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## The Use of Violence as Feminist Rhetoric: Third-Wave Feminism in Tarantino's Kill Bill Films

Leah Andrea Katona

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THE USE OF VIOLENCE AS FEMINIST RHETORIC:

THIRD-WAVE FEMINISM IN TARANTINO'S

*KILL BILL* FILMS

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A Thesis

Presented to the

Faculty of

California State University,

San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

in

Communication Studies

---

by

Leah Andrea Katona

December 2008

THE USE OF VIOLENCE AS FEMINIST RHETORIC:  
THIRD-WAVE FEMINISM IN TARANTINO'S  
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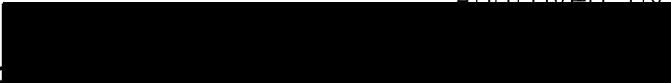
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A Thesis  
Presented to the  
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California State University,  
San Bernardino

---

by  
Leah Andrea Katona  
December 2008

Approved by:

  
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## ABSTRACT

Violence in film can be used as a symbolic representation of power. Violence is typically associated with men and masculinity, whereas femininity is typically characterized by submission. Traditionally in film men use violence to exert power over women, which is consistent with patriarchal ideology. The representation of the violent female in film breaks convention by contradicting what it means to be both masculine and feminine.

Tarantino's *Kill Bill* films used violence as a rhetorical tool to invert the balance of power between men and women. These films were distinctive as the lead fighters were women who used excess violence and gore to the same extent as their male predecessors. Women were ultimately shown to be superior killers to men throughout the films. This served as a resistant example of feminism gaining the upper hand and provided an opportunity for viewers to experience the subversion of patriarchy, even if only for a moment.

The *Kill Bill* films also embodied four general tenets of third wave feminism: contradiction, voice, agency and resistance. The presence of these tenets allowed this film to serve as a representative model of third wave feminism.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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To Noah

May you surround yourself with women of strength

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## CHAPTER ONE

### VIOLENCE AS POWER

There are various devices that illustrate power relationships in film. The use of violence is a quick and primal method for gaining and/or maintaining power over others. Through the use of physical force, domination is enacted by subverting the will, voice and even the life of another. Violence in film is prevalent and increasingly used for entertainment as well as its economic value. A violent scene provides a quick visceral reaction for audience members. Sparks, Sherry, and Lubsen (2005) echoed George Gerbner's work in stating that the

pervasiveness of violence in movies and TV programs has much more to do with its easy global marketability than it does with its inherent appeal or attractiveness to audiences. While humorous media content is often difficult to produce and is often misunderstood when it travels across cultures, violence is relatively cheap to produce and communicates in a universal language. (pp. 21-22)

A number of studies have analyzed the effects of violence on enjoyment in films (see e.g., Berry, Gray, & Donnerstein, 1999; Emmers-Sommer, Pauley, Hanzal, & Triplett, 2006; Sparks, Sherry, & Lubsen, 2005).

Overwhelmingly, these studies discovered that when the violence was cut from film, the level of enjoyment was not affected. The presence of violence did not increase enjoyment of the film and the lack of violence did not decrease it. In light of this, it seems reasonable to assume that screen violence must serve another purpose aside from enjoyment or entertainment.

Violence has become a means by which to institutionalize values of mainstream culture as well as, in some cases, challenge those values. The use of violence in film highlights the conflict between social power and cultural change. By analyzing who 'wins', who dies, and who uses violent force on the other, assumptions can be made about who is in charge and essentially who is more powerful. "Violence is the key to the rule of power. It is the cheapest and quickest dramatic demonstration of who can and who cannot get away with what against whom" (Gerbner, Gross, Signorielli, & Morgan, 1980, p. 708). Violent depictions in media are a visual representation of who is

in power and what is acceptable or forbidden in a social and cultural context. Slocum (2000) states that

depictions of violent behavior are special: they invoke some of society's most central and guiding values, those which justify the use of force, illuminate the parameters of social order, and demarcate legitimate from illegitimate action. (p. 651)

Scenes of violence can reinforce societal norms by punishing those who challenge those norms. By analyzing which characters are in the position of power (enactors of violence) versus those that are subverted (recipients of violence), it is possible to ascertain which ideologies are reinforced or marginalized.

Hollywood cinema continues to rely on circumscribed representations of violence whose meaning reinforces and perpetuates dominant myths of communal order even as it frequently strives to produce forms of violence that challenge the values of viewers and the norms of mainstream culture. (Slocum, 2000, p. 674)

Situations where members of a marginalized group function as the enactors of violence, particularly against the

members of the dominant group, can be indicative of social change or subversion of power through representation. Although violence is inscribed into the dominant ideology of patriarchy, it can also be used as a tool to criticize societal norms and challenge that dominant ideology. The visual metaphor of violence shows who is in the power position as easily as identifying who is harming the other. Violence is a clear indicator of power relations. The characters that wield violence onto others, wield power over their victims.

#### The Social Construction of Masculinity and Femininity

Before addressing violence in relation to subjective labels such as masculinity and femininity, these gender concepts must be defined. Masculinity and femininity are socially constructed labels ascribed to each sex. Each comprises a set of characteristics that are associated with what it means to be male or female. In Western culture masculinity is typically associated with aggression, competitiveness, assertion, strength and confidence. Femininity, on the other hand, is often characterized by submission, daintiness, beauty, and weakness.

The masculine ideal is one of physical strength, large size, and aggressiveness. The feminine ideal, on the other hand, is beautiful, small, thin, and, perhaps most importantly, weak. (Roth & Basow, 2004, p. 249)

As Simone De Beauvoir (1989) aptly notes, masculinity is the norm and femininity is the opposite or Other of masculinity. Femininity, then, is essentially the lack of masculinity.

The masculine and feminine are concepts that stem from the biological but are also socially constructed. Paechter (2003) examined how masculinities and femininities are developed through a 'community of practice' wherein members of each gender group inscribe the 'right' ways to be or do masculinity/femininity. Children begin peripherally learning the appropriate behaviors for each gender and as they conform to these practices, they become full members of the group. Those who practice resistance become outsiders. As infants, most individuals are 'named' one sex or the other on the basis of their genitals and subsequently adopted into either the 'masculine' or 'feminine' community. This is reinforced with every introduction of the child as male or female, selection of

clothing, and disparate treatment from one gender to the other.

This discussion of sex and gender is relevant to this analysis because masculinity and femininity are so heavily embedded in what it means to be male or female in Western culture, and by extension, the media. The norms of masculinity and femininity are reinforced by the media. Power is typically ascribed to the masculine while weakness is associated with the feminine. The masculine norms are powerful while the feminine must reject itself in order to become powerful. If power and weakness are mutually exclusive and femininity is characteristic of weakness, it must be rejected in order to become powerful (as masculinity). Consider the following argument by Paechter (2006).

Masculinity and femininity are not just constructed in relation to each other; their relation is dualistic. A dualistic relation is one in which the subordinate term is negated, rather than the two sides being in equal balance. Femininity is, thus, defined as a lack, an absence of masculinity. There can be no hegemonic femininity, because being in a hegemonic position

is also about being in a position of power; it is about being able to construct the world for oneself and others so that one's power is unchallenged and taken (more or less) for granted as part of the order of things. Hyperfemininity, on the other hand, is a powerless position, one that is defined by the absence of the power inherent not just in hegemonic masculinity, but, by virtue of the patriarchal dividend and the dualistic construction of masculinity and femininity, all masculinities. (p. 256)

It is to this end that power is distributed unevenly between the genders. Once unequal power relations are understood, the ways in which that power inequity is maintained can be identified. This supposition is pertinent to this analysis, as representations of hegemonic gender inequity in the *Kill Bill* films will be examined.

### Violence as Masculinity

Violence is traditionally associated with masculinity. This is due in part because violent aggressors, particularly in the media, are predominantly male (Boyle, 2001; Emmers-Sommer, et al., 2006; Rich, Woods, Goodman,



Emans, & DuRant, 1998). In addition, heroic figures and action stars are also traditionally men (Sparks, 1996). Masculine characters are typically displayed by overpowering others in physical ways. Heroes use violence to kill the bad guys and save the day. Sparks (1996) suggests that heroes enact their masculinity through hyper-masculinization (i.e. physique, dangerousness), male friendship and bonding (buddy movies), narrow emotions (grief and rage), positioning themselves as anti-establishment, and finally surrounding themselves with explosions, fires, deaths and other cataclysmic events. The wave of male heroes in action movies and war films serve to perpetuate the idea that violence and leadership are inherently masculine (Clarke, 2006). Often the women in these films are present in a purely sexual or supportive role. Masculinity is highlighted through violence and the brotherhood of male bonding in these films.

The hero is an overcoded image: he bears meanings about justice, morality, and law, and about being a man, in the same layered iconography. (Sparks, 1996, p. 354)

The masculinization of heroes privileges particular characteristics of what it means to be powerful and what it

means to be male. As Sparks (1996) suggests of heroes, such as Stallone and Schwarzenegger,

their pumped up bodies signify (nay, yell) 'Masculinity' as if these days one *showed* masculinity by presenting it in excess - a prototypical, warrior essence. (Sparks, 1996, p. 356, emphasis in original)

Violence and hyper-masculinity are used to exert power and within that power lies meaning about social norms and male aggression. Men retain power and the more manly the man, the more power he has. He can enact this manliness through the use of violence. Thus, violence is legitimized and tied to the Western definition of masculinity. "Power is paramount to establishing masculinity in Western society" (Eschholz & Bufkin, 2001, p. 660). As argued, violence equals power and that power defines masculinity.

While the enactment of violence by male heroes can be used for good or bad, the result is still the same. Whether characters are heroic figures or crime lords, they still obtain power through violence and the mafia killer is just as masculine as the action hero. Eschholz and Bufkin (2001) propose that men may use crime as a way to demonstrate their masculinity when they do not have other avenues

available because crime equals power and "power, whether legitimate or not, is tied to definitions of what it means to be a man" (p. 659). The motivations behind the use of force are not essential to establishing power or masculinity. Good or evil, justified or not, men become powerful through the use of force. Violence against others yields power and that power in turn bolsters their masculinity. There are no situational requirements for the use of violence; it benefits the character regardless of how he uses it.

Throughout film history, violence has been used to privilege male power and, when necessary, served to reclaim power and masculinity when the mass perception is that society has weakened it. Clarke (2006) suggests that the rise of war and action films in the 80s was a response to feminism and served to "remasculinize" America. Second wave feminism provided a more equal playing ground for women with men. Women were becoming educated, rising (however slowly) up the corporate ladder, entering fields that were previously forbidden them and thus each advancement slowly closed the power gap between male and female. With power so closely tied to what it means to be a man, the gain of power for women meant less power for men and ultimately the

perceived weakening of masculinity. In response to this weakening, Hollywood stepped in and used violence in war and action films to reestablish the powerful male and reassert traditional masculinity. Movies like *Rambo*, *Under Siege*, and *Terminator* helped visually enforce masculinity. Violence was an essential tool of that assertion.

When faced with the de-masculinization of modern culture, men (particularly white men) turned to violence to reclaim their power and masculinity such as in movies like *Fight Club* (1999), directed by David Fincher. This movie is an overt example of this pattern of exercising violence in film to regain power and masculinity. Ta (2006) analyzed *Fight Club* and looked at the violence within the film more as self-violence and self-flagellation. Whether specifically against the self or others, this violence was still used as a means of reclaiming masculinity in an overly feminized culture. Regardless of the victim, the use of violence is key to claiming power and negotiating space within societal standards. In her discussion of *Fight Club*, Ta (2006) states,

the white male rebel, who despises the corporate masochist that endures self-inflicted punishment by participating in a feminized society, must

therefore resist a castrating culture and recover what he perceives to be his lost masculinity. (p. 270)

He does this through the use of violence to exert power and thus regains his lost or diluted masculinity.

Lee (2002) also analyzed the movie and asserted that *Fight Club* assists men in rejecting the contradictory expectations of modern masculinity. Men in our society are encouraged to be restrained and treat everyone as equals, yet the virtual violence in *Fight Club* allows men to vicariously identify with the characters and 'fight' against these new weakened and sensitive masculine roles. Lee (2002) claims

at the sociological level, the violence in the film reminds men that they can fight against harmful models of masculinity. From the psychological perspective, *Fight Club*, acts for men as a surrogate mentor, as a surrogate wise man leading one to and through one important stage of life. The film's violence is a projected picture of the 'virtual violence' that one can enact within the psyche to destroy harmful

gender-role paradigms to make room for healthier masculinities. (p. 422)

The film and others like it serve as vicarious outlets for men to re-establish their masculinity through identification with violence. Violence is a key element to the establishment of power in film. It is a quick and primal way to show who has power over whom. By engaging in violent behavior over another, one exerts power and thus establishes a power relationship. Screen violence is a metaphoric representation of power. Power, in Western culture, is largely tied to masculinity. Without power, masculinity is weakened and therefore violence is often used to reassert that power and regain masculinity. Particularly in reaction to the feminization of modern culture, Hollywood tends to use violence to reaffirm traditional masculinity and help maintain the dominance of the powerful male.

#### Femininity and Aggression

Stereotypically, women have been silent, submissive and passive recipients of male action. However, as Ringrose (2006) suggests,

over the past few years there has been increasing international attention paid to what is positioned in the popular media and academic research as a significant 'rise' in girls' aggression, bullying and violence. (p. 405)

The new culture of the 'mean girl' is gaining more prominence and notoriety. This meanness is still distinctly feminine as it is relational and covert. The harm caused by feminine aggression is based on the closeness of the relationship and involves gossip, secrets and insults. It is indirect and sneaky, in contrast to the direct confrontational style of masculine culture. This "relational aggression" is a concept being reworked into the feminine model. This is due in part to a backlash to the stereotype that women are more nurturing and caregiving and that aggression is inherently masculine. Ringrose (2006) identifies this covert aggressiveness as being incorporated into a new femininity.

The indirectly aggressive girl [is] now operating as a normal template of girlhood restaging an age-old metaphor of femininity as repression by moving from the pole of nice to that of mean. (p. 419)

Aggression can only be reconciled with the feminine if it is indirect and covert. Feminine aggression is classified as "mean". Men can enact violence as a manifestation of their masculinity; however, even the smallest act of covert aggression by females is given the value judgment of being mean. Often this aggression is not even taken seriously. Xiyang and Petula (2007) discovered that female aggression and violence within dating relationships in China was not viewed as violent but as "willfulness" and "a form of playful fighting, an expression of emotion, a communication mode and even a way of increasing their affection" (p. 630). This was due in part to the inferior physical strength of women and the idea that men are not harmed by their attempts at physical aggression or violence. Women are not expected to act in harmful, direct or violent ways. When they do, they are enigmatic as they are enacting a contradiction to traditional feminine stereotypes.

Outward and overt violence by females violates the masculinity of violence (sometimes simply by being female in a male dominated arena) as well as the relational aggression of females. At its core, masculinity is associated with maleness. Thus, the usage of violence by the female challenges and contradicts the masculine rather



than reifying it. She is explicitly non-male therefore not fully masculine, yet although she is a woman, she is not fully feminine either. "We deem violence so antithetical to femininity that when a woman murders someone it doesn't make sense within our symbolic system" (Neroni, 2005, p. 62). Bloodshed does not fit the feminine image.

The overtly aggressive girl is transgressive of both traditional norms of feminine passivity and the newer successful, mean girls. She is a deviant, whose qualities cannot be easily reconciled with the feminine. (Ringrose, 2006, p. 419)

The outwardly violent woman violates conceptions of both the masculine and the feminine. She occupies her own distinct space outside what is conventional for either gender. The violent female character is distinctive in this way and requires explanation as she is becoming increasingly more prevalent in film and popular media. The *Kill Bill* films provide rich examples of these unique and enigmatic gender role violators.

## Explaining Violent Women in Film

If violence is associated with power and power with masculinity, then to enact violence is decidedly masculine. Women generally are typically the victims of violence and rarely the perpetrators. For example, it is much more likely to turn on the news and find a story about a female rape victim than a female killer. However, the face of violence is changing in Hollywood. The image of the violent female is becoming increasingly more prevalent and popular in today's media. These representations have come under debate since the rise of their popularity in the 1990's. Greenberg, Clover, Johnson, Chumo, Henderson, Williams, Braudy, and Kinder (1991/1992) summed up the debate about violent females while discussing *Thelma & Louise*:

The film has been variously interpreted as feminist manifesto (the heroines are ordinary women, driven to extraordinary ends by male oppression) and as profoundly antifeminist (the heroines are dangerous phallic caricatures of the very macho violence they're supposedly protesting). (p. 20)

Some critics saw the movie in a positive light, while others claimed that conforming to male violence only

perpetuates phallic and patriarchal ideology. Initial violent representations of women were met with backlash but there has been an increasing move to embrace these figures. In discussing two violent female characters in *Baise Moi* and *What It Feels Like for a Girl*, Franco (2004) argues that

the female protagonists take masculinely codified traits such as directness, violence, aggression, independence and control in their stride, thus challenging social prescriptions of femininity in terms of attitude and behaviour. (p. 3)

The main difference between violence enacted by women versus violence enacted by men is that female violence must be explained and justified. Violence is so inherently tied to masculinity that it need not be examined for motivation. The violence simply is. "Men's use of violence does not, in itself, require understanding or explanation" (Boyle, 2001, p. 318). For females, however, the enactment of violence is often explained in the story usually as revenge for previous victimization. As Boyle (2001) posits,

when a man commits a violent act or acts, he is more likely to be presented as a 'natural born killer', inherently violent or monstrous, his

motivations need not be examined or understood.

In contrast, when a woman commits a violent act or acts, she appears to have acted against gender and her crime requires understanding and explanation. (p. 320)

Boyle (2001) analyzed the movie *Natural Born Killers* (1994), directed by Oliver Stone, which was an early juxtaposition of male versus female violence that challenged the idea that violence is an all-male terrain. The film follows a young married couple, Mickey and Mallory, on a killing spree until they are eventually caught, jailed and made into criminal celebrities. Boyle's main contention is that Mickey is a "natural born killer" whose violent acts need no explanation because he is male and violence is associated with the masculine, whereas Mallory's backstory of victimization is central to the film in order to explain how a woman could become a killer. Mallory was not "naturally born" as having a killer instinct but created after being victimized as a young girl by her step-father.

Images of Mallory's father and references to the abuse she endured recur at strategic points in the film, continually contextualising her violence

in relation to previous victimisation and simultaneously reminding us of Mallory's vulnerability. (Boyle, 2001, p. 316)

Every violent act she commits is evaluated with the understanding of her initial victimization. She is painted as a victim before becoming a victimizer who enacts her violent revenge on male characters throughout the film. "Mallory is always simultaneously perpetrator and victim, dangerous and vulnerable" (Boyle, 2001, p. 317). She is positioned as the contradiction of victim and killer. One interesting aspect of this film is that both genders are side-by-side killers and yet they are framed differently as one requires explanation and the other does not. This is due in part to the perspective of the viewer being predominantly male.

In 1975, Laura Mulvey broke ground with her identification of the male gaze in media. She argued that women are portrayed as objects for male visual pleasure.

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional

exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. (reprinted in Penley, 1988, p. 62)

Aside from the need to justify Mallory's violence in the film *Natural Born Killers*, she also continues to be an object of the male gaze even though she is exerting physical power over men.

Although both Mickey and Mallory are looked *for* (by the police) and looked *to* (by their fans) throughout the film, only Mallory is explicitly looked at. She is the object of the gaze and the object of investigation. (Boyle, 2001, p. 318)

Boyle (2001) suggests that Mallory's character at times resists the male gaze (as she kills a man for watching her dance) and at times seeks or embraces it. She is an object both to the men in the film and the male gaze of the audience who are watching her. Boyle argues that this objectification is a means by which Mallory can be contained and not allowed too much power because while she is a killer, she also remains an object for male enjoyment. She does not negotiate her own space. "Mallory is both

fetish object and out-of-control weapon, often simultaneously" (Boyle, 2001, p. 319). She is a dangerous representation who has the potential to shake up the masculinization of violence. However, the need to examine and explain her actions further serves to normalize male violence.

#### Statement of the Problem

Reactions to the violent female are mixed as she is a perplexing figure that challenges both what it means to be masculine and what it means to be feminine at the same time. She is a unique representation that has not yet been fully defined. In her book, *The Violent Female*, Neroni (2006) expresses the confusion and challenge of understanding the violent female character:

As the media reaction to female violence has revealed, the questions that most often arise in reaction to the violent woman are: Can this be a woman? Can femininity be corrupted by violence? Can femininity be attached to violence in any way? These hysterical questions are provoked, because the female violence in some way deeply threatens ideological definitions of gender that

bind together and inform many other cultural  
ideals and ideological systems. (p. 85)

The violent female is enigmatic and presents a challenge to normative gender roles, as well as direct resistance to patriarchal domination as she occupies a space that is categorically masculine. Patriarchy uses characteristics associated with masculinity such as aggression and violence to enforce and maintain the power imbalance between men and women. However, violence and aggression are tools that contain power regardless of the gender that uses them. In the enactment of violence from one individual onto another, for example, there are two distinct positions: one of power and one of submission. The one enacting the violence onto the other is exercising power over the other and placing that individual in a subverted position. The idea that violence and aggression are decidedly masculine and therefore the usage of these elements by women simply reinforces masculinity and thus patriarchy is problematic. This logic suggests that the power behind violence is contained within the masculine framework rather than within the act itself regardless of the gender that uses it. Put plainly, violence inflicts harm onto a subject, thus subverting that subject. In this vein, women using violence



against men turns the tables of power and positions women over men if only for the duration of the act. Thus, images of women enacting violence in film, particularly onto men, serves to challenge the existing power relations between men and women as dictated by patriarchy by offering a sample of women in the seat of power. This image challenges the status quo of dominance and can be read as a resistant representation of feminism, that is women claiming power that is traditionally held by men.

The use of violence in film is tied to power and when used as a form of resistance to dominant ideologies, it can serve as a catalyst for social change. Violence is associated with the masculine, so when it is used by women as a resistance tool, it holds meaning about social critique. "Falling outside ideological expectations regarding violence, the violent woman carries the burden of challenging cultural ideals and filmic traditions" (Neroni, 2005, p. 84). In response to the threat of feminism, masculinity has been recaptured through film violence and reasserted by action heroes, war movies and fight dramas like *Fight Club*. The rise of violent females, in turn, communicates resistance through the use of violence and thus continues to challenge the dominant patriarchal

ideology. Particularly when violent acts by females are associated with revenge or vindication, the exertion of power over their would-be victimizers highlights their resistance.

This resistance could have implications for vicarious viewership. Franco (2004) argues that the rape revenge drama offers

empowerment to female viewers by engaging them in an energetic spectacle of violence and redemption, while providing distance and mastery through irony, reflexivity and intertextuality.

(p. 2)

Female spectators can experience resistance through identification with these characters. Despite vilification by critics, the powerful woman or action heroine may provide a new role model for young women. While violence may not be the ideal solution to solving problems, these women are exerting power and positioning themselves as strong women who do not allow themselves to be taken advantage of. When they have been victimized, they retaliate and enact revenge, which moves them out of the victim role and into the role of the resistant female who takes charge and reverses the power relationship.

Mulvey (1988), in a follow up to her groundbreaking work in 1975, addresses the idea of the female spectator and her conflict between the feminine and the masculine. In discussing the female main character who takes on the active/male role, she suggests that "the female spectator's phantasy of masculinization at cross-purposes with itself, restless in its transvestite clothes" (Mulvey, 1988, p. 79). Ultimately, she argues that the female cannot be truly comfortable on either side - the masculine active or the feminine passive. In addition, casual observations indicate that the increasing number of female action heroes still conform to the stereotype of beautiful, white, thin, and athletic women. They are still subject to the objectification of the male gaze. Whether or not this gaze can be subverted and a new empowered gaze can be employed is up for debate, and this analysis underscores the urgency of this question.

[W]e can happily come away from the imaginary revolution staged in these texts with a newly earned status as dangerous women, a status which we can appropriate, manipulate, revise and define any way we choose. As empowering fantasies which engage an emergent, popular, feminist

sensibility, these embattled texts thus carve out new possibilities for female subjectivity.

(Lentz, 1993, p. 374)

With advancements made in technology and media entertainment, which is a hallmark of the third wave feminist movement, modern feminists have begun to articulate their ideology in more subtle and not so subtle unique mediated ways. Representations of feminist characters in film and television, for example, have evolved into strong, powerful female characters that often enact their power in physical ways. Female fighters and heroines have become iconic representations of powerful, independent (feminist) women.

#### Text for Analysis: The *Kill Bill* Series

A number of studies have examined the role of women in various media including books and literature<sup>1</sup>, magazines<sup>2</sup>,

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<sup>1</sup> See Ahern, 2004; Crawford, 2006; Enright, 2007; Fisk, 2006; Geary, 1976; Leder, 2005/2006; Pandey, 2004; Rodas, 2003; Ross, 2005; Waldron, 1993; Wray, 2007

<sup>2</sup> See Barnett, 2006; Darling-Wolf, 2006; Johnson, Rowan & Lynch, 2006; Johnston & Swanson, 2003; Licona, 2005; Machin & Thornborrow, 2006; Marcellus, 2006; Patterson, 2005; Sarbin, 2005; Sypeck, Gray, & Ahrens, 2004

music<sup>3</sup>, television<sup>4</sup>, and film<sup>5</sup>. In particular, film and television representations of women lend a visual example of how women navigate their roles in society. The characters portrayed on the big screen serve as role models and tangible illustrations of modern feminism. While music and print media offer one dimension of feminist portrayals, film and television allow the audience to actively engage in the fictitious lives of female characters as their experiences are acted out on the big and little screens. Western culture has become increasingly visual and media dependent (see Shapiro & Chock, 2004; Lowrey, 2004). Film offers an active visual representation of modern society and analysis of character portrayals can reflect societal norms and values.

Mediated representations of women in film and television have changed since the onset of the second wave of feminism and are now undergoing another metamorphosis

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<sup>3</sup> See Armstead, 2007; Brabazon & Evans, 1998; Dibben, 1999; Felder, 1993; Forman, 1994; McCarthy, 2006; McClary, 2000; Shugart & Waggoner, 2005; Westmoreland, 2001

<sup>4</sup> See Amy-Chinn, 2006; Armstrong, Wood, & Nelson, 2006; Banet-Weiser, 2004; Dubrofsky, 2002; Early, 2001; Fairclough, 2004; Hammers, 2005; Harris, 2004; Hendershot, 2006; Henderson, 1994; Lauzen, 2001; Rockler, 2006

<sup>5</sup> See Berland & Wechter, 1992; Borda, 2005; Brosh, 2000; Cai, 2005; Dubois, 2001; Edwards, 2004; Markovitz, 2000; McLeer, 2002; Nenno, 2001; Vint, 2007; Wang, 2003; Young, 1991

through the influence of the third wave. Female characters retain their femininity alongside their feminist politics. They can contradict themselves and be comfortable doing so. These representations are strong, vindicated, successful and independent. More recently a string of movies and television shows have positioned women in the role of action hero or violent female. Some critics are repulsed by these images (see e.g., Bowman, 2003; Medved, 2003) while others are in favor of female fighters, believing that they show women as powerful and confident (see e.g., Corliss, 2003; Johnson, 2003; Travers, 2003). Some people enjoy these representations particularly when these action figures wear less and fight more (Travers, 2004). In any case, the amount of female action heroes, fighters and killers is steadfastly becoming more prevalent in Hollywood (see e.g. *Alien*, 1979; *Thelma & Louise*, 1991; *Natural Born Killers*, 1994; *Xena: Warrior Princess*, 1995-2001; *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, 1997-2003; *Charlie's Angels*, 2000; *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*, 2001).

One of these newly emergent characters comes from Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill* films in which the main character plots and enacts her revenge on an ex-lover who nearly killed her at her wedding rehearsal. The character

of 'The Bride' became immediately iconic and the movies themselves are the first of their kind to provide violence, kung fu, killing and gore at the hands of women equal to that of what is typical for male characters in this genre of film. The sheer amount of bloodshed in the movies has been enough to cause controversy amongst critics, particularly as the one doing most of the killing is female. The character of 'The Bride' can be read as a unique, if not eccentric, representation of third wave feminist values.

In addition to *The Bride*, there are a number of other deadly female characters present in the *Kill Bill* films that also break through societal expectations of the feminine norm. These women, although positioned as *The Bride's* enemies, also enact power through violence as *The Bride* does. They are mothers, daughters, and killers at the same time.

#### Pentadic Presentation of the Text

The *Kill Bill* films are multilayered as the background, style, director, actors, and controversy all play a role in shaping the overall impression of the films. In order to effectively understand the text, Burke's pentad is applied as an organizational device to frame these

different aspects for discussion. The pentad is derived from Burke's notion of dramatism in that every rhetor describes his or her experiences using the basic elements of a drama or play. These elements are act, agency<sup>6</sup>, scene, agent, and purpose. The act is the action or event that is being described in the communication text. Agency is the means by which the act is performed. It may be viewed as the justification or method used to accomplish the act. The scene is the setting in which the act takes place. The agent is the one who is performing the communication act. The purpose is the implied intent of the agent or goal of the act.

Burke's pentad is used to introduce the varied background elements of Tarantino's *Kill Bill* films in order to effectively organize the presentation of the text for analysis. Within this pentadic framework, the act is the story contained within the films. The plot is stretched across both films. It is the content around which the rest of the pentad revolves. The agency is the background and style of the films as they are the means by which the films

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<sup>6</sup> These terms are specific to Burke's pentad. Agency, in this case is not to be confused with the term agency as used in this thesis as a descriptor of third wave feminism.



have been shaped and pieced together. This consists of the direction style, borrowing various genre elements and the overall visual approach Tarantino took in arranging the films. The scene is the public controversy/climate surrounding the release of the films. Critical response and audience reception shed insight into this element of the text. This is the setting for the films themselves as they were released into mainstream culture. The agent is writer/director, Quentin Tarantino, as he essentially created the films from the story itself to the vision and presentation of the story. Finally, the purpose, although debatable, is the empowerment of women, which has become a marked element associated with these films.

Act - The Kill Bill Story. As characteristic for Tarantino, the *Kill Bill* films do not follow a linear progression in time and instead flashback to the beginning of the story only half way through the second film. As the story goes, Bill is the leader of the Deadly Viper Assassination Squad consisting of himself, The Bride, and four others. The Bride is played by Uma Thurman. The Bride has a name, Beatrix Kiddo, but since it is omitted and even bleeped out in the first movie and partially in the second, for the purposes of this thesis the main character is most

often referred to as 'The Bride'. The Bride is trained by the most skillful kung fu master and has exceptional skill in martial arts, the art of the samurai sword, and assassination techniques. Beatrix was romantically involved with Bill and finds out she is pregnant with Bill's child just as she is caught off guard by a female assassin who works for her next scheduled target. The Bride pleads for her life and the life of her unborn child and promises to walk away without completing her mission if their lives are spared. The female assassin sees the pregnancy test showing positive, decides to trust her and leaves. Thus, The Bride goes into hiding and ends up some time later in a small church in El Paso set to marry a young man who has no idea about her past. The massacre at the Two Pines Wedding Chapel in El Paso, Texas, occurs as The Bride is in rehearsal with the groom, minister, and friends. Bill shows up, offers a reluctant congratulations; and, as The Bride takes her place at the altar, the remaining members of the Deadly Viper Assassination Squad walk in and shoot everyone in the building, killing them all. Bill concludes the massacre by shooting The Bride in the head. She wakes up 4 1/2 years later from a coma, struggles to regain her motor skills and escapes from the hospital. From the point of

regained mobility, she claims revenge by killing every individual assassin that participated in the massacre at the wedding chapel. The last on her list to die is Bill. Even after waking from her bullet-induced coma, she is beaten, shot, and buried alive before finally finding Bill. When she encounters him, she also discovers her daughter who was presumably taken from her womb and the only other survivor of the massacre. In an emotional scene, she succeeds in killing Bill with the legendary five-point-palm technique and The Bride is left to enjoy her new freedom and life with her daughter. The character of The Bride is strong and persevering. The *Kill Bill* story is shaped by the triumph over her victimization and her enactment of revenge. Yet through the fighting, the blood and the dialogue there are some distinct parallels that can be drawn between the character of The Bride and the main tenets of third wave feminism. These parallels may lend some insight into the direction of third wave feminist representations in the media, particularly as postmodern expression and/or signs of patriarchal resistance.

Agency - Background and Style. Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill* movies were originally envisioned as one movie, but were broken into two parts during the editing process.

*Kill Bill: Vol. 1* was released on October 10, 2003 and *Kill Bill: Vol. 2* was released on April 16, 2004. As one critic stated, "the interlude is a good idea. After bathing in Vol. 1's balletic blood and bustle, you may need four months to catch your breath" (Corliss, 2003, ¶ 8). The movie series was written and directed by Quentin Tarantino. Actress Uma Thurman collaborated and co-authored the films functioning to some extent as Tarantino's muse (Hedegaard, 2004). Thurman also played the main character of The Bride in the films. This role "made her into an iconic, death-dealing, blood-spattered revenge machine" (Edwards, 2003, ¶ 1). The movies also starred Lucy Liu, Vivica Fox, Daryl Hannah, David Carradine and Michael Madsen. Despite the violent nature of the films, they did well at the box office and sparked a great deal of controversy. According to *USA Today*, *Kill Bill: Vol. 1* scored \$70 million at the box office, while *Kill Bill: Vol. 2* scored \$66 million (Snider, 2004). This is not to say that profit defines the quality of a film by any means, only that despite the controversial climate surrounding these films, they did well at the box office and were popular with the movie-going public.

The films were incredibly violent and involved a great deal of fighting which in part was due to the nature of the story as well as a reflection of Tarantino's own film preferences. "It was the continuation of a love affair between Tarantino and martial arts films, and the beginning of his attempts to bring them to a modern Western audience" (Brown, 2006, p. 100). The films have been repeatedly referred to as Tarantino's love letter to the kung fu genre as well as a throwback to spaghetti westerns. *Vol. 1* was a pastiche of the kung fu films of the East, while *Vol. 2* involved a sampling of the classic Western films.

With the dense network of references in 'Kill Bill,' Mr. Tarantino is at once playing a game and making a point, demonstrating how Eastern and Western popular culture have so strongly influenced each other over the years that the new style in action filmmaking is an inseparable blend of the two. (Kehr, 2004, ¶ 2)

Critics repeatedly detailed the myriad of references to classic kung fu and western films laden in the movies. Tarantino's love of film was expressed through the incorporation of so many earlier film influences. "'Kill Bill' closes the circle, bringing Asian, European and

American influences together into a glorious, crazy, rousing and finally quite poignant meta-movie" (Kehr, 2004, ¶ 2). Some of these acknowledgements were blatant such as the casting David Carradine, the star of the 1990s television series *Kung Fu* as well as martial arts film giant, Sonny Chiba, as Hattori Hanzo.

In casting some of his heroes, [Tarantino] again accentuates the similarities between his film and its predecessors, and helps *Kill Bill* join the legacy of martial arts motion pictures he was so desperate to emulate - or recreate. (Brown, 2006, p. 100)

The violence and fight scenes in both films are presented almost as a collage of different genres with some scenes filmed in black and white, some involve a great deal of dialogue, some barely incorporate speaking, and there is even a Japanese anime cartoon scene. Tarantino used his unique style and vision to bring a postmodern collection of film genre elements inside one exceedingly violent film series. In a way, the transitions in style make the blood and gore somewhat more tolerable. The martial arts and western styles that Tarantino incorporated were at once emulative and resistant (whether intentionally or

unintentionally) because although the styles were integrated with great precision, women were the main fighters instead of the long line of male heroes that preceded them. This gender switch effectively broke tradition and sparked curiosity amongst critics and the public alike.

Scene - Violence Controversy. The *Kill Bill* films were packed with fight scenes, however the amount of graphic violence and blood was immensely overpowering. This excess of gore sparked a great deal of debate in critics and audience members alike. In particular, it was surprising that these movies received an R rating instead of the harsher NC-17 rating many believed the films deserved. An R rating allows children under 17 to be admitted under parent supervision whereas the NC-17 does not allow children under 17 to be admitted under any circumstances. The films (particularly *Vol. 1*) ignited a controversy over the use of violence in modern cinema as well as the artistic value of Tarantino's vision. *USA Today* made the following statement regarding *Kill Bill: Vol. 1*,

widely described as the bloodiest feature film ever released by a major studio (in this case, Disney's Miramax division), the movie stands out

not because of the presence of graphic violence but due to the absence of anything else. (Medved, 2003, ¶ 3)

The excess of blood in the film was described in a number of different ways by critics: beautiful by some, comedic by others, and just plain revolting. "The bloodletting is so over the top it turns the carnage into a blood-soaked ballet, almost beautiful in its choreographed mayhem" (Brown, 2006, p. 104). Blood all over the screen is likened to a ballet. It is this curious appreciation of over-the-top gore that had some critics in a rage. Another critic at *USA Today* had a different opinion of *Vol. 1*, stating "this movie represents another step in the desensitization process that erodes cultural standards and mocks our innate, healthy revulsion toward cruelty" (Medved, 2003, ¶ 11).

It was this outrage that fueled a debate over the damage these movies may be causing our society. "If filmmakers keep glorifying ever nastier and more perverse violence, that'll take American society and culture down the wrong road" (Peterson, 2004, ¶ 17). The films were categorized as a symptom of what may be wrong with our culture. This was due in part not just to the amount of



blood shown on screen but to the multiple abuses the characters suffered at each other's hands. As one critic pondered of *Vol. 1*,

if it were real, then one might begin to wonder why it was really necessary to make - or to see - a movie in which during most of its running time women are verbally abused, raped (albeit off-camera), slapped, beaten, stabbed, and dismembered. (O'Brien, 2003, p. 25)

Add to the list with *Vol. 2*, being buried alive, shot with a close range shotgun, eye gouging, and squishing an eyeball between bare toes. With the laundry list of carnage, it is not hard to see why some critics addressed the films on a moral plane.

Still others tried to rationalize the violence and attribute a greater purpose to it in order to reconcile the use of it in such excess. In discussing the vigilante justice killers in the recent surge of Hollywood revenge films, Scott (2004) states that

their methods are justified both by the utter depravity of the original crime and its personal impact on them. They each also use violence as a

kind of extreme therapy, an occasion for personal growth and self-realization. (§ 7)

Violence, then, becomes a tool for the character's own development. Regardless of the critical stance taken when addressing the films, it becomes necessary to take into account the writer/director vision that created the controversy in order to better understand the function the violence serves, if any.

Agent - A Closer Look at Tarantino. Tarantino is a wildly controversial director as most of his movies typically provoke a love or hate reaction. Emerging on the scene in 1992 with *Reservoir Dogs*, Tarantino has since written and directed the critically acclaimed *Pulp Fiction* in 1994 as well as *Jackie Brown* in 1997. He took quite a break before delivering *Kill Bill: Vol. 1* to the public in 2003. His style is uniquely postmodern as the influence of his early career as a movie store clerk seems to have rubbed off on his own filmmaking efforts. Tarantino has been referred to as "the Prince of Postmodernists" (Bowman, 2003, p. 52). He weaves together pieces of his great film loves to create new, often violent, cult classics. Hedegaard (2004) describes Tarantino as a "movie geek, loud-talking barroom brawler, high school dropout, wildly

gesticulating raconteur, apparent foot fetishist, working-class movie-mayhem madman genius" (§ 7). Critics are divided regarding Tarantino's contributions to the film industry. In a statement regarding *Kill Bill: Vol. 1*, one critic remarked of Tarantino, "As a director, he's something of a samurai himself, making a fetish of ritual and carving images with backhanded finesse" (Johnson, 2003, § 5). This same critic went on to say that "Tarantino challenges our preconceptions of what's art and what's cheese" (Johnson, 2003, § 6).

His over-the-top visual tactics are often the cause for debate as these images can be viewed as morally bankrupt, childish, comedic, or at once brilliant and imaginative. Tarantino's work rarely elicits a moderate response. For example, a critic from *Rolling Stone* magazine (2003) stated the following after Tarantino after the release of *Kill Bill: Vol. 1*:

killingly funny, wildly inventive, bloody as a gushing artery and heart-stoppingly beautiful. Tarantino has the talent to show us what's sacred about the profane . . . In *Kill Bill*, Tarantino brings delicious sin back to movies - the thrill

you get from something down, dirty and dangerous.

(Travers, 2003, ¶ 1)

There is no doubt Tarantino has a loyal fan base that follows his career and desires more of his unique storytelling. His use of the violent and perverse is seen as cutting edge and avant-garde.

However, as dedicated as those critics are who love Tarantino, there are others who despise him, remarking that he is a sick symptom of our cultural decline. One critic asked, "Why is Quentin Tarantino turning sadism and torture - stripped of all potentially redeeming context - into mass entertainment?" (Peterson, 2004, ¶ 1). This critic further went on to state, "he's like a creepy kid torturing insects with a magnifying glass" (Peterson, 2004, ¶ 3). There are a large number of critics who would agree and would again charge him with feeding our culture's love of depravity. In a statement following the release of *Kill Bill: Vol.1*, one critic noted that with this movie Tarantino

continues his career-long assault on the weak of stomach . . . the fact that Tarantino has been so richly rewarded for pursuing his perverse fascination with graphic violence should be cause

for reflection - about our culture and about ourselves. (A Study in Shootings, 2003, p. 14)

Critics on both side of the fence seem to acknowledge that aside of their personal opinions on Tarantino's work, he has no doubt been influential since his emergence in Hollywood.

Tarantino is both the most overrated and most influential director of the last decade,' says Timothy Shary, film studies assistant professor at Clark University in Worcester, Mass. (as quoted in Bowles, 2003, ¶ 11)

This influence, however, is often not viewed positively.

Yes, Tarantino has been influential,' says Brett Ingram, lecturer in media production at Wake Forest University. 'So has Jerry Springer. So has Ronald McDonald. So has George W. Bush. And this all says way more about the decline of our culture than it does about the individual we label as 'influential.' I think Tarantino is a masterful writer and film director. I just don't think he has anything important to say. (as quoted in Bowles, 2003, ¶ 35)

Regardless of critical acclaim or condemnation, Tarantino has a powerful effect on his audience and his mind, whether twisted or brilliant, has created highly influential and controversial films that have taken Hollywood by storm. He won an Oscar for *Pulp Fiction*, which also won 46 other awards with 36 additional nominations (IMDB, 1990-2008). As the powerful mastermind behind the story of *Kill Bill*, Tarantino's influence and controversial contribution cannot be ignored. This is particularly true of this series, as he mixed his highly masculine and violent movie-making style with a slew of powerful female characters who tell a highly visceral story, often through the eyes of one woman.

Purpose - The Empowerment Debate in *Kill Bill*. In addition to the controversies sparked by the violence of the *Kill Bill* films and the nature of the director's vision, these movies prompted debate about whether the deadly female characters portrayed in the films were progressive and empowering or regressive and destructive. The role and purpose of these women as enactors and recipients of violence caused a great deal of discussion in the media. For example, the main character endures an immense amount of brutal violence before she begins her quest for revenge. As one critic suggested, this endurance

by a female versus a male allowed the audience to empathize and suffer with the character to a greater degree.

By using Ms. Thurman in the lead, Mr. Tarantino is able to give the suffering an emotional core that a masculine protagonist wouldn't provide, and he allows her some of the most primal suffering ever. (Mitchell, 2004, ¶ 13)

Of course, the feminine angle ultimately points back to the motivation of the director as critics desire to understand the influence behind the text.

The theme of motherhood is rampant in KB2, but it's hard to believe QT has turned into a feminist. True, revisiting past interviews, it's clear that being raised by a single mom, and a tough one at that, has made him inordinately fond of strong women. (Rich, 2004, p. 25)

Whether or not Tarantino has developed a respect for strong females, he does have a particular fondness for actress Uma Thurman. He has reportedly referred to her as his muse. In discussing *Vol. 1*, one critic reported

every hypnotized shot of her celebrates the director's adoration of his star as woman

warrior, visual icon, and female principle with an ax to grind. (Carson, 2004, ¶ 9)

This critic went on to suggest,

One reason the movie transcends the clichés of the empowered-martial-arts-heroine genre, which isn't easy to freshen up after a decade of Lara Croft and Buffy, is that Tarantino clearly thinks female empowerment is a tautology. He wants to gaze on a goddess while she smites her enemies, and you suspect he wouldn't give a damn if she were in the wrong. (Carson, 2004, ¶ 11)

There is something appealing about a powerful woman. The question becomes whether this powerful image is constructive and empowering or further encourages the male gaze. The character of The Bride is also somewhat controversial because she endures a great deal of suffering commensurable with the amount of violence she dishes out. Tarantino shared his perspective on this issue in *Newsweek* (2003):

Uma's character - and this is not a criticism of her performance, it's just the way the role is conceived - is a superhero. And to me it would be more interesting if there were more moments where



she was also a real woman, and a vulnerable woman. / I disagree. When she wakes up from her coma, there's that one true, full bit of vulnerableness I give her, and I think it carries through the rest of the movie. / She breaks down and sobs when she . . . / . . . when she realizes her child is gone. And also, this'll sound like a cop-out, but more of that stuff comes in 'Volume 2.' As far as the first half is concerned, I didn't want to make her sympathetic. I wanted to make her scary, all right? But I think you end up liking her anyway. You admire her. Nothing is going to stop her. (Ansen, 2003, ¶ 49-52)

Clearly the goal was to make her powerful and superhuman rather than simply a victim. She is invincible and yet vulnerable. However, it is her initial victimization that serves as a catalyst for her violence. In a discussion with Mim Udovitch (Film, 2003), Tarantino is presented with the question of the motivation behind violent females. Below is an excerpt from that discussion:

UDOVITCH - . . . Why does the sight of two women beating the tar out of each other push different buttons than the sight of two men fighting? (¶ 3)

TARANTINO - Well, you know, for me there's nothing fetishistic about it. It just hurts more to see two women fighting. The thing you want in a fight between two guys is just for them to beat each other up. It doesn't have to be about the choreography, it can just be a barroom brawl where one guy's getting his head smashed against a wall. But if you take that and put in women, the more brutal they are to each other the more you wince. But it's a strange kind of a wince because you're enjoying it at the same time. It's more like wincing the way you wince when you watch the sight gags in "There's Something About Mary" - the fish hook in the cheek. (¶ 4)

UDOVITCH - That's not the answer I was expecting. I thought you were going to say it was empowering. (¶ 5)

TARANTINO - Well, it might be empowering and it might be cool but I think it just hurts more. (¶ 6)

UDOVITCH - It think the reason that the fighting in "Kill Bill" is painful is that all your

characters are fighting for family. For their lost children, or their lost parents. (§ 9)

TARANTINO - I see where you're going. It's not my job to think about all that stuff until right about now, when you're telling me what I did. But the point you're making that I'm slowly getting is that as opposed to Bill, for instance, or maybe male assassins in other movies, all these women came to violence because of something that happened to them. They weren't born this way. (§ 10)

Perhaps the ideas of empowerment and victimization being the forces that give rise to violent females were initially foreign to Tarantino but he has since been reported as saying "I actually want 13-year-old girls to see this movie. I think this will be very empowering for them" (as quoted in Medved, 2003, § 12). Whether this was his original intention or underlying motivation, the reality of these films and others like them is that women have taken to Hollywood's recent presentation of violent females. In an article about *Kill Bill: Vol. 1* in the *New York Times*, a number of women are quoted as being in favor of the violent carnage of the movies stating that it is, in

fact, empowering to women and that they would willingly take their daughters to see it (Leland, 2003). The movie marks a trend in the culture of young women who are increasingly comfortable with the once exclusive male occupied space of aggression and screen violence.

Eight years after Lucy Lawless brought Xena the Warrior Princess to the untamed world of syndicated television, the message from Hollywood is clear: You've come a long way, baby. Now kill someone. (Leland, 2003, ¶ 8)

The characters in the *Kill Bill* movie series do just that.

Uma Thurman is partly responsible for the creation and direction her character takes in the films as she is credited with co-writing the movies. Her performance was critically acclaimed. *Rolling Stone* (2003) reported of her performance in *Vol. 1*,

no one beats Thurman for sizzle. She's a warrior goddess, up there with Sigourney Weaver in *Aliens*. It's Thurman, in her best performance yet, who raises the bar on the role and the movie by showing that the Bride's battle is not without honor or humanity. (Travers, ¶ 5)

*Maclean's* reported that "Uma Thurman kicks butt with more ruthless, unrelenting conviction than any action heroine in Hollywood history" (Johnson, 2003, ¶ 2). In an interview with *Rolling Stone* magazine (Edwards, 2003-2004), Thurman discussed the iconic status of the yellow tracksuit she wore in the movie.

I've seen so many people in the yellow tracksuit. At some *Kill Bill* premieres, there would be teams of me. It's actually sort of thrilling and rewarding to see it become this signature look of female empowerment. (¶ 5)

Thurman herself associated her character with female empowerment and strength. Lucy Liu portrayed another powerful killer in *Vol. 1* and also found a sense of identification with her character.

Of her diabolical character, Ms. Liu said: 'I felt like I really understood her emotionally. In my mind she was a survivor, and it was either kill or be killed'. (Ogunnaike, 2003, ¶ 8)

The message of empowerment and identification with the strength of these female killers, whether intended or not, has become a controversial issue as Hollywood continues to

churn out these types of characters in response to an almost overwhelming need for them by the female audience.

The *Kill Bill* movie series, in particular, was chosen for analysis because it has been so controversial and so empowering for many women audience members. The sheer amount of blood and carnage speaks against what is acceptable or appropriately feminine and it does not make traditional sense for women to identify with or enjoy these movies to the degree they do. However, it is moments of triumph such as in *Vol. 2* when "the Bride rises from the dead in an emblematic horror-movie moment that speaks the language of blood as female empowerment" (Rich, 2004, p. 27). What is traditionally masculine has become a powerful tool for feminine identification. It is important to understand how this power is portrayed in an effort to understand why women so willingly embrace it.

#### Research Questions

Based on the discussion of power, violence, masculinity, femininity and the *Kill Bill* text, as well as the influence of third wave feminism, the following questions are posed:

RQ1 - How is violence used as a feminist rhetorical strategy in the *Kill Bill* films?

RQ2 - Is third wave feminism articulated in the *Kill Bill* films? If so, how?

### Chapter Outline

In addressing the research questions, the following chapters are presented:

Chapter One - This chapter includes the introduction, proposed statement of the problem, texts for analysis and research questions.

Chapter Two - This chapter details how the research questions were addressed via feminist rhetorical criticism and third wave power feminist theory.

Chapter Three - This chapter examines the use of violence as a rhetorical strategy in the *Kill Bill* films.

Chapter Four - This chapter analyzes the films for evidence of third wave feminism.

Chapter Five - This chapter provides conclusions, implications, limitations and future research.

## CHAPTER TWO

### METHODOLOGICAL AND THEORETICAL APPROACHES

In order to examine female violence in the *Kill Bill* films, feminist rhetorical criticism was employed. This method adopts a feminist perspective to analyze the patriarchal dominance and/or feminist resistance in various texts. Foss, Griffin, and Foss (1997) define patriarchy as

a system of power relations that privileges and accords power to the white, heterosexual male; anyone who does not fit this category is devalued in this system. Many men—gay men and men of color, for example—usually are not accorded power and privilege in patriarchy, just as women are not. (¶ 15)

For the purposes of this thesis, the main focus of the feminist rhetorical criticism method was specifically linked to gender-related power inequities. This method was especially appropriate for the analysis of how film violence is used as a feminist rhetorical strategy in the *Kill Bill* films. As Chapter One outlined, screen violence can be read as a metaphoric representation of power according to who enacts the violent act and who receives



it. Through the use of violence, the violent woman positions herself outside what is traditionally masculine or feminine and becomes a unique metaphoric expression of female power. Since the *Kill Bill* films are laden with violence served at the hands of women, it follows that an examination of *how* violence is specifically used in these films becomes relevant.

The rhetoric that derives from patriarchy, not surprisingly, has been concerned with winning-gaining audience acknowledgment of the superiority of the rhetor's position, establishing the superiority of the rhetor over others, and inducing the compliance of others. (Foss, Griffin, & Foss, 1997, ¶ 37)

In contrast, Meyer (2007) defines feminist rhetoric as a commitment to reflexive analysis and critique of any kind of symbol use that orients people in relation to other people, places, and practices on the basis of gendered realities or gendered cultural assumptions. (p. 3)

Additionally, Foss (2004) defines feminist criticism as the analysis of rhetoric to discover how the rhetorical construction of gender is used as a

means for domination and how that process can be challenged so that all people understand that they have the capacity to claim agency and act in the world as they choose. (p. 157)

It is through the use of feminist rhetorical criticism that power and domination can be identified by the representation of gender in film. Gender interactions, dialogue and presentation can all be examined to determine power relationships between and amongst genders.

Aside from the identification of power and domination, feminist analysis also allows for the discovery of resistance strategies that allow those who are oppressed to empower themselves. As Foss and Griffin (1992) state,

a primary goal of feminist scholarship is to discover whether existing rhetorical theories account for women's experiences and perspectives and to construct alternative theories that acknowledge and explain women's practices in the construction and use of rhetoric. (p. 331)

Thus, feminist rhetoric serves to articulate women's experiences and dismantle the oppressive forces of patriarchy by presenting alternative voices and viewpoints.

Feminist contributions to rhetoric tend to align with two major methodological approaches - the 'writing women in' to rhetorical canons approach and the 'challenging rhetorical standards' approach. (Meyer, 2007, p. 2)

This thesis is more closely aligned with challenging rhetorical standards as it sought to identify feminist counter positions of rhetoric in film violence.

A primary aim of feminist rhetorical criticism and scholarship is to share the personal lived experiences of women. In film analysis, this usually means an examination of the lived experiences as portrayed on screen or an acknowledgment of the experiences of the audience members.

The data of personal experience in feminist scholarship usually assume the form of women's personal narratives about the events of their lives, their feelings about those events, and their interpretations of them. They reveal insights into the impact of the construction of gender on women's lives, their experiences of oppression and of coping with and resisting that oppression, and their perspectives on what is

meaningful in their lives. (Foss & Foss, 1994, p. 39)

The use of personal experience as evidence makes feminist rhetorical criticism a more personal method as opposed to other rhetorical methods such as value analysis, neo Aristotilian criticism, and even narrative analysis. This is because it can incorporate the actual lived experiences of the author and tap into individual perception based on one's position as an oppressed individual, thus rendering it more personal. Texts for analysis are interpreted through a feminist lens in an effort to shed light on contrary positions that deviate from the patriarchal norm.

By describing the experiences of women, ways in which their subordinate position is resisted, and ways in which their communication can serve as models for alternatives to an ideology of domination, artifacts can contribute to an understanding of how individuals assume agency and thus effectively trivialize or dismantle the ideology of domination. (Foss, 2004, p. 161)

This methodology allows for some flexibility in interpretation of text as the perspective of the author is often explicitly named and taken into account.

It is important to note when discussing feminism, that it is comprised of multiple perspectives. It is "not a single theory or method but a highly charged field of competing narratives about the nature and consequences of gender identities" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 54). Within the framework of feminist criticism lies a myriad of perspectives representing varying aspects of gender and domination. However, along unifying lines, feminism acknowledges the subordination of women by men and seeks to end that subordination. Its method and means are varied. On the whole, feminist criticism and research is typically conducted with a notably philanthropic purpose leading society to a "greater good" that challenges patriarchal norms and gives women (and other oppressed groups) an equal voice.

Feminist research is conducted for the purpose of improving women's lives. It is done to empower women - to assist them in developing strategies to make sense of and make choices about the world in which they live. (Foss & Foss, 1994, p. 42)

Feminist criticism is characterized by the adoption of a feminist standpoint with an emphasis on the personal experiences of women as evidence (Foss & Foss, 1994). In

media analysis, this translates to identification with or resistance of mediated representations of gender.

Feminist rhetorical criticism can encompass so many different issues related to oppression and power relationships that it can make it hard to define or further, to ascribe to all women. However, Foss, Griffin, and Foss (1997) articulated the belief that,

although there is considerable variation among women, we do have things in common with one another. Particular socialization practices, marginalized positions, and lack of access to traditional forms of power, for example, tend to be shared by many women. (§ 10)

As a woman and a feminist, I am inclined to agree with them. My feminism is unique to me. Others may view themselves as feminists and have entirely different opinions or values. Part of feminism is the acceptance of contradiction. While there may be agreement on the necessity and/or purpose of feminism, often the enactment of or presentation of feminism causes great debate. It is this lack of clear definition that makes the feminist rhetorical criticism method difficult to articulate. As feminism is pluralistic, so is the use of its methods. It

is not limited to gender issues and can be used to analyze intersections of identities such as race, class, sexuality, and any number of power inequities. When this method is employed, often it is not explicitly named. Instead, a feminist perspective is implicitly used to perform the analysis.

There are a number of scholars who have used an implied form of feminist rhetorical criticism to analyze media, particularly film and television (see e.g., De Lauretis, 1987; Doane, 1991; Dow, 1996; Hooks, 1996; Mayne, 1990). This method was used in the afore-mentioned studies by analyzing text using a decidedly feminist perspective. In the same way, this thesis employed a feminist perspective to analyze the use of violence as a rhetorical device for expressing feminist values as well as identify elements of third wave feminism within the *Kill Bill* films. Due to the fluid nature of feminism and difficulty in defining an over-arching set of key characteristics, the theoretical foundation behind the author's feminist perspective is discussed in detail at the end of this chapter.

## Feminist Theory as the Theoretical Foundation

Feminist criticism is a method that draws upon feminist theory. In order to understand the theory, it is essential to examine the waves of feminism and emergent tenets that can be traced throughout its history.

The term, feminism, to describe the collective social movement for women's rights and issues throughout history has been used, abused and ultimately interpreted with varied connotations. Feminism has even, on occasion, been referred to as the 'f' word. This is presumably because the word evokes a similar instinctive response as if hearing a curse word. Historically, the mass perception of the term feminism has not been well-received and it is a continuing struggle for men and women alike to get past the radical connotations associated with the word. Some women prefer to label themselves as womanists or humanists rather than take on the misrepresented identity of a feminist. Even if a person agrees with the basic tenets of feminist theory, she or he may still choose not to self-label as a feminist because he or she does not want the social challenges that go along with that label. Baumgardner and Richards (2000)



discussed the derisive connotations of feminism in their book, *Manifesta*:

Feminism, a word that describes a social-justice movement for gender equity and human liberation, is often treated as the other F word. Partly because it's a word of great power, it's nearly as unseemly as those other girl terms, cunt or bitch. This in part explains why by the time the two of us were at college, learning that we were indeed feminists, the term was dripping with qualifiers. "I'm a . . . power, postmodern, Girlie, pro-sex, Prada, academic, gender, radical, Marxist, equity, cyber, Chicana, cultural, eco, lesbian, Latina, womanist, animal rights, American Indian, Indian, international, diva, Jewish, Puerto Rican, working-class, Asian-American, philanthropic, bisexual, transsexual, lipstick, punk rock, young, old . . . feminist." All of these adjectives help women feel described rather than confined by a term that should simply connote an individual woman's human rights, and the possibility of liberating oneself from patriarchy. (p. 50)

The feminist movement has been labeled many ways including the women's movement, women's rights movement, and suffrage movement, amongst others. Despite its mixed reactions, the term feminism serves its purpose in labeling a movement that challenges the hegemonic ideology of patriarchy. Feminism has evolved to encompass a number of different foci including liberal, radical, Marxist, socialist, black, postcolonial and ecologically minded viewpoints, to name a few. Perhaps a more appropriate description would be the use of the term, feminisms, in order to address the plurality of feminist thought.

The evolution of feminism is typically described using a wave metaphor. Although, it largely describes the efforts of white, middle-class women in the U.S.A., this metaphor is particularly relevant as "it is used to describe mass-based movements that ebb and flow, rise and decline, and crest in some concrete, historical accomplishments or defeats" (Archer-Mann & Huffman, 2005, p. 58). The period of early groundbreaking for women from 1848 through the early 1920's marks the first wave. The second wave is reported to have occurred from the early 1960's to the early 1980s. The early 1990s into present day marks the third wave.

This does not mean that there were no feminists or feminist activism before or even after these waves, but simply that their ideas and actions did not materialize into a mass-based, social movement. (Archer-Mann & Huffman, 2005, p. 58)

The theoretical framework of feminism has existed long before it was labeled. An example of this can be found in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century United States through the letters of Abigail Adams to her husband, John Adams, imploring him to consider the rights of women as he was participating in the creation of the Declaration of Independence.

If particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies, we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or representation. (Adams, 1776/1972/1992, p. 3)

Although individual voices for women's rights and freedoms have been sprinkled throughout history, the three periods of collective activism and subsequent social awareness that originated in mid 1800's in the United States have come to be recognized as the three main waves of feminism (mostly contained within the U.S.A). The women who participated in each of these waves were unified in

their desire to make their voices heard, enact individual agency by having their rights acknowledged, embrace contradiction and diversity, and resist the systems of power/oppression in place by fighting back. The methods and strategies of how these goals were accomplished vary throughout the movements, yet the main tenets have withstood time and technological advancement.

### The First Wave

Feminism as a social movement has been in effect since the mid 1800's. The social climate of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century favored men as beings created and designed superior than women in the areas of strength, intellect, skill, and arguably worth. Momentum for women's rights was building in the early 1800's as women were categorized, in effect, as property of their husbands and fathers with no legal rights of their own. Early feminist writings, such as Britain's Mary Wollstonecraft and her piece, *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), began to emerge. Men and women who were already active in abolition politics began to turn their attention to the complete lack of legal authority women had over their own lives at that time. It was husbands and fathers whose voices were heard in legal proceedings and listened to when decisions about "their"

women were made. Women did not have authority over their own livelihood, property or well-being. As John Stuart Mill reported on the role of wives in 1870,

She can do no act whatever but by his permission, at least tacit. She can acquire no property but for him; the instant it becomes hers, even if by inheritance, it becomes ipso facto his. In this respect the wife's position under the common law of England is worse than that of slaves in the laws of many countries. (as cited in Kolmar & Bartkowski, 2005, p. 81)

Women were thought to exist solely for the pleasure of men. Their role was to be subservient, submissive, and doting on their husbands and children. They had little, if any, personal freedom outside what their husband dictated for them. This lack of autonomy was disturbing for some and in light of this sublimated position, a collective women's rights movement took form in the mid 1800's and began with the fight to win the right to vote. Although the right to vote was a key focus of the suffrage movement and is often the main issue discussed in historical accounts of the movement, early feminists were faced with a myriad of issues such as those dealing with marriage, property

owning, access to education, economic dependence, reproduction, equality, wages, and the role of women in society. Men and women alike rallied for equality of the sexes.

The Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 held in Seneca Falls, New York is often credited as the beginning of the organized women's movement in America as it was the first public gathering for the sole purpose of discussing women's rights. At this convention, Elizabeth Cady Stanton presented the *Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions* which modeled the *United States Declaration of Independence*.

We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. (as cited in Schneir, 1994, pp. 77-78)

For many women, the equality they were after reached far deeper than attaining legal rights. These women had a desire to be acknowledged as rational and intelligent beings rather than good cooks, housekeepers and/or inferior servants.

I believe [men] would be 'partakers of the benefit' resulting from the Equality of the Sexes, and would find that woman, as their equal, was unspeakably more valuable than woman as their inferior, both as a moral and intellectual being. (Grimke, 1838, as cited in Kolmar & Bartkowski, 2005, p. 71)

Women, in some ways, are still fighting the battle to be viewed as equal partners, earners, and thinkers even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Although there was much more on the agenda for the women's movement, the right to vote in the U.S.A. was granted to women in 1920 with the addition of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the United States Constitution. It was a monumental step forward for womankind and validated the efforts of the suffrage movement. After the right to vote was won,

proponents of suffrage were disappointed to discover that the women's vote did not radically alter the outcome of elections, that women voted in relatively small numbers and, for the most part, with their husbands, fathers, and brothers.

(Kolmar & Bartkowski, 2005, p. 136)

Although the wave of feminism seemed to ebb until its reprise in the 1960's, it did not lay dormant. Women were activists, writers, artists and laborers. With the absence of men at home during World War II, women were entering the workforce to fill in the gaps. Rosie the Riveter became an iconic representation of the working woman. Various feminist activist organizations continued to originate and flourish during this time, but as the war ended and men returned home, the role of women began to shift back into the housewife, mother and caretaker creating the "ideal" family lifestyle of the 1950's. It was not until the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century that feminism became mainstream again with the rise of the second wave.

### The Second Wave

In 1952, Simone de Beauvoir published her book, *The Second Sex*. Her work, although originating in France, spurred enthusiasm and sparked a resurgence of the women's movement. In 1963, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* swept over the United States like wildfire breathing new life into the feminist movement. In her book, she addressed the restlessness and discontent that predominated in the lives of many middle-class white college-educated women, trapped in domesticity by the



conservative social values of the 1950s. (Kolmar & Bartkowski, 2005, p. 196)

This silent uneasiness was brought to light and marked a mass awakening for women, particularly in the middle class suburbs. Feminism was born again and the traditional roles of women in society were challenged and eventually subverted. Through the progress made by second wave feminists, women found themselves holding more equal playing ground with men in the work place and the domestic sphere. College was no longer merely a means to meet a husband, but a place where women began to cultivate their skills and open themselves up to a world of new careers. The National Organization for Women (NOW), a feminist organization focused on securing women's rights, was formed in 1966 and continues to fight for women's rights even today. The initial sparks of feminist activism ignited in the early 1960s turned radical in the 1970s with the rise of radical feminism. Radical feminists pushed the boundaries of social challenge and ultimately left a negative attitude with mainstream society in regards to feminism. As the movement died down in mainstream popular culture, feminism became almost blacklisted, as it was often unjustly associated with extremism, militancy, and

man-hating. Unfortunately, this negative perception served to invalidate the work of the second wave feminists and led to movements such as postfeminism that denies the continued need for feminism at all.

### The Third Wave

A new generation of young feminists have, in recent years, emerged and made their voices known marking the rise of the third wave of feminism. These women differ from earlier generations as the road to equality and privilege has already been paved for them by their earlier feminist predecessors.

Young feminists today enter the struggle after many of the more egregious forms of discrimination have been named, regulated, and at least diminished or proscribed by laws that can be invoked. (Howry & Wood, 2001, n.p.)

Although there is still work to be done to fight oppressive forces of patriarchy in our society, these young women have grown up in a world where they had the benefit of hearing the voices of early feminism as well as having been the recipients of the material gains the women's movement has afforded them. These young women have been provided access to education, been offered a greater amount and variety of

career opportunities, have the option to retain their own last names in marriage and have been exposed to more images of women in positions of power through becoming politicians, educators, CEOs, and advocates. As technology has advanced and media forms have become more accessible, these young women have also had the benefit of witnessing women playing lead or principle roles in film and television. Print media is filled with women's voices, however subverted, and the message of feminism has seeped into women's consciousness so overwhelmingly that it need not be labeled as a movement, but as reality. For many young women, this has fueled the mainstream media perception that feminism is no longer necessary and sparked post-feminist dialogue as the *Time* magazine cover in June 1998 asked "Is Feminism Dead?". Yet, there is still a need for women to articulate their space as feminists and carve out their place in hegemonic society.

Third wavers came of age in a world where feminist *language* is part of the public dialogue, but authentic feminist *struggles* are not accounted for in that dialogue except in terms articulated by the mainstream, which still

perpetuates a conservative and sexist status quo.

(Kinser, 2004, p. 135, emphasis in original)

In some ways, the goal of third wave feminism is to articulate the continued struggle women face in light of the widely held mainstream ideal that feminism has served its purpose and since retired. As Kinser (2004) so aptly suggested, "Perhaps what is most significant about a third wave is that it represents a complex effort to negotiate a space between second-wave and postfeminist thought" (p. 135). The third wave is not only an extension of the feminism set forth by earlier generations, but it is also a refreshing return to feminist ideals in the midst of the societal contention that they are unnecessary. Caught in between two conflicting philosophical standpoints, third wave feminism positions itself as a unique option for young modern women.

Volumes such as *Listen Up: Voices From the Next Feminist Generation* (2001), a seminal work that highlights the stories of young women who negotiate their identity as women and as feminists, are becoming more prevalent as a new third wave of feminism has developed through the emergence of these voices. According to Orr (1997),

the earliest mention of the term 'third wave' took place in the mid-eighties when a diverse group of feminist activists and academics pooled their intellectual resources into an anthology they titled *The Third Wave: Feminist Perspectives on Racism*. (p. 30)

Since then, the third wave feminist movement has come to embrace duality and contradiction, value the voice of all who have been marginalized, and is defined by agency and choice. There is a definite focus on individual lived experiences as learning tools rather than a collective identity as a movement. It is characterized by its strong connection with and emphasis on popular culture and media. Third wave feminist analyses often focus on media figures and portrayals of gender relations as representations of societal inequities (Lotz, 2001; Shugart, 2001; Shugart, Wagoner, & Hallstein, 2001). It is also accessible on a larger scale and not housed mainly in academia. Women of all races, classes, and levels of academic scholarship including those without any formal schooling can actively participate in third wave feminist discourse. This is due, in part, because the basic tenets of the third wave are over-arching and applicable to a multiplicity of perceptual

viewpoints. Contradiction, agency, voice, and resistance (or fighting back) can all be experienced on an individual level based on one's unique experiences. It is these central themes that, although expressed uniquely through each era of history, have over time come to embody the feminist movement.

### Thematic Evolution of Feminism

Although many young third wavers often intentionally separate themselves from the earlier waves of feminism, there are thematic concepts that are found in all three movements and seem to be emblematic of feminism itself. Voice, agency, contradiction and resistance are reoccurring markers in feminist ideologies.

#### Voice

Voice is the articulation of one's position, the vehicle by which one makes their presence known. Beginning with the first wave, women have struggled to gain a voice in society. The desire to have their concerns listened to and validated was a key part of the suffrage movement. "In the courts women have no right, no voice; nobody speaks for them. I wish woman to have her voice there among the pettifoggers" (Truth, 1867, as cited in Kolmar &

Bartkowski, 2005, p. 80). Women were not allowed the freedom to speak for themselves publicly and the organization of the first wave of feminism allowed women a channel through which to express themselves and make their issues known. This desire to exercise voice continued through the second wave of feminism as authors like Betty Friedan and Simone de Beauvoir articulated the uneasiness and discontent of housewives and the submissive state of women at the time. Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* sparked a revolution by giving words to the unspoken feelings of many middle class American women. These women identified with Friedan's words and it became an outlet for women to express themselves and reject the submissive roles in which patriarchal society had placed them.

It can be less painful for a woman not to hear the strange, dissatisfied voice stirring within her. It is no longer possible to ignore that voice, to dismiss the desperation of so many American women. (Friedan, 1963, p. 26)

A definite goal of third wave feminists is to lend a voice to the feminist experience.

If there's one thing that feminism has taught me, it's that the revolution is gonna be on my terms.

The revolution will be incited through my voice,  
my words. (Lamm, 2001, p. 133)

Deeply entrenched in media and often having greater access to the creation of media forms such as websites, magazines and other media, young feminists are able to carve out spaces in which they can be heard above postfeminist and patriarchal discourse. In speaking about grrl zines, Orr (1997) articulates that "the importance and intrigue of these publications are found in their overly declared dissatisfaction with mainstream representations of girls and women" (p. 38). The voice of third wavers is largely heard through media channels as these young women have come of age in a media savvy society. They are changing and reshaping media channels to fit their image and accommodate their vision, if only starting from the margins.

In addition, much of the written work of third wave feminists involves personal reflection and narrative. Emphasis on the unique contributions of each individual rather than a collective story is clear through compiled works such as *Listen Up* or *Colonize This!*. In Kinser's (2004) discussion of the rhetorical contributions of third wave feminists



One of the important contributions of third-wave feminism is its emphasis on narrative for exploring how it feels to live a feminist life, how feminism informs and complicates one's sense of identity, and how one stabilizes that identity while being knocked about by postfeminist and backlash forces. (Kinser, 2004, p. 137)

It is through these narratives that the feminist experience is shared amongst women. It is what allows women-of-color feminists to articulate their struggles with multiple oppressions in a way that can reach all women regardless of race. The personal narrative is central to third wave feminist articulation as it has even seeped into published academic works and is interwoven with traditional academic language when discussing feminist ideals (see Lister, 2005).

### Agency

An additional central theme amongst third wave feminists is the emphasis on agency. The idea that women need to make their own choices and determine their own destiny is not a new concept in feminism as this was a common point of contention with society amongst early feminists as well. "Being empowered in the third-wave sense

is about feeling good about oneself and having the power to make choices, regardless of what those choices are"

(Shugart, Wagoner, & Hallstein, 2001, p. 195). Whether a woman makes a choice that follows typical feminist conventions (to end the subjugation of women) or seems contradictory to her ideological groundings, she is encouraged to feel comfortable with her ability to make a sound decision. Much of the literature that highlights young feminist voices is laden with emphasis on individual choices. "I chose to call myself androgynous and hoped to destroy the distinction between masculine and feminine, male and female" (Reid Maxcy Myhre, 2001, p. 86). Choice is central to the identification of feminism. It is through the freedom to enact one's own choices that power can be realized and experienced. It is this power of choice that third wave feminists encourage and embrace. To win the power to make individual decisions and have those decisions respected by other feminists and society as a whole is a fundamental goal of third wave feminism.

### Contradiction

Contradiction has been a key element of feminist ideology as women have tried to negotiate the multiplicity

of their identities and social roles that often times are in conflict with each other.

My contradictions can coexist, cuz they exist inside of me, and I'm not gonna simplify them so that they fit into the linear, analytical pattern that I know they're supposed to. (Lamm, 2001, p. 133)

The desire to be free of categorization and be allowed to contradict oneself is a basic ideological grounding of the third wave. "Navigating feminism's contradictions -- historical, cultural, psychological -- is a primary theme of third wave feminism" (Orr, 1997, p. 31). Many third wave feminists are increasingly comfortable with the parts of their identity or ideology that are contradictory. Rather than embracing one piece of their identity while rejecting another, these women learn to live with inconsistencies and reconcile internal oppositions.

The politics of difference that drive third-wave feminism thus are manifest in an embracing of contradiction so that apparently inconsistent political viewpoints coexist in the name of third-wave feminism. (Shugart, Wagoner, & Hallstein, 2001, p. 195)

This is particularly relevant when discussing the multiple identities by which many feminists are defined.

As many third wave feminists have articulated, oppressions can occur on multiple levels such as the intersection of race, class, and gender. In speaking of the "colored woman" of the late 1800's, Anna Julia Cooper (1892) shared that "she is confronted by both a woman question and a race problem, and is yet an unknown or an unacknowledged factor in both" (as cited in Kolmar & Bartkowski, 2005, p. 103). Feminists may not fit neatly into predefined identity categories; instead they seek to define themselves with new discourse.

Largely influenced by post-modern and post-structuralist thinkers such as Michel Foucault, a movement has emerged in which categorization is seen as an oppressive strategy used to label and control. Resistance can be achieved by not acknowledging the categories laid out by those in power and instead allowing one's identity to be fluid and take form through the product of one's own unique lenses.

The central idea is that identity is simply a construct of language, discourse, and cultural practices. The goal is to dismantle these

fictions and, thereby, to undermine hegemonic regimes of discourse. (Archer-Mann & Huffman, 2005, p. 63)

By embracing all parts of themselves, however contradictory, these women can resist the categorization imposed upon them by the dominant majority influence. Granted, there are women who no doubt embrace aspects of patriarchal culture and may yet consider themselves a feminist. I do not believe these small acceptances negate their feminism, but instead may shape it in a way that is unique to them. For third wave feminists, contradiction can be an acceptable and desired condition. "I am mixed. I am the colonizer and the colonized, the exploiter and the exploited. I am confused yet sure. I am a contradiction" (Tzintzun, 2002, p. 28).

#### Resistance/Fighting Back

Fighting back against patriarchal constraints by engaging in resistant behaviors or speech is central to feminist theory. Resistance marks the rejection of oppressive forces and challenges the mainstream dominant ideology. Resistance can be enacted through words, behaviors, actions and attitudes. It is a powerful tool in

combating patriarchy and pushing the boundaries of feminism.

She knows that regardless of what ought to be, the brutal, unavoidable fact is that she will never receive her freedom until she takes it for herself. . . Woman must not accept; she must challenge. (Sanger, 1920, as cited in Kolmar & Bartkowski, 2005, p. 139)

The continuing struggle to end patriarchal power and influence in society is still central to feminist theory even in the third wave.

I know that the fight to end patriarchy, to devour it, to deplete and dismember it in favor of a system that does not achieve cosmic orgasm through the oppression of others is a just and valiant fight. And I will continue to pursue this glorious end as long as my soul wanders the earth. (Higginbotham, 2001, p. 12)

For many third wave feminists, this struggle reaches beyond the boundaries of patriarchy and is expanded to encompass all oppressive forces including capitalist powers, racial superiorities, and the ruling class. The intersection of multiple oppressions is a very real struggle for many

women-of-color and other feminists who are aligned with the third wave movement. Although feminist scholars differ on the strategies for fighting back, most all of them engage in a counterattack and defense on some level. They fight to protect themselves. They fight to "take back the night" from violent would-be predators. They fight to be heard, to gain equality, and to end oppression. Women use strategies such as shaving their head, marching in protest, taking back terms such as "bitch" or "slut", running for political office, publishing magazines or websites that give women a voice, and other such methods to challenge oppression wherever they encounter it. "I prefer to think of fighting in rational terms: You want to hurt me, I'll take you down. I won't allow it" (Walker, 2001, p. 129).

Groups of women such as the Riot Grrrls have begun to fight back by using discursive tactics to appropriate meaning and negotiate their own unique feminist spaces. The Riot Grrrls have subverted the traditional connotation of the word 'girl' and instead used it to "reclaim the vitality and power of youth with an added growl to replace the perceived passivity of 'girl'" (Rosenberg & Garofalo, 1998, p. 809). It is through the reclamation of words that were once used to belittle them, that these young women can

find a sense of strength and empowerment. They have fought for the opportunity to label themselves. "The tone of most Riot Grrrl rhetoric is angry, the content is highly personal, and the emphasis is on creating safe and supportive spaces for grrrls to express themselves" (Orr, 1997, p. 38). This is also true of the Guerrilla Girls who have taken on the girl label and paired it with the strong image of a guerilla.

Feminists definitely differ in their strategies for fighting back. While some enact this discursively, others fight back politically, socially, or even physically. Audrey Lorde's famous words cautioned women that the master's tools cannot be used to dismantle the master's house. Yet Ani DiFranco, just as emphatically, claims that every tool is a weapon if you hold it right. Similar to different strategies employed in the civil rights movement, vis-à-vis Martin Luther King jr. and Malcolm X's approaches, there are different camps of women poised to fight without aggression and others who are radically aggressive in their methods. Either way, many feminists are enacting self-defense, self-preservation and participating in a collective fight against the systems of power that oppress them.



## Influence of Postmodernism

An important theoretical facet that cannot be overlooked in this analysis is postmodernism. Grown out of the modern tradition of one truth, one understanding, and one clear way to do things, postmodernism embraces multiplicity. There can be more than one truth based on varied perspectives within postmodernism.

In place of classical modernist values, postmodernism sets a knowing reliance on familiar images and appearances, a nostalgic rummaging for markers of identity and meaning. Postmodernism offers a nostalgic, depthless image or simulation of the 'real' without reference to actual historical detail or reality. (Real, 1996, p. 245).

Postmodernism is a theoretical idea that accounts for the incorporation of varied genres together in one film. Borrowed from anthropology and art fields, postmodern media is built upon the idea of pastiche or bricolage. Both terms effectively describe the process of piecing together a collage of co-opted cultural references, art pieces, or even ideas to form an entirely new product. Typically these pieces are juxtaposed in highly unlikely pairings.

"The bricoleur speaks through things, as well as with them" (Dezeuze, 2008, p. 31). Although images may be pieced together, the end product may not hold any great message. Postmodern fragmentation of images and/or cultural references is usually tied heavily to consumerism and consumption (i.e. flashing of commercial images or brand names). Postmodernism in the media is particularly empty and may or may not communicate meaning through symbolism.

Postmodern culture is marked by a depthlessness in which appearance is all. Media offer simulacra that simulate a reality but remain at a surface level because there is no longer substance behind the image. The resulting culture is marked by excess and overload but offers an art of absence, of deconstruction and minimalism counterbalanced only by decoration. Little is said, but much is assumed and implied. Within this postmodern environment, personal and social life becomes dominated by private pleasures and encourages a schizophrenia of multiple personalities (Bauman, 1988, 1992). The individual too becomes a postmodern pastiche of disparate styles. (Real, 1996, p. 254)

Tarantino is known, in part, for his highly postmodern style.

*Pulp Fiction's* play on surfaces, its quotation and borrowing, and its anarchic originality place Tarantino alongside David Lynch as Hollywood's leading postmodern auteur. Fragmentation, relativism, depthlessness, intertextuality, ironic parody, and all the other characteristics of postmodernism are seldom used so effectively. (Real, 1996, p. 259)

The *Kill Bill* movies are no exception to this postmodern pastiche style.

### The Challenge of Peace Feminism

There are those who would postulate that if violence exemplifies the patriarchal image of the masculine, a contrary position suggests that non-violence or peace would exemplify the feminine. Additionally, if violence is a patriarchal assertion of masculinity then the violent woman is simply reinforcing the patriarchal value of the masculine. As Shugart (1997) notes,

submerged groups take a significant risk with regard to challenging their oppressors on the

latter's terms because those terms have been used historically to oppress them. (p. 211)

However, words like "bitch" or "nigger" have been co-opted by the groups that they were used upon and the meaning within those groups has been transformed from negative to positive. Yes, the risk of derogatory association still exists, but for the subverted, discursive tools once used to tear down can be used to strengthen, unify, and identify with positively. To assume that because something has been used harmfully in the past means it will cause harm inevitably does not account for the intention of the user.

Peace feminists typically ascribe feminism and socially constructed femininity with concepts such as peace and life-affirming actions that are in opposition to violence, war, and oppression.

Feminism and peace share an important conceptual connection: Both are critical of, and committed to the elimination of, coercive power-over privilege systems of domination as a basis of interaction between individuals and groups.

(Warren, 1994, p. 6)

El-Bushra (2007) contends that many peace organizations are "sustained by the sense of empowerment that women gain in

this process, as well as by a frustration with the 'failed politics of violence'''' (p. 135). Feminist reconstructionists share similar views as peace feminists as both focus on non-violent means of conflict resolution and communication. Feminist reconstructionists strive to reform existing power inequities by reconstructing traditional oppressive communication tactics.

The methods used by feminist reconstructionists focus on reconstructing communication constructs and theories so they engender non-exploitative, non-dominating ways of living and communicating.

(Foss, Griffin, & Foss, 1997, ¶ 39)

Starhawk is a woman who has been positioned as a feminist rhetorical theorist who offers a feminist alternative to traditional patriarchal rhetorical theory (Foss & Griffin, 1992). Her conceptualization of power relationships extend beyond the traditional view that power is 'power-over' another. Starhawk acknowledges the inherent value of each rhetor simply because they are interconnected to all life. This immanent value of the rhetor is tied to the idea of power-from-within. This ascribes value to each rhetor and thus lends them credibility because of that

value. One of Starhawk's rhetorical strategies identified by Foss and Griffin (1992) is the idea of power-with or social power, the influence wielded among equals in order to empower them. . . Power-with is always revocable because it is based on others' willingness to respond. Group members do not automatically adopt or obey the ideas of other members; their ideas are followed out of respect for them as unique people and because their ideas feel right and focus the will of the group. (Foss & Griffin, 1992, p. 334)

This peace affirming rhetorical model is in contrast with the dominant patriarchal model of domination through power-over others. Foss and Griffin (1992) label this patriarchal model as "an unnatural state that oppresses and destroys the inherent values of beings" (p. 335). This power-over concept comprises a number of rhetorical strategies: compliance, rebellion, withdrawal, and manipulation.

Foss and Griffin (1995) developed a power-with model that uses power-with strategies to deal with persuasion and influence. They envisioned this model as invitational rhetoric, whereby each rhetor shares their perspective and allows the other to express their perspective. The goal is

then to come to a greater understanding of each position rather than to win one over to the opposing side of an argument. The rhetorical strategies of Starhawk as well as Foss and Griffin are active examples of peace feminism.

What still needs to be addressed is the perception that feminism is synonymous with nonviolence, peace and life affirming action. El Bushra (2007) aptly points out "women do not necessarily speak with one voice on issues of war and peace. Clearly they are divided by political identities and allegiances, just as men are" (p. 135). Granted, not all women are feminists. However, this is key because often women are spoken for as if they all believe in non-violence and peace, yet there is clear division amongst women and even amongst feminists, as they are individuals first and part of a collective group of women or feminists second. It seems counterintuitive to associate feminism with violence but there are feminists who use it, whether directly or vicariously, to feel powerful. As Cabrerros-Sud (1995) writes in the feminist anthology, *To Be Real,*

I have this thing with violence. I look for fights on the train. I dare Joe Pervert on the street to touch me so I can kick his balls. I go

to firing ranges for fun. I confront a guy who's talking shit about me and my girlfriend and tempt him to punch me by telling him he can't get his dick up. I should have a gun tattooed on my forehead. I've got this problem with violence, you could say. (p. 41)

El-Bushra (2007) also identifies two poles of women's peace activism, the first "understands the innate violence of males as being at the root of war. In this view, the violence of war and that of the domestic arena are linked: war is effectively war on women" (p. 140). The second view

suggests that the essentialist conflation of womanhood with motherhood (and similar caring, nurturing roles) not only seems remote from the reality of many women's and men's lives and outlooks, but also fails to challenge the very stereotypes of masculinity and femininity which may need to be transformed if conflict is to be managed non-violently. (El-Bushra, 2007, p. 141)

In other words, to say that femininity and further feminisms are synonymous with nurturing, care giving and peace is an essentialist position that does not fully account for the diversity amongst them. This would position



men/masculinity against women/femininity and violence against peace. "Although 'men predominate across the spectrum of violence', there is no neat polarity to be distinguished around men-women, violence-caring" (El-Bushra, 2007, p. 136). In addition, Sylvester (1989) argued that

patriarchy may damage and distort women's perspectives as well as those of men: women may be embracing (and calling our own) peacemaker images that reflect and serve the prevailing gender order. If so, this will limit the types of strategies women find acceptable for fighting patriarchal monopolies, and lead us to think, perhaps too righteously, that 'real women' are totally opposed to destructive acts. (p. 102)

The polarity of peace versus power or dominance within feminism demonstrates that there is no clear position from which all women and all feminists speak from with regards to issues such as violence, war, care giving, motherhood, and peace. Each woman is unique in her position just as she is unique as a woman. As an example of this diversity of viewpoints amongst women and feminists, there is a segment

of feminism called power feminism that stands in opposition to the peace feminist mentality.

### The Power Feminist Response

Power feminists deliberately steer away from the victim role and instead use feminism to empower themselves and others. "Girl(ie) power can be seen as a form of 'power feminism' set up in opposition to earlier, often caricatured, forms of feminism seen as victim-centered and proscriptive" (Taylor, 2003, p. 188). Peace may be possible but the goal of power feminists is to negotiate their own power even if that means using traditionally patriarchal means. For the power feminist, the use of aggression as a demonstration of their own empowerment is perfectly acceptable.

Power feminism is about choosing to be proactive and powerful. Inequity and oppression are acknowledged but not dwelled upon by power feminists. Rather than focusing on articulating the details of the problem, power feminists are focused on solutions and empowerment strategies. Women are not necessarily seen as universally caring, nurturing, and non-violent, but instead as multi-faceted and uniquely powerful. From this perspective, an aggressive woman is

celebrated and praised for using power to assert herself or to prevent or punish her attacker.

Power femininity is not to be confused with power femininity, which is a social mentality that connects female power with beauty and the feminine presentation of self. Power femininity is an extension of postfeminism, the idea that women have arrived and feminism is no longer relevant or necessary. Power femininity has become a vehicle for advertisers as empowerment is tied to consumerism.

Popular (post)feminism is a hybrid media discourse that blends feminist and postfeminist elements with consumer capitalism to produce a de-politicized power femininity as one of its subject effects. (Lazar, 2006, p. 513)

From this discourse comes the idea that to celebrate the feminine is to celebrate women and how beautification of the external appearance can contribute to their self-efficacy. However, this ideology is largely tied to consumerism and thus feminism gets commodified and reinscribed by advertisers for use as a marketing tool (Gill, 2008; Lazar, 2006; Taylor, 2003). Empowerment, in a sense, has been repackaged and sold to the female consumer

along with beauty products and fashion accessories.

Despite, the trivialization of feminism by advertising media, the realization of each individual woman's influence and ability is still salient for today's power feminist.

Naomi Wolf is a controversial author that has taken power feminism to mainstream culture with her books, *Fire on Fire* and *The Beauty Myth*. She argues that right or wrong the culture of feminism, most notably the 2<sup>nd</sup> wave and peace feminist movements, has been categorized by victimization. In essence, feminism has become victim feminism, to which Wolf offers a power feminism alternative. "There is nothing wrong with identifying one's victimization. That act is critical. There is a lot wrong with molding it into an identity" (Wolf, 1994, p. 136). The following is an excerpt of Wolf's (1994) list of characteristics of victim feminism:

Charges women to identify with powerlessness even at the expense of taking responsibility for the power they do possess. / Is sexually judgmental, even antisexual. / Idealizes women's childrearing capacity as proof that women are better than men. / Believes women to be naturally noncompetitive, cooperative, and peace loving. / Sees women as

closer to nature than men are. / Exalts intuition, "women's speech," and "women's way of knowing," not as complements to, but at the expense of, logic, reason, and the public voice. / Puts community first and self later, hence tends toward groupthink, as well as toward hostility toward individual achievement. / Is judgmental of other women's sexuality and appearance. / Believes it is possessed of "the truth," which must be spread with missionary zeal. / Projects aggression, competitiveness, and violence onto "men" or "patriarchy," while its devotees are blind to those qualities in themselves. Casts women *themselves* as good and attacks men *themselves* as wrong. / Wants all other women to share its opinions. / Thinks dire: believes sensuality cannot coincide with seriousness; fears that to have too much fun poses a threat to the revolution. (pp. 136-137)

Wolf contrasts this victim feminism with power feminism. She characterizes power feminism in a similar list. Below are a few characteristics of power feminism according to Wolf (1994):

Examines closely the forces arrayed against a woman so she can exert her power more effectively. / Knows that a woman's choices affect many people around her and can change the world. / Encourages a woman to claim her individual voice rather than margining her voice in a collective identity, for only strong individuals can create a just community. / Is unapologetically sexual; understands that good pleasures make good politics. / Seeks power and uses it responsibly, both for women as individuals and to make the world more fair to others. / Knows that poverty is not glamorous; wants women to acquire money, both for their own dreams, independence, and security, and for social change. / Is tolerant of other women's choices about sexuality and appearance; believes that what every woman does with her body and in her bed is her own business. / Acknowledges that aggression, competitiveness, the wish for autonomy and separation, even the danger of selfish and violent behavior, are as much a part of female identity as are nurturant behaviors;

understands that women, like men, must learn to harness these impulses; sees women as moral adults. / Seeks "bilingualism" - the joining together of what is best about women's traditional knowledge and commitments with traditionally male resources. / Has strong convictions, but is always skeptical and open, and questions all authority, including its own. / Hates sexism without hating men. / Sees that neither women nor men have a monopoly on character flaws; does not attack men as a gender, but sees disproportionate male power, and the social valuation of maleness over femaleness, as being wrong. / Wants all women to express their own opinions. / Knows that making social change does not contradict the principle that girls want to have fun. Motto: "If I can't dance, it's not my revolution." (pp. 137-138)

Sylvester (1989) discussed women warriors in the debate over war and peace claiming that radical and socialist feminists were, in fact, warriors against patriarchy. Although this concept came before the label of power feminism, Sylvester (1989) encouraged feminists of the time

to tap into and embrace what she termed "*woman-warrior feminism*".

Women warriors are less well-adjusted to dominant society and, in fact, fight to make creative spaces for 'irrational' and 'disorderly' feminist projects which defy the rules and practices of social order. Their strategies are multiple, yet contain a common element of power through energy, capacity, competence, and effectiveness.

(Sylvester, 1989, p. 98)

With such varied views on feminism, violence, peace, power, and dominance, it becomes necessary to highlight my own unique views as a feminist and identify the lens with which I used to conduct this research.

#### The Author's Feminist Position

As a self-proclaimed third wave feminist, I identify greatly with the power feminist perspective. I do not believe that we should focus on the lingering gender inequities in our society as much as take a proactive stance to minimize them. In my opinion, we should remember previous offenses of course, but I believe we should expend the greatest amount of our energy looking towards the



future and focusing on solutions. From here, what strategies can be used empower the oppressed? How can women gain equity? How can the feminist movement progress?

Today's woman has a great deal of power and influence, some more than others e.g. educated, white, upper/middle class, etc. However, overall I am in a better position as a woman in terms of my rights and services I have access to because of the groundwork laid by earlier feminists. Women are much better off, although I do believe we are still consistently bombarded with patriarchal representations in the media. However, women can express themselves through available communication technology and assert their positions for more and more of the world to hear. I myself have a blog and publish my voice regularly on the Internet.

My position as a feminist influences my perception and interpretation of media. I used this position to perform a feminist rhetorical analysis on the *Kill Bill* films. I analyzed these films from a third wave power feminist perspective. However, I would not consider myself a power or peace feminist as I agree with elements of both camps. I am against violence. It makes me uncomfortable. In fact, the first *Kill Bill* movie made me sick to my stomach and I refused to watch the second one for months after it came

out because I did not want to see any more gore. I became intrigued by the *Kill Bill* film series after watching the reactions to the movie by various women in my life. All found the strong female characters to be admired and seemed to vicariously identify with them. Particularly those who have been victimized seemed to be the most moved by the bloody revenge tale. They had a strong identification with the character of the Bride to the point that she almost became heroic in their perception. The strength of the identification I witnessed in other women is what drew me to this topic. Though I myself have not been the victim of violence, I still felt a sense of power in watching a woman who had been a victim fight back against her perpetrators and enact revenge in such a tangible way. It was greatly rewarding to look deeper into how this vehicle of screen violence was used to express third wave feminist ideals and allow today's women to experience this connection with powerful and deadly female characters.

## CHAPTER THREE

### VIOLENCE AS A RHETORICAL TOOL

The *Kill Bill* movies are saturated with violence to the point that violence almost operates as its own unique character in the films. It becomes a means of articulating power as it leaves its gory marks on all of the other characters. Violent acts in the *Kill Bill* films serve to illustrate conflict and dominance. However, since so much of this violence results in death, death becomes the ultimate illustration of power over another. The dominant individual(s) inflicts violent harm and ultimately takes the life of the weaker or submissive individual(s). These deadly conflicts occur in greater number between men and women (i.e. unnamed male assassins), although the episodes of violence between women are highly glorified.

Research has shown that males are more aggressive and violent than females. Researchers differ on whether or not this is due to the biological chromosomal level of the sexes or the social construction of gender stereotypes. "Specifically, in the U.S., aggression, competitiveness, and other stereotypically masculine components are frequently associated with men's genetics and hormones"

(Jandt & Hundley, 2007, p. 217). Whether by nature or nurture, violence in mainstream media is commonly associated with the social construction of masculinity. This association permits male characters in film to forgo explaining their violent acts. The rationale need not be explicitly stated because of their very existence as males and thus, their masculinity by default, warrants their behavior or actions. The socially constructed female, on the other hand, is commonly associated with aggressiveness and are typically seen as the victims of violence rather than the perpetrators. Femininity is associated with peace and nonviolence. However,

those who wish to conceive of women as nonviolent/nonaggressive and morally superior ignore the fact that not all women have such a luxury. In addition, because passivity and nonviolence (or more specifically weakness and fragility) is part of the White femininity model, feminists should be extremely skeptical of it.

(Roth & Basow, 2004, p. 259)

Hollywood's pretty pictures of the feminine are most often depictions of the dainty white upper middle class woman who has to do little but look pretty and have good manners.

Feminine aggression is known to be back-handed and covert rather than dominating and harmful as masculine aggression. Women hurt with words, men hurt with fists. When a female uses violence, it must often be excused, justified or rationalized in order to make sense to the audience (see Boyle, 2001). The justification is usually created by previous victimization. A woman is raped, beaten or abused so she turns violent and seeks revenge or takes out her anger on the world through violence.

Television programs such as *Snapped* are now airing that attempt to make sense of a woman's turn to violence out of anger or revenge. There is something unnatural about a 'naturally' violent woman. There must be a valid reason for the violence such as justice or being blinded by emotional pain from betrayal. The popularity of these shows speaks to society's need for justification in these real life cases. "By violence, we often mean an insufficiently justified, intentionally harmful force (which is often oppressive)", however Roth & Basow (2004) suggest that a more appropriate term for describing the violence enacted by women in self-defense or otherwise justified is 'physical power'. They contend that there is a marked difference between oppressive and non-oppressive violence,

that is violence that is used to maintain a position of power over others versus the use of violence to resist that power or otherwise defend against it.

Power is illustrated through violence; and, in the end, women in these newer media texts are more powerful than men and use masculine means of articulating their power and asserting their place. This is reminiscent of power feminism, which seeks to articulate the power women already possess. This power may exist and be expressed even in what is traditionally masculine terrain. Strength, aggressiveness, competitiveness, and even violence can all be co-opted and expressed as effortlessly for women as for men under the conceptualization of power feminism. For some, this lends women great power through brash and bolden expressiveness. For others, the depiction of the vengeful and violent women is a step in the wrong direction.

Obsessive and slightly unhinged, the figure of the woman set on revenge indexes a tradition that has little or nothing to do with contemporary girl power, but rather with its opposite: powerlessness. She cannot really change things, but simply respond momentarily with an angry, vengeful gesture that may feel cathartic but

leaves the status quo of gender relations intact.

(Gill, 2008, p. 47)

Violence enacted by women is often seen as a negative because violence is so often used as a tool to oppress women. The violent woman is often seen as re-inscribing patriarchy because she is using the methods by which the dominant majority exercises power over women.

Given the way that physical force functions to oppress women, (radical) feminists may see it as patriarchal and oppressive. Even if men are not naturally more violent, than women, violence has been one of the major forces in oppressing women. Thus, women cannot hope to use violence to liberate themselves, because they would only be contributing to oppression. (Roth & Basow, 2004, p. 257-258)

However, the violence in and of itself is a useful tool to articulate power for women in film. It levels the playing ground by showing that women can be just as adept and skilled in strength as men.

Because physical strength is so valued in our culture and because rape is so prevalent and significant in women's oppression, women cannot

afford the costs of arguing first and foremost that violence is bad. They must first argue that women are capable of violence and give women the knowledge and practice needed to be violent. Only then can they efficiently argue that violence is bad. (Roth & Basow, 2004, p. 259)

The power feminist position, however, does not require that women justify their strength and power. Women are already powerful and may lay claim to that power without provocation or explanation. With regards to violence, Naomi Wolf (1994) suggests that power feminists "acknowledge that impulses toward aggression, retaliation, dominance, and cruelty are as innate to women as they are to men" (pp. 317-318). It is in this vein that the violence in the *Kill Bill* films makes its mark as a meaningful rhetorical device. The female characters in the films are presented as though this primal aspect is just a natural piece of their character. This is in contrast to the lighter and less violent depictions that critics associate with postfeminism and the commodification of feminist ideals for marketing purposes. Commodity feminism "employs kick-butt portrayals of womanhood in the remake of *Charlie's Angels* (2000) and



similar images to reduce feminism to fashion and lifestyle choices" (Owen, Stein, & Vande Berg, 2007, p. 8).

The *Kill Bill* murderesses use gore and dramatic violence in comparable excess to traditionally masculine movies with male killers. "It would seem that for women to 'do power' seriously is to do it like men, more specifically, to draw upon a model of masculine dominance" (Lazar, 2006, p. 511). In these movies, women 'do power' like men and do it well. They are strong and capable killers on the same level as the male characters. It is to this end that I believe that co-opting masculine strategies such as violence can articulate a resistant message against patriarchy. I believe that violence is used as a feminist rhetorical strategy in the *Kill Bill* films by depicting women as more deadly and powerful than men. It is through the use of violence that existing power imbalances between men and women are challenged and subverted. Although feminism can encompass the resistance of multiple oppressions, the use of violence in these films specifically speaks to gender inequity and provides a space for resistant representation that is highly indicative of power feminism as masculine means of handling conflict are appropriated and used by women.

This chapter addresses the use of violence a feminist rhetorical strategy by focusing on women characters in the films who kill as men kill and are afforded the same opportunities (i.e. training, weapons, etc.) as men. In addition, the women killers are not only equally matched to the men; they possess greater skill and weaponry. After all of the killing in the films, the only ones left standing are women.

#### Natural Born Killers

What is noteworthy about the *Kill Bill* films is that women are positioned as natural born killers with no prior provocation. They are afforded the same right as men to be violent without reason or provocation. The deadly women in the *Kill Bill* films are violent and beautiful with no further rationale given. Of the six deadly female characters presented in the films, only one of them is given a background and rationale for why she became a killer. As a young child hiding under her bed, O'Ren Ishii watched her parents die. She grew up to be an assassin and Toyko crime boss to avenge her parents' brutal murders.

The Bride is initially portrayed as an unjustified killer in her role as a hired assassin for the Deadly Viper

Assassination Gang. Viewers do not know what steps led up to her membership in this gang of assassins, only that she was a strong warrior and excellent at what she did. In fact, in a final scene with Bill as he is about to die at her hand, he refers to her as a 'natural born killer.' He proposes that she cannot shed that aspect of herself for motherhood and a normal life. Then as the film reveals the main plot, she becomes a justified killer as she avenges her wedding rehearsal bloodbath. However, her victimization did not cause her to become a killer. She was already a highly skilled, highly trained assassin. The fact that she was wronged only helped to align the audience with purpose of the murders to come. All but one of the other female killers in the films are simply presented as killers without reason or some great victimization that created them. The Bride is the contradictory exception as she is justified in her revenge spree but not justified as an innate killer. The majority of female killers in the films, however, are not created by a prior offense that turned them bad. To the audience, they exist as assassins. No empathetic backstory is given in the films. Vernita Green played by Vivica Fox and Elle Driver played by Daryl Hannah are both members of the Deadly Viper Assassination Squad

that which Beatrix belonged. Once O'Ren Ishii establishes herself as the head of the Tokyo crime underworld, the female members of her Crazy 88 gang are deadly without reason. Her personal bodyguard is a 17-year-old female killer named GoGo. She is not just female but a young girl who is presumably tough and deadly enough to protect the most powerful woman in Tokyo.

There are a number of motives behind the violence in the films. It is used out of anger, for pleasure, for training, for money and most notably for revenge. Violence for revenge is reminiscent of vigilante justice although it is not dished out in an eye for an eye format. Rather, every offense earns death. A hospital orderly sold the Bride's body for sex while she was in a coma and as a result, she killed both the man who bought her and the man who sold her. In a brief bar scene, a young man tries to pick up on GoGo (O'Ren's bodyguard) and GoGo quickly kills him for desiring her. O'Ren Ishii is questioned about her heritage at a meeting and she beheads the man who questioned her in front of all those present. The massacre of all those involved in the Bride's wedding rehearsal brings the Bride to kill only those involved in the murders rather than kill their whole families and friends as was

done to her. The Bride discusses this with Vernita Green in Vernita's kitchen before her death.

*Vernita: So I suppose it's a little late for an apology, huh?*

*The Bride: You suppose correctly.*

*Vernita: Look, bitch. I need to know if you're gonna start any more shit around my baby girl.*

*The Bride: You can relax for now. I'm not gonna murder you in front of your child, okay?*

*Vernita: That's being more rational than Bill led me to believe you were capable of.*

*The Bride: It's mercy, compassion, and forgiveness I lack. Not rationality.*

*Vernita: Look. I know I fucked you over. I fucked you over bad. I wish to God I hadn't, but I did. You have every right to wanna get even.*

*The Bride: No. No. Get even? Even Steven. I would have to kill you, go up to Nikki's room, kill her, then wait for your husband, the good doctor Bell, to come*

*home and kill him. That would be even,  
Vernita. That'd be about square.*

Vernita then beseeches the Bride for forgiveness on behalf of her daughter, unsuccessfully. Vernita shoots at the Bride and takes a dagger thrown to the chest and dies on the floor amidst spilt cereal. As outlined in the dialogue, the Bride killed Vernita mercilessly. She laid claim to the masculine characteristic of rationality while forsaking mercy, compassion and forgiveness, which are traditionally feminine. Aside from the outward beauty of the Bride, she is on a mission to shed blood in revenge as man after man has done for years in films before this one. The fight between the Bride and Vernita Green is the first kill on the Bride's revenge list that is presented to the audience. Her list consists of three women and two men, one of the men being the master architect over the massacre and betrayal that left her in a coma for four years.

By positioning the women in the film as unjustified killers who use violence without provocation, men and women share equal ground in the films. Women are not more sensitive or submissive or even feminine in the traditional sense by being meek and quietly obeying. Instead the power and privilege of men over women has been erased by its lack

of acknowledgement. This levels the playing field by granting women the same treatment as men.

#### Women versus Men: The Superior Sex

The incidences of violence in the *Kill Bill* films overwhelmingly favor violence initiated by women more than men. Defining violent acts as inflicting physical harm on another, whether by shooting, stabbing, kicking, punching, raping, or otherwise hurting, there are over 150 individual acts of violence shown in the first film alone. Of those, approximately 92% of the violence occurs by women and is inflicted upon men. The majority of this occurs in one of the film's final scenes where the Bride fights her way through a mass of male assassins to get to O'Ren Ishii. Some of the most cold-blooded acts of violence occur at the hands of men upon a female, the Bride. She is shot in the head, raped, buried alive, and shot point blank in the chest - all by men. However, the majority of deaths in the films occur at the hands of women. The Bride kills Vernita Green, GoGo and O'Ren Ishii as well as countless anonymous fighters for O'Ren. O'Ren kills her parent's murderer, a world leader, and a Tokyo crime boss. Elle kills the

martial arts master, Pai Mei, and uses a snake to kill Bud. The Bride kills Bill.

A prime example of women being positioned in the films as equal to men occurs in *Vol. 1* with O'Ren Ishii's gang, the Crazy 88. There are a small number of female unnamed assassins in that gang that fight alongside the men, die as the men die at the hands of the Bride, and even wear the same black assassin suit the men wear. The women are also given the same weapons as men. They use swords, guns, ball and chains, etc. The female members of the Deadly Viper Assassination Squad receive the same training as the men and fight alongside the men. They are presented as natural born killers just as the men are. Men and women in the films are not only equal but the women ultimately surpass the men in skill and survival. The Bride is a prime example of this. Her weapon, a samurai sword, is actually the most revered weapon in the movie. An entire chapter of *Vol. 1* is dedicated to her acquisition of the sword in Japan from a retired sword maker who specifically came out of retirement to make this sword for her. One of her would-be killers, tried to sell the sword for one million dollars. The women in these films are first equal to men as killers, yet they surpass the men in skill and weaponry.



The Bride's skill as a fighter far surpasses all the other killers, male or female, in the movies. In the end, a woman who has been trained by men to use men's tools to fight as men fight surpasses them all and kills the man who commissioned her training. The student kills the teacher, so to speak. Violence is indicative of power. However, death has the final word. Ultimately, the *Kill Bill* films tell a tale of a woman who systematically enacts justice on those who have wronged her until she brutally kills each and every one. She alone is left standing victorious, thus women take not only an equal playing field as men in the films but beat them at their own game in a sense. This concept is illustrated not only in the Bride's revenge, but O'Ren Ishii's revenge killing of her parent's murderer as well as a few other scenes where women are clearly dominant over men. One scene in particular takes place between Elle and Bill's brother, Bud, in his trailer. Bud thinks he has killed Beatrix and is selling her sword to Elle. She brings a suitcase with one million dollars in it. The two exchange dialogue about Elle's rivalry with Beatrix and Elle continues after the Black Mamba snake she planted in the suitcase kills Bud.

*Bud: So, which are you filled with? They say the number one killer of old people is retirement. People got a job to do, they tend to live a little bit longer so they can do it. I always thought warriors and their enemies share the same relationship. So now that you're not gonna have to face your enemy no more on the battlefield, which are you filled with - relief or regret?*

*Elle: A little bit of both*

*Bud: Horse shit. I'm sure you do feel a little bit of both, but I know damn well that you feel one more than you feel the other. The question was which one is it.*

*Elle: Regret.*

Bud opens the red suitcase filled with money and a snake jumps out and bites him. Elle tells him it's a Black Mamba, the codename snake of the Bride. Elle reads him the details she looked up on the internet of the black mamba and its venom. She then continues their earlier discussion.

*Now in these last agonizing minutes of life you have left, let me answer that question you asked earlier more thoroughly. Right at this moment, the biggest R I feel is regret. Regret that maybe the greatest warrior I have ever met her end at the hands of a bushwackin scrub alchky piece of shit like you. That woman deserved better.*

According to Elle, Bud was so low a human being that he did not deserve to kill a great warrior--Beatrix. Not only did Elle indirectly kill Bud using the signature snake of Beatrix, she expressed to him verbally his inferiority to both women.

Another example of women dominating over men comes through O'Ren Ishii's position as Tokyo's crime boss. In the scene where Beatrix narrates O'Ren's rise to power, O'Ren is seated at the head of a board table with a number of men seated at each side. One of the men is upset by her ruling over the others, not because she is female - because again the playing field is equal in these films - but because she is a mix of Chinese descent leading the Japanese crime bosses. Thus, race remains a basis of discrimination rather than gender. Boss Tanaka expresses his displeasure at having a "half-breed" rule the crime

scene and O'Ren very calmly approaches him and quickly slices his head off. Blood sprays upward like the Old Faithful Geyser. The camera catches the smiles of the two other women in the room affiliated with O'Ren, her bodyguard and her best friend. O'Ren is then shown still holding the blade in the back swing very composed and calm through a curtain of spraying blood. Once the blood spray diminishes, she lowers the blade slowly and addresses the council in Japanese. She quickly swipes the blade and blood sprays off of it onto one of the men's faces. She returns it to the holster at her side. She then speaks in English while Sofie translates.

*As your leader, I encourage from time to time, and always in a respectful manner, to question my logic. If you're unconvinced a particular plan of action I've decided is the wisest, tell me so, but allow me to convince you and I promise you right here and now no subject will ever be taboo . . . except of course the subject that was just under discussion. The price you pay for bringing up either my Chinese or American heritage as a negative is . . . I collect your fuckin' head . . . just like this fucker here. Now if any of you*

*sons of bitches got anything else to say, now's  
the fuckin' time. . . I didn't think so.*

She yells the last bit of the speech while holding up the decapitated man's head. The women in the room smile in agreement and pride. This scene clearly places a woman in dominance over a room full of men. She exercises that dominance through violence and brings death to the one man in the room that opposes her.

Two final illustrations of the superiority of women over men in the films come from the Bride herself; one at the showdown at the House of Blue Leaves and the other in the final showdown with Bill. In an extremely emasculating scene at the close of the fighting at the House of Blue Leaves, the Bride has sliced her way through over a hundred unnamed assassins until one scared and shivering man is left standing. He is holding his blade pointed upright at an angle resembling an erect penis. The Bride swipes his blade with hers and cuts off the tip of it, essentially circumcising him. The man continues to hold the blade in the same angle as he stands trembling. The Bride then swipes the blade 3 more times, each time making it shorter, until it is the size of a small dagger. Now he is castrated and emasculating him. He drops the blade and lifts his

hands up in surrender. She pulls him over her knee and spanks him with her sword. *"This is what you get for fucking around with the Okusas. Go home to your mother!"* and sends him running.

At the close of the second movie, the Bride kills Bill using the infamous five-point palm technique. This technique was legendary. The audience first becomes aware of it during a flashback in which Bill and the Bride are sitting by a campfire and Bill tells the tale of Pai Mei and his five-point palm technique. Supposedly Pai Mei, the martial arts master, was able to kill someone using only the palm of his hand by hitting five pressure points that allowed the victim five steps before their heart would explode and they would collapse in death. The Bride asked Bill if he knew the technique and he said he did not, that the master taught it to no one. In the final showdown between Bill and the Bride, a great amount of dialogue is coupled with a small amount of fighting that ends by the Bride performing the five-point palm technique on Bill. He is surprised to find that she was taught the technique. The Bride, a woman, his pupil kills him with a legendary martial arts technique known only by his own teacher. Since the five-point palm technique allows the victim to take 5

steps before dying, Bill has a moment to soak in the reality and significance of his death. The Bride exceeded Bill in martial arts mastery and ultimately kills him using only her hand.

Additionally in the films, the only killing the audience bears witness to is done at the hands of women. In a sense, only women have the power to both give life and take it away. The men try to kill but are unsuccessful. The only exception being the animated male figure that kills O'Ren Ishii's parents that serves as the pivotal moment that turns her into a killer. However, even in that scene, the actual act is not shown so much as blood spraying and the implication of it. Bill and Bud are involved in the execution in El Paso, but the men were not shown killing the bridal party. In addition, the female assassins joined the two males so women were present at the time of the murders. The men did not kill alone or explicitly.

The Bride seeks justice and retribution through the use of violence, the same means by which power was exercised over her. The audience is presented with a visual depiction of the injustice against her and bear witness her being brutalized in the first scene of both movies. This betrayal becomes the justification for the Bride's killing

spree. The audience is encouraged to root for the Bride and feel the satisfaction of bloody revenge. The Bride uses the same means to obtain justice as was used to unjustly brutalize her: violence. She does not passively seek an apology, a heart to heart conversation, or a lengthy criminal trial. Revenge is served by taking the lives of those who sought to take hers and ultimately she succeeds. Each and every offender is killed until the only ones left standing are the Bride and her daughter. She travels down the masculine path of conflict resolution and rewarded for it. What is traditionally masculine terrain is not only occupied by women but also overtaken by them. The predominant violent figure in both movies is female, the Bride. Violence in these movies occurs at both the hands of women and men; although it is the main female killer who ultimately survives to the end of the story.

#### Concluding Remarks

Tarantino's *Kill Bill* series is a violent and controversial set of films that tell a gory, disturbing tale of cruelty and revenge. "Much of the magic of cinema lies in the medium's power to give us something other than life as is" (Hooks, 1996, p. 9). What is particularly



relevant about the *Kill Bill* representation of violent women is the extent of gore and blood that is featured in the films. Previous to these representations, there were women fighters in film but rarely on the same scale or skill level as men. For example, the four leading women in *Charlie's Angels* were portrayed as empty headed, beautiful fighters who obeyed a man and delivered beatings, leaving the enactment of justice to the law rather than taking it upon themselves to dish it out. The *Kill Bill* women are not to be crossed. Infractions equal death and the punishment is non-negotiable. As discussed in chapter one, violence is often used to illustrate power relationships. When violence is employed as a rhetorical tool in this way certain distinctions can be made about how it was specifically employed as well as what meaning is conveyed through its usage. The *Kill Bill* films use violence to such an extent that it is worthy of analysis. Women are positioned as powerful in the same manner as men. They brandish the same weaponry, fight alongside the men and are portrayed as unjustified killers, which is typically a representation that is reserved for men only. In addition to the portrayal of equality of men and women killers, the *Kill Bill* films take the relationship a bit further by ultimately

positioning women as superiorly skilled and the only ones who the audience actually witnesses in the act of killing. In addition to the general usage of violence between men and women, the violent relationship between the two archetypes of Bill and the Bride serve as a metaphoric illustration of the battle between patriarchy and feminism.

Women in the *Kill Bill* films are distinctly violent and capable of protecting themselves as well as enacting revenge for offenses committed against them or their loved ones. Whether this is a step forward or backward for feminism seems to be a subjective determination based on each individual feminist and their unique perspective, whether they align more closely with peace or power feminism, or simply their own personal preference. It would follow that peace feminists would object to the direct use of violence even when used as an oppositional tool to patriarchy because its usage can be read as reinforcing patriarchal values through the use of patriarchal tools. From a power feminist perspective, however, the use of violence as a power metaphor makes sense. Violence illustrates power on screen, women are powerful whether or not the patriarchal view acknowledges it, and therefore

women enacting their power metaphorically even using a patriarchal method is perfectly acceptable.

Without placing a value judgment on the violent female, the fact remains that violence enacted by females in the *Kill Bill* films serves to illustrate the powerfulness and strength of women. Violence is used to dominate and exercise power over others and ultimately the women in the *Kill Bill* films are greater in number, more glorified in their fight scenes, and ultimately left standing in the end. The woman who exercises the most violent harm against the most people in the films is rewarded with the elimination of all her previous oppressors as well as given a new life, the life she chooses for herself: motherhood. It is worth mentioning that there are occasions in the films where women do fight other women, however, with the exception of the Bride's revenge mission, all female fighters in the films fight each other for one of two reasons: orchestration by a man or in defense of women, either themselves or another.

Bill is the symbolic archetype of patriarchy in the films. He is pitted against the Bride in a metaphoric struggle between patriarchy and feminist resistance. Bill is the force that orchestrates the attacks against the

Bride and pits women against women. For instance, Bill is the designer of the massacre at the Two Pines wedding chapel. It was his leading that caused the death of the wedding party and his bullet that sent the Bride into a coma. It was frustration that the Bride chose her own path and 'left' him, that inspired the attack. Bill's violent attack of the Bride can be read as patriarchy's backlash to feminist liberation. The Bride chose her own path was punished for her choice just as the waves of feminism have been continually met by patriarchal backlash in the media through the resurgence of hyper-masculine war movies and male heroes.

Bill directly pits woman against woman when he sends Elle to kill the Bride while she lays in a coma. Then as easily as he commissioned the act, he retracts it and stops Elle's hand. It is made clear throughout the movies that Elle does not like the Bride and is her sworn enemy, but she does not kill her when given the opportunity instead choosing to obey Bill and let her lie safely in a coma. Later in the films, she has her showdown with the Bride and fights in self-defense. She does not initiate the fight as the Bride takes her off guard.

The Bride is the only female that challenges Bill's instruction. Bill sends the Bride on the assassination job in which she finds out she is pregnant. Upon discovering this, she is immediately faced with another female assassin who has come to defend the woman the Bride was sent to kill. The Bride tells the assassin to pick up the pregnancy strip she dropped by the door as both women hold guns pointed at each other. The assassin reads the directions on the box and discovers that the strip indeed indicates the Bride is pregnant. The Bride pleads for her to leave and promises to do the same (without completing her assassination mission Bill sent her on). The other female assassin agrees and both women are able to walk away. In fact, the other assassin wishes the Bride congratulations through the gaping shotgun hole in the hotel door. The creation of life is prioritized. The Bride disobeys her orders and abandons her life as a paid assassin in favor of being a mom. She is the only female character who acts independently and outside of these two justifications when fighting women. She fights for revenge and ultimately kills each of the women that follow Bill's orders.

As a metaphoric representation of feminism, the Bride operates outside of the will of patriarchy even though she

was ruled by Bill at the time. She disobeys and resists for the sake of her own freedom to choice and for the purpose of protecting the life she has growing inside her. While other women follow Bill's orders to the letter, the Bride resists them and enacts revenge after being punished for that resistance. She ends the life of the men and women who obey Bill and Bill himself, essentially putting an end to patriarchal rule. By taking the life of those who follow Bill, power is reclaimed for feminism. Patriarchy and its followers are dead. The only one left standing at the end of the films is the Bride. In essence, feminism wins. After numerous battles to get to the heart of the patriarchal force, resistance is effective and change is imminent. The Bride is rewarded at the close of the movies with the return of her daughter and the life for which she fought. Feminism has been a movement rich with battles over a woman's right to choose for herself, direct her own path, and maintain rights equal to those of men. Through the use of violence, the Kill Bill films illustrate feminism putting an end to patriarchal dominance. This was done using direct aggression and violence as has traditionally been used to oppress and dominate women. However, these tools have been metaphorically used to reclaim power that

was taken from women. This is relevant because although feminists do not endorse the use of violence in real life, film is a rich arena where symbolic dialogue can take place. As Roth and Basow (2004) indicate, before the figure of the violent woman can be written off as 'bad' or 'harmful', she must first exist and stake her claim as a valid representation. Women can watch these films and feel a symbolic connection even if that connection is only felt and not expressly articulated. They may feel more powerful after seeing a woman who refused to be taken advantage of without a fight. They may realize their own unique strength and confidence. The implications are great for individual empowerment if the films are read as a positive representation.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### REFLECTIONS OF THIRD WAVE FEMINISM

The character of the Bride is strong and persevering. As evidenced from Chapter Three, the *Kill Bill* story is shaped by her victimization and revenge. Yet through the fighting, the blood and the dialogue there are some distinct parallels that can be drawn between the character of the Bride and the main tenets of third wave feminism. As discussed in Chapter Two, these tenets are voice, contradiction, agency and fighting back. Voice relates to the lived experiences of third wave feminists as well as the right and privilege of speaking out and sharing those experiences. Contradiction is the reconciliation of opposing elements or characteristics within oneself. Third wave feminists often express their contentment with the embodiment of contradiction whether it is philosophical, racial, or any number of other opposing factors. The third tenet, agency, deals with choice and using one's power to partake of choices available to them even when those choices are difficult. It is the manifestation of one's own unique identity. This is related to the final tenet, fighting back. Fighting back is just as it sounds as



feminists struggle to express resistance. The act of resistance may be peaceable or forceful but the fight against patriarchy remains the same. Agency and fighting back appear to be similar as agency can be used to enact resistance by choosing identity elements that overtly combat patriarchy; however since agency is so uniquely related to identity, it deserves to stand out on its own rather than falling under the umbrella of fighting back.

This chapter draws from the candid voices of third wave feminists taken from *Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation* (2001) and *Colonize This!* (2002) to illustrate parallels with the Bride's characteristics. *Listen Up* is one of the most widely quoted and referenced texts in academic writings about third wave feminism (Kinser, 2004; Orr, 1997; Shugart, Wagoner, & Hallstein, 2001) as it features the voices of young, third wave feminists describing their unique identity, struggles, perceptions and experiences. *Colonize This!* follows in suit, allowing another group of young third wave feminists to share their lived experiences as women-of-color and with the intersection of oppressions. Although this text primarily addresses women of color feminists and the Bride is white, the text is still relevant and useful as a third

wave feminist text because it highlights the voices of individual women. Social change in the media does not always appear in shocking contrast to social reality. The main female fighter in these films is white but there are also African American and Asian women assassins featured in the films. It may be some time before a non-white race is positioned as the leading killer, however progress must begin somewhere. Therefore, a woman of color text may more accurately represent the mentality of third wave feminism through the its members' voices. Drawing from third wave feminist standpoint, these texts are juxtaposed against the Bride in the *Kill Bill* films, which operate metaphorically illustrating a tangible connection between third wave feminism and this character.

#### Voice

Voice is the articulation of feminism, the means by which all representation of feminism can flow.

"Historically, women's personal stories have been the evidence of where the movement needs to go politically and, furthermore, that there is a need to move forward"

(Baumgardner & Richards, 2000, p. 20). Third wave feminist texts often interweave actual voices and incorporate real

lived experiences alongside discussions of the theoretical framework behind the movement (see e.g., Kinser, 2004). The emphasis on realizing the unique lived experiences of women from all different backgrounds is of great importance to third wave feminists. Speaking out, voicing opinions, and sharing one's story is encouraged however different, harsh, or difficult the story may be.

I worry that I scream and scream and we make a wailing wall, all of us screaming at the tops of our lungs, screaming for our lives, and no one is listening, nothing is changing. (Doza, 2001, p. 46)

In *Listen Up* (2001), there are stories from women who have been raped, who struggle to start feminist clubs at school, who have been ridiculed for being fat, who are finding their sexual identity. Indeed, the book provides numerous personal experiences of young feminists. All the stories are different and yet they share a common thread - they are all lived out by third wave feminists. The policy of lending voice to experience is so central to the movement that a majority of the academic writing that adopts a third wave style tends to incorporate individual voices in some

way (Findlen, 1995; Hernandez & Rehman, 2002; Heywood & Drake, 1997; Walker, 1995).

The *Kill Bill* movies, *Vol. 2* in particular, are narrated by the Bride who makes her presence known and speaks over the movie at times. It is as if the story is being told on her terms and in the way she wants it told. It does not follow a traditional linear chronological storyline as most movies do. Instead the scenes are mixed and the movie unfolds in an asynchronous order. This is characteristic of postmodern media.

Conventions of film and television can be indulged in and then violated. . . Depthlessness and fragmentation are not failing but goals, to create a different order of meaning and purpose.

(Real, 1996, p. 255)

For example, *Vol. 1* shows the Bride killing Vernita Green, number two on her list, before reverting back and showing the elaborate killing of O'Ren Ishii, number one on the death list. Although this is distinctly postmodern, it is also reflective of a traditionally more feminine communication style as stories are told in a circular and fluid manner.

Typically, men have learned to speak in a linear manner in which they move sequentially through major points in a story to get to the climax. Their talk tends to be straightforward without a great many details. The rules of feminine speech, however, call for more detailed and less linear storytelling. (Wood, 2001, p. 132)

The Bride's non-linear presentation of her story is reflective of her own understanding and priority in experiencing it. Her voice is expressed through story telling style. Also, in the beginning of the second movie, she is driving and breaks the fourth wall by speaking directly to the audience.

*Looked dead, didn't I? Well, I wasn't. But it wasn't from lack of tryin, I can tell you that. Actually, Bill's last bullet put me in a coma. A coma I was to lie in for four years. When I woke up, I went on what the movie advertisements refer to as a 'roaring rampage of revenge.' I roared . . . and I rampaged . . . and I got bloody satisfaction. I've killed a hell of a lot of people to get to this point, but I have only one more. The last one. The one I'm drivin' to right*

*now. The only one left. And, when I arrive at my destination, I am gonna kill Bill.*

Breaking the fourth wall is quite uncommon in film, yet here the Bride takes a moment in the midst of her revenge mission to share with the audience and bring them up to speed. Her direct interaction with the audience lends a personal and authentic element to her story.

The Bride's story, however simulated, is told as though it is a real lived woman's experience as she struggles through being both a victim and a victor. She wrestles with issues of contradiction and choice. The movie is presented as her story as if it was being told through her eyes. When she confronts her attackers in the first film, her first glance of them incites a red glowing flashback with a siren sound that alludes to the anger she feels towards them. The narration is her voice telling her story. Although she is fictional, she seems to have control over the direction of the story. In these ways, her story is told similar to the real life narratives of third wave feminists who use their own lived experiences to articulate and shape their conception of what it means to be a woman and a feminist in contemporary America.

## Contradiction

The notion of contradiction or dualistic identity is a central theme in third wave feminism. The idea that not only can women learn to live with their dualities, but learn to embrace them is a basic tenet of the movement. This is particularly relevant to the women-of-color feminists who live with the intersection of multiple oppressions along race, class and gender lines. As Sonja Curry-Johnson (2001) made clear,

As an African American, I feel the duality. But I suffer from more than duality. As an educated, married, monogamous, feminist, Christian, African American mother, I suffer from an acute case of multiplicity. (pp. 51-52)

Most all feminists have conflicting identities or ideologies that they must reconcile within themselves. Societal pressure to compartmentalize people into neat categories encourages individuals to favor one element over another in the interest of convenience.

Those of us who do not fit into either/or boxes therefore experience an enormous amount of pressure to choose one "side" of ourselves over

another. We are not considered whole just as we are. (Weiner-Mahfuz, 2001, p. 37)

The celebration of contradiction by third wave feminists allows for opposing elements to exist simultaneously within one individual. Throughout the *Kill Bill* series, the Bride is continually faced with internal conflict and contradiction. She finds a way to reconcile the deadly with the motherly and the masculine with the feminine.

As a member of the Deadly Viper Assassination Squad the Bride was a killer, yet she feels strongly drawn to being a mother. This was evident in the scene when the Bride was confronted by a female assassin after taking a pregnancy test and finding out it was positive. She begs the woman to leave and tells her she will do the same. She made an immediate decision to forsake her job as a hired assassin to protect the child that she had only just learned was growing inside her.

At the end of the second movie, all the characters had been assassinated with the exception of Bill, Beatrix and BB, their daughter. Once BB is asleep in her room, Bill and Beatrix talked about the events that have led up to the present moment where she has arrived to kill him. Bill begins talking about superheroes and alter egos. He points



out that most superheroes are regular people who wake up in the morning and have to put on their special outfit to become the superhero. Superman, on the other hand, wakes up as Superman and his alter ego was the one trying to blend in with the world around him. Bill suggests to Beatrix that she would always be a killer and what she was trying to do was live out her alter ego, a normal life, but in the end she can not escape who she really is. He tells her in one of the final scenes,

*I'm calling you a killer. A natural born killer.*

*You always have been and you always will be.*

*Moving to El Paso, working in a used record store, going to the movies with Tommy, clipping coupons. That's you trying to disguise yourself as a worker bee. That's you trying to blend in with the hive, but you're not a worker bee.*

*You're a renegade killer bee.*

As Bill points out, Beatrix is a natural born killer, a renegade killer bee, not a worker bee. He does not believe that she can forsake the deadly aspects of her character. The Bride, therefore, has two identities she is trying to negotiate: her identity as a killer and her identity as a mother. One part of herself gives life and

the other takes life away. Initially she attempts to forgo the killer side of herself for the sake of the mothering side, which Bill argued would be impossible. Yet, ultimately she is able to do both and live with both contradictory parts of herself. She kills throughout the entire movie series and is rewarded by getting what she wants in the end: revenge. She also gets to be a mother and is rewarded by the return of her daughter. Both parts of herself are fulfilled through the course of the movies. She learns to live with the duality of her existence and is able to be content in reconciling her internal conflicts.

The Bride's duality is similar to the concept of the *mestiza* as expressed by Gloria Anzaldua (2007). *Mestiza* is a term used to refer to a mixed blood woman living at the borders of Mexico and the United States. This person is often part Indian and part Mexican. She is a prime example of duality and contradiction as each side of the border leads to a different country, a different culture. Yet, these women adopt and embody elements of both cultures. They speak Spanish and English in tandem to the point that it becomes its own 'Spanglish' language.

Another contradiction expressed through the Bride encapsulates the duality of masculinity and femininity.

Often these two gendered concepts are viewed as opposing or contradictory to each other. Throughout the films, the Bride retains her style and femininity while exhibiting masculine and aggressive behavior. She is not a traditionally feminine woman as it pertains to submissiveness. She is constantly faced with life and death situations, which forces her to approach others in a more masculine dominating way. However, in contrast to the upfront aggression of the masculine, at her wedding rehearsal the Bride puts on her veil and asks Bill, "Do I look pretty?" The triviality of her appearance is still something she is concerned about despite the gravity of anxieties she is faced with day to day. Life and death, large sums of money, martial arts training, samurai swords and the like seem out of place juxtaposed with outward appearance, beauty and makeup. Also, when she shows up for her final kill, to kill Bill, viewers see her in a skirt for the first time in the movie since her wedding dress. Her hair is shiny. She looks beautiful in comparison with contemporary standards of beauty as she dons a long, flowing skirt and a samurai sword strapped to her back. Although the weapon is not a typical accouterment with a skirt, she finds a way to visually retain both parts of

herself (feminine skirt and masculine weapon) and she pulls it off gracefully. She is both masculine and feminine. The samurai sword is a visual illustration of the masculine as it is a phallic instrument used for violence and death. Yet, the flowing skirt and attractiveness of the Bride remind us of her grace and femininity.

The contradicting identities of the bride in the *Kill Bill* series serve as a metaphor for the third wave feminist embrace of contradiction. She is duplicitous and yet comfortable with the contradicting parts of herself as third wave feminists encourage each other to be. Rather than denying one part of themselves, third wave feminists embrace all parts of their identity, however complex. For example, a feminist may enjoy sexist programming. I, myself, enjoy the sexist comedy in shows like *Family Guy*. I am Christian and yet I enjoy watching *South Park* that regularly makes light of Christianity. I am comfortable with these contradictions within myself and do not believe that partaking in these shows lessens or demeans my beliefs or identity as a feminist or as a Christian. Instead, in some sense, I feel I am able to appreciate the humor to a greater degree because I am part of the opposition.

## Agency

Agency is paramount to feminism as the freedom of choice was hard won. Choice and the expression of identity are key features of third wave feminism. Agency and the expression of one's own unique identity is the manifestation of empowerment. An individual is empowered to express him or herself with or without consequence. Evidence of agency in the *Kill Bill* films can be found in the Bride's choice to become a mother and start a new life for herself in El Paso. It is this choice that sparks the trail of events in the films.

The Bride chose to forgo her life as a killer and become a wife and mother. She wished that for herself and enacted it by disappearing and moving to El Paso. At her wedding rehearsal, the path she chose was taken from her. Outside the chapel, she conversed briefly with Bill and he asked her about her decision and what she wanted.

Bill:        *And what are you doing for a J O B  
                 these days?*

Beatrice:   *I work in the record store.*

Bill:        *Ah, so it all suddenly seems so clear.  
                 Do you like it?*

Beatrix: *Yeah, I like it a lot, smartass. I get to listen to music all day, talk about music all day. It's really cool. It's gonna be a great environment for my little girl to grow up in.*

Bill: *As opposed to jetting around the world, killing human beings, and being paid vast sums of money?*

Beatrix: *Precisely.*

Bill: *Well, my old friend, to each his own.*

The dialogue between Bill and Beatrix highlights her enactment of agency. She is choosing a quiet life working in a record store rather than jetting around the world as a paid assassin. Bill presumably used the phrase "to each his own" to express the fact that his view differs from hers. She shared with him her decision and reasoning. Then, moments later, he knowingly kept her from living out her choice as the Deadly Viper Assassination Squad entered the chapel, killed all the parties involved and Bill left a bullet in her head in protest of her choice to marry and leave the life of which she was accustomed and that they shared together.

Later in the series, once she discovers her daughter is still alive, she reclaims her choice and her right to raise her daughter. She chooses to be a mother and she does everything she can to defend and live out her choice. She enacted her own agency regardless of the cost. Bill did not agree with her choices and did what he could to prevent her from enacting them. His rationale may have made sense to him but they were still her choices to make. Beatrix chose to be a mother and leave her life as a killer behind. She did what she thought was best for her daughter. She discusses her choice with Bill in the same scene.

Beatrix: *Before that strip turned blue, I was a woman. I was your woman. I was a killer who killed for you. Before that strip turned blue, I would've jumped a motorcycle onto a speeding train for you. But, once that strip turned blue, I could no longer do any of those things. Not anymore, because I was going to be a mother. Can you understand that?*

Bill: *Yes, but why didn't you tell me then instead of now?*

Beatrix: *Once you knew, you'd claim her and I didn't want that.*

Bill: *Not your decision to make.*

Beatrix: *Yes, but it's the right decision and I made it for my daughter. She deserved to be born with a clean slate, but with you she would've been born into a world she shouldn't have. I had to choose. I chose her.*

Everything changed for her once she became pregnant. She had to make some difficult choices and she did what she felt was right for her and her unborn child. It is clear she made her choice to move from killer to mommy and she spends the entirety of the movies paying for and fighting for that choice. She paid dearly for it in the El Paso massacre as her friends, future husband, and her baby were all taken from her. She lost four years of her life in a coma. Her body was violated while in the hospital. All of these events occurred as a result and consequence, however irrational, of her decision. Her subsequent killing spree is about more than revenge. She is defending her right to have made her decision without being forced to give it up.



She was entitled to live the life she wanted and makes those who sought to rob her of it pay for it dearly.

In the final scene of *Vol. 2*, the Bride laid on the bathroom floor crying tears of happiness then joined her daughter on the bed to watch cartoons. The scene then faded to black and on the screen these words appeared, "THE LIONESS HAS REJOINED HER CUB AND ALL IS RIGHT IN THE JUNGLE." Tarantino's words make a statement in declaring "all is right" now that the Bride is reunited with her daughter even at the expense of hundreds of lives. She killed Vernita Green, robbing Vernita's daughter of her mother. She left Sofie Fatale without her arm and Elle Driver without her eyes. These expenses to others are worth the struggle to get what she wanted: revenge and motherhood. She was rewarded for her determination. After all she has been through and all the bodies left in her wake, the Bride gets what she was after all along - life with her daughter. Not only does she get what she wants, but the movie itself speaks to the audience in declaring that now that she has attained what she wanted and taken on the role she chose for herself, everything is finally okay. What is good and right is the enactment of agency and

pursuing authenticity despite the cost to yourself or others.

The feminist movement has been marked by the fight for choice. Affording individual's their own agency is central to the movement dating back to the first and second waves. It has not lost its place on the feminist agenda for third wavers. The idea that women should be allowed to make their own choices, regardless of what they may be, is a recurrent theme in third wave feminist writings. Allison Crews (2001) shared her experience as a pregnant teenager faced with the choice between abortion and motherhood. "I was told, over and over again, that teenage girls are immature, they are selfish, they can't possibly decide what is best, and so others must step in and make these choices for them" (p. 147). In the end, it was the enactment of her choices that helped her to feel complete and whole.

Through giving birth, I loudly and publicly proclaimed my freedom of choice. . . I felt at peace with myself, after feeling torn and alone for so long. I had grown in a way that I had not thought possible, and found a happiness that I had once only hoped existed. My choices allowed

me this. And I refused to let another person deny me this joy ever again. (p. 148)

As the examples illustrate, the ability and freedom to make and enact one's own choices can be very empowering. It is so central to the feeling of empowerment that when agency is threatened, it can be emotionally and/or psychologically damaging. The Bride was robbed of her right to choose the life she wanted. Her ability to choose for herself was violently taken from her and it incited her to violently take it back. Just as Crews (2001) refused to let anyone deny her the joy of choosing for herself again, the Bride refused to have this joy robbed from her too. When it was taken from her, she did not passively relinquish control and accept the situation. Women through the ages have been fighting for the right to make choices and not be judged for them. The Bride's struggle to live out her decisions mimics this overarching struggle of the women's movement that third wave feminists are still experiencing today. Her struggle for the right to live her life as she wants to, for the freedom to choose her own path and what roles she wants to take on as part of her identity mirrors that of millions of other women all over the world.

## Resistance/Fighting Back

It almost goes without saying that the Bride fights back. The entire movie series is filled with the physical enactment of this. It is the cause of the controversy. The main male characters all harm her in very brutal ways. For instance, one shoots her in the head. Another shoots her in the chest, ties her up and buries her alive. One of the more violating acts committed against her comes early in the first movie as she is waking from her coma. A male orderly brings another male to the foot of her bed to sell her body for \$75. He proceeds to run down a list of rules, including 'no punching her in the face', then tosses the guy a dirty jar of Vaseline and leaves the room. Beatrix is conscious as the man climbs on top of her and as he proceeds to lean in to kiss her, she bites his lip off and he is dumped unconscious on the floor with his chest covered in blood. She acts in self-defense and fights for self-preservation. The orderly returns and she cuts his ankle, bringing him to the floor on his back with his head in the doorway. A moment earlier, she fought to defend herself from physical advances. In this moment, as evidenced in flashbacks she remembers the orderly's repeated raping of her while she was unconscious. She

acknowledges the memory of his words to her and recites, "Your name is Buck, right? And, you came here to fuck, right?" as she slams the door on his head leaving him at minimum unconscious, but presumably dead. Against him, she fought back for what he has done to her both physically and emotionally. His actions did not go unpunished and rather than report him to proper officials or take legal action, she simply took matters into her own hands and smashed his face. Although this is a violent representation of fighting back, it parallels the passion of third wave feminism that instructs women to stand up to oppression in all forms and resist victimization. Rallies such as 'Take Back the Night' in which people march in opposition to the fear caused by male predators that make the streets unsafe for women at night are resisting the role of victim and fighting for the right not to worry about being taken advantage of simply because of their anatomy.

The Bride has been wronged. She has been beaten down, attacked and nearly killed. Her child was taken from her womb. She was robbed of her position as wife, mother, and robbed of the ability to choose these roles for herself. The movies follow her quest for vindication and justice. Much like the young women who label themselves as third-

wave feminists, willing sublimation is no longer an option. Instead, these feminists adopt a policy of resistance. Whitney Walker (2001) shared the empowerment she feels through self-defense training and knowing she has the power to fight back:

It was a source of strength for me to know that women organized and fought for the right to legal abortion, equality in schools and to end sexual harassment. Knowing that women were martial artists did the same thing for me. When I discovered that women were learning to defend themselves, I knew I had to be part of it. (p. 128)

Although the story is the Bride's story, it detours for a moment to provide background on one of the Bride's targets. This illustrates that In *Kill Bill: Vol. 1*, the Bride is not the only one to fight back. In fact, another member of the Deadly Viper Assassination Squad, O-Ren Ishii, also fought back against one that had wronged her. Through Japanese anime, the audience is shown the story of how O-Ren became an assassin. She witnessed the murder of her parents from underneath a bed as a young girl. Her fighting

back was evidenced when she turned 11 and preyed upon the killer's pedophilic nature and stabbed him in his bed.

In some ways the killings that are portrayed in these movies, for the women that commit them, are representational. While they are killing the perpetrators of crime, they are simultaneously putting an end to victimization by stopping these people from hurting, molesting, raping, or murdering others. They are fighting back for justice, self-preservation, and protection. This falls in line with the resistant strategies of third-wave feminists who fight back against patriarchy and oppression wherever it is found. "There are certain things that are worth fighting for. I am proud of what I've done, and I am committed to continuing the battle" (Silverstein, 2001, p. 205). Battle and war metaphors are consistently used by feminists to describe their experiences. They fight battles and continue fighting to win the war against inequity and injustice. The Bride visually enacts this battle in a very physical and tangible way. She is a metaphoric representation of the movement's struggle to fight back as she is damaged and beaten along her road to justice, but in the end she gets it. "Finally, I can say that I am proud to be a woman, a warrior, myself" (Mandava, 2001, p. 100).

### Concluding Remarks

The character of the bride is physically, willfully strong and incredibly determined. She embodies the basic tenets of third wave feminism: contradiction, agency, voice, and fighting back. Although the bride may not be the only strong fighting female character in the movies, she is centered in a controversially violent film series that is focused on her strength and determination. She is positioned as the strongest fighter and self-proclaimed 'most deadly woman in the world.' She, and other strong female fighters in the movies, can serve as empowering role models for women as they are a metaphoric representation of third wave feminism. Women that may not otherwise have an outlet for their anger, aggression or expression can find in these characters a sense of vicarious empowerment by watching them visually enact their power. The Bride reconciles the contradictory parts of herself, defends her choices, gives voice to her experiences and fights back for justice against those that have wronged her. She is indeed the metaphoric embodiment of third wave feminism.

Resistant representations such as the Bride and other female killers in the *Kill Bill* films can metaphorically embody feminist ideals without being expressly labeled or



marketed as a "feminist" film. The text can be feminist even through the inadvertent presentation of feminist tenets (i.e. voice, contradiction, agency and resistance or fighting back). Throughout the two films there are numerous examples of these tenets that parallel with the lived experiences of feminists, which may allow for an unspoken connection between feminists (whether explicitly named or not) and the characters.

It is through the unconventional use of violence that this feminism is conveyed.

The importance of the media as a cultural space through which feminism is accessed cannot be overestimated. This is not to assume, however, that a pure, uncontaminated feminism (or femininity) exists beyond its representations in media culture. (Taylor, 2003, p. 183)

As third wave feminism seeps into the media, it can be an important tool to combat existing patriarchal representations of women. Patriarchal representations may still be dominant but resistant representations may begin appearing juxtaposed against them. If anything, it is important to present an alternate view: the image of the powerful woman. Representations such as those figures in

the *Kill Bill* films, although violent, communicate strength through the tangibility of physical force rather than subjective criteria such as beauty or sexiness. This is particularly relevant because currently, a woman's power is tied to her beauty and identity as a consumer in the media. It is important to offer additional powerful representations that communicate third wave feminism in an effort to resist and combat patriarchal standards.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### WHAT BILL'S DEATH MEANS FOR THIRD-WAVE

#### FEMINISM

As revealed in this feminist rhetorical analysis, the *Kill Bill* films are a unique representation of third wave feminism. Additionally, violence is used in the films as a rhetorical tool to communicate contemporary female power and superiority. The films can be read as rich with evidence of feminist ideals as identified in Chapter Four.

In response to my first research question, "How is violence used as a feminist rhetorical strategy in the *Kill Bill* films?" the answer is clear: screen violence inverts the power relationship between men and women, effectively taking power from men and granting it to women. Naturally, screen violence as portrayed in the *Kill Bill* films is not a prescription for male and female relations, but rather a metaphoric power reversal that should be used for the purposes of illustration only. Gill (2008) analyzed revenge advertisements where women enacted violent revenge against men. She acknowledged that these women "might represent for some viewers sexy, powerful women who are not going to put up with poor treatment from men, yet may appear to others

as part of a negative pattern of portraying women as 'ball breakers'" (p. 53). Regardless of the positive or negative association ascribed to the character by the audience, the fact remains that the enactment of violence on screen positions the enactor as having power over another and in the case of violent women; women are portrayed as the powerful ones and conversely men are weaker.

As with any visual or verbal form of communication, violent representations of women are polysemic in that there are multiple interpretations. For instance, these representations can be deciphered as either a negative reinforcement of patriarchal values or as a positive step for women. Gill (2008), for instance, does not look favorably upon advertisements that show women enacting violent revenge on men. In her opinion, revenge advertisements

"suggest that the 'solution' to male 'bad behaviour' is simply to 'turn the tables', to invert the relationship. Thus women in revenge adverts mock, humiliate and attack men, yet we are invited to see this as in some way empowering for women - in a distortion of feminism that somehow seems to suggest that, if women are doing

well, then men must be disadvantaged". (p. 54)

A more positive view of strong females holds with Roth and Basow (2004) who made a poignant observation that "the point of female physical strength is not to extend male strength-related privilege to women but to end the existence of the privilege altogether" (p. 261). Once these figures are established and women are shown in equal or superior light to men, the men dominating women power-over relationship may become less and less frequent or at least less taken for granted as it continues to be challenged. Thus, from this perspective, the first step is equality even if equality means equally skilled fighters and on-screen killers as with this analysis of *Kill Bill* films.

The second research question was "Is third wave feminism articulated in the *Kill Bill* films? If so, how?" Through the analysis, it became clear that third wave feminism was indeed articulated in the films as voice, agency, contradiction and resistance were all present in the Bride and other female characters. Hence, the *Kill Bill* films are rich in feminist ideals. Therefore, if female audience members identify with the Bride, they are essentially embracing feminist ideals although perhaps not explicitly. Resistant representations in the media can be a

valuable tool to combat patriarchal influence.

Although evidence of third wave feminism was found in the *Kill Bill* films, the Bride seems to serve as a bridge between second and third wave feminism. For instance, the second wave heavily weighted equality and fighting the patriarchy, clearly, the Bride represents these concepts as demonstrated in Chapter Four. Yet, third wave feminism is substantially marked by the acceptance of contradiction and throughout the films; the Bride journeyed to accept her contradictions. At first, she tried to choose motherhood over her killer nature, but ultimately by the end of the films she learned to live with and reconcile all parts of herself. This is characteristically third wave.

Although, there are some distinct similarities between the two waves of feminism, the emphasis of each creates enough difference to cause some conflict between members of the two waves. One of the main criticisms second wave feminists have of third wave feminism is that third wave feminists seemingly do not remember the past. Labeled with a selfish "me" attitude just as are other members of their generation, they appear to neglect the battles that second wavers have won for third wavers in order for women to enjoy the equalities they have today. For instance, the

modern third wave feminist may wear short skirts, cleavage revealing tops, or other clothing that seems to invite objectification. To second wave feminists, this may be taking a step backwards by inviting judgment based on sexualization and beauty rather than demanding respect and equality. However, the third wave feminist may qualify her clothing choices as self-expression and tap into the power she has as a sex object.

The Bride embodies the fight against patriarchy as emphasized by the second wave feminists as well as the acceptance of contradiction and the use of alternate forms of power as characterized by the third wave feminists. Hence, she serves as a bridge between the two waves potentially offering something either feminist can identify with and appropriate as their own. Granted, this character may not be the great catalyst that unifies all feminists, but perhaps it is a start and where there is unity, there is strength.

#### Discussion and Implications

Ultimately, the *Kill Bill* films are about power. Regardless of label, wave, or era, feminists must come together and accept one another and their unique

expressions of power. Power always exists, regardless of who lays claim to it. Patriarchy dictates that men as a group occupy a position of power over women as a group. Feminism seeks to end that power imbalance through equality. This is not to say that power itself can or should be eliminated in favor of some utopian society of equals. Instead, the gross imbalance of power can be rectified. This is based on the assumption that there is enough power to go around and there are constructive ways to self-motivate, empower and become successful based on one's own skill set rather than membership in a dominant group wherein power is built in at the expense of others. This is particularly true of men and women as gender groups. Rather than assigning power based on a category such as gender, class, or race, individuals may stand out in certain areas based on their strengths rather than enforcing weakness upon others. For example, the most skilled politician would become president regardless of gender. If this was a man, he would have won the position in office based on his qualifications rather than his membership in a dominant group. Equality does not mean sameness. Difference should be celebrated. Feminism strives not only to eliminate the gender gap that keeps women from



equal privilege as men, but there is also an element to feminism that celebrates the unique ontology of women. In the event that equality was reached, women could still celebrate their own unique perception and experiences as a woman. That premise in itself should be unifying. However, as it stands now, the power imbalance between men and women is still present and pervasive in popular culture.

The image of the powerful woman has traditionally been threatening in both Western and Eastern cultures. Bitches, ball breakers, feminazis, and the like remain derogatory terms today that are used to counteract the threat of a powerful woman.

The first few female leaders were considered so unusual, they were cast as male, or metal. In the 1960s and '70s, Iron Ladies sprang up around the globe . . . women who did not shy from war and quashed any notion that women were the gentler sex. Their success created one of the most repetitive clichés for women in politics - iron maidens, iron butterflies, even steel magnolias - as journalists cooed over the fact that a woman could be (gasp!) decisive and authoritative, a marvelous combination of flesh and steel. Such

labels reflected a longstanding inability to imagine women wielding power - their ambition cast as an ugly trait, their exercise of authority as bizarrely forceful, their tenacity as a sign of psychological concern. (Baird, 2008, ¶ 6-7)

Power can be threatening, especially when it is expressed overtly through violence. However, violence is only one method for expressing power. Power can be experienced a number of different ways that do not involve domination over others. Empowerment can consist of physical beauty, strength, agility, athleticism, wealth, individuality, agency, or intellect, just to name a few forms. Furthermore, power is not necessarily a negative attribute. For instance, Roth and Basow (2004) posit that women who participate in self-defense classes and sports find themselves feeling more confident.

"One woman claimed that only after she began playing violent sports did she learn to 'stop apologizing for the space [she] take[s] up in the world'. Studies also show that self-defense gives women a greater sense of self-efficacy - the belief that one can change the world around

them". (Roth & Basow, 2004, p. 255)

Screen violence is indeed an expression of power over another, but in the case of the violent woman harming a man, the representation can serve as a metaphor for fighting back and essentially taking power back from men. Obviously, this violent female character is fiction and extreme but that is the nature of narratives, to condense and highlight. There is something women, and possibly men, grapple onto in these representations judging by the increased frequency and popularity of them. For example, Lifetime television, a self proclaimed network for women, consistently produces its own movies that tell revenge stories at the hands of women. The Oh!Oxygen network, also for women, features a show called *Snapped* that highlights actual violent acts at the hands of women that appear justifiable. These programs and their popularity as evidenced by their continued air time suggests that in our culture there are occasions when the oppressed is justified in fighting back and attacking their oppressor. More than anything, it is about not being victimized; it is about standing up for your rights.

## Empowerment and Expression

In order for progress to take place, there have to be first steps. There are people who will be offended along the way. In the case of the Bride character in the *Kill Bill* films, first steps involve occupying the space typically reserved for men or becoming aggressive and violent. This does not mean the purpose of the violent action is necessarily 'bad'. In order to place a value judgment on the representation of the violent female, she must first exist on the same level as her male counterparts. As far-fetched as this may seem, it means she must be equally strong, aggressive, and powerful in order to successfully complete her quest. In the *Kill Bill* series, Tarantino went as far as to position women as superiorly skilled fighters and more powerful assassins than their male counterparts in the films. As a consequence, these atypical female characters may create controversy in that violence incites controversy. From this scholar's perspective, this is acceptable.

It remains important to acknowledge that powerful female representations exist beyond stereotypical contemporary standards of female power. That is, through fashion, beauty and sexuality, which are aspects of the

feminine repeatedly portrayed in the mainstream media. With this in mind, it would be unethical to ignore the clear physical attractiveness of the Bride character, played by Uma Thurman. The exterior beauty of Thurman as well as her white skin and blond hair can serve to reinforce patriarchal standards of beauty. Unfortunately, it is near impossible to escape sexualization in the media. The sexualization of women saturates advertising, film, television, radio, the Internet and virtually every medium used for mass entertainment. These are ideals being sold by the media in an effort to capitalize on the purchasing power of female consumers. Lazar (2006) observed that

because of the advertising genre, women's agentive power is directly tied to consumerism, i.e., women's confidence and ability to act are enabled by and premised upon their consumption of beauty products and services. (p. 510)

Empowerment is a hot commodity in advertising to women. Female empowerment becomes connected to the patriarchal standard of beauty, which is a dangerous place to tread. Empowerment through resistance can become blurred with the reinforcement of hegemonic ideals.

However, as third wave feminists contend, physical

beauty can be read as a form of empowerment despite its place amongst patriarchal standards. Beauty and sexuality can lend women great power over heterosexual men. Just as with men, women can use these superficial realities to launch her career, extend her successes, make money, travel, or gain access to a number of opportunities she may otherwise be denied. Anna Kournikova, the Russian tennis player, has achieved a majority of her fame not from her skill as an athlete but by her attractiveness. Her beauty has launched her career as a model and fueled her popularity. Natalie Gulbis, the American golfer, has also used her looks to gain popularity through modeling rather than skill on the course. Physical beauty is a very valuable commodity in Western culture. This is inescapable. Therefore, the Bride's beauty and the other strong yet attractive female characters of the *Kill Bill* films simply added to the power they already possessed.

Consequently, female empowerment and watered down feminism is now commodified, packaged and sold to women as though empowerment can be obtained as easily as applying a new shade of lipstick.

Acts as trivial as purchasing a pair of shoes or eating a particular brand of cereal bar are now

recognized as gestures of female empowerment just as surely as participating in a demonstration or pushing for a stronger voice in politics. (Gill, 2008, p. 36)

It is no surprise, then, that feminism, as a movement, has lost some ground with the inception of postfeminist thought. Postfeminism suggests that feminism is no longer needed. The notion suggests that women have 'arrived' and equality has been attained. With women hesitating to ascribe the feminist label themselves or needing to qualify it in order for it to be palatable, the off-putting connotation of the "f" word still lingers. Feminism is still a dirty word in the general public and without the power of naming or self-identifying as a feminist, women need representations that extend further than the pretty faces used to sell empowerment in the magazine ads.

In contrast to the powerful female commodified in the media, the violent woman stands as a significant and tangible model of resistance. Screen violence can be used as a rhetorical tool to communicate power and feminist ideals. Thus, as female audience members identify with film and television characters, they can have a safe place to express their potentially repressed feminism. Women tend to

make excuses for their power or write it off in the name of not being like those who have gone before them and abused it. However, it is important to acknowledge female power and use it. There is power in naming oneself a feminist as it allows greater freedom of expression and adoption of characteristics that go along with that label. When women choose not to ascribe the feminist label to themselves, but still find themselves attracted to feminist ideals that are expressed through characters such as the Bride, this is a step towards adopting that label and acknowledging their own power.

While there are different forms of empowerment, the figure of the violent woman on screen such as those depicted in the *Kill Bill* series is a very salient form. Feminists of all backgrounds must come together and acknowledge the differences among them and accept that each feminist person may express their own power differently. It is important to acknowledge those differences, accept them, and watch the transforming effects these representations may have for feminists in the future.



## Limitations

As with any research, there are numerous limitations in this thesis; yet it is important to make note of them. The limitations to this study can be found in the text itself as well as the unit of analysis (the Bride) as a third wave feminist model. The text that was examined was a set of two films telling an extended story. The addition of other media such as television or video game representations may have been more comprehensive. However, film is a highly influential medium for communicating ideology to the masses. Resistant feminist representations in film, even those that are not explicit or directly labeled as such, can be a useful tool to allow feminists a space to challenge patriarchal influence. As Bell Hooks (1996) aptly stated, "movies do not merely offer us the opportunity to reimagine the culture we most intimately know on the screen, they make culture" (p. 9). As feminist representations in film become more prominent, patriarchal resistance can also gain strength. Films such as the *Kill Bill* series, however controversial, are effective in communicating feminism through the use of power as a metaphorical symbol to end women's oppression.

The theoretical limitations of this analysis are such

that feminism is not clearly and uniformly defined and agreed upon by all of its members. This required the establishment of basic tenets that have been present since the beginning of feminism as a social movement as well as incorporating the premise that feminism seeks to end the power imbalance between the genders. These concepts are foundational to all branches of feminism and thus potentially unifying. Where there is unity, there is strength. In addition, the feminist rhetorical criticism method was limiting as it relied heavily on the researcher's own feminist philosophies. Consequently, third wave feminism is characterized by individuality, voice, and sharing one's own experiences. As a third wave feminist, I believe the incorporation of my feminist sight lent greater credibility to this study as I was able to approach the research from within the theoretical framework being used to analyze the text.

#### Future Research

There are numerous research studies that can extend this analysis of violence, power and feminist representation. Further research should focus on audience reception to the *Kill Bill* films and how both women and men

perceive the films; or those depicting other female killer characters in similar films, that may since have been released. This would be a natural extension of the current analysis of the text as it is important to examine actual audience responses to assess whether or not the text is truly being used and interpreted positively or just creating revulsion through gore and violence. In addition, other examinations of strong, violent women in other media such as television (e.g. *Alias*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Xena: Warrior Princess*) and video games (e.g. *Final Fantasy X2*, *Parasite Eve*, *Perfect Dark Zero*, *Resident Evil*, *Tomb Raider*) would be beneficial to extend the knowledge of these representations as potential third wave feminist models.

Another interesting line of inquiry may include examining the symbolism of the color red and specifically address the excess of blood in the films. In the *Kill Bill* films, particularly *Vol. 1*, it is hard to ignore the almost comedic excess that blood is used in many of the fight scenes. Blood is sprayed, splattered, and gushed throughout the films. When the Bride sees her victims, an alarm is sounded and the screen turns blood red as the scene transitions to a flashback of her victimization. The red

color and discomfoting sound of the alarm both remind viewers of the pain the Bride experienced and the justification for her kill. It is with a passionate vengeance that she kills.

Women in particular have a unique relationship with blood through the experience of their monthly menses. Blood is red and the color red is found all throughout the *Kill Bill* films in blood, the skies, a suitcase containing a deadly snake, etc. Where there is red in the films, death follows. The young bodyguard, GoGo, cries blood red tears as she dies. The association of blood with violence and women's bodies may reveal further insight into rhetorical devices that may send messages about the strength and power of women. Although there are numerous directions that future research could take, this study is an additional step in understanding third wave feminism and violent, aggressive female characters.

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