

Absent Presence: Women in American Gangster Narrative

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ABSTRACT

Absent Presence: Women in American Gangster Narrative investigates women characters in American gangster narratives through the principal roles accorded to them. It argues that women in these texts function as an “absent presence,” by which I mean that they are a convention of the patriarchal gangster landscape and often with little import while at the same time they cultivate resistant strategies from within this backgrounded positioning. Whereas previous scholarly work on gangster texts has identified how women are characterized as stereotypes, this dissertation argues that women characters frequently employ the marginal positions to which they are relegated for empowering effect.

This dissertation begins by surveying existing gangster scholarship. There is a preoccupation with male characters in this work, as is the case in most gangster texts themselves. This preoccupation is a result of several factors, such as defining the genre upon criteria that exclude women, promoting a male-centred canon as a result, and making assumptions about audience composition and taste that overlook women’s (and some women characters’) interest in gangster texts. Consequently, although the past decade saw women scholars bringing attention to female characters, research on male characters continues to dominate the field. My project thus fills this gap by not only examining the methods by which women characters navigate the male-dominated underworld but also including female-centred gangster narratives.

Subsequent chapters focus on women’s predominant roles as mothers, molls, and wives as well as their infrequent role as female gangsters. The mother chapter demonstrates how the gangster’s mother deploys her effacement as an idealized figure in order to disguise her transgressive machinations (*White Heat*, *The Sopranos*). The moll chapter examines how this

character's presence as a reforming influence for the male criminal is integral to the earliest narratives. However, a shift to male relationships in mid- to late-1920s gangster texts transforms the moll's status to that of a moderator (*Underworld*, *The Great Gatsby*). On the other hand, subsequent non-canonical texts feature molls as protagonists and illustrate the potential appeal of the gangster figure to women spectators (*Three on a Match*). Subsequently, the wife chapter explores texts that show presence is manifested in the wife's cultivation of a traditional family image, while absence is evident in her exposure of this image as a façade via her husband's activities (*The Godfather*, *Goodfellas*). In the following female gangster chapter, I examine how gender functions to render this rare character a literal absent presence such that she is inconceivable as a subject (*Lady Scarface*, *Lady Gangster*). Expanding upon this examination of gender, a final chapter on the African-American female gangster (in *Set It Off* and *The Wire*) explores how sexuality, race, and female—as well as “gangsta”—masculinity intersect to create this character's simultaneous hypervisibility and invisibility. By examining women's roles that often are overlooked in a male-dominated textual type and academic field, this dissertation draws scholarly attention to the ways that peripheral status can offer a stealthy locus for self-assertion.

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INTRODUCTION

“Like the western,” notes John McCarty, “the gangster movie has been a male-dominated genre for most of its existence, much like the underworld society it depicts” (76). McCarty’s observation may also justifiably be extended to other mediums like literature and television, for the focus of American gangster texts is men’s exploits. His observation also applies to the gendered nature of scholarly work on gangster texts, which continues to be dominated by men’s work. However, although women characters are often absent from the main action in gangster texts, one would have great difficulty in locating a text that featured no women whatsoever. Marilyn Yaquinto has described the nature of this particular absence as “conspicuous” (*Pump* 44); thus, it is ripe for scholarly investigation. In the pages that follow, I analyze selected women’s positions in American gangster texts including film, literature, and television in order to examine their relegation to stereotypical roles often functioning at the margins. On the other hand, I also demonstrate how some women characters offer a challenge to such roles by achieving a level of authority through various means while nevertheless occupying strongly typed roles, thereby complicating McCarty’s observation above.

My project diverges from previous studies of American gangster narrative by virtue of its being one of the few sustained analyses of women characters. Male gangsters are the focus of most critical work on the American gangster genre (including, admittedly, my own 2006 Master’s thesis on *The Godfather* texts [Coccimiglio]). This fact is not surprising since American gangsterism largely has been, in history, media, and criticism, a male activity. Robert Warshow’s seminal essay “The Gangster as Tragic Hero” (1948) initiated scholarly interest in the gangster genre, but women characters are notably absent in his discussion. Since that essay

appeared, much of the intellectual interest in women characters has followed suit by appearing as so many asides in works that have another subject (usually the male gangster) as their main focus.¹ Often, the most that is written about women in such texts is merely that they have “limited” roles and function as “objects” (Rosow 188).² Beyond such scant observations, no lengthy interrogation of these roles is undertaken. On the other hand, the past decade has marked a shift in critical work on gangster texts: first, there has been a greater interest in examining women characters; second, women scholars are the ones undertaking this work. Book chapters by Cindy Donatelli and Sharon Alward (2002), Lisa Cassidy (2004), Marilyn Yaquinto (2004), Esther Sonnet (2005), and Mary Elizabeth Strunk (2005) all have a primary focus on women in gangster texts. To date, however, no book-length study about women in American gangster texts has been published.³

Accordingly, and following the lead of these women scholars, my dissertation will address the gap in the bulk of scholarly work on American gangster texts since that work has the male gangster and his exploits as the main focus. To marginalize or exclude women characters from the critical conversation precludes a nuanced understanding of both said characters in and of themselves (be they stereotyped, resistant to type, or both) and male gangsters along with their relationships with these women. Kim Akass and Janet McCabe argue that the positioning of

¹ See, for example, Farber, Cortés, and Munby *Public*, respectively.

² According to the index in Eugene Rosow’s book *Born to Lose: The Gangster Film in America* (1978), women are mentioned only on ten of the book’s 400-plus pages. The passages about women include generalizations with little or no discussion such as the following: “Most women in gangster films were objectified as sexual punching bags to be smacked with grapefruit, hands, or feet and dragged around by the hair” (176). This sentence comes from a paragraph about gangster film violence, and it includes no references to specific titles. Elsewhere, Rosow names *Blondie Johnson* (Ray Enright, 1933), *Lady Scarface* (Frank Woodruff, 1941), and *Lady Gangster* (Florian Roberts, 1942) as exceptions to women’s traditional roles in gangster films; however, he misses a major opportunity to expound on these powerful exceptions (as I do in Chapter Four), thereby privileging the “familiar roles” with, once again, little discussion (282).

³ Jana Kay Lunstad’s Master’s thesis, “‘An Offer You Can’t Refuse’: Women and the Evolution of the Gangster Genre” (1998), is one rare and unpublished example of a study of the gangster genre whose primary focus is women characters. In it, Lunstad traces how women characters contribute to the genre’s formal and ideological operations.

women in gangster film in particular is inherent to the genre. “Establishing the woman as inferior ‘other’ emerges as a generic necessity,” they explain, “for it is against her that the film gangster can define himself and strengthen his own narrative authority” (147). If Akass and McCabe are correct (and I suspect they are), then it is essential to investigate the women against whom the gangster forges his identity. Such an investigation undoubtedly would uncover the ways in which these women are constructed as inferior; more importantly, perhaps, it would also reveal instances of women’s transgression and their impact not only on the gangster’s selfhood but also on our understanding of genre conventions.

Following Akass and McCabe’s sense of women’s roles in gangster texts, it is not surprising that scholars have long established that women in gangster texts are depicted as stereotypes.⁴ Richard Dyer tells us (and the *Oxford English Dictionary* [*OED*] confirms) that the word *stereotype* as it continues to be used today was invented by Walter Lippmann in 1922 (11). The *OED* defines the word as a “preconceived and oversimplified idea of the characteristics which typify a person, situation, etc. . . . [and] a person who appears to conform closely to the idea of a type” (“Stereotype,” n., def. 3b). In other words, the essence of a character is reduced to a limited set of qualities such that they come to define that character. That a stereotype is established as such by its repetition through time and with little alteration relates back to an earlier sense of the word as describing a simplified printing process wherein copies of a plate, rather than the original, were used for printing (“Stereotype,” n., def. 1). For quite some time, scholars generally have agreed that judging a stereotypical depiction of a given group as “good”

⁴ The following are representative examples describing the most popular roles for women. Rosow tells us that the “warm-hearted immigrant mother had a strongly typed role.” He continues: “The mothers usually had thick accents; they dressed in simple peasant clothes and were normally to be found in the kitchen preparing food” (189). The moll typically is a “status symbol . . . portrayed as an annoying leech who lacks loyalty, brains, or real ambition” (Yaquinto, *Pump* 44). Wives “enjoy the rewards of crime without taking any risks to earn them” (Yaquinto, “Tough” 219).

or “bad”—a common approach in studies of gangster texts and also by readers and spectators of gangster texts—is not especially productive.⁵ To put it another way, stereotypes in and of themselves are not “wrong” since they perform the function of “ordering . . . reality”; rather, the larger concerns are “who controls and defines” stereotypes and “what interests they serve” (Dyer 12). These two concerns remind us that what lies beneath stereotypes is an exchange of power.

Stereotypes and gangster texts go hand in hand. For instance, ethnic, racial, and gendered stereotypes abound in the gangster genre. Ethnic stereotypes have a long history in American gangster texts, with persons of various ethnic groups depicted as gangsters in order to imply a connection between ethnicity and crime.⁶ Racial stereotypes share this long history. Scholars recognize race as a construct rather than an innate, biological characteristic (Covington 1). Werner Sollors argues that said construct is always in process: “race,” together with “ethnicity” and other descriptors of identity, is a “collective fiction[] that [is] continually reinvented” (xi). For African Americans, the construction of race by whites has functioned historically as a way for whites to construct themselves as superior (Covington 1).⁷ With respect to gender stereotypes, George De Stefano argues in the context of the “Mafia myth” that crime is but one phenomenon examined through gangster films (and, I would add, gangster texts in general). He

⁵ For example, Jude Davies and Carol R. Smith’s book *Gender, Ethnicity and Sexuality in Contemporary American Film* (1997) quotes several scholars who find this approach unproductive. Among them are Robert Stam and Louise Spense who claim the following in the context of racial images: “[An] insistence on ‘positive images’ . . . obscures the fact that ‘nice’ images might at times be as pernicious as overly degrading ones, providing a bourgeois facade for paternalism, a more pervasive racism” (qtd. in Davies and Smith 1).

⁶ For instance, the contribution of Mario Puzo (1969) and Francis Ford Coppola’s (1972, 1974, 1990) *The Godfather* texts to the association of Italian Americans with the underworld, particularly the Mafia, cannot be overstated (Dika 76). Even before the appearance of these texts, associations between ethnic groups and crime as depicted in gangster films led to industry changes. The 1933 Motion Picture Production Code, which functioned as the industry’s guidelines for self-censorship, included the following directive: “no picture shall be produced that tends to indicate bigotry or hatred among people of differing races, religions, or national origins” (Dika 81).

⁷ The depiction of African Americans as criminals (which, according to Jeanette Covington, is “[o]ne of the best strategies for making white domination appear warranted” [2]) has the effect of rendering African-American women criminals masculine, an effect I explore in Chapter Five. A common strategy, the association of African-American women with the stereotypically male activity of crime represents a “violati[on] [of] the standards of true womanhood” (Covington 231).

proposes that the works of Martin Scorsese and others pose fundamental questions about gender: “What does it mean to be a man? What does it mean to be a woman? What constitutes masculinity and femininity, and what burdens do these socially constructed categories impose on men and women?” (181). To analyze gangster texts, then, is to uncover the ways that ethnicity, race, and gender have been constructed and to what effect; most often, they have been constructed in stereotypical fashion, and the effect on women characters has been marginalization.

My dissertation does not necessarily challenge the fact that women characters in gangster texts usually are stereotypically represented; rather, while it acknowledges the stereotypes of women characters, it seeks to offer an alternative angle from which to approach the analysis of women characters. This angle I call *absent presence*. I recognize that this term is a cliché; however, as such, it illuminates women’s status quo in gangster texts because it parallels the argument that women characters in gangster texts are stereotyped, which itself has been described as a cliché.⁸ As mothers, molls, and wives, women characters occupy traditional roles, often with little impact on male characters or the narrative. On the other hand, this term is an oxymoron, or a contradiction in terms. By employing this sense of the word, I demonstrate how some women characters—especially gangsters—use their positioning in these restrictive roles to empower themselves or, at the very least, call into question the stereotyped margins from which they operate. In sum, the term *absent presence* in its literal and metaphorical senses opens up the interrogation of women characters in gangster texts to one that both recognizes their expected territory and illustrates the transgressive ways that women have operated within it.

⁸ George De Stefano observes, “It has become a critical cliché that the *Godfather* films, whatever their virtues as cinema, are retrograde in their portrayals of women” (187). I submit that his observation can be applied to gangster texts in general.

Before I detail the specifics of this project in greater length, it is necessary presently to turn to the concept of genre. Because this project focuses on a textual type, the gangster narrative, and because it mainly focuses on this type in film, where a major preoccupation for academic work is genre, it is productive to give a sense of the debates among which this project positions itself. In film, serious study of American gangster texts began with two essays written by popular culture critic Robert Warshow. The one most often referred to in scholarly work is “The Gangster as Tragic Hero” (1948), but Warshow also sporadically ruminates on the subject throughout “Movie Chronicle: The Westerner” (1954). The 1948 essay is important “cultural commentary” because it begins the speculation—which continues today—about why the gangster is so important to American culture (Neale, *Genre* 76). Both essays helped the gangster in film to become a figure worthy of scholarly attention and identified characteristics of the gangster genre that were subsequently adopted by critics in the 1970s and after.⁹ Neither essay purports to be a genre study; however, evident at several points in “The Gangster as Tragic Hero” is Warshow’s understanding of genre in general and the gangster genre specifically. He describes that film tends to “create fixed dramatic patterns that can be repeated indefinitely with a reasonable expectation of profit” (99). This statement suggests that, for Warshow, genre encompasses a set of formulaic, unchanging conventions closely followed in the film industry’s production of a

⁹ For those who may be unfamiliar with Robert Warshow’s well-known 1948 essay, I offer a brief summary of its main points. Warshow suggests that the fictional gangster is a cultural response to a distinctly American optimism that is required by its citizens in order for them to respond to modern problems like success, the city, and optimism. He suggests that there exists a “current of opposition, seeking to express by whatever means are available to it that sense of desperation and inevitable failure which optimism itself helps to create” (98-99). The gangster embodies this current of opposition, for no matter how successful he (and by extension, any American) can be, he is still ultimately penalized precisely for asserting himself. “In the deeper layers of the modern consciousness,” he writes, “*all* means are unlawful, every attempt to succeed is an act of aggression, leaving one alone and guilty and defenseless among enemies: one is *punished* for success” (emphasis original, 103). Warshow also postulates conventions of the gangster genre in film. The most influential has been his identification of a specific narrative pattern which charts what he calls the gangster figure’s “steady upward progress followed by a very precipitate fall” (102).

genre film. It also suggests that since genre film is profitable, it generates its own audience comprised of spectators who attend precisely because a genre film will meet their preconceived expectations; in other words, genre films are predictable, both as spectatorial fares and as profitable wares. Nostalgia also attracts audiences to genre films. As Warshow explains, “it [the genre film] appeals to previous experience of the type itself: it creates its own field of reference” (100). In Warshow’s view, then, the genre film is reflective of a closed system that circles back upon itself and exists without the onus of originality unless it “intensifies the expected experience without fundamentally altering it” (100).

Following Warshow, a major preoccupation of 1970s scholars was defining the gangster genre, a task that was very much considered a problem. They largely viewed the task of defining a genre as “impos[ing] order” on the “vast and chaotic history of film” (Gabree 10). The gangster genre specifically was understood to be “protean, unruly” (Shadoian xi). Stuart M. Kaminsky hoped genre criticism would incorporate scientific principles in order to lend “stability” and “orderly, verifiable thought” to this field of film studies (*American* 5). Scholars saw the maintenance of boundaries between genres as an essential task. For instance, Andrew Sarris lists titles of films which he identifies as gangster films, then adds that the list is “already stretching the genre beyond its original conception of the gangster as subjective protagonist and romantic hero” (“*You*” 68). John Gabree argued that the “pure gangster film” existed for such a short period (i.e. the brief time span of the 1930s’ trio¹⁰) that he was forced to broaden his conception of the genre in order to complete his book-length study (10). What becomes clear in

¹⁰ By “1930s’ trio” I refer to three films: *Little Caesar* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1930), *The Public Enemy* (William A. Wellman, 1931), and *Scarface* (Howard Hawks, 1932). The impact of these films on the gangster genre as well as definitions of said genre is too profound to include here. Together, these films have been described variously as the “triumvirate of magisterial early sound gangster performances” (Nochimson, *Dying* 45) and as the “classic gangster ‘trilogy’” (Durgnat 94) (and later, with irony, as “the trilogy of ‘classic’ early 1930s gangster movies” [Maltby 52]). The view that these three films comprise the gangster genre in its “pure form” (Bartell 102) has long since fallen out of favour. I will use the term “1930s’ trio” throughout my dissertation to refer to the films listed above.

these examples is that scholars recognized the trouble with their own strict definitions of genre and found techniques that enabled them to work around the problems while still curiously upholding their unproductive views of genre. Further, although Kaminsky's yoking of scientific principles to genre criticism could be an attempt to legitimize the then-emerging field of Film Studies by linking it to a well-established discipline, it is significant that he would seek legitimacy for the genre in gendered terms. Science involves the imposition of order and the ability to verify knowledge through rational processes, both of which typically are gendered masculine; hence, applying scientific principles to genre studies suggests that questions of "legitimacy" could be resolved by turning to a historically male discipline and its male-gendered techniques. That work on the gangster genre in film overwhelmingly has been a male endeavour adds to the perception of the genre as masculine and to scholarship in the genre as traditionally being men's work.¹¹

Although the purpose of this project is not to examine genre *per se*, its grounding in what is commonly accepted to be a genre in film whose parameters still are actively being debated requires that I offer my preferred definition. Yaquinto best captures (and Hardy et al. similarly

¹¹ Scholars have continued to point out the problems with attempted definitions of the genre, including those that are based on a very limited number of examples and on narrow definitions. For example, although few gangster buffs would even entertain the possibility, Fran Mason points out that *The Godfather* and *The Godfather Part II* would not qualify as gangster films if one considers the rise and fall narrative pattern (xiv) first identified by Warshaw. By this logic, neither would *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* (D. W. Griffith, 1912), *Dance, Fools, Dance* (Harry Beaumont, 1931), *Dead End* (William Wyler, 1937), *Key Largo* (John Huston, 1948), and scores of other films which scholars have positioned in the genre. For Colin McArthur, a film qualifies as a gangster film if it refers to Prohibition; hence, his exclusion of *Underworld* (Josef von Sternberg, 1927)—which I discuss in Chapter Two—from his analysis (34). Although McArthur acknowledges that crime films existed before *Little Caesar*, he makes it clear that they would not be gangster films according to his iconographic and thematic definition (34); it goes without saying that all films made before the ratification of Prohibition through the Eighteenth Amendment on January 16, 1919 and the Volstead Act of October 28, 1919 would be disqualified. To return to the example of *The Godfather* films, save for one reference in *Part II* (Hyman Roth tells Michael Corleone that Hyman earned a lot of money by smuggling liquor from Canada with trucks owned by Michael's father, Vito) the films are not concerned with Prohibition and would be disqualified from the genre by McArthur's criteria. The same could be said for all other films which are not set during the period between the ratification of the Eighteenth Amendment and its repeal in 1933. Although I would not disagree that Prohibition had a significant role in the emergence of historical gangsters such as Al Capone and their fictional counterparts, limiting definitions of the genre to texts set during Prohibition is too restrictive.

acknowledge [8]) the inherent contradictions of this task: “A hard definition remains elusive, yet everyone, including moviegoers, thinks he or she can easily recognize a gangster when he appears on-screen” (*Pump* xi).¹² One of the reasons for this ease of identification is precisely that the gangster film, along with the western, seems to embody so well conventions based on narrative thrust and iconography (Mason xiii). A hat (often a fedora) combined with a tailored three-piece suit is quickly recognized as the male gangster’s favoured costume. However, Steve Neale is wary of such *a priori* categorizations of this genre; he believes that “critical and theoretical preoccupations” have determined ahead of time which films can be included within the boundaries of the genre and which ones cannot (*Genre* 78). I favour definitions of genre such as those offered by Fran Mason and Lucy Fischer because of their flexibility and, in the latter’s case, cautionary awareness of the implications inherent to the very act of defining. Mason defines genre as “a field of operations which makes available a range of textual tropes, semiotic codes and narrative patterns and that it is a site of possibility or a space that allows things to happen” (xv). This sense of genre as a “site of possibility” seems to allow for variations and is therefore less strict than previous definitions outlined earlier. Lucy Fischer’s work operates with a sense of genre as “open” and as “acknowledg[ing] the limits of proposing rigid definitions” (4), making her definition both accessible and realistic. Insofar as defining the gangster genre specifically, which I think is important work that must continue, I leave that to other scholars to tackle. For this project, I am more interested in identifying the results of given definitions. For example, as I show in Chapter Two, *Three on a Match* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1932) is

¹² Phil Hardy et al. explain that “although the gangster as a character is easily recognizable, as a genre (or subgenre) the gangster film is less easy to conceive. . . . [W]hile we may have a recognizable figure in the gangster, this does not necessarily mean that we have a recognizable gangster film” (8).

not commonly recognized as a gangster text due to the central position of its women characters; as such, I call attention to what is at stake in adopting any genre definitions.

Besides disagreement over the definition of the gangster genre in film, there is also discord about its very status as a film genre. Yaquinto leans toward its identification as a genre; thus, she excludes from her book what she identifies as sub-genres, including films in which a character acts alone rather than with a gang, heist films, and prison films because they all “stray too far from the genre’s core values” including the gangster’s “essential tragedy” (*Pump* xi-xii). As such, she acknowledges the existence of sub-genres, but her book traces the evolution of gangster films through a fairly limited definition of the genre. For Neale, the gangster film, detective film, and suspense thriller function as genres within the overarching genre of contemporary crime; they are distinct, “at least as tendencies,” under this umbrella, but cross-fertilization is evident within each of the three as well as among all of the genres in film (*Genre* 72). Thomas Leitch takes a position similar to Neale’s: “Because every genre is a subgenre of a wider genre from whose contexts its own conventions take their meaning,” he explains, “it makes sense to think of the gangster film as both a genre on its own terms and a subgenre of the crime film” (4). McCarty takes a firm position on the matter: “All gangster movies are crime movies. But not all crime movies (films noir or prison pictures, for example) are necessarily gangster movies” (249). Jack Shadoian also draws a link between the gangster film and the crime genre, but the inconsistency of his terms suggests perhaps an uncertainty with this association. He calls it the “gangster/crime film,” the “gangster-crime film,” and the “gangster crime genre” in the course of his book (vii, 29, xi).

Another issue scholars ponder is whether films are produced in cycles or whether it is more productive to identify them as part of a genre as a whole. A cycle is defined as a grouping of

films that are patterned on the qualities of profitable individual films and produced within a precise, limited period of time (Neale, *Genre* 9).¹³ Thoughts about the cyclical nature of gangster films are generally reactions to the arguments by Thomas Schatz, Kaminsky, and others who argued that the 1930s' trio cemented the characteristics of the gangster genre as a whole. Jonathan Munby (*Public* 17) and Lee Grieveson, Sonnet, and Peter Stanfield (1) are among those who favour the position that films are produced in cycles, with Munby noting that during the classic Hollywood film era, gangster films were described using the word "cycle" (*Public* 4). Adopting the "cycle" position challenges the prestige that has been granted to the 1930s' trio; instead, we can view said trio as a cycle, a variation of preexisting conventions (Neale, *Genre* 79) rather than as something completely new and unrelated to anything that came before it. The films comprising the 1930s' trio can certainly be grouped together in terms of common generic characteristics, but it is prudent to remember that the genre has never been fixed despite the desire of some scholars to view it as such (Munby, *Public* 4).¹⁴ Understanding gangster films as cycles also changes the way we can analyze them within their historical context. To view the films as illustrative of stable, unchanging generic conventions renders them "ahistorical," and it generates the paradox that the gangster figure is both mythic and a side-effect of modernity (Mason 6). Eugene Rosow is exemplary in this regard, asserting that the genre's conventions

¹³ Some critics also identify production trends along with cycles as distinctive production periods in the Hollywood film industry. Lee Grieveson, Esther Sonnet, and Peter Stanfield define production trends as "broad and inclusive categories made up of interconnected cycles" (3), and Steve Neale interprets Tino Balio's application of the term to suggest that trends are more stable and can be charted over longer periods than cycles (*Genre* 237). Balio notes that in the 1930s Hollywood studios plotted out their productions on an "annual seasonal basis" based primarily on budgetary considerations which overlapped with distribution and exhibition; in order to reduce financial risk, studios favoured the creation of series, cycles, and production trends (in Neale, *Genre* 236-37). That film studios plotted their output in such defined patterns suggests that genre theorists and critics should give more consideration to industry intent along with output when examining a particular genre.

¹⁴ Jonathan Munby's examination of gangster film censorship lends powerful support to the idea that the genre has never been fixed nor does it hold mythic status. He asks, "If the post-Crash talking gangster only 'reinforced' older success mythology and governing law, why did it warrant censure?" (*Public* 16). Munby challenges those who label the triumvirate films as consolidating the conventions of the gangster genre, arguing instead that these films deviated from previous representations of criminals and it is this deviation that led to censorship of the genre (*Public* 16-17).

have “basically been copied with few real changes down to the present day” (181). Analyzing cycles, however, allows us to see the adaptability of the genre and the gangster figure as reflective of their specific historical, social, and cultural circumstances. It also allows us to respect post-1930s’ trio films in their own right rather than label them as watered-down versions of the trio’s formulation.

If the gangster genre is constantly in flux while simultaneously operating within generic conventions, the concept of hybridity proves instructive. Writing about literary genres in “The Law of Genre,” Jacques Derrida insists that “the law of the law of genre . . . is precisely a principle of contamination, a law of impurity, a parasitical economy” (227). Applying this view to film, we see that the boundaries early gangster genre critics wished to construct are impossible to maintain due to Derrida’s insistence upon contamination as an in-built necessity to the system which would rather exclude “‘anomalies’” as threatening to the law of genre (226). Later in his piece, Derrida makes the point that “subversion . . . needs the law in order to take place” (240). The same can be said about the gangster figure who plays out the opposition between criminality and the law; one needs the other as a point against which to establish difference. For Thomas O. Beebee, hybridity and difference are inherent to genre: “‘since a ‘single’ genre is only recognizable as difference, as a foregrounding against the background of its neighboring genres, every work involves more than one genre, even if only implicitly’” (qtd. in Staiger 189). That Hollywood film genres were ever “pure” is quashed by Janet Staiger who locates purity only in the intentions of those critics who seek patterns among films, a practice that she acknowledges is, in and of itself, a valuable communication tool and scholarly undertaking (185-86).¹⁵

¹⁵ Work of the past twenty years is informed by the notions of hybridity and mutability. Mason proposes a mathematical analogy in his understanding of the gangster genre in film. He sees the genre as “analogous to a Venn diagram with both areas of overlap and areas of distinctiveness . . .” (xv). Although the Venn diagram would render individual genres as closed circles, and therefore suggest fixity, the shared area is suggestive of hybridity.

Hybridity could potentially be at work in all film genres, but it is especially evident in the gangster genre, “the loosest of genres” (Hardy et al. 9). We can position a gangster film in virtually all of the major genres that Neale identifies in his book *Genre and Hollywood* which perhaps suggests that a defining characteristic of the gangster genre in film is its (and the gangster figure’s) resistance to generalizations.¹⁶ Significantly, as Staiger shows, contemporary critics of two of the 1930s’ trio—*Little Caesar* and *The Public Enemy*—were accustomed to cross-genre fertilizations, further suggesting that genre purity was the prerogative of the Film Studies discipline as it established itself in the 1970s (with the exception of John Baxter as I indicated in note 15) but not of the film industry or of filmgoers before that time. Staiger’s examination of film reviews for *Little Caesar* show that it was viewed as a “crime movie but [that] the ‘modern criminal . . . thirsts primarily for power’; thus, it is also described as a ‘Greek epic tragedy,’ a gangster film, and a detective movie” (193). Contemporary reviews of *The Public Enemy* also indicate genre mixing. This film was described as a “gang film, documentary drama, and comedy, but ‘in detail *The Public Enemy* is nothing like that most successful of gangster films [*Little Caesar*]’” (emphasis original, Staiger 193). These contemporary reviews highlight the importance of audience perception in an examination of film genre, which seems to

Significantly, in a 1970 article, John Baxter proposed a view similar to Mason’s, which is unusual for work of that period. He cautioned against attempts to constrict the gangster genre in film. Such attempts are “idle,” according to Baxter, due to the commonality of cross-genre influence (30). See also Leitch 5; Neale, *Genre* 3 and “Questions” 172.

¹⁶ For example, Neale discusses *Scarface* (1932) in the biopic genre (61), *The Public Enemy* in the social problem genre (115), *Dead End* in the teenpic genre (120), and *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967) in the youth movie genre (123). Thomas Leitch describes *White Heat* (Raoul Walsh, 1949) as combining “a gangster hero, a film-noir heroine, an undercover cop, and an extended prison sequence” (8). Even in his refusal to include in his analysis films which are generated from “Hollywood’s penchant for mixing genres,” John Gabree lists three hybrid types: the “gangster-horror, gangster musical, [and] gangster-comedy” (10). Commenting on 1930s films, Dominique Mainon notes that some could be called “society melodrama” or even exemplify a “‘chick film’” (278). Leitch also points out that creative intent must be considered when determining genre; for example, he classifies *Married to the Mob* (Jonathan Demme, 1988) as a comedy rather than as a gangster film (9). A filmmaker’s generic intent, however, is no guarantee that audiences will receive the film in the intended genre. As I go on to show, Janet Staiger points out that contemporary audiences viewed two of the trio films as generic hybrids, but most 1970s critics perceived only the gangster genre in these films.

have been ignored by those later critics who shaped the gangster genre according to formal thematic and iconographic characteristics and fixed genre definitions.

A major consequence of the critical preoccupation with defining the gangster genre through what Sarris labels “textbook titles” (“*You*” 68) is a misrepresentation of its historical existence. Taken together, the 1930s’ trio of *Little Caesar*, *The Public Enemy*, and *Scarface* have come to represent the genre’s “Golden Age” in film (J. Smith 3). Critical evaluation of these films points to their privileged and generally unquestioned positions in studies of the genre and cites one or all of the aforementioned titles as ushering in the gangster genre proper.¹⁷ Films that came before these three have tended to be necessarily denounced as underdeveloped predecessors in order to uphold the trio’s prestige in the formation of the genre.¹⁸ Despite the attempts to conceal, belittle, or explain away the fact, scholars working in the gangster genre are aware, of course, that it existed in film in some form before *Little Caesar* and also before the sound era.¹⁹ The first all-talking film, which is coincidentally a gangster film, is Bryan Foy’s

¹⁷ See, for instance, Silver 1; Bondanella 183; Perez 187; Jowett 58; and Kaminsky, *American* 14.

¹⁸ For example, John Raeburn describes the genre before World War I as existing only in “embryonic form” and becoming a “distinct genre” only in the late 1920s (47). Citing Wallace Worsley’s *The Penalty* (1921) as an early example of a gangster film, Arthur Sacks nevertheless characterizes such silent films as “either ill-conceived or naïve or both” (5). Jack Shadoian, like other scholars, acknowledges the importance of *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* in establishing the now-familiar elements of the genre; however, he goes on to describe the genre as subsequently “struggl[ing] in unfertilized soil” until its first flowering through the 1930s’ trio (29). Thomas Schatz labels films produced before the 1930s’ trio as “precursors” and calls *Underworld* “rudimentary” because it is a silent film and because it depends on “the conventions of silent melodrama” (84-85). Following Schatz’s terminology, Thomas Doherty describes “[p]recursors” as “wander[ing] aimlessly, without a narrative road map or thematic blueprint, unattended [sic] to the tragic dimensions of the criminal” (146). Doherty thus credits the 1930s’ trio with shaping the lost and infantile early gestures towards the gangster genre. Finally, Rosow outlines the difficulty he had with tracking down some of the films he analyzes in his book, explaining that he was forced to rely on alternative material such as scripts and reviews for the films that he was unable to locate. “[F]ortunately,” he writes, “nearly all of these films were in the 1912-1930 period” (vii).

¹⁹ Mason quips, the genre “did not spring into life fully formed, like Athene out of Zeus’ head” with the appearance of *Little Caesar* (1). Mason’s observation is reminiscent of the language used by 1970s scholars to describe the 1930s’ trio. Andrew Sarris and McArthur, respectively, describe the genre as having been “born full-blown” and “fully developed” (“*You*” 68; 34). According to Schatz, the gangster genre in film “spr[un]g from nowhere in the early 1930s . . .” (81). A rare exception to this view is seen in William K. Everson, who in 1978 wrote that the 1930s’ trio film *Little Caesar* is “frequently cited as the first of the gangster films. This is, of course, both an oversimplification and a gross distortion, but it was undeniably the first gangster film that really caught on with the public” (231).

1928 film *Lights of New York* (McCarty 72; Dixon and Foster 51). Between it and *Little Caesar* there were dozens of gangster films such as *The Racket* (Lewis Milestone, 1928), *Alibi* (Roland West, 1929), *The Racketeer* (Howard Higgin, 1929), and *The Doorway to Hell* (Archie Mayo, 1930). These films and others challenge assumptions that the genre suddenly appeared, reached its peak, and degenerated within some 255 minutes combined of only three titles.

Collectively, genre, gender, and audience have contributed to be important perceptions about the gangster genre and women's place within it (onscreen) and relationship to it (as spectators). The terms genre and gender are connected etymologically, as Mary Gerhart points out (in Fischer 7). In fact, in its etymology section for the word *genre* (meaning "kind"), the *OED* highlights the linkage between genre and gender by pointing the reader to the definition of the word *gender* by means of a hyperlink ("Genre"). Both genre and gender are terms of classification, and Paula Rabinovitz recognizes the implications of their shared roots: "The law of genre . . . is also the law of gender: that system which demarks the boundaries and ascribes meaning to sexual difference. And anything that steps outside of those boundaries risks 'impurity' . . ." (in Fischer 7).²⁰ This difference is evident in the characterizations made by scholars like Schatz, who tend to label gangster films as masculine (in Fischer 7), thereby limiting critical interest to male characters, narrowing the number of films that can be identified in the gangster genre, and assuming that men make up the majority of the genre's audience.

²⁰ This idea of impurity as it is associated with genre further illuminates the latter. In her lament of the general lack of scholarly attention to motherhood, Fischer finds said lack to be incongruent with one meaning of the word *genre*. She points to Mary Gerhart's definition of the "'productive sense'" of genre which Fischer claims has been "repressed": "'of or pertaining to the act of rooting, begetting, bearing, producing'" (in Fischer 7). This "'productive sense'" of genre is highly suggestive of a link between genre and maternity (7). To wit, when Shadoian summarizes the criticism of the first edition of his book *Dreams and Dead Ends: The American Gangster Film*, his choice of words betrays this link: "I had foisted too many *illegitimate children* on the *mother genre*, more than she could handle" (emphasis added, xiv). Questions of impurity and illegitimacy, then, remind us that despite the patriarchal assumptions behind such terms, womanhood cannot be extricated from a critical understanding of genre.

Gendered assumptions about genre and audience are misleading. Molly Haskell makes a sweeping statement about the genre and its presumed intended audience. She argues that the gangster genre was “almost designed to turn women off” because of its focus on guns, blood, and “little-boy acting,” and later claims that the genre was directed to men just as “women’s films—the weepies” were directed to women (“World”). Such an assumption about spectatorship is openly challenged by Sonnet’s research into a cycle of films produced from 1929-1931, a period of time which roughly overlaps with the production period of the 1930s’ trio. As I highlight in Chapter Two, her examination of five “society melodrama” films (gangster/romance melodrama hybrids) that are “addressed to women but that revolve around gangsters” reveals that audiences for gangster films at that time did indeed include women (97). This argument turns on its head the view that the gangster picture is masculine fare that caters only to men. Rather than turning women off, as Haskell claims, gangster films of the 1930s turned women on, so to speak, and attracted them to the cinema.

Sonnet’s call for a recovery of a “‘lost’ history of films” that are directed toward a female audience is warranted; however, the concept of a female audience for the gangster genre should not be restricted to one cycle of films in a single genre, nor should it be restricted to film (94). I would like to come back to the concept of hybridity here. Staiger acknowledges that Fordian Hollywood films (i.e., those produced before 1960) usually have two intersecting plotlines which, in her view, enabled producers to draw the attention of a variety of spectators compared to single-plotline films. One of those plots usually involved a “heterosexual romance” which was presumed to attract women filmgoers “whom the industry also assumed from the 1910s were major decision-makers” in family leisurely activities (Staiger 190-91). Staiger’s comments on the Fordian dual plotline further support the importance of women to the gangster genre in its

various manifestations and on both sides of the camera.²¹ The New York audience for the film *The Public Enemy* may have been 75% male; however, as Raeburn acknowledges, this proportion was exceptional compared to the usual film audience (52). I would add that it may also be exceptional for the gangster film audience in particular.

As is evident through some of the titles listed above, Shadoian correctly observes that the gangster genre “is of course not exclusive to film” (xi). Among other mediums, the gangster figure has been featured in novels, stage plays, comic books, films, songs, and television shows. Chris Messenger observes that the gangster narrative seems to have a particular “copying logic: from the page to the large screen to the small screen” (254), a logic clearly evident with *The Godfather* texts. With respect to the small screen, David Chase’s critically acclaimed television series *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) breathed new life into the genre while renewing scholarly interest in both the genre and the gangster figure. In another challenge to the presumably male-dominated audience for gangster fare, women were a major part of the anticipated target audience for *The Sopranos*; because the series has so many women characters, Chase counted on a female audience to make it successful (Nochimson, *Dying* 248). In an interview with Martha P. Nochimson, Chase describes his bewilderment with the lack of attention to women characters within the gangster genre (*Dying* 248). His television series is meant to act as a corrective and thus it features a multiplicity and diversity of women characters.

The anticipated female following for the series is also connected to the show’s medium as a television series and particularly its common identification as a soap opera. Donatelli and

²¹ This romantic device is evident in source material for gangster films, including material penned by women. For instance, *Lady Gangster* is based on the play “Gangstress, or Women in Prison”; *A Free Soul* (Clarence Brown, 1931) is based on the novel of the same name by Adela Rogers St. Johns (1926); and *White Heat* is based on a story credited to Virginia Kellogg (McGilligan 10). Other films that combine a heterosexual romance plot with a minor gangster character include *Three on a Match*, *Marked Woman* (Lloyd Bacon, 1937), and *Lady Scarface*.

Alward recognize that most of each episode features “domestic space and dialogue” which they identify as characteristic of the daytime soap opera; it also has “a little violence thrown in for prime-time” (64). This description of *The Sopranos* captures the show’s *Godfather*-like combination of the American family with the Mafia Family perfectly while also indicating that the soap opera format devotes more attention to domesticity. Since the series is often considered to be a soap opera, women spectators are expected, according to Robert C. Allen, because that genre has an audience comprised of almost 80% women (in Donatelli and Alward 64-65). The formal elements of the soap opera also make it a favourable avenue for exploring women characters. Akass and McCabe recognize that the format and generic patterning of the soap opera “give nuance to the feminine voice” (149). They point to Ellen Seiter’s interpretation of the matter: “‘The importance of small discontinuous narrative units which are never organized by a single patriarchal discourse or main narrative line, which do not build towards an ending or closure of meaning, which in their very complexity cannot give a final ideological word on anything, makes soap opera uniquely ‘open’ to feminist readings’” (qtd. in Akass and McCabe 149). In other words, while *The Sopranos* has a “masculine” institution as its subject matter, its soap opera structure ensures analytical indeterminacy and draws attention to both women characters and spaces.

The affinity of *The Sopranos* with the soap opera is also evident in its emotional register. As Donatelli and Alward write, “it is well established that television intensifies emotions and makes action seem more private and intimate” (64). This emotional intensity is identifiable in the soap opera as well as in melodramatic film, both genres of which are directed to women spectators (Kuhn 437). Although it might seem strange to modern audiences who may regard the gangster genre as gendered masculine and who likely have a different conception of melodrama than

previous generations, melodrama has had a long association with the gangster genre. In the 1910s and 1920s, the most common descriptive phrase for the gangster film was ““crook melodrama”” and, until the 1960s, the term “melodrama” or, more commonly, “gangster melodrama,” was applied by the industry as a generic identifier (Neale, *Genre* 145n18). Since the term “melodrama” relates to emotional intensity and excess and is therefore coded as feminine, it seems that the gangster genre and its historical connection to the term suggests that it has always been flexible and fluid in its gender coding in order to attract the widest and greatest number of spectators with their varying tastes. This flexibility challenges rigid generic categorization by critics such as Schatz who place the gangster film and the melodrama, among other genres, on opposite gender-based poles and thereby “mask their potential interrelations” (Fischer 7).

Turning now to the specifics of my project, I examine women’s roles in American gangster literature, television, and film, with a primary focus on the latter. This mixed-media approach to gangster texts is not without precedent.²² Although much scholarly interest has been directed toward gangster films, the gangster inhabits diverse media forms: in Shadoian’s words, what he calls the “gangster crime genre” is “of course not exclusive to film” (xi). Even a cursory examination confirms Shadoian’s obvious reminder of the gangster’s place in American popular culture: comic books, games of various types, cartoons, plays, albums, and other mediums explore the underworld and its inhabitants. Shadoian further insists that film “does not exist in isolation from other media” and admits that examining film along with other media would prove “illuminating” (xi).²³ Drawing on multiple textual types emphasizes similarities with respect to

²² To give but one example, Munby’s book *Under a Bad Sign: Criminal Self-Representation in African American Popular Culture* (2011) examines such mediums as literature and music.

²³ Despite promoting its advantages, Shadoian does not employ a mixed-media approach to his study of the gangster in film in his book. He explains in the preface that his primary goal is to examine the development of the gangster

the representation of women, as my project demonstrates. Consequently, characters who are depicted as departing from generic norms can be understood as unique by locating them within a larger oeuvre. For example, of the women characters in *The Sopranos*—known for its high level of intertextuality²⁴—Regina Barreca colourfully notes “all bets are off”: although they occupy familiar territory for women in gangster texts, they are nevertheless “unpredictable” within it (29-30). Series creator Chase himself adopted a multimedia approach since his personal goal was for each episode of his television series to function as its own complete film (“David Chase Interview”). As I have shown, this approach is not uncommon among gangster texts.

Through my investigation of primary gangster texts, I have identified three major roles for women: the mother, the moll (girlfriend), and the wife. I have also identified a fourth role—the female gangster—which is considerably rarer but is nevertheless included in my project because it provides a powerful contrast to the other three traditional ones and because this character simply generated much personal interest. Following my analysis of those four roles as portrayed by white characters, I devote a chapter to exploring those same roles as they are depicted in representations of African-American women characters. By organizing this dissertation around these four key character types, I do not mean to imply that each role for women is in any way self-contained. As De Stefano similarly recognizes with respect to Mafia texts, “[t]he typology of mothers, wives, and gumads . . . can be too simplistic. Whatever their relationship to the

film genre. In his view, folding in other mediums would only emphasize the genre’s “protean, unruly nature” (xi). As I demonstrated earlier, this desire to impose order functions as an exclusionary measure that has significant gender implications; thus, I have chosen to marry film, literature, and television in my dissertation in my belief that such a move will highlight the similarities of women character types regardless of medium. Significantly, in the preface to the second edition of his book, Shadoian recognizes that “isolated disciplines can supply only a frail account of the meaning, range, and effect of whatever it is they may be holding under scrutiny” (xiv), thereby promoting interplay among both fields and subjects of study, an interplay promoted by my project.

²⁴ Along the same lines, Chris Messenger uses the term “tangled intertextual web” to describe *The Sopranos*’s indebtedness to *The Godfather* in particular and to television and film that have “become dependent on it” in general (262).

gangsters in their lives, their actual behavior can't be reduced to these roles"; in other words, as victims and victimizers, enablers and accomplices, and conformists and rebels (187), women are not simply reducible to stereotypical roles. One example proves instructive: in the texts of *The Godfather* (both novel and films), Connie Corleone is a daughter, girlfriend, wife, mother, sister, aunt, and, in the third film, exhibits characteristics of a female gangster. Further, she exhibits behaviours spanning the range that De Stefano identifies above, none of which originate in any single role that she occupies.

Given the aforementioned acknowledgment, I chose to structure my dissertation around women's roles for three reasons. One reason is that my main interest is in exploring thematic concerns that present themselves for each role. Patterns emerge through the focus on a given role for women. Conversely, deviations from said patterns are readily identifiable. A second reason is that the texts themselves often emphasize one role. To take another example from *The Godfather* texts, the role of mother for character Mama Corleone is given precedence over all others—including that of wife to Vito Corleone—by virtue of the fact that she is called *Mama* Corleone. Neither the novel (as Messenger similarly notes [132]) nor the films reveal her given name. A final reason is that narrowing my study to the examination of one key role for a woman character greatly facilitated my work by helping to me to navigate a vast pool of texts.

As with any project analyzing texts of a particular generic type, a scholar must make judicious selections in terms of primary sources. The gangster has been a recognizable figure in American popular culture for over one hundred years. The origins of the filmic gangster text extend almost as far back as the birth of film itself. This long history has produced innumerable primary sources; with respect to film alone, McCarty's list of gangster films from 1915 to 2004,

which he acknowledges is by no means exhaustive, comprises some 1,252 entries (264-301).²⁵

The number would be even larger if one considers films that do not fit wholly into the typically rigid genre definition. The process of textual selection leaves one vulnerable to criticism of the kind directed to Shadoian's book about the history of the gangster genre in film. Neale assesses the book as being "highly selective" for its examination of only nineteen films (*Genre* 77).

Other accounts of the gangster genre have also been criticized for being too selective.

Warshow's "The Gangster as Tragic Hero" has faced such criticism because of its discussion of a scant number of films; later, work by scholars in the 1970s received similar disapproval.

Grieverson, Sonnet, and Stanfield capture the result of this narrow approach: it "leads inevitably to a distortion of the history of the production of films about gangsters" (2). For Jim Smith, the problem of selectivity is directly related to the sheer size and multiplicity of the gangster genre itself and the variety of ways that it can be defined; consequently, he acknowledges that any project on the genre "is always going to be *a* history rather than *the* history, an angle rather than exhaustive" (emphasis original, 1). Any attempts to account for gangster texts in any medium will have what Neale calls "[I]mitations" (in reference to previous accounts of the gangster genre) because the nature of such studies necessarily involve a process of selection (*Genre* 77). Elsewhere, Neale asserts that scholarly study of any genre is "not possible" without undertaking said process ("Questions" 166).

My work cannot escape such limitations. However, although my dissertation focuses on texts of the gangster variety, its main thrust is to examine the characterization of women within said type. As I demonstrate in Chapters Four and Five with my analysis of female gangsters, definitions of the gangster genre most often are based upon the actions of male characters,

²⁵ For a list of novels written after Puzo's *The Godfather* and up to 1975, see D. C. Smith, Jr.

thereby marginalizing or excluding texts whose primary focus is female characters. This marginalization of women in gangster texts necessitated my inclusion of several texts per chapter if only for practical purposes. For instance, that Mrs. Martin in the film *Dead End* only appears in a single, brief scene demanded that I analyze other mother characters along with Mrs. Martin in Chapter One in order to support my portrait of motherhood as it is depicted in gangster texts. Further, by analyzing texts such as the 1930s' trio which have been traditionally located in the genre as well as texts that do not fit previously established definitions of the gangster genre, my hope is that I have pre-empted questions about my own selection process while simultaneously calling for a continuing revision of the gangster genre definition and the related problem of canonicity.

As mentioned above, this dissertation is organized around women's roles in American gangster texts. The first three chapters examine the three most popular roles for women in American gangster texts. Chapter One, "'Senza Mamma': Mothers, Stereotypes, and Self-Empowerment," shows how mothers are characterized as stereotypes such that they often have little influence on the criminal son in particular and on the text in general. On the other hand, this chapter also demonstrates how mother characters like Livia Soprano in *The Sopranos* and Ma Jarrett in *White Heat* use their awareness of the expectations associated with motherhood in order covertly to advance their own objectives or, at the very least, force other characters to rethink their assumptions about motherhood.

Chapter Two, "'Three Corners Road': Molls and Triangular Relationship Structures," demonstrates the shift in the moll character's function beginning in the mid- to late-1920s. Before that time, molls have a primary role as the catalysts for the gangster quitting his life of crime. Applying René Girard's theory of the triangular relationship structure among the subject,

mediator, and object of desire, I illustrate how molls take on a secondary (but nevertheless crucial) function as a conduit for relationships between men in the film *Underworld* (Josef von Sternberg, 1927) and in the novel *The Great Gatsby* (F. Scott Fitzgerald, 1925). I then discuss the legacy of this shift by examining the films *Little Caesar* and *Three on a Match* which respectively adopt or challenge the characteristics of the 1920s texts.

The male gangster's female spouse is the focus of Chapter Three, which is entitled "[M]arriage and our thing don't jive": Wives and the Precarious Balance of the Marital Union." There, I examine the gangster's drive—put in motion by Puzo's novel *The Godfather*—to seek marriage for reasons including normalcy and legitimacy. I then argue that although wives like Karen Hill (*Goodfellas*, Martin Scorsese, 1990) and Ginger McKenna (*Casino*, Martin Scorsese, 1999) expose the gangster's insistence on the sanctity of marriage as illusory via, among other things, his adultery, both the wife and husband nevertheless maintain the fiction of a marriage steeped in traditional values in order to meet deep, psychological needs.

With Chapter Four, "[Y]ou have to fucking deal with me": Female Gangsters and Textual Outcomes," this project shifts its focus to a less common woman character in American gangster texts in comparison to the mother, moll, and wife. The assumption that gangsters are male appears in both scholarly work and gangster texts, and it is strongly ingrained in American culture, to the point that it forms a crucial plot point in the film *Lady Scarface*. This chapter examines the female gangster by considering the results of her actions, including death and heterosexual marriage. As I show in this chapter, the female gangster character is a site of possibility by virtue of her gender transgressions, and she prompts us to ponder our assumptions about gender as captured by the following question: "[W]hen women are in the dominant position, are they in the *masculine* position?" (emphasis original, Kaplan 28).

Having explored the typical terrain for women characters in American gangster texts that focus on white characters, the final chapter examines the female gangster once again as she is embodied by African-American characters. Chapter Five, “‘I’m a bitch with a gun’: African-American Female Gangsters and the Intersection of Race, Sexual Orientation, and Gender” illustrates how the interplay of those three facets of identity result in simultaneous invisibility and hypervisibility for African-American female gangsters Cleo and Snoop in the film *Set It Off* (F. Gary Gray, 1996) and the television series *The Wire* (David Simon, 2002-2008), respectively. This chapter demonstrates that while their common sexual identity as lesbians ensures these female gangsters cannot be recuperated through heterosexual marriage as can white female gangsters, their identification with female and especially “gangsta” masculinity allows for an expression of their disenfranchisement at the hands of the white, patriarchal system. This chapter also discusses links between the white Hollywood gangster and the African-American gangsta figures in order to speculate about why Cleo and Snoop choose to model themselves on these figures. Perhaps their marginalization as African-American women allows them to identify with both the exclusionary tactics employed against male gangsters (black and white) and the rebellious, illegal activities undertaken by those gangsters as a method of self-assertion from the margins.

By bringing attention to women characters in American gangster texts, this dissertation seeks not only to continue the work of other women scholars who have analyzed these characters in their own right but also to demonstrate that stereotyped depictions do not tell the whole story. While they are strongly typed characters, women in these texts prompt us (both researchers and fans alike) to take a closer look at how power can be cultivated by minorities both at the margins and in plain sight. They also encourage us to re-evaluate the assumptions behind such concepts

as audience, genre, gender, and canonicity in relation to gangster texts specifically but also “male” texts generally. That the fictional gangster figure remains as popular as ever ensures a continuing emergence of women characters—mothers, molls, wives, female gangsters, and others—who, I hope, will fuel future scholarly inquiry.

CHAPTER ONE

***“Senza Mamma”*: Mothers, Stereotypes, and Self-Empowerment**

A hot-headed man takes a desperate phone call: his pregnant sister has been abused again by her husband. Likely intending a violent confrontation with his brother-in-law, the man ignores his henchmen's pleas and races to his sister's home. At the tollbooth, he is impatient—the car of the person in front of him appears to be stalled, and the toll collector seems to have dropped that person's change. Suddenly, the man is surrounded by gunmen: they are the work of his treacherous brother-in-law, the man must realize too late. Hit by a barrage of bullets, the man cries out, exits his car and returns fire in vain. Though the man is already dead, a shooter once more sprays his body with bullets and kicks him in the head. The killers drive away, leaving the man's bullet-riddled body strewn by the tollbooth. The man's henchmen arrive and can do nothing but briefly survey the carnage and rush back to report it.

These are the well-known details of the scene in which Sonny Corleone is killed in Francis Ford Coppola's 1972 film *The Godfather*. In contrast, there is one detail in this scene that is easily overlooked in light of the main action revolving around violence and male gangsters, a detail that functions as the point of departure for this chapter. As Sonny motors to the tollbooth, his car emerges from behind a billboard advertising tires. The billboard depicts a smiling young woman with her hand covering a telephone receiver. Her head is turned over her left shoulder, and against the billboard's bright yellow background is the pitch: “[D]on't worry, Mom, he's got Atlas Tires.” The pitch certainly is ironic in the context of this scene, for no brand of tire could have prevented Sonny's murder. The most intriguing aspect of the billboard is that the Mom is a central part of the advertisement, yet she is simultaneously outside of its space. The position of

the mother on this billboard as an absent presence is comparable to the position of the gangster's mother in gangster texts. This chapter argues that absence is a patriarchal strategy for effacing the mother figure, but at the very same time it is also a feminist strategy for projecting female empowerment. It begins by examining how the mother is effaced by her construction as a stereotypical character, then proceeds to show how mothers can be empowered within the patriarchal regime by rejecting or appropriating assumptions about the institution of motherhood.

As likely the first woman with whom a male gangster will have a relationship, the gangster's mother is one of the primary roles for women characters in gangster narratives. Further, she is arguably the most easily recognized as a stereotyped character even by the most casual fans. Consider the following description of Mrs. Carlotta Guarino in Armitage Trail's novel *Scarface* (1930): she is a "squat, wrinkled Italian woman of fifty, with a figure like a loosely packed sack tied tightly in the middle, dressed in a shapeless, indescribable gray wrapper whose waistline was invisible from the front due to her breasts dripping over it" (14). Although this description specifically describes Mrs. Guarino, it signals a number of features that mothers have in common in gangster texts: they usually are uneducated ethnic immigrants whose responsibilities include cooking and raising children. The mother is typically a southern Italian woman since gangster texts often focus on the Italian Mafia, and she runs the household (De Stefano 182). However, as George De Stefano reminds us, "the man ultimately ruled the roost" (182). Perhaps the most beloved mother in gangster texts is Mama Corleone in *The Godfather* texts. In the film versions especially, Mama Corleone is presented as a mother that a viewer might wish for his or her own because of her warmth and nurturance, with *Sopranos* creator David Chase remarking in an interview that she reminds him of his grandmother ("Appendix" 248). Yet for all of her benevolent charm, Mama Corleone is a secondary character. Especially in the first two

Godfather films, Mama Corleone is either absent or a background figure. Jeffrey Chown identifies her best scene as the one in the first Godfather film wherein she sings an Italian song at her daughter's wedding (79); however, that is also one of the few scenes in which Mama is foregrounded. Chown's praise thus demonstrates the extent to which Mama Corleone is a minor player.

The texts of *The Godfather* are so well known as to require no detailed plot summary. The saga of the Corleone family as it originated in Mario Puzo's bestselling 1969 novel and enraptured audiences in Francis Ford Coppola's three films (1972, 1974, 1990) remains a powerhouse in popular culture, and the impact of these collective texts on gangster narrative is too vast to include here. Setting aside its intense Mafia violence and strategic business deals between men, at the core of the saga is the family unit. The title of each text places the father at the forefront (initially Vito Corleone and then his son Michael) and reinforces the patriarchal structure of the family. William Malyszko points out that "the very absence of strong female characters is telling in itself," and this absence results from the social organization of the *Godfather's* world as a patriarchy (40). Both the family and Mafia structures are governed by men, in part because women are viewed as being "not competent in this world" according to Vito Corleone (Puzo 38). In an interview with William Murray, Francis Ford Coppola also makes a connection between the Mafia and women's roles when he is asked about the passive women characters in his films. "That was how the women were represented in the original book and, from what I know, it was the role of women in the Mafia fabric . . ." (32). Coppola seems to be deflecting Murray's question by claiming fidelity and authenticity as drivers of his work. Nevertheless, rendering women incompetent and passive is a means by which male characters can justify their own dominant position.

The billboard mentioned earlier appears not to suggest any particular ethnicity for the absent mother, but ethnicity is an important facet of the mother's characterization in *The Godfather* texts and in gangster texts more generally. Critics have long identified the *Godfather* saga's celebration—rather than vilification—of ethnic identity as a major turning point in gangster narrative. Up to the 1920s, the gangster was treated as an “other” in binary terms, where this “other” functioned as the “dark opposite of ‘official’ society” (Munby, *Public* 20). Further, the depiction of the criminal as an ethnic character functioned as an exclusionary tactic, reinforcing “the boundaries that separated the realm of legitimate values from the illegitimate” and also justifying the reformist project (as I explore in Chapter Two) (Munby, *Public* 21). On the other hand, as “definitively ‘hyphenated’ Americans,” gangsters of the 1930s’ trio complicated this dual structure (Munby, *Public* 20). Irish American Tommy Powers (*The Public Enemy*, William A. Wellman, 1931) and Italian Americans Rico Bandello (*Little Caesar*, Mervyn LeRoy, 1930) and Tony Camonte (*Scarface*, Howard Hawks, 1932) are depicted as “living in two worlds and yet not belonging fully to either” (Munby, *Public* 20). Challenging previous notions of what it means to be an American, these gangster protagonists attacked the ethnic basis upon which they had been excluded from gaining self-sufficiency.

The Godfather texts build upon the ethnic gangster's positioning in the 1930s’ trio. According to Micaela Di Leonardo, interest turned to exploring the lives of “white ethnics” including Italian Americans in the 1970s (qtd. in Baker and Vitullo 214). Vera Dika (along with Aaron Baker and Juliann Vitullo [214]) identifies the texts as signaling a “return” to an ethnic identity of the kind evident in the 1930s’ trio (82). Where *The Godfather* texts differ from their forbears is in the way that the characters treat ethnicity as a consciously chosen barrier from America at large. It is this “insular notion of Italian-Americanness” (Baker and Vitullo 214) that

helps to produce a veneer of ethnic authenticity (Dika 78-79). Especially in the film adaptations, the level of attention to detail allows spectators to immerse themselves in what they believe to be an Italian-inflected world replete with pasta dishes and red wine. Insularity is depicted as the method by which the Corleones can operate their business with the outside world while preserving their notion of the family as the crucial social unit.

The fusion of the Mafia Family with the blood family in *The Godfather* texts—a phenomenon I discuss in greater detail in Chapter Three—brings crime home, as it were. Depictions of the Mafia “began to involve home and family as much as guns and gambling” (Santos 209). Scholars have recognized that Mama Corleone plays a major role in the perception of the Corleone family as an ethnic Italian family, especially in the film versions. Dika claims that Mama Corleone is not so much peripheral to the action as she is a “structuring absence” (90). As the “creator and maintainer of the family,” Mama Corleone is “at the center of all that Michael and Vito try so desperately to protect” (Dika 90). Following this claim, one can interpret Mama Corleone’s general absence as part and parcel of the men’s responsibility to maintain the ethnic insularity of the Corleone family unit. Along the same lines, Daniel Golden argues that Mama Corleone’s small role as the traditional Italian mother functions as a contrast to what he calls the “Americanized generation of her children” (7). One example of this contrast is Michael’s distinctly non-Italian first communion party for his son at the beginning of *The Godfather Part II* (Shadoian 272), a party at which the regal Mama Corleone looks out of place among the canapés (French finger food). Michael’s decision to wait until his mother is dead to have his traitorous brother Fredo killed further supports the idea that the mother is emblematic of the immigrant generation.

The argument that these films celebrate the mother as the symbolic centre of the ethnic Italian family is plausible on some level; however, it cannot fully account for the treatment of ethnicity and motherhood in Puzo's novel. After Mama Corleone's son Sonny is killed, it is up to Tom Hagen, her husband's *consigliere*, to decide how to handle the news. The narrator tells us that Mama leaves it up to the men in her life to determine whether or not she should be informed of bad news, and that she has her own way of dealing with it:

Impassively she boiled her coffee and set the table with food. In her experience pain and fear did not dull physical hunger; in her experience the taking of food dulled pain. She would have been outraged if a doctor had tried to sedate her with a drug, but coffee and a crust of bread were another matter; she came, of course, from a more primitive culture. (265)

Food itself plays an important part in shaping the culture of a given ethnic group, and it is a major component of "Italianicity" in the films (Dika 85). However, the connection that the narrator makes between food and primitivism in this passage is significant in that it is made in relation to motherhood. Worth noting is the fact that men are celebrated for their adherence to seemingly archaic rituals. When Michael is hiding out in Sicily after killing the men responsible for the attempt on his father's life, he meets a young girl named Apollonia Vitelli. Much emphasis is placed on her being a virgin upon their marriage. The narrator tells us that "Michael Corleone came to understand the premium put on virginity by socially primitive people" (342-43). Although there is a distinction made here between Michael and "socially primitive people," his infatuation with his new wife's sexual innocence helps to further advance Michael's entrance into the Corleone Family. Because the novel demonstrates power as being achieved through a rigid gender binary, Michael's seemingly backwards movement to a primitive way of thinking is

paradoxically what allows him to advance in the Family hierarchy. In contrast, women's inferior position in the hierarchy seems to be exemplified by the novel's treatment of Mama Corleone as an ethnic relic.

Puzo's depiction of the mother as an ethnic relic is also carried forward to the second film adaptation, *The Godfather Part II*. In one of the film's flashback sequences depicting Vito as a young adult in New York City, Vito and his friend Genco go to the theatre in time to see the next scene of a play in progress. This scene features an Italian immigrant man named Peppino who laments coming to America and leaving behind his mother for a "no-good tramp." When he receives a letter from Italy informing him that his mother has died, Peppino launches into a song of lament called "*Senza Mamma*" (without mother)—from which this chapter draws its title—and nearly commits suicide. Scholars have analyzed the scene for the connection it makes between the song's subject matter and Vito's life, particularly his own experience of losing his mother to a Mafia murder when he was a child in Sicily (Chown 101; Dika 87). Dika further argues that Peppino's mother's death "means the loss of Italy, the old life, the old warmth" (87). Elemental to the male immigrant's sense of self in this scene, the mother is not so much a character in her own right as she is a symbol of a past that can never be recovered, much less fully recreated in the New World. That the scene focuses on the son lamenting his absent (and, later, deceased) mother emphasizes not only the mother figure's function as a vestige of some irrecoverable past but also the figure's secondary status in gangster narrative.

On the other hand, this scene's contrast to Vito's experiences further demonstrates that the mother figure's positioning in the saga is elided by that of the father. Whereas the death of Peppino's mother indicates the loss of Italy as the motherland, the *Godfather* texts themselves depict Italy as the fatherland. In the novel, the child Vito is sent by his mother to America so

that he might avoid being murdered as was his father (Puzo 192). Save for this act, Vito's mother is not mentioned again. The Sicily sequences involving Vito's son Michael in both Puzo's novel and Coppola's first two films also emphasize Italy as the fatherland. It is the place where Michael goes to seek shelter after committing two murders as vengeance for the attempted murder of his father, murders which signal his entrance into his father's Mafia world. It is also the place which allows him "finally to understand his father's character and his destiny" (Puzo 322). The bond between father and son is established on what is depicted as Vito's home turf, suggesting that while Mama Corleone appears to symbolize the family's ethnicity, it is really through the father that Michael forms an identification with his ethnic roots.

One final way that the mother is effaced in *The Godfather* novel is demonstrated in Mama Corleone's powerlessness to protect her children. Despite the mother's primary role as a childcare provider, she is nevertheless subject to a gender hierarchy wherein she must acquiesce to her husband's authority in all matters. For instance, the novel depicts newlywed Connie Corleone as a survivor of repeated physical abuse perpetrated by her husband, Carlo Rizzi. The narrator relays to readers what transpired after the first such attack, including the reaction of Connie's parents in whom she confided. The narrator tells us, "Her mother had had a little sympathy and had even asked her father to speak to Carlo Rizzi" (238). Mama's concern is that of a mother for her daughter's safety. However, as a wife herself, Mama has no power to help as she is subordinate to her own husband, Vito. Her request is swiftly refused by Vito because his control over his daughter ended the moment she married. "'She is my daughter,' he had said, 'but now she belongs to her husband. He knows his duties'" (238). When Connie challenges her father's coldness by asking if he has abused his wife (and her mother), we see that even Mama understands her sympathy for her daughter to be out of place. He responds, "'She never gave me

reason to beat her,”” and Mama “nodded and smiled” to confirm as much (238). According to the novel’s patriarchal arrangement, men are within their rights to abuse women as punishment for failing to act according to their husband’s expectations. As a result, the narrator tells us that Carlo takes pride in his abusive treatment of Connie because it signals his superiority to Vito (236). Nevertheless, Vito’s ability to spy on Carlo (238) ultimately places the Don in the most powerful position while Mama’s interjection carries little import.

Earlier in this chapter, I explained that *The Godfather* novel and films build upon previous gangster texts from the 1930s. I would like to examine one such text—*The Public Enemy*—to discuss other ways that the mother character functions as an absent presence. This film takes place over a span of some eleven years beginning in 1909. It follows Tommy Powers from his troubled youth through to his success as a bootlegger with partner Matt and his ultimate death by rival gangsters. Much of the film focuses on the Powers family, including Tom’s policeman father, who only appears in the 1909 sequence; his brother, Mike, who is a student by day, streetcar operator by night, and, briefly, a Marine; and their perpetually cheerful mother, Mrs. Powers. The brothers engage in arguments and physical fights because Mike strongly objects to Tom’s underworld lifestyle and Tom thinks Mike is wasting his time on an education and a low-paying job. Trying to keep the peace between the brothers is Mrs. Powers, who is oblivious to the true source of Tom’s lavish lifestyle. When intergang warfare breaks out, Matt is killed and Tom is injured in the course of carrying out a revenge killing. Much to Mrs. Powers’s delight, the brothers make amends while Tom is recuperating in the hospital. Subsequently, Tom is kidnapped, and Mike worries about his brother’s fate until receiving word that he will be released. In the film’s final scene, Ma prepares Tom’s bedroom for his return, but when Mike

answers a knock at the door, he opens it only to face his brother's dead body propped up on the stoop. He stands aside, and the body falls inside and onto the floor.

As the family is depicted in this film, the mother is powerless. The Powers men have authority based on a gendered division of labour. Initially, the father keeps the child Tom in line. Mrs. Powers can only express silent dismay when her husband retrieves the strap hanging from the kitchen wall so that he can punish Tom for misbehaving. A potent symbol of patriarchal control, the strap's location in the kitchen—traditionally the mother's domain—reinforces Mrs. Powers's subjugation to her husband. Scholars interpret Ma Powers as weak (Doherty 147; Mason 18; Shadoian 60) and also as indulgent toward Tom (Mason 18; Shadoian 52). While this film does suggest that Mrs. Powers's "mollycoddling" of her son plays a role in his criminality (Mainon 284), this critical tendency to blame Mrs. Powers for Tom's actions seems inappropriate given that authority is invested in men in *The Public Enemy*. In other words, to describe Mrs. Powers as being "not up to the job" of controlling Tom after her husband dies is to assign her a task that is incommensurate with her role in the family (Shadoian 52). It is Mr. Powers who represents "authority, the Law, [and] righteousness" (Gabree 25); thus, all Mrs. Powers can do is "suffer[] passively through it all" (Shadoian 53). Despite having some role in Tom's lawlessness, Mrs. Powers's expressing of unconditional love for her high-rolling son Tom (as well as her morally superior son Mike) is part and parcel of her embodiment of traditional motherhood.

Related to the above, another way that *The Public Enemy* effaces motherhood is by depicting Mrs. Powers as having little impact on her sons' battles. Beyond unsuccessfully urging them to make peace with one another despite each one's serious reservations about the other's moral code, Mrs. Powers is not influential. One example of her inconsequential treatment is evident

during the course of a heated argument between Tom and Mike. At this point in the film, it is 1920. Mike has returned from Marine service decorated but psychologically damaged. Tom is flourishing by distributing alcohol, an activity which is illegal due to Prohibition. The brothers have already had several scuffles, with Mike accusing Tom of shady dealings and Tom calling Mike a hypocrite. In the scene under analysis, the brothers argue over Tom giving his mother money. The shot is framed so that Ma Powers faces the camera and occupies the centre of the shot while Tom and Mike stand on either side of her and face each other, and Ma's eyes shift from one to the other as they argue. Mike rejects Tom's substantial monetary offer on his and Ma's behalf, and his choice of words is meant to attack Tom for the money's underworld origins: "Ma don't go to nightclubs and she don't drink champagne." The film then cuts to a shot only of Ma, and she responds, "Now how do you know? I used to dance when I was a girl." Ma literally is an absent presence to both sons in this scene. The shot's composition places her at the centre, but the men argue as though she were not there. Further, her words elicit no response from either of them. The possibility of her enjoyment of alcohol and nightlife—things Tom enjoys—is tantalizing for its potential to undermine the saintly mother image and Matt's perspective, but the fact that neither responds seems to dismiss her interjection as preposterous. The audience could be curious about Ma Powers's identity beyond that of mother but is ultimately comforted by her protected innocence and amused by her lighthearted response amidst an intense disagreement.

As the aforementioned scene indicates, the mother is an important yet effaced family figure in gangster texts. One final way that motherhood is effaced in *The Public Enemy* is by granting the mother no ability to think critically about her gangster son's lifestyle. She believes without question that the source of Tom's quick wealth, which has permitted him to commission custom suits for himself and also handsomely support his widowed mother, is some "political job," as

Mike relays. When she witnesses an argument during which Mike confronts Tom about being on a “seedy payroll” and acquiring his wealth from the “[b]lood of men,” she dismisses Mike’s accusations as those of someone who “ain’t been well” since returning from the war. At no point does Mrs. Powers consider the possible validity of Mike’s accusations. Even after Tom is shot and critically injured, Ma’s focus is on her boys’ reconciliation. “I’m almost glad this happened,” she states as she stands over Tom in his hospital bed, providing no elaboration on “this” as being the result of gang violence.

According to Gerald Peary, this lack of judgment on Mrs. Powers’s part is an essential characteristic of the mother figure. A “*real* mother in such stories takes in her son, no questions asked, no matter what his crimes” (emphasis original, 293). Even though Ma’s lack of judgment comes across as naïve, it is important to remember that since the mother is not an authority figure, she is not permitted to be critical. At the same time, there were limits placed on what Mrs. Powers could be depicted as blindly accepting. The film features a scene in which Tom brings home a large keg of beer and places it in the centre of the dinner table. Ma praises this as a “nice” gesture, and she partakes of a glass of beer herself. Originally, this scene featured a shot of Mrs. Powers passing a glass of beer to Mike; however, censors ordered that the scene be cut as it implied that she “condoned [Tom’s] bootlegging, thus sully[ing] her as a cherished icon” (Yaquinto, *Pump* 45). Although much of the film is set during Prohibition, its suppression of authority in the mother figure allows Mrs. Powers to be excited about the keg and even drink bootleg beer, but it stops short of having her override Mike’s moral objections. In sum, only men are in the position to make moral judgments.

Thus far, this chapter has shown the ways in which the gangster’s mother functions as a stereotyped character operating at the margins of gangster texts. On the other hand, some

examples can be found of mothers who undermine the expectations associated with this archetypal figure in gangster texts. In the remainder of this chapter, I will demonstrate how mothers reject or appropriate traditional maternal characteristics in order to achieve their own agendas. For the latter, motherhood functions as a mask, the donning of which allows mothers simultaneously to violate accepted standards and conceal their infringements. Through these characters, absent presence manifests as an exposure of motherhood as a social construction.

One way that a mother in gangster texts rejects conventional maternal characteristics is by refuting the assumption that a mother's love is unconditional. This strategy is demonstrated by Mrs. Martin in *Dead End* (William Wyler, 1937). In this film, the mother has been an absent presence to her son for a decade since he left reform school. Hugh "Baby Face" Martin has been hiding in St. Louis and returns to New York City with a new face, a new identity as a ruthless gangster, a desire to "stay put," and, most importantly for the present discussion, a "kind of a yearning to see [his] old lady." However, when Hugh locates his mother, she upends his expectations by calling him a "no-good tramp," a "dog," and a "butcher" who "never brought nothin' but trouble." Most shockingly, she delivers a resounding slap upon her son's cheek. "Don't call me Mom," she commands. "You ain't no son of mine." Whereas Hugh wants so much to remember the past and stage a triumphant return, Mrs. Martin inquires as to why Hugh will not allow her to forget him and demands that he leave the family alone, going as far as telling him to "die." Since Mrs. Martin's past treatment of her son is not revealed, one is left to wonder whether Hugh is craving what he always had or what he always wanted; in any case, he receives the opposite of what he expects. Hugh realizes his mistake in assuming that his hometown and its inhabitants stayed the same when he calls himself "soft," "crazy in the head," and "nuts," questioning both his masculinity and sanity for believing in his mother's

unconditional love. After his equally disastrous run-in with his old girlfriend, Hugh's companion, Hunk, reminds Hugh that Hunk had advised him not to return: "Never go back. Always go forward." With the city itself also undergoing massive changes, Hunk's advice seems to suggest the inevitability of change; however, Hugh's desire for stasis in his mother (and his girlfriend) hints at the alienation caused by modernity and the impossible demands made on women who, along with Hugh, become a "warped social by-product" of the constant drive toward economic success and development (Yaquinto, *Pump* 62).

Through her actions and words, Mrs. Martin rejects both her murderous son and his expectation that his feelings for her are mutual—that *he* has been an absent presence in *her* life—regardless of his criminal exploits. This denial of maternity likely is what draws Richard Whitehall's praise of this character. One of the few scholars to comment on this film, Whitehall describes Mrs. Martin as "brusque" and "memorable" in comparison to most gangster film mothers (9). It is through her assertion of the right to choose the conditions under which she will mother that Mrs. Martin is empowered. She cannot stop the "cops and newspapers" from harassing her because of who her son is; however, by distancing herself from Hugh, she can concentrate on mothering Johnny and Martha, presumably Hugh's siblings, on her own terms. In the context of motherhood and melodrama, Mary Ann Doane explains that "the true mother is defined in terms of pure presence: she is the one who is *there*" (emphasis original, *The Desire* 84). By ending her relationship with Hugh, Mrs. Martin challenges the given definition of motherhood through her absence. Significantly, *Dead End* attempts to undermine Mrs. Martin's empowerment. Toward the end of the film, a newspaper article reporting Hugh's death claims that Hugh's "last thoughts were of his mother, a plump, pink-cheeked little woman who lives in a neat cottage near Sunnyside, Long Island." This erroneous description of Mrs. Martin's home

and physical appearance (and its implications about her demeanour) is patriarchy's attempt to reinstate Hugh's fantasy of ideal motherhood, a long-standing fantasy in gangster texts.

Conversely, the fact that the characters who relay this newspaper account recognize its falsity works against this reinstatement and gives further weight to Mrs. Martin's choices. In this example, the mother does not operate behind the facade of traditional motherhood; rather, the facade is imposed upon her by the communications industry which appears to be invested in constructing a sensational story to sell newspapers and an idyllic mother to preserve tradition.

If Mrs. Martin finds power by staunchly remaining outside of the underworld in *Dead End*, then Ma Jarrett in *White Heat* (Raoul Walsh, 1949) demonstrates how power can be attained by positioning oneself within it. Unlike Mrs. Martin, who rejects her gangster son's maternal fantasy, Ma Jarrett celebrates her son Arthur Cody Jarrett's lawlessness and in fact participates in it for her own ends. As a United States Treasury agent describes her, Ma is "the prop that's held [Cody] up." Cody depends on Ma Jarrett in order for him to function despite his mental illness inherited from his late, institutionalized father. Described variously as "nuts" and a "crackpot," middle-aged Cody suffers from debilitating headaches, and he finds respite in elderly Ma Jarrett, particularly (and infamously) in her lap. Like a puppet master, Ma Jarrett controls Cody in an attempt to "wreak vengeance on the world that has destroyed her family" (Shadoian 168; see also Fischer 97). Although she is not ultimately successful, Ma Jarrett's techniques in defiance of the law and its (male) enforcers open up a space of maternal nonconformity from within an already unusual role for a gangster's mother.

White Heat opens with Cody and his gang stealing \$300,000 from a California mail train, and what follows is the Treasury's pursuit of the gang, particularly Cody. To evade conviction for the heist, Cody (falsely) admits culpability for another crime in Illinois and accepts a minimal

prison sentence, leaving Ma Jarrett in charge of the gang. Agent Hank Fallon is sent into the prison undercover as “Victor Pardo” to attempt to extract Cody’s confession for the train robbery and learn how he unloads stolen money. Meanwhile, Cody’s wife, Verna, falls for Big Ed, another Jarrett gang member who is set on replacing Cody as the leader. Big Ed’s plot to have Cody killed in prison fails, and Ma Jarrett visits Cody to vow revenge on the traitor. Frightened, Cody plans to break out of prison to protect Ma, but he later learns that his mother has died. This news leads Cody to have a mental episode which prison authorities believe warrants institutionalization. Instead, Cody breaks out with “Pardo” and others and heads to California. The original Jarrett gang has disbanded, fearing Cody’s revenge on Big Ed for Ma’s murder. Cody and the new gang plan to steal the payroll of a chemical plant, so “Pardo” secretly alerts his fellow Treasury agents beforehand. “Pardo” is exposed as a fraud just as the plant is surrounded. Cops arrest Verna—Ma Jarrett’s real killer—and a shootout begins between Cody and the authorities, including Hank Fallon. Cody retreats up the exterior of the burning plant and finally succumbs to the police’s bullets after a final, and famous, proclamation: “Made it, Ma! Top of the world!”

Cody’s “umbilical relationship” with his mother has long been the focus of scholarly scrutiny (Bookbinder 33), just as it often was highlighted by *White Heat*’s original reviewers.²⁶ The

²⁶ For example, Fran Mason examines Cody’s “mother fixation” (68), Thomas Schatz comments on Cody’s “perverse devotion . . . especially [to] his mother” (88), and Lucy Fischer explores the nature of Cody’s “*uncommon attachment to his mother*” (emphasis original, 95). Contemporary reviewers including Charles L. Franke note Cody’s “mother fixation,” with Bosley Crowther finding this dominant aspect of Cody’s personality “slightly remote.” According to co-screenwriter Ben Roberts, this mother-son relationship was based on the one between Ma Barker and her sons, a group of criminals known as the Barker-Karpis gang who were active in the American Midwest during the 1930s, and this relationship was also shaped by psychoanalysis. Roberts explains that the goal of the Barker gang’s influence on the screenplay was to “‘have the gangster with a mother complex and play it against Freudian implications that she’s driving him to do these things, and he’s driving himself to self-destruction. Play it like a Greek tragedy’” (qtd. in McGilligan 15). Significantly, the extent of Kate “Ma” Barker’s involvement in the gang’s criminal activities remains a mystery (Fischer 97; Strunk 148); however, her 1935 death in a shootout with the Federal Bureau of Investigation would have continued to resonate in the 1940s when *White Heat* appeared, and she is a staple in popular culture due to such films as *Queen of the Mob* (James Hogan, 1940) and *Bloody Mama* (Roger Corman, 1970).

overtly Freudian nature of this relationship and the critical attention to said nature points to another element of this bond that performs a disruptive function. Lucy Fischer demonstrates various ways in which *White Heat* upsets gender norms (92-97). Fischer reads Ma Jarrett as exhibiting both feminine and masculine characteristics, with the latter evident in her gang participation (96). Ma's femininity emerges through her mothering, whereby she comforts Cody during his mental episodes and nourishes him by purchasing strawberries. Fischer builds upon her claim of Ma's gender fluidity by suggesting that the character engenders a camp sensibility through the actress's "broad-shouldered suits and stern, punchy delivery" (96). Fischer offers no elaboration, and her description seems to apply to Ma's "masculine" qualities in the film as a whole. I submit that Ma's camp performance of femininity in a scene during which she and Verna, Cody's wife, are interviewed by Treasury agent Philip Evans permits her to destabilize motherhood as "feminine" while also retreating within its typical gender construction in order to conceal her power as a criminal.

Although the concept of camp is a minimum of one hundred years old (White 70), it remains difficult to define, as others have similarly observed (Booth 11-17; Cleto 2-9; Melly 5; Meyer 6-8; Shugart and Waggoner 21). No small part of this difficulty can be attributed to the proliferation of detail and, at times, contradiction, in Susan Sontag's 1964 essay "Notes on 'Camp,'" wherein she claims to be the first to elaborate on its meaning. Among its other characteristics, Sontag suggests that camp is artificial and exaggerated, not natural (275); playful, not serious (288); and style, not content (277). Gender and parody are other key elements of this concept. Judith Butler understands gender as continually in process. She describes it as performative, meaning that it is "the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names" (*Bodies* xii). In other words, gender serves a normative

function as it is “regulated by heterosexist constraints” (*Bodies* 178). This function is highlighted through drag, which is a form of camp. Drag exposes gender as an imitation rather than a natural and original component of heterosexuality (*Bodies* 85). With respect to parody, Sontag captures this element of camp when she explains that “[c]amp sees everything in quotation marks. It’s . . . not a woman, but a ‘woman’” (280). Significantly, *White Heat* features a woman’s camp performance of femininity. This “same-sex female masquerade,” as Pamela Robertson calls it, questions essentialism through an exaggeration of femininity, thereby creating a gap between the woman and her feminine image (12-13). A key feature of camp, then, is light-hearted theatricality, and people who camp expose the distance between gender and image (see Jarraway, Introduction and passim).

As I stated earlier, Ma’s camp performance allows her simultaneously to challenge the association of motherhood with femininity and to exploit this association for her own protection. The scene under review occurs after Cody decides to claim guilt for the Illinois crime as an alibi for the California heist. Cody instructs Ma and Verna on how to behave if they are questioned by the T-men regarding Cody’s recent whereabouts: only Ma must speak, and Verna should “cry a little” for effect. Agent Phillip Evans conducts the ensuing interview, his arm in a sling after having been shot by Cody for discovering the gang’s location at a motel. Phillip (correctly) identifies both women as witnesses to the shooting, thus placing Cody in California and linking him to the train robbery. Ma’s alibi for the shooting is that she and Verna were seeing a movie, and she confidently affirms Cody’s (false) absence from the state while Verna quietly sobs into a handkerchief. At this point, Phillip rises up from his perch on the edge of his desk, stands behind Ma’s chair, and affirms his certainty of Cody as the shooter by claiming that he was the same distance from Cody as he is from Cody’s mother. Ma responds: “‘Course bein’ a woman I

wouldn't know much about the law, but I hear you got to have witnesses to make anything stand up in court." With no other witnesses to corroborate the motel shooting and thus place Cody in California, Phillip excuses the pair. Ma confidently leads the way out of the office and tells Verna, who is still crying, that "[n]obody's going to hurt [Verna]."

Several aspects of the aforementioned scene qualify as camp. Ma presents herself to the police as a nurturing, comforting, non-threatening mother figure when she tells Phillip that she went to the market to shop for food and prepare a meal to lift Verna's spirits, when in reality Ma despises Verna and went to the market only for Cody. She is also fiercely protective of Cody during the interview. She refers to her middle-aged son as "[her] boy," and rebuffs Phillip's attempts to place Cody with the women through a firm yet airy tone of voice. Ma's obvious intelligence and knowledge of the law, including the requirement of witnesses to a crime and the right not to be held without cause, do not undermine her performance but rather enhance it. Neither does Phillip's awareness that Ma is performing.²⁷ Also enhancing Ma's camp performance is Verna's. Virginia Mayo, the actress who portrays Verna, has been previously identified as a camp icon for the "corny flamboyant femaleness" exhibited in her film roles (Sontag 279). Not only are Verna's tears and doe-eyed fragility disingenuous, they are also an exaggerated display of a stereotypically-feminine quality: emotionality. Verna's own brand of camp, then, complements Ma's more restrained version. Indeed, Ma performs so well that

²⁷ Critics recognize that an audience response is necessary for a performance to qualify as camp (Long 80). More specifically, there are two required responses because the audience must be split: "there is always someone for whom the performance is taken seriously and someone who is in on the 'joke'" (Shugart and Waggoner 36). In *White Heat*, two characters and the film's audience are part of the "camp mafia" (Melly 5). As Ma's intimate acquaintance and accomplice, Verna is in on the joke. So too is *White Heat*'s audience who has witnessed Cody's actions and Ma's demeanor up to this point. Finally, Phillip is in on the joke because he experienced Ma's evasive driving tactics during the attempt to trail her, which cast doubt on her aura of innocence. Further, he can identify Ma and Verna as witnesses to the motel shooting, and he can finger Cody as the shooter. Without independent witnesses, however, Phillip is forced to play along with Ma's performance and perhaps hope for a slip-up. One can assume that Ma's performance is taken seriously by the other officer who is in the room during the interview and who was presumably absent during the shooting.

despite Verna's over-the-top performance she succeeds in her goal of protecting her son from the law: a newspaper headline reveals that Cody's confession for the Illinois robbery is accepted.²⁸

The mere presence of a criminal mother in a gangster text, let alone one who engages in camp, would seem to upset the genre's requisite mother's role of private-sphere nurturer (like Tony Passa's unnamed mother in *Little Caesar* [Mervyn LeRoy, 1930]) and unquestioning supporter (like Mama Corleone in *The Godfather* [Francis Ford Coppola, 1972] and *The Godfather Part II* [Francis Ford Coppola, 1974]) of and for her gangster son. However, presence alone, and more specifically camp presence, does not necessarily imply a complete overthrow of genre expectations or the patriarchal system at large. Ever since Sontag's assertion that camp is apolitical because it is purely aesthetic (277), scholars have debated both the apolitical designation and camp's potential as a form of resistance.²⁹ In her analysis of a form of camp called drag, Judith Butler argues that there is potential in revealing "the mundane impersonations by which heterosexually ideal genders are performed and naturalized"; however, such revelations

²⁸ It must be mentioned that the following scene reveals that Phillip Evans arranged for Cody's confession to be verifiable for the sake of the Illinois police. Phillip's goal is to learn how Cody launders money, so he sends Hank Fallon into prison undercover in the hope that Hank will glean a "real" confession from Cody. In the next section, I discuss the subversive potential of camp in *White Heat*. It seems that Phillip's maneuver reveals him to be a sort of puppet master who undermines Ma's subversive camp performance since he does not need Ma to corroborate her son's story. In other words, Ma's proclamations of Cody's innocence support the police's ruse against her son and provide both mother and son with a false sense of confidence. This revelation provides us with an alternate reading of one contemporary reviewer's description of Ma as a "soft-spoken mother who knows how to put on an act for the benefit of the police" (emphasis added, Rev. of *White Heat*). Still, as I later claim, Ma's performance is transgressive to some degree.

²⁹ For example, on one end of the resistance spectrum, Moe Meyer recoups camp as a political tool by affirming the agency of the camp performer and linking camp to queer theory (10); that is, queer theory's characterization of identity formation as a continual performative process (2) links up with camp's exposure of gender as a similar process. Jack Babuscio professes camp's resistive potential as "a means of illustrating those cultural ambiguities and contradictions that oppress us all . . ." (28). On the other end of the spectrum are critics like Andrew Britton and David Bergman. Britton accuses contemporary camp of "'allowing one to remain inside oppressive relations while enjoying the illusory confidence that one is flouting them'" (138), while Bergman is leery of camp's focus on artifice being touted as "the Archimedean lever or rock that will move the gender system off its path" (12). Pamela Robertson's position is somewhere in between. She argues for women's "feminist camp practices" (9)—including those exemplified by Mae West and Madonna—since feminism and camp share similar concerns including performativity (6); however, she ultimately admits that camp is "more committed to the status quo than to effecting real change" (22).

often serve to reiterate heterosexual gender norms as the standard (*Bodies* 176). *White Heat* exemplifies Butler's qualified suggestion of subversion through gender parody. While Ma Jarrett's camp performance exposes the impersonations mentioned by Butler, her subversive potential as a masculine-identified criminal mother is undone by the fact that she is murdered. Further, her murderer is Verna. Verna arguably is presented as the more "feminine" of the two women, as demonstrated in her repeatedly-expressed interest in consumption.³⁰ Ma's death by Verna's hand suggests that despite its "[g]endered confusion" (Fischer 97), *White Heat* ultimately upholds traditional gender roles in Ma Jarrett's case.³¹ Nevertheless, Ma's violation of gender norms throughout the film in her capacity as a woman heading a men's gang and in her presenting herself as a typical mother in the scene described above demonstrate how awareness of said norms can be used covertly to one's advantage.

Ma Jarrett's self-conscious manipulation of cultural expectations is taken even further by Livia Soprano. A mother with a first name and a fully-developed, complex identity, Livia Soprano of the television series *The Sopranos* (David Chase, 1999-2007) functions as a direct response to the stereotypical gangster mothers before her. Originally conceiving the material for a film, series creator David Chase wished to explore a gangster's relationship with his mother who is "not a typical mob mother" ("David Chase Interview"). Chase's private difficulties with his mother led him to ask questions about women in gangster texts, especially mothers, whom,

³⁰ During his discussion of *Scarface* (Howard Hawks, 1932), Mason describes the "feminine form of consumption" as "the concern with looks and style" (26). This concern encapsulates Verna's character. She is always impeccably coiffed and made up, even while napping (as her first appearance in the film demonstrates), and she encourages Cody not to split the train robbery money with the gang by telling him, "I look good in a mink coat, honey." Later, she dons a mink coat over her negligee and stands on a stool to admire her appearance.

³¹ Fischer cites Verna's killing of Ma as example of said confusion since Cody initially suspects Big Ed as the guilty party (97). However, it should be noted that Verna is arrested at the end of the film. Her arrest, coupled with Ma's demise, ensures that, regardless of the temporary threat, patriarchy is restored.

he asserted, “[w]e never see” (Donatelli and Alward 70).³² Accordingly, the first shot of the series establishes the significance of the Soprano matriarch. Livia’s son, Tony Soprano, is contemplating a statue of a nude woman in his psychiatrist’s waiting room. The camera is positioned behind the statue such that Tony’s head and upper body are visible from between the statue’s legs, evoking a powerful, frank image of birth and motherhood.³³ At the most basic level, despite the prominent role of Tony’s gangster activities, the series is essentially “about a boy and his mother” (Millman). The importance of this relationship is supported by the fact that much of Tony’s time in therapy with Dr. Jennifer Melfi is spent (often reluctantly) discussing Livia, whom scholars have described as “one bitch from hell” (Donatelli and Alward 66) and compared to Medusa (Ricci 147) and Medea (De Stefano 207; Gabbard 106-07; Willis 7). The mother’s traditional characteristics in gangster texts, as articulated earlier in this chapter, and the empowering actions taken by non-conventional mothers, converge in Livia Soprano. She is conventional as can be, and she is a master operative.

Scholars have identified several facets of Livia’s identity from which she draws power and to which she retreats for concealment of said power. First and foremost, she is a mother; as such, she takes advantage of her and Tony’s shared cultural assumptions surrounding motherhood, including the assumption that the mother commands utter reverence and loyalty (Gabbard 104; Orban 49). Second, her ethnic and religious affiliations compound the expectations associated with motherhood. Tony’s shared identity as an Italian American (Messenger 279) and a Catholic

³² Livia’s inception is also rooted in a personal connection to her creator. It is well known that David Chase cites two main influences for Livia: his mother and fictional gangsters’ mothers. Having sought psychiatric therapy because, like Tony, “his mother [was] driving him crazy,” Chase then turned to art and “began to apply [his] family dynamic to mobsters” (“Chasing”). Parallels exist between Mama Soprano and Mama Chase. Livia Soprano shares the first name of Chase’s mother (Grossman) and speaks to her son Tony the way that Chase’s mother spoke to Chase (Gabbard 105). In this way, Livia represents a working through of personal and collective anxiety about motherhood.

³³ A number of scholars have analyzed the series’ first scene. See, for example, Gabbard 99; Nochimson, “Waddy” 189; Ricci 147; and Walker 109-11.

(Gibson 197) further ensures that he will feel compelled to show the reverence of the mother as a Madonna and allows Livia emotionally and psychologically to exploit her son. Livia ultimately bears little resemblance to *The Godfather's* Mama Corleone or Tony Camonte's unnamed mother in *Scarface*. No husky, large-bosomed, heavily accented, kitchen-restricted mother here; Livia is "as plain as her hair" due, in part, to the casting of a non-Italian in the long-established generic role of the gangster's mother (Donatelli and Alward 66). Also, whereas earlier ethnic mothers are identifiable by their "strong moral fiber" (Rosow 43), Livia is best known for her corrupted morality in turning against her own son. By doing so, she is manipulating Tony's (and the viewer's) expectations of the Italian *mamma*.

Besides parental status and ethnic and religious import, Livia harnesses her age and her connection to Mafiosi as sources of authority. The "powerless, invisible, and grotesque" qualities that are attached to an elderly woman like Livia permit her to manipulate her son without obvious suspicion (Donatelli and Alward 66). Tony dismisses Dr. Melfi's concerns about his mother by telling her, "You're supposed to take care of your mother. She's a little old lady" ("The Sopranos" [1.1]³⁴). Finally, Livia's attachment to Mafia men through her late husband and her son give her access to a vast web of power. As a mobster and a gangster film aficionado, Tony is well aware that "[m]obsters supposedly revere motherhood" (Parini 82), as evidenced in earlier gangster texts. Because mobsters are to maintain a strict separation between their Mafia and blood families, women are excluded from men's business. Indeed, when Livia rebuffs her son's request to speak to her brother-in-law because she "[doesn't] know that world,"

³⁴ When referencing episodes of television series, this dissertation includes the episode title along with a numerical episode reference. The reference has two digits: the first corresponds to the season in which the episode appears, and the second refers to the order of the episode within the season. The sixth and final season of *The Sopranos* was divided into two parts that aired some eight months apart, so where there are three digits in a numerical reference, the second number indicates in which part of the sixth season the episode appears.

she is falling back on this gendered separation (“Pax Soprana” [1.6]). However, her later protestation that she detests being “in the middle of things” means that she is in the middle and therefore does know the men’s world (“Nobody Knows Anything” [1.11]).

In contrast to *White Heat*’s Ma Jarrett, who has a direct role in the Jarrett gang run by her son, Livia Soprano is an outsider to the New Jersey Mafia Family headed by hers; however, as others have also recognized, her tactics allow her to manipulate gangsters into doing her bidding (Gettings 167). Rather than physical violence, which often characterizes male interaction in gangster texts, Livia uses speech—or its absence—to communicate. J. L. Austin’s speech act theory illuminates Soprano characters’ verbal exchanges, as Michael Gettings demonstrates in his book chapter. Austin proposes that an utterance can perform an action (hence the title of his book, *How to Do Things with Words* [6]) and that there are three such types. The locutionary act is the act of speaking, or the literal meaning of what is spoken. The illocutionary act is the action performed in speaking. The perlocutionary act is the effect of the utterance on a listener (Austin 94-101). While much scholarly attention has been given to Livia’s role in arranging the (failed) hit on her own son, which is discussed below, she also indirectly orders another murder earlier in the series through performative utterances. In “Denial, Anger, Acceptance” [1.3], Livia’s brother-in-law, Corrado “Junior” Soprano, visits Livia at her nursing home. Junior heads the DiMeo Family, but, unbeknownst to him, in name only, for his nephew Tony is the true leader. Junior tells Livia about Tony’s underlings, Christopher Moltisanti and Brendan Filone, who are causing him trouble. The following conversation occurs between Junior and Livia:

Junior: Him [Christopher] and his little friend, they’re slapping me in the face and they’re hiding behind Tony.

Livia: Well, Tony always loved Christopher like a son, and so do I, Junior. He put up

my storm windows for me one year.

Junior: Good. But what do I do? I just let him and this Filone kid piss on me in public?

And how far do I go before I light a friggin' match under that hot-headed son of yours?

Livia: Maybe Christopher could use a little talking to, you know. The other one, Filone—I don't know him.

Junior: You got a lotta sense for an old gal.

Livia: No. I'm a babbling idiot. That's why my son put me in a nursing home.

In this exchange, Livia's illocution is advising: in a veiled manner, she instructs Junior to spare Christopher and eliminate Brendan. Junior's responses ("Good" and "You got a lotta sense") indicate that he understands her intention, and he arranges for Brendan to receive a "Moe Greene special," or a bullet through the eyeball, made famous in *The Godfather* film. Not once does Livia directly order Brendan's murder, but the effect of her locutions on Junior is exactly that. Ever aware of the import of her illocutions, Livia claims dementia (as above) or ignorance ("I don't know what you're talking about" ["Pax Soprana (1.6); "Down Neck" (1.7); "Isabella" (1.12)]) when complimented or confronted by Junior, Tony, and others. By retreating into assumptions about old persons and women outsiders of the Mafia, Livia can goad male gangster relatives into doing her bidding while protecting herself from implication. Her evasive communication tactics lead Tony to tell his mother, "if you'd been born after those feminists, you woulda been the real gangster" ("Down Neck" [1.7]).

The previous example demonstrates that, as she tells her daughter-in-law, Carmela, Livia "know[s] how to talk to people" ("Nobody Knows Anything" [1.11]).³⁵ In contrast, Livia also

³⁵ In context, Livia is defending herself. Carmela accuses her of claiming a victim position to manipulate Tony, and Livia responds by describing herself with these words as if to pass for an adequate conversationalist. However, the

knows “how—and when—to *not* talk to people” (emphasis original, Walker 118). It is through the absence of speech that Livia famously gives tacit approval for Junior to make a murderous move against her own son, in contrast to *Dead End*’s Mrs. Martin simply wishing her son dead. Livia gets a lift to her grandson A. J.’s birthday party from Junior because, as she told Tony earlier in the episode, she “doesn’t drive when they’re predicting rain” (“The Sopranos” [1.1]). In the car, the elders commiserate over their respective problems with Tony: Livia bristles at his attempt to put her into a nursing home, and Junior complains that he is hampering business. According to Junior, their “friends” (read: Mafiosi) are pushing him to take a more commanding role. When he suggests that “[s]omething may have to be done . . . about Tony,” he is being purposely non-committal in order to test the idea on Livia. She says nothing, and when Junior surreptitiously glances to his right to gauge her reaction, there is none. Livia looks out the passenger side window and readjusts her closed lips, as though to confirm that her response is withholding a response. However, Junior’s body language indicates that he interprets her as having no objections. According to Glen D. Gabbard, a mother’s desire to hurt her own child is “among the most disavowed and repressed of all human feelings” (100). Livia’s silence in response to Junior could be read as appropriate in light of this powerful taboo; that is, in her refusal directly to sanction her son’s murder, Livia herself is acknowledging just how disturbing are her desires.³⁶

women’s interaction also demonstrates Livia’s deft use of speech, this time with a woman. When Carmela says that she knows Junior often visits Livia, Livia purposely misinterprets the comment as implying sexual impropriety: “You think I’d blacken my Johnny’s memory by getting mixed up with his brother?” Livia is deflecting attention away from her relationship with Junior so as not to arouse suspicion of her role in the assassination attempt on her son; thus, in telling Carmela that she knows how to talk to people, Livia is simultaneously revealing her sharp, calculated communication skills.

³⁶ Characters exhibit varying responses to Livia’s role in the assassination attempt, which is realistic in the face of this taboo. Junior is unsettled by his sister-in-law’s approval. When he hears Donny, one of his men, express humoured disgust with the idea of a mother wanting her son “popped,” he has Donny killed as though to erase the possibility altogether (“Isabella” [1.12]). Despite Dr. Melfi’s warnings about the hit, Tony remains in denial about his mother’s role in it until a federal agent shares a damning taped conversation between Livia and Junior. This

As the previous paragraphs demonstrate, Livia manipulates her position as an old woman and mother of Italian descent whose male relatives are gangsters in order to advance her own agenda. However, perhaps the strongest evidence for Livia's centrality in *The Sopranos* mounts upon her death. Even after she dies, Livia remains an influential presence in Tony's life (as is Ma Jarrett in Cody's life [*White Heat*]) through to the end of the series, confirming that she will always be what Dr. Melfi once called a "formidable maternal presence" for Tony ("The Sopranos" [1.1]). Tony continues to struggle with his conception of Livia through his relationships with others. For example, he has affairs with women like the beautiful but unstable Gloria Trillo, all the while ignoring Melfi's observation that Gloria resembles Livia ("Pine Barrens" [3.11]). Only when Gloria repeats nearly verbatim one of Livia's oft-spoken phrases does Tony acknowledge the connection and end the relationship ("Amour Fou" [3.12]) (Barreca 45). Further, Tony's lingering anger with Livia over the assassination attempt is carried forward by Tony to her surviving co-conspirator, Junior. Junior eventually loses his faculties just as Livia allegedly lost hers, and he himself tries to kill Tony in a case of mistaken identity ("Members Only" [6.1.1]). Finally, Tony's strained relationship with his troubled son, A. J., also echoes the difficulties between Tony and his mother with regard to Tony's mental illness. Like his father, A. J. suffers from depression and panic attacks, and he sees a therapist after a disturbing suicide attempt which Tony averts. In a family therapy session, Tony ridicules A. J. for the same issues that he has and uses the same language that Livia once used with Tony to demean his son: "Oh, poor you. It's all your mother's fault, isn't it?" ("The Second Coming" [6.2.7]). Tony's insensitivity

revelation leads Tony to seek revenge by attempting to smother Livia with a pillow ("I Dream of Jeannie Cusamano" [1.13]). Significantly, Tony recalls at least two other instances during which Livia threatened her children harm. Tony remembers Livia threatening to stab him in the eye with a fork when he asks for an electric organ, and he also remembers overhearing Livia threaten to smother Tony and his siblings with a pillow ("Down Neck" [1.7]). The latter memory foreshadows Tony's own attempted murder of his mother by the same technique.

toward his son's psychological issues reveals that his own issues—particularly those connected to his mother—continue to linger unresolved and may, in turn, be repeated by his only son. In some of his most important relationships, then, floats Livia's spectre. This absent presence may be what prompted David Chase to ask rhetorically, "Was any Italian gangster ever so haunted by his mother?" ("Appendix" 248).

Besides personal and familial connections, Tony grapples with Livia's legacy by comparing her to a fictional mother in an early gangster film: Ma Powers in *The Public Enemy*. *The Public Enemy* is an appropriate choice because it allows Tony to support his perception of what he has been conditioned to think motherhood should be and simultaneously mourn his mother's incongruence with said perception (as well as mourn her death). During the episode in which Livia dies ("Proshai, Livushka" [3.2]), there are several scenes wherein Tony watches parts of *The Public Enemy*, the first and only time in the series that he does so. Glen D. Gabbard interprets Ma Powers's role in this episode as representative of Tony's continuing desire for a stereotypical mother (112), and his reading is supported by the fact that Tony refuses to believe Livia sanctioned the attempt on his life, among other evidence. Mrs. Powers's unconditional love for her gangster son, her uncomplaining acceptance of domesticity, her singular desire for peace within the family, and her deference to patriarchal authority all starkly contrast to Mrs. Livia Soprano. If Livia is "the nightmare of all mothers" as James Gandolfini, the actor who played Tony, puts it ("Meet Tony Soprano"), then Mrs. Powers is Tony's fantasy mother. Livia makes her son's life a living hell, no small feat for a man immersed in the violent world of the Mafia, and Tony's choice to watch *The Public Enemy* after the monumental loss of his mother elicits sympathy for Tony and anger for a woman undeserving of his tears.

On the other hand, Tony's engagement with the mother figure as embodied by Ma Powers also represents his sense of ambivalence toward motherhood and the mother-son relationship in general. This ambivalence is on display during Tony's first therapy session with Dr. Melfi after Livia's death. Tony quickly vacillates between various reactions to the loss. He initially claims he is "glad" that she is dead and "wished" that she would die, but then he questions himself: "Is that right? Wishing her dead? Is that being a good son?" He then tells Dr. Melfi that Livia, whom he calls a "fucking demented old bat, that fucking selfish, miserable cunt," did not deserve for him to be a good son ("Proshai, Livushka" [3.2]). In this rapid switch between satisfaction, guilt, and angry dismissal, one can see that Tony's rejection of his unconventional mother and his recognition of her true personal character coexist with his affirmation of the sanctity of motherhood. Only when Tony views *The Public Enemy*'s final scene wherein the body of murdered Tom is delivered to his mother's doorstep does he express emotion about Livia's death. His tears could be triggered by imagining Ma Powers's reaction to discovering her son Tommy's body, which is not shown in the film. More likely, his tears can be interpreted as a son grieving for both the mother he lost and the one he never had.³⁷

As this chapter has shown, patriarchal strategies reinforcing male power often efface motherhood in gangster texts. Prominent stereotypes of motherhood, including unconditional

³⁷ Because of the powerful influence Livia had in his life, perhaps it is fitting that the final scene of *The Sopranos* strongly implies Tony's murder ("*The Sopranos*: Definitive"). Tony's death links back to the first scene of the series and its image of birth; thus, taken as a whole, the series opens with the suggestion of birth and ends with the implication of death. Significantly, as Tony reveals to Dr. Melfi long after Livia's death and shortly before his own, he had a drug-induced vision about the process of birth: "our mothers are the bus drivers," he explains to Dr. Melfi. "They are the bus. See, they're the vehicle that gets us here. They drop us off, and go on their way. They continue on their journey, and the problem is we keep trying to get back in the bus instead of just lettin' it go" ("The Second Coming" [6.2.07]). Given Tony's preoccupation with his mother, we might read the completed life cycle depicted by the first and final scenes of the series as suggesting that the only way Tony could let the bus go, as it were, is in his own death. Chase, who continues to be asked about what happened in the final scene, may be amenable to such an interpretation. In an interview, Chase explains that his focus regarding the ending was not Tony's fate: "There was something else I was saying that was more important than whether Tony Soprano lived or died. About the fragility of it all. The whole show had been about time in a way, and the time allotted on this Earth" ("*The Sopranos* Ending").

love for the gangster son, render the mother a nonthreatening symbol of the traditional family and a minor character of whom little is seen in many cases. At the same time, however, some mothers find a modicum of empowerment within this restricted role through their manipulation of the assumptions about motherhood to which they are expected to adhere. This latter group's exposure of the gangster genre's fantasies about motherhood illustrates a way that the margins may offer a seductive position from which to gain authority.

Whereas the mother character exemplifies absence as effacement and furtive empowerment, the moll character—the focus of the next chapter—demonstrates absent presence as she transitions from a reformer of male gangsters to an agent for male relationships.

CHAPTER TWO

“Three Corners Road”: Molls and Triangular Relationship Structures

In 1991, octogenarian actress Mae Clarke discouraged a reporter from asking her about “that damned grapefruit again,” by which she was referring to a film scene from her youth (qtd. in LaSalle, *Complicated* 92-93). The scene, one of the “best remembered . . . in gangster cinema” (Mason 17), comes from William A. Wellman’s *The Public Enemy* (1931). In it, Tommy Powers (James Cagney) joins his moll, Kitty (Mae Clarke, uncredited), at the breakfast table laid out with a simple meal, including half a grapefruit each. An argument ensues, and the scene ends with Tommy hitting the left side of Kitty’s face with her grapefruit half followed by a fade to black. Kitty never appears in the film again. Besides launching Cagney’s stardom and defining Clarke’s acting career (much to her disappointment), the grapefruit scene is instructive because it cemented the nature of the relationship between gangsters and molls. Yet, less than a decade earlier, a film like *The Shock* (Lambert Hillyer, 1923) features a male gangster’s female love interest in a prime role; the gangster treats her with respect and shields her from violence rather than subjecting her to it. This chapter will account for such a contrasting treatment of molls during this period by building upon the work of Lea Jacobs, specifically her examination of the silent film *Underworld* (Josef von Sternberg, 1927) and its contribution to this stark shift. The previous chapter demonstrated the absent presence of the mother character by analyzing the techniques employed by mothers to gain varying levels of power within their limited role. This current chapter argues that whereas the moll initially is crucial to gangster texts because she motivates the gangster’s abandoning of his criminal behaviour (presence), beginning in the mid-to late-1920s it is relationships between men that take precedence, and consequently the moll’s

role is reduced (absence); nevertheless, because of the nature of these male relationships, the moll retains a minor but key role (absent presence).

For those who may be unaware, *moll* refers to a male gangster's intimate female companion. The etymology of this and various other colourful words that have been used to describe a gangster's girlfriend help to illuminate the shift in the depiction of molls that I trace in this chapter; hence, I embark on a brief dictionary digression at present. A moll is a girlfriend, but this word usually is applied specifically to a gangster's girlfriend or female accomplice ("Moll," n. 2, def. 2).³⁸ For example, in Armitage Trail's 1930 novel *Scarface*, Tony Camonte's accomplice is Jane Conley. Jane is referred to as "The Gun Girl," meaning a woman who conceals a gangster's gun before and after a shooting so that he can avoid suspicion (28-29). Interestingly, the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) tells us that the origin of this meaning could be one of the two nicknames given to seventeenth-century London criminal Mary Frith ("Moll," n. 2, etymology). This potential origin situates moll accomplices within a global history of women lawbreakers.

Along with criminal connections, various religious connotations emerge from the girlfriend referents. Sometimes the word moll is used in combination with other words to form a "mock proper" name ("Moll," n. 2, compound 1). Such is the case in the film *Outside the Law* (Tod Browning, 1920), wherein Molly Madden's underworld name is "Silky Moll." Here, the character's nickname reflects the etymology of the word *molly*, which, as the proper name *Molly*, is an informal version of the name of Jesus's mother, Mary ("Molly," n. 1, etymology). As I demonstrate later in this chapter in my discussion of gangster texts before *Underworld*, women

³⁸ The slang term *jane* (or *Jane*), which originated in the United States, refers to a woman or young girl generally or a girlfriend specifically ("Jane, jane"). In *The Public Enemy*, bootlegger Paddy Ryan's girlfriend is called Jane, but the slang meaning of her proper name also reveals her relationship to Paddy.

exert religious influence over criminal men as part of the men's transformation away from lawlessness; as such, this connection to Mary is apt. On the other hand, Dominique Mainon reminds us that prostitutes once were historically known as molls in homage to the Bible's other Mary: Mary Magdalene (277). The *OED* states that this usage of moll to indicate a prostitute is now rare ("Moll," n. 2, def. 1); however, a sense of this usage is present in the *Little Caesar* novel (W. R. Burnett, 1929) and film (Mervyn LeRoy, 1930) through the character named Ma Magdalena. She is a surrogate mother to the title character and conceals his ill-gained money, thereby implying a level of moral corruption similar to that which could be assumed of a prostitute. In terms of the literature on gangster texts, these two Marys—the virgin and the whore—reflect what was recognized in gangster studies of the 1970s onwards as the full range of women's roles in the genre (Akass and McCabe 147; Gabree 25; Rosow 188; Yaquinto, "Tough" 209). Artists incorporated features of Jesus's mother, Mary, when creating moll characters in texts of the 1910s and 1920s, texts to which this chapter now turns.

The changing role of molls in mid- to late-1920s gangster films is connected to a larger shift in aesthetic judgment. In *The Decline of Sentiment: American Film in the 1920s* (2008), Lea Jacobs maps "a history of taste" in film studies by examining press pieces written about films of various types (ix). Working from the assumption that reviewers and journalists do not mirror audience experiences of film so much as they create them (18), Jacobs demonstrates that contemporary critics came to find 1920s sentimental films "cloying, foolishly optimistic, or too intent on achieving big dramatic effects" (ix). She locates the origins of this filmic shift in taste to a literary shift in taste around the time of World War I. Among other characteristics, literary taste in this period celebrated naturalism and the vernacular (12), with the latter being a defining feature of gangster texts. Important for my present purposes is the impact of gender on taste.

Because sentiment was deemed by critics to be a feminine preference, one can discern a connection between the negative response to sentiment at this time and the concomitant elevation of “masculine” texts (23, 16).³⁹ Among other narrative types, Jacobs analyzes the male adventure story to illustrate the decline of critical interest in sentiment. It is to one such example—the gangster film—that this chapter now turns.

The transformation of the moll’s role can be traced to this emergent change in the perception of sentiment. Beginning in the 1920s, the trade press perceived an incompatibility between male-centred narratives, including gangster films, and sentiment (Jacobs 128). According to Jacobs, the first gangster film to reject the genre’s sentimental inflection is Josef von Sternberg’s 1927 film *Underworld* (171). Having captured a statuette at the first Academy Awards ceremony for Ben Hecht’s original screenplay and known today as “the first ‘famous’ gangster film” (Yaquinto, *Pump* 18), *Underworld* is a silent film which debuted on the cusp of the transition to sound. Before *Underworld*, Jacobs observes, gangster films are characterized by the relationship between the male criminal and his female love interest. This romantic relationship is important because it is the impetus for the criminal’s eventual “moral reformation” (171): he accepts “traditional ideas of authority and law” because of the woman’s presence and

³⁹ Lea Jacobs quotes at length from Theodore Dreiser’s 1928 *Photoplay* interview of actor/director Mack Sennett to illustrate this point. The interview turns to the dearth of comedienues in film:

“I was just thinking of a nice woman we had out there at the studio.” He laughed at this point. “Good actress, too. Played crazy parts that we created for her, but did it under protest sometimes because she didn’t always like it. . . . Well, we got up a part in which she had to wear a big red wig and a cauliflower ear.” And here he went off into another low chuckle that would bring anyone to laughing.

“What a shame!” I said, thinking of the hard-working, self-respecting actress.

“I know,” he replied. “It was sort of rough.” And he laughed again. “But we couldn’t let her off.” And into that line I read the very base and cornerstone of that ribald Rabelaisian gusto and gaiety that has kept a substantial part of America laughing with him all of these years. Slapstick vigor—the burlesque counterpart of sentiment—the grotesquely comic mask set over against the tragic. (qtd. in Jacobs 15)

In her analysis of this exchange, Jacobs locates the misogyny at the heart of this shift in taste, a misogyny which she describes as “attendant upon the simultaneous rejection of sentimentality and celebration of the vulgate” (16). In other words, the “nice woman” who plays a comedic role that makes her uncomfortable and who incites laughter between men at her expense encapsulates what could be described as an effect of this major cultural shift.

encouragement (177). As a result, the gangster abandons his criminal lifestyle and his crew. In sum, before *Underworld*, women characters are emphasized due to the tendency of gangster films to feature not only romance but also moral reform. The connection of the two—romance and reformation—necessitates the presence of law-abiding women characters who function as catalysts for the gangster’s life change.

The reformatory, heterosexual romantic relationship of pre-*Underworld* films is readily identifiable. For example, three early 1920s films starring Lon Chaney share this feature: *The Penalty* (Wallace Worsley, 1920), *Outside the Law* (Tod Browning, 1920) and the aforementioned *The Shock*. All follow big-city criminals who are eventually reformed through a woman’s love and support. Because the 1915 film *Regeneration* also shares this feature, it is evident that the early 1920s films continue an earlier trend which *Underworld* later bucks. Jacobs lists *Regeneration* among other films of the 1910s which have a love-driven reformation. I will discuss it briefly as a representative example of said reformation. This film follows Owen Conway, who becomes a criminal as a young man due to the urban environment’s oppressive conditions⁴⁰ and whose relationship with Marie Deering redirects him. Owen’s transformation is best encapsulated by an intertitle stating that Marie’s influence leads him to discover a “new world” characterized by “education, inspiration, and—love!” Marie is characterized by her privileged innocence (or her “butterfly existence”). She becomes curious about the criminals whom District Attorney Ames aims to expel from the city. That Marie will inspire Owen’s eventual transformation is foreshadowed by her excited assertion to Ames that she would “love to see” a criminal of the type Ames loathes, a desire that seems exploitative but is nevertheless

⁴⁰ Owen’s mother dies when Owen is a child, leaving him an orphan and exposing him to abuse by the couple who takes him in. Marilyn Yaquinto identifies this film as one of the first to explain a gangster’s criminality as being caused by the conditions of his childhood (*Pump* 15).

genuine and indicative of later romance (emphasis added). A brief encounter with Owen at a dancehall and with a pontificator extolling the virtues of local “charity” leads Marie to experience an “awakening,” and she begins working with gangsters in a settlement house. The purity of her character also matches Owen’s essential wholesomeness which has been battered since childhood. Numerous signs are presented to indicate Owen’s innate goodness. For example, a shot of the child Owen eating an ice cream cone is superimposed onto that of the adult Owen drinking beer, implying the adult’s lost innocence. Owen’s transformation is complete when Marie is accidentally murdered by Skinny, who replaced Owen as the gang leader, and Owen resists the urge to seek vengeance. In the film’s final scene, Owen extols Marie’s virtue at her gravesite, insisting that “[s]he made [his] life a changed thing and never can it be the same again!” Marie’s life is sacrificed so that Owen’s can be saved, indicating the extent to which a woman’s love is at the heart of the criminal’s conversion. Marie’s death renders her a martyr.

Marie’s characteristics as a moral figure highlight the role of religion in the criminal’s transformation before *Underworld*. Jacobs does not mention the role of religion in the moll’s moral reform of the gangster; however, it is significant for two reasons: 1) the connection between women and religion is prominent in pre-*Underworld* films and often forms an element of women’s reforming influence on male gangsters, and 2) religion is an example of the kind of conventional authority that, according to Jacobs, gangsters accept through women’s romantic influence (177). These two points are evident in *The Shock*. Gertrude Hadley’s Bible, which she gives to Wilse Dilling to supplement her own religious instruction, symbolizes both her personal mission to assist the disabled criminal to reform and the sense of a proper authority to which she convinces Wilse to submit. For his conversion, Wilse is rewarded by God himself when

“Providence” sides with the couple, causing an earthquake which rescues Gertrude from the threat of violence at Ann “Queen Ann” Cardington’s hand and miraculously heals Wilse’s disability. Providence also intervenes in *Regeneration* at the moment Owen exercises his restraint. Owen does not come easily to Marie’s religious influence: seeing the sign “God is love” at Marie’s settlement house causes him visible discomfort. However, when Marie is on her deathbed, the Bible passage Romans 12:19 is superimposed over the scene: “Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay.’” Inspired, Owen stops himself from choking Marie’s shooter, Skinny, because Owen imagines Marie’s shocked response. Instead, Marie’s death is avenged by another of Owen’s associates; more accurately, the film implies that God, working through the associate, has taken Owen’s revenge for him. At the end of the film, Owen praises the deceased Marie for guiding him to recognize his “God-given heart.” In other words, in films like *The Shock* and *Regeneration*, the love of a woman enables a former criminal’s love of God, a sanctioned authority who enacts revenge for the converted.⁴¹

As this chapter has shown, up until the late 1920s women characters played a significant role in gangster film with respect to the gangster’s eventual rejection of criminality. However, with *Underworld*, a change in the nature and prominence of women characters is evident. Jacobs argues that this film initiates in the gangster genre a movement whereby the importance of the

⁴¹ Religion has a similar function in *Outside the Law*; however, one of the converted criminals is a woman, and her religious awakening is tied to biological determinism. Molly “Silky Moll” Madden and her father abandon their criminal lifestyle through the Confucian instruction of Chang Low. However, when her father is framed for the murder of a police officer and imprisoned, a disillusioned Molly reverts back to petty crime with a man named “Dapper” Bill. While in hiding, Molly begins her process of conversion through events that are meant to steer her toward motherhood: she comforts a crying child and watches a dog suckling its puppies. Seeing a shadow of a crucifix on the floor prompts Molly finally to turn in some stolen jewels to the police. Although the crucifix is revealed to Bill and the spectators to be caused by the child’s kite, this revelation only heightens the impetus for Molly to accept her God-given destiny to be a mother. Thus, for both male and female criminals in 1920s, religion plays a significant role in reformation.

heterosexual love relationship is reduced. In its place rise “themes of male violence, power, and sexual rivalry” (170-71). Because the focus shifts to relationships between men in *Underworld*, women no longer function as the inspiration for men to abandon their gang; instead, women become a threat to male relationships (172).⁴² However, women are instrumental to the exchange of male power, thereby calling up a number of important theoretical concepts, the most important of which will be discussed briefly below before turning to an analysis of *Underworld*.

The accentuation of male interactions instigated by *Underworld* is better understood by bringing in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s concept of male homosocial desire. By male homosocial desire Sedgwick refers to the full spectrum of same-sex male relationships ranging from social to sexual (1-2). Although a similar spectrum exists for women’s bonds (coined the “lesbian continuum” by Adrienne Rich [51]), Sedgwick explains that unequal access to power affects sexuality such that the full male continuum is less visible than the female continuum (1-2). This asymmetry among the two continuums accounts for the treatment of women and homosexuals in society. There is a link between patriarchy, homophobia, and the oppression of women due to “‘obligatory heterosexuality’ [which] is built into male-dominated kinship systems”; this “prohibitive structural obstacle” is what maintains the rigid boundary between social and sexual bonds along the male same-sex continuum (3). Men’s control of the kinship system results in what Gayle Rubin calls the “traffic in women” (175). Women are exchanged by men to promote men’s own interests, resulting in “women being a conduit of a relationship rather than a partner

⁴² Jacobs undoubtedly would disagree with Yaquinto (as she does with Gerald Peary [171-72]) for linking *Underworld* with other 1920s films because of its alleged “theme of redemption” which Yaquinto describes as “standard” (*Pump* 20). Similarly, it is safe to assume that Jacobs would take issue with John McCarty’s characterization of *Underworld*’s moll “Feathers” McCoy as a “requisite flapper heroine . . . who typically forsakes her hoodlum sugar daddy for the upright and decent hero” (65). As this chapter has shown so far, pre-*Underworld* women do not forsake their criminal men; rather, they lead them to rebirth.

to it” (174). This notion of women as conduits of relationships between men is central to Jacobs’s argument relating to the heightened focus on men in gangster films of the late 1920s. Before we take a closer look at the woman who is *between* men (as in the partial title of Sedgwick’s book *Between Men*) and what transpires through her in gangster texts, there is one more theoretical concept that applies to Jacobs’s work: the erotic triangle.

The shift in gangster texts to the emphasis on men’s relationships and the reduction of the woman’s role share features of the triangular relationship between the subject, the object of affection, and the mediator discussed in various works by René Girard. This relationship is characterized by both admiration and rivalry. The subject’s (or disciple’s) desire for an object imitates the mediator’s desire of that same object because the subject holds the mediator, and thus the mediator’s choices, in high esteem (*Deceit* 6-7). The subject’s desire for the object is motivated by the mediator’s original desire for that same object. In other words, the object of affection captures the subject’s attention because it is already being desired by the mediator (*Deceit* 2). When the subject and mediator desire the same object, the mediator becomes both a model and a rival: “The mediator can no longer act as his [the subject’s] role model without also acting or appearing to act the role of obstacle” (*Deceit* 7). Perhaps the most important element of the erotic triangle is the relationship that it elicits between the subject and the mediator. As Girard puts it, “[t]he impulse toward the object is ultimately an impulse toward the mediator” (*Deceit* 10); to put it another way, the object is significant insofar as it initiates and subsequently magnifies the relationship between the subject and the mediator. As such, Andrew Sarris’s insistence that molls like *Underworld*’s “Feathers” McCoy are “activators rather than accessories” who are “crucial to criminal existence” supports Jacobs’s argument in the sense that women in the gangster genre serve as negotiators for the interactions between men and are

therefore ambivalent characters, although Sarris would probably disagree with this interpretation (“Big Funerals” 87). As I will now demonstrate, Feathers is crucial only as a conduit for the homosocial desire between her gangster boyfriend, Bull Weed, and his friend, who is known as Rolls Royce, and for the rivalry between Bull Weed and Buck Mulligan.

Loyalty and rivalry are quickly established as the defining features of male relationships in *Underworld*. The bond of loyalty between gangster Bull Weed and his sidekick Rolls Royce is cemented in the first scene wherein the two men first meet. Bull commits a bank robbery that is witnessed by Rolls Royce, who is at that point a nameless lawyer-turned-drunkard. Although in an intertitle Bull warns the drunkard that liquor turns men who are otherwise in control of themselves into “bums and squealers,” the bum assures Bull that he is a “Rolls Royce for silence,” which creates a bond of trust between Bull and the man upon whom he bestows the nickname Rolls Royce; however, Bull’s initial suspicion of Rolls Royce evidently lingers as their ensuing rivalry indicates. That Bull’s moll, Feathers McCoy, is absent from this opening scene heightens the film’s concentration on events occurring between males. Significantly, Feathers’s presence in the next scene mediates the explicit rivalry between Bull and another gangster named Buck Mulligan.

At a café, Buck tries to provoke Bull by attracting Feathers’s attention, thereby forming a triangle of competition and emphasizing the animal nature and hyper-masculinity connoted by the gangsters’ names. “Watch me show that dame what I think of money,” Buck scoffs to his friends. To insult Rolls Royce, who is now working as a janitor in the café, Buck offers Rolls Royce ten dollars but throws it into a spittoon. When Rolls Royce refuses to retrieve it, Buck threatens him. Buck must humiliate Rolls Royce and force him to retrieve the money in order to impress Feathers (and show up Bull) by showing her that he can play games with his money

because he has so much of it. Bull steps in to protect Rolls Royce, which incenses Buck to the point where he must be restrained from starting a gunfight. That Feathers functions as a conduit through which the men can compete for power is evident in Bull's retaliatory show of brute force by bending a coin in half with his bare hands and raucously laughing. Once again, Feathers is absent at this moment, having exited the café with Bull's new friend Rolls Royce and another of Bull's associates. She need not be a witness to this one-upmanship because the show of masculinity has nothing to do with her; rather, it is about the two men attempting to establish dominance over one another, which would subsequently establish dominance over Feathers. This power play is confirmed by Feathers herself, who earlier commented that "Buck Mulligan's looking for trouble," meaning trouble with Bull, not with her. Thus, the major triangular relationships are established early on in the film. One triangle between Bull, Feathers, and Buck is always a relationship based upon male rivalry. Another triangle between Bull, Feathers, and Rolls Royce is initially a relationship based upon male loyalty: Bull offers to take Rolls Royce off the streets and protect him from their common enemy, Buck Mulligan, likely in exchange for Rolls Royce's vow of silence regarding Bull's bank robbery. However, when Buck suspects inappropriate behaviour between Rolls Royce and Feathers, loyalty is replaced with suspicion.

Suspicion comes to taint Buck's bond with Rolls Royce when the latter spends more time with Feathers. Despite his interest in her, Rolls Royce is careful to keep his distance from her in order to preserve his loyalty to Bull. Bull makes his claim on Feathers clear to Rolls Royce, introducing her to Rolls as his (Bull's) "girl" and illustrating his trust in his new friend by leaving Feathers alone with Rolls Royce while he robs a jewellery store to procure baubles for Feathers and frames Buck for the act. Rolls Royce flirts with temptation but retains his resolve, while Feathers proves to be a fickle moll. She discovers that Rolls Royce used to be a lawyer

before alcoholism affected his career and alluringly asks if he had a female love interest at that time. Rolls Royce replies, “I’m not interested in women.” This response is important for three reasons. First, Rolls Royce’s possible lack of interest in women is a decided break from earlier gangster films wherein male criminals engage in heterosexual relationships which inspire reformation. Rolls Royce’s dismissal begins the connection in gangster texts between molls and danger in contrast to the earlier association with salvation. That Rolls Royce is the one who reminds himself and Feathers of their obligation to Bull (“Bull Weed’s our friend, isn’t he?”) implies that a moll is not to be trusted. Second, a consequence of this dismissal is the connotation of homosocial desire located on the homosexual end of Sedgwick’s continuum.⁴³ In other words, if Rolls Royce is not interested in women, there is a possibility that he is interested in men, in particular, Bull. The movement away from heterosexual relationships to homosocial ones is a major trend in post-*Underworld* gangster films, as Jacobs recognizes (177-78); the possibility of homosexual feelings, which are unacknowledged by Jacobs, is also heightened in subsequent gangster texts, one of which I discuss later in this chapter. Feathers’s position in the triangle between the two men thus functions as a counterbalance to the connection between the males. Third, Rolls Royce’s rejection of Feathers in this scene and elsewhere alters the conventional romance plot; she does not inspire any man to reform (Jacobs 177). Despite Rolls Royce’s claim to Feathers that he is not interested in her, he takes action to protect her from danger at the gangster’s ball and faces a further degeneration of his bond with Bull as a result.

At the gangster’s ball, described by an intertitle as the “underworld’s annual armistice,”

⁴³ I advance this argument with an important clarification, the same one offered by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in her advancement of the male homosocial continuum. She states, “I do not mean to discuss genital homosexual desire as ‘at the root of’ other forms of male homosociality—but rather a strategy for making generalizations about . . . the *structure* of men’s relations with other men” (emphasis original, 2). Instead, I read Rolls Royce’s response to Feathers, together with his relationship with Bull, only as connoting homosexuality. Nothing about their relationship suggests otherwise. I do make a case for homosexuality within the male homosocial continuum in my analysis of the film *Little Caesar* later in this chapter, but Sedgwick’s caveat still applies there.

Bull's feelings of friendship toward Rolls Royce turn sour, leading Rolls Royce to become Bull's rival, as is Buck Mulligan. Alerted to Feathers and Rolls Royce sharing a dance, Bull angrily confronts Rolls Royce for failing to ask Bull's permission to dance with Feathers. Significantly, Feathers herself is not confronted by Bull, implying that she has no power of her own and the problem is one between men. For Rolls Royce's disrespect of the homosocial bond, he is banished by Bull. Ironically, this banishment, which reduces the Bull-Feathers-Rolls Royce triad to a dyad, leaves Feathers exposed to danger. When Bull becomes inebriated and passes out, Buck Mulligan pounces on Feathers as vengeance for Bull framing him as the jewellery store robber. The implied goal of this sexual assault is for Buck to assert his power over Bull through the violation of Bull's moll. However, Bull is alerted and murders Buck in Buck's own flower shop, thereby reestablishing Bull's power over the now-deceased Buck on Buck's own property. This is the power that Buck attempted to take for himself by violating Bull's "property," Feathers. Left alone at the ball, Feathers finds comfort in Rolls Royce, who appears to be interested in her. As he did with the coin bending, Bull has employed physical force to prove his manhood to Buck, but Feathers is absent from the actual scene of masculine display.

As with events at the gangster's ball, the triangle between Bull, Feathers and Rolls Royce is disrupted once again when Bull finds himself sentenced to death by hanging for Buck's murder. Like Jay Gatsby in F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby* (1925), a text which I will discuss in detail later in this chapter, Bull sacrifices himself to preserve a woman's honour and, more importantly, his own power; ironically, this act leaves Feathers alone with Bull's best friend, just as Gatsby's sacrifice (taking the blame for Myrtle Wilson's death by vehicular homicide caused by Daisy) drives Daisy back to her husband and Gatsby's rival, Tom Buchanan. Rolls Royce, still loyal to his friend, concocts a plan, with Feathers's support, to break Bull out

of prison. Significantly, Rolls Royce instructs Feathers to wait in her car at Three Corners Road, a location which forms part of this dissertation chapter's title, where Bull will join her once he is free; this street name—*Three Corners Road*—alludes to the prominence of triangular relationships in this film and in subsequent films. Unsurprisingly, Bull's suspicions about Feathers's and Rolls Royce's relationship only increase once he is incarcerated, and he refuses to believe in the existence of an escape plan. "Rolls Royce doesn't want me to get out!" he jealously barks. A prison guard's gossip about the couple confirms Bull's belief in Rolls Royce's betrayal. When the escape plan is foiled unbeknownst to Bull, he mistakenly assumes that there was no plan in the first place. Driven by his lack of faith in Rolls Royce, Bull plots revenge.

Upon his escape from prison, Bull discovers circumstantial evidence which supports his assumption about Rolls Royce's compromise of their homosocial relationship. At the hideout, Bull finds one of Feathers's feathers inside Rolls Royce's cigarette case, implying inappropriate intimacy. Bull also reads a newspaper headline describing Feathers as "[f]ickle," driving him to try to choke Feathers when she shows up. That the police have followed Feathers only further infuriates Bull, and he refuses to accept her confirmation that there was indeed a prison-break plan. Rolls Royce rushes to the hideout after discovering that Bull is involved in a shoot-out with the police. He has the key to the door of the hideout's secret passageway, and unlocking the door would allow Bull to escape. Unfortunately for Rolls Royce, he is injured by a stray bullet as he makes his way there. With Rolls Royce's arrival, Bull finally realizes that his suspicions were unfounded: "I've been all wrong, Feathers. I know it now. I've been wrong all the way." This admission is meant for Rolls Royce, only it must be filtered through Feathers. By telling Feathers he was wrong, Bull indirectly relays to Rolls Royce that he has been unfairly

questioning Rolls Royce's loyalty. Bull is only happy to submit himself to arrest once the devotion of his male friend has been confirmed. Indeed, one can surmise that Bull gives his blessing to Feathers and Rolls Royce to form their own bond after his execution (and thus demonstrating Rubin's traffic in women) precisely because he has been able to confirm the strength of his male bond with Rolls Royce. According to Jacobs, Bull's apology is not so much a sign of his reform as it is the moment when he has "regained his trust in his friend and is ready to reciprocate the help that Rolls-Royce has given him" by ushering the couple into the hidden passageway to escape arrest (177). In a way, then, this is Bull's final act of self-sacrifice, for he accepts his imminent death so that Feathers can change hands, so to speak, as a reward to loyal Rolls Royce (Mason 3).

It may be tempting to interpret Feathers's movement from Bull to Rolls Royce not as an exchange between men but as a selection on Feathers's part. Fran Mason states that Feathers "chooses the upright Rolls Royce over the criminal Bull Weed," which he claims is evidence of conventional morality in its clear split between good (Rolls Royce) and evil (Bull) (3). Although Feathers certainly grows amorous of Rolls Royce during the course of the film, it would be inaccurate to describe Feathers as selecting between the two men. Such a description implies that she is unfaithful to Bull, and it fails to account for her role in attempting to break Bull out of prison before his execution. It also gives Feathers a level of agency incongruent with the shift to male relationships as identified by Jacobs, a shift whereby Bull Weed sanctions the couple's relationship in exchange for Rolls Royce's steady loyalty. Feathers does not so much choose Rolls Royce as Rolls Royce chooses Bull, who returns the favour by bestowing his blessing on Rolls Royce's pursuit of Feathers. Jacobs's reading would also question Mason's description of *Underworld* as "showing the love of the gangster moll rescuing the middle class Rolls Royce"

for the same reason: loyalty to the male homosocial bond (3). In Mason's description of Bull's sacrifice as "redemption," however, we see evidence of Jacobs's arguments about the changing nature of taste during this period in action. Bull is redeemed not by the love of a woman but by sacrificing himself, and this sacrifice does not so much confirm that Feathers has chosen the "correct" man as it does transfer her to Rolls Royce because of the men's choices.

The 1927 film *Underworld* marks a point in gangster film where, as Jacobs argues, there is an increased focus on male relationships and a simultaneously decreased role for gangsters' girlfriends. However, this shift is also evident earlier in a 1925 novel featuring a gangster: F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Jay Gatsby has earned his fortune by associating with such underworld characters as Meyer Wolfsheim, whose "'business gonnegtion[s]'" (75) include peddling false bonds (87-88) and selling alcohol through drugstore fronts (141).⁴⁴ Gatsby's female love interest, Daisy, is not a moll in the way that I have defined her (i.e. as a gangster's girlfriend and accomplice) because she is married to Tom Buchanan when she is reunited with her former lover, Gatsby; yet *Gatsby*'s thematic resemblances to *Underworld* justify *Gatsby*'s classification as a gangster text. Further, if Jacobs's examination of women's roles in gangster film is opened up to gangster texts in other mediums such as literature, then the shift she identifies needs to be pushed back to 1925. As in *Underworld*, Gatsby's relationship with Daisy

⁴⁴ Some readers may question my classification of *The Great Gatsby* as a gangster text. However, Thomas H. Pauly—who describes Gatsby as "Fitzgerald[s] gangster"—sees in the novel Fitzgerald's direct engagement with contemporary events including Prohibition and the resultant ascendancy of American gangsters (225). Pauly identifies the novel's numerous underworld elements. Among them are Gatsby's aforementioned function as a front for illegal activities (226), as is Rolls Royce in *Underworld*. Thematically, *Gatsby* is concerned with issues common to gangster texts, including the rise of consumer culture and its impact on class (226). *Gatsby* was also a major influence on the later gangster film *Scarface* (see Roberts, Raeburn). For these reasons, *Gatsby* is an appropriate literary selection to include in this project. Aesthetically, however, I acknowledge that *Gatsby* cannot be categorized with gangster novels in general due to Fitzgerald's more nuanced approach to character development, among other things. For instance, Mario Puzo's descriptions of Sonny Corleone's penis size in *The Godfather* (1969) unsubtly emphasize Sonny's masculinity, and Puzo's heavy-handedness here unsurprisingly resulted in Francis Ford Coppola's excision of this detail from his first film adaptation (save for a sexually-suggestive hand gesture made by Sonny's wife in the wedding scene).

does not lead to his reform, and the rivalry between two men, Gatsby and Tom, occupies much of the plot. Both *The Great Gatsby* and *Underworld* influenced the 1930s gangster film canon and beyond; thus, *Gatsby* should be included as an important progenitor of moll depictions in later texts. The absence of women's reforming influence coupled with the preoccupation with rivalry between men demonstrate that *Gatsby* participates in the displacement of the moll character initiated in film by *Underworld*.

Raymond Durgnat describes the three film adaptations of Fitzgerald's novel (up until then [Herbert Brenon, 1926; Elliott Nugent, 1949; Jack Clayton, 1974]) as "love stories featuring 'romantic' gangsters" (94). This statement implies that the adaptations' source text, *The Great Gatsby*, resembles pre-*Underworld* films with their connection between romance and reformation. Gatsby is certainly an attractive figure, evidenced by the "romantic speculation" shared among the women at his party (Fitzgerald 48). However, *Gatsby* differs from pre-*Underworld* films because Gatsby's feelings for Daisy do not inspire him to give up his illegal activities. In fact, the opposite occurs: Daisy indirectly inspires Gatsby to become a gangster. When Gatsby later conceals Daisy as Myrtle Wilson's true killer, the text further distinguishes itself from pre-*Underworld* films: Gatsby obstructs justice rather than resigns himself to it. All this Gatsby undertakes in order to win Daisy's hand. Like the gold hat-wearing, bouncing lover trying to stand out among his competition in the novel's epigraph, Gatsby's persona has been created to distinguish himself from the others competing for Daisy's hand. In order to achieve his personal vision of himself as an upperclassman of wealth and refinement, Gatsby erases all signs of his origins as James Gatz, son of poor North Dakotan farmers (103-04). The other characters' and, consequently, the readers' speculation about Gatsby's identity contribute to the obfuscation of his past and the elevation of his character to near-mythic proportions. Gatsby's

identity is connected to his breaking of, not abiding by, the law to win a heterosexual relationship.

Gatsby is an enigmatic character. Daisy's husband, Tom Buchanan, mockingly accuses Gatsby of being "Mr. Nobody from Nowhere," a statement which captures not only Gatsby's achievement of the mysterious aura that he was aiming to create for himself regarding his origins but also the undoubtedly great effort he has taken to divorce himself from said origins (137). Gatsby (falsely) claims to the novel's narrator, Nick Carraway, that he comes from a wealthy, Oxford-educated family, now dead, from whom he inherited a vast wealth (69-70). The purported death of all of Gatsby's relations is a convenient strategy, for it prevents anyone from attempting to corroborate his story, exaggerates the speed with which he allegedly accumulated his wealth, and lends an air of uncertainty to the man. Indeed, Nick asks Jordan Baker, "Who is [Gatsby]?" (53). Much of the novel is preoccupied with attempting to answer this question by separating truth from fiction, a challenging task given that Fitzgerald created this "crazy-quilt collection of rumors" about Gatsby's origins in part to conceal the fact that his (Fitzgerald's) underworld knowledge was limited (Pauly 231-32). Gatsby's surroundings also contribute to the ambiguity. Gatsby has carefully crafted his environs to exude his assumed class position as a wealthy American with European roots in preparation for a possible reunion with Daisy. That his surroundings betray their artificiality undermines his ability to pass as one of East Egg's old money inhabitants such as the Buchanans. His mansion, which is in the "less fashionable" (read: nouveau riche) West Egg, Long Island, is said to be a copy of a hotel in Normandy (9). The library is also speculated by Nick to be a European relic, "probably transported complete from some ruin overseas" (49). One of Gatsby's own party guests, known as "Owl Eyes," questions the library's authenticity (and thereby Gatsby's too) by telling Nick and Jordan that he had

initially imagined the books to be fake (50). Gatsby's self-created ambiguity designed to regain Daisy's favour fails, of course, but it is important to note that the inspiration for his drastic, not quite convincing transformation—which includes his underworld activities—is Daisy herself.

Gatsby's transformation into a gangster is connected to his relationship with the wealthy Daisy as a young adult, thereby suggesting a degeneration rather than a regeneration in his character in comparison to pre-*Underworld* films. He describes Daisy to Nick as the first “‘nice’ girl” he had ever encountered (155). While “nice” may suggest virginal, this is simply not the case: Gatsby is described as being “excited” that “many men had already loved Daisy” (156). Male sexual rivalry is at the core of Gatsby's competitive interest in Daisy; as Nick reports, other men's interest in Daisy “increased her value in his [Gatsby's] eyes” (156), for the struggle over Daisy equates to the struggle for power over all other males vying for her attention. Consequently, neither does Gatsby's descriptor “‘nice’” refer to Daisy's character; rather, as Judith Fetterley argues, he is commenting on her social status (74). Gatsby is attracted to Daisy for “what she represents rather than . . . what she is”: wealth, social mobility, and power (Fetterley 74). Gatsby sleeps with Daisy for the same reason. He “took her because he had no real right to touch her hand” (Fitzgerald 156), meaning that he slept with her under false pretences. Gatsby “let her believe that he was a person from much the same strata as herself” (156). Thus, the “invisible cloak” that Gatsby is petrified will “slip from his shoulders” is the cloak of class that he has assumed in her presence (156). If Daisy is “safe and proud above the hot struggles of the poor” (157), then the “grail” that Gatsby commits himself to pursuing is the grail of socioeconomic advancement as symbolized by Daisy (156). That he eventually might become what he has professed to Daisy to be is his singular pursuit in life.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ The arguments in this paragraph are further supported by reading them through René Girard's mimetic theory. The men (and, later, Tom) who have sex with Daisy are the mimetic models and mediators in Gatsby's triangular

Daisy's function as Gatsby's grail prompts us to compare Daisy to pre-*Underworld* moll characters with respect to the gangster's reformation. Whereas the connection between women and religion in pre-*Underworld* films further advances their reformist agenda, in *The Great Gatsby* Daisy inspires the initially "penniless" soldier to continue his pursuit of wealth that was cut short upon the death of Dan Cody, his benefactor (160). The worship of money replaces the worship of God found in earlier films such as *Regeneration* and *The Shock*, leading Gatsby to partner up with gangster Meyer Wolfsheim. Thus, when Nick discovers Gatsby "trembling" with ecstasy while reaching out to the "single green light" which represents Daisy, it is no coincidence that the light's colour resembles the colour of money (26). The range of interpretive possibilities inherent in Daisy being "nice" and functioning as a "grail"⁴⁶ initiate further contrasts to pre-*Underworld* women characters. Joan S. Korenman identifies inconsistent accounts of Daisy's appearance and characteristics in the text, noting that Daisy possesses dual qualities of both "the fair and the dark women of romantic literature" (574). The fair half of Daisy is represented by the oft-appearing colours gold and white, which allude to her namesake flower (576), and descriptions of her hair as blonde (574). The suggestion of "nice" as equating with

relationship of desire wherein Daisy is the object of affection. They initiate (and, with respect to Tom, sustain) Gatsby's desire for Daisy because they are high class and they sleep with Daisy; thus, they are in a socioeconomic position that Gatsby wishes for himself and they possess an object that Gatsby wishes for himself. For Girard, rivalry arises when the subject bases his behaviour on the model's: "*the subject desires the object because the rival desires it*" (emphasis original, *Violence* 145). Becoming like the men would permit Gatsby to cross the "indiscernible barbed wire between" him and the high-class people he earlier had met (Fitzgerald 155), where the wire symbolizes the boundary that restricts him from social advancement and from the women who occupy those upper echelons from which he is excluded.

⁴⁶ Daisy is keenly aware of her symbolic status in Gatsby's eyes. When she cries into his excessive shirt collection, lamenting that she has "never seen such—such beautiful shirts before" (98), she is expressing concern that she will be unable to meet Gatsby's expectations (Fetterley 76). Significantly, the novel suggests that Daisy knew from the beginning of her relationship with Gatsby that he did not share her class status: Gatsby shares his belief that Daisy only married Tom because Gatsby was "poor" (137). If Gatsby is right about Daisy being fully aware of his lie and nevertheless believing it, then Daisy's need for fantasy is just as deep as Gatsby's. As Leland S. Person, Jr., puts it (and as Sarah Beebe Fryer similarly notes [47]), "Gatsby is as much an ideal to Daisy as she is to him" (253). The novel may be preoccupied with Daisy as Gatsby's grail, but Daisy also indulges in her own dreams about the "shape[.]" stability (Fitzgerald 159), and emotional openness her life could have had with Gatsby (Fryer 49). As a result, Gatsby becomes a potent symbol for Daisy's own escapist fantasies.

virginity is also relevant here. On the other hand, Daisy is also described as a brunette (574), drawing connections to the highly sexualized, “knowledgeable, experienced dark women” of romantic literature (577). Whereas the pre-*Underworld* women characters tend to be explicitly divided between the virginal heroine and the sexualized villain (as are Gertrude Hadley and Ann Cardington, respectively, in *The Shock*), Fitzgerald embeds both within a single woman character. Even the possibility that Daisy is a religious symbol inspiring reform, which would align her with pre-*Underworld* women, is undone by Fitzgerald’s bastardization of the grail symbolism through its connection with money. In sum, while Daisy shares some characteristics with women characters in earlier gangster films, the treatment of these commonalities ultimately aligns the novel with *Underworld*. So, too, does its preoccupation with male relationships.

Like *Underworld* and in contrast to pre-*Underworld* films, *The Great Gatsby* prominently features male homosocial bonds. One type of male same-sex relationship, Gatsby’s friendship with Nick Carraway, is emphasized by the fact that it is Nick who narrates the bulk of Gatsby’s life story. Nick also honours Gatsby’s request to orchestrate the reunion between Gatsby and Daisy, who is Nick’s cousin (83-85). This same-sex friendship is somewhat similar to Bull Weed’s friendship with Rolls Royce in *Underworld*. Just as Bull financially assists Rolls Royce for the latter’s vow of silence about Bull’s bank robbery at the beginning of the film, Gatsby attempts to reward Nick with illegal business opportunities after Nick arranges Gatsby’s reunion with Daisy (87-88). Another type of male relationship, the one between Gatsby and his mediator/rival Tom Buchanan, drives Gatsby’s pursuit of Tom’s wife, Daisy. Because Gatsby essentially wants to become Tom, he tries to acquire Daisy as the surest sign that he has copied Tom’s class position.⁴⁷ Technically, Gatsby’s extreme self-interest generates another triangular

⁴⁷ The male acquisition of status through women becomes a significant feature of later gangster texts, especially in 1930s canonical gangster films. Not only does the romance plot further diminish in post-*Underworld* texts (Jacobs

relationship between Daisy and the two competing versions of Gatsby: the self he is now and the self from which he wants to escape. It is no surprise that critics like Giles Mitchell describe Gatsby as a pathological narcissist who is “worshipping himself” by pursuing his self-created illusion of Daisy (389). Gatsby just “does not want to know Daisy—the real Daisy” because she would compromise his fantasy of not only her but himself (Mitchell 392). For Gatsby, facing the reality that “the object is in fact *only* a mirror” is too much to bear because of the devastating implications it would have on his identity that he invested in her (emphasis original, Mitchell 394). As a result, Gatsby continues to pursue Daisy even when Nick notes that she has been exposed as falling short of Gatsby’s illusions (Fitzgerald 98). Finally, the clashing of two triangular relationships causes the outcome in *Gatsby* just as it does in *Underworld*. In *Gatsby*, Tom’s rivalry with Gatsby over Daisy and Tom’s emergent friendship with George Wilson, the husband of Tom’s mistress, Myrtle, collide in the novel’s climax due to Tom’s manipulation.

The collision of these triangular relationships occurs when Gatsby attempts to usurp Tom’s place as Daisy’s significant other, which results in the rivalry between Gatsby and Tom reaching its highest intensity. Most of the conversation occurs between the men, emphasizing once again the novel’s focus on male relationships. Gatsby’s request for Daisy to deny ever loving Tom causes a major argument between the men, with Tom exposing Gatsby in front of Daisy and others as a ““common swindler”” (140). The conversation then turns to larger issues of loyalty and rivalry between the men. When Gatsby reminds Tom that Tom’s friend Walter Chase once worked with Gatsby as a bootlegger, Tom insinuates that Gatsby abandoned Walter when the

177), but it tends to function at most as a way for a gangster to emerge victorious in his rivalries with other males. As Judith Fetterley puts it in her analysis of *Gatsby*, “[W]omen, who have themselves no actual power, become symbolic of the power of moneyed men” (83). For example, both John Raeburn and Marilyn Roberts point out that the 1932 film *Scarface* resembles Fitzgerald’s novel in its treatment of the main character’s moll, Poppy (50; 74).

latter went to jail (141). Tom's accusations against Gatsby win back Daisy's hand for Tom.⁴⁸

Tom insists that Daisy ride back from New York with Gatsby in Gatsby's car, thereby working through Daisy to express his victory over Gatsby and to humiliate Gatsby by forcing him to ride with the woman he can never have (142). Because the basis of Gatsby's social climb has been exposed as criminal, he is denied the status he seeks and is expunged as Daisy's potential new mate.

In *Underworld*, Bull's rivalry with Buck Mulligan causes Bull suspicion in his friendship with Rolls Royce, leading to Bull's attempted murder of both Rolls Royce and Feathers. A similar series of events occurs in *Gatsby*. When Tom's mistress, Myrtle Wilson, is struck and killed by Gatsby's yellow car, Tom immediately assumes that Gatsby was driving: "The God Damn coward!' he whimpered. 'He didn't even stop his car'" (149). Tom also plants the idea in the head of George Wilson, Myrtle's husband, that Tom knows who the driver was: "That yellow car I was driving this afternoon wasn't mine, do you hear?" (148). George is unaware that Tom is the man with whom his wife was having an affair; thus, Tom orchestrates a relationship with his mistress's husband, George, identifying himself to a policeman as George's "friend" (148). Tom's friendship with this cuckolded husband is undertaken to orchestrate revenge on Gatsby, Tom's rival for Daisy's affection, thereby revealing another triangular relationship in the text between Tom, Myrtle, and George. Tom uses this triangular relationship of alleged friendship as a way to dissolve the other triangular relationship in which he is

⁴⁸ Tom and Gatsby's insistence that Daisy choose between them is demonstrative of a pattern of mimetic desire described by Paisley Livingston. In this pattern, "[t]he victory in the conflict is to an important degree, if not entirely, a matter of the desire of the so-called 'object' of rivalry, whose preferences determine the winner. . . . [The object's] choice is essential, for even if [the conflicting parties'] deepest concern is winning out over the rival, winning [the object's] choice is an indispensable part of the object of desire . . ." (100-01). Being selected by Daisy, Tom not only wins out over Gatsby but also garners Daisy's vote, as it were, thereby elevating his victory. As an alternative to the "sexist configuration" of the two-man, one-woman triangle (Livingston 100), this pattern advances a more nuanced reading of the object of desire by investing in her a modicum of power.

involved: the one between Gatsby, Daisy, and him that is characterized by rivalry.⁴⁹

Tom's machinations are slowly revealed through the remainder of Fitzgerald's novel, but only through indirect means. While Gatsby spends his time after the accident thinking about Daisy, the true driver of the car for whom Gatsby takes the blame for Myrtle Wilson's death, Tom's concerns lie elsewhere. As Nick explains to Gatsby, Daisy is safe with Tom because Tom is "not thinking about her" (152); in other words, Tom is preoccupied by thoughts of Gatsby. George, meanwhile, comes to the (false) conclusion that the driver of the yellow car, whom he presumes was a man, is the person with whom Myrtle was cheating (166). When Nick implies in his narration that George sought out Tom in order to learn the driver's identity, it is understood that Tom fingered Gatsby as both Myrtle's lover and killer (168). After Gatsby and George are found dead from a murder-suicide (169-70), Tom's revenge on Gatsby is complete. Thereafter, Nick learns that Daisy and Tom are gone and have left no forwarding address, and the reader surmises that the couple have escaped Long Island so they cannot be traced to Myrtle and Gatsby's murders, respectively (172).

In taking the blame for the vehicular homicide caused by Daisy, Gatsby appears to be sacrificing himself for Daisy's well-being. However, like Bull's eventual acceptance of his hanging in *Underworld*, Gatsby's act is more about personal satisfaction than it is about Daisy's well-being. Gatsby refuses to leave town after the car accident until he learns Daisy's plans. According to Nick, Gatsby was "clutching at some last hope" (155), but this hope is not simply

⁴⁹ Earlier in the novel when Meyer Wolfsheim describes Gatsby's character to Nick, Wolfsheim offers the following observation: "Yeah, Gatsby's very careful about women. He would never so much as look at a friend's wife" (77). Although Wolfsheim is attempting to qualify his insistence on Gatsby's "fine breeding," this action is undone by the fact that Nick and Wolfsheim's conversation is interrupted by trivial (and macabre) talk of Wolfsheim's human molar cufflinks (76-77). Gatsby's character is further sullied because Wolfsheim's comment is revealed as ironic: since Tom and Gatsby are not friends, Gatsby feels free to pursue Tom's wife, Daisy. In other words, it is actually true that Gatsby would never look at a friend's wife because he and Tom are rivals. This irony lends greater support to the male rivalries and friendships in the novel and supports the suggestion that Tom's calculated befriending of George is meant to hurt Gatsby.

about fulfilling his fantasy regarding a permanent reunion with Daisy. The hope is that Gatsby can still acquire the acceptance of East Egg as one of their own. Because Gatsby's assumed identity as a wealthy socialite has "broken up like glass against Tom's hard malice" following Tom's exposure of him as a bootlegger (155), Gatsby is trying to rescue himself inasmuch as he is trying to rescue Daisy by concealing her crime and possibly earning her hand. That Gatsby tells Nick the story of how he met Daisy and passed himself off as her social equal at this point in the novel supports this reading of Gatsby's ulterior motive. Gatsby's acceptance of blame is meant to counteract Tom's exposure of Gatsby as a fraud, just as Bull's acceptance of his fate is meant to prove to Rolls Royce that Bull trusts him. As in *Underworld*, the elimination of the underworld male clears the way for the remaining male to establish a relationship with the text's woman character. For Martha P. Nochimson, Rolls Royce is a "'real' gentleman and represents a stable identity within which real love can take root" (*Dying* 39). Tom Buchanan, too, is predictable in terms of his basic character: he was born into wealth, he is deterministic, and he will always be unfaithful. Although the actions of Bull and Gatsby lead to sympathetic feelings toward them on the viewers' and readers' behalf, respectively, ultimately the Rolls Royce-Feathers and Tom-Daisy relationships do offer at least the illusion of stability in what Nochimson describes as the "incoherent modern world" (*Dying* 39).

Thus far, this chapter has established that *The Great Gatsby* and *Underworld* demonstrate a new focus on male homosocial bonds in gangster texts as well as a new function for molls. Post-*Underworld* and post-*Gatsby*, women companions of gangsters continue to be secondary to men's power struggles. The 1928 silent film *The Racket* (Lewis Milestone) demonstrates the immediate adoption of *Gatsby's* and *Underworld's* innovations through gangster Nick Scarsi's frank misogyny, as when Scarsi sneers in an intertitle, "Women are poison to me." Jacobs

argues that films in the early part of the next decade “intensify” the two-pronged shift that occurred in *Underworld* (1927). Violence is escalated while gangsters continue to avoid reform, and male relationships gain even greater precedence over those with women (1927). Jacobs supports this reading with a brief discussion of two films: *The Public Enemy*, a scene from which opened this chapter, and *Scarface* (Howard Hawks, 1932). Yet *Little Caesar* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1930) is an especially vivid example of Jacobs’s argument because the gangster’s reform is relegated to a secondary character, Joe Massara. Further, the relationship between Joe and the title character, Caesar Enrico Bandello (known as Rico or “Little Caesar”) intensifies the focus on male relationships as initiated by *Gatsby* and *Underworld* such that homosexual feelings are plausible.

Little Caesar elevates the importance of men’s interaction with other men to the exclusion of women, thereby demonstrating the continuing absence of the moll character initiated by *Underworld* as well as *The Great Gatsby*. This focus on men is captured by the program cover design for a banquet thrown in gangster Rico’s honour late in the film. It features the words “friendship” and “loyalty,” the qualities that characterize Rico’s intimacy, at least in Rico’s eyes, with his “pal” Joe, the gang’s front man. From Rico’s point of view, this intimacy is disrupted by dancer Olga Stasoff, Rico’s rival for Joe’s affection, as Jack Shadoian similarly notes (39).⁵⁰ Although Rico often reminds Joe of the latter’s obligation to the gang, he takes Joe’s gradual abandonment of it personally as a “betrayal of male solidarity and friendship” in favour of a

⁵⁰ This erotic triangle differs from the triangles in the texts discussed thus far. Here, the subject is male (Rico), but the mediator—and rival—is female (Olga), and the object of affection is male (Joe). This composition produces an arrangement that does not appear in *Gatsby* or *Underworld*, and one that is difficult to account for using Girard’s mimetic theory as Girard most often applies it to texts with two men as the subject and mediator and one woman as the object (Sedgwick 21; Moi 23). Sedgwick argues that Girard ignores gender as a factor that impacts the dynamics of the erotic triangle (23). Rico and Olga’s roles as the active participants in the triangle and Joe’s role as the passive object create gender as well as power dynamics that a genderless mimetic theory cannot accommodate.

heterosexual romance (Shadoian 38). Whereas Bull Weed and Rolls Royce's homosocial relationship in *Underworld* could be described as somewhat tempered by the desire for Feathers experienced to some degree by both men, Rico's complete lack of interest in women coupled with his misogyny lead to his distrust of Olga for her alleged power to influence Joe, even though the beginning of the film indicates that Rico knows Joe's dream is to be a dancer. Whereas the Rico character in W. R. Burnett's novel *Little Caesar* (1929) has sexual relations with women, the adaptation removes all such traces (as Andrew Bergman similarly recognizes [8]), thereby increasing his hostility towards Olga and emphasizing the connection he feels for Joe. Rico attends the banquet alone and inadvertently calls attention to this fact by stating, "It sure is good to see all you gents with your molls here," which further demonstrates his preference for male companionship.

Another feature of the banquet program related to *Little Caesar*'s adoption of *Gatsby* and *Underworld* trends with respect to the male homosocial continuum is an image of two turtledoves, which are symbols of romantic love and devotion. Rolls Royce pursued Feathers despite his claim of being uninterested in women, but Rico's total lack of interest in women and intense desire for Joe open up the possibility that the men's relationship is located on the homosexual end of Sedgwick's continuum of male homosocial desire from Rico's perspective.⁵¹ Supporting this reading of Rico as homosexual is his hostility toward women as mentioned above (D. S. Golden 80-81; Sacks 8-9).⁵² Most critics read Rico as homosexual, whether or not

⁵¹ Yaquinto's description of gangsters' sidekicks as "life partners" is apt here, for it seems that this is the kind of relationship Rico seeks from Joe. Nonetheless, her claim that the exclusion of women from gangster texts is a symbol of the gangster's "abnormality" seems problematic due to its implicit equation of homosexuality with abnormality (*Pump* 44). Girard's theory of mimetic desire accounts for homosexuality as part and parcel of the erotic triangle's functioning (*To Double* 54). Girard argues, "[a]ll sexual rivalry has a homosexual structure in woman as in man" (qtd. in Moi 24). However, because Rico and Joe are positioned as subject and object, not subject and rival, it is not clear how Girard's theory would explain Rico's homosexual interest in Joe.

⁵² I do not mean to imply that all homosexuals are misogynists. Sedgwick reminds us that "most patriarchies structurally include homophobia" (4), which might help us to understand Rico's near-constant machismo and

he is himself aware of this facet of his identity (Gabree 23; Kaminsky, *American* 21; LaSalle, *Dangerous* 57; Mason 10; Shadoian 39). Arthur Sacks articulates the source of such a reading: “There is something about the proximity, the intimacy, and the violence of these gangsters who try to prove themselves as men which lends itself to such an interpretation” (8). Rico is concerned almost to the point of obsession with displaying his masculinity through violence and phallic symbolism, boasting of his fearlessness and ability to handle a “rod” (gun). He is also terrified of impotence (Peary 292), evidenced by his repeated insistence to other men that he is not “soft.”⁵³ When Rico accuses Joe of being a “softie” and a “sissy” because of the latter’s preference for dancing and romancing Olga instead of participating in gang crime, he is ironically unaware that his own feelings for Joe (and his interest in his personal appearance and grooming [Nochimson, *Dying* 46]) render him the type of man that he loathes: an effeminate man. Further irony is revealed in a dramatic scene during which Rico spares Joe from death by Rico’s hands (or, rather, gun) and is, in turn, accused of being “soft, too,” suggesting that he may be aware of his sexual desire for Joe on some level; more obviously, he knows that he has sealed his own fate with the police in allowing Joe, a prime witness of the gang’s crimes, to live based on a sense of devotion not unlike that represented by the turtledoves.⁵⁴

possible self-hatred (as I go on to demonstrate) as products of his socialization. Further, Gayle Rubin explains the connection to misogyny: “The suppression of the homosexual component of human sexuality, and by corollary, the oppression of homosexuals, is . . . a product of the same system whose rules and relations oppress women” (180). Rubin’s statement helps me to capture the connection between homophobia and misogyny seen in Rico.

⁵³ Despite the strong evidence suggesting that Rico might be homosexual, a few scholars argue in favour of other interpretations. Jim Smith argues that Rico’s attitude toward women is “distinctly pre-teen,” rendering him a “schoolboy appalled by ‘nasty girls’” and placing him “beyond and beneath the concerns and emotions of the normal human world” (24-25). On the other hand, Peary suggests that reading Rico as homosexual cannot account for his “familial isolation”: “Lacking any loved ones, he is better understood as a perfect emblem of the Depression times, a person completely dislocated, solitary, forlorn” (292). Neither interpretation seems adequate to account for Rico’s strong feelings for Joe.

⁵⁴ There exists another definition of the word moll that could prove instructive here. In this other definition of the noun, a moll refers to an “effeminate man” (“Moll,” adj. and n. 1). Although it may be a stretch, this definition captures Rico’s irony: he criticizes Joe as being a “softie” for seeking female companionship, yet Rico’s total avoidance of women leaves him vulnerable to the same charge.

Rico's pursuit of Joe and rivalry with Olga classify *Little Caesar* as a descendant of both *Gatsby* and *Underworld*. However, with respect to a woman influencing a gangster's reform, at first glance it appears that *Little Caesar* does not resemble *Underworld* because there is a gangster in this text who abandons crime due to heterosexual love: Joe Massara. With Olga's support, Joe successfully breaks away from Rico to pursue his long-standing passion of a legitimate dancing career. Olga supports Joe's self-perception when she suggests that he should leave the gang because he is "not that kind" and he "need[s] somebody" like her to guide him through his regeneration. The transition is not a smooth one because Joe is wavering between his loyalty to Rico and his love for Olga. Joe explains to her, "you can't go back on a gang," thereby emphasizing male loyalty as the most highly regarded quality in a gangster as well as implicitly revealing the serious consequence of death for its violation. So tortured is Joe that even when Rico threatens to kill the couple to prevent betrayal, Joe refuses to turn Rico in to Sergeant Flaherty, not because it will result in the couple's death but because it will signal Joe's violation of the loyalty bond. Hence, it is Olga who turns Rico in to Sergeant Flaherty on Joe's behalf. With Olga's prompting, Joe's decision to "go straight," as Thomas Schatz puts it without irony, implies not only a recommitment to the law that was previously seen in pre-*Underworld* films but also a commitment to a woman, which works against the homosexual subtext in Joe's homosocial bond with Rico (87).⁵⁵

That *Little Caesar* features a gangster's regeneration, however, does not mean the film should

⁵⁵ Thomas Schatz explains, as I have shown, that Joe's transformation is "motivated, predictably enough, by the love of a good woman." He then describes such a woman as "a rare commodity in the gangster genre where women invariably are depicted as sexual ornaments, mere emblems of the gangster's socioeconomic status" (87). However, as this chapter illustrates, heterosexual love as inspiration is not rare if one examines earlier gangster texts. Schatz's comments here demonstrate not only a limited definition of the gangster genre based only on the 1930s' trio (a popular definition in 1970s film criticism) but also the effect of such a limitation on an analysis of women's roles. As this chapter has worked to demonstrate, Schatz's description of women as symbols of the gangster's success is applicable only to texts that elevate male relationships at the expense of female-influenced reformation, which, of course, returns the focus to the 1930s' trio.

be classified as pre-*Underworld*. Rico, not Joe, is the main character, and Rico does not reform due to a woman's influence. His steadfast defiance of the law leads him to die in a gunfight with Sergeant Flaherty rather than be taken alive. Joe's relationship with Olga and his subsequent reformation are secondary to the film's plot. Whereas classical narratives feature an opposite-sex marriage as part of their resolution (Munby, *Public* 54), the "dapper rogue sophisticates" who conventionally participated in said resolution are relegated to the subplot (Munby, *Public* 63); thus, while *Little Caesar*'s subplot harkens back to pre-*Underworld* features, its main plot is illustrative of the shift in women's influence as identified by Jacobs. The main plot is driven by male relationships; thus, Olga is perceived as a threat by Rico for trying to separate Joe from him. Even within the reform-driven sub-plot derived from the silent era there is an element of difference from its depiction in that era. The change to women's roles occurs parallel to the diminution of religious authority. Stuart M. Kaminsky notes religion's "irrelevance and ineffectuality" in gangster films as a whole, although his reference clearly applies only to post-*Underworld* texts ("Little" 223). Olga expresses no religious values as part of her facilitation of reform in Joe. Rather, the devout beliefs once held by the moll shift to the mother character at this time, as seen in *Little Caesar*'s Mrs. Passa; the shift later encompasses gangster wives (which are the focus of the next chapter) like the devoutly Catholic Carmela Soprano in the television series *The Sopranos* (David Chase, 1999-2007). No longer being aligned with religious authority, the moll ends her traditional ushering in of the main gangster character's reform.

Whereas early 1930s films including *Little Caesar* exploit the change identified by Jacobs in gangster-moll relations initiated by *Underworld* (and, as I have argued, *The Great Gatsby*), it must be mentioned that the same cannot be said of non-canonical texts. Although she does not

explore it in *The Decline of Sentiment*, Jacobs herself is likely aware of this fact since she notes that it is the “canonical films of the early 1930s” that carry forward the major preoccupations established in *Underworld*, implying that non-canonical gangster texts are not part of the shift in the moll’s role (emphasis added, 177). To wit, Esther Sonnet has identified a cycle of gangster films⁵⁶ whose production overlaps with that of the male-centred canonical 1930s’ trio (*Little Caesar*, *The Public Enemy*, *Scarface*) but whose content explores gender and sexuality which is explored through “romance and female-centered melodrama” (93-94). This lesser-known cycle begs a reexamination of assumptions about gangster texts relating not only to their ideological thrust but also to the gender constitution of the gangster film audience. Whereas *Variety* indicated that men made up the majority of the New York audience for *The Public Enemy* (qtd. in Raeburn 52), Sonnet undoubtedly would counter that this does not tell us the whole story. She argues that the female-centred cycle “insist[s] on the presence of *female* spectators in audiences for gangster films at this time . . . [and] suggests the *primacy* of female audiences in shaping Hollywood’s gangster narratives” (emphasis original, 94-95). Post-*Underworld* canonical texts focus on male relationships through a triangular structure anchored by a decreasingly important moll (as Jacobs argues), but a film like *Three on a Match* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1932), which is an additional example of a female-centred narrative of the kind identified by Sonnet, explores female relationships and a female-centred conflict wherein the gangster functions as “an irresistible pole of sexual attraction whose social ‘illegitimacy’ [in contrast to the high-class female] engenders a highly specific erotic relationship” (Sonnet 98). Because the action of *Three on a Match* follows mother-turned-moll Vivian Revere Kirkwood, the film both

⁵⁶ The cycle includes *Kid Gloves* (Ray Enright, 1929), *The Racketeer* (Howard Higgin, 1929), *Ladies Love Brutes* (Rowland V. Lee, 1930), *Dance, Fools, Dance* (Harry Beaumont, 1931), *A Free Soul* (Clarence Brown, 1931), and *Corsair* (Roland West, 1931).

counterbalances other texts of the period which subvert the moll's presence to male relationships and offers an interesting and important gangster text located outside of the established, male-dominated gangster film canon.⁵⁷

This chapter has demonstrated how the concept of absent presence is manifested in a second major woman character for gangster texts: the moll. It is grounded in Lea Jacobs's work while expanding on said work in several ways. Jacobs demonstrates how the trade press's shifting perception of sentiment affected the relationship between gangsters and molls in gangster film, and she argues that Josef von Sternberg's 1927 film *Underworld* initiates male-focused relationships that emerged from this new regard of sentiment. I have added to Jacobs's argument by showing that religion is a significant component of the moll's reforming tendency only of pre-*Underworld* films. Drawing on theoretical concepts including Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's notion of male homosocial desire and René Girard's concept of the erotic triangle allowed me to enhance Jacobs's argument by examining how gender and sex affect interactions between men as well as men and women. I have also illustrated how F. Scott Fitzgerald's 1925 novel *The Great Gatsby* shares the same features that Jacobs identifies in *Underworld* with respect to gangsters and molls and thereby made a case for the significance of this literary text to the shift Jacobs identifies. Finally, my brief discussion of an alternative early-1930s film cycle calls attention to the fact that Jacobs's ideas need to be re-evaluated in light of woman-centred gangster texts.

The shift in taste identified by Lea Jacobs as the catalyst for the moll's new role in the gangster genre brings us back to the on-screen moment that opened this chapter. In 1937 Gilbert Seldes succinctly described the impact of early 1930s *Underworld*-inflected films (one of which

⁵⁷ Esther Sonnet's analysis of this alternate film cycle appears in the edited collection *Mob Culture: Hidden Histories of the American Gangster Film* (2005), the title of which further emphasizes that the female-centred cycle mostly has been off the scholarly radar.

was analyzed in this chapter [*Little Caesar* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1930)]) by referring to that grapefruit scene: “‘Men found the movies feminized and the great change came when Mr. Cagney in *Public Enemy* was being annoyed by Mae Clark [sic] and rudely ground half a grapefruit into her face’” (qtd. in Sonnet 116).⁵⁸ It should come as no surprise that this single moment of violence shaped gangster texts up to the present day.⁵⁹ Just two years after her role in *The Public Enemy*, Clarke starred in *Lady Killer* (Roy Del Ruth, 1933), another Warner Brothers film that paired her once again with Cagney. It features an allusion to the grapefruit scene, and it has Cagney drag Clarke out of a room by her hair at one point because of Clarke’s character’s betrayal. The grapefruit scene is also referenced in the more recent text *The Sopranos*, where its function is to call attention to questions of masculinity. When gangster Corrado “Uncle Junior” Soprano discovers that his girlfriend Roberta “Bobbi” Sanfillipo has made public his cunnilingus skills, he squashes a lemon meringue pie into her face (“Boca” [1.9]).

As this chapter has shown, the reforming impetus of the moll character disappears in the mid-to late-1920s with the appearance of *The Great Gatsby* and *Underworld*. However, this facet of the moll’s character is evident in a third major role for women in gangster texts: the wife. It is to this character that the project now turns.

⁵⁸ The grapefruit scene, which was apparently inspired by a true event between gangster Hymie Weiss and his moll and involved not a grapefruit but an omelet (Cohen 17; Jowett 72n15; McCarty 308n2), rightly is deemed “horribly misogynist” by Colin McArthur (in *The Public Enemies*). At the same time, Yaquinto reminds us not to forget the function of Cagney’s action: “It captures the essence of what’s wrong with these people [gangsters] without using a heavy-handed sermon from an off-screen narrator” (*Pump* 44).

⁵⁹ The scene also shaped Mae Clarke and James Cagney’s subsequent careers. Phyllis Frus relays an account of Clarke’s reaction to the scene by John Bright, co-writer of the film’s unpublished source material *Beer and Blood*. Clarke was so upset about what she perceived to be Cagney’s betrayal in agreeing to smash her face with the grapefruit that when the camera stopped rolling she punched Cagney and “swore never to work for Warner Bros. again” (230). For his part, Cagney saw the scene as innovative: “‘It was just about the first time . . . that a woman had been treated like a broad on the screen instead of like a delicate flower’” (qtd. in Jowett 72n15).

CHAPTER THREE

“[M]arriage and our thing don’t jive”: Wives and the Precarious Balance of the Marital Union

In an episode of the television series *The Sopranos* (David Chase, 1999-2007) entitled “Watching Too Much Television” [4.7], Tony Soprano and Silvio Dante encourage Christopher Moltisanti, Tony’s protégé, to continue his relationship with fiancée Adriana La Cerva despite her recent revelation that she might be unable to have children. In contrast, Paulie Gualtieri, who himself is conspicuously unmarried in a series rife with married gangsters (as Christopher J. Vincent has similarly noted [40]), interjects with the following observation: “Oh, no offence, but, ask me, marriage and our thing don’t jive.” There is ample evidence in gangster texts to support Paulie’s statement. One need look no further than the conflict-riddled union between the series’ title characters, Tony and Carmela Soprano. On the other hand, despite Paulie’s insistence that marriage is antithetical to the mob, it has become expected that a gangster will be married. Mario Puzo’s 1969 novel *The Godfather*—with its elevation of the blood family to equal importance with the mob Family—promoted this image of the gangster as a family man that runs through to *The Sopranos* and has become a generic standard. This desire for marriage is not purely practical; that is, it is not simply a way for the gangster to create legitimate male heirs through which the business can flourish, although that function does play a significant role. Having explored the concept of absence/presence relating to the first two women with whom the gangster has significant relationships—his mother and his moll in Chapters One and Two, respectively—this chapter will apply said concept to the woman with whom the gangster spends most of his adult life: his wife. Focusing on texts from Puzo’s *The Godfather* onward, this

chapter argues that the wife actively participates in cultivating the image of a traditional family and all that it represents (presence), while her criticism of her husband's criminal behaviour and infidelity exposes this family image as a façade (absence). In the *Sopranos* episode mentioned above, Tony may suggest to Christopher the necessity of "balance in a relationship"; however, as I will show, the gangster's investment in a traditional family through marriage is simultaneously coupled with the flagrant violation of its alleged sanctity, rendering the resultant marital relationship in gangster texts more precarious than balanced.

The marriage of the organized crime Family and the nuclear family in Puzo's *The Godfather* extends the meaning and function of the family unit and brings heightened attention to the marital relationship. Nevertheless, the family has always been an important element in gangster texts, as Jack Shadoian specifically recognizes in film (8-9). A major thematic concern in gangster texts is the family, and this concern is often dual in nature. On the one hand, the dissolution of the basic family unit is depicted; on the other hand, that family is replaced with a "'false' family," the gang (Shadoian 8). In order to situate this chapter's analysis of the wife in post-*Godfather* texts, I begin with a brief historical overview of the depiction of marriage in gangster texts up to the appearance of Puzo's novel. This overview demonstrates that there is a connection between the gangster's evolving construction and his relationships with women (or lack thereof).

In silent gangster films, women operate within the popular "narrative of redemption" for the male criminal (Mason 2), as Chapter Two demonstrated. Fran Mason argues that this narrative type exemplifies the melodramatic tendencies of these films, tendencies which are in tension with the filmic interrogation of modernity (1-3). When the male gangster ends his opposition to society, he reenters it through the act of marriage (as in *The Penalty* [Wallace Worsley, 1920]).

Such texts, therefore, are beyond the scope of this chapter since marriage takes place after the main character is no longer a criminal. In contrast, and as I also discussed in Chapter Two, texts of the 1930s present marriage as an attractive option, but only for some gangsters. For instance, the respective title characters in the 1930s' trio never marry. To borrow Matt's assessment of his friend Tommy Powers in *The Public Enemy* (William A. Wellman, 1931), the gangster in this period "isn't the marrying kind." Only the title characters' respective male sidekicks maintain serious relationships with women and/or marry. If the gangster's goal is "to draw himself out of the crowd" (Warshow, "The Gangster" 103), then it is reasonable to assume that the gangster perceives that marriage would deposit him back into the crowd because that union signals a "weakness for traditional society" that undermines the ability to succeed as a gangster (Yaquinto, *Pump* 45). For these men, the most significant relationships are with other men.

Extending this trend of limited relationships, the gangster emerges as a solitary figure in the 1940s. Few gangster films appeared through World War II, likely a continuing effect of the 1935 moratorium on gangster films imposed by the Hays Office; just two were made in 1943 (Hardy et al. 11). At this time, gangsters are depicted as "aberrations" who are "completely distilled from ethnicity, families, or neighborhoods"; their excision provides catharsis for the American public (Yaquinto, *Pump* 85). Films produced during World War II aimed to create a sense of national unification wherein "inevitable victory" and "positive outcomes" dominated (Munby, *Public* 119-20). Consequently, gangster narratives were seen as undermining the aforementioned objectives, so new gangsters materialized: mentally ill gangsters (like Cody Jarrett in *White Heat* [Raoul Walsh, 1949], a film I analyzed in Chapter One). This new iteration meant that gangsters could now appear as an isolated problem, a fix which tended to avoid

censorship (Munby, *Public* 120). Generally single and divorced from the social order, the 1940s' gangster is best described as a loner.

In the 1950s, paranoia is a defining feature of American society (Rosow 260; Shadoian 176; Mason 105-06). This paranoia resulted from multiple factors including the Cold War and the televised Kefauver hearings on the "apparent perversion of the United States by gangs" (Mason 105). As a result, conformism emerges in the 1950s as a mechanism with which to repress paranoia and simultaneously enhance the "false sense of accomplishment, purpose, and well-being" created by the decade's prosperity (Shadoian 182). In gangster films of this period, particularly those continuing the *noir* sensibilities of the late 1940s, there are two important changes. First, the gangster becomes a "[g]uest star[]" (Yaquinto, *Pump* 81) in the sense that the main character is now the cop or citizen trying to bring down the gangster (Shadoian 176); Fritz Lang's *The Big Heat* (1953) is a representative example. Second, and related to the above, there is a movement away from the individual gangster as a threat to the syndicate network as the opposing force. Crime is now portrayed as penetrating all echelons of society on both sides of the law (Mason 88; Munby, *Public* 140; Shadoian 176). Less interest in the individual gangster and a blurring of previously clear distinctions between hero and criminal (which is characteristic of *noir* [Yaquinto, *Pump* 77]) mean that it becomes difficult to track and analyze representations of the gangster's wife at this time.

Fewer gangster texts were produced in the 1960s, at least in film, as compared to the previous decade, and they tended to be historical biographies or depictions of "a new type of cold, restrained, psychotic hero" (Shadoian 237). *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967), an example of the former type, is recognized as the most important film of the decade and ushered in the death knell for the Hays Code due to its graphic violence (Carr qtd. in Mason 125). Bonnie's

non-traditional relationship with Clyde—she is his partner in crime who also struggles to gain sexual fulfillment from him—speaks not only to changing sexual mores but also to the shifting relationship between men and women as a consequence of the feminist movement. Her position as a co-gangster may have been inspired by said movement, but her violent death at the hands of male police officers could be read as a “backlash” against the changing role of women in American society (Yaquinto, *Pump* 99, 103). Puzo’s novel *The Godfather*, published just two years after the release of Penn’s film, has been interpreted as another response to the feminist movement: reversion to conservative 1950s gender roles (De Stefano 190). Because *The Godfather* also marked a major turning point in the history of gangster texts with respect to its treatment of the family, it is a key text with which to begin an analysis of the wife and marriage.

The Godfather has earned an unprecedented status in popular culture, spawning some 260 Mafia novels in the few years following its publication alone (Ferraro 191), and the three film adaptations continue to permeate the collective consciousness of a “family” mindset. The novel’s major contribution, as John G. Cawelti and others have argued, is its focus on the family (327). Whereas the gangster sidekicks of the 1930s’ trio are depicted as poor gangster material for establishing a family bond with their female partners (Yaquinto, *Pump* 45) or fellow male gang members (Scobie 9), in *The Godfather* the opposite holds true. The family is the highest source of a gangster’s strength, its protection the reason for becoming a Mafioso and the foundation of a gangster’s masculine image, for as Don Vito Corleone explains to his godson, Johnny Fontane, in Puzo’s novel (and in a similar fashion in Francis Ford Coppola’s first *Godfather* film [1972]), “‘A man who is not a father to his children can never be a real man’” (Puzo 37). This focus on the family is evident in the novel’s title, which fuses the multiple meanings of the word godfather: a surrogate father, traditionally a relative, who serves as a

child's instructor in the Catholic faith upon the biological father's death, and a gangster (the latter being Puzo's invention [qtd. in Cowie 216]). This connection between the family, with its members linked by consanguinity, and the Family, the hierarchical criminal enterprise, necessitates a rise in importance of female relatives, particularly wives. In a business modeled on hierarchical, patriarchal relations, a gangster's marriage ensures the continuation of the bloodline and the Mafia organization through the production of male heirs. Such texts that are almost exclusively focused on the interaction between men seem to leave women to occupy territory of little consequence; however, as Molly Haskell asserts, there is a concomitant elevation in the family's social function as an American institution: in the first *Godfather* film, writes Haskell, the "portrait of the close and fiercely ethnic family . . . in a time of rampant alienation and divorce . . . was irresistible" ("World"). Within the world of the *Godfather* texts, then, the family forms an insulating boundary against the corrupting influences of the sphere beyond, including other Mafia families with their movement into drug trafficking or American (read: WASP) values such as ethnic assimilation. It is within this closely protected space that the gangster cultivates his identity apart from the underworld, and it is upon his wife that the gangster relies to do so.

Since *The Godfather*, gangsters have been characterized as family men. Not only that, gangsters perceive themselves as family men and actively work to associate themselves with what they believe the family represents. This self-identification is strongly connected to the gangster's relationship with his wife; indeed, whereas the 1930s' trio emphasizes the mother as the gangster's most important family member (a character discussed in Chapter One), later gangster texts elevate the wife to this position. The gangster seeks three related elements through marriage and family life: tradition, legitimacy, and normalcy. For instance, Tony

Soprano's desire to maintain tradition is evident in the title sequence of *The Sopranos*, the purpose of which is to convey the journey home. Tony's face upon exiting his vehicle in the family driveway reveals the "absence of a look"; it is a stony, unreadable face betraying little emotion (Johansson 34). That he repeats the journey after each work day and that each episode of the series begins with this journey intimates a sense of safety in the home and relief in the existence of the family within, regardless of Tony's unreadable face. In his spouse, Carmela, Tony finds a further sense of stability in tradition with respect to gender, for Carmela is a typical mob wife in many ways. With a clear division of labour in the home, Carmela concerns herself with domestic tasks such as raising the children, preparing meals, and doing laundry, while Tony's work takes him outside their home in suburban North Caldwell, New Jersey.⁶⁰ Her status as the Mafia boss's wife means that she has certain advantages accorded to her station: she wants for nothing as far as material possessions are concerned. The large home she keeps is a concrete symbol of her privilege. That she has a housekeeper, a Polish immigrant named Una, is a further indication of her status: the family can afford to pay someone to undertake some of the domestic duties for which Carmela would otherwise be responsible. The housekeeper frees up Carmela from performing some household labour so that she has more time for leisure activities (exercising, receiving manicures, shopping, dining with other mob wives) and charitable events (hosting a paediatric fundraiser, collecting donations for various church initiatives). The final

⁶⁰ Tony Soprano's long drive home depicted in the title sequence draws specific attention to this movement from the city to the suburbs. Fred L. Gardaphé praises David Chase's television series for what he perceives as its revolutionary transplantation to the suburbs. This transplantation "exposes [the gangster] to greater female influence" because of the separation of work and home life, and it forces the gangster to confront his masculinity (*From Wiseguys* 157-58); however, Gardaphé overlooks the fact that Tony Soprano is not the first gangster to live in the suburbs. This movement is evident at least as far back as Puzo's *The Godfather* novel wherein Vito Corleone relocates the family from New York City to a compound in Long Beach, Long Island so that his children could attend better schools and he himself could take advantage of the "anonymity of suburban life" (223). Gardaphé's observation about *The Sopranos* seems to be based on the intentional focus of the series on its setting in suburbia as emphasized by the title sequence. The setting of *The Godfather*, on the other hand, is obscured by its isolation as a compound built to exclude all non-Corleones, not just urbanites or other suburbanites.

destination of Tony's commute is occupied by a mob wife whose similarity in her domesticity to Kay Adams in his beloved *Godfather* films surely reflects a conscious choice on Tony's part to recreate the family insularity and sense of ritual and tradition as depicted in Coppola's films that he so values.

Besides seeking continuity with and security in past traditions through marriage, particularly in terms of gender roles, the gangster also yearns for legitimacy. It is common knowledge among fictional gangsters that wives and children idealistically are immune from danger; in Tony Soprano's words, "families don't get touched" ("The Blue Comet" [6.2.8]). As "civilians" (a term originating in the *Godfather* texts), those who are not directly involved in the business are excluded from acts of vengeance in inter-gang warfare. The bifurcation of combatants and civilians mostly falls along gendered lines, where combatants are men and civilians are women. For example, when World War II veteran and mob civilian Michael Corleone abruptly decides to join the Family to aid his endangered father, his brother Sonny seizes the opportunity.

According to Sonny, Michael's involvement will surprise the Family's enemies who have pegged Michael as "faggy" since Michael is understood to be a non-combatant in the Corleone/Tattaglia war and consequently is feminized (134). As a civilian, the wife offers a connection to the allegedly peaceful world from which the gangster is excluded by virtue of his profession while also affirming the gangster's masculinity and heterosexuality as a combatant.

Michael gains legitimacy not only through his marriage but also his choice of a non-Italian woman, Kay Adams, for a spouse. The self-alienated civilian Michael chooses a woman who is his complement but who also is his opposite in terms of his family's ideal Mafia wife. While at war overseas as a Marine, Michael envisioned for himself a woman who embodied the American values in which he believed, contrary to his family, and for which he felt he was fighting. He

“dreamed . . . [o]f a beauty like [Kay’s]. A fair and fragile body, milky-skinned and electrified by passion” (Puzo 77). Here, Kay’s literal, racial whiteness is emphasized along with her metaphorical whiteness as goodness. Both contrast with Michael, who is described in the novel as having “clear olive-brown” skin and “jet black hair” (16) and who is depicted in the film adaptations by the similarly featured Al Pacino. Michael’s family dislikes Kay for her very traits that he admires, specifically those that characterize her as different from the stereotypical Italian wife: “She was too thin, she was too fair, her face was too sharply intelligent for a woman, her manner too free for a maiden” (17). Kay is a well-educated woman, she has premarital sex, she works outside the home as a schoolteacher, her father is a Baptist pastor and scholar (229), and her family can trace back its American roots for 200 years (17), all of which combine to make Kay an ideal wife for an American-identified man, which is what Michael aspires to be. After Michael’s transition into the business, Kay offers a connection to the civilian, American world in which he had hoped forever to reside and into which he attempts to steer the Corleone business once he is the Don, despite his conflicting sense of allegiance to his Italian heritage, organized crime, and his family.

On the other hand, the wife’s role as harbinger of legitimacy appears to be undermined in *Casino* (Martin Scorsese, 1995). Beginning in the early 1970s, Sam “Ace” Rothstein runs the Las Vegas Tangiers casino for the Mafia’s Midwestern branch leaders. Sam despises the “bookie” descriptor, for in Las Vegas he is respected. He takes gambling to be not a form of entertainment but a serious, legitimate endeavour. As his boyhood friend and associate Nicky Santoro explains with a combination of fascination and disdain, Sam “bet like a fucking brain surgeon” who “had to know everything” before placing a wager, thereby virtually eliminating the possibility of risk and making him “the only guaranteed winner [Nicky] ever knew.” What is

shocking in this film is not that Sam wants to “settle down,” for post-*Godfather* it is conventional for a connected man to seek a family life. What is startling is who Sam chooses to pursue as a wife: hustler, prostitute, and drug addict Ginger McKenna. Despite helping to create a fantastic environment wherein “bright lights,” “comp trips,” “champagne,” “free hotel suites,” “broad” and “booze” all align for the express purpose of acquiring the casino patrons’ wealth, Sam is drawn to the kind of woman his casino uses for her ability to goad male gamblers into spending their money. During his first sighting of Ginger, Sam appears to be hit by the same “thunderbolt” that strikes Michael Corleone when he spots Apollonia Vitelli, the Sicilian woman who would become his first wife in Puzo’s novel (330) and Coppola’s first film; however, in an ironic reversal, Ginger seemingly is unworthy of the same kind of reaction incited by the virginal Apollonia. Further, Sam comes to resemble the male patrons of the Tangiers by becoming entangled in the freedom and licentiousness of Las Vegas as symbolized by Ginger.

Upon closer inspection, however, it is evident that Sam’s marriage to Ginger is motivated by his desire for legitimacy. Sam believes that Ginger seeks the same legitimization he sought for himself when he was a common bookie, which is why he offers her marriage. He sees in Ginger an opportunity for the magical city of Las Vegas to cleanse her of what he perceives to be her sins just as it cleansed him (Casillo 366). Sam thinks he could help Ginger by socially elevating her into the role of typical mob wife, and in a voice-over he explains his egotistical thought process at the time of the proposition: “‘I’m Sam Rothstein,’ I said, ‘I can change her.’” Ginger, however, does not want to be changed. Sam vacillates between accepting that he “could never make her love [him]” and contemplating why Ginger did not commit to his offer of elements comprising the American Dream: “money, being somebody for the first time in her life, a home, a kid.” Feeling internal pressure to demonstrate continuously the legitimacy he has earned as

operator of the Tangiers casino, Sam seeks to become a family man at age 43 and claims to accept during the marriage proposal that Ginger does not love him. For Sam, love is irrelevant; as long as they share a “mutual respect,” he believes she would “eventually . . . care enough about [him] that [he] could live with that.” That this respect is tempered with piles of money and material goods should be a warning to both of them about the eventual outcome of their marriage. When Ginger later calls Sam’s friend Nicky her “new sponsor,” this designation merely confirms that she has always been more realistic about who she is and what the relationship is really about compared to Sam. She viewed Sam as nothing more than a financial provider, whereas he tried in vain to create a wife out of someone who professed to be content as a prostitute, someone who he deluded himself into thinking he could treat as his partner and mirror in both social and moral betterment. In sum, although legitimacy functions as a motivating force for marriage in *Casino*, Ginger’s refusal to ignore reality as does Sam hints at the ways in which marriage and family are corrupted in gangster texts, a point I will fully explore later in the second part of this chapter.

Besides a sense of tradition and an air of legitimacy, the wife and family provide the gangster with a sense of normalcy to contrast with the brutish nature of his work. Despite its Mafia subject matter, *The Sopranos* depicts its principal family as typical. As John McCarty puts it, the Sopranos are “an otherwise average suburban family, coping with the same mundane pressures all families have about school, teenage dating, gaining too much weight, caring for older parents, and so on” (246). In other words, even a gangster’s family cannot escape the trappings of the typical American family, nor would the gangster want to escape those elements because they keep him in touch with the civilian world and remind him of his humanity. No matter how chaotic, home life functions for the gangster as a respite from the underworld; however, divisions

between the two realms are not rigid, and the home itself often becomes a stressor. Such is the case in *Goodfellas* (Martin Scorsese, 1990) when Henry Hill leaves his wife, Karen, after she threatens to kill him because of his infidelity. To Henry, the home functions as an escape, a safe haven from the dangers he faces outside of it. As he explains to Karen, he has “enough to worry about getting whacked on the street.” Even a friendly, casual encounter between made men such as casually joking around (about a previous violent encounter, no less) betrays the possibility of violence lurking just under the surface, as demonstrated by the well-known, highly quoted “funny guy” scene between Henry and Tommy DeVito earlier in the film. The fact that Henry rhetorically asks Karen during the course of her confrontation if he has to “fucking come home for this” suggests Henry would rather not return if his risk of death at home becomes equal to that at work.

This violent marital encounter implies that rather than being an inherent feature of home life, the sense of the gangster family’s normalcy is carefully developed over time. This is especially true for wives who originate from outside the gangster society, for they must undergo a process of inculcation in order to formulate the traditional family that the gangster seeks. Unlike Carmela Soprano, who, as Tony reminds her, “grew up around” male gangster relatives and therefore already understands a wife’s role when she marries (“Whitecaps” [4.13]), Kay Adams in the *Godfather* texts and Karen Hill in *Goodfellas* have little or no sense of what they must learn to accept as a gangster’s wife until they marry their respective husbands. Karen delivers two separate voice-overs indicating that time and isolation work to normalize Henry’s choices to the point where she feels that “[a]fter awhile it got to be all normal” and “[n]one of it seemed like crimes.” Such is the effect of belonging to an in-group, according to Robert Casillo. Casillo explains that, on the one hand, isolation creates in the in-group “unaware[ness] of its difference

from the larger world” and, on the other hand, an ironic realization that its members’ lives are “little different from that of the mainstream society they prey upon” (288, 295). Accordingly, Karen is proud that Henry takes an active, aggressive, albeit illegal, role in providing for the family where other men would passively wait for legal opportunities to come to them. Another normalizing feature mentioned twice by Karen is that the Mafia is a closed system; there are “[n]o outsiders, ever” in day-to-day life and events such as birthday parties. The abundance of Karen and Henry’s wedding guests who share the names Peter, Paul and Marie emphasize that this Mafia desire to create insiders is produced by repetition of certain traditions to the point of loss of individual identity to the group mentality. One of the wedding guests even comments that the Jewish Karen looks Italian and can therefore pass as an insider though she can never fully be one, just as Henry’s half-Sicilian ancestry permits him to work for the Mafia but limits his upward mobility within it. Further, this exclusion of non-members lowers or even eliminates objective criticism against members of the in-group, thereby creating a shield around the group and enhancing its pursuit of both normalcy and legitimacy. Once again, as with the cultivation of legitimacy, the sense of the gangster’s family as typical is exposed as a fiction, much to the gangster’s chagrin.

So far, this chapter has shown that the wife is a harbinger of stability in the eyes of her gangster husband in contrast to his violent, chaotic underworld life. The next section of this chapter, however, will show that as hard as gangsters work to achieve a clan-like sense of family in its most traditional sense, it is nevertheless revealed by the wife to be a construction that is exposed as precarious at best and dangerous at its most extreme. This underbelly is clearly established in the text that has been grounding the analysis of the wife in this chapter: *The Godfather*. That the Puzo-created fusion of the family and the business discussed earlier can be

described as “*the business of the family*” exposes the economic impetus of this closed, idealized system (emphasis original, Ferraro 178). To put it another way, despite the appeal of a tightly-knit Italian family in that text, it is exposed as a “nostalgic fiction” (Mason 131). In Puzo’s novel and in the first film adaptation, fissures appear from the beginning of the texts through Michael Corleone, the only brother who purposely alienates himself from his family. Michael arrives at his sister’s wedding wearing his army uniform and accompanying his future wife, Kay. Michael’s uniform and American girlfriend expose the alluring bond of the hermetically-sealed Corleone family protected from outsiders as fictional, for it is ironically (or perhaps not) a person who views himself as an outsider who will come to occupy the most powerful position in the Family and who will, as Mason observes, “divest the Corleones of their function as a domestic unit” (131). That Don Vito Corleone holds business meetings in his study while the wedding celebrations for his only daughter continue in the backyard further calls into question the alleged precedence of the family over all other concerns. Even earlier in the chronology of the Corleone saga, the young Vito Corleone sequences in *The Godfather Part II* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1974) depict Vito’s move into the Mafia as not only a means to provide for his family—he is muscled out of his job at Abbandando’s grocery store and replaced by Don Massimo Fanucci’s nephew—but also a commercial activity for its own sake because he takes money from his friends in exchange for killing Fanucci (Mason 134). The gangster’s fierce protection of the family unit appears to be incongruent with his capitalist pursuits, rendering his insistence upon the primacy of the former as itself a front, perhaps, for his interest in the latter.

Related to the mythical construction of the family as the primary social group, there is an inherent tension between the responsibilities stemming from the family bond and the capitalistic drive of the Family cementing that bond. As Alessandro Camon explains, “[c]apitalist morality

is individualistic” (60). This standard is especially evident in gangster films of the early 1930s, where the gangster breaks away from his family of origin to establish himself on his own terms. In the *Godfather* texts, however, it becomes necessary to abandon individual interests for the sake of the greater good because of the responsibilities owed to the family as a whole (Leitch 121). Just as the closeness of the family is revealed to be a mythical construction, so the selflessness of Vito Corleone for his family proves illusory. Mason argues that greed, not family, is the major motivation for the Corleones, despite their professions to the contrary. To wit, Fredo Corleone and Carlo Rizzi—members of the Corleone family by blood and through marriage, respectively—are murdered on Michael’s orders for turning against the family, illustrating that the primary interests of each family member have always been their own (Mason 134). In Puzo’s novel and in Coppola’s first film, Carlo sides with Don Emilio Barzini against the Corleones and boldly marries into the Corleone family to benefit himself. In *The Godfather Part II*, Fredo betrays his brother Michael, the Corleone Family Don, to Hyman Roth because Roth promised Fredo that “there was something in it for [Fredo] on [his] own” if he cooperated. Ironically, despite ordering Fredo’s death for failing to act in the family’s benefit, Michael’s chilling response to Tom Hagen’s accusation that the former wants to “wipe everybody out” reveals how skewed Michael’s own sense of acting for the greater good has become: “I don’t feel I have to wipe everybody out . . . Just my enemies, that’s all.” Even back in Puzo’s novel there is a clear imbalance between Michael’s expressed belief in his family to Kay and his insistence that he “‘take[s] care of [him]self, individual’” (364). To Mason, perhaps playing off of the Thomas J. Ferraro quotation in the previous paragraph, “the real ‘business’ of family is not social, but economic” (135). The results of Michael’s individualistic, money-driven goals are evident in their devastating effects on the family. While the Family grows exponentially

richer—Michael donates \$100 million to the self-established Vito Corleone Foundation in *Part III* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1990)—the family crumbles. In the final *Godfather* film installation, Michael is divorced from his wife, Kay; his son, Anthony, refuses to take over the Family business; and his daughter, Mary, dies in his arms from a bullet meant for him. Fittingly, Michael himself dies alone in Sicily as a consequence of his alleged belief in the supremacy of the family.

Tony Soprano, too, faces difficulties in reconciling the values of an idyllic past with the demands of the present. He wants his family life to mimic a version of the 1950s; accordingly, there are similarities between *The Sopranos* and the “domestic sitcom,” which includes such early examples as *The Honeymooners* (Harry Crane and Jackie Gleason, 1955-1956) and *Father Knows Best* (Ed James, 1954-1960) wherein the male family head returns home after a day of work to face “comfort or chaos” (Polan 105-08). Significantly, Tony and his crew worship the first two films of the *Godfather* trilogy, and Tony’s favourite is *Part II*, which is set in the 1950s. Tony’s obsession draws attention to the fact that, as discussed above, the reverence for the family in the *Godfather* texts, and by implication in *The Sopranos*, is a façade, and it only emphasizes the degree to which his family differs from 1950s constructions, affirmed by Tony’s revelation to Dr. Melfi that he feels he “came in at the end. The best is over” (“The Sopranos” [1.1]). The clearest sign of this gap is that Carmela has a degree of self-awareness incomparable to other gangster wives. She is an expert at performing the role of suburban housewife and using it to its full advantage, impeccably playing the “self-sacrificing angel in the house” (McCabe and Akass 45). For example, in “Second Opinion” [3.7], Carmela expertly manipulates Tony into making a donation to Columbia University, their daughter’s school, in the amount of \$50,000, a staggering ten times the amount to which he initially committed. Her guilt-inducing strategies in

this episode are those of a skilled housewife and performer using her status to her advantage so that Dean Ross will be impressed by her and Tony's support of Meadow's education. Despite Tony's desire to be the head of his household as he believes Michael Corleone to be, he often finds himself subject to the machinations of his wife, which leave him pining for an idealized past.

The wife's role in promoting the alleged dominance of the family cannot be overlooked. In *The Sopranos*, Carmela works with her husband to create a *Godfather*-like façade of family primacy and normalcy despite Tony's unorthodox employment. Carmela's own desire to "keep up with the Cusamanos," their fully-assimilated Italian American neighbours (Quinn 170), requires that she ignore or rationalize the troublesome aspects of her existence that undermine the veneer of the typical American family that she and Tony produce. Like other mob wives such as Karen Hill in *Goodfellas* and Mickey Santoro in *Casino*, Carmela abets her husband. When there are signs that federal indictments are looming, Tony rids the house of damning evidence with Carmela's assistance, and she calmly hands over her jewellery purchased with ill-gotten gain as though this sweep were nothing more than spring cleaning ("The Legend of Tennessee Moltisanti" [1.8]). Along with Tony, Carmela lies to the children about what their father does for a living to protect their innocence. Still, Carmela takes advantage of their father's well-known mob status to manipulate a Cusamano, Joanie, into writing her daughter a college reference letter; however, she wears her housewife veil while doing so, bringing a homemade ricotta pie and dismissing Joanie's accusations of intimidation with a laugh and an affirmation that she only wants to help her "little daughter" gain admittance to Georgetown ("Full Leather Jacket" [2.8]). Even her husband's extramarital affairs are carefully rationalized as typical gangster behaviour that nevertheless needs to be carefully hidden. Carmela's suggestion to Tony

that he get a vasectomy if he is going to continue seeing his Russian mistress is submitted on the basis of “what a bastard child would do to [their] family,” but the larger point is not that she is upset about his cheating per se; rather, his fathering a child with his mistress would publicly humiliate Carmela and ruin the façade of the perfect family that she works so hard to maintain. After all, she only brings up the possibility of a vasectomy after hearing gossip about another gangster having a baby with his mistress (“From Where to Eternity” [2.9]). Carmela accepts that Tony will never be as faithful as Tony’s associate Bobby Bacalieri is to his wife, but she insists upon discretion to protect the Soprano family image.

The image of the faithful family man is important to protect a gangster’s reputation, but it is also revealed to be a matter of life or death for the entire gang. In *Goodfellas*, Paulie Cicero, the boss of Henry’s gang, and Jimmy Conway, another member of the gang, warn Henry of the threat that his jilted wife, Karen, poses to the Mafia. Following the scene discussed earlier wherein Henry leaves his wife after she threatens to kill him for his infidelity, Paulie confronts Henry and insists that he return home. Significantly, Paulie condones Henry’s adultery since, in Casillo’s words, it is “a virtual underworld institution at least for males” and a feature of the gangster’s self-sufficiency (299). Paulie assures Henry that “[n]obody says that [Henry] can’t do what [he] want[s] to do.” Rather, the problem is a lack of discretion on Henry’s part that causes his infidelity to be made public by his wife (Casillo 299). Jimmy reveals that Karen has been “commiserating” with his own wife, Mickey, and with Paulie’s wife. The collusion of women over marital problems creates a fear in the mob men that it might inspire “retaliatory infidelities” by the wives that could “breach[] . . . mob security” (Casillo 299). In other words, despite Jimmy’s insistence that Henry return to his family because it is the “right” thing to do, morality is not the issue since Henry is free to do as he pleases; rather, as Paulie explains, the

reconciliation is necessary so that Henry can “keep up appearances.” By creating an ironic façade of a loyal family man, Henry’s cheating can function as an open secret that will be tolerated by Karen so long as Henry comes home every night. This public image of fidelity will separate Karen from the other wives and deter the threat of mob danger arising from what is understood to be a private issue between a husband and wife. Paulie’s insistence that Mafia men shun divorce because they are “not *animali*” (animals) adds further irony to the image of the committed family man that Henry is expected to cultivate and project in order to align with his relationship to the Mafia Family.

Betrays need not be only physical in order to affect personal image and gang safety; emotional alienation creates a similar result. Although not sexually unfaithful himself, *Casino*’s Sam Rothstein is emotionally unfaithful. This betrayal causes Ginger to turn on him, just as Henry’s open, sexual infidelity causes Karen almost to kill him in *Goodfellas*. Like Henry who often fails to return home, Sam neglects his wife by working “18-hour days” due to his obsessive need to control every aspect of the Tangiers casino, including something as trivial as consistency in the number of blueberries per muffin baked by the kitchen staff. Just as Karen commiserates with other mob wives when she discovers Henry’s infidelity, Ginger takes advantage of her status as “Mrs. Sam Rothstein” to get a better table at a restaurant for her and her female friends when she is feeling lonely. This is a comparatively minor perk, but one woman insists that Ginger “might as well get something out of” her marital status, suggesting the sense of abandonment Ginger feels as a result of Sam’s workaholic tendency. Ginger’s comment also draws attention to the fact that the marriage is a sham. Both parties treated Sam’s idea of marriage as a business proposal, with mention of sure things, handicaps, and chances. Ben Nyce points out that “Ginger warns Ace about who she is, but his desire for a home life is too strong

and he lures her” with material goods, which she comes to realize are not enough to sustain her interest (141-42). Where Karen’s retaliation remains an individual threat perpetrated against Henry by Karen alone, in *Casino* the jilted wife draws upon resources within and outside of Sam’s world when she turns against him. Ginger takes money from Sam and gives it to her pimp, Lester, and she demands that Sam’s best friend Nicky have “that Jew bastard [Sam] killed,” emphasizing the very real danger that exists for a gangster from within his own family when he exposes himself as a fraud.

Even as she helps support the façade of the family, the wife also criticizes the gangster’s presentation as a family man. Through the wife’s criticism of the gangster’s approach to marriage, his sense of family is exposed as a deception. The wife herself is an active critic of her husband’s behaviour, questioning his familial devotion due to its incongruity with his participation in organized crime. Because the wife is privy to enough aspects of her husband’s life to understand the methods that her husband employs to acquire family resources, she is also in a position to criticize those methods. As will be detailed later in the final section of this chapter, this criticism should not necessarily be read as hypocritical, since it often reflects the gangster’s own difficulty with accepting his deviant behaviour; rather, the wife’s criticism serves to undermine the picture of the traditional family that the couple creates and for which the husband deeply yearns. That gangsterism is normalized as part of typical family behaviour beginning with *The Godfather* novel does not preclude the wife from examining it and forcing her husband to do the same. In fact, because wives in gangster texts are often in a precarious position as outsiders having been introduced to the gangster way of life through marriage, they are in an advantageous position to evaluate that way of life and force the gangster to confront his inconsistent value system.

In *The Godfather* novel and first film adaptation, Kay is perhaps best known for asking questions that force Michael to justify his choices. In a way, the texts function didactically as *The Education of Kay Adams*, wherein she (along with the readers and spectators) becomes indoctrinated into the Mafia world. The larger purpose of her questioning for the present discussion is to undermine Michael's commitment to his family's business. In Puzo's novel, Michael initially is "charmed" by Kay's curiosity and he happily but carefully obliges in acclimatizing her to his family (18); however, over time the effort of responding to her pointed questions wears him down.⁶¹ Especially in *The Godfather Part II*, Kay continues interrogating Michael for two reasons. First, in contrast to her novelistic equivalent, Kay has not been assimilated into her husband's world. She continues to be an outsider to it and is therefore in a position to force Michael to acknowledge the things he would rather ignore, such as the obvious effects of his business's violence on their young son's social and emotional development. Second, her continued questioning reminds Michael (and the spectators) that no matter how hard he tries and how much he desires normalcy, he can never erase who he is. There will always be those like Senator Geary who "despise [Michael's] masquerade" of legitimacy and loathe those like Michael who, according to Geary, "try to pass [themselves] off as decent Americans" despite, as Michael retorts, Geary's own hypocrisy. *The Godfather Part III* vividly portrays

⁶¹ In Puzo's text, the subversive potential of Kay's questions is undermined by the inclusion of "romance language" among her and Michael's dialogue (Messenger 100-01). For example, in the wedding scene Kay thinks Michael is telling stories about his father and Luca Brasi to "scare" her away from marrying him (24). Eventually, Puzo's Kay undergoes a "reverse assimilation" (Gardaphé, *Italian* 96) and comes to resemble Vito Corleone's wife. According to the narrator, as a younger spouse Mama Corleone "never asked [Vito] where all the money came from when he was not working" (207); similarly, Kay's questions for Michael eventually stop. When she realizes who Michael really is (435), Puzo's Kay resigns herself to "the impossibility of moral defiance of the code of violence" that defines the mobsters' lives (Chown 71), converting herself and the couple's two children from Protestantism to Catholicism and, in the novel's final scene, turning to her last resort: praying for her husband's soul (443). In the film adaptation, however, Coppola removes the romantic language and creates a character who functions as a moral touchstone throughout the trilogy, one who "demands answers" rather than suppresses her questions (De Stefano 188).

Kay's realization of the futility of Michael's attempts to be seen as more than simply a gangster. In that text, money, which is supposed to buy his legitimacy, ironically makes him "more dangerous" as Kay observes. Although the couple has since divorced, Michael still pines for the relationship he thought he could create with Kay, while Kay still refuses to gloss over his gross moral violations.

The continuing source of tension between Michael and Kay is part of a larger conflict in the texts of *The Godfather* between stasis and change. Michael claims in *The Godfather Part II* (as he does in Puzo's novel) that, as his father is also aware, "[his] father's way of doing things is over." Yet modernizing and legitimizing the business conflicts with Vito Corleone's view of the family as an unchanging, mythical, enduring social institution, a view to which Michael at least partly subscribes since he marries Kay and has children who will become the next generation of Corleones. In turn, alterations to the business necessitate alterations to the family because the two are interlinked; one cannot be changed without affecting the other. This core conflict between stasis and change is reflected in Michael's relationship with Kay. Despite disassociating himself from his father earlier in his life, which culminated in marrying a woman who is "the symbol of the values he has renounced," in *The Godfather Part II* Michael, together with the spectators, loses himself in memories about the way things used to be when his father was alive (Chiampi 29). This nostalgia highlights how both the business and family have fundamentally changed since Michael became the Don. In attempting to legalize the Corleones' business affairs, Michael must come to terms with the alienation that it creates with Kay on a micro-level and the possibility of unhinging the family as a persistent concept on the macro-level. As Michael acknowledges to his mother, "[t]imes are changing," and despite doing

everything possible to keep it, there is the ironic possibility of a man like Michael “los[ing] his family.”

Like Michael, Kay is highly aware of his failure to balance tradition with evolution, and she refuses to accept any more broken promises. In *The Godfather Part II*, Kay, whose third pregnancy engages speculation about the future, reminds Michael of his as-yet unfulfilled seven-year-old promise from the first film that “in five years the Corleone Family will be completely legitimate,” and berates him for his failure as a husband and father. When Michael promises that he will “change,” the look on Kay’s face suggests she has heard this all before. Referring to Michael’s rhetoric-filled speech to the Senate committee, Kay demands to know how he persuaded a key witness, Frank Pentangeli, to reverse his testimony against the Family because this intimidation tactic undermines Michael’s claims of the business’s legitimacy. In terms of their family life, Kay refuses to believe that a person like Michael who subscribes to the attitude that “[t]here are things that have been going on for years between men and women that will not change” can actually fulfill the aforementioned promise to his wife that he will change. Despite becoming more like Kay through his erasure of his ethnic identity, Michael remains committed to his father’s ideals about the family and therefore touts the “impossibility” of allowing her to fragment his family through divorce as his sister Connie did hers. The couple, however, has been broken for a long time. Kay’s behaviour should not be read as “profoundly destabiliz[ing] Michael” as Vera Dika interprets it because there has never been a perfect family to destabilize, only the illusion of one that Michael himself created (91). Kay’s abortion only functions to reinforce the marriage’s pre-existing problems and indicates her refusal to believe in Michael’s empty promises any longer. Like his father, Michael never takes mistresses (Yaquinto, *Pump* 142), but, like Sam in *Casino*, his obsession with the business emotionally alienates Kay in the

way that infidelity would. The abortion illustrates Kay's acceptance of reality, whereas Michael's devastation with losing a potential business heir indicates his attachment to his father's ideals about the family. Further, his reaction demonstrates a conflict between those ideals and Michael's purported drive to disassociate from them specifically and from the Family's interests generally.

The wife's refusal to accept fully her husband's underworld participation is often motivated by her religious beliefs in *The Sopranos*. Carmela Soprano resembles Michael Corleone's wife Kay in the *Godfather* novel in that both women are devout Catholics, Carmela a lifelong worshipper and Kay a convert soon after her marriage to Michael; however, whereas Puzo's Kay accepts that Michael will not change and chooses to appeal to God for her husband's salvation, Carmela's religiosity places her in a precarious position, for inasmuch as she "tries to make up for [Tony's] lapses and sins," she cannot pass judgment on Tony without simultaneously passing judgment on herself (Messenger 273). In the first episode, Tony awaits an MRI to determine the cause of his fainting. Worried about the possible outcome, he recalls the "good times" the couple has shared, but Carmela refuses to indulge him. She takes a self-righteous stance by telling Tony, "you're going to hell when you die" ("The Sopranos" [1.1]); yet in a later episode when she prays to Jesus for Christopher Moltisanti, her cousin and Tony's underling, to recover from a serious shooting, she fully acknowledges that she and her family have "chosen this life in full awareness of the consequences of [their] sins." Further, when she asks Jesus to heal Christopher and grant him the "vision" to turn from crime to God, the camera finds Tony's face in the waiting room, implying that she is praying as much for her husband as she is for her cousin ("From Where to Eternity" [2.9]). The family's spiritual destiny so occupies Carmela's thoughts that during confession with Father Obosi in the third season she reveals her belief that recent

physical symptoms she has been experiencing are signs of ovarian cancer, a punishment from God for living a lie (“Amour Fou” [3.12]). Later in the series when Tony himself is hospitalized in critical condition after being shot by his demented uncle Junior, Carmela’s thoughts turn to her children. In a therapy session with Dr. Melfi, Tony’s psychiatrist, Carmela thinks about the “façading” the children have had to maintain due to their father’s business. Carmela cries when Dr. Melfi completes Carmela’s statement that the children become “complicit” over time, and it would not be inaccurate to suggest that here Carmela contemplates whether Meadow and A. J.’s lives of complicity will leave them with the constant moral struggles as adults that she has had to endure throughout her marriage (“Mayham” [6.1.3]). The larger danger from Carmela’s perspective would be the children’s complicity leading them fully to accept their father’s choices (as well as their mother’s) without any moral scrutiny.

Along with a critique of gangsterism as a violation of their husbands’ devotion to the family, some wives highlight their discomfort with infidelity for the same reason. Despite the husband’s obsessive protection of the family as a sacred unit, he often ironically breaks the marriage vows by cheating. Whether with or without his wife’s knowledge (or her silent resignation), gangster husbands like Sonny Corleone in the *Godfather* novel and first film, Henry Hill in *Goodfellas*, and Tony Soprano in *The Sopranos* revel in their sexual improprieties with *goomahs*.

Popularized by *The Sopranos*, the term *goomah* (variously spelled and pronounced) refers to a husband’s mistress. This slang word is based on the Italian *comare*, or godmother, which is another ironic twist on the alleged sacredness of the family by bestowing an honourable Catholic title on a husband’s sexual partner outside of marriage. The taking of a mistress connects to the gangster’s conflict between individualism and the greater familial good that was discussed earlier

in the context of capitalism and *The Godfather*. Constant sexual fulfillment comes at the cost of this image of selfless devotion to the family.

Gangsterism may eventually be tolerated or even accepted by gangster wives, but infidelity is often a more difficult violation to contend with as it has a direct impact on the wife and children in many ways. In *Goodfellas* Karen only begins to criticize what Henry does to get what she calls “the little extras” when she tires of his infidelity, an aspect of the gangster lifestyle she has never fully accepted. Although she eventually appears to ignore Henry’s infidelity and focus on the privileges of being a gangster’s wife, under the surface she seethes with rage. Henry is oblivious to her anger; he explains in a voice-over that Karen “never asked questions” about his whereabouts anymore, implying that he thinks she has accepted his right to behave however he pleases. Waking up to Karen holding a cocked gun to his face and threatening to kill him and his mistress, however, reveals to Henry the degree to which she feels betrayed. If self-sufficiency is understood as the “freedom to act on one’s desires without fear of transgression or punishment,” then Karen’s startling confrontation contravenes not only her husband’s code of autonomy but the Mafia’s code of behaviour as a whole (Casillo 276). Playing off of Henry’s previous attempt to discount her allegations by suggesting that his infidelity is “in [her] mind,” Karen straddles him, holds the gun steady and declares that she is “crazy enough to kill” Henry and his mistress. Significantly, Henry is trying to persuade Karen that there is no such thing as infidelity because a husband’s faithfulness is not expected in marriages of those belonging to his group. His infidelity is “in [her] mind” because she is still occupying a mental space that places her outside of the Mafia and evaluating her husband’s actions according to external moral standards. Asserting his authority as head of the family regardless of his violations of it, Henry symbolically regains the power in the marriage and exercises his perceived right to autonomy by

violently reversing their body positions and holding the gun to her head. Karen is rightfully terrified since, as a gangster, Henry is deftly familiar with committing violence against rivals. As a result, Karen's confrontation has the opposite effect from what she intended, for although Henry supposedly confirms his love for her, this scene ends with Henry leaving Karen and Karen apologizing to him, which is likely the opposite of what she had expected to happen.

Infidelity is also an issue in *Casino*, a film similar to *Goodfellas* in several ways. Unlike *Goodfellas*, it is the wife, not the husband, who is unfaithful. Ginger's cheating is an act in defiance of the neglect caused by her husband's total immersion in his work. This difference results in another significant reversal: the feminization of the gangster husband. As the betrayed spouse, Sam occupies Karen's position while the cheating Ginger occupies Henry's. Sam discovers inappropriate behaviour between his wife and her pimp, Lester, meaning that Ginger has failed to be discreet about her affair and Sam appears to be at a loss of control, much like Karen. Karen confronts Henry and his mistress; Sam confronts Ginger and has Lester beaten. Sam does not enjoy the privilege of infidelity as a connected man is expected to because his attention is consumed by the casino; instead, it is his wife who cuckolds him. Despite the insult, Sam cannot bring himself to end the marriage. Echoing Karen's sentiments about her cheating husband, Sam explains in a voice-over that he "didn't want her to go." Just as Karen tried to manipulate her husband to be faithful by using a gun, Sam manipulates Ginger by refusing to give her the money to which she is entitled as per their marriage agreement because if she received it he "knew [he'd] never see her again." If Ginger left, Sam would lose the illusory family to which he desperately clings. Like Henry, Ginger fails to be discreet. She publicly shames Sam by yelling from their front lawn that she is "fucking Nicky Santoro," his best friend. Like a housewife, Sam is confined to the domestic sphere in this scene whereas Ginger is outside

in the public space, indicating her refusal to be confined to the home by her husband. She embarrasses Sam by advertising his lack of control over his wife to all of their neighbours. This announcement is strategic on Ginger's part, for it goads Sam into finally letting her retrieve her things and allows her to steal the coveted safety deposit box key surreptitiously. Sam's fidelity, then, casts his masculinity into question, just as his obsessive devotion to his work casts his devotion to his family into question.

In *The Sopranos*, infidelity is a constant sore spot lurking under the surface of the Soprano marriage, with arguments of various intensity occurring between Carmela and Tony throughout the series. Unlike the positions of earlier gangster wives, Carmela has mixed feelings about Tony's cheating. On the one hand, she finds relief in it, telling Father Phil Intintola that she views Tony's mistresses as "a form of masturbation" for when she "couldn't give him what he needed" due to her being occupied with domestic duties ("Pax Soprana" [1.6]). She also uses Tony's cheating as a way to elevate her self-image into that of a martyr, telling other wives that she "put[s] up with this *goomah* shit . . . [and] made peace with it the best [she] could" ("Mergers and Acquisitions" [4.8]). On the other hand, Carmela strongly resents Tony's cheating precisely because it diminishes her self-esteem. Of Tony's mistress, she asks Tony, "What does she have that I don't have?" ("Whitecaps" [4.13]). Tony swiftly dismisses his infidelity as being commonplace for gangster husbands to the extent that he claims Carmela "knew the deal" when she married him; that is, her exposure as a young, single woman to the gangster lifestyle through connected members of her extended family and her familiarity with Tony's own father, formerly the Family captain, erases, in Tony's mind, her right to complain about that very thing ("Whitecaps" [4.13]).⁶² To Tony, the kindness and sense of humour that Carmela wishes she

⁶² In the same vein, Cindy Donatelli and Sharon Alward lambaste Kay Adams of the first *Godfather* film for what they perceive to be her self-righteous "nose-stuck-up-in-the-air" attitude about Michael's business while she

could see more of in him are not, as Tony explains, parts of the gangster persona (indeed; the inner turmoil causing his panic attacks reveals just how far he is from normalcy even for a gangster). Carmela finds it difficult to accept that his cheating is a trade-off for the middle-class lifestyle to which his occupation makes her privy, a lifestyle of material acquiescence that he rightly assumes (and critics have observed) she could have never lived without (Gabbard 133; Willis 6). For his part, Tony resents Carmela's domestic work that, according to him, has made her "[f]ree to sit back for twenty fucking years and fiddle with the air conditioning, and fucking bitch and complain" ("Whitecaps" [4.13]); ironically, Tony's affluence is what has given Carmela access to the homemaker position that he purports to loathe, a position that reflects on his own status as boss of the DiMeo Family and patriarch of the Soprano family. The life of leisure that Tony perceives her to have is balanced, in his eyes, by the comforts of a traditional family that he craves and has been, from the series' first episode, afraid of losing.

As this chapter has established so far, the cultivation of a traditional family image in gangster texts is shattered by the incompatibility of this image with the husband's behaviour. However, despite the turmoil in the marriage stemming from the husband's gangster activities and infidelity, he remains fiercely faithful to the family as a concept, if not to his wife as an individual. If it is impossible for married life ever to meet the idealistic standard he seeks, what emerges is the gangster's psychological need for a constant moral compass with which he can measure himself. The wife fulfills this function. Even though gangsters would rather distance

uncomplainingly accepts the benefits she reaps from his work when she is still a moll, including "great Jackie O. clothes" and Christmas gifts "which she surely couldn't afford on her schoolteacher's salary" (63). Yet Donatelli and Alward's claim is baseless. As George De Stefano has also observed, Kay is far from "oblivious" (188). This lingering critical view that wives are ignorant or completely dismissive of the true source of their husbands' income (as seen in McCabe and Akass's sweeping claim that Carmela Soprano "turn[s] a blind eye to what her husband does for a living" [39]) betrays a desire on the part of critics for the wife to be representative of blissful innocence. In a sense, critics share the same desire as the gangster: a split between his average American side represented by the façade of the traditional family as symbolized by the wife and his corrupt side represented by his gangsterism and infidelity.

themselves from moral evaluations of their lifestyle, be they from external or internal sources, they nevertheless tend to marry women who serve as the conscience they struggle with, a struggle often shared by the wives who also contemplate the ramifications of their husbands' (and sometimes their own) involvement in the underworld. The remainder of this chapter will demonstrate how these shared marital struggles force both spouses to confront the consequences of their choices, even if only momentarily.

Christopher Moltisanti—the character whose relationship problems opened this chapter—undergoes numerous cycles of sobriety and relapse across multiple seasons of *The Sopranos*, and these cycles gesture toward the series' larger concerns with the repetition of behavioural patterns that resemble addictions in their satisfaction and destruction and the possibility of such cycles being broken. In light of this addiction, it is appropriate that Sharon Sutherland and Sarah Swan characterize Tony and Carmela Soprano's relationship as "one of mutual dependence" (238). Unlike Christopher's drug addiction, which can be characterized as a disease, the Sopranos' cyclical patterns seem to be deliberately sought out by each spouse to fulfill a deep emotional and psychological need. Hence, Dana Polan, who has also observed this phenomenon, describes it as "willed repetitiveness" to emphasize it as a purposeful pursuit for characters rather than merely random luck (58). For Tony and Carmela, guilt is what drives their respective behavioural cycles and binds them to each other despite the rockiness of their marriage. The guilt cycle is characterized by the following features: first, an inciting event that jumpstarts the character's guilt; second, an attempt to quell the guilt, which often occurs along with a confrontation; and third, a resolution of the cycle. For Tony, resolution involves a commitment to change the behaviour that led to the inciting event, usually his infidelity, whereas for Carmela it involves emotional manipulation and displacement of guilt onto Tony. The peaceful time

between each cycle varies until it is repeated again. The repetition of these cycles emphasizes the core identity of husband and wife. As Polan observes, Tony's choices always lead him "back to what he's always been" (62); in other words, Tony will always be a serial cheater. As revealed by the series' ending (or, rather, what Polan calls the "non-ending" cut to a black screen [as I described in Chapter One]), Polan suggests that "ultimately [Carmela] will always be there to stand by her man" (59). Vincent pinpoints the significance of the "full circle" that *Sopranos* characters experience during the series: "It's not transformation but coming to terms with who they truly are and embracing that and living it, rather than making themselves unhappy by trying to be something they are not" (172). In other words, the cycle with which the characters engage is one of personal discovery and acceptance, and it illustrates that the comfort and stability Tony and Carmela each experience through his or her own behavioural characteristics as well as those of the other spouse greatly outweigh the severe pain and stress caused by the very same characteristics.

For two people with similar conventional standards who are yet constantly fighting, one must look to deeper psychological needs that are fulfilled through their respective cycles of behaviour in order to understand their simultaneous cyclical attraction and repulsion to each other in the series. Tony, whose mental landscape is laid bare to other characters and to the series' spectators alike, relies on Carmela for much of his sense of self despite the vulnerable state in which this leaves him. The episode "Whitecaps" [4.13] has Carmela identifying Tony's ambivalent feelings for her because of her intimate knowledge of him, not just on an occupational level—though that, of course, plays a role in her potential to expose Tony as a gangster—but also on a psychological level, both of which give her a sense of power over him. As Carmela states, "I know you better than anybody, Tony, even your friends, which is probably why you hate me."

In light of this revelation, one can read Tony's statement in an early episode that Carmela "is [his] life" as meaning just that: she simply knows so much about him, arguably more than he himself knows, that it is as though she occupies his consciousness completely ("Pax Soprana" [1.6]). Most important in Carmela's thorough, intimate knowledge of her husband is her awareness and validation of the psychological trouble caused by his mother, Livia, whom I analyzed in Chapter One. Carmela supports his venture into therapy to cope with his panic attacks and depression, and she encourages him to accept Livia's Alzheimer's disease as a ploy devised by his mother so she "can't be called on her shit," as Carmela puts it, for having tried to kill Tony ("I Dream of Jeannie Cusamano" [1.13]). In a way, Carmela's understanding of Tony on a psychological level renders her a domestic double to Tony's psychiatrist, Dr. Melfi, much as it would pain him to admit this to himself.

Carmela, too, finds psychological fulfillment in her volatile marriage to Tony. For all the faults she finds in him, she tells Father Phil that she "still love[s] him" and "believe[s] he can be a good man" ("College" [1.5]). At the same time, this devotion and hope, which are evident in Carmela throughout the series, mask the real motive she has for staying in the marriage. Edie Falco, the actress who plays Carmela, believes that "[t]here is something . . . about [Tony's] running around, his evasiveness about what he does, that provides something that [Carmela] needs" (qtd. in Gabbard 137). That something, according to Martha P. Nochimson, is sex: for all of Carmela's religiosity and moralizing, she is unknowingly "sexually excited by transgressive behaviour, and especially by violence" ("Waddaya" 198). This repressed excitement sharply contrasts with Karen Hill's frank voice-over admission in *Goodfellas* that she was "still very attracted" to her husband and "still couldn't hurt him" for his infidelity with the gun she points to his face. Nochimson calls attention to Carmela's reaction when Tony returns home after

murdering Matthew Bevilacqua, the man who tried to kill Christopher, in the episode “From Where to Eternity” [2.9]. Nochimson asserts that the murder “is not a deed of which Tony has explicitly informed her, but the sequences before [Tony rushing out after Carmela passes him the phone] and after [Tony and Carmela having sex] indicate that she knows the basics of his intent, a situation that patently horrifies and arouses her” (“Waddaya” 198).⁶³ On some level, this sexual arousal exposes Carmela to the conflicting feelings triggered by her husband’s violent actions.

If a deep psychological need to be reminded of one’s own moral conundrums is part of the marital glue in *The Sopranos*, the same holds true in the texts of *The Godfather*. Kay functions as a “nagging conscience” for her husband (Chown 72). Michael thought he had successfully expunged this conscience in the conclusion of the first *Godfather* film by having the door closed on her and symbolically excluding her not only from his office but also from his business affairs (Shadoian 272). Yet, as *The Godfather Part II* illustrates, choosing a woman like Kay as a life partner indicates that on some level Michael needs to have a constant reminder of the difficult moral problems of his family business that he cannot ultimately ignore in spite of himself. Kay’s criticism of Michael’s hypocrisy in claiming a “family man” image means that Kay simultaneously functions as a hair shirt for him: a punishment that Michael imposes on himself

⁶³ Significantly, in this sexual stimulation by violence, one can draw a parallel between Carmela and Tony’s mother. In a therapy session with Dr. Melfi, Tony recalls the source of his first panic attack as a child, and his recall takes the form of a flashback. Having witnessed his father cut off part of butcher Francis Satriale’s pinkie finger over an unpaid gambling debt, the boy Tony observes the sexual excitement between his mother and father when the latter brings home a roast from Satriale’s store. The young Tony hears his father suggestively note that his mother likes her roasts “standing with the bone in” and his mother marvel at the roast’s “juices.” He watches his parents sexily dance, and when his father states that “[t]he lady loves her meat,” Tony has a panic attack and faints (“Fortunate Son” [3.3]). Glen D. Gabbard offers a Freudian interpretation of the Soprano marriage, stating that Tony chose Carmela as his wife in order to relive his relationship with his mother while also distancing himself from it (126-27). In this light, Carmela’s resemblance to Livia in her sexual desires triggered by violence as well as in her criticism of Tony for his violence function as a way for Tony unconsciously to work through psychological trauma from his past through his wife.

to alleviate some of his guilt. Even after the couple is divorced, the moral problems that decimated the marriage and fundamentally altered the business have continued to occupy Michael, and they have taken their toll mentally and physically as *The Godfather Part III* illustrates. There, an older, frail Michael, who once ordered the murders of the heads of the rival Five Families during his nephew's christening (in the first *Godfather* film), turns to the Catholic Church for absolution and to his now ex-wife for forgiveness, a movement which reflects the late 1980s' "men's movement" wherein businessmen were prompted to "reconnect with families and rediscover spirituality" (Yaquinto, *Pump* 163). Significantly, Kay compares the historical plight of the Sicilian people to the difficulties of the couple's marriage, explaining that she and Michael "do have a bad history, but [she is] still here," thereby aligning the resilience of Michael's ancestors to her continuing function as his conscience. Although Michael asks Kay for her forgiveness ("Oh, like God, huh?" Kay retorts), all he receives is her admission of her continuing love for him. Immediately after this revelation, Kay overhears Michael promise to assist in Calo's revenge for Don Leone Tommasino's murder. "It never ends," she says to herself, defeated, implying the continuation of both the family business and Michael's inner torment that it causes. Kay is perceptive in her observation that Michael's guilt will never end, particularly the guilt for having hurt his former wife. This guilt occupies a significant place in Michael's outdoor confession to Cardinal Lamberto. Michael begins his confession by first admitting to having "betrayed [his] wife" and then having betrayed himself, stressing the primacy of Kay as a reflection of his own moral shortcomings. Michael insists to Lamberto that confession is an exercise in futility, for he is "beyond redemption." Despite assuring Michael that redemption is possible for all, Lamberto knows that Michael will go to his grave with the burden of his conscience: "you will not change," remarks Lamberto astutely. The absence of Kay in the film's

final scene wherein Michael dies indicates not the absence of Michael's conscience but its excess in light of the grave cost of his choices.

This chapter has shown that despite the gangster's association with deviance, post-*Godfather* he seeks out a normative life experience: marriage. The presence of the wife is represented by her working with her gangster husband to create an image of a typical family whose household is steeped in traditional values from which he gains a sense of legitimacy, normalcy, and humanity; however, her interrogation of her husband's all-consuming preoccupation with work and her exposure of his infidelity also reveal the wife's absence in denying unquestioning deference to her husband. Through the marital relationship, the gangster reveals an ambivalent attitude toward the essentially staged relationship he purportedly requires. For her part, the wife's refusal to support fully her husband's choices only enhances the family man image as purely illusory. That both spouses commit much effort to maintain this illusion at great cost to their marriage and especially to their children (if present) reveals the significant effect that psychological need plays in closing the gap and maintaining the façade. The wife's absence as represented by her refusal to condone the husband's behaviour is balanced by her presence in actively cultivating the family fiction despite the pain it causes. Moreover, her knowledge of her husband's activities further shatters the image of wifely innocence while her role as civilian simultaneously shields her from danger.

The protective aspect of the gangster's wife's position functions as a contrast between the wife and another, less common character in gangster texts who places herself amid underworld activities: the female gangster. By occupying a role typically reserved for men, the female gangster directly presences herself in criminal life by actively participating in it, but at the same

time she absents herself from that criminal life by raising searching questions regarding gender and violence. This further “absent presence” will thus be explored in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

“[Y]ou have to fucking deal with me”: Female Gangsters and Textual Outcomes

On August 23, 2009, the *ABC News* homepage featured the following title among its headline news stories: “Move Over Don Corleone, Godmothers on Rise.”⁶⁴ The headline was accompanied by a photograph of the accused, Elmelinda Pagano, with each of her arms held in an iron grip by police officers. Clicking on the headline led to an article stating that because of the death or incarceration of the men who led Naples’s Camorra syndicate, “the women are increasingly taking over the helm from their men” (D’Emilio). What is most fascinating about the article for my current purposes is that its headline is meant to draw the reader’s attention by referring to Don Vito Corleone, one of the most influential fictional characters in popular culture who was created by Mario Puzo in *The Godfather* novel (1969) and played by Marlon Brando in Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Godfather* film (1972). This reference generates the expectation that the article is about the increase of fictional female gangsters; in fact, as the corresponding photograph makes clear, it focuses only on historical women. The public may be intrigued by the idea of women participating in organized crime; however, in comparison to male gangsters, there has been much less interest—both academically and artistically—in fictional women who participate in the underworld, those “Godmothers” of *ABC News*’s headline. Accordingly, whereas the previous three chapters of this project analyzed absent presence through the three most common roles for women in gangster texts (mother, moll, and wife), this chapter examines the concept through a fourth, rather exceptional, role: gangster. It argues that the absent presence

⁶⁴ The homepage headline is no longer accessible on the *ABC News* website; however, Frances D’Emilio’s article—without *ABC News*’s original headline—can be viewed by entering the original web address (listed in the Works Cited) into the address bar on the Internet archive website *Wayback Machine* (<http://archive.org/web/web.php>).

of the female gangster is evidenced by gender, specifically the fact that the construction of this character foregrounds gender. It does so by illustrating how this foregrounding impacts the character's fate in comparison to male gangsters. The punishment meted out to the female gangster reveals how the conventions of gangster texts are altered when applied to a woman who is in charge of a gang. When she is re-domesticated through a privileging of heterosexual love and respect for the law, the odds of the female gangster's survival through the end of a text are virtually guaranteed.

The organization of gangster texts around a male gangster is itself a convention. This should come as no surprise; as I established elsewhere, the gangster genre is concerned primarily with interrogating men's behaviour. This convention is upheld not only by those who create the bulk of gangster texts but also by those who analyze them. The introduction to this project noted the significant contribution to gangster studies made by Robert Warshow in his essay "The Gangster as Tragic Hero" (1948). Warshow describes the gangster in artistic works as a "man of the city": "he hurts people" (101), "he always dies *because* he is an individual" (emphasis original, 103), and, paradoxically, "he is what we want to be and what we are afraid we may become" (101). Warshow's ideas are based upon the sexist generalization that all gangsters are men, an incorrect assumption both historically—as the *ABC News* article indicates—and fictionally. Nevertheless, despite evidence to the contrary, scholars since Warshow continue to employ his bias when writing about gangsters in general: "everyone, including moviegoers, thinks he or she can easily recognize a gangster when he appears on-screen" (Yaquinto, *Pump* xi); "The gangster, like his forbear in American history and culture, the gunslinger, is a classic character . . ." (McCarty 1); "He is . . . an anti-social figure . . ." (Mason vii).⁶⁵ This generalization occurs despite the fact

⁶⁵ Some thirty years after the publication of Robert Warshow's article, Jack Shadoian amends Warshow's generalization when he explains that generic patterning in the gangster film involves "[a] man, a woman, or a group

that the respective works from which I have quoted briefly mention female gangsters, thereby indicating that the authors are not unaware of this character's existence. The female gangster thus lurks at the periphery of scholarly work in this field.

On the other hand, in gangster texts the female gangster is more accurately described as an absent presence. As Marilyn Yaquinto and John McCarty observe, this character in the American gangster genre is as old as the genre itself (*Pump* 99; 77). In order for me to avoid misrepresenting the degree of the character's depiction in gangster texts, I must mention that she is a rarity. One explanation for this rarity can be found in Jack Shadoian's description of the character as an "anomaly" (17), which the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as "[i]rregularity, deviation from the common order, [or] exceptional condition or circumstance" ("Anomaly"). It is likely her rarity that makes her an exception within male-dominated gangster studies and leads scholars to exclude her when advancing arguments about the gangster figure in general; however, Shadoian's word choice implies that she is a deviation. This sense of the word anomaly points to the heart of the matter with regard to her rarity and overall absence. If it is true that "[t]o excel is to transgress" (Shadoian 22), then the woman gangster exacerbates this transgression in comparison to her fellow males by virtue of her gender. As Yvonne Tasker recognizes, the label "'criminal women'" is a loaded term: it embodies "transgression in a literal sense . . . and, potentially, in a more symbolic sense" (109). It is the female gangster's gender that complicates her positioning among other male characters and raises related issues with respect to power and violence. In her contemplation of sex and gender in film, E. Ann Kaplan poses the following question: "[W]hen women are in the dominant position, are they in the *masculine* position?" (emphasis original, 28). Although this is a rhetorical question, it

in opposition to the society" (4). Two paragraphs before, however, he reveals a bias when he writes that "[o]ur involvement with the gangster rests on our identification with him as the archetypal American dreamer . . ." (4).

illuminates the difficulties that scholars have had in positioning the female gangster in relation to both her male counterparts and the gangster genre as a whole.

Violence is one of the central themes of gangster texts. It is partly this “irrational brutality” that continues to draw modern audiences to the gangster genre (Warshow, “The Gangster” 102), for, as Shadoian points out, its subject matter makes it inherently “the most violent of genres” (8). Contemporary examples of the genre, particularly in film and television, seemingly attempt to best each other in terms of graphic violence; for example, just when audiences think they have witnessed the goriest scene in a gangster film, the well-known chainsaw scene in Brian De Palma’s 1983 remake of *Scarface* (Howard Hawks, 1932), the vice scene in *Casino* (Martin Scorsese, 1995) makes a tight squeeze, as it were, onto the screen. Although these examples involve violence against men by other men, violence against women by men is also a staple feature of this genre. As I described at the beginning of Chapter Two, one can almost feel the sting of the fruit when Tom Powers slaps Kitty in the face with a grapefruit in *The Public Enemy* (William A. Wellman, 1931). On the other hand, one is left to speculate about which violent acts have been committed on the dead, naked, bloody prostitute in bed with Senator Pat Geary in *The Godfather Part II* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1974). Unsurprisingly, perhaps, violence also plays a role in texts featuring women in the role of criminal. For instance, Kate “Ma” Barker participates in a bloody shootout with police alongside her sons in *Bloody Mama* (Roger Corman, 1970), and Connie Corleone gives her godfather, Don Altobello, a box of *cannoli* (Italian pastries) laced with poison in *The Godfather Part III* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1990). Both women cause the death of at least one human being; however, their fates diverge. Kate is killed by the police, whereas Connie faces no consequences; indeed, her survival is emphasized by the fact that she has a small taste of the deadly dessert herself at the insistence of her

godfather but is unaffected. Whether victims or perpetrators, then, women characters exemplify the violence at the heart of the gangster genre.

Although both male and female gangsters commit violence, the consequences differ to a degree that warrants examination. Punishment of the gangster figure converges with the genre's thematic concern with violence. Whereas the male gangster generally faces some form of punishment due to the severity of his transgressions, the female gangster does not always meet the same fate in terms of both type and severity of punishment. Warshow argues that individuality is the cause of the gangster's death: "In the deeper layers of the modern consciousness, all means [of attaining success] are unlawful, every attempt to succeed is an act of aggression, leaving one alone and guilty and defenseless among enemies: one is *punished* for success" (emphasis original, "The Gangster" 103). The male gangster's punishment is almost always death. It is caused by either the state or rivals, particularly other gangsters.⁶⁶ On the other hand, death is not always the outcome for the female gangster. To be sure, there are women who are killed or presumed dead at the end of a text. These women include Ann "Queen Ann" Cardington in *The Shock* (Lambert Hillyer, 1923) and Slade in *Lady Scarface* (Frank Woodruff, 1941). In contrast to her male counterparts, however, a number of female gangsters survive. In light of the crimes that they have committed, the women's fate is to face life or love as reform. Such characters include Dot Burton in *Lady Gangster* (Florian Roberts, 1942) and Annalisa Zucca in *The Sopranos* (David Chase, 1999-2007). This chapter will proceed by

⁶⁶ Examples of the former are *Underworld* (Josef von Sternberg, 1927), the *Little Caesar* novel (W. R. Burnett, 1929) and film (Mervyn LeRoy, 1930), *Scarface* (Howard Hawks, 1932), *Angels with Dirty Faces* (Michael Curtiz, 1938), *High Sierra* (Raoul Walsh, 1941), *Johnny Eager* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1942), *White Heat* (Raoul Walsh, 1949), and *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967). Examples of the latter include *The Penalty* (Wallace Worsley, 1920), *The Public Enemy* (William A. Wellman, 1931), *Scarface* (Brian De Palma, 1983), *Donnie Brasco* (Mike Newell, 1997), and the television series *The Sopranos* (David Chase, 1999-2007). As I have mentioned in previous chapters, Tony Soprano's fate is a matter of debate; however, a convincing case for his being murdered by an enemy (the mysterious character credited as the Man in Members Only jacket) has been made by a blogger who meticulously analyzes the series' final scene (see "*The Sopranos*: Definitive").

analyzing the aforementioned characters: those who face death due to the nature and degree of their transgressions (Queen Ann, Slade) followed by those who are permitted to live because they—like the male gangsters in early films analyzed in Chapter Two—will reform through heterosexual love (Dot) or are somehow beyond punishment (Annalisa). Proceeding in this order allows me to explore the extent to which gender impacts the character's representation as transgressive and dictates the consequences for her actions.

According to Jonathan Munby, silent gangster films “mediated fears about the nation's urbanization and modernization primarily in terms of a binary system of oppositions inherited from a traditional frontier mythology” (*Public* 20-21). Such oppositions abound in *The Shock* through such aspects as place, race, and ability. Munby goes on to argue that the gangster films of this period “did not ultimately disturb fundamental oppositions that guaranteed the bourgeois order” (*Public* 25). Upon an initial viewing, an audience may find that Munby's assertion is applicable to *The Shock*. This film follows the reformation of a male gang member (a process I explored in Chapter Two) and the death of his female leader. Upon closer inspection, in the death of Ann “Queen Ann” Cardington there is evidence to suggest that such oppositions are undesirable and untenable, even if the oppositions themselves remain firmly in place. Because films of the 1920s are largely concerned with themes relating to women (Everson 198), *The Shock* is a pertinent text through which to examine the female gangster in terms of consequences for her actions. *The Shock* attempts to warn of the dangers of boundary-crossing for women, an act which is ultimately undermined by the acknowledgment that transgression of outmoded binaries is necessary for women's survival in the modern age.

The Shock peers into the “ever dimming records of yesterday” in San Francisco's Chinatown. It follows self-described “cripple” Wilse Dilling as he travels to the small town of Fallbrook on

the orders of his underworld superior, Queen Ann. He is befriended and biblically educated by Gertrude Hadley, whose father, Micha, is the town's most prominent banker. Wilse soon learns, however, that he is to help Queen Ann exact revenge on Micha. Caught between "the woman he loved [Gertrude] and the woman he feared [Queen Ann]," Wilse chooses the former. He attempts to warn Micha by revealing his connection to Queen Ann, but Micha flees. Wilse blows up the bank to prevent it from falling under an investigation orchestrated by Queen Ann, and Gertrude is inadvertently injured in the blast; as a result, her fiancé, Jack Cooper, ends their relationship. Wilse later learns Micha and Queen Ann's history: they were to be married long ago, but with Micha's corroboration, Queen Ann was imprisoned and has been blackmailing him since her release by hoarding damning documents. Back in San Francisco, Wilse discovers that Queen Ann intends on using Gertrude in her plot to ruin Micha, so he and Jack try to recover the documents from Queen Ann's house. Queen Ann learns of Wilse's betrayal and has Gertrude kidnapped. Wilse is powerless to stop Queen Ann's revenge until an earthquake suddenly befalls the city and kills Queen Ann. Although Wilse is hurt, the earthquake restores to him the full use of his legs. Wilse surprises Gertrude with his recovery, and the film closes with a shot of the couple admiring an ocean view.

Like other gangster films in the silent period, *The Shock* explores the potential for crime in modern America. This potential, a product of the city according to the film, seems to be an inevitable by-product of modernity. Accordingly, early creators of gangster films tended to treat criminal activity as a given and focused on possible accommodations for modernity's unfortunate by-product. For Munby, no matter the entertainment value provided to audiences by the observation of shady characters, the principle aim of early gangster films was the espousal of a "reforming morality" (*Public* 24). Wilse's reformation is at the forefront of the film; his

disabled legs are an external signal of his internal drive to break the law, and his ability to walk at the end of the film indicates that he has undergone an internal change into a law-abiding American. Wilse becomes a hero, aligning himself with Gertrude while turning against Queen Ann. He prevents Gertrude from becoming a victim to the underworld any further than she already has been by virtue of her injury in the blast, which briefly twinned her physically with Wilse in her infirmity. That the film foregrounds Wilse's reformation by contrasting it to Queen Ann's vengeful resolve and death characterizes Queen Ann as a dangerous woman.

The Shock evidently positions Queen Ann as the Evil to Wilse's Good, illustrating a common binary in crime films from this period (Rosow 87). Nonetheless, Queen Ann's gender complicates both this traditional scheme and critical arguments about the period's films. The "bad guy [may be] punished at the end" of other 1920s films such as Wallace Worsley's 1920 film *The Penalty* (Sochen 4), but in *The Shock* the male criminal is reformed and the bad *girl* is punished by death. If June Sochen is correct in her suggestion that the "new and old worlds [are] reconciled by assuring the preservation of traditional morality" through punishment of the transgressor, then conventional constructions of gender are also being preserved through Queen Ann's demise (4). Placing Queen Ann and Gertrude side by side, viewers easily realize that Gertrude survives because she is representative of nineteenth-century femininity whereas Queen Ann is doomed because she stands in for the New Woman of the twentieth century.

Queen Ann's death exemplifies male anxiety in the early twentieth century with regard to the changing roles of women in American society. Leslie Fishbein describes the first Hollywood films as embodying the "assumption of the cult of true womanhood," but by the 1920s the industry's films acknowledge the dangers for women of the continued adherence to outmoded gender hierarchies (77). Gertrude effectively exemplifies Fishbein's description of true

womanhood as “feminine purity, piety, passivity, and domesticity” since she is, like the true woman, a “fragile, innocent creature[] who [is] naturally religious, far too delicate for the strains of business or politics, and best confined to the home” (77). Gertrude is almost always shown in the lush gardens behind her father’s house and wears modest, lightly-coloured dresses, associating her with nature, light, and goodness. Her most prized possession is a Bible, which belonged to her deceased mother. Her relationship with Jack Cooper is implied to be chaste, as the extent of their physical contact is a hug in the garden. Finally, her delicacy in matters of business is implied by her injury in the bank explosion. This injury is a result of her attempt to become involved in her father’s affairs when she “just *feel[s]* that everything isn’t right” with his work, implying a sort of woman’s intuition (emphasis original in intertitle). Although the cult of true womanhood could have been empowering for women of the period in the sense that it spurred social reform, Gertrude’s characterization offers no threat to masculinity.

On the other hand, Queen Ann’s character exemplifies Fishbein’s description of the “new concept of womanhood” in the twentieth century: “more economically independent, [and] less sexually reticent” (77), this version of womanhood held “vast potential power [for women] over men” (Ruth 111). In contrast to Gertrude, Queen Ann is associated with darkness through her clothing and her placement in shadowy, confined spaces. Her association with interior spaces should not draw an association with domesticity; instead, her “house of mystery” in Chinatown functions as the space out of which she conducts her illegal operations. Queen Ann’s sexual potential and its correlated power potential are implied by the fact that she is only surrounded by men. Since these men (with the exception of Wilse) are Chinese, Queen Ann takes on the air of a mysterious other, a dissident, just as Chinatown and its underworld are separate from—yet part of—San Francisco as a whole. This structure is exemplified in an intertitle describing Queen

Ann's house as "overlooking the Oriental Quarter, yet linked to it by secret, malevolent forces" The scene that best illustrates Queen Ann's power potential occurs in the Mandarin Café just before her death. She manipulates Wilse and Jack into delivering Gertrude. Wilse is at his most powerless here, forced to drag himself on the floor when his crutches become inaccessible, while Queen Ann stands proudly and directs the action. The audience's sympathies are intended to be for Wilse, who is pleading on the floor while Queen Ann dismisses him through her henchmen and her satisfied smiles. Her control over the film's male protagonist demonstrates the threat to men of the New Woman.

Due to the nature of her threat to the social order, it is not surprising that Queen Ann presumably dies in the earthquake during the film's climax. Significantly, through the earthquake, it is God himself—in the form of a convenient *deus ex machina*—who punishes the criminal woman and restores normative roles. As the intertitle puts it, where Wilse failed, "Providence interfered." Despite what Fran Mason refers to as the "triumph of ideology and hierarchy" in pre-classical gangster films, *The Shock*'s exploration and punishment of the emerging powerful, independent woman attempts to uphold the cult of true womanhood while simultaneously acknowledging that nineteenth-century values can no longer work in the twentieth century (5). The Queen Anns of America are not going away, the film seems to suggest. Accordingly, whether or not Queen Ann actually dies in the earthquake is as much of a mystery as she is purported to be since no shot of her dead body is included in the film. In her final appearance, she cowers in a corner in fear as Wilse eyes her in triumph and the Mandarin Café crumbles down around them. According to Fishbein, modern filmmakers (which would include Lambert Hillyer) were trying to "warn[]" those very same innocent women whose traditional characteristics they were trying to uphold by revealing the dangers of "feminine

innocence” (77). In other words, the goal of such films was “to sophisticate the innocent by acquainting them with the perils of urban vice, thereby protecting the purity of women by ending their innocence via filmic enlightenment” (Fishbein 77). Through *Gertrude*, the filmmakers fulfill a didactic function by illustrating what can happen to the ignorant innocents. At the same time, *The Shock* provides clues that, like *Gertrude*, a town like *Fallbrook* (emphasis added), which is described as “seemingly in another world,” has never really been free from corruption. It has been easily infiltrated by a “dope-peddler, safe-cracker, gun-man,” Wilse Dilling. Further, it has been corrupted from the inside well before the film begins and before Wilse even arrives since Micha almost married Queen Ann and continues to pay for having become entangled in her political scheme. Finally, the gentlemanly comportment of Jack Cooper is revealed as a façade when he quickly abandons *Gertrude* when she becomes injured. In these clues, *The Shock* suggests that the problem caused by modernity may not be the New Woman per se but the false belief in perfection and the defense of maintaining binary oppositions.

Like *The Shock*, the 1941 film *Lady Scarface* features a female gangster whom Shadoian describes as a “majestic gargoyle” (17) and who must die for her actions. As the title of Woodruff’s film immediately registers, this gangster is anomalous by virtue of her gender because of the presumption that gangsters are masculine men. Other gangster films starring women such as *Lady Gangster* and the remake of *Lady Scarface* that is in production (Fleming) feature the word lady in the title, which immediately suggests that the presence of a female gangster upsets the genre’s conventions. In fact, the woman gangster in *Lady Scarface* is literally absent. She is nonexistent as a possible subject in the mind of a policeman who bases his investigation on the pursuit of a man.⁶⁷ *Lady Scarface* is not the first film to have some

⁶⁷ The film’s title also alludes to the nickname of gangster Al Capone, who orchestrated the infamous Saint Valentine’s Day Massacre in Chicago and who, according to Eugene Rosow, despised the “Scarface” moniker in

connection with the infamous gangster, but it does stand out from the pack due to its woman gang boss known only as Slade. The film hinges on the dramatic irony created by the audience's (and Slade's gang's) awareness of Slade's identity as a woman, in contrast to the other characters' ignorance of this fact, particularly Bill Mason, the lieutenant determined to track "him" down. Bill's mistake is a result of the assumption that masculinity and femininity are strictly binary terms and that gender is determined by sex. Judith Butler argues that the production and maintenance of the gender binary is a result of the "heterosexualization of desire," which requires that "certain kinds of 'identities' cannot 'exist'—that is, those in which gender does not follow from sex" (*Gender* 17). Significantly, Slade expresses no romantic interests in the film and embodies stereotypically masculine conceptions of women as threatening distractions for men when she warns gang member Lefty that she does not trust him when he has been "mixed up with dames." Once Bill learns her gender, *Lady Scarface* seems to acknowledge that "those permutations of gender which do not fit the binary are as much a part of gender as its most normative instance" (Butler, *Undoing* 42).

On the other hand, the ending of the film reveals an uncertainty surrounding the very possibility of gender multiplicity. Woodruff's film contains two separate but related plot lines. One follows Slade and her male gang members in New York City as they attempt to recover \$8,000 they obtained during their armed robbery of a Chicago securities building, which resulted in a broker's murder. The money was to be forwarded to the Leonard Sheldon Hotel in New York City by gang member Mullin and delivered to Slade by accomplices. The other plot line follows the aforementioned Bill Mason and Ann Rogers. Ann is a photographer who aids a

favour of "Snorky" (203). Capone claimed that a German bayonet wound he received in World War I caused the deep scar on the left side of his face; in reality, he acquired it in a knife fight over a woman (McCarty 109). Regardless of its origins, he despised being photographed from his left side because of it.

reluctant Bill in the search for Slade, whom Bill mistakenly assumes is a man. During the course of the investigation, Bill and Ann fall in love. The two plot lines converge when Ann unknowingly invites Slade, who is posing as a maid, into her hotel room. In the ensuing melee, Ann shoots Slade. The film ends with Ann and Bill celebrating their success with the case as well as their budding romance.

It should be noted that the Slade arc is secondary to the Bill/Ann arc. This foregrounding of the romantic relationship may help to explain why *Lady Scarface* and others like it often are pushed aside in gangster studies. In his definition of the gangster genre, Shadoian claims that “certain films in the genre may be interested more in love relationships between men and women, but their primary functions cannot be overridden by a disproportionate attention to love relationships. The gangster/crime film may contain a love story, but for the most subtle exploration of the emotions surrounding love, we must seek out another kind of film” (6). This definition presumes that gangster films are men’s fare and, as such, they downplay romance. Further, it ignores the fact that most gangster texts feature love relationships of some kind, and—contrary to Shadoian’s claim—often prominently at that. For instance, as I showed in Chapter Two, much of the film *Little Caesar* examines Rico’s feelings for Joe to the extent that Rico is “brought down by a romantic fixation” (Doherty 152). *Lady Scarface*’s spotlight on its love story, then, is building upon a facet of the gangster genre. As I discuss later, the love story in this film and in *Lady Gangster* is a counterbalance to women’s criminal pursuits.

Whereas the female gangster’s survival is all but certain in *The Sopranos*, which I will discuss later, one can sense early on in *Lady Scarface* that Slade is doomed to die. In this film, there is an adherence to the death-of-the-gangster convention. This convention attempts to reinstate norms through the elimination of the gangster in a number of ways that I will illustrate below;

however, although the immediate threat of the violent female gangster may be diminished, the threat of a boundary-crossing woman like Slade remains. Slade meets an ending similar to that of Queen Ann in *The Shock*: she is presumed by spectators to be dead. After she is shot once by Ann, Slade collapses to the floor, writhing in agony. We can also assume that Slade is dead because Bill is confident that there is no longer any evidence to support his mistaken belief that Slade was a man. With Slade's apparent death, as with Queen Ann's previously, the film suggests that her threat is neutralized only for the moment. The individual transgressor is dead, but the transgression might reoccur.

The film's climax occurs in a room at the Leonard Sheldon Hotel. When Bill learns Slade's true sex from Matt Willis, he telephones Art at the hotel to warn him that Slade is on the move. He also urges Art to search Ann's purse for a photograph of Bill with his arms around "an old scrubwoman" and destroy it. That photograph captures Slade donning the disguise she used to rob the securities building and Bill encountering her, not the least suspicious, as she leaves the scene of the crime. Meanwhile, Ann occupies the adjoining room belonging to a newlywed couple, the Powells, and ushers them to safety. She locates the stolen money and hides it. Slade, having snuck into the hotel to follow a lead (planted by Bill) about the money's whereabouts, disguises herself as a hotel maid, enters Ann's room with an armful of blankets obscuring her scar, and searches for the money. Ann finds the photograph in her purse and recognizes that the scrubwoman and the maid are the same person. At this moment, gun in hand, Slade demands the money. Slade then hits Ann and hides as Bill and Art enter. Slade reveals herself, knocks out Art, and holds everyone up while hurling insults at Bill. Ann comes around, shoots Slade, then passes out. Bill destroys the photograph and takes one of Ann with Ann's own camera.

The punishment of Slade and neutralization of the threat contained in such a dangerous woman is accomplished in several ways. First, she drops her gun after she is shot by Ann. The phallic symbol of her power and masculinity slips through her fingers, and the last shot of her wearing her disguise of a maid's uniform is an attempt to diminish her cross-gendered performance and reassert the equation of gender with sex. Second, it is Ann, not the police, who shoots Slade. Ann's actions in the scene save Bill's life. Bill does not appear to be armed in this scene; in fact, he tries to wrangle Slade's gun away from her, but he fails and is taunted by Slade through an attack on his masculinity: "You're through, copper! They should've put a man on this job." Significantly, Ann takes on a masculine role and becomes the hero for Bill in the final showdown with Slade; yet, the police department, the newspaper, and Bill all choose to downplay the gender reversal by emphasizing Ann's feminine qualities such as her losing consciousness. At first, Bill appears to compliment her daring actions when he states, "What a woman." Soon after, however, he follows up his alleged admiration by tearing up Ann's only photograph of Bill and Slade when Ann is in no state to object. He also takes a photograph of the unconscious Ann, thereby reasserting his masculinity through the male gaze, and this photograph ends up on the front page of the newspaper. Like Slade, then, Ann's masculine behaviour is ultimately erased. Bill's comment, "What a woman," could equally apply to Slade, for its effect is to degrade the woman for acting like a man. The statement works to re-frame Ann by re-feminizing her, since it is uttered while Ann is lying helpless on the floor, apparently a victim of her own innate feminine inability to withstand excitable situations.

Despite the attempts to reinstate traditional gender norms, other evidence at the end of the film leaves a more ambiguous impression. Although Slade's final appearance in the film wherein she sports a maid's uniform and drops her gun might suggest that she is experiencing a

forced reversion to femininity, another reading is possible. It is important to remember that Slade's maid uniform is a disguise. She dons it in order to sneak into the hotel and retrieve the stolen money without arousing suspicion, just as she dressed like a janitor to steal the money at the beginning of the film for the same reason. In a theoretical sense, her disguise functions as something more than a way for her to avoid detection while committing a crime; it is a way in which Slade calls attention to the constructedness, the performativity, of gender. In "Film and the Masquerade," Mary Ann Doane explores femininity as a masquerade, a concept first theorized by Joan Riviere. Doane writes, "Womanliness is a mask which can be worn or removed," and she explains that the wearing of the mask purposely calls attention to the space between identity and feminine gender performance, thereby refuting femininity as an inherent quality in women (235). According to David R. Jarraway, such a space, or distance, is at the heart of "the representation of dissident subjectivity," and this gap illustrates identity to be continually in process rather than fixed (1-4). The mask, then, is "resistan[t] to patriarchal positioning" precisely because of this gap that it produces (Doane 235). In this light, Slade is not being forced into femininity so much as she is exposing its instability as a marker of her identity; in Doane's words, masquerade "effects a defamiliarization of female iconography" (235). This is the gap that Bill Mason finally discovers when Slade's associate Matt Willis reveals Slade's true sex to Bill with a pleasurable smile: "How should I know where she is?" Within the context of the masquerade, the question of who Slade is unanswerable merely through physical appearance.

In addition to the ambiguity caused by Slade's final disguise, Bill's act of deliberately ripping up the photographic evidence of his initial run-in with Slade does not completely eliminate his mistaken assumption that Slade was a man, thereby disrupting the tidy ending that the film might

otherwise suggest. During their final conversation, Ann asks about the photograph and Bill stammers, claiming that “the negative got burned up or something like that.” He then goes on to deflect attention away from that photograph by turning the conversation to the one he took of the unconscious Ann. He explains that the police department required editors to print this photograph of Ann in the newspaper in order for them to have permission to release the story. Ann calls his explanation a “mean, contemptible trick,” but Bill deflects attention away from his actions once again by proposing marriage. This final conversation highlights the fact that both Bill and Ann know about the mistake he made in assuming Slade was a man towards the beginning of his investigation, and they are not the only ones in on his erroneous assumption. Matt Willis is obviously aware of Bill’s mistake as he is the one who corrected it, as is Lefty Landers, another gang member. So, too, are the captain of the New York police service as well as the officers who were present at Matt’s revelation. Whether or not the newspaper article revealed Bill’s error is unknown, but it seems to be highly unlikely if the police had a hand in the presentation of the article and accompanying photographs. Bill has apparently not suffered any consequences for tampering with evidence, either, which suggests a corruption of authority at the level of both the individual officer (Bill, who destroyed the photo) and the police force as a whole (which has not punished him and which is likely controlling the public spin on the story). The film’s audience also retains the knowledge of Bill’s error long after the film ends. Bill may have saved face in the short term, but the final image of *Lady Scarface* is telling: a photographed subject, Officer Art Seidel, comes to life in the newspaper and raucously laughs while looking directly into the camera. The laughter and the look purposely forge a connection with the audience members, bringing them in on the joke that Bill could ever have erased his error for

good. Ann's photograph of Bill and Slade may no longer exist, but this photograph of Art laughing suggests that the knowledge contained in Ann's photograph can never be eliminated.

If *Lady Scarface* potentially erases the transgressive possibility of the female gangster by praising the heterosexual romance of its love plot characters, then *Lady Gangster* employs the heterosexual love experienced by the female gangster herself as a corrective measure for her masculine behaviour. Although Mason categorizes *Lady Gangster*'s Dot Burton as "more a liar or trickster than a gangster" (54), he also acknowledges earlier in his book that the gangster genre evolved as a result of the enforcement of the Hays Code in 1934 and the onset of World War II. In particular, the "gangster-as-gambler or gangster-as-fraudster" appears during the same period in which *Lady Gangster* is released, necessitated by the focus on law enforcement required by the Code (Mason 52). At this time, the gangster bears less of a resemblance to 1930s ancestors since s/he is now "an invisible presence who exists but cannot be named" (Mason 52). Such is the case for the "Bandit Beauty," as she is known in the local newspapers, for Dot is the only female member in an all-male gang of bank robbers. When she is abandoned by the gang after a bank robbery gone awry at the beginning of the film and left to face the police, the film switches its focus. The result exemplifies the woman-in-prison formula.⁶⁸ Suzanna Danuta Walters notes that contrast lies at the heart of the woman-in-prison film: "Because the genre itself assumes a certain otherness (criminal women)—differences literally explode and

⁶⁸ Judith Mayne describes the formula of the woman-in-prison film as follows: "A young woman either participated unknowingly in a crime; or participated in a crime because she was madly in love with a man who is a murderer or a thief; or didn't really participate in a crime but just happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time; or is framed for a crime she didn't commit. She is sent to prison. There she encounters women . . . who challenge her, try to seduce her, and make her life miserable. . . . By the end of the film the heroine has learned bitter lessons about life; she is no longer innocent. She leaves the prison but is destined for a life of crime (especially if she committed no crime to begin with); or is determined to get her sisters out of jail; or has learned her lesson and is determined to become a good, normal woman" (115-16). *Lady Gangster* alters this formula because Dot knowingly participates in a crime, and she does so not for love but for survival. Interestingly, in an anonymous letter from the Production Code Administration to Jack L. Warner dated February 5, 1942, the film is entitled *Women in Prison*. Though less catchy than its eventual title, this one draws further attention to the woman-in-prison formula.

proliferate” (106). It could be argued that conflict is the central feature of the gangster genre since Shadoian explains that one of the main thematic elements of the genre is the “exposition of two fundamental and opposing American ideologies,” those being “America as the land of opportunity” and “the vision of a classless, democratic society” (6). *Lady Gangster*, then, further emphasizes conflict because it combines elements of the gangster genre (with its foregrounding of conflict) and the woman-in-prison formula explored through a female criminal (with its foregrounding of otherness in terms of the criminal woman). This combination links back to the notion of genre hybridity discussed in this project’s introduction and explored in Chapter Two through *Three on a Match* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1932). As such, it locates *Lady Gangster* within a history of hybrid gangster texts directed at women and helps to frame the function of love in this film.

Although Dot Burton’s participation in the robbery of the Central Trust and Savings Bank is not related to feelings of heterosexual love, her abandonment of her crime-driven lifestyle is. Dot has feelings for Kenneth Phillips, an employee of the Commodore Broadcasting Company who has known Dot since she was a child. He has apparently seen her theatrical performances in the past, and he “can’t understand how [she] failed on the stage.” Dot’s stint in the women’s Springfield Reformatory certainly serves as a punishment for her role in the bank robbery; however, her motives for committing the crime require special consideration. Whereas in *Lady Scarface* there is a vestige of the silent-era connection between physical differences and delinquency (Hardy et al. 99; Yaquinto, *Pump* 101) because of Slade’s facial scar and the implication that it causes her criminal nature, Dot’s criminality is a result of financial desperation.⁶⁹ As Dot explains to Kenneth, she moved to the city from a small town to pursue

⁶⁹ Women characters’ motive for committing crime is usually circumstantial rather than innately criminal (Doherty 152). A number of scholars have recognized this motive in *Blondie Johnson*. While Marilyn Yaquinto argues that

stage work, but the employment opportunities eventually ran out. The film emphasizes in several ways that Dot is not to blame for participating in the robbery due to the circumstances which forced her to commit it: she views herself as a “scapegoat” for the police and initially vows to return the stolen money because it “doesn’t belong” to her; fellow robber Wilson is pained to see “a dame like that get mixed up in a thing like this [the robbery]”; and, before he recognizes her, Kenneth thinks Dot “doesn’t look the type” to be a robber. Not only does she lack culpability, then, she also lacks the apparently innate ability to commit crime because she is not only a woman but also an attractive woman; therefore, she identifies, and is identified by other characters, as an innocent victim.

Due to her portrayal as a basically good woman forced into crime because of poverty, Dot’s punishment—a stint in jail—is short-lived and is replaced by love as corrective. Whereas love is accessible only by minor male gangster characters in films of the early 1930s (as Chapter Two revealed), love is foregrounded in female gangster films like this one as a way to recoup these women into the social order (which also harkens back to Chapter Two’s claim that 1920s films depict male gangsters being reformed through love). This transition from jail to love occurs as follows. After realizing that fellow “stool pigeon” inmate, Lucy Fenton, lied to the prison matron to hinder Dot’s release and has thereby put Kenneth in harm’s way, Dot makes it her mission to save him, thereby reversing gender expectations much like Ann does in *Lady*

the film is unique in its presentation of the title character’s criminality as a choice (*Pump* 100), I and other scholars disagree (Dalton 270; Rosow 167; Ruth 117). Blondie is forced to support herself through criminal means because the system fails her. In contrast, Yaquinto describes Slade’s motive for committing crime as being “rooted in her [Lon] Chaney-like rancor for having a repulsively scarred face” (*Pump* 101). Indeed, because “deformity and disease [are] directly [linked to] evil” (Mairs 36), characters played by Chaney are vivid examples of this link. In *The Penalty*, Chaney’s amputee character, Blizzard, is found to have committed crime due to “a contusion at the base of the skull,” which, once surgically removed, causes him to become a “New Man.” Nancy Mairs notes a gender difference in the perception of disability in men and women. “Physical imperfection, even freed of moral disapprobation, still defies and violates the ideal, especially for women, whose confinement in their bodies as objects of desire is far from over” (36); thus, Slade’s facial scar marks her as an aberration of the feminine ideal.

Scarface. With the help of sympathetic prisoner Myrtle Reed, Dot breaks out of prison, rescues Kenneth, and leads the police to the other gang members as well as the stolen money. The end of the film makes it clear that Dot's feelings for Kenneth and her inherent law-abiding tendencies are what saved her from a fate of the type met by Slade and Queen Ann. In the final scene, Dot is rehearsing lines in a hospital bed. Kenneth, with his arm in a sling, reveals to her that he has spoken to the parole board on her behalf and made it clear that she will be employed upon her release. He tells her that he will be her sponsor, and that he will hire her to write for the newspaper's society section. Ultimately, Dot's motive for committing gang crimes—poverty—is erased because Kenneth promises her steady employment upon her release.

Besides love recouping Dot into the social order, the film also intimates that Dot's and Kenneth's attraction to one another is stronger and more permanent than Dot's practical, short-lived attraction to crime, and their relationship will function as an antidote of sorts for her last resort of robbing banks. Kenneth will supply her with steady employment and a heterosexual union. The "otherness" of law-breaking women emphasized by the woman-in-prison formula disappears (Walters 106), and *Lady Gangster* adheres to one of the formula's possible outcomes: the woman has "learned her lesson and is determined to become a good, normal woman" (Mayne 116). Perhaps love and normalcy are a punishment for a woman like Dot who is initially determined to do whatever is necessary to survive on her own in a big city. Such love and normalcy are also employed in *Lady Scarface*, but in that film they operate through the female heroine, Ann, not through the female gangster as is the case in *Lady Gangster*. Scholars tend to dismiss the romantic relationship in *Lady Scarface* by explaining that the film's focus on Ann and Bill "tends to get in the way of the main action" (Hardy et al. 99) or that the film is "more of

a G-man movie” (Mason 54).⁷⁰ These critical comments indirectly acknowledge the hybridity present in *Lady Scarface* by intimating that the female gangster story should take precedence as it is more compelling than the love story, and they indicate the difficulty in synthesizing the film’s gangster and romance arcs. Still, as I indicated previously, Bill’s proposal of marriage not only deflects Ann’s attention away from the mysterious disappearance of the Slade photograph, it also deflects the viewers’ attention away from Slade’s flouting of the law and of femininity just as Dot’s romantic interest in Kenneth directs attention away from her criminal lifestyle.⁷¹ The difference between these two films, then, is that while love functions as a counter to the female gangster’s behaviour in both of them, *Lady Scarface* features a law-abiding woman who falls in love, but *Lady Gangster* follows the female gangster herself as she is changed by love.

Whereas death and love are perhaps the more typical fates of female gangsters, *The Sopranos* depicts a woman who faces neither; in fact, she faces no retribution whatsoever for her

⁷⁰ For example, James Cagney and Edward G. Robinson switched from playing gangsters to pursuing gangsters in *G-Men* (William Keighley, 1935) and *Bullets or Ballots* (William Keighley, 1936) respectively. Humphrey Bogart, another actor known for his gangster roles in such films as *Three on a Match*, which I mentioned in Chapter Two, also sided with the law against gangsters. In *Marked Woman* (Lloyd Bacon, 1937), he played a district attorney who prosecutes a gangster with the help of the hostesses, the gangster’s former employees. Fran Mason’s dismissal of *Lady Scarface* in his identification of it as a G-man variant is curiously in contradiction with his call for gangster films to be viewed in their “variation or redefinition” (xvi) rather than their belonging to a “unitary genre” (xv).

⁷¹ A similar deflection of attention from the female gangster occurs in *Prizzi’s Honor* (John Huston, 1985), but with the purpose of downplaying possible same-sex desire. Whereas “[h]eterosexual desire is inserted with a vengeance to counter” the connotation of Mafia assassin Irene Walker’s lesbianism in Huston’s film (Esposito 100), this same desire functions as a corrective to counter the supposed masculinity of female gangsterism in *Blondie Johnson*, *Lady Gangster*, and, through its love story, *Lady Scarface*. By turning the focus to the heterosexual couple engaged to marry, *Lady Scarface* favours traditional women’s roles over the boundary-crossing one held by Slade. Although the romantic relationship in *Lady Scarface* does not involve the female gangster herself, it still serves the same function as the heterosexual relationship between Irene Walker and Charley Partanna in *Prizzi’s Honor*: it punishes the non-normative woman (Slade, Irene) and celebrates the normative one (Ann, Maerose) (Welsch 200-01). To be sure, Tricia Welsch does not identify Maerose as a wholly normative character; rather, she appears to be normative by contrast to Irene because Maerose acts covertly in her commission of violence. Welsch argues that *Prizzi’s Honor* “reflects an eighties audience’s anxiety about either accepting or killing off its visibly powerful female figure (Irene) by reassigning her power to a more traditional character [Maerose]” (200). Similarly, as I discuss elsewhere, Ann is not wholly normative either. She reverses gendered expectations by saving the life of a male character, and one suspects that in her future marriage to Bill her spunky, inquisitive nature will not be completely dulled. In comparison to Slade, however, Ann appears to be the normative female character because Slade’s sexual orientation is ambiguous and she steadfastly defies gender conventions until her death.

participation in crime. Annalisa Zucca, a minor character in the series, is a strikingly attractive, sexual, well-groomed wife and mother, and she seems to view her criminal role not as a privilege or a hindrance but as another responsibility among the many others she holds in her busy life. In a series that focuses on male gangsters, Annalisa is one of only a handful of women who occupy positions within organized crime.⁷² Like Dot Burton before her, Annalisa's involvement in organized crime is depicted as more of an economic necessity than an innate drive, suggesting, as it does in *Lady Gangster*, that women are inherently incapable of and/or uninterested in committing crimes unless driven by external circumstances. A Jill-of-all-trades, Annalisa takes the place of her father, Vittorio, the former head of the Neapolitan ring and Tony Soprano's distant relative. As the new leader, Annalisa is forced to balance the Family's responsibilities with those of the blood family, a concept I explored in Chapter Three through the character of the gangster's wife. Unlike Slade, however, Annalisa does not purposefully fashion herself as masculine. Annalisa may be in a predominantly masculine position, but the series' desire to challenge binaries and stereotypes renders her as perhaps one of the most complex female gangsters to come out of the genre thus far.

Annalisa is featured in an episode from the second season entitled "Commendatori" [2.4], the goal of which is to challenge the characters' (and the viewers') preconceived romantic, *Godfather*-based conceptions of Italy. As the episode opens, Tony and his associates have gathered in the back room of the Bada Bing! strip club to watch a bootlegged copy of *The Godfather Part II*. Tony reveals that his favourite scene in the film is the flashback to Don

⁷² Other women characters who officially hold positions of power that are otherwise associated with men in the series include Angie Bonpensiero, who is reported to have become "one of them" (as in a gangster) when she provides money to low-level gangsters out of her deceased husband's auto body shop ("Live Free or Die" [6.1.6]). Another example is Lorraine Calluzzo, known as the "lady shylock," who displays her understanding of gender bias when she asks her male debtors whether they would take their loan repayments seriously if she were a "black man" ("Where's Johnny?" [5.3]).

Ciccio's Sicilian villa wherein Vito Corleone carves up Ciccio's belly to avenge the murder of Vito's mother in 1901. After this revelation, Tony discusses with his men their upcoming trip to Naples to oversee his side business of exporting stolen vehicles from America for profit. The Americans' idyllic view of Italy is almost immediately shattered upon their arrival: Paulie Gualtieri demands a plate of Americanized "macaroni and gravy" to eat when the black squid ink sauce on his pasta turns him off, and he is forced to reminisce about his Sicilian hometown with a prostitute who is more interested in cleaning herself off after their sexual encounter; Christopher Moltisanti would rather explore Italian drugs than his Italian roots; and both Paulie and Tony are horrified to witness the police-sanctioned beating of a boy and his mother after the child sets off firecrackers in the street to gain the attention of, and possible employment with, the Mafia.⁷³ The most shocking thing that the men learn, of course, is that they must conduct their business with Annalisa. The HBO website's summary of this episode conveys the men's surprise by connecting Annalisa's unexpected leadership to the distinctive physical geography of her country: "it ain't [sic] for nothing that 'the Boot' is a high-heeled one" ("Episode 17"). In the process, this connection generates a chuckle as it emphasizes male anxiety about women occupying powerful positions.

The Sopranos explores the complexities facing all Americans, not just gangsters, in a modern world. As Chapter Three demonstrated, from the series' first episode Tony expresses a "nihilistic moral vision" of the kind seen in film noir (Stoehr 39). This nihilism manifests itself through his nostalgic admiration of *The Godfather Part II*. "The Mafia in *The Sopranos* might look up to Coppola's characters," notes David Pattie, "but they also look back on them; the world has changed . . ." (141). One major change, which is the cause of much of Tony's angst,

⁷³ Unless otherwise indicated, all of this chapter's quotations from *The Sopranos* are taken from "Commendatori," the fourth episode in season two.

relates to gender. Chapter Three illustrated how Tony's yearning for a time of traditional gender roles for men and women is evident in his family life, and it is best encapsulated by his often-quoted response to his daughter Meadow's progressive views about the Monica Lewinsky scandal: "Out there it's the 1990s, but in here it's 1954" ("Nobody Knows Anything" [1.11]). Tony is also very concerned with the changing definition of masculinity. Over and over during the series' run, Tony expresses his admiration for actor Gary Cooper, the epitome of a masculine man. He tells Dr. Melfi, "That was an American. He wasn't in touch with his feelings. He just did what he had to do. See, what they didn't know is that once they got Gary Cooper in touch with his feelings, that they wouldn't be able to shut him up. And then it's dysfunction this and dysfunction that and dysfunction *va fangul!*" ("The Sopranos" [1.1]).⁷⁴ Certainly some of Tony's disappointment in the disappearance of the Gary Cooper type relates to his shame that he is in danger of being feminized by seeking help for his panic attacks, but his obsession with Gary Cooper, the "strong, silent type," also relates to his disappointment with the changing values of organized crime ("The Sopranos" [1.1]). He complains to Dr. Melfi that there used to be *omertà* (a code of silence) among gangsters, but now there are "no values" and men become informants because they have "no room for the penal experience" ("The Sopranos" [1.1]). It seems that the masculinity of gangsters is also changing and, in Tony's view, degenerating from what it once was in his father's generation.

⁷⁴ The Italian swear words that Tony uses to express his disappointment in effeminate men can have several translations and spelling variations; in one instance on the *Urban Dictionary* website, it is literally translated as "[g]o do an ass" ("*Va Funculo*"). Brian Gibson argues that Tony and his men use gay slurs when referring to other men in order to "exaggerate the ball-busters' own virility" (200). In this instance, Tony's homophobic slur is an attempt to boost his own masculinity in comparison to men who seek psychiatric help and are, in Tony's mind, less than men, or gay. Of course, as I go on to describe, Tony's swear words also reveal his fear about becoming an emasculated man himself. In a moment of exasperation in "Commendatori," Tony yells to Annalisa, "Up your ass." This phrase serves not only to reveal his anger and humiliation with the negotiations he must perform with a female gangster but also to express his sexual interest in her and his attempt to reassert himself over her.

It is in the context of Tony's nostalgic longing for traditional gender roles and gangster values that Annalisa is introduced. When she first meets the Americans, Annalisa serves as the caretaker for her aging, incapacitated father. The group also learns that she is the wife of a man named Mauro who is in prison for undisclosed reasons, though one can safely assume those reasons are related to organized crime. Tony would presumably be content with these two things: Annalisa takes on a motherly role in her family, and the men of Italy uphold the values of organized crime by not shying away from the "penal experience." In other words, there seems to be a clear division of gender roles in the European country as opposed to America.

Subconsciously, Tony is very attracted to Annalisa because she seems to fashion herself as feminine; he has a sexual fantasy wherein he sports gladiatorial garb and has sex with her from behind on a balcony overlooking a spectacular vista.⁷⁵ Later, while they play golf together, Tony (and the camera) ogle Annalisa's shapely bottom as she prepares to swing her golf club, thus casting the controlling gaze as male and objectifying the female subject. Initially, then, Tony is satisfied by his experiences in Italy because they match his personal beliefs about both gender and organized crime.

On the other hand, the next Neapolitan scene in the episode alludes once again to the fact that the Soprano gang's version of Italy and Tony's perception of Annalisa are not what they seem. As Tony arrives at Annalisa's home, soft, operatic music is heard. Whether this music is diegetic or non-diegetic is unclear; that is, there is no indication given as to whether the music

⁷⁵ At this point, Tony is subconsciously asserting patriarchal control over a woman he perceives to be ideally feminine. Clara Orban describes the erotic dream thusly: "As a way for his subconscious to dominate Annalisa—he cannot have her sexually because they are potential business partners . . . he dreams of the two of them coupling in Roman garb . . ." (53). Orban's thoughts are not entirely accurate. The erotic dream occurs before Tony discovers that Annalisa is the boss of her Neapolitan Family; therefore, Orban's claim that the dream is a way for Tony to subconsciously dominate a masculine woman is invalid. Still, Orban is correct in identifying the dream as a way for Tony to fulfill his desire for sexual domination over her. This reading is especially pertinent in light of Gibson's reading of Tony's preferred sexual position: "Tony has casual sex with women 'doggie style,' so that he has utter control of the act and does not have to look at their faces" (197).

comes from within the world of the characters and can therefore be heard by them (diegetic) or whether it comes from the world external to them and can only be heard by the television viewers (non-diegetic). Nonetheless, the key point here is that as Tony approaches the home, the soft music is replaced by rap music from a radio, a diegetic sound in this instance since Annalisa tells her son, Vincenzo, to turn off the radio. The replacement of the operatic music (which might originate from within Tony himself) with rap music suggests the Americanization of Naples and the incongruence of Tony's image of Annalisa as a representative of the motherland in comparison to a modern genre of music emanating from her estate. Another incongruity occurs while Tony observes Annalisa receiving a pedicure outside in the sunshine. He has obvious admiration for Annalisa's bikini-clad body lying in repose, yet he cannot make sense of the pedicurist carefully collecting all of the toenail clippings from the ground. In the next scene, a conversation between Tony's wife, Carmela, and his sister Janice highlights Tony's perception of gender as it is revealed throughout this episode. The women discuss the marital problems of Angie and Sal "Big Pussy" Bonpensiero. Janice is incensed that men like Pussy have such limited views of women's roles: "Madonna/whore is the full equation, I believe." Carmela's view of the situation differs: "It's not that simple." Neither is Tony's perception of Annalisa that simple, as he comes to discover. Tony's reaction to her true role in the Naples Family reveals just how invested he is in conventional gender roles.

Paralleling the laughs generated by the "Boot" reference on HBO's website, Tony initially laughs at Annalisa's revelation of her true status in the Family as though it were a joke: "A fuckin' woman boss? . . . Never happened in the States. Never." To him, the two identities together do not compute. Earlier in the series, he reveals a similar gender bias when trying to explain to Dr. Melfi his wife Carmela's unawareness of Melfi's gender. He stammers to Melfi

that Carmela does not know Melfi is “a girl. You know, a woman. Excuse me, a doctor. Woman doctor” (“Pax Soprana” [1.6]). Tony does not believe that there can be a woman boss in an organized crime system, insisting that America preserves patriarchy; however, he later shares with Annalisa his disappointment in America and inadvertently reveals his insecurities about his own masculinity when he proclaims that American men (which would include him) are “soft.” This word cuts beneath the surface of his machismo, which serves as a front to hide his anxiety that American men have become effeminate, literally flaccid, unable or unwilling to maintain the gender performance associated with the male sex. He even repeats to Annalisa the same nostalgic longing for the past that he revealed to Dr. Melfi in the series’ first episode. Tony tries to restore a patriarchal relationship by asking Annalisa to speak to her incarcerated husband about their business deal, revealing that he finds her incompetent to hold her position. Similarly, in the first *Godfather* film Clemenza and Tessio try to circumvent Michael Corleone’s authority by pleading their case to break from the Corleone Family with Vito Corleone, the semi-retired Don and Michael’s father. Tony, Clemenza, and Tessio find their respective new leaders to be unqualified, but the leaders are unmoved. Ever the strategist, Don Vito’s tactic is to ask the men to give his son the same faith and loyalty as they have given to their Don. Annalisa’s tactic alludes to Vito’s but also is both practical and unashamedly blunt: her husband will never return, so Tony has to “fucking deal with [her].” Annalisa’s word choice here—“fucking”—captures both the mutual frustration and sexual attraction (evidenced by Tony’s sexual fantasy noted earlier) colouring this new relationship. Through this statement, Annalisa reminds Tony that he is challenging her authority when he should be deferring to her as the new Neapolitan don, however unorthodox he thinks she is for this position.

Although Annalisa is, to Tony and to gangster texts at large, in an unusual position, much of her character presentation nevertheless reveals stereotypes of Italy and women (Orban 53). Clara Orban points out that Annalisa cares for her father in the house of his birth, which is visibly “humiliating” to Tony because it contrasts with his own treatment of his mother (53). His struggle to put his own mother into a nursing home, or what he prefers to call a “retirement community,” is a running joke throughout the series and a sore point for him since family is allegedly his top priority (“The Sopranos” [1.1]). While serving as the primary caregiver for her father, Annalisa also finds the time to raise her children without the help of her imprisoned husband and to stage an elaborate dinner for Tony and other guests along with her own family (Orban 53). She believes in superstitions, explaining that she has her nail clippings and hair trimmings collected and burned because if they fall into the wrong hands, an enemy can “make the evil on you.” Finally, she is Italian and is involved in organized crime.

Still, despite these evident stereotypes, Annalisa upsets expectations because she cannot be wholly defined by any one category and its corresponding stereotypes. As Orban puts it, “[s]he represents the *mamma*, the Mafia, and Italy, all in one” (Orban 53). Annalisa is very good at reading people, particularly Tony, and uses this to her advantage. Knowing that Tony has a certain image of Italy, she might be feeding into his stereotyped beliefs by suggesting that enemies could cause one’s ruin with toe nail clippings in order to throw him off from a more obvious explanation: that such bodily waste could be used against her as evidence in a court of law. More importantly, seeing as she is fully aware of both Tony’s gender anxiety and his blatant sexual interest in her, she uses them both to her business’s advantage. While giving Tony a tour of a cave, Annalisa forces him to admit his sexual feelings by asking him a direct question: “You don’t want to fuck me?” This question forces him to act because it is a “deliberate

provocation of his masculinity” (Green 67). It would not be the first time that Tony has an extramarital affair: at this point in the series, he maintains a sexual relationship with his “girlfriend,” Irina Peltsin (“Down Neck” [1.7]), visits a bordello (“Nobody Knows Anything” [1.11]), and sleeps with an unidentified woman (“Guy Walks into a Psychiatrist’s Office” [2.1]). Significantly, this is the first time that an extramarital affair could potentially have an impact upon his criminal activities. If he chooses to cave in the cave, so to speak, he would assert his masculine sexual prowess and “regain control” over Annalisa’s “allegedly superior psychological knowledge of him,” but this control would come at the cost of their business relationship and the violation of social taboos (since Tony and Annalisa are cousins by marriage) (Green 67). If he chooses not to have sex with her, he would preserve the respect that should be accorded to the head of a Family by convention, but this respect would come at the cost of his masculine image. Tony chooses the latter, redirecting the focus back onto the business negotiations. Although Annalisa’s probing for sex might have been a strategic way to “(literally) soften him up” before they turned to business matters (Green 67), both parties come away satisfied: Tony acquires from Annalisa a ferocious new Italian associate, Furio Giunta, to accompany him back to New Jersey, and Annalisa pays less for each car exported to Italy. Tony and Annalisa carefully negotiate the standards and stereotypes of which each is aware.

Since she is a successful female gangster, it is reasonable to suggest that genre fans who watch this episode would expect her to meet an end conventional for this type of character; namely, death or love. There is no indication, however, that Annalisa is punished for assuming the highest position one could have in the underworld. Annalisa is featured in some capacity in two other episodes of the series. She appears in Tony’s food poisoning-induced dream wherein Dr. Melfi’s body morphs into Annalisa’s (“Funhouse” [2.13]), and Tony speaks her name in the

series' final season when he explains to his men that she is sending assassins to America to kill one Rusty Millio of the Lupertazzi Family ("Live Free or Die" [6.1.6]). That she is mentioned again by name means she is still alive, and that she is able to spare two men to conduct a hit for Tony suggests she has been a success with running her Family in Italy. Nor is love, specifically marriage, possible as a corrective for Annalisa since she is already married. That her husband is in jail and Annalisa is essentially living as an independent woman who runs the household (as well as the Mafia Family) in his absence implies that marriage can no longer function as a method through which to reform the criminal woman; in this particular case, marriage grants freedom rather than restricts it (as it does in *Lady Gangster*).

There are several possible reasons for Annalisa's apparent survival and avoidance of punishment. One reason could be that she is a minor character in the series. Since she makes only one appearance of any substantial length in the entire series and said appearance focuses on the revelation of her rise to power, perhaps the writers deemed it inappropriate to give more attention to her beyond illustrating Tony's efforts to establish a business relationship with her and extend his Mafia reach. After all, the series' main character is Tony Soprano. Turning to the medium of *The Sopranos* provides a more convincing explanation. According to Jane Feuer, the "serial formula and multiple plot structure" of soap operas, which could include *The Sopranos*, "do away with obvious ideological standpoints and delay narrative resolution" (qtd. in Akass and McCabe 149). Because soap operas, according to Ellen Seiter, "'do not build towards an ending or closure of meaning'" (qtd. in Akass and McCabe 149), having the series depict Annalisa's demise in any way would be violating what is perhaps the defining feature of the soap opera, especially for a character who resists stereotypical categorization as Annalisa does. The most one can know about her besides what one learns from her first appearance in the series is

that she is still alive in the final season, and she may have even outlived Tony Soprano himself. With her feminine qualities serving to temper her masculine ones, Annalisa appears to be less of a threat to traditional binaries than a woman such as the gun-toting, conservatively dressed, childfree female gangster Slade in *Lady Scarface*. Plus, as David Chase explains, even though the series is “infused” with “its own ancestors,” which would include female gangsters, it still “breaks the tradition” of its connection to this family tree (“Audio Commentary”). As Edie Falco, who plays Carmela Soprano, explains, “everybody’s just a little off-kilter” from what generic conventions dictate, which, to Falco, is what makes the series “interesting” (“A Sit-Down”). The series’ self-conscious engagement with its ancestors functions as not only a critique of the gangster genre’s conventions but also a reflection of the fact that American social attitudes toward gender have changed since the early days of gangster films.

The purpose of this chapter has been to analyze the status and function of the female gangster at the end of selected texts by virtue of her gender construction. In her examination of the Elmelinda Paganos of the world, those historical women who are involved in the world of organized crime, Clare Longrigg attempts to dispel the myth that “[t]here are no women in the mafia” (emphasis original, x). In a way, however, there is truth to the myth: if the definition of women is based on an association of gender with sex, then it is difficult to conceive of women participating in the underworld, whether historically or fictionally, because it is gendered masculine. As this chapter has shown, through the few female gangsters that are to be found in American gangster texts, the convention of death as punishment is tested. Depending on the cause of their involvement in the underworld and the severity of their crimes committed (both in a literal and metaphoric sense), some female gangsters face death. Others gradually become involved in a heterosexual relationship. Both are outcomes for exposing “unnatural” flights of

masculine behaviour. Even where neither of these outcomes occurs, the female gangster highlights conventions of the gangster genre, especially with regard to gender, and offers a significant challenge not only to the genre's male domination but also to its constructions of masculinity and femininity.

Having completed my analysis of the three major roles and—in this chapter—one minor role for women in gangster texts, I will examine in the final chapter how African-American women exemplify absence/presence when they occupy the role of female gangster.

CHAPTER FIVE

“I’m a bitch with a gun”: African-American Female Gangsters and the Intersection of Race, Sexual Orientation, and Gender

“I can do it like a brother, do it like a dude / Grab my crotch, wear my hat low like you.”

These lines are part of the chorus in British artist Jessie J’s song “Do It like a Dude” (2011).

This pop/hip-hop song features a woman seeking empowerment through actions that are coded as typically masculine. She drinks beer rather than “pretty drinks” and brags about her sexual bravado with women in a decidedly misogynistic way (“My B-I-T-C-H is on my dick like this”).

The singer, who is white, adopts not only female masculinity as a gender identity in order to achieve authority but also an identity informed by race. The words “brother” and “man’dem” (the latter reminiscent of Caribbean patois) invoke African-American masculinity, while “do it” and “crotch” inscribe hypersexuality onto the African-American body. Taken together, the intersection of race, sexual orientation, and gender in Jessie J’s lyrics parallels the same intersection informing the characterization of African-American female gangsters in American gangster texts.

Whereas the previous chapter on white female gangsters showed how those characters function as an absent presence primarily due to gender, this chapter will show how race and sexual orientation, along with gender, operate in the representations of female gangsters in the film *Set It Off* (F. Gary Gray, 1996) and the television series *The Wire* (David Simon, 2002-2008). The way these categories intersect within the figure of the African-American female gangster and mutually inform each other illustrates the complexity of tracing the absent presence framework in this case. Stereotypes of African-American women affect not only the depiction of

African-American female gangsters but also the daily experiences of these characters. As a result, the commission of criminal acts by these characters reinforces the stereotypes but also criticizes the culture that allows for their perpetuation. The African-American female gangster's embracing of "gangsta" masculinity offers her a way to support herself despite her marginalized position and resist standard gangster narrative recuperation for criminal women.

The other chapters in this project have focused on texts featuring white gangsters. Although such texts dominate both the American gangster genre and the canon of gangster texts, the black gangster figure also has a long, rich past. Black gangsters have appeared in film since the emergence of the gangster genre (Yaquinto, *Pump* 178), and Mark A. Reid cites Oscar Micheaux's 1927 film *The Spider's Web*, which focuses on the numbers racket, as an early example featuring these male characters (40). Both the black gangster and white gangster traditions depict characters attempting to fight back against marginalization. Jonathan Munby effectively articulates this common purpose in both traditions: "the black recourse to the gangster image is part of a long history of struggle, both black and white, to use the weapons of confinement against the grain and communicate (visibly and audibly) across race and class lines—to dramatize an enduring collective sense of grievance" (*Public* 226). To put it another way, the gangster figure symbolizes the sense of rebellion that is involved in the process of seeking freedom, regardless of an individual's origins. Even so, gangster texts also demonstrate a particular grievance with respect to the limited freedom available to members of ethnic and racial minorities. For example, Italians comprise the main ethnic group portrayed in gangster texts, especially those focusing on the Mafia. Because Italians have not always been considered white (Corkin 88), the white and African-American gangster traditions are specifically linked with respect to the shifting constructions of race and ethnicity in American history and culture.

As a result of these shared protests, perhaps it is not surprising that the black gangster tradition, like the white tradition, mostly explores men's involvement in underworld activities since the male gangster's life is a conventional focus of the genre. In both traditions, women occupy the requisite roles of mother, moll, and wife, with the mother being the lead role for women in texts about the African-American gangster.⁷⁶ However, as a tradition adapted to explore the experiences of African Americans, black gangster texts featuring female gangsters explore the specific ways in which African-American women have been excluded from the gangster's realm and marginalized in the general society. As such, African-American female gangsters are an important facet in the picture that this dissertation is weaving of women in American gangster texts.

To give but a brief sense of the history of African-American female gangsters, I offer some examples and general trends. African-American female gangster characters appear at least as far back as the 1930s. Reid deduces that the black female gangster was a trend in films of that decade, citing *Bullets or Ballots* (William Keighley, 1936) as an example featuring this character (44). In it, Nellie LaFleur, a black woman, runs the Harlem operation of the numbers racket—a type of lottery—that she founded. She answers to Lee Morgan, a white woman and numbers runner who controls the Bronx operation. In the 1970s, however, the trend shifts to gangsters as the enemies that the now-prominent black hero—male or female—has to conquer, with *Shaft*

⁷⁶ Examples of the gangster's mother are Mrs. Baker in *Boyz n the Hood* (John Singleton, 1991), Ella Skuggs in *Sugar Hill* (Leon Ichaso, 1993), and Brianna Barksdale in *The Wire* (David Simon, 2002-2008). Examples of the moll are Flo Gray in *Dark Manhattan* (Harry L. Fraser and Ralph Cooper, 1937), Dinah Jackson in *Underworld* (Oscar Micheaux, 1937), and Maizie Walford in *Gang War* (Leo C. Popkin, 1940). Examples of the wife are difficult to locate if one defines a wife as a woman who is in a legally-recognized relationship. Courtney D. Marshall's analysis of Donette, the mother of gangster D'Angelo Barksdale's son in *The Wire*, provides an explanation. Marshall observes that Donette wears a wedding ring despite the fact that she is not married to D'Angelo, and she argues that the Barksdales "don't let the law determine who their family is" (153). Both Donette and De'Londa Brice, another character in *The Wire*, can be considered wives according to the characters' self-determined definition of the family.

(Gordon Parks, 1971) being one of the most popular examples. Films of this “Blaxploitation” era also feature African-American women working for the law rather than fighting against it (Smith-Shomade 28). A representative example is *Cleopatra Jones* (Jack Starrett, 1973), wherein the title character is a special agent who brings down the drug gang headed by Mommy, a white woman.

African-American female gangsters reappear in the 1990s, which is likely a result of black women’s increasing presence in filmmaking (Smith-Shomade 25-26). *Hoodlum* (Bill Duke, 1997) is one example wherein this character reappears. Set in the 1930s, this film follows Harlem numbers banker Stephanie “Madam Queen” St. Clair as she fights gangster Dutch Schultz to maintain her authority. Characters Cleopatra “Cleo” Sims in *Set It Off* and Felicia “Snoop” Pearson in *The Wire*—the characters upon which this chapter is focused—are informed by the “gangsta” or “hood” cycle that emerged in the 1990s. This cycle features “gangsta stars and inner-city criminal stories of thug life” (Munby, *Under 77*). Popular examples include *Boyz n the Hood* (John Singleton, 1991) and *New Jack City* (Mario Van Peebles, 1991). *Set It Off* follows Cleo and her female friends Stony, Tisean, and Frankie as they turn to robbing banks in their hometown of Los Angeles to support themselves. Among its many other storylines, the television series *The Wire* follows Baltimore’s various drug organizations and the individuals that work within them as they battle and strategize to control Baltimore’s drug trade. One such organization is run by Marlo Stanfield. Trained by crew lieutenant Chris Partlow, Snoop serves as muscle for Stanfield’s operation. Of major concern in both texts is the examination of how racism operates within social systems and how it affects characters in their daily lives.

The opening scene of *Set It Off* depicts systemic racism as part and parcel of the African-American woman’s experience, including Cleo’s. In this scene, three African-American men

commit a deadly armed robbery at the Los Angeles Pan-Pacific Bank where Francesca “Frankie” Sutton, one of Cleo’s best friends, works as a bank teller. Afterwards, bank manager Mr. Zachery, who is white, fires Frankie because he believes that her having known one of the robbers means she was in collusion with him. Spectators, who were privy to the robbery, know that Zachery’s belief is false. More importantly, they see it is motivated by racism. “What happens the next time one of your friends robs the bank?” he asks. His question demonstrates Kimberly Springer’s observation that “Black people . . . are thought to be inherently violent” (174). His remaining unmoved while Frankie reminds him that he recently promoted her and that she counted \$240,000 by hand the day before (presumably without incident) indicates his conviction that Frankie cannot be trusted because she is African-American. The white male police officer’s insistence that Frankie failed to follow procedure demonstrates his lack of sympathy for her decisions during what was clearly a traumatic, unpredictable situation. Compounding his unfeeling interrogation is the fact that he questions her while the murdered customer’s blood is still on her face and clothes. Both men, then, make assumptions about Frankie based on stereotypes, and they allow those stereotypes to form the basis of their beliefs and actions.

This scene implicates not only white men but also women and African Americans in the reinforcement of the white, patriarchal structure. The two other women in the room are a white bank employee and an African-American police officer. Both remain silent throughout this scene, signalling their complicity in Frankie’s treatment by the two men. Frankie is especially troubled by the silence of the African-American police officer, who sips a glass of water throughout this scene. Frankie coolly links this woman to her own racially-motivated dismissal and to African Americans’ role in perpetuating the structure within which such actions can take

place: “You didn’t even bother to ask me if I was thirsty, sister.” When Cleo later suggests to Frankie and the other girls that they themselves hold up a bank, the film implies that the “capitalist, white patriarchy provokes them to commit a bank robbery by pushing them over the edge of social disenfranchisement” (Springer 180). This provocation is demonstrated by Frankie’s justification of their decision to go through with Cleo’s suggestion: “we just taking away from the system that’s fucking us all anyway.” In other words, the women feel that their helplessness in confronting a faceless structure that is stripping them of their dignity and livelihood can only be overcome by attempting to turn the structure against itself.

Overt racism is also demonstrated in *The Wire*. Each season explores a different social system including the illegal drug trade and the educational institution as well as the rampant corruption operating in and across each. One of the most telling incidents in the series is the accidental murder of a police officer in the episode “Slapstick” [3.9]. Roland “Prez” Pryzbylewski, a white police officer, responds to a scene where shots have been fired, and the suspect that he and the other officers are to search for is an African-American man. He spots an African-American man running away from the area, pursues the man, and shoots him dead, obviously having assumed that this man was the suspect. To his horror, Prez’s partner, Detective James “Jimmy” McNulty, discovers a police badge on the body: he was a plainclothes officer named Derrick Waggoner. Prez failed to follow the procedure of identifying himself as a law enforcement official. Although Prez’s commanding officer, Lieutenant Cedric Daniels (an African-American man), urges Prez to contact the officers’ union because of how Prez’s act might be interpreted due to the “racial thing,” Prez is not sure if anything besides spotting the man’s gun motivated him to shoot. “I didn’t give a shit he was black or whatever. Or maybe I did. How the fuck do you know if that’s in your head or if it’s not?”

Prez's uncertainty in the aforementioned scene points to the fact that racism can be deeply ingrained to the point of being not only normalized but also invisible. A related problem, and one that is also explored in *Set It Off*, is the uneasy relationship between the police and the African-American community. That Prez initially is an inept and violent police officer ("The Detail" [1.2]) who only keeps his job when he is first hired because his father-in-law is a long-time officer ("The Buys" [1.3]) could suggest his accidental shooting of Waggoner is but another demonstration of his poor policing abilities; however, the stereotyped assumptions regarding African Americans and crime cannot be overlooked in Prez's role as a law enforcement official. Both *Set It Off* and *The Wire* demonstrate how African Americans are subjected to the gaze of the police and to what effect. According to Francesca Royster, "One of the things that butches and black male gangster/hip-hop culture have in common is a conscious facing off against surveillance and the use of the pose and of accessories as a way of reclaiming public space" (184).⁷⁷ Law enforcement officials in both texts are almost obsessively preoccupied with the surveillance of suspects or criminals who are most often African Americans. In *The Wire*, the Baltimore police use all manner of surveillance techniques—some illegally—to work their cases, while both the police and the criminals try to stay one step ahead of each other through the use of sophisticated technology in order to avoid being detected.

As I have demonstrated above, racist stereotypes function so that African Americans are rendered imperceptible and expendable at the same time as they are hypervisible and dangerous. These simultaneous operations are also working on the plane of sexual orientation as a facet of

⁷⁷ Both of these aspects—resisting surveillance and using accessories—are demonstrated by Cleo. The latter is evident in Cleo's beloved car, while the former is evident when Cleo taunts the terrified customers during the course of the women's first bank robbery. "What are you looking at?" she yells. "I'm a bitch with a gun! Two!" The figure of the African-American female gangster dares characters to look, while her possession of dangerous weapons forces them to avert their gaze.

identity. Sexual orientation is revealed as a paradoxical construction in the characters Cleo and Snoop in *Set It Off* and *The Wire*, respectively. Both characters are attracted to women. This attraction produces an absent presence as it intersects with race and, as I show in a later section of this chapter, gender. According to Ekua Omosupe, the black lesbian is absent from the word “lesbian” because that word alone presumes whiteness (108). In other words, because white lesbian culture is signified by the word “lesbian,” the experiences of lesbians of colour are invisible unless and until race is invoked (Omosupe 108). At the same time, when race is invoked the black lesbian becomes strikingly present or visible along two planes. First, for all African-American women regardless of sexual orientation, sexuality has been understood only in comparison to that of white women; as a result, African-American women’s sexuality “is rendered simultaneously invisible, visible (exposed), hypervisible, and pathologized in dominant discourses” (Hammonds 170). The mammy and jezebel stereotypes exemplify opposite ends of the pole with respect to invisible and hypervisible sexuality. Second, as butch lesbians, Cleo and Snoop’s “masculine” gender identification also engenders their visibility: “the black butch lesbian is the most visible of forms of homosexuality, in part because of stereotypes of black women as sexually voracious” (Royster 174). This complex positioning is evident in the depiction of the characters’ sexuality. While assumptions can be made about their sexual orientation based on race and gender, both texts also delay confirming the characters’ sexuality, which is also an effect of the factors described above.

The depiction of Cleo and Snoop’s sexuality in *Set It Off* and *The Wire*, respectively, is another instance of absent presence for the African-American lesbian woman. Judith Butler explains that sexuality and gender are not in an easy relationship with one another in terms of being able to capture one’s identity. In her words, “sexuality always exceeds any given

performance, presentation, or narrative which is why it is not possible to derive or read off a sexuality from any given gender presentation” (“Imitation” 315). The reason, as I explain in greater detail in the next section of this chapter, is that sex cannot be said to produce gender. The former is biological and the latter is a social construct enacted so that it appears to originate in the former. To quote once again from Butler, “There are no direct expressive or causal lines between sex, gender, gender presentation, sexual practice, fantasy and sexuality” (“Imitation” 315). Further, sexuality is not reducible to what is presented: “Part of what constitutes sexuality is precisely that which does not appear and that which, to some degree, can never appear” (“Imitation” 315). Assumptions about Cleo and Snoop’s sexual preferences based on their shared gender presentation of female masculinity, then, are invalid. Only when the characters present their sexuality can an analysis of it be made, and even then only to a certain extent. As I will proceed to show, the contrasting cases of Cleo and Snoop with respect to sexuality demonstrate the limits of attempting to define sexuality by gender.

In *Set It Off*, Cleo’s sexual orientation seems to be established by her interaction with another woman. Cleo has a girlfriend named Ursula, who in her gender presentation is coded as “femme.” Ursula has close-cropped, dyed blonde hair; wears lipstick and hoop earrings; and dons “feminine” clothing. Nevertheless, Cleo’s identity as a lesbian is not revealed until she shares with Ursula physical contact that marks their relationship as a same-sex one. Keeling reads an early scene during which Cleo kisses Ursula as the specific moment when Cleo’s butch lesbian identity is revealed:

Prior to that kiss, Cleo appears to be one of the girls. Associated with gangsta rap, Cleo is harder or more “masculine” than the rest, but she does not necessarily appear to hegemonic common sense(s) (which already habitually call forth versions of

“masculinity” in order to recognize “black woman”) to be a “female” who has sex with “females.” (37)

In other words, regardless of her gender presentation, Cleo is presumed to be straight until she kisses Ursula. That kiss is the moment when, as an African-American woman whom society reads as “masculine,” Cleo’s lesbian identity is revealed to spectators as an absent presence. Thereafter, other interactions between Cleo and Ursula are understood within the context of their same-sex relationship. For instance, there is a scene after the first bank robbery wherein Cleo reclines on the hood of her newly remodeled car while wearing jeans and a lacy, black lingerie top. Also on the hood is Ursula, who seductively dances to romantic music while wearing thong-style lingerie purchased for her by Cleo with stolen money. Because the earlier kiss has already signalled that Cleo is a lesbian, this scene is understood as an intimate moment between two lovers and a continuation of the intimacy depicted earlier.

On the other hand, we can also understand Cleo’s sexuality in terms of what it does not (or cannot) express. For instance, Butler tells us that the butch in a butch-femme relationship may identify as masculine in terms of gender presentation, but that she “can find herself caught in a logic of inversion whereby that ‘providingness’ turns to a self-sacrifice, which implicates her in the most ancient trap of feminine self-abnegation” (“Imitation” 315). While we don’t appear to see Cleo sacrifice herself within her relationship to Ursula, the ending of the film—as we shall see in the final section of this chapter—most certainly depicts her as laying down her own life to save the lives of her female friends. As a result, any attempt to read Cleo’s sexuality solely in terms of an aggressive butch would be ignoring her identification with femininity.

In contrast to *Set It Off*, *The Wire* delays confirming Snoop’s sexual orientation until nineteen episodes after her first appearance in the series. Moreover, unlike Cleo, there is only one

moment wherein Snoop presents sexual interest in women. In “Final Grades” [4.13], she and Chris are arrested on suspicion of murder. While the two are handcuffed and sitting on the curb, the following exchange occurs between Snoop and Detective William “Bunk” Moreland:

Snoop: Think you all that for hasslin’ niggas and shit [sic].

Bunk: I know I’m all that. I’m thinking about some pussy.

Snoop: Yeah, me too.

For the last two lines quoted above, the camera is on Bunk, who puffs away on his trademark cigar. The camera then cuts to a shot of Detective Shakima “Kima” Greggs searching the glove compartment of Snoop and Chris’s SUV with the assistance of Detective Lester Freamon. All three detectives are African-American (Kima is half-Korean), and Kima is openly gay. Although it is unlikely that Snoop is aware of Kima’s sexual orientation, Snoop’s statement and the cut to Kima link the women by virtue of their sexual orientation and thereby “out” Snoop. As with Cleo, Snoop’s identity as an African-American woman (and her, along with Cleo’s, favouring of the gangsta image, as I discuss later on in the chapter) is read as “masculine,” again as per Keeling’s argument quoted above. Only when Snoop makes this seemingly offhand remark to Bunk is her homosexuality revealed—as was Cleo’s—to be an absent presence.

The treatment of the characters’ sexual orientation varies in each text, but it does reveal the homophobia that is part and parcel of patriarchy. In *Set It Off*, Cleo experiences homophobia from her employer and her friends. Luther, her employer, is blatantly homophobic. He refers to her as a “gentleman,” and Cleo responds by stating that she will “stick that mop up [his] ass.” Luther reacts thusly: “You better save that for your little girlfriend.” Cleo’s lesbianism functions as a threat to Luther’s masculinity in particular and to the heterosexual order in general, with her response and his reaction exposing male anxiety about homosexuality. As for Cleo’s female

friends, the women look away when Cleo exchanges physical intimacy with Ursula and barely acknowledge Ursula's existence, as Springer has also observed (188). Springer reads their behaviour, as I do, as indicative of latent homophobia (188). The women have known each other for years and are clearly very close friends, but Frankie, Stony, and Tisean's reactions—or, at times, purposeful lack thereof—to both Cleo's expression of her sexual orientation and Luther's homophobic comments reveal that they do not accept her sexual preference.

Although Snoop's sexual preference is mentioned in an offhand way and spectators are never made privy to her sexual activity, *The Wire* depicts her community as homophobic. As mentioned earlier, the camera is on Bunk, not Snoop, when she reveals her sexual orientation. The effect is to render this revelation matter-of-fact rather than salacious as it might appear in *Set It Off* due to the friends' reactions to Cleo and Ursula's kiss, including rolling their eyes and looking away. That *The Wire* delays disclosing Snoop's sexual orientation for so long forces the audience to confront the assumed equation of African-American women with "masculine" and "straight." Furthermore, unlike numerous other *Wire* characters straight or gay, Snoop is never shown having sex, being in a relationship, or even scouting for potential mates in a bar. As a result, this character resists one of Judith Halberstam's "visual markers" of butches: sexual aggression (230). She also undoes the visibility of black butch lesbians that is based on "stereotypes of black women as sexually voracious" (Royster 174). In a way, then, Snoop is dangerous more for what she does (murdering rivals) rather than how she self-identifies (as a lesbian, and allegedly therefore sexually aggressive) since her sexuality mostly is concealed from the audience.

As with *Set It Off*, the people around Snoop are homophobic; however, so, too, is Snoop. As far as the audience can tell, Snoop is not a victim of homophobia in her daily life per se; rather,

she participates in perpetuating it. For instance, when Snoop's gang leader Marlo Stanfield decides that his crew will hunt down Omar Little, an openly gay African-American man who steals from drug dealers, Snoop partakes in disparaging Omar for his sexual preference. She refers to him as a "dick sucker" ("Clarifications" [5.8]) and announces that the Stanfield gang will take information on Omar's whereabouts from anyone, including "some fag he be with" ("Not for Attribution" [5.3]). The series suggests that Snoop's homophobia is part of her identification with the hypermasculine gangsta culture, which I analyze later on. Her position as a Stanfield soldier also requires unquestioning deference to authority, so such homophobic remarks are expected as part of her group identity. On the other hand, by participating in the group's homophobia while not directly experiencing it herself, Snoop helps to proliferate the kinds of attitudes that result in the stereotypes to which she herself has been subjected.

Jessie J's song lyrics from which I quoted at the beginning of this chapter—the singer can "do it like a dude"—call up gender issues which I would like to explore next in the context of Cleo and Snoop. Butler quotes from Aretha Franklin's song "(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman," which, like Jessie J's, features a simile at its heart, in order to demonstrate the "troublesome identifications" in the sex/gender regime ("Imitation" 317). Both Cleo and Snoop identify themselves through female masculinity, a seeming contradiction in terms. Female masculinity has been expressed and understood (or misunderstood) in a myriad of ways for at least two hundred years (Halberstam 45). It can be understood as bringing to light an incongruence between sex and gender within the heterosexual order. As Jean Bobby Noble puts it, "Female masculinity references a range of subject positions . . . simultaneously constituted by irreducible contradictions between (de)constructions of 'bodies' *misread in a certain way* as female and yet masculine" (emphasis original, xi). Butler helps us to comprehend the origins of

this misreading as articulated by Noble. In the course of making her argument that a subject comes into being as an effect rather than expression of gender, Butler explains the assumption whereby “gender is the rightful property of sex, that ‘masculine’ belongs to ‘male’ and ‘feminine’ belongs to ‘female’” (“Imitation” 312). Female masculinity, then, challenges the normative perception that gender follows from sex since it features a woman performing masculinity rather than the “proper” gender allegedly following from that sex (femininity).

We can see how female masculinity causes confusion with regard to the presumed linearity between sex and gender when we examine some initial responses to Snoop. A colleague of mine who is a big fan of *The Wire* first read Snoop as a man due to Snoop’s “masculine” appearance. Similarly, Gary Phillips describes Snoop as “hard,” with the result being that “at first glance she’s perceived as male” (207). These reactions are no doubt a sign of actress Felicia Pearson’s prowess in portraying what horror fiction author Stephen King describes as “perhaps the most terrifying female villain to ever appear in a television series” (“Setting”). However, I submit that the “perceived inherent masculinity of blackness” (Halberstam 228) also influenced my colleague and Phillips’s reading (or, rather, misreading) of this character, as well as the assumption that “hardness” equals manliness. As per Butler above, then, “masculine” has been presumed by these two people to signal “male.” Although it is not clear when my colleague and Phillips realized their error, such a realization characterizes Snoop as deviant. In Halberstam’s words, “femininity and masculinity signify as normative within and through white middle-class heterosexual bodies” (29). As African-American working-class homosexuals, both Cleo and Snoop force spectators to confront an identity that is seemingly unimaginable while also somehow plausible.

Both Cleo and Snoop call attention to the fact that gender is not a fixed category of identification expressing its origin, sex. Rather, as Butler argues, “*gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original*” (emphasis original, “Imitation” 313). Because Butler claims that gender does not originate in biology, she argues that gender must be continually reproduced to create the illusion of an origin (rather than express an origin) (“Imitation” 312-13).

Homosexuality cannot be interpreted as derivative of heterosexuality since there are no origins, only endless copies (“Imitation” 313-14). This performative nature of gender that brings the subject into being is compulsory: “acting out of line with heterosexual norms brings with it ostracism, punishment, and violence, not to mention the transgressive pleasures produced by those very prohibitions” (“Imitation” 314-15).

The instability of gender as well as the pleasures enjoyed by those who perform the “wrong” gender are evident in two scenes from *The Wire*. The confusion created by Snoop’s gender allows her to commit murder without arousing suspicion in both scenes, but to different effect. In the first one, Snoop is a passenger on a motorcycle driven by a man. She has on a helmet, and she is dressed in tight jeans and a pink and white jacket, both of which constitute a significant departure from her usual baseball caps and oversized t-shirts and jeans. Her “feminine” costume, together with her opposite-sex partner in crime, appears to show Snoop enacting the compulsory gender for her sex within the heterosexual regime; however, the costume not only obscures her preferred “masculine” gender identity and her same-sex orientation but also her identity as a killer. She can easily approach her target, Rico, and efficiently murder him without drawing attention to herself (“Back Burners” [3.7]).

Even when Snoop dons her “masculine” clothes with her usual swagger, she is not always immediately identified as a threat. In “Not for Attribution” [5.3], Snoop enters blind Butchie’s

bar and asks for service. When she cannot provide identification to verify her age, she exits. Butchie asks another barman who that patron was. “Little girl,” replies the barman. Suddenly, Snoop re-enters with her gang mentor, Chris Partlow. Both are armed, shots are fired, and Butchie is kidnapped and subsequently tortured and killed. Here, Snoop’s female masculinity gives way to the initial absence of a threat. The sighted barman recognizes her precisely as a masculine woman, but her young-looking face is what draws his attention; because of this, he does not read her gender—together with her race and sexual orientation—as somehow deviant. The barman’s failure to identify Snoop’s masculinity and criminality in this scene emphasizes gender’s inherent failure as a secure measure of being. That she participates in covering murdered enemies’ bodies with quicklime further emphasizes the way that her identity is obscured, for just as the quicklime dissolves the victims’ identities and renders the bodies unreadable to police, so does Snoop’s disruption of gender render it unreliable as a stable marker of identification.

Cleo and Snoop’s identification with female masculinity is also informed by a gender identity often associated with African-American men: “gangsta” masculinity. Alluding to the title of gangsta film *Boyz n the Hood*, Halberstam describes Cleo as a ““butch in the hood,”” a description which could also be extended to Snoop (29). Munby identifies the characteristics of the gangsta as well as the key features of the films in which this figure appears. The protagonists are African-American male gangsters, and the films themselves are “[u]ncompromisingly violent” (*Under* 157). The notion of authenticity, or “keeping it real,” informs both the characters’ lives and the filmmakers’ intentions in exploring these characters (*Under* 158). This authenticity is achieved by tracing the lives of young African-American males in the urban space of the ghetto as they are confronted with poverty, drugs, crime, violence, and often family

troubles including absent fathers. Important, too, is the influence of the music genre gangsta rap. Gangstas obsessively pursue material gain such as jewellery, and they exhibit misogynistic treatment of women stemming from an identification with the Hollywood male gangster figure as well as the pimp (*Under* 167; 172-73). That gangsta rappers (as actors), along with gangsta rap, are often featured in these films also enhances the gangsta figure's authenticity through an association with the established gangsta persona.

The female characters' identification with gangsta masculinity manifests itself in several ways. For example, both characters have a common interest in white gangster films. In *Set It Off*, Cleo and her friends hold a meeting in an opulent boardroom of the office building in which they work as custodians. The purpose of the meeting is to have the friends agree upon certain conditions before robbing another bank. This scene parodies the one between the heads of the Five Families in *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972), replete with features like non-diegetic music instantly recognizable to viewers as that film's theme song, the women's adoption of *Godfather*-inspired nicknames ("Cleomenza" for Cleo, alluding to *Godfather* character Clemenza), and their use of hand gestures and voice inflections. Significantly, while that *Godfather* scene functions as a means to form temporary peace between male members of warring Families, this scene in *Set It Off* establishes the primacy of female relationships in the face of their shared experiences of institutionalized racism, poverty (and, for Cleo, homophobia). Unlike the *Godfather* men who are enemies, the *Set It Off* women are lifelong friends who simply need to clear the air and recommit to their common goal.

Similarly, Snoop associates herself with elements of gangsta masculinity in *The Wire* through her admiration of fictional gangsters. She wears t-shirts and jackets emblazoned with the likeness of Tony Montana from Brian De Palma's 1983 film *Scarface* ("Soft Eyes" [4.2]; "Know

Your Place” [4.9]), and she mimics a scene from a gangsta film when she agrees to murder rival drug dealers in a West Coast, *Boyz n the Hood*-style drive-by shooting (“Unconfirmed Reports” [5.2]). Unfortunately for Snoop and her male associates, none of the shots hit their intended targets. Once the driver pulls over, Snoop exits the vehicle, carefully takes aim at a man running away from the scene, and shoots him in the back. To the associate who suggested they employ the drive-by method she boasts, “Fuck them West Coast niggas cuz in B-more we aim to hit a nigga, you heard?” Although this *Boyz* method fails Snoop, her recovery aligns her with the gang violence committed by the young men in that film and elevates her as even more ruthless than they.

There are numerous other ways that Cleo and Snoop identify themselves with gangsta masculinity. Both wear baggy, “masculine” clothes, which are often associated with “criminal and . . . prison culture” (Royster 185). Both sport hair plaited in cornrows, a hairstyle often perceived as unfeminine and deviant on African-American women. The women are involved in the drug culture to varying degrees, with Cleo providing her friends with marijuana and Snoop being an enforcer for Marlo Stanfield’s drug operation. Both are knowledgeable about and proficient with guns. Cleo uses a MAC-10 machine pistol, which is associated with gang violence, while Snoop horrifies a hardware store employee selling her a nail gun with her frank description of the effects of a .22 calibre bullet on the human body (“Boys of Summer” [4.1]). Finally, Cleo is obsessed with material goods, evidenced by the fact that she is the first one of the group to spend all of her portion of the money acquired during the first robbery. Among other things, she spends it on equipping her 1962 Chevrolet Impala with hydraulic lifts—the car and lifts being potent symbols of material wealth for gangstas—and she demands that all of the girls participate in another robbery by pointing a gun in her friend Stony’s face and sneering, “I want

some more motherfuckin' money.” With such details connecting the women with gangsta masculinity, it is impossible to agree with Thomas Leitch’s assertion that the characters’ self-perception in *Set It Off* is unrelated to the gangster figure (111). Leitch’s observation may apply to Cleo’s friends, but Cleo, like Snoop, is a gangsta.

Another way that gangsta culture is depicted in both texts is through the presence of gangsta rappers and other elements to lend authenticity. For instance, Cleo acquires the guns that she and her friends will use for their first bank robbery from Black Sam, who is played by gangsta rapper Dr. Dre. Method Man, another rapper, plays Stanfield gang member Calvin “Cheese” Wagstaff in *The Wire*. The actresses who play Cleo and Snoop, respectively, lend further credence to the gangsta life portrayed in each text. Cleo is played by rapper Queen Latifah, who made two musical contributions to *Set It Off*’s soundtrack. Snoop is played by an actress whose name she shares with the character she plays, including her nickname. The “real” Snoop is a Baltimore native who lends a distinctive manner of speaking to her character, rendering the dialogue incomprehensible at times. Moreover, the actress’s past as a drug dealer and her conviction of second-degree murder as a teenager lend weight to the fictional murders she commits as the character Snoop (C. W. Marshall and Potter 11). Parallels can also be drawn between the actresses and their respective characters’ sexual orientation. Snoop (the actress) is an out lesbian. Although Queen Latifah has never publicly confirmed her sexual orientation, there have been rumours that she, too, is a lesbian. Her choice to play a lesbian character could be a way for her to reject these rumours (Iverem 113-14), perhaps to retain her music fans (Royster 173).⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Similarly (and coincidentally), Jessie J, whose song lyrics opened this chapter, has also been subjected to rumours regarding her sexual orientation. Refusing to confirm her preference, she tells an interviewer, “I fall in love with who I fall in love with. It’s society who says that people have to fall into categories.” She goes on to connect her refusal of labels for her sexuality to her refusal of labels for her music in terms of genre. Further, of her song “Do It like a Dude,” she claims it is not an “‘I hate men’ song,” thereby distancing herself from the stereotyped association of feminism with male-bashing (“Just Jessie”).

A question provoked by Cleo and Snoop's embodiment of gangsta masculinity is why these women characters are drawn to a misogynistic gender identity conventionally associated with men. Munby—from whose 2011 book *Under a Bad Sign: Criminal Self-Representation in African American Popular Culture* I have been quoting in this chapter—proves instructive here, albeit in a limited manner. He tells us that scholars have generally overlooked what he claims is “the link between the black-made hood film and the Hollywood gangster film’s historically special relationship to the concerns and ambitions of ethnic and racial others” (158). He goes on to argue that the link between gangsta authenticity and the “realist aesthetic of the mainstream gangster formula” has also been overlooked (158). Munby demonstrates this link, in part, by analyzing what he calls the “signal influence” of De Palma’s *Scarface* on gangsta rappers as they themselves explain it in the documentary *Def Jam Presents: Origins of a Hip Hop Classic* (Benny Boom, 2003), which was packaged with the *Scarface* DVD in celebration of its twentieth anniversary (167). I quote at length from Munby’s analysis of some of the rappers’ statements:

Such testaments reveal the extent to which the Hollywood gangster’s aspirations resonate with gangstas because they emanate from the position and articulate their desires in the language of those stuck on the wrong side of the ethno-racial divide. In the process the gangster highlights the hypocrisy of a culture that excludes on the basis of ethnic/racial difference. Moreover, the conspicuous identification of gangsta rappers with capitalist excess . . . provides an ironic vision not only of the ambition of black outsiders but of the hegemonic values they aspire to. (167)

Here, Munby makes a convincing point that the gangster figure appeals to gangsta rappers because of shared cultural exclusion resulting in the pursuit of wealth by any means necessary. Significantly, however, the documentary from which Munby quotes only features one female

rapper, Eve, whose ruminations Munby chose not to include in his book. Additionally, Munby excludes women from this link he makes between the gangsta image and the gangster figure.⁷⁹ Yet as the cases of Cleo and Snoop (and the careers of other female rappers) make clear, women are also invested in gangster narratives. Their exclusion from Munby's argument functions as an absent presence that I will address next.

It would be accurate to argue that African-American female gangsters emulate fictional gangsters for the reason Munby identifies in the passage quoted above; namely, because they are marginalized in racist society. However, as African-American female gangsters and lesbians, these characters extend the gangster's appeal by seeing in the figure their own marginalization via gender and sexual orientation as well as race. As women operating on male-dominated turf, they remind us of the gender anxieties that are imbued in the gangster figure, which I have explored in previous chapters. Although the misogyny in both gangsta and Hollywood gangster culture does present a troublesome aspect of Cleo and Snoop's identification, in a roundabout way this treatment of women further supports their emulation of both cultures in the sense that they can identify with this misogyny, as they can with racial marginalization, in terms of their own experiences of it. While this identification certainly does not excuse gangsta culture's misogyny, it may provide a way to understand why the women model themselves as gangstas.

In the *Def Jam* documentary that I mentioned earlier, Def Jam music label co-creator Russell Simmons states that De Palma's *Scarface* is about "empowerment at all costs." For Cleo and Snoop, that cost is their own lives. The remainder of this chapter will examine the convention of the gangster's death as it applies to these characters. When Robert Warshow observes that the

⁷⁹ Eve herself also excludes women from this link made by Munby. She states in the documentary, "People love that [Tony Montana] was so determined to get where he needed to get. And I think a lot of *guys* just go, like, 'Yo, you know what, like, this dude is . . . he had balls, and he made it happen'" (emphasis added).

(male) gangster figure must die “because he is an individual” (“The Gangster” 103), he does not consider how factors like race, gender, and sexuality affect this convention. For instance, Kara Keeling argues that death is part of the gangsta code: “each manifestation of ‘black masculinity’ is a tendency towards death, an outlaw on the path towards a ghetto heaven” (40). That both women die by gun violence, albeit under different circumstances, emphasizes this tendency. Because both women are butch lesbians, sexuality (as well as gender) cannot be overlooked as a point of analysis. As Halberstam notes, “death, dishonor, [and] disgrace” are the common destinies for fictional butches (230). As I will show, while both characters are shown to take their respective journey to “ghetto heaven” and thus satisfy one of Halberstam’s three common destinies, they die with honour and even pride.

In *Set It Off*, Cleo is killed by the police. Like many male gangsters, she dies in a “classic blaze of glory,” literally driving towards death in her beloved Chevy (Springer 192-93). Male gangsters such as Rico Bandello in the film *Little Caesar* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1930) often confront death as a result of their ego or greed. Like Rico, Cleo dies in a shootout with police; however, in contrast to Rico, hers is a self-sacrificial death undertaken to try and save her surviving friends after their final robbery goes horribly wrong and leaves Tisean dead. In the dramatic, disturbing nighttime scene, Cleo is alone in her car. She has forced Stony and Frankie out with the stolen money, all three knowing that Cleo’s intention is to create a diversion so the girls can escape. Trapped in a tunnel and surrounded by police in cars and helicopters, Cleo steels herself and speeds out. She makes it some distance until she reaches a blockade. When she lowers her car’s hydraulics, it appears that she will appease the police’s demand for her surrender. Sweating, controlling her tears, she lights a cigarette. She raises up the car. She ducks and motors through part of the blockade as her car is sprayed with bullets. Then, the car slowly rolls along and stops

of its own volition. It is surrounded. Cleo appears to be dead. Suddenly, she bursts from the car and fires her gun at the police. She is repeatedly shot by them, her body reeling from the bullets and her face contorting in pain. She collapses to the ground and dies.

Cleo's death is notable because of the multiple instances of rebellion she enacts against the dozens of police officers. Although her immediate motive is to draw the police's attention to her long enough for her friends to find safety, the larger goal is to protest the white, patriarchal system that views them all as both invisible and hypervisible. This system traps her and her friends and regards African Americans as criminals requiring constant surveillance. In Francesca Royster's words, "What distinguishes the staging of this violence on Cleo's body from a gay bashing is, at least in part, the film's message that black women are consumed as the objects of the gaze by a public that has little concern for their everyday lives" (181). In this regard, empathy for Cleo is created in several ways. The massive use of resources in this scene as well as what appear to be an excessive number of bullets to take Cleo down alienate the audience from law enforcement officials in their brutality. Lori Perry's haunting song "Up Against the Wind" (1998) overtakes the soundtrack for most of this scene, and the lyrics complement the film's depiction of Cleo's lifetime of oppression: "It seems since I was born / I've wakened every blessed morning / Down on my luck and up against the wind." Further, Cleo's death is captured in slow motion, lending it a balletic quality and creating in the audience a feeling of anger and exasperation toward an institution that has been shown to target African Americans more often than it protects them. That the film appeared a few years after the Los Angeles Police Department's beating of Rodney King only emphasizes the way the gangsta film cycle "tapped into an increasingly volatile climate of racial discontent . . ." (Munby, *Under* 157). Cleo's refusal to stand down comes at a great cost, but *Set It Off* suggests that so, too, does

acquiescence. Spectators understand that Cleo dies because “she is a woman who transgressed gender, race, and heterosexual norms *unrepentantly*,” but the film nevertheless portrays her death as an honourable one (emphasis original, Springer 193).

In contrast to Cleo, *The Wire* suggests that Snoop’s life has been dedicated to immersion in the criminal world. Snoop emerges as an angel of death in *The Wire*, assisting in eliminating rivals and concealing their bodies in empty row houses. She meets her end in “Late Editions” [5.9] not by police but by a fellow Stanfield gang member, young Michael Lee. Snoop’s death is directly attributable to a misstep on her part: she failed to anticipate that she would be watched while planning Michael’s death. In a previous episode, Chris and Snoop explained to Michael the importance of arriving early to a job to case the scene and avoid surprises (“Unconfirmed Reports” [5.2]). Unbeknownst to Michael, Snoop arranged to kill him under the guise of their having to commit a murder together. Michael arrived early to the meeting place as instructed, only to observe Snoop talking to their supposed target, Big Walter, and understand that he (Michael), not Big Walter, is the true target.

As a full-fledged member of the underworld, Snoop is well aware that death is simply part of what the series often refers to as “the game.” Her role in the game is to kill people, so she shows no signs of fear in the face of her own death. As Snoop and Michael drive over to eliminate the target, Michael asks upon what basis they are to kill Big Walter. “It’s his time, that’s all,” Snoop replies. Michael’s reaction, with a slight shake of his head, indicates his disappointment that the gang punishes suspicion of one’s guilt with death (as they are doing with Michael). He asks Snoop to stop so he can relieve himself. Instead of doing that, he pulls a gun on her. Snoop immediately understands, and she accepts her fate. In fact, even with a gun pointed at her face, she berates Michael for failing to live up to the rigid code of the streets by being untrustworthy.

“[I]t’s how you carry yourself,” she tells him. “Always apart, always askin’ why when you should be doin’ what you told. You was never one of us. And you never could be.” Through these statements, Snoop affirms that gangstas are unquestioningly to defer to authority. It makes sense that her final concern before being killed is the appearance of her hair because that concern confirms her belief that she has adhered to the code of the streets and has no regrets. “How my hair look, man?” she asks Michael, patting down her cornrows while glancing in the SUV’s side mirror. Even though Snoop’s death is caused by her own mistake, it would be inaccurate to characterize it as somehow dishonourable; rather, she dies in “stoic fashion” (Phillips 207), secure in her loyalty to the gang and proud to die while in service to her crew. At the same time, her deference to her gang superiors reminds us of the ways in which she flouts authority not just as a criminal but as an African-American butch lesbian and gangsta. By “refusing to play along with the game” (as Robert LeVertis Bell puts it in his reading of the nail gun scene mentioned earlier [538]), Snoop demands recognition. In contrast to Cleo’s death, however, where spectators directly witness and emotionally respond to her demise, spectators are soberly detached from Snoop’s death because of the camera’s positioning behind the SUV. Although spectators may regret witnessing the death of this character (murderer though she may be), there is less sympathy stirred up for Snoop here than for Cleo. This lack makes sense in light of her commitment to the gang. Instead, her death prompts viewers to feel respect for the honour she displays and reminds them of the reality of life (and death) on the streets of Baltimore.

In the previous chapter, I analyzed how some white female gangsters—unlike most male gangsters—are recouped by heterosexual romantic love. Cleo and Snoop’s violent acts cannot be contained in this fashion because Cleo and Snoop operate outside of compulsory heterosexuality. Instead, like the sexually ambiguous Slade in *Lady Scarface* (Frank Woodruff,

1941), Cleo and Snoop do not survive through to the end of their respective texts. In Snoop's case, *The Wire*'s depiction of the interconnectedness of social institutions as well as the individual's helplessness in being subjected to them deny narrative closure for the series as a whole. *Set It Off* gestures toward the convention of recuperation but not through Cleo. Cleo's friend Stony's romantic relationship with a "Buppie (Black urban professional) banker" named Keith brings her a modicum of redemption after having desperately prostituted herself early in the film to pay for her brother's tuition (Springer 198-99). However, because it is Cleo, not Stony, who is characterized as the gangsta, Stony's redemption has no effect on Cleo's fate.

In some ways, Stony's recuperation resembles the sense of closure provided by Ann and Bill's presumed marriage in *Lady Scarface*. In that film, Ann is redeemed through a heterosexual romance to restore the order that was challenged by Slade, the female gangster. However, Stony and Keith are not together at the end of the film, and he does not rescue her since she had to escape to Mexico with the stolen money to avoid arrest (Royster 192), thereby undoing the film's gestures towards conventional closure. Further, just as Slade's absent presence lingers at the end of *Lady Scarface* through laughing subject Art Seidel, Cleo's spectre remains. Stony is the sole survivor of the four friends, but her memories of Cleo (and the others) to which spectators are privy remind them of not only Cleo's value as a treasured friend but also her captivating appeal as an unapologetic female gangster. While *Set It Off* and *The Wire* diverge in the degree to which spectators are encouraged to mourn for the deaths of their respective female gangstas, both texts force us to consider the conditions into which these characters were born.

This chapter has examined how the absent presence framework anchoring this dissertation functions when applied to the African-American female gangster character. It has shown how

representations of this figure as seen in Cleo in the film *Set It Off* and Snoop in the television series *The Wire* produce the paradoxical effects of absence and presence through interwoven categories of identity including race, sexual orientation, and gender. Informed by the stereotypes attached to these categories, portraits of criminal African-American women nevertheless explore how these stereotypes—including the allegedly inherent criminality of African Americans which produces their almost constant surveillance—lead to the women's marginalization from the social order. Rejecting recuperation by heterosexual romance, Cleo and Snoop revel in gangsta masculinity for its recognition of those who—like the Hollywood male gangster—are excluded on the basis of difference. To the extent that she can, the African-American female gangster carves out an existence with whatever means available to her; as such, she inevitably races towards death while she operates within the long tradition of American gangster mythology.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation has investigated women characters in American gangster texts including selections from literature, film, and television. Its principal aim was to assess these characters according to their recurring roles within the gangster genre. That women characters are readily identifiable as stereotypes has been well established by previous work on gangster texts; however, existing scholarship often does not move beyond cataloguing those stereotypes, and it seems to be preoccupied with analyzing male characters as well as creating and promoting a male-centred canon. This project has attempted to re-evaluate women characters to show how they might gain influence from within their largely marginalized roles. While its analysis of women characters' furtive empowerment, or what I have called their "absent presence," does not necessarily challenge the premise that women characters are stereotyped in gangster films, it does find that said characters' stereotyped positioning offers an intriguing position from which they may claim authority.

In this dissertation, I have considered women characters' absent presence through the primary roles for women in American gangster texts including the mother, moll, and wife. I found that the gangster's mother is easily recognized for her idyllic characterization, but it is from within this characterization that she often challenges assumptions about motherhood. On the other hand, the moll transforms from the primary agent of the gangster's reform in texts up to the early 1920s to the mediator for male homosocial bonds from the mid-1920s and beyond, but women characters may also choose the moll role for its seductive lure of sexual freedom. In terms of the wife's role, her participation in the husband's fantasy of a patriarchal nuclear family does not preclude her questioning her spouse's fidelity to either that family image or her as a life partner.

My investigation of a secondary role—the female gangster—demonstrated how gender enables the criminal woman character’s covert operation, while the specific case of the African-American female gangster renders such operation more complex due to the juncture of race, sexuality, and masculinity (both of the female and “gangsta” varieties). My dissertation thus contributes to a field of study that has mainly focused on male characters by concentrating on women characters and highlighting how they gain influence precisely as outliers.

Of course, much work remains to be done. One possible avenue for further research grows out of this project’s single-role approach, by which I mean its focus in each chapter on a single role occupied by any given character (such as the mother role and so on). This approach was chosen to enable close scrutiny of each role type, facilitate comparisons among various characters occupying the same role, and aid in the overall structuring of this dissertation. An alternate approach examining the intersection of multiple roles occupied by a single character would yield a more complex portrait of that character. Although the texts themselves encourage the approach adopted herein by virtue of their reduction of women characters to a single role, no one role can capture a given character’s complexity. To provide an example, while Chapter Three analyzed Carmela Soprano’s role as a wife (*The Sopranos*, David Chase, 1999-2007), examining the ways in which her wifely role impacts her motherly role (and vice versa) would result in a fuller understanding of how her creation of a façade with her husband affects the lives of her children and her approach to mothering them.

Furthermore, this project only examined women characters’ absent presence as shown in four roles, with three of those being the most common regardless of medium. However, my investigation of potential primary sources uncovered other roles available for scholarly analysis. One example is the male gangster’s daughter, who in Mafia texts is often referred to as an

“Italian princess.” Meadow Soprano in the television series *The Sopranos* (David Chase, 1999-2007) is a readily identifiable example from a more recent text, and earlier examples include Connie Corleone in *The Godfather* novel (Mario Puzo, 1969) and films (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972, 1974, 1990) as well as Mary Corleone in *The Godfather Part III*. Another role is the representative of the legal system, such as a policewoman (*Paradise City*, Lorenzo Carcaterra, 2004) or lawyer (*New Jack City*, Mario Van Peebles, 1991) involved in the gangster’s arrest or prosecution, respectively. Relatedly, one more role is what I will call the whistleblower: the person who helps to topple a gangster’s empire. Sometimes she goes undercover to help bring a gangster to justice, as does Bonnie Jordan in *Dance, Fools, Dance* (Harry Beaumont, 1931). Such roles indicate a wider variety of roles for women than the most common ones might otherwise suggest.

Space limitations demanded that in the final chapter I only examine African-American women’s occupation of a single role. I chose the female gangster in order to demonstrate how multiple factors intersect to produce her simultaneous absence and presence; further examining this character allowed me to explore how the gangster figure appeals to African-American women. However, the absent presence framework can be applied to African-American women characters in the other three roles analyzed in this thesis: the mother, moll, and wife. For instance, as Beretta E. Smith-Shomade has argued, deceased mother Ella Skuggs in the film *Sugar Hill* (Leon Ichaso, 1993) is a “black female phantom . . . [who] reinscribes the bad black mother [stereotype]” by lingering in her drug kingpin son Roemello’s memories (33). As such, she challenges what Wahneema Lubiano refers to as the “welfare queen” image (337-38) by encouraging Roemello to make legitimate life choices, but she does so while literally an absent presence.

Another limitation encountered during the process of this project involved the availability of and access to film sources, which were the most predominant textual type analyzed herein. As with earlier films of all genres, the gangster film has been affected by problems relating to preservation. John McCarty tells us that some estimates put the loss of all silent films as high as 80%, whether by neglect, destruction, or decomposition of film stock. He also explains that some studios regarded the invention of sound as rendering their silent film catalogues unprofitable, while others devised one last method to cash in on the contents of their vaults: they boiled the negatives to extract and sell the silver compound within (303n2). While this method appears devastatingly short-sighted from today's vantage point—especially from the perspective of film scholars and fans—it nevertheless reminds us that our understanding of the early film era and our efforts to establish a canon of any film genre necessarily are informed by the physical survival of the films themselves.

Related to the above, Marilyn Yaquinto suggests that one reason why the silent film *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* (D. W. Griffith, 1912) appears in so many studies of the genre is that it has survived (*Pump* 12). Nevertheless, survival cannot explain some scholars' favouring of gangster sound films over silent films in their analyses of this genre. For instance, Fran Mason acknowledges that his study of the gangster figure "rather unfairly neglects the silent movie gangster," but the reader is left to speculate about the reason for this neglect since none is provided (xv). While efforts were made in this dissertation to include silent gangster films in its discussion of women's absent presence (as seen in Chapters Two and Four), this project nonetheless has been constrained by availability. It is only by supporting film preservation efforts that we can hope at least to slow the loss of these precious texts.

Moreover, this project also faced challenges with regard to accessing individual gangster

films not available on home video. In particular, *Blondie Johnson* (Ray Enright, 1933) is a film about which I had read during the course of my research and hoped to include in Chapter Four since there were so few examples of the female gangster character. This film's shooting script was accessible via the *American Film Scripts Online* database, but the film itself was unavailable. I was fortunate enough to view a copy of it at UCLA's Archive Research and Study Centre (ARSC) in Los Angeles, California, during a conference trip in 2010. The ARSC's manager, Mark Quigley, was kind enough to offer to forward a request on my behalf to Warner Brothers asking for the film's release through its Archive Collection. Later that same year, *Blondie Johnson* was released on DVD on a made-to-order basis. While this film ultimately was not included in the final version of Chapter Four, its availability should prompt other scholars to examine this unique film and encourage studios to make their films readily available.

This project raises several issues related to canonicity that should be taken up by future scholars. That the gangster film canon continues to be populated by male-centred narratives and generated by male scholars presents not only an incomplete picture of the genre but also a troubling gender bias within this area of study. This dissertation is not necessarily advocating for any particular text's inclusion into the canon; rather, it calls for more work to be done on texts outside of the canon—so many of which have received scant attention, if any—and for more women to participate in the process of canon formation. Finally, it encourages instructors of courses on gangster narratives to consider their own role in the process of canon formation. For instance, a cursory glance at three syllabi for gangster film courses⁸⁰ reveals a principal (if not exclusive) focus on texts featuring Italian- and Irish-American male gangsters, with one course's

⁸⁰ These syllabi include David Lavery's "Special Topics in Film: The Gangster Film," Marianne Conroy's "Power, Masculinity, and Authorship in the Gangster Film," and Kurt Mosser's "Philosophy and Film." Links to the syllabi are included in the Works Cited.

title revealing its specific focus on masculinity; as such, the instructors appear to miss the opportunity to discuss with students the way that both women and non-white characters are taken up in the gangster narrative. While a general course should not exclude formative texts such as Francis Ford Coppola's film *The Godfather*, the inclusion of non-canonical texts and the detailed analysis of women characters would demonstrate to students the sheer variety within this textual type and provide a more nuanced approach.

Besides those who study gangster texts, this dissertation would be of interest to scholars researching other "masculine" narratives such as the Western, action films, and war films. As with gangster texts, these narratives often feature women in requisite roles. The absent presence framework's illumination of women characters' opportunities for surreptitious empowerment could result in similar findings if applied to these other narratives. For those who study textual production and receptivity, this project encourages continued evaluation of gendered assumptions influencing both. They might examine if, how, and why the cowboy, action hero, and soldier appeal to women and how these traditionally male figures are taken up in female-centred texts. Lastly, gangster narratives produced in other nations and featuring gangsters of other ethnicities can be analyzed using this dissertation's approach. For instance, although the Charbonneau Commission currently underway in Quebec, Canada (as of March 2013) is drawing attention to the Canadian underworld's influence on that province's construction industry, unions, and politicians, some might be surprised to know that a 1928 Canadian novel is recognized as the first modern gangster novel: Morley Callaghan's *Strange Fugitive* (Dubro xiii). This novel, with its requisite mother and wife characters, also features a woman who runs a speakeasy; as such, it differentiates itself from other American gangster novels of this period and lends itself to a potential reading of the kind undertaken in this project.

There are no signs that American gangster texts are declining in number or appeal. On both the small and big screens, where perhaps the genre is most popular, new iterations regularly appear and draw major audiences thanks, in part, to their star power. To give only a few examples, Showtime's upcoming series *Angie's Body*, to be directed by Jodie Foster, will follow a woman-led criminal empire (Goldberg). Baz Luhrmann's *The Great Gatsby* is a highly anticipated film premiering in a few weeks (again, as of March 2013). Al Pacino and John Travolta are set to star in a project that is tentatively called *Gotti: In the Shadow of My Father* (Barry Levinson, forthcoming 2014), and singer Rihanna is rumoured to be interested in playing moll Elvira Hancock in a remake of Brian De Palma's 1983 film *Scarface* (Smart). This plethora of future texts ensures continuing opportunities for scholars to examine the presence of women characters and their surreptitious methods of "absent" self-empowerment.

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