that are explicitly anti-realist. In the example of *Black Skin, White Masks,* its use of British accents for (historical) characters who are clearly not British, or, the use of actors instead of maintaining a simple documentary (talking heads) narrative structure undercuts the film's supposedly biographical subject.

All these films utilize a range of film techniques to foreground the "ghosts of old [colonial] stories of slavery, racism, oppression, and capitalist exploitation," in order to demystify the contemporary system of race, sex, and gender (Baker, et al. 7). They all deal with the differences between (and within) subject positions, eschewing the self/other epistemology upon which racist/ethnocentric/colonial structures rely. Each film, for instance, narrates its story from a multiplicity of perspectives, with several, often contradictory, positions given voice. More importantly, these voices are consistently situated in both space and time. For all three, "the historicizing emphasis in such critical counterdiscourse is an overdetermined necessity in order to counteract the *de*historicizing logic of racist ideologies" (Mercer 57). Not only do the films anchor their narrative work to a particularly heightened historical moment, they do so by locating their characters in meaningful geographies—Algeria and Paris, Ibo Landing, and East End London. The discourses of place central to these films' "foster a provisionally isolated space in which to delve into class," as well as religious, sexual, postcolonial, "and even racial tensions internal to the community," be it black British, African American (specifically, Gullah), or expatriated Martinique; "and while exploring ideological conflicts…these films

explicitly and implicitly define black positioning in relation to white centers of power"
(Shohat 249). However, in their critical engagement with these centers of power, the
films do not limit themselves to Manichean concerns, for they seat their critiques not in
reactionary response but rather in the diffuse and multivalent effects wrought by such
ideological conflicts.

Examined together, these postmodern films attempt to present "a polyphonic play
of voices…which, rather than represent real humanly purposeful events within an
illusionistic esthetic, simply stage the clash of socially generated languages and
discourses" (Stam, "Bakhtin" 255). The polyphony of voices de-centers the notion of a
stable subject (racial/ethnic/gendered/sexual), refusing monolithic categories such as the
"black experience" or the "black community," and rejecting any firm belief in one, true
History. A central concern for each film is the violence of omission of certain positions,
or voices, and the histories they represent, in the discursive process of establishing *the*
community. For example, each film contains textual references to homosexuality, which
work to problematize the idea of a monolithic black community. In the embodiment of
queer characters that are recognized as members of the diegetic community, assumptions
about what constitutes "a community" are called into question. In *Daughters of the Dust*,
Yellow Mary "has a female companion and a 'past'—grounds enough to be despised;"
nevertheless, the trajectory of the narrative impels the family to embrace her (although
they do not embrace her partner), a gesture her sister, Viola, the voice of Christian
assimilation, cannot accept (Cade Bambara xvi). Homosexuality has a similar, albeit
much less explicit, role in Julien and Nash's cinematic contemplation of the life and work
of Franz Fanon, which interrupts the biographical narrative with images of gay sexuality.

This visual incongruence calls out Fanon's troubling refusal to acknowledge queer desire in the West Indies, challenging Fanon's prejudice, and the Anglo-European and psychoanalytic influences that inform it.

Homophobia is also represented as a problem of community formation in *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*. Homosexuality, as measured in the response of the character of Rafi upon discovering two women (one South Asian) making love, is a sign of postcolonial decadence and religious sacrilege, representative of the decay of true British-ness, as well as the failure of the Indian diaspora to sustain traditional Indian mores (and acceptable gender positions). This position however is reframed in the film's critique of Rafi's problematic embodiment of South Asian heterosexual patriarchy and his petite bourgeois exploitation of India's poor. Significantly, this critique is given voice through a ghost, a visual and aural embodiment of the tortured political prisoners in Rafi's—and the country's—past. In this way, *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* "rescues the dead from the amnesia and structured forgetfulness which haunt the English collective consciousness whenever it thinks of its crisis-ridden 'race relations' in the here and now" (Mercer 61). The film raises the specter of the whole history of the British Empire and the postcolonial crises left in its aftermath. Rafi's ghost delineates a legacy of decolonization, adroitly set out in Kureishi's dialogue (53):

> *Ghost:* You said I was the price to be paid for the overall good of our sad country, yes? You gave the order. You were in your big house, drinking illegally, slapping women's arses adulterously, sending your money out of the country…
>
> *Rafi:* The country needed a sense of direction, of identity. People like you, organizing into unions, discouraged and disrupted all progress.

Ghost: All of human life you have desecrated, Rafi Rahman!

This dialogue is notably spoken by the embodied/voiced Rafi and the disembodied/silenced incarnation of those who are (perceived by the centers of power as) a ghostly presence in the first world.

Set in the complex context of Martinique/France/Algiers, the effects of colonialism and the violence of decolonization is also the central theme of Julien's and Nash's *Black Skin, White Masks*. Although no explicit ghostly references are made, it is Frantz Fanon himself who haunts this film text; his spectral presence drives the narrative trajectory, necessitating the critical examination of multiple historical phenomena— slavery and its lingering effects in Martinique, the violence of decolonization in Algiers, the racism at the heart of urban Paris. In these films, such ghostly presences have the function of a representational strategy or critical practice with specific filmic effects: "Our initial security and confidence in some unified narrative to come has been dispelled without return by the interventions of experimental film: we are no longer necessarily in reliable hands, things may never cohere. And even if they do, a different, another momentum has been conferred on the narrative process" (Jameson, *Signatures* 133). The blurring of historical linearity effected in all three films, without the assuring bracketing of flashback and flash-forward, is one central technique for creating this shift in temporality.

Daughters of the Dust, it may be argued, is the most successful attempt at presenting this alternate momentum because it utilizes unique technologies that concretely refuse to rely upon "the interventions of experimental film." The film renders past, present, and future simultaneous, making the concept of linear time unreal. As Toni

Cade Bambara points out, the film "questions …whether the standard of twenty-four-frames-per-second rate is kinesthetically the best…the frame rate changes just enough to underscore the children as the future. For a split second we seem to travel through time" (xv). The situated knowledge of the Gullah demands other forms of technological representation, unapologetically accounting for "what is not necessarily seeable and touchable, but which nevertheless exists" (Gabriel 397). Dramatically demonstrated in *Daughters of the Dust*, but present to a lesser extent in all these films, is the ghost in the (cinematic) machine; that is, how the haunting of history, and the engagement with the workings of time, as Jameson's "another momentum" insinuates, revolutionizes the cinematic apparatus itself. These films' themes demand the invention of technological tropes, which implicate the racialized networks of meanings at work in any given film.

The historical re-imagination shaping these films reflects Benjamin's famous insight: "To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was.' It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger…. Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins" (257). In each film, a kind of recuperation of the dead is central to the polyphonic motifs of the film and the historical in(ter)ventions they necessitate. In their distinctive representational strategies, the polyphony of voices presented includes the voices assumedly lost to history. In this way, these films proffer "a transfigured object world in which fantastic events are *also* narrated" (Jameson, *Signatures* 3). This is clear in *Daughters of the Dust*, in which the presence of Unborn Girl is metonymic of a whole chain of fantastic signification from the visions of slave ancestors and conjure bags, to bottle trees and Eli

walking on water. For *Daughters of the Dust*, Unborn Girl speaks with, and from, the

history of slavery and its resistance as well as signaling slavery's legacy—lynching and

rape as institutions of Anglo-American control.[4] The invocation of the voices of the dead,

including Rafi himself by the film's conclusion, in *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* is less

diffuse but similarly deployed "not in order to chase away ghosts, but…to grant them the

right…to…a hospitable memory out of a concern for justice" (Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*

175). And, in Julien and Nash's *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon's powerful critique of

colonial violence and injustice haunts the present configurations of race in other national

and postcolonial contexts, particularly Great Britain.

Thus, the critical practice performed by these "black films"—and one that

necessitates a demystificatory practice—is what, for lack of a more precise term, can be

conceived as *haunting*. For my purposes, haunting is one exceptionally salient

"performance" of black film as genre, even if the terms black film and genre no longer

function in the same way. Without defaulting to essentialized identity, either of the

bodies displayed on the screen or those of the makers of the films themselves, these films

lend themselves to a critical practice of demystification. They cinematically demystify

the operations of hegemonic memory and power by presenting and *re*presenting

structures of feeling that I refer to as "haunting." As Avery Gordon proposes, "haunting

is a constituent element of modern social life. It is neither premodern superstition nor

individual psychosis; it is a generalizable social phenomenon of great import. To study

social life one must confront the ghostly aspects of it. This confrontation requires (or

produces) a fundamental change in the way we know and make knowledge, in our mode

of production" (7). It is the production of this "fundamental change in the way we know"

that is especially appropriate to cinema. In all of these films, the cinematic apparatus is

engaged in such a way as to present what Gilles Deleuze identifies as "new images of

thought" (*Cinema 1* 215). These new images struggle to articulate the haunting of

imperial memory, which "derives its ghostly power to insinuate memory between the

lines, in the spaces between words" (Roach 60). In cinematic terms, the visual style

expressive of haunting is highlighted in the "spaces between" narrative or dialogue.[5] In

the broader context, haunting names a film style situated in critical relation to realism but

not confined by the conventions of anti-realism.

The aesthetic codes of haunting are frequently associated with a manifestation of

"black film" distinct from realism. This split is mapped out by Manthia Diawara,

articulating at least one important fission in "the black aesthetic"—the distinction

between the realism of "Afro-modernism" and the more symbolic postmodern narrative

style of anti-realist black film (413). According to Diawara, the latter style is defined by

narratives, which "contain rhythmic and repetitious shots, going back and forth between

the past and the present. Their themes involve Black folklore, religious, and the oral

traditions which link Black Americans to the African diaspora" (412). Yet, I argue that

anti-realism in fact does not accurately describe the aesthetic and narrative work of these

films, as the point of such films is to assert another "reality" in their thematic and stylistic

features. All three films, for example, use prominent features of realism to trouble

hegemonic images of "reality." *Daughters of the Dust* edits in historical, journalistic

footage of the northern cities to which the family is about to migrate, while *Black Skin,*

White Masks reproduces historical events within its diegesis. Notably, these practices

intersect and borrow from established genres, such as the biopic, historical costume

drama and romance melodrama to map points of identification and recognition that are then problematized, or subverted outright, in their generic citation. For example, *Daughters of the Dust* utilizes costuming in subversive ways, insisting on the beauty of African American women in the use of dress against the film history, which has consistently envisioned black women in the past in less than flattering attire: "audiences were not used to seeing black folk in their nice dress…and not working, not being a beast of burden, they were unable to accept it" (Dash 45).

Haunting, in this way, names a mode of generic re-citation that borrows from popular film genres, while resisting the imperatives of realism that often accompany these forms, to envision another reality. Haunting, specifically, names the way generic narrative modes are disrupted with another genre altogether—the fantastic. In order to foreground what David Marriott sums up as "the essential deathliness of black experience," black genre films frequently employ tropes from the fantastic in order to articulate "the irony and perversity of a haunted life" (241). Fantasy, according to Rosemary Jackson's extensive study, is characterized most frequently by "its obdurate refusal of prevailing definitions of the 'real' or 'possible,' a refusal amounting at times to violent opposition," an opposition embodied in the grotesque, or in a generalized estrangement and alienation, "exerting pressure against dominant hierarchical systems" (14, 17). Diawara's exemplum of anti-realism, *Ganja and Hess,* appropriates the tropes of the vampire sub-genre of the fantastic to articulate its intervention into racial and sexual politics, while in the above examples, both *Daughters of the Dust* and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* articulate their political intervention in well-established patterns associated with the genre of the fantastic, especially ghost stories. The product of this specific form of

genre hybridity, the syncretic conjunction of black film genre and the fantastic, however, is no longer contained by either genre (if it ever was), but represents rather a trans-generic mode of critical citation and aesthetic invention. Haunting, to this extent, should not be seen as a generic form but rather as an expression of what Gabriel delineates as "nomadic thought," because, in this form of thought "the fantastic, which is a direct extension of everyday life, merely represents a heightened experience" (398). In other words, the fantastic is destabilized by placing it in the service of another reality, another momentum.

Moreover, in naming haunting as a textual performance, the terms that stabilize black film as genre begin to shift as well, moving away from essentialist claims that delimit and contain the body of texts addressed. In other words, demystificatory genre criticism, as I direct it here to the textual manifestations of haunting, may trace subversive interventions in the racial imaginary in texts not necessarily identified as "black film" but nonetheless possessing traits associated with that genre. Cripps argues, "the symbolic content of black genre film is given moral urgency by a *tone of advocacy* rather than, say a reportorial style" (10). This distinction cannot be overemphasized, indeed it is accentuated in the filmic practice of haunting, which is marked by the distinct break with the realist tradition. Haunting describes a uniquely visual and filmic expression of advocacy, one that highlights, by contrast, "the crippling weaknesses of realism for coming to terms with contemporary issues. When…film is taken as a transparent medium for the reflection of real social problems very little filmic communication is possible" (Henriques 19). The structures and images of haunting forward "another momentum" precisely because the momentum of realism is unable to

convey a thoroughgoing critique of the historical origins of the "real social problems" of

racial injustice. All three films, in this way, articulate their distinct "tones of advocacy"

through ghostly embodiments, that is, fantastic (and nomadic) characters, from "Fanon"

to "Unborn Girl."

Yet, ultimately these films are overdetermined by the canon of "black film" in

which they neatly fit; their Afro-Diasporic creators haunt these filmic texts as presences

lurking behind the cameras that demand race and ethnicity be made a priority in the

understanding of their films. The question, however, remains whether the formal and

narrative strategies demonstrated in these clearly demarcated black (British, American)

films may be found as well in other film and media, that, although saturated with ethnic

resonances, are in no way readily available to categorization as black film as genre. In

other words, can haunting adequately challenge the range of texts understood as "ethnic"

and/or "racial," expanding the field of analysis to all forms of visual representation in

which haunting is a constitutive element? Indeed, it might be argued that once the ground

for defining black film is identified, the genre's more subversive practices become less

adventuresome, and less critical. A parallel can be drawn to another, similar genre—

"black music," which also "sets up expectations and disturbs them at irregular intervals;

that it will do this, however, is itself an expectation" (Snead 222). I contend that the

tautology that has, for the most part, proscribed the examination of racial meanings and

forms to films made by African American subjects has ghettoized the interrogation of

race and ethnicity to a very circumscribed body of works, such as those addressed above,

premised either explicitly or implicitly on the identity of the filmmaker haunting the text

itself. This is because, confronted with the implications of "the culturally constructed

nature of ethnic identities," there remains a palpable ambivalence towards the postmodern call for the outright dispersal of (ethnic, racial) subjectivity. This reticence is understandable when faced with such questions as how to retain central critical concepts like "black film" (or "the black aesthetic" on which it is based) in the wake of this dispersal.

However, by explicating haunting as the critical practice performed by the (genre) text's themselves, my goal is to lay out an alternative framework for the analysis of race and ethnicity in terms not bound to static identity claims. This, I suggest, is an important step in the radicalization of genre studies, particularly as it enters what Nichols has defined as its third stage—cultural studies (36). If previously, "scholars have avoided writing about the representation of race in American genre film, although race is very much a part of when and where people of color enter into the camera frame," it is because race is perceived as a noun, as something belonging to *someone*, someone most often located beyond and outside the film text, thus shifting the analysis from genre to *auteur* (Reid 1-2). Haunting, on the other hand, names a set of textual performances that problematize essentialist or foundationalist film criticism because haunting is an active process rather than a static concept. Jeffrey T. Nealon proposes a similar argument in his Deleuzean discussion of "becoming-black": "there is no 'ontology' of difference—no guarantee of otherness or subversion, no easily identifiable site of hegemonic or antihegemonic culture. Deleuze maintains that the hypostatizing attempt to guarantee otherness by making it into a noun has in fact been 'disastrous'" (122). While Nealon forwards "becoming" as a critical framework for de-essentializing critique, he nonetheless grounds this activity, reassuringly, in the texts of two icons of black

literature, Amiri Baraka and Ishmael Reed. But, I want to suggest, what if the "transhistorical nouns" such as "black literature" and "black film" were in fact replaced with "active site-specific verbs" such as haunting (Nealon 122)?[6]

Haunting, I contend, identifies a form of generic subversion that is less dependent on transhistorical categories than the critical activities performed by film texts. If blackness, as a state of being, does not guarantee the critical or subversive status of a text, then black film as genre cannot so hastily be assumed to address or foreground "change." For this reason, I forward the concept of haunting, which can be described, like genre, as a mode "of representation, of mediation, a specific orchestration of discourses in relation to a theme" (Stam, "Bakhtin" 253). Yet, unlike black film as genre, haunting is processional, necessitating a demystificatory critical practice to accompany and attenuate its interventions. This intervention into black film as genre is a logical outcome of anti-essentialist cultural critique. Julien Henriques reaches a similar conclusion: "As an initial move to start the ball rolling, I think we should drop the term 'black' when we are talking about art amongst ourselves" (20). Henriques goes on to defend his "shocking suggestion," explaining the term "black":

> …will continue to have a tremendous polemic value when arguing against the racism of individuals and institutions that refuse to recognize the existence, never mind the value, of black artistic activity…. But now…the immediate effect of abandoning the label is emancipatory…. If we don't make this move the black arts…are likely to become as frozen in their saying-it-like-it-is realism as traditional art forms have been in their exoticism (20).

The question here is why only "amongst ourselves," and, why only the "we" in the Black Arts Movement? It is also an important supplemental political move to undo the ways "blackness" is "frozen" into certain texts while race remains unexamined in the popular imagination generally, or simply summed up as "exoticism" or worse.

I want to trouble this binary, demonstrating the ways "haunting" transects texts, and media, by presenting a reading of a number of television episodes that directly address issues that have been all-too-readily bracketed off into genre criticism of "black film." My aim is to complicate the way race is framed in discussions of popular genres (when it is discussed at all), so that the space is made to critically map the subversions of the racist imaginary that take place in otherwise mainstream genre texts. By examining certain episodes of Chris Carter's series, *The X-Files* (1993-2002), I argue that the trope of haunting works to trace systems of signification that complicate traditional popular representations of race and ethnicity, even in supposedly racially-neutral, or "exoticizing" mainstream media, such as television. Demystification, in particular, affords new terms for media critics to write about the representation of race in American genre. The following section employs the methodology of demystification, as a mode of "ethnographic cultural critique," to articulate the complex ways race and nation inform the televisual discourses of *The X-Files* (Shohat 218). *The X-Files*, as a series fully instantiated in the genre of the fantastic, is not concerned with the invention of "another non-human world: it is not transcendental. It has to do with inverting elements of this world, re-combining its constitutive features in new relations to produce something strange, unfamiliar and *apparently* 'new,' absolutely 'other' and different" (Jackson 8). Because of its framing genre, the series frequently borrows from, and intersects with, the themes and images of black film, reflecting in its "other" characters, "in its value-laden images, its allegories, its icons, the outlaw, the obsessed, the deviant, the heroically fantastic" (Cripps 156).

Haunting the (T.V.) Screen

No longer anchored by "black cultural workers," like Isaac Julien or Julie Dash, to which film criticism's *auteur* theory lends itself, we can begin to expand the definition of haunting to accommodate media analysis more broadly conceived. Television is only very rarely linked to its cultural workers; directors and writers are only occasionally acknowledged in the public discourses about a series. This makes television a particularly fecund medium to mine the various ways "ethnicity is culturally ubiquitous and textually submerged," as Shohat argues. The FOX series, *The X-Files,* for example, bears little resemblance to the informal canon of films and television that fall within the multiculturalist purview.[7] However, many of the themes of black film as genre can be seen in the series, such as challenging the history of racial oppression within the United States as well as its international relations with peoples of the African Diaspora, the critical examination of the imperialist gaze of the camera with its ethnographic overtones, and the epistemological destabilization of representation itself. Rather than following the hegemonic line of representing racial and cultural indifference, *The X-Files* engages the historical power relations between peoples and cultures by explicitly depicting the polyphonic discourses of ethnicity available in U.S., particularly through the genres of science fiction, horror and their broader framework of the fantastic.[8] By doing so, it is one of the few television series that envisions identity as multiple and multifarious, as opposed to fixed and stable. Because *The X-Files* is conceived as an interrogation and destabilization of "the norms of life," it lends itself to allegories and characterizations that tend to be identified with black film genre.

In addressing the series' focus on race and ethnicity, I return to Shohat's

challenge to produce a methodological approach that is not reducible to image-based

analysis. Instead, the goal is to map the ways *The X-Files*, in the following episodes,

suggest an epistemological shift. To do this, I want to argue that Gordon's definition of

haunting, especially when applied to film and media studies, is a way to begin to identify

what Shohat's refers to as "inferential ethnic presences." For Shohat, such presences

denote "the various ways in which ethnic cultures penetrate the screen without always

literally being represented by ethnic and racial themes or even characters," (223).

Although much attention has been spent arguing the complex relationship of Mulder to

his sister or to Scully, or the alien/ government through-line cast as his search for "the

truth," most actual screen time is spent searching for a multiplicity of phantasms,

miraculous things, Others not defined as human—the "alien" and the "monstrous." It is in

The X-Files' proliferation of monsters, freaks, and assorted "aliens" that such "inferential

ethnic presences" take shape in terms of characterization and the narratives they evoke. In

this sense, *The X-Files* is deeply instantiated within the genre of Science Fiction: "science

fiction is generally concerned with the interpenetration of boundaries between

problematic selves and unexpected others and with the exploration of possible worlds in a

context structured by transnational technoscience" (Haraway 300). This definition

highlights the constitutive relationship between characterization and genre that is central

to mapping the inferential ethnic presences that haunt the television screen.

The show is over-populated with the genre's unexpected, fantastic others, which

begs the question—why and how do these others come to make sense in this show?

"Using monsters, allegories, metaphors," as Stam has suggested, "stresses the fictive-

discursive construction, placing the whole issue [of race and ethnicity] on a socio-

ideological plane rather than on an individual-moralistic one" ("Bakhtin" 258). Donna

Haraway has made a similar argument concerning the genre as a whole: "SF—science

fiction, speculative futures, science fantasy, speculative fiction—might issue in

something other than the sacred image of the same, something inappropriate, unfitting

and so maybe inappropriated" (300). For my purposes here, this something other is

figured in the deformation of expected characterization, which is figured in the

desecration of the image of the same, of the generic. Indeed, Haraway's expansion of

Trinh T. Minh-ha's catachresis, "inappropriate/d others," is quite helpful in naming those

who haunt *The X-Files*:

> Designating the networks of multicultural, ethnic, racial, national, and sexual actors
> emerging since World War II, this phrase refers to the historical positioning of those
> who cannot adopt the mask of either self or other offered by previously dominant
> modern Western narratives of identity and politics…to be an 'inappropriate/d other'
> means to be in critical, deconstructive relationality in a defracting rather than
> reflecting rationality—as the means of making potent connection that exceeds
> domination. To be inappropriate/d is to be dislocated from the available maps
> specifying kinds of actors and kinds of narratives, not to be originally fixed in
> difference (299).

The ceaseless stream of emerging social subjects inhabiting *The X-Files*, understood here

as inappropriate/d others, ultimately "point to the meaninglessness of traditional concepts

like the 'fantastic' and the 'alien' in a totally e-stranged world marked by alienation, by

temporal and spatial disorientation, by decentralization and marginalization" (V.

Sobchack, "Postmodern Modes" 28). This disorientation is shared with the above films,

in that both the films and the series produce another "momentum," one insistent on the

existence of the fantastic, the alien, and the strange. They share, in this way, a

foundational belief in the historical and cultural verity of the inappropriate/d others

populating their worlds.

It is this disorientation in the series that often thwarts, undermines, and even mocks outright the discourses of epistemophilia driving *The X-Files*. This epistemophilia emanates from the investigative paradigm that is the show's context as a hybrid form of the detective genre. From the moment Scully and Mulder commence an investigation:

> They are confused by strange, often dangerous sights and sounds. By emphasizing confusion, [the series] creates a desire for knowledge and for the authority it bestows. Underlying the narrative[s] is the assumption that self-identity will follow from comprehension, implying that the investigators will find themselves when they understand the confusion surrounding them, that they will define themselves in opposition to the Other (Springer 169).

But because they find inappropriate/d others, such self-knowledge, and the authority it entails, forever eludes Scully and Mulder. In this way, the series challenges the Manichean dialectics of self and other haunting the social body, particularly in the engagement with ethnic inferential presences. It further undermines spectatorial expectation, consistently shifting focus and identification from the spectator's stand-ins, Mulder and Scully, to the "aliens" and "monsters," whose existence we have come to believe, often through access to information, and feelings, from which the detectives themselves have been barred.

Along with shared motifs, the above canonical black films and episodes of *The X-Files* discussed here utilize the apparatus in editing techniques, camera placement, and other suturing devices to make clear that the most fantastic elements, scenarios, and characters—reincarnated spirits, ghostly children, apparitions, and monsters—are understood by the spectator to be absolutely real, not imagined. In this way, it should be stressed that for both the series and the above films, "the point of indiscernibility is not fantasy; it concretely relates to objects and their potential intelligibility…Physical object or mental description? The two become confused in a process that both deepens our

understanding of objects or events and widens our access to circuits of remembered experience in a mutual interpenetration of memory and matter" (Rodowick 92). Such indiscernibility operates in all these visual texts to deepen our understanding and access to systems of racial power and injustice; by utilizing otherwise "fantastic" elements, they struggle to resist "common sense" approaches to "race relations" by employing structures of haunting. The explicit and implicit manifestations of racial figurations are informed less by liberal discourses of tolerance than by the complex and debilitating matrix of domination and its sites of resistance.

This complicated history of domination and resistance is addressed specifically in terms of the African diaspora in the episodes, "The List" (1995) and "Fresh Bones" (1995). Both of these episodes are significant for they confront the role of visual technology in the imperialist imaginary and critique the ethnographic gaze with which the African diaspora has been rendered all too visible. For example, Pratibha Parmar has shown that, "historically, photographic images of black people all over the world have been captured by intrepid white photographers looking for the exotic, the different, the anthropological native types for local color—creating myths, fictions and fantasies which have in turn shaped the nature of encounters between whites and their 'others'" (115). Such arguments concerning the gaze and its subsequent distribution of power inform the historical and ideological dynamics presented in these episodes. Both episodes, for instance, deal with the imprisonment of African diasporic communities. "The List" takes place in a U.S. prison and "Fresh Bones" concerns a Haitian refugee camp in the American south. Both stories revolve around powerful, oppressive white figures literally haunted by ethnic and racial presences. Indeed, "Neech" (Badja Djola), the central

fantastic figure under investigation, sums up this theme in the first few minutes of "The

List:" "I will return to avenge all the petty tyranny and cruelty I have suffered."

Season Three's "The List" opens on Florida's Death Row, where, before being

put to death by electrocution, Napoleon "Neech" Manley, who is referred to throughout

the episode as exceptionally intelligent and well read, composes a list of five men who

will die after his execution. Agents Scully and Mulder are called in to investigate as

Neech's targets perish under mysterious circumstances. It becomes clear to the viewers, if

not to Scully and Mulder, that Neech has achieved his goal of reincarnation, returning as

a fly to undertake his revenge. The events of the second season episode, "Fresh Bones,"

occur in an American processing center for Haitian immigrants. The agents explore the

possibility that Voudoun ceremonies are being used against the oppressive soldiers

running the internment camp. Again, the viewer witnesses the key, overtly supernatural

events that Scully and Mulder fail to see, which explain the extraordinary circumstances

of the plot. This grants the audience access to events that the leads themselves never

witness. This very concern with the field of vision, and the power/knowledge it grants the

observer, is a central theme in both episodes. The opening sequence of "The List" evokes

Jeremy Bentham's panopticon in its original form—the gaze of the prison tower, in this

case aligned with the gaze of the camera. Aptly named, Neech is clearly in his racially

assigned niche within the prison walls; he is confined within his cell, and then the glass

booth, the restraints of the electric chair, and, finally, the extended close-up of the

camera. In "Fresh Bones," the camera similarly frames the object of its gaze; it

ethnographically pans and tracks the incarcerated, lingering on nameless Haitian faces to

insinuate their threat in its Othering process. In both cases, it is evident that, "just as

spectacle fortifies gender differences by allowing for the contemplation of the woman as an object contained and domesticated by the male gaze, spectacle can also allow for the similar contemplation of the ethnic and racial Other as an object, separated from and under the visual control of the viewer positioned with the camera, in power, as the eye of dominant culture" (Marchetti 287). No doubt, this is how the cinematic apparatus is deployed in these visual introductions. Yet, as the episodes unfold, it is revealed that their narratives are invested in problematizing these very ethnographic operations.

These two episodes do so by turning the gaze back on whiteness, making it evident that "looking is culturally determined and involves more than simply the gaze. It symbolizes ways of being toward others, ways of expressing domination for example" (Kaplan 204). In "The List," Napolean "Neech" Manley appears only twice: once, in the execution segment before the opening credits, when he is coldly put to death and, the other, as the reflection in the warden's rear-view mirror. Yet, throughout the episode, the camera is aligned with Neech's vision (now embodied in his reincarnated form as a fly), bearing witness to the injustices he suffered, confirming the tyranny of which he speaks, and thus his perspective becomes our own. The camera work literally becomes Neech's "fly-eye" view, inverting the power relations implied in the omnipotence of the panopticonic structure of the prison. Through this viewpoint, a critical perspective is generated, undercutting the earlier perception of "Napolean's" threatening black masculinity that the white juridical system effectively exiled and (supposedly) annihilated. This reversal reveals Neech's only statement to be in fact accurate—that the system itself is unjust, led by the "petty tyrant" of the white warden.

Indeed, the episode concludes with a dramatic reversal—Neech is returned to the frame embodied, and we are given the warden's reaction shot. It is this reversal that succinctly demystifies the power relations inherent in the apparatus of the camera. In other words, "in the gap between reaction (shot) and narrative identification may lay one of the ways in which irony is figured within the specific textual practices of television" (Caughie 54). This ironic gesture on the part of the filmic structure of "The List" emphasizes the political significance of returning the gaze. This return of the gaze demonstrated in Neech's condemnatory reflection in the warden's rear-view mirror has the power not simply to kill the warden but to effect a powerful discursive inversion. Neech's speech just before his electrocution appropriates concepts such as "justice" that have been systematically employed to substantiate and enact institutional forms of racism. His speech, however, is countered by the weight of the visual context, which situates him as a condemned prisoner of an assumedly "just" system. We see this to be a fallacy by the end of the episode, which has revealed not "Napolean" but rather Warden Brodeur (J.T. Walsh) to be tyrannical and oppressive. This appropriation of "righteous" power is reinforced visually with Neech's persistent gaze. The significance of this gaze should be understood in historical context; as bell hooks notes, "black slaves, and later manumitted servants could be brutally punished for looking, for appearing to observe the whites they were serving, as only a subject can observe or see" (qtd. in Kaplan 65). The camerawork of "The List" manifests Neech's refusal to be seen as a "fly" by the eyes of his racist oppressors. Not to be un-manned by their gaze, he looks back with a vengeance.

"Fresh Bones" is equally concerned with representational discourses of resistance. Set in a somewhat different register, this episode—which scored the highest ratings of

any in the first two seasons—revisits Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness*. It concerns

the mistreatment of Haitian detainees, whose detention seems to be partly motivated by

the colonel of the camp as he wants to learn more from them about voudoun practices.

Here, Colonel Wharton (Daniel Benzali), the Kurtz figure, desires to have "native"

knowledge to gain access to the powers of the exotic culture. Such a plotline toys with

concepts of ethnographic exoticization, but also metaphorizes the violent imperialist

appropriation of resources, peoples and goods of other cultures. Yet, the camerawork of

this episode undercuts the discourses of Otherness taking place within the *mise-en-scène*.

For example, the ghost boy, Chester Bonaparte (Jamil Walker Smith), who died in an

uprising within the detention center weeks before the arrival of the FBI agents, is leant

credence through editing techniques, akin to the visual structures of *Daughters of the

Dust* that frame the ghostly Unborn Girl. Further, every cinematic visit to the detainment

camp grows less and less ethnographic and, in fact, distances us more and more from the

Colonel, revealed eventually as a violent imperialist, notably in that he is the practitioner

of morbid voudon rituals which have turned his soldiers into zombies. It is his imperialist

gaze that is ultimately blinded when Pierre Bauvais (Bruce Young) blows white (frog-

derived) powder into his eyes, a "magic" that renders the Colonel paralyzed long enough

for him to be buried alive. By the film's conclusion, the camera has exposed the

imperialism of its original ethnographic gaze, providing instead the claustrophobic view

of a different spectacle—the Colonel's death, a death that is framed as retribution for the

appropriative acts he has committed.

"Fresh Bones" and "The List" both utilize claustrophobic space, particularly with

the specific framing device of the mirror employed as a metaphor for the return of the

dead. This use of the mirror returns the white gaze violently, revealing the true force of such a gaze when directed at the inappropriate/d other. The mirror, in fact, is a structural motif in "Fresh Bones," employing a *vever* or *loco-miroir* that is the sign of a Loa, and signifies a mirror to the soul. The white gaze in the mirror recalls and specifies the violence of the original ethnographic lingering on the faces of the internees, a violent gaze which negates the subjectivity of the Haitian people. To this extent, while "The List" presents the return of the gaze in relation to the warden who orders Neech's execution, "Fresh Bones" implicates the detectives themselves, who do not or cannot see the violent repression in effect at the detention center. It is the gaze of Mulder and Scully with which the ethnographic, othering gaze of the camera is first aligned. Therefore, it is their gaze that is critiqued in the episode. At the climax of the story, Scully is distracted from Bauvais' revenge by her own experience of Voudoun "magic." She is in the car when she begins, we assume, to hallucinate, visualized in her bloody but silent mouth reflected in her rear-view mirror—an image which underscores the broader political discourses of the episode. The repressed of the racist national imaginary returns fantastically in the image of the white body (politic) both infected and robbed of voice. Scully's unexplained hallucination begins, notably, with something/someone dark tearing through her white skin, and then she sees her reflection in her rearview mirror and panics. This visual imagery implies the socio-historical palimpsests of contemporary Western imperialism that haunt the nation-state. Specifically, "Fresh Bones" cannot help but recall the intense, systematic silence surrounding the Haitian, supposedly HIV positive, detainees held at Guantanámo Bay which came to light just a few years before the episode aired.[9] The episode explicitly critiques this "real" event in its fantastic re-

presentation, especially by conveying such historical violence through the affective

register of horror.

In the fictive-discursive concerns of *The X-Files,* the psychic splitting constitutive

of whiteness is a consistent theme in a myriad of investigations of inappropriate/d others.

Because the political and social arrangements of race and imperialism are metaphorized

in individual characters, the critique affected by the narrative often implicates inter-

psychic structures of identification and dis-identification. To this extent, the

preponderance of mirrors suggests the aggression and desire implicit in the Lacanian

model of the mirror-stage. This stage, complicated by subsequent re-readings through the

lens of race, is implicit in the Manichean dynamics of racism and colonialism turning,

constitutively, on the moment of the look.[10] The psychoanalytic model, as Kaplan

contends, explains how "whites continue unconscious of their own psychic splitting in

the very construction of themselves as white; that is, whites' self-definition as without

color and superior has depended on their difference from blackness constituted as

something specific—a color, an entity—and inferior" (293). By destabilizing both

whiteness and Otherness, *The X-Files* attempts to map the racial structures of

subjectivization and subjugation that haunt the social field and its narratives.

The conclusions of both episodes finalize the discursive struggles of the narratives

in such a way as to point out the fact that "it is from the affective experience of social

marginality that we must conceive of a political strategy of empowerment and

articulation, a strategy outside the liberatory rhetoric of idealism and beyond the

sovereign subject that haunts the 'civil' sentence of the law" (Bhabha, *Location* 56). Both

"The List" and "Fresh Bones" present strategies outside "the law" (in both the juridical

and psychoanalytic sense), reincarnation and Voudoun, which allow them to uncivilly haunt and trouble the law's conception of the sovereign subject. In fact, it is only through these strategies conceived and executed by inappropriate/d others—an African-American prisoner reincarnated as a fly and an interned Haitian Voudoun priest aided by his spectral child-helper—that justice is established. In this way, the viewer is reliant upon these ghostly, fantastic Others for any sense of narrative closure rather than on the white investigators. If "the black genre rests on *heroic figures*…each reflecting a different focus of black experience," than the heroic figures of Neech Manley and Pierre Bauvais reflect not only the several ways "justice" is a screen for a repressive state apparatus policing black men in the U.S., but may also point to the ways black genre and its concerns haunt supposedly "white" genres, influencing their storylines and characterizations (Cripps 10-11).

Notably, Mulder and Scully are rendered ineffective in both storylines. Neither case is solved (at least in no rational, scientific way) in that little, if any, knowledge is gained by the agents and protagonists except for a partial awareness of the crimes committed by the *white* authorities, now seen as antagonists. No one is brought to justice in the pedestrian legal sense, and the black "criminals" are now acknowledged as unjustly incarcerated. In fact, in "The List," Scully and Mulder drive off in the opposite direction without checking their own rear-view mirror, which would reveal the "truth" they never discover—at that moment, Neech is indeed reincarnated and murdering the warden. In "Fresh Bones," both are clueless that the Colonel is buried alive, oblivious to his screams that close the episode. In the failings of the agents, the implications are that Scully and Mulder, as white authorities themselves, precariously embody multiple ideological state

apparati that render them virtually impotent, albeit visably sympathetic to the in/appropriated others they encounter, in these circumstances. To simply consign them to the roles of hero and heroine in these stories would effectively reify the "liberatory rhetoric of idealism." Instead, these episodes prioritize "the affective experience of social marginality."

Race and (Alien)Nation

What is apparent in these shows are not only socio-historical discourses of race and social power allegorized in the alien and alienated bodies of monstrous and ghostly others, but embedded in these discourses lies a critique of the ideologies that constitute whiteness. Most often, these allegorical narratives take the form of either cruel or humorous irony. "Home" (1996) in its excess of violence and spectacle, represents such a cruel parody. Indeed, the fourth season episode was removed from syndication for years after its initial airing because of its intense violence; although, it begins with iconic, innocent images of integrated schoolchildren playing baseball. When one of them discovers a deformed, abandoned fetus, the FBI agents come to investigate. Its postmodern nostalgic twist works to expose and reject "the totalizing force of master narratives that would homogenize the diversity of cultural experiences into a single and generalized myth such as American-ness" (V. Sobchack, "Postmodern Modes" 349). The setting of this episode is, as Mulder overtly states, "small-town America." Further, the textual citation of *The Andy Griffith Show*, through the winking references to Andy Taylor, the (now) African American sheriff (Tucker Smallwood) with whom they work during their investigation of the dead mutant baby, parodically critiques the cultural

politics founding a nostalgic fifties middle- America. Pick-up baseball games, unlocked

doors, dialogue such as "everybody knows everybody" are the signifiers of sameness

dominating this text; staying "the same" is referenced time and again throughout the

dialogue. This critique is nowhere more insightful than in the trope of motherhood and

family inclusion on which the "horror" of the story relies. "Home" derides the "family

values" valorized by conservative political rhetoric and the American Heartland with

which it is equated. Specifically, the Peacock family, all genetically deformed in various

ways, "raise and breed their own stock;" it is the son impregnating the mother willingly

that produces the mutant baby. The family's endogamy, and the stagnation of "the old

ways," calls forth all that is "sick and horrible," not the multicultural, integrated "modern

world"—to cite the dialogue of the episode.

The Peacock family in "Home" comes to represent the horrific underside to the

historical discourses that haunt a racist hegemony in the West. The Civil War,

particularly, is referenced throughout the script, signaling a subtext of racial segregation

and disenfranchisement. More potent than the emblem of the Confederate flag, the

mother of the Peacock family calls the Civil War "the war of Northern aggression,"

bringing to the fore the question of what constitutes aggression. The fact that the Peacock

family dates from this historical epoch and aligns explicitly with the Southern slave-

holding position is further complicated by the Peacock's explicit desire to "keep

separate," the impetus behind the establishment of Jim Crow. Thus, the temporality of the

Peacock family parallels the most explicit moments in the history of racism in the U.S.

The family seems to have been "caught" in time, as Scully states, just before the Civil

Rights Movement; the 1950's car and the Johnny Mathis tune played on the radio

highlight the ways in which the Peacock family are identified with a precise time and history. The ramifications of the history of American racism are driven home in the excessive violence represented in the murder of the black family, the Taylors, by the inbred Peacock boys.

As the story unfolds, a tropological inversion takes place, articulating the position that pre-modern "savages," or "cavemen," "regressed to an almost prehistoric state," as the murderous Peacock boys are described, are not dark or alien bodies, but the warped and mutated bodies of incestuous postmodern (in Fredric Jameson's sense of a nostalgia for the past) whiteness. This inversion is further effected by Scully's specific scientific language; in describing the Peacock baby, Scully describes the notably white baby as "genetically mutated." This hints at the other fifties and sixties history that is rarely spoken of, that is, the research into genetics that overturned extant theories of race: "in a phrase, genetics demonstrated that 'race,' as defined by scientists from the late eighteenth century, had no scientifically verifiable referent" (Miles 37). These scientific discourses, taken together, reveal a metonymic corruption of the body politic, exposing the mutations wrought by a vitriolic racism arrested in and by history. A brutally ironic destabilizing of the Manichean terms of self and other, of black and white, of "same" and "different" is neatly effected in "Home." In its inverting and perverting intertextuality, a black Andy Taylor is "self," and "home," while the incestuous, monstrous whiteness of those who have descended generations from ancestors committed to the south, with its investments in a slave-based economy, are seen as horrific Others—the racist imaginary of the nation-state embodied and personified in all its disfigured grotesqueness.

Yet, this episode, with its characterization of corrupt, brutal racism, as the incarnation of abject (specifically un-sympathetic) monstrosity, is not unique in the series. Underpinning the comical episode, "War of the Coprophages" (1996), is a similar conceptual paradigm of racial hysteria. "Home" and "War of the Coprophages," in presenting their "speculative fictions," are interested in science's metanarratives of "progress," of the movement from "savage" to "civilized." This is because, as Haraway has argued, "in the history of the life sciences, the great chain of being leading from lower to higher life forms has played a crucial part in the discursive construction of race as an object of knowledge and of racism as a living force" (308). "Coprophages," in fact, opens with Scully refuting Mulder's belief in alien life with a linear model of evolution, inherited from Charles Darwin, evoking the limits of a homogenous definition of "us" once again. "War of the Coprophages" explicitly interrogates the languages of the life sciences to provide an implicit critique of their racist investments and outcomes. The conceit of the episode is that there is no monster or mystery to investigate. As in "Home," the setting is an unnamed community, this one experiencing a cockroach infestation and a series of untimely but apparently unrelated deaths. Mulder and Scully are not officially investigating anything, allowing the episode to focus on the characters' mundane fears of the unknown and *unheimlich*. By utilizing cockroaches to allegorize the possibilities of conflict, contagion, and contamination lurking beneath the surface (literally) of the social body, "rationalist and universalist claims to history—which were also the technologies of colonial governance: Evolution [Scully: alien life is "anti-Darwinian"], Evangelism [Mulder: "something up there in the night sky"], Utilitarianism [the entomologist's fascination with insect life patterns]—are attenuated in their encounter with the question

of cultural difference" (Bhabha, "Postcolonial Authority" 64). This encounter with cultural difference leads, comically, to white suburban panic and a proliferation of explanatory narratives, which attempt to articulate and contain the inferential ethnic presences that haunt the (racist imaginary of the) white suburb.

That these insects signal racial panic and loathing becomes evident not simply on the level of explicit dialogue, as in Mulder's claim that "I don't fear the natural world, I hate it," but the camerawork itself generates a discomfiting closeness to the insects, as the camera placed in a sink pipe with a roach crawling towards us, or the clever placement of a cockroach so that it walks across the lens, creating the illusion that it is on our side of the television screen and effectively inviting the audience to share in the panic. Sampling from various representations of cultural panic—Ebola virus, *The Planet of the Apes*, World War II (the brief image of a sailor grabbing hose and chocolate bars), *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* ("I heard they attack you while you're sleeping")—the show reveals the ideological fears just beneath the surface of "the typical suburban split-level house" (Mulder's description of his location at one point in the episode). The clever tricks evoking our terror, as when we are shocked by the dark but "normal house" suddenly inundated with cockroaches, or the roach running on the covers of the bed where a man calmly watches TV (as we are), show that despite Mulder's wishes, the "alien" does not emanate from the cleanliness of outer space but rather "the outskirts of civilization," as Scully remarks—outskirts clearly coded as African in origin.

The reference to the Ebola virus with its (white) media images of dying Africans safely elsewhere, the evocation of Darwin and "the origins of man," the reference to the science-fiction film series, *The Planet of the Apes,* with its simian inappropriate/d others,

and, if there were any question, the warehouse housing imported African dung beetles bearing the slogan, spelled out on a large sign on the building, "Waste is a terrible thing to waste," all make it only too clear that if racial meanings have a history in "Home," they have a geography in "Coprophages." This cooptation of the slogan for The United Negro College Fund concretizes for the viewer, through parodic citation, the connection between coprophages and the African Diaspora. The evocation of not space but place, specifically the African continent, and what it represents in the racist imaginary, is best described by Haraway:

> This wilderness is close in its dream qualities to 'space' but the wilderness of Africa is coded as dense, damp, bodily, full of sensuous creatures who touch intimately and intensely. In contrast, the extraterrestrial is coded to be fully general; it is about escape from the bounded globe into an anti-ecosystem called, simply, space. Space is not about man's origins on earth but about his future…Space and the tropics are both utopian topical figures in Western imaginations, and their opposed properties dialectically signify origins and ends for the creature whose mundane life is supposedly outside both (315).

The roaches that infest the diegesis and social imagination are dung-eaters—the darkness of shit with its psychoanalytic overtones is made explicit here. And, the show gets its shock quotient from images of these innappropriate/d others touching a little too intimately and intensely, as when Bambi (Bobbi Phillips), the entomologist, tells Mulder that roaches have been known to crawl into ears and noses. Or, even more explicitly, we see roaches all over the toilet and toilet paper where a man is calmly reading the paper as he defecates.

Ultimately, the episode, on the level of plot, is mockingly critical of the panic, fear, and hatred the mostly white populace of the town directs towards these "monsters." Indeed, the show suggests that Mulder, who is supposedly sympathetic to "aliens" and "who epitomizes the ideal of detached observation in his reporting and summarizing of

the encounter, fails when confronted with an alternative reality" (Springer 184). The encounter with the feared and hated other invites the audience to see its inanity and critique such a response, via the agents themselves. Mulder may fail in the confrontation, but we are allowed to laugh at his failure, his "girly scream," when confronted with the natural world. Indeed, all those who fail in their encounter with the coprophage "reality" are, in the end, made both pathetic and dangerous. The scientist who hates and fears the insects, yet exploits their resources for gain, in a plotline indebted to the history of colonialism, turns into the greatest threat as he waves a gun at Mulder, while accusing him of being "one of them" in his paranoia. The question of how one knows if s/he "is one" is the rhetorical principle motivating the use of the cinematic (and aural) apparatus in the episode. We, as viewers, are provided, literally, with the vision from below; many of the shots are angled from the roach-eye view. In fact, Scully, upon entering the town, is immediately framed from ground level at the gas station—a shot not used with her during any of the sequences in her apartment. Her lack of fear towards the Other is witnessed not just in her refusal to panic, and disdain for those who generate irrational myths about the Other, but in her literal reaching out to the other, in the scene where she kneels down and stretches out her hand to the "Choco Droppings" candy (from where the camera is unexpectedly positioned) mistaken for roaches by the hysterical masses in the store.

This use of sympathetic camerawork, coupled with the prioritization of sound in the self-mocking, excessive employment of the cell phones and the robot inventor's talk-box, "argues an overall shift in priority from the visually predominant logical space of modernity (perspective, evidence in empirical science, domination of the gaze) to a

postmodern space of the vocal (oral ethnography, people's history, slave narratives) all as ways of restoring voice to the silenced" (Stam, "Bakhtin" 256). This episode emphasizes the aural/oral over the visual in one of the only ways this highly visual medium can—by fetishizing the voice and its attendant technologies. It is, significantly, a ringing cell phone (in his pocket) that identifies Mulder as "one of them" (and nearly gets him killed); and, the episode begins with Mulder mistaken for a drug dealer by a white cop precisely because he is talking (to Scully) on his cell phone. In fact, nearly half the dialogue is delivered via phone. Understood another way, "the visual organization of space, with its limits and boundaries and border police ["The List" and "Fresh Bones"], is a metaphor of exclusions and hierarchical arrangements, while the concept of voice suggests a metaphor of seepage across boundaries which, as in the cinema, redefines spatiality itself" (Stam, "Bakhtin" 256). The combination of prioritizing voice and roach-perspective visuals effectuate this seepage for the spectator, who is invited to cross the boundary separating coprophage from human.

The episode's televisual redefinition of spatiality works to alter our perceptual sympathies and along with them, reconstitute our subjective positioning by situating the camera placement, literally our view of the pro-filmic world, from below. We are invited not simply to sympathize with the alien(ated) roach but to become the roach through effects such as the shot, reverse-shot that places us in the multiple-eyed perspective looking back at Mulder, reflecting not the roach but Mulder as the many-faced monster. So, by the end, we are "one of them." At the very least, any identification with the "civilized," idealized side of the evolutionary narrative has been troubled and literally distanced from our perspective, illustrated by Dr. Berenbaum (the voluptuous Bambi)

strolling off with the paraplegic, cyborg inventor, Dr. Ivanov (Ken Kramer), while Scully

quips about their *uber*-children. This filmic distanciation works to direct our sympathies

away from their anti-social scientist doppelgangers, and, instead, toward Scully and

Mulder, who have been altered (literally covered with shit) by their encounter with the

inferential ethnic presence of the coprophages. "Typical" white America, through the

surrogates of Mulder and Scully, and the suturing process itself, ends up not "smelling so

good" when confronted with its own racist imaginary, that is, the "shit" that is generated

by white cultural anxiety and paranoia and then projected on to Africa and its diaspora.

What I have tried to establish by demystifying the ideological struggles evident in

certain episodes of *The X-Files,* is that "the stakes in television studies are significant,

given television's rearrangement of everyday life, politics, culture, our imaginary and

national borders" (Mellencamp 10). These stakes, in fact, demand that what we define as

black film and media expand beyond its current definitions. *The X-Files* as well as the

films discussed above offer a range of insights into the construction of "our imaginary

and national borders" in their fantastic signifying practices. These practices work to call

forth the ghosts and monsters lurking in the national imaginary, but do so as part of the

"contemporary postmodern political desire" to make the cultural space for "new forms of

agency and identification that confuse historical temporalities, confound sententious,

continuist meanings, traumatize tradition, and may even render communities contingent"

(Bhabha 58-9). Accordingly, the goal of demystification is to proffer a critique relevant

and proper to this desire. By proposing a demystification of black film as genre, the aim

is to expand the field of radical genre criticism to account for these "new forms" in a

broad range of genre texts and varied media, freed from the "epidermic" determinants

that have produced inevitable correspondences between black filmmakers, black

characterizations (avoided altogether in "War of the Coprophages"), and black film (as)

genre.

The textual readings included here of some of the more epiphanic episodes of *The*

X-Files attempt to point out some possible openings along these lines. However, it would

be shortsighted to privilege the series' textual strategies over its larger social context.

This is not a new dilemma in television studies:

> It is in the very celebration of television as the quintessence of postmodernity which,
> while proclaiming the end of grand narratives and universal theories, simultaneously
> universalize a local, national experience—the US experience—as the essence of
> television, thus marginalizing all other experiences, and confusing the effect of a
> particular commercial arrangement with an inevitability of nature (Caughie 48).

It would be naive, to say the least, to not acknowledge that *The X-Files* is "enmeshed in

the expectations, aspirations, and possibilities produced by particular histories of

broadcasting and by particular legal, commercial, and political arrangements of

regulation and deregulation" (Caughie 57). Nonetheless, because ethnicity inheres in

virtually all media, film and television alike accommodate the tools of demystification,

although the latter would hardly be included in the designation "black film as genre."

Nonetheless, *The X-Files*, in its allegorical presentation of inappropriate/d others, works

to demystify the culturally dominant myths that define race, particularly blackness, very

much in accordance with what has come to be defined as the ideological and genre

imperatives of "black film."

What might be hypothesized is that black film has had time enough to make an

impact on mainstream media. Rather than insist on the unilateral movement of generic

material from dominant, mainstream film genre into black film via the latter's conscious

reappropriations and subversive recitations of genre tropes (reframed by the critical

engagement with race and culture), I want to suggest that the political interventions of black film genre has had a notable impact, by this point, on the visual field of the popular imagination(s). In addressing certain episodes of the television series, *The X-Files*, I have tried to show, in part, the ways the political and genre hybridity of black film has in turn influenced popular mainstream narratives, bringing with it the direct critical engagement with race and alterity outside the bounded conception of "black film" and "the black aesthetic" while nonetheless maintaining a tone of advocacy. Shared anti-realist generic markers stand as a privileged mode through which this advocacy is conveyed. Exemplary episodes from the series and several representatives of black film as genre center on "a transfigured object world in which fantastic events are *also* narrated…a kind of narrative raw material derived essentially from peasant society, and drawing in sophisticated ways on the world of the village or even tribal myth" (Jameson, *Signatures* 128-9). The fantastic provides both, apparently distinct generic forms a frame through which a critique of the social order and its constitutive power relations can be made in the form of a refusal of realism and its conceptual order. Put another way, "structurally and semantically, the fantastic aims at a dissolution of an order experienced as oppressive and insufficient" (Jackson 180).

Yet, as Henriques makes clear, "we should remember that a break with realism is not in itself enough. It is what we are breaking *with* more than what we are breaking *from* that is so vital and can give us real strength and real hope" (20). By breaking with realism in the ways they do, these pivotal shows in the television series and anti-realist black cinema share certain salient features that subvert racist visual culture and its conceptual, social and historical foundations. Considered together, the critical practices performed by

the texts' themselves tend to "critically engage [race] in a dialogue with its own past meanings so as to explicitly foreground both its current value and that value's historical and cultural provisionality…address[ing] ethnic [and racial] consciousness and [their] changing context[s] directly—foregrounding [both] as a contradictory, paradoxical and multivalent experience (V. Sobchack, "Postmodern Modes" 342). Yet, to critically articulate these complex textual practices, a mode of address is needed that would be responsible to the contradictory positionings that characterize racial formations in the popular imagination. Demystificatory genre criticism, the mode of address outlined here, which must play a significant part in the larger project of radical genre criticism, aims to build and elaborate on these practices, prioritizing and foregrounding the critical engagement with race and ethnicity in its several textual configurations, not the least of which are the complex and contradictory *characterizations* that haunt the screen, large and small.

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[1] For an example of this critique, see Tommy L. Lott, "A No-Theory Theory of Contemporary Black Cinema" 40-41.

[2] See Mark A. Reid, *Black Voices, Black Lenses*, in which he constructs two companionate categories for "African American film;" one category is notably "*African American Film* [which] refers only to films directed, written, or cowritten by members of this community. The term *black-oriented film* denotes similar black-focused film whose directors and screenwriters are nonblack" (1).

[3] For an extensive discussion of this history, see Alison Griffiths, *Wondrous Difference: Cinema, Anthropology, & Turn-of-the-Century Visual Culture*.

[4] For a finely honed analysis of this legacy, see Jaquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Mind That Burns Into Each Body," in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*.

[5] In *Cinema 2*, Deleuze refers to the "in-between" as the "interval." Laura U. Marks develops this concept of the interval specifically in terms of "intercultural cinema," including the films of Dash, Kureishi and Langston. See *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* for further discussion. In it, she uses Deleuzean concepts including, but not limited to, the interval to ground a demystificatory film theory.

[6] Notably, Nealon does not seem to recognize the logical inconsistencies of his own argument, epitomized in his concept of "African American deterritorialization," which

implicitly relies on "African American identity and agency," that is, following Deleuze and Guattari, deterritorialization does not have an identity (122).

[7] The HBO series, *The Wire*, exemplifies this position in television criticism, as it is critically praised in terms of its "realistic" representations of race, class and cultural difference.

[8] Patricia Mellancamp has pointed out, "in an era of mass diversity of sameness it is critical to identify differences and unravel the operations of contradiction rather than focusing on the manufacture of indifference" (5).

[9] The producer of the show, Howard Gordon, took the idea from actual "articles about three suicides involving U.S. servicemen in Haiti." See Brian Lowry, *The Truth is Out There: The Official Guide to The X-Files* (1995): 197.

[10] See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks* (1967); Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (1994); and the anthology, *The Psychoanalysis of Race,* Christopher Lane, ed. (1998).

Conclusion

Deformations of Character, Formations of Fantasy

If there were a position of knowledge (about the workings of a film narrative) it would have to be located in a combination of synthesis of several different tracks, stands or places. It would have to give some account of the emotion or idea that the narrative is devised to embody, represent or talk about. It would have to take on board the institution of characterization. It would acknowledge the crucial principle of conflict, both within and between characters, and between characters and other forces active or implied (Christopher Williams 208-9).

Generic Subversions is an attempt to articulate a specific position of knowledge about film genre. The methodological aim has been to map out the ideological work of contemporary genre media in the ideas and emotions embodied in a set of film and televisual narratives. Specifically, this project reframes genre criticism in terms of reading practices attuned to textual manifestations of difference or, more precisely, alterity, located in the embodiment of characterization rather than grounding it in the intentions of either the spectator/reader or the *auteur*. To this end, the preceding chapters have attended to what Deleuze refers to as "signaletic materials"—a distinctly different approach to textual classification (*The Brain is the Screen* 368). I have argued that the materials specific to genre films, their generic signals, are the starting point for the analysis of the unique operations of generic subversion. Central to the signaletic materials which form the generic contract is the establishment of "distinctive discursive modalities governing what can be said by what kinds of speakers for what types of imagined audiences" (Jim Collins, *Uncommon Cultures* 12). The previous chapters address the various discursive modalities of popular generic forms, proposing that textual subversions take place primarily through the challenge posed by the texts to the assumptions governing who can speak, what kinds of speakers are valid and which are

not. However, in historicizing specific generic characterizations such as the serial-queen and the tough chick, the noir detective and the femme fatale, and a range of alien Others, I have left the institution of character itself relatively unexamined; I will attempt to correct this oversight here.

In the radical approach to film genre criticism forwarded in various contexts over the previous chapters, character stands as a lynchpin supporting claims to subversion. This is because character functions as a crucial "signaletic material" in the ideological analysis of film genre, particularly in regards to the question of difference—cultural and generic. Hamid Naficy describes the relationship of genre difference to cultural difference as inherent to the generic economy itself: "Difference and slippage…are essential to the generic economy, and they are inscribed by filmmakers not only as authorial visions or stylistic variations but also as markers of ethnic, gender, national, racial or class differences" ("Phobic Spaces" 122-3). In the film texts I address in the previous chapters, I ascribe the markers of difference not to "authorial visions" but rather to the subversion of generic conventions on the textual level, mobilized through subversive characterizations which destabilize the cultural expectations implicit to the generic imagination. Genre slippages articulated as unexpected characterizations bring to light the unspoken assumptions that underpin the generic, and thus popular, imagination. In other words, the theory of generic subversion in my project arises from the protocols of cultural (and textual) criticism, especially ideological critique, to identify the slippages and differences within the generic imaginary and their political, often subversive, implications.

To this extent, *Generic Subversions* is part of the recent trend in Cultural Studies approaches to film that have proposed more contextualized descriptions of the intersections of genre and culture(s): "genres hang together as an integrated system of intersecting fictional worlds. In this perspective, boundary crossings and disputes become productive sites of cultural activity," often because they involve contested identities (Gledhill, "Rethinking Genres" 224). Yet, in the move from "fictional worlds" to "contested identities," the terms of critical investigation slide from texts to the subjects "behind" them, with text itself treated as the domain of (or site of transmission of) dominant ideology, and its subversion the conscious work of (or reflecting the experiences of) subaltern Others, as insituated in Naficy's "stylistic variations." Indeed, as genres have become more hybrid, more "mixed," the (identity of the) subjects involved with producing them have increasingly provided the ontological coherence not necessarily available in genre labels and texts themselves. For example, Jameson's tentative response to the "problem" of genre, mass culture, and its "intertextuality" is a vague assertion of identity politics: "The only authentic cultural production today has seemed to be that which can draw on the collective experience of marginal pockets of the social life of the world system: black literature and blues, British working-class rock, women's literature, gay literature, the *roman qué-bécois*, the literature of the Third World" (*Signatures* 23). Though he himself states: "the demands for equality and justice projected by [students, blacks, browns, and women] are not (unlike the politics of social class) intrinsically subversive" (Jameson, *Signatures* 36).

Still, while Jameson is more ambiguous about the relationship between texts and the "marginal pockets" they "draw on," others are much more precise about the origins of

generic subversion, returning to an authenticating *auteurist* approach as the legitimate grounds of textual subversion. Janet Staiger, for one, insists that the only authentic "hybrid" genre films are "…examples of films created by minority or subordinated groups that use genre mixing or genre parody to dialogue with or criticize the dominant" ("Hybrid" 197). These arguments turn from textuality to the identity "behind" the text, intimating that generic subversion is a textual phenomenon produced, used, articulated by, or reflecting the interests of socio-cultural marginals. This reflects the difficulty film genre criticism has had in moving away from (the positivism of) the purity hypothesis, which, as a mode of critical and taxonomic knowledge, asserts identity—of genres and subjects alike—in all its various incarnations (i.e., the text, the spectator, the critic, the *auteur*). Indeed, even Staiger, who champions the thorough routing of the purity hypothesis, cannot see its operations in her own, ethically oriented claims. Staiger urges genre critics to stop uncritically using the concept of hybridity by countering: "films by U.S. feminists, African Americans, Hispanics, independents, the avant-garde and so forth" may be the only "good cases" (because of their inherent hybrid or subversive identities) ("Hybrid" 197). Thus, despite her own explicit indebtedness to poststructuralism, she does not make the connection that the purity thesis is equally in operation in identifying subject-positions as it is in labeling genres. Identities, like genre texts, are "inevitably impure because [they] cannot but be known by the context in which [they] exist"—a context that is relational, situational and contingent (Staiger, "Hybrid" 189). Thus, securing generic instability in the identity of its filmmakers offers precarious grounding for claims to generic hybridity.

While the historical origins of genre criticism were linked to the structuralist critique of the (death of the) author, more recent insights as to the instability of generic assignation, argued both by genre theorists and historians alike, have come to trouble text-based genre studies. This has led film genre critics to rely on the supposedly self-identical subject as the basis for a critical practice, whether this is located in audiences, critics or *auteurs*. Grant describes this critical trajectory in film genre studies: "If, in the eighties, leftist critics were able to shift away from the view of genre as necessarily mythic embodiments of the dominant ideology—for example, a convincing case was made for reading many horror films as critiques of American society rather than as endorsements of its fears and repressions—so, more recently, previously marginalized voices have been finding spaces from which to speak within the discourse on genre, as is the case of queer readings of popular films" (*Film Genre Reader* xvii). A notable slide between "marginalized voices" and "readings" is effected here that reflects a general assumption that ties reading practices to identity, although there is no necessary correspondences between the two. Yet, this new attention to who can "speak within the discourse on genre" has led Altman, for one, to retrofit his influential syntactic/semantic theorization of film genre. Adding the term "pragmatic" to his categorization, Altman explains: "I underemphasized the fact that genres look different to different audiences, and the disparate viewers may perceive quite disparate semantic and syntactic elements in the same film. This blindness in turn kept me from fully investigating the possibility that genres might serve diverse groups diversely" (207). This eye to diversity informs the recent interest in the uses to which genres are put, and by whom. Ideological film

criticism, in this way, turned from locating subversive strategies in textual operations to forms of reception and specific constellations of genre "users."

However, if "pragmatic analysis must constantly attend to the competition among multiple users that characterize genres," it does so nonetheless with an eye towards "facilitating the integration of diverse factions into a single social fabric" (Altman 210, 208). This exposes the limitations of the additive approach, which perceives "contested identities" as a problem to be solved by taking into account more identities. The adulteration of genre texts, and their subsequent resistance to generic classification, has inspired this change in address, by shifting the presumption of ontological stability from the text to the producing or receiving subject, readily classified as members of marginal (or dominant) groups. Pragmatic and user-based approaches, along with theories based on the "marginal" status of filmmakers, continue the recent trend in genre criticism away from textual analysis, tending to privilege reception and production over textual determinants.

These recent theories attempt to account for generic "difference," but do so by "escap[ing] the residual tyranny of the text-king" (Altman 213). In the wake of poststructuralism, film genre critics, like Staiger and Altman, have actively reassessed explanatory models that historically account for generic change, intervention and even subversion, by rethinking the grounds on which texts are identified and categorized—to a very great extent, the central work of genre studies. Yet, in my aim to propose a radical form of genre criticism, I have rejected these more recent interventions; instead, the critical terms I employ in naming generic slippage and difference are informed by feminist, queer and postcolonial textual studies. Feminism, for instance, reached its own

impasse regarding textual assignation, rejecting "the more conventional positions

regarding the categorization and assessment of feminist (and patriarchal) texts," which

parsed texts according to four broadly defined methods: "1) the sex of the author; 2) the

content of the text; 3) the sex of the reader; and 4) the style of the text" (Grosz 11). While

genre critics have been loath to return to textual studies, feminist, critical race and queer

critics have pointed out that poststructuralist theory presents quite provocative alternative

routes for textual analysis, such as the example of demystification introduced in the

previous chapter, since the identity of the author or the reader present no better options.

Although they do not reject text-based analysis outright, anti-essentialist theories, such as

poststructuralist feminism, reject textual models that locate the political critique in either

the identity of the author or the spectator:

> One of the most contentious presumptions of author-based interpretations is the presence of a knowing, controlling consciousness, a rational, intentional subject for whom language is simply a means of expression of ideas. The presumption of the active productive reader…simply shifts the position of the sovereign subject from sender to receiver…. While perhaps decentering the sovereignty of the singular author, the multiplication of reading   subjects remains governed by the norms of sovereignty (Grosz 16-17).

In terms of genre criticism, this profoundly troubles the methodological approaches

outlined above; even some of the most contemporary theories of genre must be critically

reevaluated from these insights.

As Grosz points out, "the text's materiality exerts a resistance, a viscosity, not

only to the intentions of the author but also to the readings and uses to which it can be put

by readers" (Grosz 17). This, however, does not mean that textual analysis is prohibited.

While recent genre critics have tended to demonize "the preceding text-based era," anti-

identity theorists have attacked foundationalist claims with equal fervor (Altman 213).

Rejecting the coherence of identity and subjectivity by foregrounding the conflictual

negotiations of situated performative practice, these anti-essentialist theorizations render mute foundational claims to the hybridity or subversiveness of film genre premised on the "difference" of identity of filmmakers or audiences. Thus, the genre criticism forwarded here suggests a return to textual analysis, via ideological and cultural critique, in hopes of evading the traps of identity politics that are symptomatic of post-textual genre studies. Anti-essentialist epistemologies effectively challenge identity as the grounds of knowledge production, rejecting the conflation of identity with ideological or political critique, a tendency reflected in some recent interventions in genre criticism. Rather, the intervention in genre criticism undertaken in my project follows what Adam Knee refers to as "a more pragmatic approach," because it allows "texts and textual attributes to retain at least some place in our conceptualization of genre" (35).

In each chapter, my project returns to the genre film text, grounding claims to difference and slippage in the productive reading of character. In organizing each chapter's engagement with, and identification of, specific film genres, I have looked to the generic "symptom" of characterization as the basis for a radical rethinking of the genre category under discussion. Deleuze argues that genres such as "classic," "romantic," and "neorealism" are valid categories if "we trace them to singular symptoms or signs rather that general forms. A classification is always a symptomology"(*The Brain is the Screen* 368). This is how the radical genre theory I propose, one attentive to the degenerence of genre and its constitutive precariousness, can retain the notion of genre in general, and textual analysis as a useful mode of critical practice. Through the symptomology of characterization, the question of the text is central. Although, as Knee stresses, the place of the text within genre studies "should be a dynamic and unstable

place," it nonetheless is the locus of such Deleuzean symptoms; that is, "generic discourses are intimately bound up with groupings of formal textual elements, even if our terms are fluid, our semantic and syntactic aspects always located on shifting ground" (Knee 35). By privileging the text over other approaches to generic slippage and subversion, this project rejects the gesture of stabilizing genre's shifting textual ground on the foundational "difference" of extra-textual identities. The specific methodology employed in *Generic Subversions* is, in this way, a form of queer pedagogy, which is focalized through textual reading practices: "When reading practices are privileged over the intentions of the author or the reader, the concern becomes one of thinking through the structures of textuality as opposed to the attributes of biography" (Britzman 163). Yet, this redirection from "biography" and towards textuality does not eradicate the question of identities and difference. Rather, for me this question is posed in terms of generic characterization and its singular symptomology.

Central to genre's iconography, if not foremost, is "archetypal characters and even specific actors.… Genre movies take…social debates and tensions and cast them into formulaic narratives, condensing them into dramatic conflicts between individual characters and society or heroes and villains" (Grant *Film Genre* 12, 16). In the previous chapters, I have mapped out these narrative arrangements, making claims to generic subversion on the ideological work of certain films, on their exceptional rearrangements of dramatic conflicts in particular. That these conflicts are articulated precisely as *embodiments*, as characters, is salient to radicalizing genre criticism in that characterization is historically foundational to Hollywood genre formations, as Altman outlines: "idiosyncratic and easily identifiable characters (sometimes actually borrowed

from comic strips) were created so that each individual film could contribute to marketing the next" (116). Notably, Altman is describing early cinema, but the appropriateness of this description to current blockbuster fare (*Iron Man, The Dark Knight, The Hulk, X-Men*) is inarguable. This emphasis on "propriety characters" marks contemporary cinema in ways that can be said to transcend genre categories. "Though it has been generally assumed that Hollywood makes and publicizes genre films," Altman hypothesizes,

> Careful inspection of advertising campaigns reveals that generic claims have never constituted a substantial portion of feature film publicity strategy, except when capitalizing on some other studio's success…poster texts and trailer voice-overs systematically stress *propriety* characteristics (star, director and related successful films by the same studio) over *sharable* determinants like genre…Paramount doesn't call *Raiders of the Lost Ark* an adventure film; instead it touts 'Indiana Jones'—the new hero from the creator of *Jaws* and *Star Wars'* (117).

Textual analysis, to this extent, must deal with the preeminence of character in the production of generic meanings. Each of the textual analyses developed in the preceding chapters, in this way, take as their starting point not the iconography of a given film genre so much as the discursive activity registered in generic characterization, such as "tough chick" or "hard-boiled detective."

Yet, what I have taken for granted in the project thus far is the question of character as the epistemic baseline of ideological genre criticism. Hélène Cixous frames the question inontological terms: "What exactly is 'character'? How is it possible at present to think of the 'concept' of 'character'—if it is a concept….What does 'character' name" (383)? In the analysis of the discursive function of character in film genre, the question of what character names is central. According to Cixous, "'Character' occupies a privileged position in the novel or the play: without 'character,' passive or active, no text…. Upon his 'life' depends the life of the text—so they say" (386). What is

insinuated in this caveat is the recognition of textual experimentation with the attenuation, or suspension, of character epitomized by postmodern avant-garde textual production. What divides the avant-garde from mainstream or popular cinema in many ways can be reduced to the place and treatment of character in a given work. The disappearance of character, particularly the "hero" function, has been referred to as a death "generally experienced by the reader as a murder, a loss, on which follows the reader's quick withdrawal of his investment, since he sees nothing more to be done with a text that has that has no one in it… No one to talk to, to recognize, to identify with" (Cixous 387). In many ways, genre film can be seen to epitomize the antithesis of these experiments, depending instead on the intensification of genre characterization to fulfill the generic contract almost entirely on its own.

When character is "larger than life" in its embodiment on the screen, as it is in film genre with its emphasis on propriety characters, that characterization becomes what the French refer to as *personage*—"not simply a person; he is a *notable*; a *fictitious* person, man or woman, he personifies" (Cixous 386). Generic characterization, therefore, does not simply personify, it exceeds the task of bodying forth subjectivity in its larger than life aims. Character is a crucial concept in the naming of generic subversion because it is a sign through which ideological contestation comes to be signified in its exceeding the bounds of narrative and plot. "Excess," as Altman suggests, "is one of the many ways in which genres embody counter-cultural expression" (158). The excessive spectacle and discursive power of character highlights its critical potential for resignification. In other words, character acts as a privileged "mark" of genre, one that exceeds genre by calling attention to itself as a generic marker. The excessive mark of genre that concept of

character identifies is described by Félix Guattari in terms that stress the interconnectedness of the (psychoanalytic) imaginary and the (generic) imagination, particularly in the profound "unconscious action" of "commercial cinema": "At the movies one pays to be invaded by subjective arrangements with blurry contours in order to give in to adventures that, in principle, have no lasting effects. 'In principle,' because the modelization resulting from this cheap sort of vertigo is not without telltale traces: the unconscious finds itself populated by cowboys and Indians, cops and robbers, Belmondos and Monroes" (162-3). Notably, this invasion of subjective arrangements is assumed in genre criticism without much note. Genre films are recognized by their "cowboys and Indians," "cops and robbers," detectives, *femme fatales*, clowns, gangsters and (action) heroes. It is how these generic characters bridge the imaginary and the imagination that is the central concern linking together the constellations of readings presented in my project.

The modelization afforded by genre characters suggests they be addressed and analyzed as *signs* within the generic economy that by definition exceed the terms of "proper" representation, such as simply serving an actantial function in genre narrative, and therefore have the potential to subvert the generic contract. Put another way, generic characterization can be classified as signs in order "to formulate a concept that presents itself as an event," in this case, the "concept" of character, "rather that an abstract essence" (Deleuze, *Brain is the Screen* 368). Generic characterization is an event to the extent that its signs—"cowboys and Indians" as signs of the Western, for example— populate the unconscious in excess of any single given film text. Grant, for example, translates this event in more pedestrian but equally descriptive terms, presenting the

argument that "genre films are directly related to lived experience, their traditions clearly connected to communal values. While most filmgoers do not go to the literal extreme of attempting to live generic conventions directly…audiences do model their values and behavior to a significant degree according to those conventions" (Grant, "Experience and Meaning" 116-7). Interestingly, it is less generic conventions than its subset—characterization—that creates templates for modeling. This idea of "modeling" actually names an imaginary relation that is inherent to the function of character. According to Cixous, "The imaginary is the category of identification. Any relation between one thing and another is part of the imaginary. (In this sense, the notion of 'character' necessarily goes back to a theory of the imaginary)… It is on the basis of the imaginary and by means of its restrictions that 'characterization' is produced; and 'characterization' conducts the game of ideology" (Cixous 384). Because characterization conducts the game of ideology, the analysis of generic subversion starts with character in its ideological critique.

To be clear, the *imaginary* of which Cixous speaks is a psychical structure on which all character identification relies, while the *imagination* is particularized by social and historical structures. The imaginary retains its unconscious dimension while the imagination "can be conceptualized as a public space of social imaginings within a culturally conditioned aesthetic framework" (Gledhill, "Rethinking Genres" 232). For example, the concept of the national imaginary is important to an understanding of an imaginary projection of the nation-state that never existed and cannot be willed into being but nevertheless is a powerful force in the definition and conceptualization of the nation. In other words, "a 'mode of imagination' is both culturally and historically definable,"

while an imaginary is a pre-condition for these modes but insubstantial on its own

(Gledhill, "Rethinking Genres" 232). It is within the terms of the generic imagination that

the ideological analyses of specific genres, and their concomitant characterizations, most

often take place. Most ideological criticism of aesthetic forms starts from the position that

"art is a special perceptual agency that performs a quasiepistemic function: it literally

makes a spectacle out of ideology, and in doing so, elucidates, even materially

objectifies, the presence and activity of ideology" (Klinger 76). Ideological analyses of

the generic imagination frequently stress the conserving forces of ideology that are

evident in films genre and hold that "genre closes off alternatives, resists multiple

meanings and symbolically resolves real contradictions in imaginary ways. Specific

generic outcomes…also work to promote a larger pattern of acquiescence in conventional

and rule-governed methods of 'solving' problems" (Langford 21). Yet, an altogether

different critical position emerges when the generic *imaginary*—outlined here in terms of

characterization—is examined as part of the ideological performance of film genre.

Although Guattari states that "commercial cinema is undeniably…reactionary,"

its very ability to populate the spectator's unconscious with "invaders" makes it "possible

for a film to upset our whole existence…due to the fact that cinema intervenes directly in

our relations with the external world. And even if this exterior is contaminated by

dominant representations, a minimal aperture could result from this intervention" (164).

This aperture manifests for me as a subversive genre citation, a citation that attempts not

to transcend the generic imagination but rather to repopulate the generic imaginary.

Throughout the preceding chapters, I have tried to map the appearance of this aperture

across film genres in terms of the intervention of generic characterization. This imaginary

relation of character has in fact rarely, if ever, been examined in film genre. When character is examined in film it is often in regards to the aesthetic elucidation of the postmodern dispersal of character. Epitomizing this position is Thomas Docherty's *Alterities*, which forwards the position that the reader's (or viewer's) unconscious is supposedly opened to otherness "through a scenario of seduction which radically involves the confusion of the ontological status of character with that of the reader and author" (40). Docherty's thesis is very much in line with Cixous' antithesis to the closures of character, the "nonhuman," a form of multiplicity, "a trans-subjective effervescence" (Cixous 387). The central purpose of my own project—to trace out the potential subversive apertures within character—is mobilized in part to circumvent this binary, which has tended to define ideological approaches to character. In other words, Guattari's proposal of a minimal aperture available in the generic imaginary affords another interpretive model through which to lay claim to the concept of character, avoiding either/or formulations that address character as either complicit and illusionary, "locked up in the treadmill of reproduction….prisoners of the monotonous machinations that turns every 'character into a marionette,'" or free from representational constraits, left with "Nobody" to "baffle…repressive interpretation" (Cixous 388).[1]

If another conceptualization of character is possible in film genre, it is because generic characterization is not synonymous with, and in fact rejects, proper modes of characterization inherited from realist fiction. Genre films are frequently distinguished as deficient because they lack the requisite "'well-rounded', or 'vividly realized' or 'fully depicted' characters" of (assumedly) non-generic fiction films (Docherty 64). Yet, the generic imaginary is able to invade the unconscious precisely because its

characterizations proceed in the opposite direction, refusing the depth model. In this way, it is generic types—"cowboys and Indians"—that invade the imaginary, not specific characters precisely because they lack depth, individuality. This lack of depth produces distinct characterizations with altogether different effects: "Rather than the humane, dimensional characters who populate films of 'good taste,' the excessive…stereotyping of genre films is critically preferred…endowed with a revelatory salience" (Klinger 84). Yet, this position—that genre's particularly rejection of character depth is indeed revelatory—is far from the dominant critical position. It is more frequently judged a failure of genre to abide by the nineteenth century Enlightenment concept of character, with its rationalist epistemology articulated in the terms of human nature. Within this tradition, according to Docherty, "character accordingly becomes understood as an allegorical type: not only 'individual' but also, as in the tradition of bourgeois democracy, 'representative'" (43). Thus, "the notion of character as locus of the revelation of an essential human nature…enact[s] certain practices as socially normative" (Docherty 44). This historical function of character is pivotal to the understanding of character de-formation I forward. Inherent in this hegemonic conception of character is the production of the social and subjective norm, against which the film genre characterizations I discuss are measured. Their constitutive difference imbues these characters with revelatory salience, which I want to reassert here.

According to Thomas Sobchack, "Other fiction films are not genre films precisely because they…appear more realistic, more true to life. Their characters are more highly individualized, their actions physically and psychologically more believable" (106). Characterization in film genre works through codes of iconography rather than depth of

individual psychology. For this reason, Sobchack can claim: "typecasting in the genre film is a bonus, not a debit…just one more way of establishing character quickly and efficiently" (T.Sobchack 108). Yet, what is implicit is that the establishment of unspoken norms for the speedy establishment of generic character that relies heavily on cultural and social material to provide an appropriately readable shorthand to its (assumed) unified audience. Certain systems of signification shape the expectations built into the generic contract, giving that term a double meaning. Genre, in other words, mobilizes sets of expectations about character that is implicitly shaped by "the generic," in the sense of representing a generalized subject recognized by the norms that define a presumed cultural verisimilitude. In other words, "through 'character' is established the identification circuit with the reader; the more 'character' fulfills the norms, the better the reader recognizes it and recognized himself" (Cixous 385). One such norm, for example, is whiteness, which in generic iconography is assumed and unspoken. As Richard Dyer has argued, "White power secures its dominance by seeming not to be anything in particular…. This property of whiteness, to be everything and nothing, is the source of its representational power" (44-45). This very representational power is produced and reproduced in generic citation of characterizations, when norms remain intact.

The stakes of representational power at work in the generic economy turns directly on the question of characterization. Nichols spells out these stakes: "Who gets to represent what to whom and why; what image, icon or person shall stand for what to whom are questions in a form that allows issues of visibility and cinematic representation to tie into issues of social and political consequence" (45). These consequences are bound up with the ideological function of characterization, which reiterates norms implicit in the

generic signal. The generic, in this context, is understood as the incarnation of a set of socio-cultural norms: "the norm is a measurement and a means of producing a common standard, to become an instance of the norm is not fully to exhaust the norm, but rather, to become subjected to an abstraction of commonality" (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 50). Generic characterization is precisely *generic* in its reiteration of norms, which in turn subject participants in the generic contract to this very abstraction. The consequences of this contractual arrangement (of power) should not be underestimated: "characters in fiction are, proportionately to the extent that they are 'representative' of a supposed human nature, models upon whom selves in history must fashion themselves if they are to have a claim on being a 'reasonable' or 'enlightened' individual—a legitimate individual—within human nature" (Docherty 63). In this sense, generic characterization has social implications that become all the more apparent in the slippages and differences available in film genre. These aporia, frequently identified in terms of ethnic, gender, national, racial or class differences, are less stylistic flourishes than crucial interventions that challenge the status of the generic in its several meanings.

Historically, character bears the meaning of "what it is to be a human in a social formation," as Docherty makes clear in his genealogy of character; he explains that this particular Enlightenment tradition of treating character "as an locus of essential identity" promotes the assumption that "to change the order of things would be 'unreasonable', 'unenlightened', or simply criminally 'illegitimate'" (45). Because this is the dominant tradition shaping film genre characterization, epitomized in the implicit claims at work T. Sobchack's definitions above, film character plays a constitutive role in delimiting the human in its textual systems. If the human's "basic needs and, hence, basic entitlements

are made known through various media, through various kinds of practices, spoken and

performed," then the media serve as an important starting point in the ethical

interrogation of the human and its limits (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 37). In articulating the

political implications of generic subversion, my dissertation is mobilized by the question

of the human and its various foreclosures. The discursive function of character would

appear to be as the mark of humanness in the text. It therefore stands as a privileged term

of textual and ideological analysis. Through the analysis of character, particularly in its

articulation of difference (as opposed to the difference of audiences or filmmakers), it

becomes apparent that "the terms by which we are recognized as human are socially

articulated and changeable. And sometimes the very terms that confer 'humanness' on

some individuals are those that deprive certain other individuals of the possibility of

achieving that status, producing a differential between the human and the less-than-

human" (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 2). It is this differential that is the central concern of

my project.

Genre subversion often turns on character to the extent that it is through

characterological embodiment that a genre film calls into question the status of the

generic, that is, the cultural and social norms which define the hero, the villain, the

sidekick and the like. To this extent, generic subversion names the textual practice of

embodying characterization Other-wise, challenging the norms which define and delimit

the "human" by marking character in the specific. In doing so, what constitutes the

human is called into question. The methodology informing the interrogation of the

deformation of character I employ here sets out, after Irigaray, to "question any discourse

which claims to be indifferent to the subject—in its dimensions of perceptions,

sensitivity, understanding, and sex—which calls itself universal and neutral. What does

the neutral conceal" (143)? By attending to the specificities of gender, sexuality, race and

nation, I have tried to expose what supposedly "neutral" genre characters conceal. The

specific—and unexpected—embodiments examined in these chapters challenge the

norms that tend to shape generic characterization. By elaborating the historical and

narrative contexts in which these subversive characterizations arise and take shape, it

becomes apparent that "embodiment denotes a contested set of norms governing who will

count as a viable subject within the sphere of politics" (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 28). It is

not surprising then that violence is a central trope in all the genre texts addressed. If we

are going to take seriously the connections between the domain of political representation

and fictional characterization, these characterizations point to the fact that some still live

lives beyond such forms of representation altogether—this is really where the ethics of

alterity lie, in the violence that limns the existence of those occupying the space of the

inhuman. As Butler avers, violence often attends those that refuse, or simply cannot

acquiesce to the norms of the human, but rather embody "the inhuman, the beyond the

human, the less than human, the border that secures the human in its ostensible reality"

(*Undoing Gender* 30 & 218).

What I am suggesting is that central to the "norms" of genre films is the cultural

norms of what is seen as human, denoted through generic characterization. "The human,"

according to Butler, "is understood differentially depending on its race, the legibility of

that, its morphology, the recognizability of that morphology, its sex, the perceptual

verifiability of that sex, its ethnicity, the categorical understanding of that ethnicity"

(*Undoing Gender* 2). Therefore, the specificity of difference is precisely subversive

because it exposes the very limits of this legibility. The place and meaning of violence in these genre films signals the fact that something more significant than counter-casting is in effect when generic norms are called into question through alternative embodiments. I historicize my project along these lines: "By the 1990s many genre movies attempted to open up genres to more progressive representations of race and gender, often deliberately acknowledging and giving voice to groups previously marginalized by mainstream cinema" (Grant, *Film Genre* 81). Yet, the theoretical ramifications of this were not taken up by film criticism, which tended to see this trend as simply a form of pluralism rather than an intervention into the foundational terms of the generic economy. As Barry Keith Grant proposes, "meaning is generated by generic associations of actors," providing the grounds for "generic subversion through casting" ("Experience and Meaning" 123).[2] Yet, generic subversion has not been theorized as an outcome of embodiment, as I have argued in the previous chapters. Counter-casting is indeed subversive when it is recognized that "something other than a simple assimilation into prevailing norms can and does take place. The norms themselves can become rattles, display their instability, and become open to resignification" (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 28). Thus, embodying generic norms with the specificity of social difference has the subversive textual effect of resignifying genre's central conceits, such as the heroic and villainy.

Christine Gledhill frames the question of generic subversion slightly differently:

Protagonists classed, gendered, or ethnically [or sexually] marked for our cultural recognition take up symbolic positions in a moral and affective drama…It asks of the protagonists and actors available: who can personify—body forth in their physical presence, in the particularities of personality in their social representativeness—the cause of innocence, justice, hope? Who embodies that oppression and allure of demand run rampant which dares to break taboos, releasing desires we disown as threatening destruction?" ("Rethinking Genres" 238)?

The politics of personification are located in the intervention and transformation of the generic contract. The dynamic difference of these characterological embodiments disrupt assumptions about the human gleaned from generic meanings, claiming the generic structure and signal in the name of those previously not recognized according to these systems of representation. In other words, the deformation of generic characterization reflects back on the ways the human "is crafted in time, and that it works through excluding a wide range of minorities means that its rearticulation will begin precisely at the point where the excluded speak to and from such a category" (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 13). The hypothesis of *Generic Subversions*, accordingly, is that in the re-citation of genre norms from the position of difference, as embodied by its central figures, generic meanings are deterritorialized in their textual practices. As Butler suggests in different contexts, (generic) "norms" can be cited in such a way as to expose them as "non-natural and nonnecessary when they take place in a context and through a form of embodying that defies normative expectation" (*Undoing Gender* 218). When the characterizations of film (and television) genre are no longer *generic*, a subversion of cultural and narratological norms become the central concern of ideological genre criticism.

In this way, the question of generic aporia and difference is situated squarely in the text, foregrounding not identities so much as reading practices. Particularly regarding the subversion of norms, "resignification alone is not a politics, is not sufficient for a politics, is not enough"; it requires the necessary supplement of critical engagement and praxis (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 223). My dissertation has aimed at an elaboration of this critical praxis under the rubric of radical genre criticism, one informed by the multivalent concerns of cultural criticism—from queer and feminist pedagogy to demystification. In

bringing together and highlighting at times one mode critical practice and then another, I have tried to redefine the terms of ideological critique, particular as a methodology of film genre theory. The through-line for me in the textual readings presented here is the specificity of difference evoked by the particular (as opposed to general, generic) embodiments of character put into effect in the generic re-citation, and resignification, evident in the films discussed. My emphasis on textual criticism as crucial to the continuing reinvention of genre studies is significantly influenced by Butler's recent reconsideration of gender subversion and its political efficacy. As she stresses in *Undoing Gender*, "norms may or may not be explicit, and when they operate as the normalizing principle in social practice, they usually remain implicit, *difficult to read*, discernible most clearly and dramatically in the effects they produce" (Butler 41; my emphasis). The readings of subversive genre films undertaken here seek out the textual and contextual moments in which generic norms are most readily discernible because their instabilities are foregrounded, most frequently through characterization.

As Gledhill has suggested, "The job that critics do, then, whether journalistic, academic, or counter-cultural, is to make connections across generic boundaries, to bring into view previously unperceived configurations and patterns…that were present if inarticulated in a previously figured terrain" ("Rethinking Genres" 239). This job is particularly necessary to a radical film genre criticism precisely because generic characterizations invade our unconscious, where the effects of norms are the most powerful and yet most remote to critique. Guattari puts it best: "The themes of cinema— its models, its genres, its professional castes, its mandarins, its stars—are, whether they want to be or not, at the service of power. And not only insofar as they depend directly on

the financial power machine, but first and foremost, because they participate in the

elaboration and transmission of subjective models" (146). Yet, the elaboration of

subjective models is not as overdetermined as it would at first appear, something I have

tried to show throughout the dissertation. One way to understand the operations of

generic characterization is not so much as "models of individual subjectivity" but rather

as an aesthetic system of "popular representations," which "elaborate social anxieties

through fantasmatic structures that are apparently 'private'. Collective or public fantasies

about social difference, then, take shape through representations that seem to draw on

private or subjective intensities" (Sharon Willis, "Style" 279). In other words, generic

characterization may indeed draw on subjective intensities, but the popular imagination is

also populated with representations that provide the terms of a more subversive fantasy to

take place in the generic imaginary. In the deformation of generic characterization

enabled by a constitutive refusal on genre's (generic) norms, specifically in resisting the

terms by which the human is defined and known, other fantasy spaces are opened.

As Butler suggests, "The critical promise of fantasy, when and where it exists, is

to challenge the contingent limits of what will and will not be called reality," making

filmic claims to verisimilitude a political act (*Undoing Gender* 29). Generic subversion is

identifiable, in part, in the assertion of other, non-normative realities in which social

others—indeed, the inhuman—function as sites of identification and models of

possibility. In this way, radical genre criticism acknowledges the utopian elements of

cinema, rejecting earlier cynical attitudes towards the political potential of film genre.

"Because the preferred theoretical term has been textual 'resistance' rather than

'utopianism'," Jane Gaines points out, "the origins of the understanding of ideology as

tempered by the aspiration for something better in popular forms are in danger of being

forgotten" (107). Interestingly, the movement among some genre theorists has been to

return to Ernst Bloch to recuperate the concept of utopia for the analysis of the function

of genre; indeed, ideological criticism plays a central role in this movement. This has

provided an important corrective to the ritual thesis that takes the *function* of genre as its

point of departure. Bloch holds particular appeal to genre critics because his "specific

comments on film…often call up references to classical genres, most specifically

melodrama and science fiction" (Gaines, "Dream Factory" 109). Yet, my own claims to

the potential utopian effects of generic subversion fall instead within specific claims to

feminist, queer, racial and national politics. The specific engagement with generic

characterization articulated in these chapters is shaped by the political (utopian) agendas

of social others systematically overturning the norms that mark them, in differing ways,

as inhuman. According to Gledhill, "The body images of liberation and struggle created

by the women's movement, black power, and gay liberation—along with a repertoire of

gestures, looks, dress codes, character traits, and so on—provide material…for

enactments of heroic resistance against tyranny and of world-transforming hope to

counter the terrible fascinations of power at work" ("Rethinking Genres" 240). It is this

very heroic resistance that the utopian fantasy offered by the deformations of character

effects through the subversive resignification of film genre.

"Genre characters, because they are so unrealistic and without depth, because they

are so consistent and unwavering in their purpose, because they are never forced to come

to terms with themselves—they have no 'self' in one sense—invite identification with the

role of the type; that identification releases us from the ordinary and mundane realism of

our own lives" (T. Sobchack 109). These are the very terms by which generic subversion

enables different, and politically utopian fantasies. Deforming the norms by which

generic characters are recognized (as human) allows for genre audiences to be invaded by

social others. Or, articulated differently, T. Sobchack proposes, "the use of less

individualized characters sets up the basis for the existence of Aristotelian catharsis by

allowing for an increase in empathy by the audience. Being so much their exteriors, genre

characters allow us to easily assume their roles" (T. Sobchack 109). Indeed,

Kaja Silverman finds evidence in early film theory to support this model of

characterological empathy: "several early film theorists conceptualize the experience of

going to the movies more as a transport or abduction of the spectator. Indeed, they find

cinematic identification to be fundamentally excorporative or heteropathic, rather than

incorporative or idiopathic" (*The Threshold of the Visible World* 88). In this way, generic

characterization provides heightened contexts for increased empathy and recognition with

social others in their resistance to (social and political) tyranny. "Fantasy," as Butler

defines it, "is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise; it establishes the

possible in excess of the real; it points elsewhere, and when it is embodied, it brings the

elsewhere home" (*Undoing Gender* 29). The utopian strains of genre cinema enable this

political possibility, giving rise to subversive identifications and formations of fantasy at

odds with cultural and characterological norms. To these ends, generic subversion names

a radical approach to genre criticism that rejects the long-standing ideological critique of

the popular, and of film genre specifically, precisely because it forecloses the utopian

fantasy of imagining (and empathizing with) the heroic struggles of specific

embodiments of subjectivity systematically marginalized and effaced from the "human"

in the social imaginary.

Subversive characterization (and the ideological criticism it requires) reminds us that:

"the struggle to survive is not separable from the cultural life of fantasy, and the

foreclosure of fantasy—through censorship, degradation, or other means—is one strategy

for providing the social death of persons" (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 29).

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[1] I am wary of the repressive hypothesis at work in this particular construct of 'character'.
[2] A famous example of generic subversion through casting is George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*. Significantly, much of the subversion of this film is attributed to the casting of a black man in the lead role; yet, this is in dialogic relation to the film's casting of the central monster as "society" itself. Indeed, the subversions of the film are interrelated, as expressed by Barry Keith Grant: "within minutes I found myself struggling to adapt to each of its generic alterations and violations: the black hero (something never commented on by the other characters…); the disorganized and unheroic military…the death of the teenage romantic couple. The film also consistently eliminates the conventional means of such narratives for dealing with monsters, since both religion and reason ultimately prove ineffective in halting the threat of the living dead" ("Experience and Meaning" 124). For Grant, the film's thwarting of "our generically reinforced desire either to find the *cause*…or to know what they *mean*—and so to make them manageable and safe" is bound up with "the events of the Democratic National Convention in Chicago in 1968, the same year as the film's release" (125). Yet, the DNC could not have informed Romero's original screenplay. It is interesting that Grant's reading of the conclusion that is specifically the senseless murder of the black protagonist by representatives of the state is not directly translated into a reading of Alabama and other sites of civil rights activists met with violence and repression by white mobs and lawmen, but rather transmuted to the state attacking mostly white radicals in Chicago. To this extent, the specificity of race is evacuated, although it is the first "violation" which Grant mentions, becoming more (ironically) the generic "the darkness of the human spirit brought about by the absence of compassion and understanding" (126). I agree with Grant that "when one is open to it as potential experience, it is a rich film indeed"; however, the specific alignment is that of spectator with a black man experiencing senseless violence from a (white) mob at the end of the sixties descending on his house much like the KKK coming to burn a cross. The film needs this cultural specificity attended to rather than watered down with generic platitudes (particularly one which mobilizes the concept of "darkness" in its most de-negrating fashion) (Grant 127).

Portions of Chapter Two appeared as the article "Queering Hollywod's Tough Chick: The Subversions of Sex, Race, and Nation in *The Long Kiss Goodnight* and *The Matrix*" in *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies,* Volume 25, Number 3 (2004).

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PUBLICATIONS

Journal Articles

"The Personal Cinema of Maya Deren: *Meshes of the Afternoon* and Its Critical Reception in the History of the Avant-Garde," *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* 28.1, Special Issue: "Narrative Cinema as Autobiographical Act," edited by Linda Rugg (Winter 2006).

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