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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Madison R. Ross entitled "Film Women Violence." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in Sociology.

Michelle S. Brown, Major Professor

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Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

FILM WOMEN VIOLENCE

A Thesis Presented for the
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Degree
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Madison R. Ross
August 2022

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ABSTRACT

As a condensed version of social reality, film has become a more common object of modern sociological and criminological investigation. As such, we can explore film to understand taken-for-granted as well as innovative constructions of social phenomena. Among these are gendered violence. We can use film to dig deep into its logics, elaborated in visual and narrative representations. Prior literature has analyzed crime films and the behavioral constructions within them, outlining the representations of serial homicide, rape, mass shootings and revenge. However, few studies have outlined films that do meaningful, non-voyeuristic representational work on the issue of violence against women. The purpose of this thesis, then, is to fill the gap by conducting a thematic analysis of four films that convey women resisting violence: *Precious* (2009), *Room* (2015), *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (2017), and *Promising Young Woman* (2020). While resistance to violence against women and other feminized subjects is usually the province of men or the masculine state, these four films cast women as the main protagonists and furthermore characterize them as active and powerful in their negotiation of violence.

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CHAPTER ONE – ESTABLISHING CONTEXT: AN INTRODUCTION TO WOMEN AND VIOLENCE IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN FILM

Popular film is replete with men combatting violence. Take the (2008) film *Taken* for example. In this tale of male rage and revenge, the all-too-common *retired special ops* character, Bryan Mills (Liam Neeson), makes use of his years of combat and intelligence training to travel across the globe and rescue his innocent teen daughter, who is abducted by an unknown, French-Albanian squad of men and subsequently sold into sex trafficking. At the film's turning point, Bryan kills the seemingly affluent man who recently bought Kim, preventing him from pursuing his final act of sexual violence. After a prolonged estrangement, Bryan's presentation of bravery and 'heroism' brings father and daughter closer and ultimately makes up for his absence throughout her life. While *Taken* (2008) focuses on an individual combatting unspeakable harms to save a loved one from male violence, it "valorizes white masculine protection and feminine purity" (C. Kelly 2014:405). Further, the male savior is often seen as the hero, while the victim in need of a savior is most commonly a woman. In doing so, the film ignores the experiences of victims of male violence and the experiences of women more generally.

Women in film seek out vengeance as well. Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill* (2004), David Fincher's *Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2011), Meir Zarchi's *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978) and Abel Ferrara's *Ms 45* (1981) are stories of women who, after suffering horrifically at the hands of men, seek autonomy and agency.

Recent films have begun to challenge both the Liam Neeson-esque genre of male-dominated revenge thrillers as well as the female out for blood rape-revenge narratives by

portraying women who, when in the face of victimization, look for some sort of closure – a cousin to justice. In their seeking out of such closure, the women in these contemporary films focus on agency and re-situating themselves into a society where justice is under attack. While some of these women still technically seek vengeance or some sort of retributive justice after experiencing an act of violence, they are often focused more on reclaiming agency and autonomy than enacting further personal violence.

These new films stand to illuminate current, possibly visionary, notions of agency and gender in atmospheres of violence. This thesis examines four films: *Precious* (2009), *Room* (2015), *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (2017), and *Promising Young Woman* (2020) to discern how recent American-made feature films convey women resisting violence.

Filmic Violence

Violence pervades popular film and has for decades. When entranced by the pleasures of filmic narratives, it becomes easy to forget that each narrative of violence could have potentially been represented differently, and thus every chosen narrative of violence represented in film “has been awarded the significance of actuality” (Young 2009:8). Films shape how we define violence, organize our thinking about violent actions, identify victims and perpetrators of violence, and infer how violence is (or ought to be) resisted (Rafter and Brown 2011).

While films are often used to “reflect society’s lifestyles and values,” surprisingly few American films, “within their propensity for violence” accurately and deliberately

depict resistance to violence (Berets 1996:176). The term *resistance* is often associated with ‘nonviolent action’ (Moran 2011:15). However, there exists a pervasive paradox in contemporary film where violence or wrongdoing is often met with violent, rather than nonviolent, resistance. The essential facet of this filmic paradox is normative, depicting violence or wrongdoing as harmful, while depicting violence in response to wrongdoing as justified. Perpetrator violence often requires a violent response from a victimized character – usually the protagonist or main character. This responsive violence is separate from perpetrator violence and is characterized as ‘retribution,’ ‘punishment,’ ‘justice,’ ‘heroism,’ and so on (M. Connell 2018). Nevertheless, this paradox of violence as legitimate(d) responses to violence does not parallel reality, especially in terms of women’s resistance.

Take Tarantino’s *Kill Bill* (2003–2004) franchise, for example. In this hyper-violent film franchise, after being shot in the head and left for dead by her ex-partner and his team of assassins, Beatrix – the female protagonist – regains her strength and goes on a manhunt for her assailants. Her wrath and plan of vengeance extend throughout the entirety of both films as Beatrix individually hunts down and kills each of her assailants. The violent actions taken by Beatrix against her assailants are justifiable – that is, in the context of the film – and function to allow her to reclaim agency after the violence that she endures. While entertaining, these “commodified images of women in film” as violence combatants bare little relation to reality (Mulvey 2004:1291).

Realities of Violence and Resistance

Kumar and Yelne (2003) critically consider the various types of strategies of negotiation women use in real time in the face of violence. They note, “like any oppressed category, women maneuver and negotiate with the given (patriarchal) structure in their everyday life and offer resistance in many ways and degrees at the individual and collective levels” (91). While resistance strategies used by women in the face of violence may differentiate to various degrees, Kumar and Yelne (2003) specifically outline three strategies most viable for women in everyday life. These strategies are as follows: ‘covert resistance,’ ‘overt resistance,’ and resistance as a “by-product of women’s participation in the economic program” (92). However, for the purposes of my thesis, I will focus only on women’s covert and overt resistance to violence.

Covert resistance is defined as “noncompliance to patriarchal authority in everyday life” (Kumar and Yelne 2003:92). In this sense women navigate the social world as ‘conscious agents’ and resist violence covertly through their own means. Those means may range from withholding sex from a male partner, using femininity or sexuality to control men, or even secretly making plans to leave a violent partner or situation to escape further abuse.

Overt resistance, on the other hand, as described by Kumar and Yelne (2003) is direct or organized confrontation. They state that overt confrontation “can produce ripple effect, both by demonstrating to women (who may not have yet made the leap) what is necessary and possible and by bringing undiscussed issues into the arena of public consciousness and debate” (Kumar and Yelne 2003:92). Overt resistance might look like

a group of women organizing to confront a shared issue; however, in other cases it might look like an individual woman discursively¹ confronting men and/or patriarchal power structures at large.

Both covert and overt strategies of resistance focus on those most directly impacted by violence and emphasize meaningful accountability (Todic, Christensen, McMahon 2021:3). Here, gender – particularly features of femininity and masculinity – is crucial in understanding the causes of and responses to violence.

Contrasts in Gendered Responses to Violence

The ways in which women might ‘make things right’ after a violent event can be contrasted against the ways in which men might respond in similar circumstances. Further, how a man or woman might respond to violence can be dependent upon their gender performativity.

Socialized gender norms play a substantial role in creating and perpetuating violence. To understand how various forms of violence are enacted and/or resisted, then we must understand how “social actors construct notions of femininities and masculinities” (Salazar, Goicolea, and Öhman 2016:315). Some scholars in biological and social sciences have attempted to theorize masculinity and femininity as inherent, biological constructions that are natural extensions of the sexed body (Kimmel 2011). For others, masculinity and femininity are purely social constructs – edifices solely dependent

¹ By discursive confrontation, I mean verbal confrontation through discourse rather than physical harm.

on their social and environmental surroundings (Moynihan 1998; Kimmel 2011). Notions of ideal masculinity and femininity then are sewn into the fabric of society, where they inform and are informed by the institutions that uphold them.

Rafter and Brown (2011) draw attention to James Messerschmidt's (1993) study of hegemonic or dominant masculinity where he found that men are constantly forced to accomplish masculinity according to the dominant social script – “this script endorses the performance of traditional masculine values such as labor, subordination of women, and hypersexuality” (157). Thus, violence, oftentimes becomes a resource for men to demonstrate their masculinity and define themselves as ‘real’ men. However, while violence can also be used by women as ‘resource for expression,’ it often has ‘destructive effects’ on their lives, thus further subjugating them rather than liberating them (Rafter and Brown 2011:157). One could infer then that because the use of violence by a woman to resist violence is more likely to subjugate them rather than free them, they may be less likely to respond in such a way. Thus, responding instead with non-violent resistance strategies such as undoing gender and discursive confrontation.

While scholarly study of the topic of women and violence in contemporary American film is still somewhat limited, its prevalence in contemporary film is striking. This thesis uses narrative thematic analysis (Reissman 2008) to explore how four exemplary films: *Precious* (2009), *Room* (2015), *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (2017), and *Promising Young Woman* (2020), portray female protagonists making sense of and resisting violence. The purpose of this thesis is to illuminate how

popular American film depict women in the face of violence, specifically how resistance and gender are enacted.

Organization of the Thesis

This thesis is organized as follows.

I dedicate the next chapter, (Chapter 2) to my theoretical framing of the thesis. There I conceptualize the terms gender and violence and consider the theorizations of their complex relationship. This literature helps to convey that by examining each female protagonist's gender performativity, we can see both the role of individual agency in behavior and the social conditions that restrict their agency in the production of or resistance to violence.

Chapter 3 provides a detailed breakdown of my thesis methodology and methods. This section of the thesis: (1) outlines the sampling strategies via which I arrived at a purposive sample of contemporary, American made, feature films in the crime genre; and (2) discusses how the films were analyzed. I used thematic narrative analysis, a form of narrative analysis that analyzes themes across the entirety of various narratives or texts, to gather and interpret my data.

Chapters 4 and 5 analyze the four purposively chosen films for this study. In Chapter 4, I analyze *Precious* (2009) and *Room* (2015) in a side-by-side comparison and thereafter, in Chapter 5, I analyze *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (2017) and *Promising Young Woman* (2020) in the same fashion. In doing so, these analyses outline

the ways in which each female protagonist actively resists violence. Finally, in Chapter 6, I conclude my research summarizing the findings of this thesis.

Chapter 6 asserts that while traditional crime film narratives tend to link femininity with victimhood and masculinity with power, these four films cast women as the main protagonists and furthermore characterize them as active and powerful in their resistance to violence. This chapter ends by expressing the implications for constructions of women in distress, and thus gender, and for responses to harm-doing.

CHAPTER TWO – GENDERING VIOLENCE

Gender and violence are closely linked. Examining gender and violence in the present moment means summoning many complex questions. Contemporary research on gender and violence brings about an assortment of problems across a variety of contexts. Bahun-Radunović and Rajan (2008) explain that:

All contemporary approaches to the relationship between gender and violence are grounded in an awareness that the regulation, surveillance, and assumed performance of gender is informed by conventional views of “masculinity” and “femininity” and, further, that those views are premised on historic assumptions of how the gendered production of “male” and “female” bodies have been constructed through the phenomenon of violence. This designation of societal significations to human experiences and activities as “female” and “male” is associated with various forms of violence that constitute a range of physical, psychological, representational, discursive, and situational violations of human and, particularly, women rights (1).

This chapter thus endeavors to better understand the relationship between gender and violence. The first step is to conceptualize *gender* because the problem of gender and violence covers a vast and culturally twisted landscape of psychological, physical, cultural, and political behaviors and actions that “delimit—particularly—women’s activity and mobility and threaten their security” (Bahun-Radunović and Rajan 2008:2).

The second step is to conceptualize *violence* because any study of violence must begin with a conceptualization or theorization of the term itself. In doing so, this portion

of the chapter will address the varying definitions of violence and describe how those definitions have been socially constructed.

I end this chapter by theorizing the gendered dynamics of violence and explaining how those dynamics define and construct victimization and culpability in cases of violence against women.

Conceptualizing Gender

Rather than conceptualizing the creation of gender as a process of realization and awareness of our pre-given selves, gender is treated as an invention – or social construction – that is (re)produced in the continuous interactions between people (Richardson and May 1999). Concepts of gender should thus be thought of as socially constructed. West and Zimmerman’s (1987) article entitled “Doing Gender” reconfigured the concept of gender – rather than an attribute, they argued that it is a performative action that one accomplishes throughout day-to-day life (see also Butler 1999). The idea is that individuals are constantly performing (i.e., doing) gender, noticed or not. Consistent with social constructionism, this performative view of gender envisions people’s potential to challenge (deviate from) or maintain (and thus perpetuate) gendered processes – or learned patterns of gendered behavior (McCann 2018). Gender and gendered expectations are contextual and change throughout time and across space, thus allowing numerous meanings of masculinity and femininity to co-exist in any one society at any point in time. Gender is not constant but rather an “ever-changing fluid assemblage of meanings and behaviors” (Kimmel 2011:10).

With regard to gender, I will often refer to masculinity and femininity, recognizing that there are multiple masculinities and femininities. Kimmel (2011) explains that the mere existence of multiple masculinities and femininities affectedly undermines the belief that the gender differences we observe and attend to come from to conversely “gendered people occupying gender-neutral positions” (10). These fluctuating masculinities and femininities are hierarchically organized and measured against one another, supporting the argument that domination produces and reinforces differences. The social construction of difference is not impartial. Further, if men and women continuously see themselves as ultimately contrasting beings, women will not expect to hold an equivalent status within social structures, and “therein lies the power of gender” (Risman 2004:432).

Butler (1999) explains that as identities – or subjectivities – become *enacted fantasies*, coherence is wished for, desired, and idealized, and this idealization is an effect of material significance (173). Paramount among the many scripted subjectivities in circulation are those of masculinity and femininity: ideologies of appropriate social and spatial gendered roles for men and women. The feminization of household labor, for example, confines women to a relatively isolated sphere where they are more subject to the power of their husbands and fathers and less able to form bonds with other women. It renders women dependent on the men who control family income and property and vulnerable to male dissipation of income. The feminization of household labor also instills a potent strain of nurturing that can disadvantage women in the competitive struggle with men in the broader society. Gender, therefore, as a notion or organization,

communicates an arrangement of society based on perceived distinctions between men and women (Sayer and Walker 1992:43–4). Consequently, gendered norms construct ‘appropriate’ roles and duties for women and men and distribute resources differentially based on these divisions.

Neither masculinity nor femininity is monolithic; instead, the meanings of each are both historically and geographically grounded and intimately connected (K. Anderson 1997). Indeed, quite different models of masculinity have prevailed at different times and in different locales; in other words, the social construction of masculinity has both geography and history (Jackson 1991:203). However, as the preceding discussion of gender and violence revealed, constructs of masculinity and femininity are strongly associated with hetero-patriarchal assumptions of ‘man’ as provider and protector and ‘woman’ as nurturer and homemaker. Moreover, masculinity and femininity are mutually dependent: the production and performance of masculinity correlate with ideas about femininity. Indeed, as Day (2001) explains, many men construct their masculine gender identities around notions of femininity that highlight the vulnerability and fear of women. In effect, men’s need to ‘prove’ their own masculinity may be extended by viewing women as weak, vulnerable, and fearful – traits that are presumed antithetical to those of a ‘real’ man (110).

Theorizing Femininity

Skeggs (2001) argues that femininity refers to behaviors as well as appearance. She writes that, “The appearance of femininity, i.e., the labor of looking feminine, can

also be distinguished from the labor of feminine characteristics, such as caring, supporting, passivity and nonassertiveness, although the two are merged in the term ‘femininity’” (297). The various ways femininity has historically been constructed has led to complex inquiries about which bodies are deemed feminine and whether femininity expresses an expectation or a marker.

The relationship between the terms “woman” and “feminine” sometimes suggests that all people may perform femininity in different ways, thus defining *femininity* as descriptive rather than normative function. In other words, these accounts use “femininity” to describe women, where “woman” is a term used to label adult bodies designated female (Holland 2004). However, this is not the approach to femininity I wish to embrace; such perspectives define femininity in problematic ways that prevent the recognition of, for example, masculine women or other myriad configurations that unbind gender identity from gender presentation. In other words, we must understand that even though all women are expected to be feminine, that does not mean that they all conform to this expectation.

Theorizing Masculinity

Like femininity, masculinity requires an approach that considers masculine attributes as plural and multiple values that vary and are modifiable according to cultural and social contexts. Scholars in the fields of sociology, criminology, anthropology, and gender studies have sought to rationalize how masculinity is constructed by considering “gender and sexual relations, engagements with social institutions, systemic inequalities,

power and men's subjectivity" (Waling 2020:111). American studies on masculinity, however, have remained constant in their focus on hegemonic masculinity to keep the ongoing debate around white heterosexual power and superiority alive, as Kimmel (2011) explains. The concept of hegemonic masculinity began with Richard Connell's (1987) social theory of gender, which drew from patriarchy and cultural hegemony theories to provide a structural account of gender and power relations. R. Connell (1987) found that men either resist or conform to hegemonic masculinity in their own conceptualization and action of performing and displaying a masculine identity. Such actions then grant them access to specific and distinct status, power, and prestigious positions within society. Further, men that successfully conform to hegemonic masculinity hold greater power and status than those who do not or cannot. Through the maintenance and perpetuation of privilege and the subordination of feminine and other masculine identities, hegemonic masculinity prevails.

Conceptualizing Violence

When we refer to violence, it may well be that we take for granted what violence is, without further consideration of the word. Violence, after all, is a word we toss around in our lives regularly. If we are asked to define it, perhaps we assume it looks only one way; however, across disciplines scholars have defined and conceptualized violence in multiple ways (Harris 1980; Glasser 1999; Walby 2009; and Hamby 2017). Any study of violence should begin with a definition of the term, mainly when debating the relative

distinctions between the social construction model and the biological model. I have chosen one definition most prominent in the literature to further conceptualize violence.

Defining Violence

Hamby (2017) defines *violence* as “a behavior that is intentional, unwanted, nonessential, and harmful” (167). She argues that the latter is necessary to a definition of violence for it to be, as she puts it,

...fully capable of accounting for the *exclusion* of behaviors such as accidents and self-defense and the *inclusion* of behaviors such as child abuse, sexual offenses, and manslaughter (2017:167).

The types of acts that are definitively violent in accordance with Hamby’s (2017) argument, might consist of acts such as: *sexual violence* (e.g., stalking, groping, exposing, child sexual abuse, person directed sexual threats, incest), *interpersonal violence* (e.g., domestic violence, community violence),² and *state or penal violence* (e.g., corporal punishment, execution, abortion). In all cases, these acts of violence have negative psychological consequences for the victim, which include but are not limited to depression, shame, and grief (Cooley 2019:798)

Harris’s (1980) work illustrates that an act of violence ensues when injury or suffering is imposed on a living being – human or nonhuman – “by an agent who knows (or reasonably ought to have known) would result in the harm in question” (19). It is

² Domestic violence occurs within the family unit or with a partner. Community violence occurs at the community level with acquaintances or strangers (Kilpatrick 2004).

important to note that Hamby's (2017) definition of violence, similar to that of Harris (1980), also outlines that 'negative action,' or causing harm by failing to act, also constitute acts of violence. The latter is especially suitable for a discussion of those incidents which are not straightforward acts of physical violence – such as state or penal violence. As we interpret these various forms of violence, we must understand how violence, as a concept, has been socially constructed.

Constructing Violence

Before the early 2000s there had been few theoretical attempts within criminological scholarship to define and distinguish traditional crimes (e.g., street crime) and crimes of the powerful (e.g., state crime and corporate crime) and even less attempts had been made to theorize harm over crime. Lois Presser's (2013) book, *Why We Harm*, however, undertakes an ambitious endeavor to create a unified theory of human-instigated harm for various fields of critical criminology including state crime, cultural criminology, green criminology, and interpersonal violence. Throughout the book, Presser (2013) compares traditional definitions and understandings of harm and crime. She claims that traditional concepts of crime centralize the narratives of the criminal or the state, whereas the concepts of harm (defined as "trouble caused by another") draws attention to the subject who endures harm, thereby privileging the perspectives of the victims over the offender or rather, agent of harm (2). In the first chapter of the book, "Making Misery," she explains that throughout the social world, definitions of *harm*, are socially constructed, regulated, and perpetuated "in and by institutions and other

hierarchical arrangements” (Presser 2013:15). I propose that violence – a sub-type of harm – holds the same characteristics to that of harm more broadly, as it has also been socially constructed, and is therefore regulated by and for the benefit of those who possess power in hierarchical arrangements.

Violence is often widely acknowledged as an ever-present cultural motif, which may be viewed simultaneously on multiple social levels. Conceptualizing violence, then, requires an interrogation of what we perceive or understand as violence and what makes that understanding possible. As Kilby (2013) explains, the matter in question is how we frame or more commonly construct violence (265). Walby (2009) makes it clear that “the deployment and regulation of violence are social processes” (216), and “violence itself socially patterned, embedded in institutions and regimes of inequalities” (217). Further, the way in which violence is socially constructed has significant implications on how it is perceived, “experienced, and more or less ‘tolerated’ or rejected” (Richardson and May 1999:308). Put differently, how society constructs violence shapes how social bodies perceive it and, in turn, react to it. This portion of the thesis aims to examine the social construction of violence with the intention to specifically scrutinize how perceptions of and reactions to violence are gendered processes linked to notions of victimization and culpability.

According to predominant legal approaches, violence is understood as the result of activities carried out to harm or injure oneself or others. These harms or injuries are ‘dealt with’ by specifying who is culpable and subsequently punishing them according to their evaluated extent of premeditation or intent (Felson and Messner 1996; Tedeschi and

Felson 1994). Violence can take various forms, such as gang violence, domestic violence, violence against children, self-inflicted violence, media violence, penal violence, corporate violence, and sexual violence. Regardless of the myriad forms of violence, though, their social definitions ultimately always “revolve around culpability, victimization, and what is deemed socially appropriate behavior in particular contexts” (Richardson and May 1999:309). To adequately theorize violence, then we must understand the significance of the victim/perpetrator binary, whereby specific people or groups of people individuals are labeled as either victims or perpetrators.

Gendered Dynamics of Violence

I turn now to discourses that engender violence. Hester (1992) proposes that ‘violence work’ is used to sustain, create, and recreate social inequalities. The threat and the use of violence are often used to control the life of lives of others. Within the context of gender, then, violence is used as a means of power construction – placing men above women in this power dynamic (Kaufman 1987). Therefore, violence against women works as a social tool to control women and simultaneously allow men to exert and maintain power over other men and women via women’s bodies. As in any social order, male power prevails through coercion to consent – which includes force or the threat of force and thus further violence (Hester 1992:1–2). This power of the male over a woman’s sexual and reproductive rights denies their freedom and thus subjects them to gender-targeted forms of violence (Campo-Engelstein 2016).

Hollander (2005) states that while violence against women is a prevalent problem, this does not simply imply that women are or should be "passive in the face of violence" (780). Every violent act includes women's resistance because ingrained in the notion of violence is the indication that it is undesired and nonessential—the woman did not ask for it or want it. Even when not verbalized, the essence of the word “no” marks a seed of resistance. Such resistance is most apparent “when physical, such as yelling, kicking, or running away” (Hollander 2005:780). However, resistance can also be cognitive or emotional. Cognitive resistance would appear “when women think about alternatives and strategize how to stay safe” (Hollander 2005:780).

Emotional resistance, on the other hand, occurs “when women protect some core part of themselves even if they choose to submit to an attack to protect themselves from other injury” (Hollander 2005:781). Regardless of how unseen this remains by the observer, in some way, female victims resist being involved in violence. Further, it becomes problematic to denote women who are victims or survivors of violence as weak or inactive (Hollander 2005; Papendick and Bohner 2017). Women actively resist violence, employing whatever resources necessary to prevent it, reduce it when it happens, and flee from it when given the opportunity. Such actions do not denote passivity but power and bravery.

Victimization, Culpability, and Appropriate Behavior

Analyses of women's experiences of violence have revealed the degree to which the fear or threat of violence is a feature of many women's daily lives and the detailed

scope of behaviors they must perform to appropriately avoid or respond to acts of violence (L. Kelly 1988). Because it is generally assumed that women will be less capable than men to defend themselves in a violent situation (Newburn and Stanko 1994), women face more risk than men of becoming potential victims of violence. Crime iconography and culturally constructed gendered stereotypes are prevailing discourses in filmic depictions of violence and victimization. This interplay between stereotypes and discourses of violence has been illuminated with explicit reference to both the victimization and violence of women and in cultural criminology more broadly (Henry 2014; Picart 2007; Rafter and Brown 2011; Young 2009). Such representations frequently demonstrate Nils Christie's (1986) *ideal victim*, a classic theoretical instrument in victimology (Fredriksson 2021). Christie (1986) illustrates the ideal victim as an individual or group of people who are seen and labeled as complete and legitimate victims when subjected to violence. He illustrates the ideal victim as a virgin woman approached by a strange man on her walk home from a sick relative's house. This 'ideal victim' tries to fight the stranger off; however, he ultimately overpowers and thereafter rapes her (Christie 1986). Put differently, Christie (1986) identifies the ideal victim as innocent and therefore deserving of compassion and support.

Further, understandings of violence are not only constructed based on the social characteristics of the victim, such as gender or race, but also in terms of 'behavioral responsibility for risk' (L. Kelly 1988). Put differently, there is a greater social expectation on women to protect themselves from violence since they are often assumed to be less likely to defend themselves than men, which means women's lives are

structured around personal safety. However, by contrast, the presence of a strong victim stereotype defines what precautions women should take to avoid violence. For example, women should avoid ‘risky’ situations and behaviors, like walking alone at night (Pallak and Davies 1982) or hitchhiking (Acock and Ireland 1983).

Additionally, women are expected to take on several preventive measures, such as attempting to run and actively resist the violent actors (Howard 1984). Invariably, observers often tend to blame victims for not having done enough to prevent an act of violence (e.g., when women are raped, it is often because they ‘asked for it’ or did not verbalize the word ‘no’) (Bell, Kuriloff, and Lottes 1994; Estrich 1991; Fitzgerald, Swan, and Fischer 1995). Further, female victims are not only judged based on their actions but also on their inactions in not having done enough.

Though sympathy and concern are the “normatively prescribed responses to victims in our society, we may also derogate victims, holding them at least partly responsible for having been victimized” (Howard 1984:270). Further, although most ideal victims are seen as innocent, society still places a greater expectation on women to safeguard themselves from violence by modifying *their* behavior in social contexts associated with the risk of violence. If women ‘fail’ to modify their behavior appropriately in a potentially violent environment, they are often deemed culpable for making themselves vulnerable.

Socially constructed gendered differences also structure ideas and, oftentimes, stereotypes about how female victims should behave after made victim to violence (Howard 1984). After an act of violence is perpetuated, victims typically experience

some level or form of grief. According to Doka and Martin (2010), there are various ways in which individuals experience, express, and adapt to grief. They describe the process of grief or grieving as a natural reaction to loss. They define *grief* as a “result from tension created by an individual’s strong desire to (1) maintain his or her assumptive world as it was before the loss, (2) accommodate to a newly emerging reality resulting from his or her loss, or (3) incorporate this new reality into an emerging assumptive world” (Doka and Martin 2010:18). However, while it is understood that individuals react to violence and thus experience grief differently, society generally assumes that women should react to victimization – whether it be first or second-hand victimization – with behaviors deemed appropriate to the status quo. That is, they should display ‘response tendencies’ – “predispositions that are shaped by cultural influences and personality styles” and therefore “operate subconsciously, allowing quick and efficient reaction to environmental challenges, threats, and opportunities” (Doka and Martin 2010:19) – that are considered normal, and thus non-deviant.

A victim’s conduct after experiencing an act of violence is critical. If believed to be in violation of gender norm(s) – or socially constructed and shared rules and ideas about appropriate and inappropriate behavior of women and men in specific social contexts and environments – after experiencing an act of violence, women are often deemed deviant by other social actors (Doka and Martin 2010). Oftentimes, women’s mere resistance to violence, whether it be through verbal or physical contestation, mass mobilization, or even escapism is seen as a form of non-conformity and is thus defiant to the status quo. Women’s resistance is often seen as non-compliance because of the

existing multitude of social and gender norms that promote and perpetuate violence against women.

A Note on Domestic and Sexual Violence Against Women

With discussions about sexual assault and domestic violence continuing to gain national attention (Berg 2019; Dick 2012; Dick 2015), it is possibly more important to acknowledge female narratives of violence now than ever before. In American film, we may classify the primary types of violence as that which takes place in the home, or between partners or relatives. Examples of violence in domestic settings might also include that which takes place on the street and other types of violence that arise from specialized contexts. The latter might include penal violence or violence taking place in captivity, as well as state violence enacted by state agents.

Stark (2007) focuses on the functions of gender inequality entangled in violence, dubbing the processes involved in sexual violence, domestic violence, and other types of violence against women ‘coercive control.’ Questions about what constitutes *domestic* and/or *sexual violence* are straightforward to answer on the one hand yet complicated and contested on the other. *Domestic violence* can be defined as any repeated behavior towards another person in the home that is controlling, coercive, and threatening. (L. Kelly and Westmarland 2016). Further, domestic violence can be characterized as a coercive, controlling, or violent act (or pattern of acts) between two or more people in the same household, whether they be intimate partners or parents and children. Violence in domestic environments such as the home may consist of physical

harm and emotional, sexual, psychological, or economic abuse (or threats of abuse) that influence another person's behaviors. These coercive actions include intimidation, manipulation, terrorization, blaming, humiliation, and physically harming another (Itzin, Taket, and Barter-Godfrey 2010).

Draitser (1999) notes a myriad of explanations for why domestic violence might occur: one might be that a woman is asserting her independence 'too strongly;' another might desire to neutralize the danger a woman could potentially present; a third might be the exhibition of hyper-masculine behavior; and a fourth could be that violence is regarded an indicator of love (149). However, regardless of the reasoning behind it, domestic violence can impact any person of any race, age, gender, sexual orientation, economic class, immigration status, or religion. It affects people of all socioeconomic backgrounds and education levels (Sacco 2019).

Sexual violence, while often occurring as a form of 'domestic violence,' is a bit distinct in definition. *Sexual violence* ensues when one person or group of people forces or manipulates another person into unwanted sexual activity without their consent (Hlavka 2014). Reasons for the lack of consent may include fear, the influence of alcohol or other drugs, illness, age, or disability. Sexual violence can impact people of all races, ethnicities, genders, sexual orientations, religions, ages, incomes, professions, and abilities. However, social inequalities can heighten the risks. Sexual abusers can be relatives, friends, acquaintances, or strangers; however, in most cases, abusers' assault someone they know – a friend, classmate, coworker, neighbor, or family member – rather than a stranger (Hlavka 2014). The rigid social assortment of gender roles is one of the

major catalysts that have led to the perpetuation of sexual violence. Men have traditionally been assigned the role of protector or savior; women have the role of needing protection or saving. Further, despite men being predominantly “the rapists, a woman’s ultimate security lies in being accompanied by men at all times” (Brownmiller 1975:449).

A critical analysis of sexual and domestic violence reveals a culture’s fantasies, anxieties, fears, and obsessions with power and sexuality. This concurrence of oppression and fantasy suggests a critical ambivalence about gender inequality in film and, thus, society. Understanding these distinct definitions of violence and the representation of women and violence from a gendered perspective is useful for analyzing how women are shown resisting acts of violence in contemporary crime film.

CHAPTER THREE – MATERIALS AND METHODS

This chapter describes the steps I took to arrive at a sample of contemporary, American-made, feature films in the crime genre; and outlines my methods for analyzing the data collected. Here, I also call attention to how and why I employed thematic narrative analysis, a form of narrative analysis that analyzes themes across the entirety of various narratives or texts, to gather and interpret my data.

Thematic Narrative Analysis

The purpose of qualitative research is to reveal the underlying meanings of social phenomena as well as to understand the structuring of social phenomena through the analysis of language – whether it be spoken, written, or images translated into text. Thematic analysis interprets language in terms of content, or ““what is said, written, or visually shown” (Reissman 2008:53). Thematic narrative analysis is a form of thematic analysis that focuses specifically on narrative contents, rather than narrative structure. Put differently, thematic narrative analysis is often employed to identify common themes across several narrative accounts by focusing on ‘what’ is said rather than attending to “language form or interaction” (Reissman 2008:59).

Reismann (2008) provides a guidebook on how to assemble and interpret thematic data among narratives. In this guide, she offers exemplars of how various researchers associate their methods with their respective research objectives and assumptions. In particular, she deconstructs each study to convey the unit of narrative analysis, how narrative is defined, how data is constructed into text, and the degree of attention given to

context of the narrative. Reissman (2008) indicates that although narrative analysis and grounded theory turn up themes, narrative analysis does not “fracture” data in each case but instead focuses on theorizing across multiple cases.

Further, thematic narrative analysis was chosen for this study over other methods of qualitative research such as content analysis because I wanted to focus solely on themes that arose among the filmic narratives. I was less concerned with turning up the logics behind why the stories were told in the form in which they were.

Data

Data in this study was collected in the form of filmic narratives in which female protagonists resist violence. The data collected relied on written and spoken words and visual representations of female protagonists to discern their life stories and interpret the meaning of their experiences with and negotiation of violence.

Internal Review Board

Since this study does not require human subjects – rather, only representations of human subjects – there was no need to create or employ a consent form; however, I was required to apply for and seek exempt status from the university’s Internal Review Board (IRB). Exempt research requires completion of an Information Sheet for consent that includes a draft of all methods of data collection, like, for instance, interview questions and instruments to be completed. Further, I was required to submit an exempted research application to the IRB and received approval for exemption before I began collecting

data. The conceptualization of this research began in April of 2020, it was proposed in October of 2020, and exempt status from the IRB was granted in December of 2020. Shortly after receiving approval, I began the process of data collection, and thereafter, data analysis.

Sampling

My sampling method was purposive, meaning that the films in this sample were not chosen at random, but purposely to produce a sample that could be representative of the contemporary popular filmic population of women in the face of violence.

Whereas the ultimate sample consisted of four feature films made in the U.S. that center on a female protagonist responding to violent crime, the ‘net’ was much broader at first. My initial inquiry was into the ways in which crime and justice were represented. I did not abandon that curiosity, but it narrowed to an interest in how violence against women and women’s agency in the face of violence are represented.

I began the data collection effort with the Official Academy Awards Database (<https://www.oscars.org/oscars/awards-databases-0>), which is publicly available. I conducted an “advanced search” of the award category ‘Best Picture,’ and included all nominees for feature films released between the years 2007–20. This sampling method resulted in an initial total of 115 feature films; however, not all thematized violence and not all were American-made features. To ensure a generous purposive sample of American-made feature films released between 2007–and 2020 that, in some way or another, construct violence and its relationship to gender would be identified and

included, I filtered out those that did not fit these criteria. This methodology consisted of three phases (Silva 2019). (See Figure 3.1).

For the first phase, I limited my sample to all American-made feature films that were released between 2007 and 2020 and had been nominated for an Academy Award for ‘Best Picture;’ and (2) I wanted to avoid made-for-TV films because they “are shaped by different considerations of audience, artistic aspiration, duration, and financing than feature movies” (Rafter 2006:7). The films needed to receive a theatrical release between the years 2007 and 2020, must have been released in the U.S. by an American production company, and must have portrayed problems occurring in a U.S. context (Welsh, Fleming, and Dowler 2011). I chose the year 2007 as my start date to observe how film narratives of violence and its relationship with gender have been portrayed after the initiation of the #MeToo Movement that began in 2006, and 2020 as my cutoff date because I began my research in 2021. I chose American-made films because they are seen by a relatively wider audience and are generally acclaimed worldwide. However, this emphasis on American film also builds on a basis to examine women’s responses to male perpetrated violence on themselves or a loved one in the United States. All the films I am analyzing are made in the United States, where violence is prevalent, and the criminal justice system is either unresponsive or fails to serve justice (Reiman and Leighton 2013). Because films are often a by-product of the culture in which they were constructed, the actions carried out (or not carried out) by the female protagonists speak to the status of male perpetrated violence in the U.S. as the film was being created.

As stated before, the initial sampling method resulted in 115 feature films; however, not all films thematized violence – meaning several of the films failed to present violence or its consequences as dominant dimensions of the overall narrative. In that regard, for the second phase, feature films that fit within the initial parameters – American-made film nominees for ‘Best Picture’ between the years 2007 and 2020 – but did not allude to violence in any way, were filtered out. I was also keen to filter out (1) supernatural films, (2) films based on fantasy – such as *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015), and (3) comedy films – because I wanted to understand ‘serious takes’ on violence and resistance to it. Films that fell within the aforementioned guidelines and included definitional standards of crime film resulted in a total of 26 films.

For the third stage, I used a more extensive review of the plot summaries of each of the 26 films to determine their suitability for the study. I did so by reviewing plot summaries found on Google.com for each of the films and thereafter watched a trailer for each of the films on YouTube.com. After completing this thorough and painstaking review, I found that a total of 8 films fit all required sampling parameters and appeared suitable for the overall study. Those films were: *Precious* (2009), *Twelve Years a Slave* (2013), *Room* (2015), *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (2017), *BlacKkKlansman* (2018), *Joker* (2019), *Judas and the Black Messiah* (2020), and *Promising Young Woman* (2020). After I viewed each individual film in its entirety, however, I found a distinct running theme between 4 of the 8 films. The theme was that of *women-centered* narratives – “narratives in which the audience sees fully developed female protagonists who carry the plot from beginning to end” (Jeong 2016:743) – and

their fight to resist violence perpetrated by men. I decided then that the purpose of this thesis would be – instead of interpreting the ways in which violence and resistance were represented in film, as I mention earlier in this section – to analyze the differentiating portrayals of gender and gendered violence in contemporary crime film and interpret how different women respond to violence. The final purposive sample of films (see table 3.1) consisted of *Precious* (2009), *Room* (2015), *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (2017), and *Promising Young Woman* (2020).

Data Analysis

This thesis identifies, analyzes, and describes the narrative patterns used to represent gender and gendered responses to violence in feature crime films – released between 2007 and 2020 – that were produced by an American production company in the U.S. In doing so, I discern how each film definitively frames and constructs gender and violence and observe how they might portray, and therefore, shape our thinking specifically about women and their responses to violence. Of particular interest are narratorial statements about the events related, as well as any interpretation offered within the text of the events in fictional film. Though I believe that close reading and a text-based approach are the most productive ways to begin narrative analysis, I include theoretically based interpretation where appropriate. Constructions of specific behaviors and uses of language were also analyzed to determine how American-made feature films engages or critiques constructions of gender and violence.

The foundational framework of my study leads me to undertake thematic narrative analysis, which allows me to observe the “kinds of social worlds” that the characters are “making happen in their talk” (Baker 2002: 793). Thus, in reading these filmic texts sociologically, I am mainly concerned with what stories are told through the film and less concerned with how they are told.

One shared feature of these films stands out; each portrays representations of violence within the context of a narrative. A *narrative* is a discourse that recounts a series of experiences across time to make some point (Labov and Waletzky 1967). Reissman (2008) states:

Narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting...stained glass windows, cinema, comics, news items, and conversation. Moreover, under this almost infinite diversity of forms, narrative is present in every age, place, and society; it begins with the very history of mankind...it is simply there, like life itself (4).

Narratives are thus “strategic, functional, and purposeful” (Reissman 2008:8) conditions of social life and thus “constitutive of reality and not merely its representation” (Presser 2013:29).

Further, I followed a methodical classification procedure of determining and coding patterns – or themes – among narratives of women resisting violence. Therefore, narrative themes were not only used to read and analyze the text but also to gather the data used to interpret the text (Patton 2002; Riessman 2008). The texts were interpreted by analyzing and identifying patterns – or *themes* – within and across each text to assess

the nature and scope of representations of gendered harm, suffering, and resistance as the film portrays them. In doing so, I employed a list of specific questions to help me navigate through the films. Such a list of questions (see Table 3.2) allowed me to analyze the films systematically.

By following Riessman's (2008) approach to thematic narrative analysis, I explored the explicit thematic content of dialogue and the underlying thematic content of relationships between female protagonists and other characters in each filmic text. The contexts of each film narrative were of great importance and thus had to be analyzed separately and efficiently to draw out variations across each case – to do so, I reviewed each of the film's screenplays as I screened each film. I also considered the contexts of the female protagonist's character narrative within each given film.

First, I screened each of the four films separately and recorded extensive notes concerning the initial research questions. As mentioned above, the first viewing concentrated on coding dominant messages about women's responses to violence. As I screened each film, I recorded my notes on each case and then imported them into ATLAS.ti 22 to code the qualitative data. I coded the narratives according to the most prevalent themes across each of the three films: statements made by the protagonist about violence and/or resistance. Next, I discerned whether any of those themes overlapped – meaning that the same or similar aspects occurred across two or more separate film cases – and connected them to theoretically derived concepts of violence and gendered reactions to violence. Different aspects of each case allowed for other controlled comparisons. Then, I noted what each observed film narrative was about – its pivotal

events or complicating actions (Labov and Waletzky 1967) – and how it was told. Then, I created a running summary of the context of violence to grasp the story of violence, including antecedents and responses to violence,

Additionally, I discerned each of the film’s female protagonist’s gender accomplishments. Put differently, I noted how each protagonist performs gender – or how they “cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine ‘natures’” (West and Zimmerman 1987:126) – when in the face of violence and victimization throughout each film narrative. I did this to observe variation in women’s agency across each case. I then screened each of the four films a second time, with the codes mentioned above in mind.

I devoted the second screening of each film strictly to transcription. As I re-screened each film, I transcribed relevant dialogue between the protagonist and other characters. In this case, relevant dialogue was deemed as being associated with or concerning speech about violence or resistance. This portion of the research was tedious, requiring roughly 12 hours of my uninterrupted and undivided attention. Roughly 4 hours had to be devoted to re-screening each film to allow additional time to pause and transcribe narratives where necessary. I decided to refer to the film screenplays (which I obtained via simplyscripts.com – a publicly accessible website) when transcribing specific narratives because they provide verbatim accounts, which allowed me to record the narratives as precisely as possible.

While transcribing, I was able to note previously overlooked codes (Aiello 2014). Finally, I observed the extent to which – or lack thereof – each case might fail to probe

the most extreme, power-driven forms of harm and violence women experience in real time. After multiple viewings, I determined the dominant cinematic constructions of gender responses to male violence. I then assessed the coded film constructions to evaluate how women are represented conceptualizing violence and fashioning responses to it.

CHAPTER FOUR – ESCAPING VIOLENCE THROUGH ALTERNATIVE REALITY: *PRECIOUS* (2009) & *ROOM* (2015)

In discerning the relationship between women and violence in four contemporary American feature films released between 2007 and 2020, I have tried to identify main themes that pertain to the portrayal of female protagonists encountering violence. I present the four films as pairs. First, I present both *Precious* (2009) and *Room* (2015), then I present *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (2017), and *Promising Young Woman* (2020) thereafter. My reasoning for this comes from the themes that arose throughout my data analysis, where I found that both *Precious* (2009) and *Room* (2015) present narratives of female protagonist who transform their realities to cope with violence, while, *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (2017) and *Promising Young Woman* (2020) instead present narratives of discursive confrontation when illustrating female protagonists in the face of violence and victimization.

Violence and Coercive Captivity

Precious (2009) and *Room* (2015) portray the harsh realities of domestic violence including coercive isolation or captivity and motherhood for many women. *Precious* (2009)³ takes place in late 1980s Harlem and follows the story of Claireece “Precious”

³ Lee Daniels’ (2009) film, *Precious*, closely follows the cinematic footsteps of Steven Spielberg’s (1985) film, *The Color Purple*, which tells the story of Celie, a 14-year-old marginalized Black woman who suffers sexual and domestic abuse at the hands of her stepfather and later her husband. Like *Precious*, Celie has been conditioned to believe that she must remain obedient to avoid violence; nor does she appreciate her femininity or her body. Celie feels victimized and has very low self-esteem. However, like *Precious*

Jones – an illiterate, overweight, 16-teen-year-old. Precious is pregnant with her second child and lives at with her abusive and dysfunctional mother, Mary. Shortly into the film, Precious is encouraged by her principal to attend an alternative school where she hopes to attain a valuable education and thereafter autonomy from her abusive mother.

Room (2015)⁴ takes place in present day Akron, Ohio and follows the story of Joy Newsome, better known as ‘Ma,’ throughout the film. Held captive and repeatedly raped for seven years, Ma decides that she and her now 5-year-old son, Jack, must escape their

again, Celie finds solace in writing letters that disclose her abuse and help her work through her trauma. She finds and her own identity in a world of patriarchally inscribed narratives (Hemmati 2021:172). It is not easy for Celie to verbalize her autonomy, but after she discovers how intentionally cruel and harmful her husband has been to her, she rebels against his control. We see a remarkably similar narrative in *Precious* (2009) in that when Precious, the film’s female protagonist, discovers the extent of her parents and especially her mother’s intentional abuse and neglect, she is able to achieve a sort of self-enlightenment. Her new awareness then allows her to leave her violent situation and start a life of her own with her two children. These films differ not only in terms of setting, but also in the portrayal of harm doers. *The Color Purple* (1985) primarily portrays Black men as abusers while *Precious* (2009) portrays both a male abuser and a female abuser.⁴ The narrative arc that *Room* (2015) follows—adolescent abduction, imprisonment, childbirth, and eventual escape—is familiar enough that it provides the structure for many texts in a broader discourse of captivity in mediums such as contemporary literature and film. Several films throughout the past two decades have presented a similar plotline (Jeffers 2015). However, many of these films tell the true stories of victims in real-time. *Room* (2015), on the other hand, is completely fictional, though one could imagine that screenwriter, Emma Donoghue, may have derived some of her ideas from the horrifying case of Elisabeth Fritzl, a young Austrian woman held captive and repeatedly assaulted and impregnated by her father for 24 years. Further, in terms of contemporary film, I have found it challenging to find another American-made feature film that depicts such a story of violence against women, *Room* (2015) resonates with several memoirs written by victims who lived through similar circumstances in real time.

captor, Old Nick. After successfully gaining autonomy from their captor, Ma readjusts to reality and Jack experiences the outside world for the first time in his life.

In both films, the more liberated or resistant the female protagonists, Precious and Ma, become to violence and coercion, the more brutal the violence against them and their children becomes. Precious and Ma respond to violence in similar ways; both women are ‘social avengers’ (M. Connell 2018) who first resist violence by transforming reality. However, after gaining autonomy from their abusers, each female protagonist is able to “act intentionally towards a future goal,” which requires that she has the ability “to perceive herself as the cause of her actions” (H. Anderson 2002:1), thus reclaiming the agency⁵ – or control – over her own life. This reclamation of agency gives each protagonist a new sense of hope and encourages them “to make new meaning” of their lives. (H. Anderson 2002:7).

Neither woman relies on the criminal justice system or the state at large to right the wrongs done to them after gaining autonomy from their abusers and instead achieves their own form of personalized justice by reclaiming their agency and caring for their children. Further, while Precious and Ma are quite different in terms of physical characteristics – as Precious⁶ is a Black, overweight, pregnant, 16-year-old and Ma is a

⁵Agency is distinguishable from autonomy as it focuses on the capacity to view oneself as capable of making choices, whereas autonomy focuses on having the freedom of choice (H. Anderson 2002:1).

⁶ On a cautionary note, that Precious is the only Black female protagonist in my sample, should not be taken to indicate that her experiences parallel to those of all Black urban women in the face of violence.

white, slender, 24-year-old – they endure very similar traumatic events and face extreme mental anguish due to their coercively violent circumstances before gaining autonomy.

In the first half of both films, Precious and Ma experience various instances of violence in their everyday lives. Precious is currently pregnant with her second child – both of whom were conceived out of rape by her biological father Carl, who we find out later, has also infected her and her mother with HIV. Although her father no longer lives with or has contact with her, Precious still faces physical, verbal, and sexual abuse at the hands of her horrific mother, Mary. For example, in the first twenty minutes of the film, we see Mary hit Precious with a thick glass ashtray, call her names such as ‘dummy,’ ‘bitch,’ ‘cunt,’ ‘fat,’ ‘whore,’ and more, and thereafter coerces Precious to perform oral sex on her. Precious also faces stigma and intimidation outside of the home, in her community due to her illiteracy and physical appearance. Ma, on the other hand, was abducted by her captor (i.e., Old Nick) when she was only 17 years old and has for the past seven years, lived locked away in a shed behind his home. Two years into Ma’s captivity she gave birth to Jack. Ma and her son are forcefully held captive and physically locked away from the world by their abuser. Precious, on the other hand, has the ability to step foot outside of her home and interact with her community. However, regardless of Precious’s nominally greater level of ‘freedom,’ she and Ma both live their lives in a constant state of fear and coercive isolation. Ma fears the routinized rape that she must endure at the hands of Old Nick and fears what he might do to Jack if she lashes out or tries to escape. Precious fears the pain that her mother will inflict upon her if she tries in any way to gain autonomy, however, she also fears a life without her mother due to her

own internalized oppression and feelings of powerlessness, the result of the physical and emotional trauma she has endured.

The spectator's understanding of the fear the protagonists experience in these films are distinct. Because *Room* is told from Jack's perspective, Ma is kept inevitably distant from the spectator, thus generating a more innocuous understanding of the violence she endures. This move is part of what makes *Room* unique, as Ma's actions both in before and after their escape have little to do with her empowerment and instead are focused on preserving Jack's innocence. Because Jack is so naive, he does not entirely understand violence and thus does not always understand what is to be feared. For instance, Jack is quite delighted when Old Nick brings him a birthday gift and does not recognize Ma's fear of what Old Nick will expect in return for such a gift. Thus, the violence that Ma faces is inferable from the limited onlooker perspective of Jack.⁷ Jack's point of view is sometimes naive and guileless, partly because he is unaware that he and Ma live in confinement. However, the spectator can still recognize the aspects of violence and confinement, even if Jack is unable.

On the other hand, *Precious* tells her story of trauma and abuse from her own perspective – the perspective of the invisible victim. *Precious*'s first-person narrative is supported by visual depictions of rape and other physical abuse – making it the only film in the overall sample that shows the suffering body. Tanner (1994) asserts that first-

⁷ Jack's narrative perspective resonates with contemporary work by feminist scholars Sorcha Gunne and Zoe Brigley Thompson (2010), who identify an increasing need for filmic "rape narratives that refuse voyeurism and exploitation" and instead "confront the uncomfortable and shocking nature of sexual violence in [ways] that are themselves shocking and uncomfortable and break the mold of the victim/perpetrator binary" (3).

person narratives of violence, like that of *Precious* (2009), “affect spectators who are otherwise reluctant to engage with depictions of suffering” by forcing them into “a position of discomforting proximity to the victim’s vulnerable body” (10). Despite the film’s visual depictions of rape and domestic violence, Precious’s body is never eroticized. Instead, Precious’s body is shown being raped, beaten, and brutalized which affectively helps the spectator to identify with the female protagonist rather than the male abuser. Tanner (1994) explains the usefulness of this identification between spectator and protagonist, stating:

...representations of violence appropriate the conventions of film, either relying upon a highly visual mode of narration or undermining the distancing conventions of reading to direct the reader’s gaze upon a scene in a manner similar to the enforced perspective of the camera’s frame (12).

Although we never visually experience Ma’s abuse, the viewer nonetheless can identify with her as well, rather than with her abuser, since the narrative is told from the perspective of her son.

Transforming Reality

Precious and Ma both resist violence initially through escapism. Precious escapes through recurring fantasies where she is ‘attractive,’ appreciated, admired, and light/white to escape from her brutal reality. Through these self-narrated fantasies, we begin to see Precious’ ideations of beauty and femininity. The film’s opening scenes

introduce the audience to Precious's fantasy world via her inner monologue, which is often murky due to her vernacular and literacy level. While navigating down a busy junior high corridor, Precious states, "I wish I had a light-skinned boyfriend with real nice hair. And I wanna be on the cover of a magazine." Soon after, we get a glimpse into the circumstances that Precious dreams about escaping when we meet her mother, Mary. Mary's malice is illustrated alongside Precious' periodic flashbacks of her father's sexual abuse. For instance, in one scene, we see a flashback to Carl sweating over Precious's body, whispering, "Daddy loves you," as he brutally rapes her. Precious feels comfort in repetitive fantasies filled with flashing lights, admirers, paparazzi, and healthy familial bonds when in need of reprieve from her harsh reality and emotional trauma. Each of these montage fantasy sequences plays out on screen every time Precious is being harmed, criticized, or feeling despondent. Precious feels fear, disgust, and shame about her abuse in the film's first half. As a result, she sees herself as an outcast from her peers and community members and therefore distances herself and further disassociates⁸ from reality.

Throughout her dissociative fantasy sequences, spectators get a glimpse into Precious's idealized life – one that is primarily characterized by white femininity and

⁸ Dissociation is defined by the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5) as "a disruption, interruption, and/or discontinuity of the normal, subjective integration of behavior, memory, identity, consciousness, emotion, perception, body representation, and motor control" (American Psychiatric Association 2013: 519). However, "more widely accepted is the idea that dissociative" behaviors "are expressions of an automatic defense mechanism that serves to mitigate the impact of highly aversive or traumatic events" (Giesbrecht, Lynn, Lilienfeld, and Merckelbach 2008:617).

middle-to-upper-class status. One specific fantasy sequence introduces us to Precious's desires to experience advantages of light/white beauty. It plays out on screen after she ignores a Black male in her community who disrespectfully shouts that he wants "some of that sweet ass" as she passes him on her walk home from school. When Precious disregards his remark, she is pushed to the ground by one of the man's friends. As she lies on the ground, the aforementioned fantasy sequence plays out on screen. We are transported to a scene where Precious excitedly dances on a brightly lit stage in front of an unseen yet adoring audience. While on stage, she is met by the object of her admiration: a man she mentions earlier in the film, whom she describes as "a light-skinned boyfriend with real nice hair." This fantasy sequence is a visual juxtaposition against the previous scene that echoes her formidable reality.

This comforting fantasy is brief, and the film quickly returns to Precious's reality, where she lies with her face on the sidewalk. Under the veneer of this seemingly innocent fantasy—whiteness relieves Precious's deviance as an overweight woman of color daring to embody alluring confidence. Further reinforcing the social value of lightness/whiteness, including and among people of color (Hunter 2005), it is only through this fantasy that Precious's desirable femininity and thus beauty is validated. This fantasy, therefore, allows her to contest the actions of the Black men who have harassed and abused her.

One could interpret these fantasies as innocent because Precious is aware that she is not and cannot become white. However, it remains crucial to examine how whiteness informs a Black female protagonist's idealized femininity and further offers redemption

from the violent horrors of her daily life. Culturally reproduced ideas about beauty are “centered on white women and are therefore a standard of beauty only achievable by and awardable to them” (Madison 1995:233). Precious’s fantasies are thus characterizable as ‘internalized oppression’ (Goodman 2011), which signals her belief in her own inferiority and reinforces her intense desire to identify with more privileged bodies, like white women. Precious’s idealized white femininity can be read, then, as an instrument for her to look and feel better than her victimized life permits. However, these fantastic sequences also reveal the ascendancy of the white being⁹ in contemporary U.S. popular culture as they showcase perpetuated definitions of idealized beauty (Rodríguez 2021).

While Ma also uses means of escapism to cope with her trauma and push through daily violence, she does not do so by constructing and dwelling in her *own* fantasies, like Precious. Instead, Ma constructs an alternate reality for the benefit of Jack to keep him safe from the trauma that she endures daily.

One of the primary responsibilities of motherhood for Ma is keeping Jack safe by limiting his knowledge of the violence she faces each day and keeping him away from Old Nick. As mentioned earlier, Old Nick routinely visits Ma in the evenings to rape her. When this occurs, or essentially any time that Old Nick visits Room, Ma orders Jack to stay inside the wardrobe – where she fashions a small pallet for him to sleep. Ma does this to keep Old Nick away from Jack; she does this to protect him. Jack does not

⁹ White Being is not white people. It is a template of being in the world and a way of life/living – a template of goodness, beauty, and the ‘good life’ – that has been historically grounded in the white conquest and making of Civilization (Rodríguez 2021: 39).

understand this routine and instead dreams up a world of imagination where he has a pet dog named Lucky. In these scenes, narrated through Jack's perspective, one can infer that Ma's efforts to transform Jack's reality is merely one of the various steps she must take to keep him safe.

Due to his birth in captivity and Ma's constructed reality, Jack holds no conception of the outside world; in fact, he believes that Room simply floats through Outer Space. Jack feels that his and Ma's experiences are entirely normative in this transformed reality of *Room*.¹⁰ Jack is simply living a fictional, fairytale life, so when Ma — who has been held captive since her abduction seven years ago — decides (on Jack's 5th birthday) that he is old enough to learn the truth about the world so that they have better chances of escaping, he refuses to believe her. Jack's bewilderment is “a direct result of Ma's attempts at raising him with some sense of normalcy” (Jeffers 2015:20). She constructs Jack's deficiency of understanding; however, she does not keep her abuse and their captivity a secret to manipulate Jack but rather to protect him from Old Nick — the man who has generated her unimaginable pain. Further, Jack has become dependent upon Ma's constructed reality for his own happiness, just as Ma has become dependent on Jack and her responsibilities of motherhood to maintain her well-being.

¹⁰ *Room* is the name that Jack has created for the space in which he and Ma are held captive. To Jack, everything has a personality and a proper name. Room includes four walls, a full-sized bed, a wardrobe, a bathtub, a toilet, a sink, a stove, a flickering TV with minute signal, and a skylight in the ceiling — which marks their only connection to the outside world. However, in Jack's mind, the only reality that exists is that which exists in Room, and everything else (the outside world) is outer space.

Although Jack’s perceptions of the world and violence have been distorted by his lifelong existence in captivity and the fantasies that Ma has introduced him to, his narrative remains firm in its identification of Ma’s dedicated mothering – dedication that she maintains in the face of rape, physical abuse, and coercive captivity. Mothering in the context of such violence is often associated with “a poor motherhood experience” for battered women (Hooker, Samaraweera, Agius, and Taft 2015:92). However, for Ma, it is through motherhood that she regains mental strength.¹¹ Holding herself solely responsible for Jack’s care and well-being, Ma is extremely protective of and invested in his upbringing. She maintains a calm demeanor when Jack becomes frustrated with her or complains about, for instance, not having candles on his birthday cake. They play “thousands” of games and watch TV together when they have a signal; Ma also ensures that they exercise regularly, maintain their hygiene, and eat and sleep daily. All of this demonstrates Ma’s strong motherly aspiration to maintain Jack’s happiness, health, and safety. *Room* (2015) thus portrays Ma as a sexually abused woman of seven years who, despite all odds, remains a courageous and positive influence in her child’s life.

From the very start, *Room* (2015) portrays Ma as a loving mother. Through her maternal responsibilities, Ma ‘does’ gender and specifically femininity. Ma’s maternal efforts to maintain Jack’s safety through transformative reality can be supported by

¹¹ Glimpses into Ma’s life in the initial two years of captivity before Jack’s birth further illustrate how motherhood has provided her with a sense of hope. For example, Jack narrates that Ma used to let her teeth rot, but now she and Jack brush their teeth every day; she used to cry every day, but that ceased when Jack “shot down from heaven,” as he describes it. These narrative anecdotes convey that it is through motherhood that Ma regains her mental strength.

feminist discourses which claim motherhood is a classification awarded to “an ‘experience’ and/or a ‘social institution’ where a set of socially constructed actions and relationships involving nurturing and caring for children are evident” (Hooker, Agius, and Taft 2016:88). Mothers thus perform gender by taking up activities of caregiving and nurturing. Ma’s maternal work of keeping Jack away from harm, constructs Ma as a sort of ‘super mom,’ in the eyes of Jack, hiding him from the true horrors that she faces (Choi, Henshaw, Baker, and Tree 2005:177).

Autonomy and Agency as Resistance

Each of the female protagonists in these two films about violence against women, *Precious* (2009) and *Room* (2015), initially use escapism to endure daily violence. However, approximately halfway into both films, these women obtain freedom from their abusers and begin their transformations from timid women living in personally transfigured realities to autonomous mothers determined to regain their agency. This transformation for *Precious*, comes after the birth of her second child, Abdul. Prior to Abdul’s birth, *Precious* had already been achieving autonomy from her mother by making friends with other underprivileged women, learning to read and write, attending the doctor regularly, and opening up to her social worker about her abuse – all of which she had never done before attending Each One, Teach One, the alternative school she enrolled in at the beginning of the film. For the first time in her life, *Precious* begins to feel love an acceptance and with that we begin to see a shift in her demeanor.

After Abdul's birth, Precious must stay at the hospital for several days. Throughout this time, Precious is continuously visited by her peers and a friendly nurse (who also fits the description of her object of desire), but not by Mary. Precious also consistently writes journal entries back and forth with Ms. Rain throughout her hospital stay, opening up about her abuse and casually making plans to get away from her evil mother. The challenge of journal writing helps Precious deal with her traumatic past of enslavement by her father abused her and got her pregnant with two of his children and by her mother, who besides also sexually abusing her, despises her for stealing her man and kept her locked in the house, isolated and illiterate. However, despite her chats with Ms. Rain and the overwhelming support she receives from her peers and the nursing staff at the hospital, Precious returns home to her mother's house after she is released from the hospital. The reason for this is never verbally disclosed, but the viewer could easily infer that Precious makes this decision out of fear and uncertainty.¹² However, this return home from her extended absence turns out to be the final catalytic factor that provides Precious with the strength to escape her mother's wrath permanently.

Upon Precious's return home, she cautiously makes her way into the apartment fearing what is to come next. After a short exchange about Precious's time in the hospital, Mary asks to hold Abdul and Precious allows this. As soon as Precious hands

¹² A (2004) study on fear and the perceptions of alternatives for battered women in violent homes shows that "more battered women are killed in the process of leaving or indicating that they will leave than any other time... and leaving does not guarantee safety for women or children" (Brown 2004:343). With that, it is sensible to interpret Precious's choice to stay in her violent situation as a choice made out of fear and uncertainty of safety.

Abdul to Mary and turns her back, Mary drops him onto the couch, throws a glass jar at Precious's head and then proceeds to attack her screaming, "You fucking bitch... You done took my man, you had those fucking babies, and you got me put off the welfare for running your goddamned stupid ass mouth!" Instead of fully escaping into the fantasies of her mind, though, Precious fights back and eventually pushes Mary down, picks Abdul up, and makes her way out of the apartment. As Precious feverishly runs down the staircase with Abdul in her arms, she trips and falls. As she sits up to catch her breath and check on Abdul, in a final attempt to stop her, Mary throws a television set down several flights of stairs in the direct path of Precious and Abdul. Luckily, Precious resists the blow of the television just in time and subsequently flees into the wintery streets, eventually arriving at Each One, Teach One, the alternative school where she met Ms. Rain – which, at this point, is the only safe place she has or knows to go for help.

Ms. Rain then takes Precious and Abdul into her home and tirelessly advocates to get them placed in halfway house. On her first night at their home, Precious is regaled by stories and happy voices of Ms. Rain and her lovely, warm partner. In this scene, Precious looks on in wonderment, realizing that for the first time she is surrounded by people who love her and one another. An influential scene that conveys Ms. Rain's dedication to Precious's humanization appears when Precious breaks down in class after discovering that her sexually violent father has infected her with HIV. With tears pouring down her face, she cries:

Precious: *Fuck you! You don't know nothin of what I been through. I ain't never had no boyfriend. My daddy said he gon marry me. How he gonna do that? It would fuckin be illegal!*

Ms. Rain: *Write.*

Precious: *I'm tired Ms. Rain.*

Ms. Rain: *If not for yourself, then for the people who love you.*

Precious: *Nobody loves me.*

Ms. Rain: *People do love you Precious.*

Precious: *Please don't lie to me Ms. Rain. Love ain't done nothing for me. Love beat me, raped me, called me an animal, make me feel worthless. Make me sick.*

Ms. Rain: *That wasn't love Precious. Your baby loves you. I love you (Daniels 2009).*

The scene mentioned above is incredibly delicate because Ms. Rain is the first and only individual to tell Precious that she loves her genuinely. After this point in the film, we see a significant shift in Precious's behaviors and thoughts. Rather than thinking and feeling that she is worthless and unloved, Precious feels that she has a purpose in life. Through a self-awakening prompted by the love and support of Ms. Rain, Precious finally sees herself as something other than "ugly, black grease" – as she calls herself early on in the film; she begins to see herself as a mother loved by her teachers, peers, and most importantly, her children – Abdul and Mongo. As Precious's abuse subsides and her literacy improves, she learns to accept love as a form of genuine care rather than violence, thus allowing her to become more associated with reality rather than fantasy, which in turn, helps her to gain autonomy. As such, she regains her agency, or perhaps achieves agency for the first time.

Feeling a sense of empowerment where there was none before, Precious agrees to have a sit-down meeting with Ms. Weiss (Precious's new, sympathetic caseworker) and Mary to discuss her abuse. This scene is one of only a few in the film that Mary dominates, as she opens up, for the first time, in an emotional narrative of how Precious's abuse began. Every other scene throughout the film, up to this point, has shown Mary as powerful and dominating. However, in this scene, she is weak – not because she is

remorseful, but because she fears a life without Precious. Mary also fears a life without welfare, which is why she brings Mongo to the meeting. This scene also further depicts the strength and autonomy that Precious has attained throughout the film. Precious remains stoic as she watches Mary fall apart, fumbling to fabricate a logical argument for her and Carl's sustained violence against her. After Mary fails to persuade either Precious or Ms. Weiss to sympathize with her behavior, Precious gives a kind farewell to Mrs. Weiss, picks up Mongo, and says to Mary, "You ain't gon see me no more." Then Precious walks out of the office with Abdul in one arm and Mongo in the other. Despite Mary's protests, she continues walking, hopeful for her future as a loving and supportive mother.

Like Precious, halfway into *Room* (2015), Ma, too, obtains freedom from her abuser and begins a significant transformation. Ma's freedom, however, comes with publicity, whereas Precious's is essentially invisible to the broader society. In the climactic mid-section of the film, Ma creates a decisive escape plan. The plan comes to her after Old Nick tells her that he has been laid off. Ma knows that Old Nick will not let them survive if his house gets repossessed, and he certainly will not simply allow them to go free, so her survival instincts heighten demonstrably. Ma begins to prepare Jack for what she calls their 'great escape.' However, in explaining this plan to Jack, Ma is forced to introduce him to the reality of the outside world by telling him the truth about her and her abduction and their existence in Room. Jack is reluctant to believe Ma and combats her new stories about Room because he knows only the reality that Ma has constructed up to this point. However, through his love for Ma and her wise urging and manipulation

of Jack, the plan goes forth and, against all odds, succeeds. This section of the film ends with Ma running out of the shed and into Jack's arms, declaring that they will never return to Room. Their release from Room powerfully evokes a release from prison, mirrored thematically in the intertextual allusions to the story of *The Great Escape*.

Like carceral citizens¹³ released from a penal institution, the two must adjust to life in the outside world after living in imprisonment for several years. Ma is unequivocally elated to have escaped from Old Nick, but her transition from elongated captivity to freedom is also traumatic. She explains to Jack that she is learning how to be herself again while still trying to be the best mother to him, a boy who has never been outside. Ma must also adjust to the intense public scrutiny that she faces as a 7-year victim of abduction, captivity, and rape. Although she is free from her confinement, the media exploits her enslavement for their own entertainment, just like pornography generally exploits the bodies of women for the intrigue of the male gaze (Sassatelli 2011). Local and national media outlets spread Ma's story of abduction and captivity worldwide, but her inner turmoil and mental punishment within the domestic remain unknown to the world. Both the public and private violence she is subjected to in her prison of Room and domestic dimensions after her escape draw parallels to one another, in which they are both based on the hidden institutionalized discipline against women. Again, her inner turmoil is

¹³ Carceral citizenship is a form of citizenship experienced by those with a criminal record (Miller and Stuart 2017). The term is often used to denote the ostracism faced by those labeled as 'criminals' upon their re-entry into society after being released from prison as well as their continual stigma from other social activities, roles, goods, and rights.

invisible to the public, similar to how sexual abuse and rape faced by women within the prison industrial complex remains hidden from public eye (Whatley and Hardin 2002).

Upon their return home, after receiving various tests at the hospital, Ma not only has to gather her own sanity and rebuild trust with the world, but she still must keep Jack safe – which is challenging because he has never been exposed to the outside world. Although the two are ‘free,’ Ma does not feel free, and Jack no longer feels secure. Throughout this portion of the film, we see Ma grow less patient with Jack, more argumentative with her parents, and even more depressed than she appeared while in captivity. While freedom was long anticipated by Ma, it is not as thoroughly fulfilling as she might have hoped. In the film's reality, she is working to readjust to life outside of captivity. When Ma's lawyer first mentions the tremendous attraction of various television networks and explains that she should consider writing a book in the future, Ma becomes contentious. Despite her opposition, the need for financial security outweighs her hesitations, and she finally agrees to do a sit-down interview with a television host to talk about her captivity. It is in this interview that all the feelings of hopelessness that engulf Ma's thoughts each day come to a peak.

In the beginning of the interview the hostess of the show appears sincere and genuinely curious about Ma's story, addressing her as an “amazing, inspiring, courageous, and beautiful... beacon of hope.” However, it quickly turns into an immensely traumatic event for Ma – as it not only forces her to relive the traumatic experiences through talk but puts her in a vulnerable and judged position. During this interview, we see how the ideological expectations of femininity construct these circumstances and the narratives

they produce. As the interview goes on, the hostess begins to make Ma uncomfortable. She begins by inquiring about Jack, asking Ma if he is “normal, high-functioning, and happy,” and then she specifically asks Ma about Old Nick:

Hostess: *When he's older will you talk to him about his father?*

Ma: *Jack's not his.*

Hostess: *I beg your pardon, are you –*

Ma (overlapping): *A father's a man who loves his kid.*

Hostess: *So true, in a very real sense, but the genetic relationship –*

Ma (overlapping): *That's not a relationship. Jack's nobody's but mine (Abrahamson 2015).*

With this question and essentially all that follow, we begin to see the constructed persona of the hostess. She employs a soft-spoken voice when speaking, emphasizing the inconsistency with which she acts. Thus, the malleability of the hostess's persona appears inauthentic. The hostess has already written the script, and it is up to Ma to adhere to it. However, as the interview goes on, the hostess's ulterior motive becomes more apparent, as witnessed in the following interaction:

Hostess: *Did it ever occur to you to ask your captor to take Jack away?*

Ma: *Away?*

Hostess: *To leave him outside a hospital, say, so he'd be found.*

Ma: *Why would I -*

Hostess (overlapping): *So, Jack could be free. The ultimate sacrifice, of course, but for him to have a normal childhood...*

Ma: *He had me.*

The hostess's suggestions about fatherhood and about Ma not having done all she could for her son reflect the social values and beliefs that society holds towards women and especially female victims. Domestic and sexual violence are topics that we learn or hear about daily; however, there remains a tremendous social stigma around these issues that often causes the trauma of victimization to be even worse. We see this stigma

affecting Ma in a crucial way throughout this interview. Not only is she a victim who has endured copious amounts of violence and trauma at the hands of her captor, but now she is expected share her child with him, simply because he is Jack's biological father. Rather than seeing Ma as an ideal victim, or even a victim more generally, the hostess perceives her as a woman that failed to modify her behavior accordingly in a potentially violent situation and thus deems her culpable for her own vulnerability. In posing the questions mentioned above, the hostess reinforces the patriarchal status quo and labels Ma essentially as undeserving of sympathy (i.e., a non-deal victim).

Ma is expected to recount her story, regardless of how difficult it may be because the public demands a narrative. However, it is not Ma's 'true story' specifically that the media wants, but the story of an inspiring and triumphant mother. Ma is expected to recapitulate the narratives that make her, in the perspective of the hostess, "extraordinary." An uncomfortable voyeurism characterizes these interactions, which is made visible by Ma's resistance to the hostess. The blatant fixation that the hostess has on crafting—and thereby controlling—Ma's story uncovers the tensions of Ma's public scrutiny. Unlike Precious, Ma's release and subsequent retelling of her time in such a coercive and violent space does not offer her solace but is rather quite traumatizing. Contemporary psychologists often refer to this phenomenon as retraumatization.¹⁴ This

¹⁴ A *traumatic event* is an experience that causes severe physical and psychological stress responses. Examples of traumatic events may include "loss, violence, physical and psychological abuse, serious physical injuries, exposure to war, exposure to natural disasters, and torture" (Duckworth and Follette 2011:2). Further, *retraumatization* can be defined as "traumatic stress reactions, responses, and symptoms that occur consequent to multiple exposures to traumatic events that are physical, psychological, or both in nature" (Duckworth and Follette 2011:2).

interview and tell-all story is traumatic rather than empowering for Ma, because she feels as if she is being blamed¹⁵ for making bad choices as a mother. Ma concludes this interview feeling defeated and subsequently tries to commit suicide the following night. While it is seemingly paradoxical that one should want to die after such an escape, a significant facet of trauma is that “for those who undergo [it], it is not only the moment of the event, but of the passing out of it that is traumatic; that survival itself, in other words, can be a crisis” (Caruth 1995:9).

Jack finds Ma laying on the bathroom floor and begins to scream. Ma’s mother rushes her to the hospital and luckily Ma survives. The remainder of the film, up until its final moments, Ma remains off screen and Jack’s narrative takes center. While Ma remains at the hospital after her attempted suicide Jack remains at home with his grandmother (Ma’s mother – Nancy) and her partner, Leo. It is in this time with Nancy and Leo that we see Jack flourish; however, in the beginning he is very upset with Ma for leaving him behind. Later, though, he decides to cut off his hair – which he refers to as his ‘strong’ – for the first time in his life and send it to Ma in this hospital to give her strength. Once Ma receives Jack’s ‘strong’ she calls and thanks him graciously, pleading with him to forgive her, and promising that she will never leave him again. It is clear to the spectator now, that Ma sees her value to Jack as a mother and again realizes that she

¹⁵ Whether intended or not, the hostess’ examinations of Ma’s behavior “can be equated with assigning the victim with responsibility for the trauma, something that can exacerbate the trauma of the event by magnifying stigma and shame” (Duckworth and Follette 2011:10).

must remain alive for Jack's sake and remembers also that Jack is her reason to live. It is in this moment that Ma truly regains her agency.

In the final scene of the film, which is one of the most powerful, Ma returns home from the hospital and Jack asks her if they can return to Room to say goodbye. Despite feeling nervous, Ma agrees to return to Room accompanied by a police officer. Upon their arrival to the garden shed where they once spent their every waking moment, Ma watches Jack walk around Room and as she stands in the open doorway looking in on the now empty, yet seemingly smaller space – Room's contents had been cleared for evidence, yet it still appeared smaller to Jack. He says to Ma that "it can't really be Room if Door's open." She asks if he would like her to close the door and Jack shakes his head. In this moment Jack's farewell to Room signifies not only his, but also Ma's ultimate letting go of the transformed reality that existed in Room, as Ma finally achieves a true sense of autonomy and thus liberation from her captor.

**CHAPTER FIVE – FIGHTING VIOLENCE WITH DISCURSIVE
CONFRONTATION: *THREE BILLBOARDS OUTSIDE EBBING, MISSOURI*
(2017) & *PROMISING YOUNG WOMAN* (2020)**

Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri (2017) and *Promising Young Woman* (2020) work well together in a side-by-side presentation because they both portray themes of sexual violence, grief, self-sustaining rage, retribution, and discursive confrontation. The female protagonists in these two films, Mildred and Cassie, are unlike those previously discussed in that they are not the ‘direct’ victim of the primary act of violence that constitutes the film’s narrative arc. Put differently, Mildred and Cassie, unlike Ma and Precious, experience violence second-hand. They are aggrieved by the rape and murder of their loved ones. In both films, their extreme grief quickly turns into rage, which prompts both Mildred and Cassie to take on the role of female avengers of both individual male and state violence against women. In further variation from the previously discussed female protagonists who resist violence through a transformation of reality, Mildred and Cassie discursively confront the institutionalized systems of male power that have kept their loved ones’ assailants free from punishment for so long. Their main actions are speech actions.

While both female protagonists have similar experiences with second-hand violence, and the grief that follows, they are quite visually distinct from one another. Mildred’s character does not comply with social standards of gender or beauty, not in an act of defiance per say, as I will argue that her portrayal is one that both suits the narrative, and simultaneously breaks gender norms. Cassie, on the other hand, is

extremely feminine often seen wearing various shades of pink with consistently manicured nails and styled hair. These differences in the physical appearance of Mildred and Cassie are important to note because they impact the ways in which each woman is able to effectively resist violence through discursive confrontation.

From Grief to Rage

The construction(s) of resistance in these two films display how victims, violence, and culpability are shaped within them. In these films, resistance is more of a continual process rather than a single act. Although both Mildred and Cassie wish to avenge a loved one lost to male violence, their discursive confrontations are distinct in variation.

Several months after the brutal rape and murder of her daughter, Angela¹⁶ – who is only shown in a flashback cameo in one scene of the film – Mildred is enraged that the

¹⁶ The characters of both Angela – Mildred’s daughter who was raped and murdered – and Nina – Cassie’s childhood best friend who was gang-raped and subsequently committed suicide – actively subscribe to the ‘woman in the refrigerator’ trope (Griffin 2015), meaning that their character exists as victims of brutalization merely to motivate the protagonist’s actions. Griffin (2015) notes that “the verb ‘to fridge’ refers to the concept of killing off a female character solely for the purpose of giving the story’s main male hero a reason to angst” (126). The trope was first played out in Ron Marz’s (1994) volume 3, issue 54 of the comic book *Green Lantern*. This issue featured a story in which Kyle Rayner, the title hero, finds that his girlfriend has been killed by Major Force (plot villain) and subsequently stuffed into a refrigerator, thus providing the title hero with motive to exact vengeance upon the villain (Bricken 2008). As the trope gained prominence, it shifted from referring to strictly superheroines who were either disempowered, brutalized, raped, or dismembered and placed in the refrigerator to more broadly referring to any character who is killed, raped, incapacitated, or disempowered for the sole purpose of motivating another character’s action. While this trope has historically generated heated discussions around sexism in the comic-book and film industries, by writing the protagonist as a woman and by not visually conveying Angela or Nina’s brutal rape or death scene, some of the gendered implications of this trope are

case remains unsolved. In response to the state and its agents' failure to obtain justice for her daughter, Mildred purchases space on three dilapidated billboards on the edge of town. On these, she posts a message in six-foot black lettering – reading: “*Raped while dying,*” “*And still no arrests?*” “*How come, Chief Willoughby?*” – reprimanding local law enforcement, specifically Police Chief Willoughby, for lack of initiative and ongoing failure to catch her daughter's assailants. This confrontational act then sets a series of dramatic events in motion, as Mildred's rage becomes a resource for expression – one that sufficiently allows her to discursively confront sexual and institutional violence.

Though not the direct victim of the violence perpetrated upon her daughter, Mildred is a victim – in the sense that she has endured the indirect violence that led to her daughter's death. However, while not willingly accepting the label as victim, Mildred has also been on the receiving end of male violence. In a handful of scenes in the film it is either visually or verbally confirmed that Mildred's ex-husband, an ex-cop, named Charlie (John Hawkes), was abusive. However, Mildred directly and openly challenges the label of ‘victim’ by defying the image of an ideal victim¹⁷. Rather than acting as a passive or disempowered victim, Mildred actively resists and openly combats the violence associated with her daughter's death.

An article titled “The ‘Ideal Victim’ of International Criminal Law,” written by Schwöbel-Patel (2018), “situates the construction of victimhood within a context of

diminished in *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (2017) and *Promising Young Woman* (2020). In doing so, these films avoid voyeuristic titillation of rape victims.

¹⁷ An ‘ideal victim’ as defined by Nils (1986) is “a person or category of individuals, who, when hit by crime, most readily are given the complete and legitimate status of being a victim” (18).

competition in the global justice sector,” where “...strong and resilient victims of conflict,” like Mildred – someone who denies this label wholeheartedly – “tend to be marginalized...” (703–704). As a result of this widespread marginalization and stigmatization as victim, inflected by other identities, non-ideal victims like Mildred, and the other female protagonists in the films under study, face significant barriers to accessing justice. The variety of sources that create and recreate stigma around victimhood include: the media, the criminal justice system, the healthcare system, religious institutions, the wider public, and victims themselves (Bowen, Hodsdon, Swindells, and Blake 2021). However, of these culprits of victimhood stigma creation, the criminal justice system is arguably one of the most significant, which is borne out in these two films insofar as agents of criminal justice fail to take address or take seriously the issue of violence against women (Henry 2014).

Mildred and Cassie do not trust the criminal justice system and, thus, feel they must take matters into their own hands. Mildred does so by near-literally painting the town red with rage and discursive confrontation. First with three rage-fueled billboards and shortly after by drawing actual blood from the local dentist with a medical drill after he reprimands her for her behavior (i.e., her choice to publicly broadcast the police station’s lack of effort in her daughter’s case). She explains on the local news network that the local police force “is too busy goin’ round torturing black folks to be bothered doing anything about solving actual crime.” With this remark she is referring to Officer Jason Dixon, who is known locally for his brutality against a young Black teen in town. Later, Mildred draws the figurative equivalent of blood from the local clergyman when

he pays her a house visit in hopes of bestowing some moral guidance, away from her bold communications, and instead receives Mildred's brutal narrative discourse on the Catholic Church's sins:

Father Montgomery: *I know it's been hard for you, Mildred, this past year. We all do. The whole town does. And whatever it is you need; we'll be there for you. Always. But the town also knows what kind of a man William Willoughby is. And the town is dead set against these billboards of yours.*

Mildred: *Took a poll, did you, Father?*

Father Montgomery: *If you hadn't stopped coming to church, Mildred, you'd be aware of the depth of people's feelings. I had a dozen people come up to me on Sunday. So, yes, I took a poll. Everybody is on your side about Angela. No-one's on your side about this.*

Mildred: *You know what I was thinking about, earlier today? I was thinking 'bout those street gangs they got in Los Angeles, the Crips, and the Bloods? I was thinking about that buncha new laws they came up with, in the 80's I think it was, to combat those street gangs, those Crips and those Bloods. And, if I remember rightly, the gist of what those new laws said was, if you join one of these gangs, and you're running with 'em, and down the block from you one night, unbeknownst to you, your fellow Crips, or your fellow Bloods, shoot up a place, or stab a guy, well, even though you didn't know nothing about it, even though you may've just been standing on a street corner minding your own business, those new laws said you are still culpable. You are still culpable, by the very act of joining those Crips, or those Bloods, in the first place. Which got me thinking, Father, that whole type of situation is kind of similar to you Church boys, ain't it? You've got your colors, you've got your clubhouse, you're, for want of a better word, a gang. And if you're upstairs smoking a pipe and reading a bible while one of your fellow gang members is downstairs fucking an altar boy then, Father, just like the Crips, and just like the Bloods, you're culpable. Cos you joined the gang, man. And I don't care if you never did shit or never saw shit or never heard shit. You joined the gang. You're culpable. And when a person is culpable to altar-boy-fucking, or any-kind-of-boy-fucking, I know you guys didn't really narrow it down, then they kind of forfeit the right to come into my house and say a word about me, or my life, or my daughter, or my billboards. So, why don't you just finish your tea there, Father, and get the fuck out of my kitchen. (McDonagh 2017).*

From this excerpt it is clear that social actors – in this case, the clergy, the police, and a local dentist, all of whom are male – expect women to grieve in specific, passive ways that reinforce the status quo. Social actors and institutions such as the church, law

enforcement, and the greater community construct ideas about how women and victims in general should react to violence and injustice. Father Montgomery uses these socially constructed ideas about acceptable and unacceptable actions of victims to confront Mildred behavior. While it is unclear what cultural standards Mildred abided by prior to Angela's death, we can see in this excerpt that she uses techniques of neutralization – “justifications for deviant action that mitigate the apparent immorality of the action or the doer of the action” (Presser 2004:88) – as she states that a tolerance of violence is violence itself, and thus justifies her behavior.

Like Mildred, Cassie also feels that to tolerate violence is to be complicit, and thus similarly undertakes an active and creative quest for vengeance. Rather than inflicting physical pain on the individuals that had a hand in Nina's¹⁸ brutal rape and subsequent suicide or escaping into a fantasy that allows her to escape this brutal reality, Cassie confronts Nina's assailants and the institutionalized system of male power that has kept them free from harm. As the film slowly progresses, and the plot unfolds, we learn more about Cassie's motives. She was previously a medical school student, but she dropped out after Nina was gang-raped by classmates at a party. Nina's mental health deteriorated as her authority figures and peers blamed her and failed to seek justice for her harm, ultimately leading to her implied death by suicide. Several years later, Cassie remains consumed with grief and remorse, with only the hope of avenging Nina's death

¹⁸ Nina is Cassie's childhood best friend who was brutally raped by a male classmate while drunk and unconscious and after being stigmatized and criminalized for reporting the heinous and violent crime against her, it is inferred that she subsequently committed suicide.

to maintain her sanity. A tremendous and recurring theme throughout the film is the delusion of men. Most of them express some variation on the phrase “I am a nice guy” when trying to justify their misogynistic behavior.

Rather than overtly harming the aggressive men and their objects like female protagonists in the typical rape-revenge film (Tanner 1994), Cassie instead has a hobby, or rather strategic routine, that allows her to overpower and subjugate harmful men for their violent actions. Cassie goes to bars late at night, pretending to be extremely drunk, hoping that some ‘nice guy’ will try and help get her sluggish body home. When men take her back to *their* homes—under the pretense of helping her—she asks to go back to her house, rejects their advances, and then when they persist and try to assault her, she snaps out of her pretend drunken stupor and verbally confronts the men about their behavior. Afterward, she goes home, tallies each conquest in a hidden diary she keeps under her childhood bed, and the following day begins the process anew. Her strange, stalled existence and brazen behavior stem from the loss of her best friend, Nina. She only confronts them verbally and then leaves feeling empowered, not only for herself but also for Nina – even though, like Mildred with Angela, Cassie has no real idea what Nina might have wanted.

The Non-Conforming Feminist and the Feminine Avenger

Following mainstream American culture, mainstream American films typically assign attributes including “emotional expression, purity, style, virtue, and motherhood” to women in film, portraying them as lacking conventional masculine traits such as

cleverness, strength, and resilience, thus constructing a dependency on men (Wellman, Meitl, and Kinkade 2021:661). However, Mildred's character constructs a challenging yet charismatic image of a non-conforming yet powerful adult woman – a kind rarely seen in Hollywood films. Frequently, empowered female protagonists in popular film are either seen as problematic and in need of correction (Sutherland 2013) or as oversexualized objects (Itzin, Taket, and Barter-Godfrey 2010:102). McDonagh (2017) avoids the trend of over-sexualization by characterizing Mildred as a fierce, non-conforming woman – meaning that while she is visibly a woman who openly identifies as a woman and a mother, she is not the conforming hetero, American woman. Mildred's character is characterizable as an introverted outcast, often seen in a Rosie the Riveter¹⁹ inspired set of overalls and a bandana. The status of mother seems to be the only feminine attribute that she claims. Yet, while not feminine, that doesn't necessarily denote that she is masculine, per se, but rather more aggressive and careless as a result of the violence she has endured.

Mildred shifts between two modes of being: (1) a mother who has finally had enough and (2) a hardcore avenger who is willing to break any law in the pursuit to locate and punish her daughter's assailants. Perhaps due to over-exposure to male perpetrated

¹⁹ Rosie the Riveter is a symbolic cultural icon portraying the women who worked in factories and shipyards throughout WWII. These women sometimes accepted entirely new positions, replacing the male workers who had joined or were drafted into the military. Like the Uncle Sam posters that have been circulated throughout history to recruit men to enlist in the military, the Rosie the Riveter posters were circulated throughout WWII, to help recruit women into the workforce. In the poster, Rosie appears wearing a red and white polka dot bandana and a blue-collar uniform with the sleeves rolled up – similar to the way we see Mildred dressed throughout the entire film.

violence throughout her life course, Mildred has grown resilient to her own suffering at the hands of men and thus empowers herself by further straying from conformity and, in turn, overtly responding to male violence with discursive confrontation. As Mildred's ex-husband Charlie tells her, after a rage-filled toxically masculine altercation in one scene of the film, "All this anger, man, it only begets greater anger." However, Mildred remains unsympathetic and disdainful of his and many others' objections to her lifestyle and actions. She finds that discursively confronting those responsible for Angela's case and death helps her to restore both her and her deceased daughter's agency, thus allowing Mildred to see her non-conforming actions as *justifiable* – even if violent and 'illegal.'

In specifically focusing on how Mildred engages in gender performance – or the 'doing' of gender – we can better understand both the role of individual agency (or choices) in behavior and the social (or structural) restrictions that confine her agency in the production of violence (Miller 2008). Further, in Mildred's case, rage and violence act as a "powerful resource for expression," as it liberates her from "constricting cultural stereotypes," even if it ultimately destroys her life (Rafter and Brown 2011:157).

Cassie, while just as underlyingly fierce as Mildred, often takes on the role of damsel in distress²⁰ when she lures men in because she, unlike the fierce Mildred, is presented as an embodiment of "seemingly idealized femininity," conforming to a

²⁰ The ideal victim relies on the concurrent construction of "equally ideal villains and rescuers" (Fredriksson 2021:59). The *damsel in distress* is similar in that it is also constructed in submission to, and need of rescue by, patriarchal traditions and forces (Wester 2012). The damsel in distress and the ideal victim are often portrayed as "fair (and often fair-skinned)," helpless women attacked by threatening, domineering, and often unknown men and in need of rescue by brave men (Fredriksson 2021:59).

gendered display of the “white, middle-class, heterosexual, and cosmopolitan” American woman (Marso 2016:879). Cassie is almost always shown sporting various shades of pink, with manicured nails, styled hair, and a face painted with beautiful portions of makeup. In a metaphorical sense, the damsel in distress can manifest cultural anxieties regarding gender, sexuality, and nationality. As such, the violation of the damsel “becomes symbolic of violating heteronormative values” and the laws of the patriarchal status quo (Fredricksson 2021:61). Further, the way in which Cassie uses her femininity as a weapon (i.e., playing the, albeit drunk, damsel in distress) to set traps, catch, and subsequently confront rapists offers a critical illustration of this often-conservative trope.

Fredriksson (2021) states that “in popular culture, the ideal victim often surfaces as the damsel in distress – however, it also surfaces more implicitly: through its absence, and in resistance to such portrayals of victims” (60). While Cassie adheres to the gendered status quo regarding self-presentation, her behaviors are often seen as unconventional. Cassie’s parents (Jennifer Coolidge and Clancy Brown), her boss – Gail (Laverne Cox), and even Nina’s mother (Molly Shannon), all express concern for Cassie’s choices and well-being. Her parents, whom she still lives with, express concern over many of Cassie’s behaviors. They protest the fact that she still lives with them at age 30, nor do they agree with her choice to drop out of medical school, to stay out all hours of the night, and to work at a coffee shop when she could go back to school.

Similarly, Gail, Cassie’s boss at the coffeeshop, has some of the same concerns for Cassie’s ‘unconventional’ life choices and even tries to persuade her to apply for a job with more mobility. Nevertheless, Cassie maintains that she is happy with her life.

However, none of the people who express concern for Cassie's lifestyle have any knowledge about her vengeful yet liberating agenda to achieve retribution in Nina's name. Cassie, like Mildred, has become consumed with grief. Instead of reacting to that grief in a socially acceptable fashion (i.e., appearing or acting as passive a victim), she becomes a vigilante. Cassie begins to target not only men who attempt to take advantage of inebriated women but also those directly responsible for Nina's fate.

However, Cassie's revenge, like Mildred's differs from essentially most traditional cinematic rape-revenge narratives such as *Ms. 45*, *M.F.A.*, *Thelma & Louise*, *I Spit on Your Grave*, and *Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* because she does not punish through means of physical harm or overt violence, but instead with an elaborate scheme of discursive confrontation through blackmail and deceit – which she feels is more damaging. Cassie is calm, collected, and comes off as entirely unsuspecting – which renders her even more dangerous. Cassie holds the power to frighten. The film does not shy away from this fact or from the fact that some of the decisions she makes are not nice or good. Cassie is angry, but she is very particular about her acts of vengeance. Rather than continuing to seek personal revenge against men, Cassie begins to tackle the institutionalized system of male power that helped aid in Nina's subjugation and death. Through her revenge against those responsible, she can reclaim agency for herself and Nina.

Retribution

The central themes of *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (2017) and *Promising Young Woman* (2020) – misperception, loss of loved ones, grief, vengeance – exhibit a clash of cultural values between a small, closed community and the broader society (Sellin 1938). These films suggest that sex crimes against women are taken less seriously than other violent crimes. In *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (2017), the latter statement plays out through the community's ubiquitous approval of the police chief who failed at his job over a recently bereaved mother whose daughter was brutally raped and murdered. This fact suggests that the citizens of Ebbing are less offended by the slaughter of a young woman than they are by the slander of a police chief. This lack of public outrage or pressure on local police to find the assailant(s) lends support to a society that accepts crimes against women and crimes against the Black community as typical facts of life rather than grisly crimes of overt violence.

Throughout the film, Mildred responds creatively and forcefully to violent events, first with the billboards, then by drilling a hole in a dentist's thumb. Later, Mildred blows up the police station and injures Officer Jason Dixon in the process. After that, she allows a friend to lie to the police about the bombing to establish her alibi and thereafter humiliates him when he expresses his romantic interest in her. At the end of the film, it even appears she may well be on her way to kill a man who may or may not be guilty of a rape having nothing to do with her daughter. However, while all of these actions are characterizable as deviant, having Mildred's character set up as the sympathetic victim at the beginning of the film allows spectators to remain complicit in her criminal activity

and psychologically damaging behavior. All of which leads up to the sublime final line of the film where Mildred teams up with the now redeemed Jason Dixon to go after a monstrous man who ‘could’ have played a role in the rape and murder of an unnamed woman:

Mildred: *Dixon?*

Dixon: *Yep?*

Mildred: *You sure about this?*

Dixon: *About killing this guy? Not really. You?*

Mildred: *Not really.* (McDonagh 2017).

This exchange is ambiguous in the sense that the conflict of the film (finding Angela’s assailant(s)) is still unresolved as the two most disagreeable people in town are following through with their plan to engage in yet another perversion of justice by taking the law into their hands. However, this is not what the final line is about. The final line is directed toward the spectator who must decide whether to lend support to those acting outside the boundaries of the law (i.e., Mildred or even Dixon) or instead, to lend support to a southern American society where laws sometimes operate at the expense of justice.

Justice in this film can thus be seen as Dixon’s righteous development, whose redemption is sealed in the end of the film, when he and Mildred form an alliance. In this moment, Dixon’s character of a homophobic and racist cop thus transforms into that of a valorous hero. However, such a moral journey is only budding and is not completely developed. Dixon’s reprieve has a final goal, tracking down and potentially even killing another presumed criminal—a righteous redemption that would constitute the final stage of a moral passage. Mildred, on the other hand, does not receive such moral redemption,

yet she ostensibly helps to capture the spectator's sympathy with her excessive and impetuous devotion to her cause and the natural forces that generate her femininity.

On the other hand, while in the beginning of *Promising Young Woman* (2020)²¹ Cassie seeks vengeance for Nina by discursively confronting 'could be' rapists that she meets at bars, after running into an old classmate from med school – Ryan Cooper – her methodical approach drastically shifts. Her new course of action is to take down every person who played a role in Nina's rape and subsequent suicide. Cassie begins with Madison McPhee, an old classmate of her and Nina. In this scene we see Cassie sitting at a posh restaurant pouring ginger ale into a champagne glass while she waits on Madison to arrive. Cassie pre-orders a glass of champagne for Madison before she arrives in hopes to get Madison drunk and confront her. Upon her arrival, Madison assumes that Cassie is also drinking champagne and perceives the meeting as quite casual. Sweet on the surface

²¹ *Promising Young Woman* (2020) turns vengeance into a style and trauma into discussion. The film's female protagonist, Cassie, a medical school dropout still living with her concerned parents, is a daily barista and a nightly huntress. Her prey has two legs, but a hollow mind: men who equate a woman's inebriation with consent. This debut feature by director Emerald Fennell, in some ways, resonates with that of David Slade's film *Hard Candy* (2005) portraying a young woman verbally confronting and enacting some sort of punishment on unsuspecting and potentially violent men. While the female protagonist in *Hard Candy* (2005), Hayley, is a minor who seeks out violent revenge that leads to murder and Cassie an adult who seeks out retributive justice at the expense of her own life, both films actively portray women making sense of justice in a society where it is intensely under attack. With that, one could also compare *Promising Young Woman* (2020) to cult classics like *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978) and *Ms. 45* (1985). However, a primary and crucial difference between Fennell's films and the others I have mentioned is that Cassie, does not seek vengeance and retribution through means of physical violence, but rather focuses on making things right by forcing the state to take Nina's and now her own death seriously. Further, *Promising Young Woman* (2020) in contention with the aforementioned films, contests the typical rape-revenge filmic narrative that portrays women who make things right with hard-core, responsive violence and instead offers a narrative of a calm and calculated woman willing to risk it all for an ounce of 'justice.'

but nasty at heart, Madison trades ‘compliments’ with Cassie. As Madison gets more and more inebriated, Cassie brings up her reason for dropping out (i.e., Nina’s rape):

Cassie: *If a friend ... told you that they thought something bad had happened to them the night before...What would you say?*

Madison: *If you sleep around and then say something bad happened – it’s crying wolf...If you get that drunk thing happen... Don’t get blackout hammered every night and then expect people to be on your side when you have sex with someone you didn’t want to!*

Cassie: *That’s a shame ... For your sake. I really was hoping you’d feel differently by now.* (Fennel 2020).

As Cassie stands to leave the incapacitated Madison, she hands is to Tony – an unknown character who seemingly works for Cassie that had been sitting at the restaurant’s bar throughout her meeting with Madison – a room key and an envelope and tells her where to take Madison. At this point, the spectator is unaware of Cassie’s intentions, but it can be inferred that she has hired this man, Tony, to take the inebriated Madison to a hotel room. The reasoning for this remains unknown for some while, however, in this moment it is not far-fetched to assume that Cassie has set Madison up to be assaulted, like Nina had been. As Madison calls her repeatedly the following day, leaving several voicemails stating that she “woke up in a hotel room and thinks something might have happened.” Cassie marks the name *Madison* out of her notebook and moves on to *Walker*.

Elizabeth Walker – is the collegiate Dean at Forrest University, where Nina and Cassie previously attended medical school. Cassie arranges a meeting with Dean Walker under the guise of hoping to ‘continue her degree.’ Dean Walker is a seemingly kind, clever, and reasonable person who appears well-dressed and has a patient warmth like a psychiatrist. However, when she enquires about Cassie’s desire to return to the program, she is astonished by Cassie’s response. When Cassie explains that her reason for

returning stemmed from the reason she left – Nina’s rape – Dean Walker claims that she doesn’t remember the incident even though she was the administrator who received a report. Dean Walker explains:

Dean Walker: *I understand it must be very hard. But if Nina was drinking, if she couldn’t remember fully, it’s terribly complicated.*

Cassie: *So, she shouldn’t have been drunk?*

Dean Walker: *I don’t mean that. I just mean that it isn’t always a good idea to go back to a dorm room full of boys after a party. It gives them the wrong idea... We do advise against it. We try to warn girls to be more careful. To teach them about self- respect.*

Cassie: *So, it was her fault? For not respecting herself? Sorry! I don’t mean to sound critical, Dean Walker. I just want to be clear.*

Dean Walker: *None of us wants to admit when we’ve made ourselves vulnerable. And sometimes these kinds of mistakes are very damaging. It’s much more common than you’d know.*

Cassie: *I know how common it is.*

Dean Walker: *Of course, it’s...regrettable... What would you have me do? Ruin a young man’s life every time an accusation is made? Have them expelled? That wouldn’t be fair. Accusations like this, they ruin lives.*

Cassie: *So, you’re happy to take the boy’s word for it?*

Dean Walker: *I have to give them the benefit of the doubt, yes... I wish I could do more. Is your friend, ok?*

Cassie: *No. She’s not. But Al Monroe is, you’ll be glad to know he’s doing really well. He’s getting married.*

After this exchange, as she did with Madison, Cassie leaves Dean Walker in a perplexing circumstance. Cassie convinces Dean Walker that before their meeting she picked up Dean Walker’s daughter, took her to the dorm where Nina was raped, and left her with the boys that live in that dorm now. However, we find out later that in neither situation did Cassie physically harm Madison, Dean Walker, or Dean Walker’s innocent teen daughter.

Cassie leaves this meeting feeling enraged, gets into an altercation with some random passerby on the street who called her an unsavory word, and then returns home to

find that she had forgotten a date with Ryan – the old classmate whose reunion sparked her transition in vengeance methods. She lies to Ryan to refrain from having to continue through with the date by explaining that she worked late and asks for a rain check. Ryan agrees and leaves. Cassie then immediately retreats back to her old methods, dresses in a sequin dress, does her makeup, and goes on the hunt for another rapist. However, this time while out – pretending to be drunk – she runs into Ryan who is disgusted with her behavior and the fact that she blew him off but ended up at a nightclub anyway. This encounter with Ryan causes Cassie to reflect on her behavior. However, in a final attempt to move forward Cassie goes to speak with Jordan Green, another name on her list – Al Monroe’s lawyer. She has to meet him at his home because the receptionist at his home says he is out of the office indefinitely. Unlike Madison and Dean Walker, Jordan remembers Nina’s case specifically because it haunts him. He feels remorse over his role in Nina’s fate (i.e., harassing her to drop the case against his client so that he and others at his firm would receive bonuses). He tells Cassie that he can’t sleep at night and would do anything to take back his actions. While still holding feelings of scorn, Cassie forgives Jordan and decides to apologize to Ryan.

She apologizes and the two begin anew, and after a while it seems that Cassie is finally beginning to let go of the trauma of Nina’s fate. The change in Cassie’s feelings is signified by her change in appearance as she now appears more modestly, wearing longer skirts and sweaters over her sleeveless tops. However, after a while Madison McPhee reaches back out to Cassie and shares with her a video that had been circulated around their cohort after Nina’s rape. The video, which is never shown on screen, shows Al

Monroe raping Nina while several others stand by and watch, and moments into the video, we hear Ryan's drunken voice. Cassie's expression changes as she listens to Ryan's automated voice cheer Al as he rapes Nina's passed out body. This revelation marks the climax of the film, as Cassie resumes her path of personalized retributive justice.

Cassie goes to the hospital where Ryan works and immediately confronts him, she forces him to watch the video and then threatens to send it to everyone in his address book unless he gives her the address to Al Monroe's bachelor party. Ryan, feeling he has no choice, provides the address to Cassie and she leaves him alone. Cassie, feeling liberated after taking care of another threatening participant in Nina's unfortunate fate, transforms into the most iconic and recognizable figure from this film—a disaffected stripper in a sexy nurse costume, complete with thigh-high white leather boots, and a pink and blue wig. As she exits her car, she ritualistically applies ruby red lipstick and then heads into the bachelor party.

The groomsmen all assume that Cassie is a stripper, which is exactly how she appears in that moment. Although none of them know who might have called a stripper, they do not oppose her presence and thus welcome her in with open arms. After pouring shots of liquor in all their mouths, she takes Al upstairs by himself, ties him to the bed, and proceeds to confront him about Nina's rape. Just like Ryan, Al makes the claim that "we were just kids," which infuriates Cassie. Cassie opens her nurse's bag to reveal medical instruments. Al says, "You're out of your fucking mind." Cassie shows him half of a BFF necklace that says 'Nina' and prepares to use a scalpel on him while doing a

long monologue about how special Nina was – until him. Similar to how Lisbeth Slander carves the word ‘rapist’ into her abuser’s chest in *Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, Cassie plans to carve Nina’s name into his chest – this is the first time that we see Cassie take a step toward violence rather than discursive confrontation. However, before Cassie can act, Al breaks free from one handcuff and begins to strangle her. As he strangles Cassie, a distressed Al states, “You asked for this... this is your fault” – another sure instance of victim blaming. Cassie fights until she can’t anymore, and Al continues choking her and then begins to smother her with a pillow until she goes limp. Unable to watch the violence he is exhibiting over Cassie, Al places a pillow over her head and begins smothering her while he sobs, until her body eventually goes limp. Cassie is dead, which is almost unbelievable at first, thinking that the female protagonists, such a strong and fierce, yet feminine woman could be killed in such a pointless act of selfishness. However, the film goes on.

The next morning, Al and one of his friends (Joe) burn Cassie’s body, swear her death to secrecy, and go on as planned with Al’s wedding. The finale montage of the film then plays out first showing Ryan in his office speaking with police officers about Cassie’s whereabouts – he lies and says that she is out of town. The camera then flashes to the scene of Al’s wedding reception where Ryan and Joe speak about women – in this scene we can see that Ryan is physically uncomfortable and worried about what Cassie might do. Joe, on the other hand – even though he just witnessed a dead body of a woman and helped his friend hide and burn the body – appears happy and care-free. As Joe parts and walks away, Ryan receives a ‘scheduled text’ from Cassie. Just as Ryan goes to open

the text, the camera flashes back to Jordan Green, Al's old attorney who showed tremendous remorse for the role he played in Nina's fate, as he opens a package mailed to his home by Cassie. In the package he finds the phone that holds the video of Nina's rape and a letter reading: "Dear Jordan, on July 23, I will be going to Alexander Monroe's bachelor party – cabin 57, Vernington Woods. In the event of my disappearance, please deliver this letter and package to the police." He frowns as he reads, becoming increasingly troubled as he picks up his phone, and dials.

The camera then makes its way back to Ryan who is now reading the scheduled text from Cassie: "You didn't think this was the end did you?" As Ryan looks up from his phone, he begins to hear police sirens making their way down the drive. At the same time, Al – who has just been married to a beautiful bride – and Joe, his accomplice also notices the police sirens and begin to panic. Ryan looks back at his phone as another scheduled message from Cassie appears: "It is now. Enjoy the wedding!" Ryan looks up to see police apprehending Al as the final text from Cassie appears: "Love, Cassie & Nina ;)." In the end, Nina's assailant is caught and is seemingly on his way to be punished, not only for the rape of Nina, but the murder of Cassie as well. Similar to *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri's* (2017) Jason Dixon – a once harsh and possibly violent state agent – Jordan Green is redeemed by cooperating with the female protagonist to carry out her final act of retribution as resistance.

CHAPTER SIX – CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

My overarching purpose was to discern narrative representations of victimization and gender positions, and what agents do with these. Toward that end, my thesis focused on four US-based films to observe variation in the female protagonists' agency in the face of victimization: *Precious* (2009), *Room* (2015), *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (2017), and *Promising Young Woman* (2020).

The negotiation of violence against women and other feminized subjects is usually the province of men or the masculine state and tends to be retributive, and flagrantly violent. Similarly, traditional crime film narratives have also predominantly been the province of men and tend to link femininity with victimhood. In contrast, these four films cast women as the main protagonists and furthermore characterize them as active and powerful in their efforts to negotiate violence and make justice meaningful in the context of gender performativity. Their activity and indeed their power take on dimensions, actively undoing gender norms, transforming realities, and restoring agency.

Undoing Gender

By focusing on how these female protagonists engaged in gender performance – or the ‘doing’ of gender, I was able to better understand both the role of individual agency (or choices) in behavior and the social (or structural) restrictions that confine a woman’s agency in the face of violence. That said, I found that discursive confrontation, like violence, may be a powerful resource “for expression, liberating women from constricting cultural stereotypes,” even if it ultimately destroys their lives (Rafter and

Brown 2011:157). For example, in both *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (2017) and *Promising Young Woman* (2020) the female protagonists, who are *not* direct victims of the violent act that features in each of the films' narrative arcs, discursively confront not only the perpetrators of violence, but also those who ignore such violence or treat it as insignificant. Both women find comfort in these confrontations, not only for themselves but also for the loved ones they lost to violence, and neither of these women care if this discursive confrontation destroys their lives or leads to their own demise.

The women in these two films are not 'ideal victims' because they do not conform to the status quo, meaning they do not act as passive and pure in the face of violence, and are thus deemed undeserving of sympathy. They see themselves instead as survivors of violence. By viewing themselves as survivors of violence rather than victims, these women feel more empowered in their discursive confrontations and less fearful of further violence. However, although both women identify as and act like survivors rather than victims and both actively confront violence producers and violence ignorers, they perform gender quite differently.

Mildred, the fierce, non-feminine, non-conforming, unsympathetic woman is less concerned with the ways in which she is viewed by the community – a small town who contests her discursive events, engendering resentment, and the pursuit of retribution. She is unstoppable, yet also bitter, enraged, unyielding, and most of all obsessed. Mildred is persistent in her discursive attacks on the police as well as all others who she sees as culpable for violence. Like most Western film heroes, Mildred dominates the screen with her jaw clenched, her voice sharp, and her eyes piercing. Her rage knows no bounds.

Mildred cannot be cajoled or calmed and has renounced all the civility and friendliness she may have displayed prior to Angela's rape and murder. Like Cassie, Mildred also condemns herself along with the people she accuses.

Cassie, while more accountably 'feminine' than Mildred, is just as angry; however, Cassie appears much more calm, collected, and strategic in her resistance than Mildred. Like Mildred with her ferocity, Cassie's femininity is used as weapon in her confrontations. Although Mildred uses her non-conforming and aggressive behavior to ward off further violence and combat existing violence, Cassie uses her femininity to do the same by drawing in unsuspecting, yet violent men and confronting them for their violent actions and behaviors. Cassie's femininity can be weaponized because unlike Mildred, whose fierceness can be spotted from a mile away, Cassie appears more victimizable and thus less of a threat to violent men and women. Therefore, at the end of the film, Cassie is able to confront Al Monroe, Nina's rapist, without any question of her presence at his bachelor party. Her sexualized body in these scenes of empowered discursive confrontation help to elucidate a powerful dimension of femininity that popular films often miss – one where womanhood and feminine attributes are strengths rather than weaknesses.

Contemporary American films that feature violence, and specifically women who resist violence, are often contradictory in terms of gender definitions. Put differently, when these films present women, their resistance is seen as problematic – something to be explained, overcome, or destroyed. A female protagonist's powerful and active resistance is not seen as "a solution, as it is for men in film, but rather a flaw that must be

rectified” (Sutherland 2013:149). This inconsistency reveals itself in terms of filmic form and content. For example, filmmakers rarely choose to depict resistant or violent woman as completely masculine. In this way, they refer to masculine traditions without unequivocally adopting them. These female protagonists are ‘undoing gender’ by acting in social interactions in ways that ‘reduce’ rather than ‘reproduce’ gender difference. (Deutsch 2007:122).

From Victim to Active Agent

In paying close attention to how female protagonists in these films respond to violence, I found that although they all seek to regain some form of “interpersonal harmony” (Sullivan and Tift 2005:4), this does not mean that, in effect, they take on a restorative approach to justice – one where the primary focus is on “the reparation of harm, rather than punishing the offender” (McGlynn, Westmerland, and Godden 2012:217). Instead, these women take up individualized efforts to make justice meaningful in their situation.

Mildred and Cassie are social avengers who reclaim their agency by seeking punishment for their loved one’s assailants. After suffering from the loss of her daughter and the failure of the state to enact justice, Mildred, a middle-aged Missourian mother, openly and recklessly confront those she deems responsible for her daughter’s fate. After losing her friend to rape and subsequent suicide, Cassie, a calculated, 30-year-old medical school dropout, finds empowerment through challenging institutionalized systems of male power by discursively confronting male rapists and all the actors who

keep them out of harm's way. Further, although *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (2017) and *Promising Young Woman* (2020) cast active and powerful women as protagonists, they re-emphasize the carceral sphere and point toward contested territory by presenting narratives of retribution and vengeance that work in collaboration with the state. While each of the female protagonists in the sample wishes to right the wrongs done to them by holding those responsible for their harm accountable, Precious and Ma do not actively pursue retributive or confrontational means to reclaim their agency in the face of violence. Instead, these two women find it easier to reconstruct their realities to avoid further trauma and reclaim their agency by gaining autonomy from their abusers and becoming active nurturers and caregivers to their children.

In the case of *Precious* (2009) and *Room* (2015), the female protagonists, direct victims of sexual and domestic violence, first respond with apparent compliance. Though seeming to relent, however, each woman constructs an alternative reality in which love exists, and abuse does not. In *Precious* (2009), the transformed reality is a means of disassociating from abuse. In contrast, the transformed reality in *Room* (2015) has created some amount of safety from further abuse. While both women first escape violence through a transformation of reality, once freed from their abusers, each woman avoids further violence by asserting their autonomy and thereafter achieving agency.

While seemingly compliant, though in opposition, to the violence they endure, these women find solace in restructuring their violent existence into a fantastical reality where themselves and their children are loved and out of harm's way. However, after being given hope through the support of a person or persons who love and support them,

feeling more empowered than ever before, these women can speak out about their abuse and overcome their previously violent existence. In doing so, these women reclaim their agency, making life for the first time in a long time peaceful and worth living.

Additional Remarks

My analysis of these four films has shown that the female protagonists are trying to maneuver in a context of justice in a state that does nothing for victims. Each of these women take individualized efforts to make justice meaningful in a context where justice is intensively under attack. These films thus offer localized reactions to much larger changes that are happening several times on several levels. In a sense, these are four case studies of how women who resist violence in some form, make efforts to essentially resituate themselves within their particular contexts in a manner necessary for them to not remain victims forever.

The insights I have offered in this thesis can apply to other contemporary films because the social aspect of violence against women in film—the idea that the reclamation of agency can bring a certain amount of personalized justice—is a crucial element of this filmic cycle. These insights also illuminate narratives about violence in the real world: violence can take various shapes and can arise from numerous avenues ranging from strangers to peers and even parents or guardians. The different responses that the female protagonists in the films took show that there is no correct way for a victim to feel after experiencing violence. None of the female protagonists heavily rely on the police after enduring violence echoes the lived experiences of many female

victims of violence off-screen; the fact that they cannot trust the police leads them to take their own personal actions and resistance. I have also shown differentiating kinds of female protagonists within these filmic narratives of violence. In these films, women's agency is foreground conveying variation in women's agency in the face of victimization. These contemporary narratives encompass diverse elements and are spread across many genres, making these crime films a universal phenomenon worthy of analysis due to the persistence of violence, rape culture, and the historical changes to social and legal consequences for violence against women.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

These four films convey the idea that women, regardless of the situation of violence, must be active and strategic in their resistance. However, there are a variety of things that could be examined here. I focused on the depiction of female agency in the face of violence and victimization. However, I am aware I could have focused on identifying aspects and notions of specific forms of justice. This idea brings into question that if an individual is not part of a larger collective in a social justice-oriented landscape, how does that individual enact justice; are they achieving anti-carceral means, or are they re-enforcing the carceral sphere?

I plan to incorporate such aspects of justice into future research. Such research could potentially investigate and convey how some contemporary films, while casting light on female victims of violence, still often reinforce the power of the carceral sphere. This phenomenon occurs because these films depict women who, while non-conforming

in some sense, actively fortify the state-sanctioned systems of oppression that have helped sustain their subdual for so long by enacting retributive justice. While the protagonists' resistance may be empowering and may 'feel good,' it can also reproduce harm and violence.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A



Figure 3.1. Phases of methodology

Appendix B

Table 3.1. Summary outlining film production details for sample

Film Title	Date of Release	Director	Production Company
<i>Precious</i>	2009	Lee Daniels	Lionsgate Entertainment
<i>Room</i>	2015	Lenny Abrahamson	Lionsgate Entertainment
<i>Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri</i>	2017	Martin McDonagh	Twentieth Century Fox
<i>Promising Young Woman</i>	2020	Emerald Fennell	Focus Features

Appendix C

Table 3.2. Questions used to guide film screening and analysis

Violence	Identity/Gender	Film Goals/Effects
Who is perpetuating, experiencing, or resisting violence in the film? What types of violence are they perpetuating, experiencing, or resisting?	In what ways does each film case explore the self-proclaimed identity/gender of each character?	Do these films indict hegemonic goals and means?
How does the protagonist conceive violence?	What about the socially understood identity/gender of the characters? Are the two differentiated and if so, in what way?	How – if at all – might these narratives obscure the suffering experienced by victims of violence in real time?

Appendix D: Synopsis of *Precious* (2009)

Following the cinematic footsteps of *The Color Purple* (1985) and *Beloved* (1998), Lee Daniel's (2009) film *Precious*, based on the novel 'Push' by Sapphire, recounts the life story of Claireece "Precious" Jones (Gabourey Sidibe). Precious is an illiterate and overweight teen mother residing in 1980s Harlem with her abusive and dysfunctional mother, Mary (Mo'Nique). She is currently pregnant for the second time – both of her children were conceived due to perpetual rape by her father, Carl, who also infected her and her mother, Mary, with HIV. When Precious's principal learns about her second pregnancy, she arranges to have her attend an alternative school – which she hopes will turn Precious's life around. The remainder of the film's narrative arc follows Precious's experience at an alternative school called *Each One, Teach One*. She meets a community of women who provide her with social support and subsequently learns to read and write. In the end, Precious reclaims her agency and autonomy by severing ties with her abusive mother and starting a life with her newborn son.

Appendix E: Synopsis of *Room* (2015)

Lenny Abrahamson's (2015) film, *Room*, depicts an adaptation to Emma Donoghue's 2010 book of the same title. The first half of the film is set in one single room that is the size of a tool shed and also the place where the main characters, Joy or Ma (Brie Larson) and her son Jack (Jacob Tremblay), have been held captive for several years. The room where they live is in the back yard of a man who we only know as 'Old Nick' (Sean Bridgers). It is inferred by Jack's opening narration and later verbally confirmed by Ma that Old Nick abducted her when she was 17 and has held her captive for 7 years. Jack was born 2 years into Ma's captivity and has lived his entire life in this single space, viewing the outside world only through a skylight in the roof of the shed or on the television. In this regard, we can see how the shed (i.e., '*Room*') is a prison for both Ma and Jack where they are only allowed visits from their captor. Old Nick only pays visits to provide them with mediocre food and 'supplies,' and to, upon his desire, rape Ma. As the days pass and abuse by Old Nick continually worsens, Ma becomes increasingly aware that she and Jack must escape. She finds a new light of hope and comes out with a plan. The initial plan to act as sick goes in vain, but the second plan of playing dead works. Luckily, the two manage to escape their isolation, and Ma and Jack return to Ma's childhood home, where they stay for the remainder of the film as they adjust to life in the outside world.

Appendix F: Synopsis of Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri (2017)

Martin McDonagh's (2017) film *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*, follows the struggle of Mildred Hayes (Frances McDormand), a recently bereaved Missourian woman, to find the person or people that raped and killed her daughter seven months prior. Out of disdain for the local police department's failure to locate and punish Angela's (Mildred's daughter) assailant(s), Mildred rents out three billboards on the edge of town to reprimand local law enforcement, specifically police chief William Willoughby (Woody Harrelson). When Officer Jason Dixon (Sam Rockwell), an immature, racist, and incompetent cop with a penchant for violence, becomes involved, the conflict between Mildred and the local police only escalates. However, the untimely death of the police chief, who was Dixon's mentor, causes a change of heart for Dixon, who then aids Mildred in her hunt for Angela's assailant(s).

Appendix G: Synopsis of *Promising Young Woman* (2020)

Emerald Fennell's (2020) subversive play on the rape-revenge thriller *Promising Young Woman* follows Cassandra Thomas (Cassie), a 30-year-old medical school dropout who lives at home with her parents and works at a coffee shop by day. However, by night, Cassie, dressed to kill, often visits local bars and clubs, acting drunk and powerless. Lethally stunning, Cassie is on the prowl for nocturnal predators, who are unaware that the hunter will soon become the prey. In the beginning, we do not understand why Cassie continues this ritual. However, we soon find that her actions stem from vengeance. Cassie's childhood best friend, Nina, was raped by a classmate, stigmatized for reporting it, blamed for being too drunk in a potentially violent situation, and subsequently committed suicide as a result. Further, Cassie's behaviors stem from the trauma she faced alongside Nina throughout the entire process. However, Cassie's ritual shifts from random, potentially violent men, to specifically the handful of people who played a part in Nina's fate. She starts with an old classmate who blamed Nina for her predicament, then the school dean who the crime was reported to and did nothing about it, the lawyer of the assailant, and then the assailant himself enacting her revenge accordingly along the way.

VITA

Madison R. Ross was born and raised in the state of Tennessee. She attended the University of Tennessee, Knoxville and graduated in 2020 with a Bachelor of Arts degree, Magna Cum Laude, in Sociology (Criminology and Criminal Justice concentration) and a minor in Psychology. Madison is currently working as a graduate instructor for the Sociology Department at the University of Tennessee teaching Social Problems and Social Justice. She has also served as a research assistant on issues of racialized automobility and voting, migration experiences and trauma, and social learning. She will bring her experience and acquire even more research skills while working as a graduate research assistant in the Office of Information Technology in the Fall of 2022 when she begins pursuing her PhD. She earned a Master of Arts degree in Sociology in 2022 from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Her thesis takes a probing look at how select contemporary US feature films depict the agency of women who encounter extreme victimization and injustice. In addition to her interests in research and learning, Madison enjoys watching, reading about, and listening to true crime narratives. She is also very interested in dark tourism, and she often enjoys mountain biking, days at the park with her dog, and water sports.