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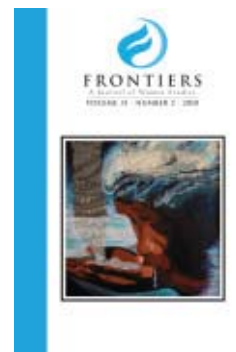
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## **Queering Hollywood's Tough Chick: The Subversions of Sex, Race, and Nation in *The Long Kiss Goodnight* and *The Matrix***

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## Queering Hollywood's Tough Chick

*The Subversions of Sex, Race, and Nation in  
The Long Kiss Goodnight and The Matrix*

THERESA L. GELLER

### QUEERING GENDER AND GENRE

The current dominance of the action genre has given rise to female characters who challenge conventional femininity through their narrative and aesthetic roles and, in doing so, open up the queer possibilities (and pleasures) of mainstream film practice. By addressing two film texts, *The Matrix* and *The Long Kiss Goodnight*, I will examine the characterization of the “tough chick” and the narrative function she performs.<sup>1</sup> These two films stand out from the plethora of “tough chick” films generated by Hollywood in the last decade for a number of reasons; in particular, both posit their “tough chick” as at odds with the social order the films introduce. The goal here is to parse out why that is. Yet, more importantly, these particular movies are among the most watched films in which the “tough chick” plays a crucial role.<sup>2</sup> Charly Baltimore of *Long Kiss* and Trinity of *The Matrix*, with their short haircuts, sleek cat suits, and death-dealing physical prowess, exemplify the “tough chick” of Hollywood cinema. This brief gloss, however, does not address what is unique to these characterizations; rather than serving simply fetishistic or comedic purposes (for example, *Charlie's Angels*), these cinematic figures are set within narratives that directly confront the gender ideologies defining the “tough chick” as an exception to extant sexual norms. The argument I propose here examines these unique films to understand more clearly the phenomenon of the cinematic “tough chick” and to map the constellation of queer subversions such a characterization enacts within the world of the film and for the spectator.

The diegesis (or fictional reality presented by a given film) of *The Matrix* introduces a world generated by an artificial intelligence (AI) that looks and is taken for the contemporary historical moment. On the level of plot, it is the story of Neo's (Keanu Reeves) induction into “the resistance”—a collective of people who are aware that the “world” as it is known is simply a loading pro-

gram that masks the “truth” that human beings are being kept in tanks to generate power to run the machines of the AI. The “resistance” is led by Morpheus (Lawrence Fishburne), the captain of the ship traveling the actual future earth that has been decimated by war. His crew consists of Trinity, Switch, Cypher, Mouse, Tank, and Dozer who travel in and out of “the matrix” through a computer link-up system. They are seen as criminals by the avatars of the machines—its “agents.” The film follows the education of Neo, but key to Neo’s transformation are the figures of Morpheus (it is in saving him that Neo becomes “the One”) and Trinity, who fights alongside Neo. In the final moments, the film indicates the development of a romantic relationship between Neo and Trinity, which is significantly developed in the sequels. Although the film does not center on Trinity, it should not be construed that she is simply a love interest for the male protagonist; the film opens with her, the first action sequence is with her alone, and she is the first to kill an agent (while coining the catchphrase, “dodge this”).

While it may be impossible to claim Trinity as the central figure of *The Matrix*, despite the pivotal role she plays in the narrative, this is far from the case for the role Geena Davis plays in *Long Kiss*. The movie revolves around her transformation and discovery. At first living as Samantha Caine in the suburbs of the Northeast, she is a schoolteacher and a single mother. As the story unfolds, we are told she suffers from amnesia, having only the last eight years of memories. The film opens with the moment at which the outside world discovers her existence; that is, when she is seen on television by those who know who she really is, a former U.S. government assassin named Charly Baltimore. Samantha begins to remember her previous life through a series of violent encounters. She eventually teams up with Mitch Hennessey, a “low-rent detective” Samantha has hired to research her past. With Mitch, she undertakes a road trip of sorts that leads her to past figures in her life such as the father of her daughter (a violent, covert operative), and her boss (Perkins). She eventually discovers that Perkins, the head of her former black ops organization, Chapter, is plotting a “fund-raiser” by staging a bombing of Niagara Falls and pinning the blame on Muslims (by planting a dead and frozen Arab man at the site of the bomb) to generate support for hawkish extremists within the U.S. government. Samantha eventually transforms back to her previous self, Charly, which enables her to stop the internal terrorists’ plot while simultaneously rescuing her daughter. Mitch accompanies her throughout and is instrumental in helping to integrate Charly and Samantha by the conclusion of the film.

Both films, as these two brief synopses imply, place their central figures in complicated narratives that entail politically motivated character develop-

ment. What follows is an analysis of these motivations and their effects upon characterization. Because popular film focalizes its pleasurable work through structures of identification, not just in terms of character-driven plots but also with more subtle reinforcements such as filmic close-ups, character affords a rich area of study, particularly in terms of identity production. As Michael J. Shapiro argues in *Cinematic Political Thought*, tales of people often translate into tales of the state:

The continuous process of constructing affiliations, necessary to reproduce a coherent national imaginary, produces a mythic connection between nationhood and personhood in the form of a story of how the nation arises naturally from the character of its people. The maintenance of such myths requires control over discourse in general and over the dominant story of national origin in particular, for many identity claims, expressed within national societies, do not aid and abet the coherent project of the state.<sup>3</sup>

This story of a coherent nation is told and retold by Hollywood in its several generic forms. The action film especially works to represent a masculine stand-in for the nation-state, defending its borders from foreign threats, exemplified by the several installments of films like *Rambo*, *Die Hard*, and *Lethal Weapon*. Indeed, the interlocking history of cinema with national politics, particularly in the action film, dates back to *Birth of a Nation*, when President Wilson viewed the film at the White House and declared it history written in lightning.<sup>4</sup> Its plot of threatened white womanhood and the defending Klansmen riding “to the rescue” by terrorizing and lynching former slaves and free black men (whom the film pointedly accuse of rending the national fabric), establish the general, albeit much more trenchantly coded, “dominant story” reified in conservative mainstream cinema. In fact, Hollywood moviemakers have inverted history by using these elements to retell stories of U.S. imperialism through metaphors evoked in characterization. For example, *Rambo* reimagined the United States winning Vietnam through Sylvester Stallone’s embodiment of American “neurotic resentment.”<sup>5</sup> In this way, mainstream film is a powerful tool used in the “control over discourse,” and characterization is the central mechanism through which the myths of the nation are figured.

However, film is a medium open to resignification, often ascribing familiar film images, or *signs* (in the semiotic sense of the word), new meanings. In other words, because it is a cultural form that must constantly mix its codes just enough to draw new audiences and still meet generic expectations, cinema can introduce stories that actually trouble the national imaginary, that is, the way the state imagines itself as unified and coherent (thus always in terms that

reflect only the socially dominant, or hegemonic, position: masculine, white, heterosexual, and the like). One effective way filmmakers do this is through its process of characterization. As Shapiro stresses, there exist identity claims that work against national myths: the “tough chick” is one such identity. By positing a woman in the expected role of action hero, the representation of the state as coherently masculine is subverted. This subversion of generic expectation often leads to a break in the “continuous process of constructing affiliations” that such a depiction entails. That is, by replacing the action hero with a woman, it becomes possible for the assumptions accompanying the idea of the action hero, such as political and personal alliances, to shift. The resignification of gender in the action film, at the very least, makes the heterosexual mythology of woman as in need of rescue (and probable love interest) a much more complicated structure for the narrative to follow. Indeed, it has been argued persuasively that,

positing a female hero in [the action film] fundamentally challenges the construction of hero function as necessarily masculine. It requires and facilitates cross gender identification, which transforms a requisite property of the genre, the action hero. In doing so, it elucidates the manifold implications of difference and sexual difference and therefore does not reduce this shift to a simple transposition.<sup>6</sup>

It is the “manifold implications of difference and sexual difference” that require explication, particularly in how these films use characterization to re-imagine the genre, and what the genre has to say about gender, sexuality, and the nation-state.

If “instances of reanimating classic Hollywood codes and genres in contemporary mainstream cinema are rarely naïve, indiscriminate, or perhaps even avoidable,” as Needeya Islam points out, then we are led to see in these films “where the traditional hero figure and genre itself are enlisted in their own critical questioning.”<sup>7</sup> For me, these critical questions resonate with the contemporary politics of sexuality because they interrogate gender roles. Stemming from the subversion of the masculine hero, these films unleash a range of ideological subversions with which queer analysis is centrally concerned. The “tough chick” characterization offers forms of identification and desire in Hollywood cinema that can allow spectators to critically question the ideologically conservative plot to which the genre of the action film usually adheres. It is along these lines that I would argue that these characterizations introduce a “queering” of the film text in which they are placed. These characters are the titular heroes of the films yet they subvert the gender expectations aligned with the action hero. This mixing of genre expectation (masculinity, “toughness”)

with femininity produces an androgynous action hero, and because we are meant to identify with these heroes, spectatorial pleasure is engaged, like power itself, from below. In other words, the androgyny of these “tough chicks” enables subject positions antithetical to social laws in that they permit forms of gender and sexual transgressions that are celebrated for heroic narrative purposes.

The readings of the films and the figure of the “tough chick” presented here are indebted to the insights of feminist queer theory. To be clear, queer theory has offered more than ways to map homosexual and homoerotic social practices. In the cumulative analyses produced by this branch of study, a central concern with the complex social forces of heteropatriarchy, the linked systems enforcing heterosexuality, *and* patriarchal gender asymmetry, has come to the fore.<sup>8</sup> In its most recent incarnations, queer theory has extended its critical reach by redefining queerness in relation to larger political forces. As Rosemary Hennessy posits, the very definition of queer “embraces a proliferation of sexualities and the compounding of outcast positions along racial, ethnic, and class, as well as sexual lines—none of which is acknowledged by the neat binary division between hetero- and homosexual.”<sup>9</sup> Although the binary still plays an important role in the process of identification, this definition opens up *queer analysis* to a wider field of inquiry. This development in queer theory is due to the desire of scholars to take seriously the very real intersections of gender, sexuality, and race and their defining relationship to nationality. For example, Judith Butler built upon her groundbreaking work in the field of feminist queer theory by attempting to integrate postcolonial insights concerning race with queer studies’ inquiry into the constitution of the sexual subject.

The queer analysis of the “tough chick” in these films follows from this line of argumentation, motivated by Butler’s imperative that queer analysis consider the interdependent nature of race, gender, and sexuality in the constitution of the subject. Indeed, character study in film provides a rich terrain for this specific form of queer subject analysis. To thoroughly understand how the characterization of the “tough chick” both destabilizes gender identity and introduces queer difference, the conceptual borders dividing categories of race, nation, and sexuality need to be reconceived in order to map the complex narrative functions at work in these films. In other words, it is by “asking how and where we might read not only [race and sexuality’s] convergences, but the sites at which the one cannot be constituted save through the other,” that the radical queer potential of the otherwise mainstream figure of the “tough chick” can be fully grasped.<sup>10</sup> Producing a queer analysis, then, does not mean inscribing these characters into a system of sexual binaries, but rather pinpoint-

ing the narrative and cinematic work which is constitutive of the “tough chick” as transgressor of racial, national, and gendered boundaries. Such transgressions, and the hostility they elicit from the guards of those boundaries, are what catalyze the women characters of these films to become “tough chicks,” forced to fight against the powers that be (and for our cinematic enjoyment).

#### QUEER INSURGENCY AND CROSS-RACIAL AFFILIATION

*The Matrix* and *Long Kiss* tell stories of subjects at odds with the ruling forces that have, to all intents, created them. Whether at war with the AI that produces and polices the “world” of *The Matrix*, or hunted by the terrorist forces that are an intergovernmental response to a “softened” democratic presidency in *Long Kiss* (see below), these films map out resistance to dominant cultural practices. Trinity and Charly engage in violent transgressions of cultural law, including that of heteronormativity, a concept that has a number of salient definitions within queer theory but for my purposes here is best defined as “the ideological anchor of an originary nuclear family, a source of legitimation for the state, which perpetuates the fiction that the family is the cornerstone of society.”<sup>11</sup> These characters, rather, can be read as queer because they take their meaning from “a semiotic of abjected otherness” that troubles the very notion of identity.<sup>12</sup> This abjection is mobilized through the characters’ complex performance of gender, a performance that challenges not simply dominant codes of femininity but the heteronormative family from which they draw their meaning. This critique of sexual norms is further framed by the cross-racial affiliations that define these characters as outlaws of the nation-state. These characters present a radical challenge to identity itself through the cinematic operations that locate them as sites of narrative resistance to the institutionalization of racial forms of heterosexuality.

The refusal of patriarchal imperatives these films enact places the characters of Trinity and Charly squarely outside the (patriarchal) law. As Charly disidentifies from her family, she is increasingly pursued by the (legal and illegal) forces of heteropatriarchy; indeed, the father of her daughter is out to kill her. The film begins with Samantha, pictured as Mrs. Claus in the town parade—literally a patriarchal fiction. But after incurring unwanted sexual advances followed by a brutal physical attack, Charly eventually emerges from her “amnesia,” no longer wanting any part of her nuclear family, which invites ever-increasing violence from those representing patriarchal law. On the other hand, *The Matrix* opens with Trinity pursued by the police and by the anonymous “Mr. Smiths” who represent the (AI) state. These “tough chicks,” “having refused the heterosexual imperative of citizenship, according to the state,

pose a profound threat to the very survival of the nation” because the nation conceives itself as heterosexual.<sup>13</sup> In sum, the refusal of these feminine bodies to submit to the heteropatriarchy costs them their national citizenship. No longer a representative of the nation and order, these figures, in their (gender, sexual, national) ambiguity, are seen as “unruly,” “criminal.” The independent woman implies a level of erotic independence that implies sexuality outside of male control, which in turn can imply lesbian or queer female sexuality focused away from men. Whether Trinity in the hotel by herself (which seems to call for scores of police to come to arrest her although the narrative never fully explains why) or Charly walking alone at night, the forms of violence these bodies receive are reflected through the cultural ubiquity of “antilebian abuse which is directed at women in public spaces [and] reflects men’s attempts to police independent women’s behavior, and hence reflects patriarchal power relations.”<sup>14</sup> Yet, because spectator pleasure is generated by these female heroes’ ability to (physically) resist the state, viewer identifications shift away from a reaffirmation of the state’s power to an alignment with those outside the law.

For example, *The Matrix* begins with the spectacle of Trinity’s escape from the forces of state control. When the police attempt to capture her within the first few minutes of the story, we are told that the police, in arrogant bravado, “can surely handle one girl.” So, when the film cuts back to Trinity systematically killing every officer in the room with little effort, we are forced to speculate on the status of “girl” in this film. Marked as girls, these “tough chicks” refuse gender expectations (such as those of the police); it is through this refusal that these films foreground the subversive erotic component at work in substituting a woman for the archetypal action hero. Because they are the heroes, these films refuse to stigmatize the ways the “tough chick” deviates from normative gender roles. In this way, it could be argued that the queer undertones of these films work to interrogate and subvert the dominant homophobic social systems that seek to vilify the lesbian existence at which these women’s androgyny hints. Although the women themselves are not lesbians, the violence they receive can be explained by the fact that androgynous “women are identified as lesbian because they fail to dress and behave according to their gender identity. . . . They are made to feel out of place by the hostility of others who identify them as outsiders through their dress, body language, and disinterest in men.”<sup>15</sup> Trinity and Charly share these qualities, refusing to demure to men, and as the scene with Trinity shows, both are willing to kill men with little remorse (in fact, at one point in the film, Mitch chastises Charly for shooting men dead instead of simply wounding them). Add to this an emphasis both films place on dress and body language, exemplified by the dramatic alteration of both image and carriage by Geena Davis in the



change from Samantha to Charly (especially the cutting short and dying of hair, the drastic change from passive to aggressive behavior), and we see that it is through these very gender-ambiguous qualities that the spectator comes to know the “tough chick.”

Both Trinity and Charly, in their queerly coded femininity, are treated with hostility by the forces of the state. Yet, their criminalization cannot be understood simply as the result of their erotic autonomy, for their refusal of assigned gender roles cannot be read as separate from the other refusals (national, racial, sexual) that determine these characters. For instance, the short hair both Trinity and Charly sport operates as a queer signifier on one level, because “short hair and dressing ‘inappropriately’ (for one’s ascribed gender) is enough to identify and at times cause violence to women deemed ‘queer’” within these films.<sup>16</sup> Yet, it simultaneously signals a range of political meanings irreducible to sexuality. For example, Charly cuts her (Samantha’s) hair off right after saving Mitch, her African American companion, from the tortures of white men—re-signifying short hair as a code for fraternizing with the nation-state’s enemies, pointing to a history of “shaving the heads of women who dared to ‘fraternize,’ or even fall in love with ‘the enemy.’”<sup>17</sup> This exemplifies the way that signs of “queerness” implicate deeper structures of national resistance. By focusing the narrative through these white female characters, who reinvent themselves outside the terms of state-sanctioned heteropatriarchy, these “tough chick” films “explore the question of whether a white [female] who . . . challenges the system of [hetero]patriarchal male power” does not “give up [her] white privilege and . . . struggle against racism” as a consequence.<sup>18</sup> This complicates and expands the reasoning behind the violence these women receive throughout the films, defining it as the price of challenging gender norms, heterosexual imperatives, and racist power structures simultaneously. Yet, when this violence is played out in the film diegesis, the narrative impels the spectator, through camera work and characterization, to identify (and even desire) the “queer” body upon whom this violence is wrought, and when she conquers her oppressors, the ideological lines are clearly drawn against the racist, hetero-oppressive state apparatus.

In *The Matrix*, Trinity and Switch, the only two women of “the resistance” (notably, both white; indeed, Switch has spiky peroxide hair and dresses in white leather, standing out from her colleagues, who have sleek black hair and dress in black latex while in the matrix), demonstrate this very question, particularly in the lives they lead upon the multiracial ship, the *Nebuchadnezzar*. Indeed, this ship is “bound for Zion,” (referring to a racial history tied to the diasporic narratives of spiritual upliftment from slavery). This spatial metaphor of racial difference is juxtaposed with the world of the matrix, signified

through images of New York City, which is often markedly white (possibly implying the whitewashing of Hollywood cinema in its historical and continued portrayal of New York City). This, in itself, is mimicked in the loading-program's (the computer program the resistance uses to train its members) version of New York City, which is placed on Wall Street and cast as a sea of white people dressed in black and white, including a nun and a bride. The one exception, of course, is the memorable "Woman in Red." The prototypical *femme fatale*, the Woman in Red figures as the exotic object of Neo's male gaze that is his undoing in the simulation (she morphs into Agent Smith). Nevertheless, the nun, bride, and "Woman in Red" represent versions of selfhood acceptable (and expected) for women within the (heteropatriarchal) matrix.<sup>19</sup> Trinity and Switch, whose names suggest split or multiple subject positions ("Switch" has further implications of bisexuality or playing both positions in the sadomasochistic dynamic), are visually queer figures—both in the sense of being "odd" and in the sense of two women together, in fetish gear nonetheless—in the world of the matrix, the late-twentieth-century urban world we know. Significantly, when they are filmed "in the matrix," they both refer to the "world" of New York 1999 as "out there," and when they are first filmed together, they are figured as mythic "(wo)men in black," driving in a long black car and threatening the protagonist. Yet, to read them as simply queer through their relation to each other and through textual encoding would be to see sexuality as the only "queer" effect of this film. By transgressing gender boundaries, these two women are no longer defined by heteropatriarchal narratives of appropriate womanhood (nun, bride, "Woman in Red": all exposed by the film as fantasy figures whose chimerical form is only legible within "the matrix") but instead located, literally, underground with the subterranean (sub-cultural) "Others" of the resistance.

What I want to stress is that race in the "tough chick" film is a social boundary that works to "queer" these films along with sexuality; "its 'addition' subverts the monolithic workings of the heterosexual imperative."<sup>20</sup> For instance, Trinity's queer threat should be read not only through her connection to Switch or her violent responses to agents of the state but also from the role she plays in the "reproduction" of Neo. She plays a central role in the (unholy) trinity of Morpheus-Neo-Trinity, enacting a perverse family that crosses racial lines by incorporating a black man into the otherwise white dyad (and even here, Keanu Reeves's racial identity as Caucasian, Hawaiian, and Asian troubles such a simplistic assumption) thereby threatening racial purity.<sup>21</sup> She enlists Neo, bringing him to Morpheus, who subsequently becomes "like a father" to Neo. This non-heterosexual form of cross-racial affiliation in which Trinity is

the linchpin is the queerness of the filmic text.<sup>22</sup> It threatens the sexual practices that ensure racial purity; when Agent Smith speaks of categorizing the human species, the eugenic implications of Darwinian science are evoked to drive this point home. Agent Smith, lecturing a bound and tortured Morpheus (referencing slave imagery), implies the histories of imperialism (“you are like ants, you simply colonize new lands”) but in directing this invective toward a black man, and concluding by rubbing Morpheus’s bald head in an act of physical intimacy while proclaiming his hatred and disgust with “humanity,” a constellation of racist discourses such as the history of colonialism and its related narrative of evolutionary theory are indexed that imply a critique of racial mixing. Trinity’s queer femininity cannot be read outside of this penultimate scene in the film; indeed, it is defined by it. This film requires us to

consider the assumption of sexual positions, the disjunctive ordering of the human as “masculine” or “feminine” as taking place not only through a heterosexualizing symbolic with its taboo on homosexuality, but through a complex set of racial injunctions which operate in part through the taboo on miscegenation.<sup>23</sup>

Through depictions of Samantha leaving her white boyfriend to join Mitch or in Trinity’s unambivalent loyalty to Morpheus (explicitly articulated, unlike her “love” for Neo), these films challenge spectator comfort levels with the taboo of miscegenation.

The refusal of normative feminine identity defines these “tough chicks,” bringing them into relation with other forms of abjection exemplified by the African American male. The “tough chick,” in her gender ambiguity, masculinizes a body not socially coded as male; the black male body as well occupies a socially perverse location in his “monstrous” or threatening masculinity to the white hegemony.<sup>24</sup> Because of their constitutive Otherness, they both embody forms of abjection toward which the dominant social order is openly hostile.<sup>25</sup> What tethers these subjects is their historical position as Other to a white, heteropatriarchal order, as Kobena Mercer has pointed out: “women, children, savages, slaves, and criminals were all alike insofar as their Otherness affirmed ‘his’ identity as the subject at the center of logocentrism.”<sup>26</sup> These films, rather than affirming “his” identity, construct narratives in which these social Others join together to fight against the very structure that ostracizes them. In other words, the sociohistorical abjection of the unassimilable woman explains how the white female protagonist (and her spectator stand-in) “do not necessarily see the black male as patriarchal antagonist, but feel instead that their oppression is ‘shared’ with [black] men.”<sup>27</sup> Indeed, the respective

“tough chicks” of these films both pronounce how much they “need” their black male counterparts (citing the films themselves) to fight, or “resist,” the powers of the state.

These powers, in fact, are shown to be even more violent toward the African American men than to the women themselves, frequently shown in excessive scenes of beating and violation. Yet, through filmic work such as continuity editing and point-of-view shots, the films rely upon our identifications with these (abject) figures for the movies to be successful. In a singular reversal of the images that sustain a racist national imaginary, violence against a notably white, male police force is ubiquitous in these films to the point of desensitizing the spectator. The spectator, however, *is not* desensitized to the violence inflicted on the “Othered” protagonists; we yearn for the “tough chicks” to risk their lives to save these black characters with whom we are made to identify and sympathize. We are not granted the comfort of the national, racist mythology that the police have our interests at heart and are “protecting” the national good when they terrorize Mitch or Morpheus. By rescripting scenes of national violence, particularly against black men, as in the scene in which Morpheus is beaten in the hotel bathroom (visually signaling not only the video of the Rodney King beating but the bathroom rape of Abner Louima by New York cops) or in the striking image of Mitch naked and bound (in a setting much like the hull of a slave ship), we are encouraged to intensely sympathize with these characters and despise the people who enact such brutality (the police in the former, the covert operators of the right wing faction of the U.S. government in the latter). Moreover, a chain of identification is set into motion that begins with the female main character but leads to these black men, allowing the spectator to see that the central lead’s enemy is not simply patriarchy but rather a heteropatriarchy that polices women’s affective allegiances to African American men. In fact, both films—especially *Long Kiss*—center on the ways in which “controls on sexuality link up with racism,” articulating a female *bildungsroman* in which the “tough chick,” in overcoming the controls on her sexuality and becoming erotically autonomous, must confront the hostility she bears toward African American men and eventually redirect it towards the racist social order that is its origin to fully mobilize her powerful potential.<sup>28</sup>

Because the “tough chick” sees her lot as shared with the African American men that populate these films, the threat of miscegenation haunts the texts; the sexuality of the “tough chick” is framed by a relationship, implicitly erotic, with a black man. To this extent, the “tough chick” is not criminal simply for her erotic independence but for her proximity to black men seen as criminal. For example, Morpheus is introduced in *The Matrix* through newspaper photos declaring him a “terrorist” and the object of a police manhunt. Similarly,

Mitch is first seen extorting money from a white man and even his own wife will not allow their son to accept Mitch's gifts because she believes they are stolen. These scenes stress the point that the "tough chick" is defined in relation to other forms of abjection and criminality. However, the teleological placement of these scenes at the beginning of the films serve to critique such cliché images, constructing stories that undo such assumptions to understand not only the "tough chicks'" affiliation with these characters but to build our own identification with figures otherwise alien to the white imaginary. What these early scenes of criminalization evoke about Morpheus and Mitch is that,

in the fantasmatic space of supremacist imaginary, the big black phallus is a threat not only to the white master (who shrinks in impotence from the thought that the subordinate black male is more potent and sexually powerful than he), but also to civilization itself, since the "bad object" represents a danger to white womanhood and therefore miscegenation and racial degeneration.<sup>29</sup>

This supremacist fantasy haunts the affiliation between the "tough chick" and her African American partner; it is the disruption of the fantasy that the filmic structures of identification and spectatorial pleasure effect. The movies create character trajectories that challenge this imaginary and expose its violent underpinnings by generating sympathies for characters usually reduced to cultural stereotypes. Through the associations of the "tough chick" to "criminal" black men, these films put into question the social definitions of criminality, in terms of black masculinity as well as feminine sexuality, underscoring the links between the two.

It is in the sexuality of the "tough chick" that the ambivalences of race and gender are most disruptive. Her ambiguous erotic autonomy is open to a range of threatening possibilities: lesbian, prostitute, miscegenator. No doubt the intensely violent responses imagined in these films (Charly is especially brutalized) marks the body of the "tough chick" in specific ways, taking their meaning from the sociocultural order that produces certain forms of subjectivity, such as the erotically autonomous woman, as deviant.<sup>30</sup> One way these films inscribe Trinity and Charly as iconic sexual outlaws is by placing them in hotels, which "are effectively surrogate bedrooms having specific (hetero)sexual associations as a site for adultery and 'dirty weekends.'"<sup>31</sup> The connection between race and sexuality is further stressed in the hotel scenes, because the women's affiliations are most clearly evinced in these spaces. At the very beginning of *The Matrix*, Trinity appears to be trapped by the authorities in a hotel room, and it is Morpheus, via cell phone, who directs her to escape her pursuers. There seems to be a pimp metaphor lurking somewhere behind this

first hotel scene, when the spectator has yet to be introduced to Fishburne's character, and the reason for Trinity's trust in the voice on the phone—as opposed to the white police—is not yet clear. This theme is further developed in the narrative of *The Matrix*, especially when Trinity lures Neo away from civil society, whispering erotically in his ear, only to bring him to another abandoned hotel room wherein she, rather than sleeping with him, turns him over to Morpheus.

These implications are magnified in *Long Kiss*. The film is set in a series of hotel rooms; the last of which is in Niagara Falls, synonymous with appropriate, state-sanctioned heterosexuality. The film follows a trajectory that introduces Mitch and his “prostitute” partner extorting money from an unfaithful husband. It is this partner who finds the information concerning Charly, instigating Mitch's trip to the (white) suburbs. His partner is quickly removed from the plot, replaced by Samantha/Charly, who becomes a stand-in for her as sexual outlaw. In three separate hotel rooms, rooms notably shared with Mitch, the pivotal scenes of transformation from Samantha to Charly take place. In the first hotel room, Samantha sees Mitch, shirtless, smoking, and drinking, through their adjoining doors while she is on the phone with her daughter. He is singing “I'm a Man” by Muddy Waters, a recurring activity throughout the film. This blues song asserts the specificity of desire the situation presents; Samantha must confront the sexuality of black masculinity. Samantha, uncomfortable with the closeness of Mitch, closes the door on him. It is just subsequent to this that she finds her previous identity's (Charly's) rifle and assembles it. In an ambiguous edit, Samantha dreams that she is confronted by her other self, Charly, who slashes Samantha's throat in the reflection in the mirror. Samantha wakes startled and picks up the rifle, then nearly shoots Mitch with it when he comes in to check on her. This scene of the white woman shooting at the intrusive, sexualized black man is complicated not only by the film's portrayal of Mitch as sympathetic and non-threatening in his comedic role but by the intrusive dream of Charly, who stands in for the threatening presence. In other words, in the moment of confrontation with the forbidden, threatening, and desirable Other embodied in the black man, a fundamental disturbance takes place within the white woman. The combination of a refusal of white male sexuality, which transpires through a series of preceding events in Samantha's suburban town, and the activation of desire for the black man gives rise to Charly.<sup>32</sup> This complex web of dissociation (from white heteropatriarchy) and re-identification (with social Otherness, embodied in Mitch) occurs with more and more frequency and intensity until Charly permanently returns.

Signaling the (literal) return of the repressed, Charly surfaces in the con-

frontation with white heteropatriarchy. At first, this scene resembles the sanctified image of appropriate heterosexual romance. Samantha and the attractive white man she believes she was once engaged to, stand close together in a long shot, smiling and petting horses in the rural, snowy locale. Yet, the price of this mythology is quickly demonstrated; she, Mitch, and her former mentor are all captured. Samantha is bound, stripped to only a virginal white dress slip by the wealthy white man she has mistaken for her former fiancé while he tells her, “nothing is more beautiful than a woman’s face contorted in pain, witness the beauty of childbirth.” It is this sadistic cost that is extorted from white women who abide by white heteronormative rules of reproduction, with all the biblical overtones of the painful punishment to which the daughters of Eve are subjected for her original violation of eating from the tree of knowledge. This is made clear in the conflation of issues that simultaneously structure Charly’s coming back to consciousness. Bound to a water wheel, Samantha, the quintessential helpless female victim, is submerged in freezing water. Close to death, we witness Charly gain consciousness through the transformation of the female lead from victim to powerfully phallic “tough chick.” Struggling from her bonds, her wrists visibly bleeding, Charly takes the gun from the crotch of her dead father figure (under the water near her), emerges from the water, and shoots her white male torturer. Significantly, her torture, the punishment wrought on her “not knowing anything” (what the hapless Samantha cries between submersions to plead for her life), and simply being a woman, is inseparable from the tortured body of the black man. Indeed, the fact that both are bound and sexualized (she in a wet slip, he naked), insinuate their (sexual) connection, which calls up this sadistically hostile response from the white, homosocial forces (Charly’s two former lovers discuss her punishment just before she is submerged in the water). It is Charly’s first (and constitutive) act to rescue Mitch (from the above mentioned slave-like confines).

Charly is never seen untying Mitch’s naked and wounded body. Instead, the film cuts from Charly, backlit, at the top of the stairs of the cellar, filmed high above the bloody and hog-tied Mitch, and from his perspective, to him laying on a bed in an expensive hotel room in Atlantic City while Charly is naked in the shower. This scene cues the audience that Charly is now the present consciousness, replacing Samantha, by a range of unspoken signifiers, beginning with her showering with no curtain to her cutting off and dying her hair. In short, Charly affects a very distinct masquerade of femininity than Samantha’s previous embodiment.<sup>33</sup> In fact, Charly refers to this directly when she says to Mitch, “Look what she did to my ass.” Yet, even before we see Charly, we are made aware of her presence through the soundtrack—Charly’s presence is signaled by the song “She’s Not There” by the Latino band Santana. This song not

only signals Samantha's departure from the body portrayed by Geena Davis but further suggests the cross-racial affiliation that will come to define Charly. The film literally evokes the masquerade, a favorite topic of feminist film theory that uses film representation as a way of exposing the constructed nature of femininity, particularly the ways actresses perform their feminine characters. By exposing the gap between performance and identity with Charly's emergence, the film denaturalizes Samantha, exposing the ways her supposedly "natural" womanliness is a performance (of ideology). This very condensed version of the infinite identity regression plotted in *Long Kiss* exemplifies the concerns of the "tough chick" films with recasting "identity as a version of performance: as drag, masquerade, or signifying play."<sup>34</sup>

These films consistently address femininity as performance in order to subvert its ideological foundations. For instance, Trinity's nominative femininity is literally distanced in the narrative's explanation that the film's most fetishized image (of Carrie-Ann Moss in black latex from head to toe) is always only her projected image in the matrix, which stands in stark contrast to her embodied self outside the matrix where androgyny is the visual rule (she is clothed in torn, gray gym clothes like everyone else). These films place emphasis on gender performativity:

pulling performance always toward "impersonation" marked explicitly as such, [the films] constitute the cultural field in which "the parodic" is situated in relation to "the authentic." In this way, gender trouble reflects genre trouble: such "trouble" accrues from [these] films uncertainty about the site of the authentic.<sup>35</sup>

The "genre trouble"—of recasting the action hero in *Long Kiss* with a woman or of science fiction's invocation of the simulacrum in which gender, time, and identity are called into question in *The Matrix*—presents a deconstruction of authenticity as the central narrative and cinematic issue. In the use of mirrors and reflections to frame Charly's exaggerated signs of femininity (there are over a half dozen mirrors in the hotel room setting where Charly is officially introduced) as well as in Trinity's outrageous fetish wear of her projected self-image, the "tough chick" is refashioned in her mimicry of femininity, but that mimicry is shown not to be a copy of some authentic version of womanhood. This is because "in mimicry, as in camp, one 'does' ideology in order to undo it, producing knowledge about it: that gender and the heterosexual orientation presumed to anchor it are unnatural and even oppressive."<sup>36</sup> Thus, "tough chick" films such as these posit a "queer" form of femininity through the female lead's use of mimicry. Trinity and Charly, in this way, mimic the masquerade, ironically performing a masculinized version of overstated femininity that can be read as a sympathetic revisiting of Hollywood's *femme fatale*.



It is in the embodiment of the *femme fatale* that the link between gender and sexuality is highlighted. The *femme fatale* articulates a version of seductive femininity that would seem to be in line with heterosexual imperatives, yet the moment the “tough chick” acts the part of the seductress, race, particularly the threat of miscegenation, comes to fore in the narrative. Charly, in fact, articulates her presence (rather than Samantha’s) by her sexual openness with Mitch. Opposed to Samantha’s earlier equivocations, Charly does not hesitate to aggressively come on to Mitch. Mitch, while Charly is pressed against him, notices the ripped up picture of the white fiancé and daughter in the trashcan. Charly’s refusal of the heteropatriarchal family is enacted in her sexualization of Mitch. Yet, as he says, this desire remains tied to the social order, which defines such a liaison as taboo; he confronts her with the idea that she still sees him as “the help.” This is only reinforced by the incongruity of her sleek black cat suit and his dated, comic golf clothes inherited from Charly’s now dead (older white male) contact.<sup>37</sup> Yet, this film challenges the figure of the “black buck,” with the intertextual reference to *Mandingo*, by having the relationship between Charly and Mitch develop beyond the terms of the white supremacist imaginary—she as the eroticized object of his (threatening) gaze, evoked early in the film when he comments on and compares her body to a female jogger he ogles, or he, the object of her fetishizing racist desire. The film, in fact, explicitly establishes dialogue between the two characters when such moments arise. When Mitch comments on Samantha’s “form,” she does not hesitate to educate him about his sexism through sarcasm. In return, when Charly makes a pass at Mitch, he too sarcastically rejects her. The two characters must unlearn the sexism and racism they have inherited to build the necessary coalition they eventually form for survival. In this way, the film asks the following questions: “Under what conditions does eroticism mingle with political solidarity? When does it produce an effect of empowerment? And when does it produce an effect of disempowerment? When does identification imply objectification, and when does it imply equality?”<sup>38</sup> It is through structures of mimicry, gender (Charly’s *femme fatale*), and race (Mitch’s pimp-player persona) that racial and sexual ideologies are destabilized and exposed as inauthentic.

By developing affinities between these two abject subject positions, the film poses possible political solutions not inherited from a racist heteropatriarchy. The denouement constructs an image of recuperation through the formation of an alternative familial structure, which does not castrate the woman while simultaneously granting the black man some semblance of viable, patriarchal power. Despite the flirtations, the film refuses the accepted movie norm of killing off the African American man; instead, in a singular reversal, Mitch rescues Charly and her daughter. In the end, Charly has killed her daughter’s sociopathic white father and replaces him with Mitch, significantly in the driver’s

seat, herself and her daughter by his side. Although both films articulate a deep ambivalence towards the eroticized connections these “tough chicks” have with black men, they nevertheless envision the possibility of solidarity as a viable response to the racist, heteropatriarchal culture. So, despite the fact that both Trinity and Charly end up romantically joined with white men, it is nonetheless the transgression of sexual and racial borders with black men, and the hostility it brings within the nation-state, that mobilizes the “tough chick” story. Indeed, in *Long Kiss*, the white boyfriend remains peripheral to the entire plot, and in the end, Charly’s commitment to him can be seen as tentative. The last shot of the film ends with her, the white boyfriend, and her daughter outside of their new home, a farmhouse in the middle of nowhere, signaling the retreat from the white suburb; yet when he comments on how he could stay there forever, Charly says nothing but rather throws a knife into a nearby tree stump, referencing the first hint of Charly’s existence in an earlier scene when Samantha uses a kitchen knife with extreme expertise and mistakes her skill as a sign that she used to be a chef. After chopping vegetables with great speed, Samantha throws the knife and pins a tomato to a wall, saying, “Chefs do that.” Of course, the scene has threatening implications that lead to Samantha’s departure, so when the scene is recalled at the conclusion, it hints at Charly’s eventual departure. The violence of the act of throwing the knife hints at Charly’s resistance to remaining in the white, nuclear-family arrangement despite its new rural setting.

Significantly, this concluding sign of ambivalence toward the nuclear family is in fact foreshadowed only moments earlier in the film when Charly refuses the offer of employment made by the president of the United States. This refusal is hardly surprising within the context of a film that works to link the violence of a racist heteropatriarchy to national interests. It is the nation-state that depends on the woman’s role in the patriarchal family to reproduce the nation as white. In this way, the hegemony of the nation-state ensures, often violently, that women do not become erotically autonomous, because with autonomy, there is the potential for miscegenation, which is a central threat to national interests. In their refusal to abide by the sexual and racial borders imposed by the nation-state, these “tough chick” films simultaneously work against the dominant myths of the nation. Both films figure national resistance as central to the production of the “tough chick” by having her form alliances with one or a set of subjects who openly expose the limits of the mythic discourses of the nation. What is witnessed in Charly’s turn toward Mitch and from the state (that once incarcerated him) or Trinity’s embracing of Morpheus as a chosen father and his ship of racially coded Others as “family” is an explicit refusal to abide by the “national stories” that “must create bound-

aries between a people and its others.”<sup>39</sup> Both films’ narratives stand in opposition to the national stories of the United States the antagonists articulate, and both evoke the “foreign,” or Other, to produce counternarratives that undermine national claims to territorial protection that the AI and Chapter make. Whether in the violence against Morpheus and Mitch or the pointed reference to terrorism directed against Morpheus in *The Matrix* and utilized as a cover story in *Long Kiss* for the neoconservative agenda of CIA fundraising, a critical distance is established within the narratives of these films toward national myths, which generate the nation-state’s Others, internal or external.<sup>40</sup>

#### THE “TOUGH CHICK” FILM AND THE NATIONAL IMAGINARY

Both movies specifically refer to Communism as a central antagonist in the legitimation of American late capitalism but do so to challenge its consolidation of state power. The space of the Nebuchadnezzar, for instance, is subtly imbued with those signs that the national imaginary has deployed for decades to police its ideological Others. Outside the matrix (specifically coded as the sign of late capitalism by its multiple images of Wall Street and multinational corporations), the Nebuchadnezzar embodies much of what the American mythology has described as the costs of communism: genderless citizens, asexuality, cyborg existence bound to machinery, tasteless gruel for food, blindly following one leader who receives orders from an unknown source (only leaders are given the coordinates of Zion), all citizens coexisting on the same level (the white educated elite, Neo and Trinity, working shoulder-to-shoulder with “Third World” workers, such as Tank and Dozer), a complete absence of luxuries in a money-less society. In fact, much of Morpheus’s dialogue is laced with Marxist rhetoric of false consciousness and top-down politics (the AI, as the bourgeois stand-in, exploits the masses, turning them into “batteries”). Yet, the film structures spectatorial identification with this discursive space of ideological critique, destabilizing the anticommunist mythologies shoring up the U.S. hegemony. The film’s structural affinity with Trinity, Neo, and Morpheus makes such representatives of the state, as embodied by the AI of *The Matrix* who can be seen as the juncture between the repressive and ideological state apparatus, function as the threat to narrative resolution. Moreover, in *The Matrix*, the project is to destabilize the very ontological grounds on which the nation is founded. The “resistance,” embodied by the protagonists, articulates an outside to the concepts of “truth” and “reality,” concepts on which any coherent national story relies. This overt deconstruction of “(the desert of) the Real” of the matrix, with its explicit citation of Jean Baudrillard’s *Simulation and Simulacra* (the book, in fact, is an actual prop in the film itself), undoes

the nation's ideological network of borders, exposing them as simulacra by its deployment of characterization: woman as object of desire (the "Woman in Red"), the black man as criminal (Morpheus),<sup>41</sup> the black woman as "welfare queen" or "mammy" (the Oracle), and "resistance" to the national order as "terrorist" Other (Neo's transformation into a terrorist, epitomized in the final scene of his threatening phone call to the "state").

However, it must be pointed out that the role of the Oracle proves that this counterhegemonic space is not exempt from the way "nations are frequently figured through the iconography of familial and domestic space."<sup>42</sup> Although the Oracle, as the all-knowing character to which the members of the resistance turn for guidance is "not what you expected," she is at the same time exactly what is expected in a racist culture: the mammy figure, attending children not of her own race (not born to her). White women, in the guise of the "tough chick," may be able to transcend the confinement of the family in spatial terms in ways not available to women of color, as in the Oracle or Mitch's wife, whom we only ever see at home with her son. The Oracle, as maternal caretaker confined within the domestic space, baking cookies and tending to her "children" is the gendered counterpart to Morpheus's father figure, who is out fighting to protect the proverbial motherland of Zion. Still, the deconstructive force of her powerful role as seer and advisor destabilizes the racist mythologies of "welfare queen" and "mammy" evoked by her surroundings (indeed, the final scene of *Revolutions* insinuates that she orchestrated the overthrowing of the machines).<sup>43</sup> A split along racial lines nevertheless exists for women in these filmic worlds, which confronts the construction of the nation as domestic sphere but ultimately cannot escape its powerful iconography.

To this end, the "tough chick's" insertion into this resistant world does not necessarily unfound basic presumptions of heteropatriarchy. That is, although "women in the military can erode one of the most powerful cultural constructions of national collectives—that of 'womenandchildren' as the reason men go to war," characters such as Trinity and Switch do not prevent both roles for women—mother and soldier—from coexisting.<sup>44</sup> This coexistence is exemplified in *Long Kiss*, in which the female soldier and the mother, occupying the same body, must struggle to coexist. In particular, Charly's identity is defined in relation to men. Her political identity is, in fact, coded as familial; she is "engaged" to her assassination target and her contact in the government counterterrorist group is known as "Uncle Max." Significantly, Charly comes to Chapter through her father who is killed undercover in Ireland. What this film exposes is that the suburban domesticity (epitomized by Samantha), which is taken for granted as the determining patriarchal force defining women's national citizenship, is not as unitary as once imagined. Charly introduces the

possibility that other forms of femininity, even “resistant” ones, may be useful to the state.

*Long Kiss* builds its narrative around the revelation that being useful to the state entails policing its borders. Notably, Charly resurfaces as a government agent who, because of her amnesia, is not aware that the “old enemies have become new allies” with the end of the Cold War, and in the name of national safety and corporate profit, the government itself depends on the mythic production of “Others” to ensure its sovereignty. In essence, the film implies that Charly is no longer useful to the national cause, because she can no longer distinguish between “us” and “them.” Since the gendered terms of nation have changed, Charly is no longer an appropriate “border guard” for the state.<sup>45</sup> The film insinuates that Charly was able to identify “them,” our national Others, because the codes were clear: a masculinized United States, defined by Reagan’s leadership and the republican hawk politics upon which it was founded, was in a clearly identifiable relationship to the feminized Soviet Union. But with a democratic president (the film was made during Clinton’s first term), the lines between “us” and “them” are no longer recognizable. To emphasize the point, the president is filmed in the White House kitchen, wearing a bathrobe, making a sandwich. There is no woman doing this domestic task for him, and while speaking with his duplicitous staff member (Perkins), the president dismisses the cold-war government activities as ridiculous and claims the money could serve better, specifically domestic interests (“can you say health care?”). This reference to health care (Hillary Clinton’s first project and, therefore, connected to the feminization of American interests) associates national interests with the maternal. It is this association that the Chapter director Perkins plans to reverse by committing an act of terrorism within U.S. borders and blaming it on “the Muslims.”

In revealing the national and corporate interests belying the “domestic tranquility” the film opens with, “women and children” are transformed from ideological myth to actual threat, in the form of Charly and her daughter. However, because we are meant to identify with them, the nation is debunked as a protector and shown to be “monstrous” in its self-interest. This is pointedly demonstrated through the characterization of the murderous father figure acting in, he claims, the nation’s interest. At the penultimate scene in the film, Perkins, about to bomb a white, suburban community like that of Samantha’s at the film’s beginning (a holiday parade is even taking place there, too), brings Charly’s daughter a doll, claiming, “I’m not a monster.”<sup>46</sup> This deadly paternity is replayed soon after when Charly finally tells her former cold-war enemy that he is the father of the little girl he is about to kill; the film emphasizes the fact that he believes this to be his daughter; yet he tries to kill

her anyway after referring to her as “my little bitch.” In this way, the film sustains an intense critique of patriarchy, explicitly extending the violent fight between national *and* domestic enemies, father and mother. Such narrative conflation of the national with patriarchal rule, with its explicit costs to women and children, explores how “nations have historically amounted to the sanctioned institutionalization of gender *difference*.”<sup>47</sup> Through the deconstruction of the domestic role for women, *Long Kiss* articulates a subversion of gender difference that automatically signals a rejection of national identity. Indeed, the final, bloody battle between mother and father takes place on the border between the United States and Canada, with a giant banner portraying the mythic image of the nuclear family (smiling father placed slightly above and with arms around mother and child) flying as the demarcation between nations. The climax of the film is pointedly structured as the moment Charly is pulled up by the Christmas lights to the helicopter from which her nemesis (and her daughter’s father) is firing bullets at her. In this scene, and choreographed as one fluid action, she cuts the tangled string of Christmas lights that are draped over an electrical wire. Caught in the lights on one side is the burning corpse of one of the Chapter men; Charly, using its body weight as it falls to the ground, rides up the other end of the lights to rise to the level of the low-flying helicopter, dramatically killing the father of her daughter (while uttering, “die screaming, motherfucker”). In doing so, she simultaneously sets ablaze the banner flying behind her of the smiling, white patriarchal family with the shorting out bulbs from the Christmas lights as they shatter and pop as she is pulled up. Remarkably, such an over-the-top antipatriarchal act is set up as the height of pleasurable excess, capped with a massive fiery explosion that finally destroys the father (whose monstrosity is underscored by such extremes needed to finish him off); the spectator is encouraged to experience this scene as an ecstatic catharsis, particularly in terms of the joyous destruction of the sadistic embodiment of paternity, and its partner, the extreme violence of which the “tough chick” and single mother is capable.<sup>48</sup>

The intricate discursive work of the “tough chick” film, as represented by *The Matrix* and *Long Kiss*, articulates subject positions that are irreducible to the singular narratives of identity politics. In these characters’ dissociations from the gender regulations imposed by state, they themselves become the abject, which, in turn, connects them to the “Alien-Others” of the national imaginary. “American cinema [has] provided important interventions in the dominant national stories that construct the culturally dangerous alien-other,” and it has done so, as Shapiro points out, by establishing characters whose “modes of selfhood have already incorporated various forms of otherness.”<sup>49</sup> Because the “tough chick” in these films is empowered by this very process of incorporation—that is, by the identification of interests with the

nation's Others, particularly black men—the emphasis is placed on the connectedness of a range of oppressions, including sexual, racial, and gender. To this extent, as Trinity and Charly come into conflict with gender norms, we (along with them) come to see these norms as inseparable from sexual and racial norms. In effect, these films “queer” the social domain by exposing the ways that domain

is composed of *racializing norms*, and that they exist not merely alongside gender norms, but are articulated through one another. Hence, it is no longer possible to make sexual difference prior to racial difference or, for that matter, to make them into fully separable axes of social regulation and power.<sup>50</sup>

The fact that historically grounded images of violence against black men and the violent imperialism of the nation-state generally are embedded in films that on the surface appear to be about white, gender-subversive subjects indexes a larger set of critical questions that can lead to an understanding of the social production of a racist heteropatriarchy and its function within the national imaginary. The “tough chick” film makes such an understanding possible by “queering” the action hero character of popular cinema.

#### NOTES

1. *The Matrix*, DVD, directed by Andy Wachowski and Larry Wachowski (Burbank, CA: Village Roadshow/Silver Pictures/Groucho II Film Partnership, 1999); and *The Long Kiss Goodnight*, DVD, directed by Renny Harlin (Burbank, CA: New Line/Forge, 1996).

2. It is well known that *The Matrix* has topped DVD sales lists and is ranked among the top grossing films of all time. *The Long Kiss Goodnight*, on the other hand, opened to only a mediocre box-office draw, yet as a recent *New York Times* article pointed out, films starring Samuel L. Jackson are immensely popular with DVD purchases, giving this film a new and wider audience than once thought. Indeed, Jackson ranks number one among actors whose films are coveted by DVD collectors. See Wilson Rothman, “I Don’t Rent. I Own,” *New York Times*, February 26, 2004, sec. 1G.

3. Michael J. Shapiro, *Cinematic Political Thought: Narrating Race, Nation, and Gender* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 47–48.

4. Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Continuum, 1991), 10.

5. See Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner, *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 214–15.

6. Needeya Islam, “‘I Wanted to Shoot People’: Genre, Gender, and Action in the

Films of Kathryn Bigelow,” in *Kiss Me Deadly: Feminism and Cinema for the Moment*, ed. Laleen Jayamanne (Sydney: Power Publications, 1995), 121–22.

7. Islam, “I Wanted to Shoot People,” 96, 106

8. For the origin of the term “heteropatriarchy” and related discussion, see Lynda Hart, *Fatal Women: Lesbian Sexuality and the Mark of Aggression* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994), 7. However, Judith Butler’s book is the key text that explicates the linkages between the heterosexual imperative and patriarchal gender ascription for queer theory. See *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

9. Rosemary Hennessey, “Queer Visibility in Commodity Culture,” *Cultural Critique* no. 29 (Winter 1995): 34. The rest of Hennessey’s citation lays the foundation of the usage of the term “queer” that informs the critical standpoint taken in this essay: “‘Queer’ not only troubles the gender asymmetry implied by the phrase ‘lesbian and gay,’ but potentially includes ‘deviants’ and ‘perverts’ who may transverse or confuse hetero-homo divisions and exceed or complicate conventional delineations of sexual identity and normative sexual practice. ‘Queer’ often professes to define a critical standpoint that makes visible how heteronormative attempts to fix sexual identities tend to fail often because they are overdetermined by other issues and conflicts—race or national identity, for example” (34).

10. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 168.

11. M. Jacqui Alexander, “Erotic Autonomy as a Politics of Decolonization: An Anatomy of Feminist and State Practice in the Bahamas Tourist Industry,” in *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, ed. M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (New York: Routledge, 1997), 64.

12. Eric Savoy, “‘That Ain’t All She Ain’t’: Doris Day and Queer Performativity,” in *Out Takes: Essays on Queer Theory and Film*, ed. Ellis Hanson (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 159.

13. M. Jacqui Alexander, “Not Just (Any) Body Can Be A Citizen: The Politics of Law, Sexuality and Postcoloniality in Trinidad and Tobago and the Bahamas,” *Feminist Review* no. 48 (Autumn 1994): 6.

14. Gill Valentine, “(Hetero)Sexing Space: Lesbian Perceptions and Experiences of Everyday Spaces,” in *Space, Gender, Knowledge: Feminist Readings*, ed. Linda McDowell and Joanne P. Sharp (London: Arnold Press, 1997), 294.

15. *Ibid.*, 292.

16. *Ibid.*

17. Nira Yuval-Davis, “Gender and Nation,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 16, no. 4 (1993): 624.

18. bell hooks, “A Call for Militant Resistance,” in *Multiple Voices in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Diane Carson, Linda Dittmar, and Janice R. Welsch (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 361.



19. The “Woman in Red” is a program generated by Mouse, one of the three white men of the resistance. He is notably a teenager who is called a “pimp” by the others when he talks of his “program.” When Neo is first tested in the loading program, it is his objectification of the “Woman in Red,” a nameless figure, that is his weakness, distracting him and allowing for an agent to point a gun to his head. The point made in this scenario is in fact feminist, implying that behind the image of the beautiful woman is really patriarchal national forces that disallow men to see the true face of their oppression—patriarchal enforcement of male desire. This is further upheld by the film because the weakest members of the resistance are white men who see women as objects, evidenced first by Mouse’s pubescent “pimping” (he is the first killed of the crew), and later by Cypher’s sinister adult lust for Trinity as well as for “blonds, brunettes and red-heads,” which is another way of signaling his lust for power—a lust that leads him to betray his comrades, brutally killing them off one by one.

20. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 18.

21. The name “Trinity” signals a certain violation in itself. The Holy Trinity consists of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. This very triumvirate functions to oust woman from a sanctioned place in the (holy) patriarchal order. The Virgin Mary should take the place of the Holy Ghost, but any physical embodiment of woman is read as a threat to the patriarchal order; the female body is a threat in religious rhetoric. So, the fact that Trinity is embodied whatsoever can be seen as a literal threat.

22. This could be productively explained, as well, in terms of the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari; they argue that it is rhizomatic (nonreproductive affiliations and connections) and not arboreal formations (of which the heterosexual family is the ideal) that most threaten the extant system with revolutionary new forms of being. *On The Line*, trans. John Johnson (New York: Semiotext[e], 1983), 5–58.

23. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 167–68.

24. For further discussion, see Kobena Mercer, “Skin Head Sex Thing: Racial Difference and the Homoerotic Imaginary,” in *How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video*, ed. Bad Object-Choices (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991), 175–77.

25. Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990). “Through Kristeva’s category of the abject, the habitual and unconscious fears and aversions that continue to define some groups as despised and ugly bodies modulate with anxieties over loss of identity” (122).

26. Mercer, “Skin Head Sex Thing,” 206.

27. Jane Gaines, “White Privilege and Looking Relations: Race and Gender in Feminist Film Theory,” in Carson, Dittmar, and Welsch, *Multiple Voices*, 180.

28. Ruth Frankenberg, “Growing Up White: Feminism, Racism and the Social Geography of Childhood,” *Feminist Review* 45 (Autumn 1993): 54. In fact, *Long Kiss* directly refers to this in its intertextual references; Mitch, when given orders by Charly, replies with another film’s dialogue, saying, “Yes, Miss Daisy, I be honkin’.” This reference, spoken in the “black dialect” popularized in films such as *Driving Miss Daisy* and

*Fried Green Tomatoes*, mocks Hollywood portrayals of black men and white women together.

29. Mercer, "Skin Head Sex Thing," 177.

30. See M. Jacqui Alexander, "Erotic Autonomy." "At this contemporary moment in the . . . state's activity in the global diffusion of sexualized definitions of morality, sexual and erotic autonomy have been most frequently cathected onto the body of the prostitute and the lesbian. Formerly conflated in the imaginary of the [white] imperial heteropatriarchy, the categories lesbian and prostitute now function together . . . as outlaw . . . poised to be disciplined and punished" (65).

31. Valentine, "(Hetero)Sexing Space," 401.

32. Samantha, the supposedly domesticated "fantasy" of the government assassin Charly, refuses the sexual assertions of men all around her. Though not as violently as Charly, who stabs her attempted rapist in the eye, Samantha scolds the teenagers who catcall at her in the parade, and she fights off the unwanted advances of the older man in the car after the party. Indeed, there is very little, if any, erotic component portrayed in her relationship with her fiancé. Notably, all these men are white.

33. See Mary Ann Doane, "Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator," in *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Patricia Erens (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 49.

34. Hennessy, "Queer Visibility," 36.

35. Savoy, "'That Ain't All She Ain't,'" 159–60.

36. Carole-Anne Tyler, "Boys Will Be Girls: The Politics of Gay Drag," in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991).

37. I am reminded here of Kobena Mercer's reading of a particular Robert Mapplethorpe photograph. Like that photo, "while the cheap, tacky polyester [clothing] confirms the black male's failure to gain access to 'culture' . . . the camouflage of respectability cannot conceal the fact that, in essence, he originates, like his prick, from somewhere anterior to civilization" ("Skin Head Sex Thing," 177). The contrast of costume is quite striking because although the clothes would be appropriate to a wealthy white man out on the links (where there is a long history of forbidding access to African Americans), on Mitch, the clothes appear dated and tacky, akin to the role of the polyester suit on Mapplethorpe's model.

38. *Ibid.*, 210.

39. Shapiro, *Cinematic Political Thought*, 48.

40. I find the cynical position of *The Long Kiss Goodnight* toward the neoconservative forces within the U.S. government remarkably prescient. In fact, the film mentions the first bombing of the World Trade Center as an example of a collusion of interests that seem even more relevant to the current administration. For example, the movie's suggestion of "CIA fundraising" takes on a frightening realism with the emerging reports that the now executive director of the CIA, "Buzzy" Krongard, headed the firm

that benefited economically from the suspicious jump in airline stock trading, which was sixty times the normal amount the day before the 9/11 attacks. For further discussion, see Gary Indiana, “No Such Thing As Paranoia: Disorganized Conspiracy,” *Village Voice*, June 8, 2004, Part 3 of 3.

41. However, the question remains as to whether the “tough chick” film’s “articulation of ambivalence . . . can be seen as a subversive deconstruction of the hidden racial and gendered axioms of [Hollywood narrative] in dominant traditions of representation” (Mercer, “Skin Head Sex Thing,” 181). For example, the highly publicized image of the Rodney King beating is clearly referenced in *The Matrix* when cops (not the agents) collectively kick and beat Morpheus before taking him into custody. Yet, embedded in this reference is a critique of the racist system that imposes such violence, because we are clearly aligned with Morpheus by this point in the story. Morpheus is sympathetic not only because of his relationship to Neo and Trinity but also because of his physical appearance and movement throughout the film—sheathed in black leather, donning frameless black glasses, and often appearing as if floating rather than walking (his feet are actually rarely seen, hidden by his full length coat). Additionally, he is given the position closest to omniscient narrator, functioning as the arbiter of “the Real.” Unlike “reality” shows such as *Cops* that depend on the anonymity of the black man in such scenarios, these films establish characters by visual and narrative means, which make any other position besides empathy nearly impossible. By placing Morpheus in the same situation as Rodney King, the spectator is forced to rethink that “real” historical event from a perspective wholly empathetic to the victim of such social injustice. To this extent, these films draw our attention to the fact that “in social, economic, and political terms, Black men in the United States constitute one of the ‘lowest’ social classes: disenfranchised, disadvantaged, and disempowered as a distinct collective subject in the late capitalist underclass.” Yet, in these films, “men who . . . came from this class are elevated. . . . Far from reinforcing the fixed beliefs of the white supremacist imaginary, such a deconstructive move begins to undermine the foundational myths of a white supremacist social order” (Ibid., 188). Yet, in the wavering of racial representations produced in these films, whether as “third world worker” (Dozer and Tank) or noble savage (the images of Morpheus breaking his manacles, in slow-motion nonetheless, or of Mitch seen bound, sometimes naked) or as comic relief (as Mitch is portrayed), “the undecidable question that is thrown back on the spectator—do the images undermine or reinforce racial stereotypes?—can be compared to the highly ambivalent aura of fetishism that frames the female body” (Ibid., 190).

42. Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Colonial Context* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 353.

43. *The Matrix: Revolutions*, DVD, directed by Andy Wachowski and Larry Wachowski (Burbank, CA: Village Roadshow/Silver Pictures/Groucho II Film Partnership, 2003).

44. Yuval-Davis, “Gender and Nation,” 623.

45. Ibid., 624.

46. This is subtly underscored by the detail that the daughter's teddy bear, referred to from the film's beginning, is named "Perkins." A gentle wink here is given to the fact that Theodore Roosevelt, whom the Teddy bear was named for, was one of the most imperialist presidents in the twentieth century.

47. McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 352.

48. The latest incarnation of this theme, and indeed its immense popularity, can be seen in the recent box-office success of Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill*, volumes 1 and 2.

49. Shapiro, *Cinematic Political Thought*, 66–67.

50. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 182.