

WOMEN IN THE WESTERN

EDITED BY SUE MATHESON



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For my daughter Rebecca

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INTRODUCTION

Sue Matheson

She is essential: as Anthony Mann has pointed out, without a woman, a Western wouldn't work (Cook, in Kitses and Rickman 1998: 293). Since Edwin S. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* (1902), women have populated the Western—among them, a telegraph operator's daughter and train passengers, sagehens and soiled doves, cowgirls and army wives, outlaw queens and school marms, ministers and madams, cattle queens and saloon keepers, doctors and lawyers, mail-order brides and barmaids, nuns and temperance workers, homesteaders and Indian princesses, boarding house matrons and respectable “widders.” Standout female characters in horse operas include Helen Holmes, Annie Oakley, Frenchy, Dallas, Lucy Mallory, Abbie Irving, Elizabeth Bacon, Clementine Carter, Tess Millay, Calamity Jane, Rio MacDonald, Oliva Dainridge, Abbie Allshard, Helen Ramirez, Amy Fowler Kane, Annie Greer, Denver, Sister Ledyard, Sierra Nevada Jones, Mrs. Jorgenson, Fifi Danon, Kathleen Yorke, Vienna, Pearl Chauvez, Vance Jeffords, Cat Ballou, Kitty Russell, Hannie Caulder, Mattie Ross, Constance Miller, Jill McBrain, Hallie Stoddard, Victoria Barkley, Belle Starr, Josephine Monaghan, Lorena Wood, Ada Munroe, Magdalena Gilkeson, Alma Garrett, Juliette Flowers, Mary Bee Cuddy, and Jane Hammond.

These women (like all women in Westerns) transmit complicated cultural coding about the nature of westward expansionism, heroism, family life, manliness, and femininity. To date, however, scholarship about the Western's gender relations (and expectations) has been primarily concerned with issues

of masculinity, masculine desire, and masculine display. Oddly, when critical attention has been directed to issues of femininity, feminine desire, and feminine display, the conversation has usually returned to the topic of the Western hero. Consider John Cawelti's revealing remarks about the Western's approach to gender typing in *The Six-Gun Mystique Sequel*. Lamenting the limitations of the genre's gender roles, Cawelti remarks there are only two kinds of women in the Western—blondes and brunettes. According to Cawelti, these types reflect the dual nature of . . . the male hero (1999: 30). Symbolizing a more "full blooded, passionate and spontaneous nature" (1999: 31), "[t]he dark girl" is "a feminine embodiment of the hero's savage, spontaneous side. She understands [the hero's] . . . deep passions, his savage code of honor and his need to use personal violence." On the other hand, the [blonde] school marm, whom Cawelti says represents "genteel, pure femininity," functions like a superego in a Western psychomachea, rejecting the passionate urges and the freedom and aggressiveness that mark this side of the hero's character: "[w]hen the hero becomes involved with her, the dark woman must be destroyed or abandoned" (1999: 31). For Cawelti, the Western is (among other things) a sexist epic (1999: 11), a male preserve: its hero archetype, the cowboy; its central group and vital relationships, male; its women, embodiments of the genre's masculine psychomachea.

Jane Tompkins also asserts the Western is "fare for men," because manhood in this genre is "*the* ideal, certainly the only one worth dying for" (1992: 17, 18). In *West of Everything*, she observes that Westerns carry "compacted worlds of meaning and value, codes of conduct, standards of judgment, and habits of perception that shape our sense of the world and govern our behavior" (1992: 6). "Women," she says "regularly identify across gender lines" when "engaged" by Westerns, and are forced to look at women from the point of view of men (1992: 17). "[S]imultaneously attracted and repelled by the power of Western heroes, the power that men in our society wield" (1992: 6), she finds that the Western transmits "[t]he whole soul of man." Then, astoundingly, thirteen pages later, she halts and asks the question "'Man?' What about woman?" (1992: 15).

It is an excellent question. To date, no collection of Western scholarship has been devoted exclusively to the nature and development of women characters in the Hollywood West. Consisting of eighteen articles, a selected filmography, and two selected bibliographies, *Women in the Western* offers a variety of approaches on selected topics and significant shifts in Hollywood's transmission of American gender values and expectations regarding under-studied aspects of women in the Western. Here it should be noted that the analyses found in *Women in the Western* divide themselves into two sections: "Roles on the Range" houses chapters that chart the increasing complexity of Western women as the Western develops as a genre; "Women's Issues in Post-war, Revisionist, and Feminist Westerns" contains

chapters which investigate race and gender politics, matters of rape and revenge figures, and the ongoing problem of female agency in the Western. Each chapter demonstrates how women in Westerns refract changes for women that take place in the American zeitgeist of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and considers the longevity of gender stereotypes as well as the assimilation of new ideas and ideologies into America's cultural milieu.

"Roles on the Range" begins with the daring roles that the early Western offered female actors. Cynthia J. Miller's "Silent but Rowdy: Stuntwomen of the Early Frontier" examines female characters, who laid claim to the skills and iconic qualities generally attributed to their male counterparts in silent-era serials and silent feature films. Miller's in-depth look at rowdy women during the birth of the Western establishes how the genre housed a broader and more complex range of roles for women than that found in many other genres during the silent era, and contributed to the "quiet revolution" that would change women's roles in society, as well as on screen, while setting the stage for the depth and diversity of genre's female characters in the mid-twentieth century. Sue Matheson's "Suffering Heroines on the Frontier—Melodrama and Pathos, 1914–39" returns the volume's discussion to roles considered conventional for the Western's leading ladies. In this chapter, Matheson looks at the Victorian constructions of women in the Western: the genre's suffering heroines, the indispensable pathos they generate, and their remarkable (and lasting) makeovers as working women in 1939. David Blanke's "When East Goes West: The Loss of Dramatic Agency in DeMille's Western Women from the 1910s to the 1930s" then examines the impact of strong women characters on the career of one of Hollywood's most influential women's directors. As Blanke points out, without the Western's women, Cecil B. DeMille would never have become "DeMille."¹ In this chapter, Blanke investigates the complexity of women's roles in the Western, demonstrating how the genre and strong female performances were critical to DeMille's initial success in the 1910s, and vital to the director's mid-career professional revival in the mid-1930s, during which the loss of dramatic agency in the representation of women took place. Bridging the gender gap between early and post-war Westerns, David Huxley's study, "The Virginian and the Rose: Two Key Female Roles in Western Films and Comics" also concentrates on the changing roles of women in the genre. He points out the ways in which female characters are not restricted to domestic roles in Owen Wister's 1903 *The Virginian* and its film adaptations and Harry Keller's *The Rose of Cimarron*, a 1952 Twentieth Century Fox production.

The next three chapters in "Roles on the Range" discuss the American Western's post-war engagement with the ideas of Sigmund Freud that helped generate psychologically complicated female characters in frontier melodramas. The oater's fusion with Freud created strong, sophisticated, and controversial leading ladies in "adult" Westerns in their treatments of the

darker side of women's sexual desires and their family lives via *film noir's femme fatale*. Considering *noir*-affiliated characterizations of women in King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun* (1946) and Raoul Walsh's *Pursued* (1947), Gaylyn Studlar's "Freud, 'The Family on the Land,' and the Feminine Turn in Post-war Westerns" demonstrates how family-on-the-land Westerns elevated the importance of women, emphasising the home as a site "of sexual secrets and emotional upheaval while offering "defiant daughters, delinquent sons, sexualized matriarchs and flawed, overreaching patriarchs involved in inter-generational conflict" (2020: 76). Next, Martin M. Winkler's "Clytemnestra and Electra under Western Skies" interrogates the function of revenge, the Electra Complex (as it is commonly understood), and complicated, conflicted portrayals of women in Anthony Mann's epic-tragic *noir* family drama, *The Furies* (1950). In "Never seen a woman who was more of a man': Saloon Girls, Women Heroes, and Female Masculinity in the Western," Christopher Minz argues compellingly that the Western has never been specifically about men. Revisiting Nicholas Ray's cult classic *Johnny Guitar* (1956) and Roger Corman's *Gunslinger* (1956), Minz observes there has always been an unconscious masculinity in the aesthetic and narrative aspects of the genre, particularly in its portrayals of strong women. Then, Fran Pheasant-Kelly's "Gender Politics in the Revisionist Western: Interrogating the Perpetrator-Victim Binary in *The Missing* (Howard 2003)" considers how *The Missing's* gender and racial coding reframes the classic Western's traditional model of the savage "Indian" and woman as helpless victim. Pheasant-Kelly observes that this twenty-first century feminist Western presents a more realistic representation of women than is usual for the genre.

Since the release of James Youngdeer's "White Fawn's Devotion: A Play Acted by a Tribe of Red Indians in America" (1910), miscegenation has been a controversial element of the American Western. The second section of *Women in the Western*, "Women's Issues in Post-war, Revisionist, and Feminist Westerns" begins with chapters that examine film narratives driven by race-mixing and racial stereotypes. Tracing racial and gender coding back to Cynthia Ann Parker's influential captivity narrative,² Kelly MacPhail's "Trading Places—Trading Races: The Cross-Cultural Assimilation of Women in *The Searchers* (1956) and *The Unforgiven* (1960)" considers the controversial subject of women assimilated across cultures and ethnic groups in the cinematic adaptations of Alan LeMay's *The Searchers* (1954) and *The Unforgiven* (1957). According to MacPhail, directors John Ford and John Huston challenge essentialist suppositions of gender and cultural identity, as well as notions of power based in ideas about racial superiority in these films. Robert Spindler's "Western Nostalgia, Revisionism, and Native American Women in *Wind River* (2017)" then considers prototypes of the Celluloid Indian Maiden before arguing that Taylor Sheridan's *Wind River* (2017) continues this design despite its revisionist stance.

After establishing the prominence of Asians in the historical West, Vincent Piturro's "Mostly Whores with a (Very) Few Angels: Asian Women in the Western" investigates the absence of roles for Asian women in Hollywood's West. Piturro first examines the singular representation of Chinese women as whores in the Western via Robert Altman's *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971) and Walter Hill's *Broken Trail* (AMC, 2006), then compares these depictions with representations of women in Asian Westerns like Akira Kurosawa's *Yojimbo* (1961) and Takashi Miike's *Sukiyaki Western Django* (2007).

Remarkably, the Western was one of the first American film genres after the Second World War to probe the nature of rape culture. Maria Cecília de Miranda Nogueira Coelho's "'We been haunted a long time': Raped Women in Westerns" traces representations of rape in rape-revenge stories from the Greek classics and Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* to post-war Westerns via analyses of *Sergeant Rutledge* (Ford, 1960), *Duel in the Sun* (Vidor, 1946), *The Searchers* (Ford, 1956), *Man of West* (Mann, 1958), *The Bravados* (King, 1958), *For a Few Dollars More* (Leone, 1965), *Hang 'em High* (Post, 1968), *Cemetery Without Crosses* (Hossein, 1969) and *The Ballad of Little Jo* (Greenwald, 1993). Following Erin Lee Mock's "'My body for a hand of poker': *The Belle Starr Story* in Its Contexts" moves from cause to effect. Mock observes *The Belle Starr Story*, the only Spaghetti Western that features a female protagonist, borrows tropes from exploitation cinema to smuggle a "female rape-revenge" plot into the male-dominated subgenre. Contending that Lina Wertmüller's revision of the Western's traumatized gunfighter validates women's experiences of trauma in *The Belle Star Story*, Mock assesses radical revisions of female subjectivity, examining the bandit queen and Wertmüller's deviations from the heroine's historical and generic record. Next, in "The Female Avenger in Post-9/11 Westerns," Martin Holtz considers how rape-revenge and the figure of the female avenger act as ideological barometers in three post-9/11 Westerns: *The Missing* (2003), *Bandidas* (2006), and *True Grit* (2011).

Throughout the Western, the conflicted question of agency for women is often addressed but seldom resolved—even in revisionist and feminist Westerns. As Paul Zinder's "You've Got Something: Female Agency in *Justified*" demonstrates, the story arcs of powerful female criminal masterminds—Mags Bennett, Katherine Hale, Winona Givens, and Ava Crowder—support the efficacy of men in this popular televised series. Following this, J Paul Johnson's "Eastward the Women: Remapping Women's Journeys in Tommy Lee Jones's *The Homesman* (2014)" considers Tommy Lee Jones's feminist Western's attempts to revise traditional expectations of the genre by highlighting the frontier's debilitating conditions and emphasizing the resolute character and strength of its female lead, while rendering mute the women to whom it aims to give voice. In "Women Gotta Gun? Iconography and Female Representation in *Godless*," Stella Hockenull determines that, despite its masculinized

female characters and the predominance of women, *Godless* (Netflix 2017) retains the tradition of a male hierarchical figure in which violence rules, and its women ultimately conform to being feminine stereotypes. Finally, Andrew Patrick Nelson's "Wagon Mistress" argues that Kelly Reichardt's feminist Western *Meek's Cutoff* (2010) does not simply revise its portrayal of Western women according to contemporary sensibilities, which is the usual approach for feminist Westerns. According to Nelson, Reichardt's film, which shows in detail "women's work" that is not seen in many Western narratives, aligns the audience's experience of the film's events with its three female characters. *Meek's Cutoff*, he says, is a feminist intervention into the Western, because the film is not only a matter of what we see, but also how we see it.

Women in the Western does not claim to be a comprehensive work on the subject of women in Westerns. Indeed, the scope of the critical work that remains outstanding on women in the Western is so immense that it could easily fill volume after collected volume. For example, for reasons of space, chapters dealing with portrayals of women in Westerns filmed to support the American war effort during the Second World War could not be housed here. In Raoul Walsh's well-regarded recruiting film, *They Died With Their Boots On* (1941), Libby Custer (Olivia de Havilland) courageously furthers her husband's army career and accepts his "sacrifice" at Little Big Horn. Female characters in B-Westerns also supported the war effort on America's home front. John English's *Raiders of Sunset Pass* (1943), S. Roy Luby's *Black Market Rustlers* (1943), Sam Newfield's *Wild Horse Rustlers* (1943), Benjamin Kline's *Sundown Valley* (1944), and Elmer Clifton's *Gangsters of the Frontier* (1944) all contain cowgirl versions of "Rosie the Riveter." As Phil Loy points out in "Soldiers in Stetsons: B-Westerns Go to War," these tough, competent female characters (and others like them in B-Westerns during the Second World War) call for more critical attention.

Like the women in the war-effort Westerns, women in Western comedies also call for their own volume (or volumes)—especially those appearing in films like George Sherman's *Feudin', Fussin and A-Fightin* (1948), Norman Z. McLeod's *The Pale Face* (1948), Preston Sturges's *The Beautiful Blonde from Bashful Bend* (1949), Richard Sale's *A Ticket to Tomahawk* (1950), George Sidney's *Annie Get Your Gun* (1950), R. G. Springsteen's *Oklahoma Annie* (1952), David Butler's *Calamity Jane* (1953), Raoul Walsh's *The King and Four Queens* (1956), George Cukor's *Heller in Pink Tights* (1960), John Sturges's *The Hallelujah Trail* (1965), Elliot Silverstein's *Cat Ballou* (1965), William Graham's *Waterhole #3* (1967), Burt Kennedy's *Support Your Local Sheriff* (1969), Gene Kelly's *The Cheyenne Social Club* (1970), Anton Leader and Ranald MacDougall's *The Cockeyed Cowboys of Calico County* (1970), Paul Bartel's *Lust in the Dust* (1984), Richard Donner's *Maverick* (1994), Joachim Rønning and Espen Sandberg's *Banditas* (2006), William Phillips's

Gunless (2010), and Gore Verbinski's *Rango* (2011). As well, the diverse and powerful female characters of the professional Western deserve more critical attention than this collection is able to provide. From Chiquita (Claudia Cardinale) in Richard Brooks's *The Professionals* (1966) to Josephine MacDonald (Michele Carey) in Howard Hawks's *El Dorado* (1967) to Mattie Ross in Henry Hathaway's *True Grit* (1969) to Teresa (Sonia Amelio) in Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969) to Mrs. Lowe (Ann-Margaret) in Burt Kennedy's *The Train Robbers* (1973) to Jill McBain (Claudia Cardinale) in Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968) to Jean-Claude La Marre's *Gang of Roses* (2003), portrayals of women in professional Westerns not only challenge women's advertised roles, they also challenge what the proponents of the second wave of American feminism have had to say about them.

In short, the largely unexamined roles of women in the overwhelming numbers of Westerns produced on film and television, before and after the Second World War and the appearance of the "feminist Western" offer new frontiers for the genre's scholars and general audiences. Designed to generate further discussion about women in the Western, *Women in the Western* concludes with Camille McCutcheon's Selective, Representative Filmography of Female-Led US Westerns; Selective, Representative Bibliography of Resources on Women in the Western; and Selective, Representative Bibliography of Resources on Women in the Nineteenth-Century US West. It is hoped that these excellent resources will encourage further viewing of women-led Westerns, more reading about women in Western films and the historical West, and more scholarship about women in the Western. To have been considered for inclusion in the filmography, films must have been set in the American West, have been included in the American Film Institute (AFI) Catalog of Feature Films, and feature female actor(s) in a prominent role or roles. As well, the principle female actor must have received first or second billing.

Because lingering Victorian stereotypes and twentieth-century gender politics make women in the Western reliable markers of cultural change in America's gender politics, refracting our actual gender values rather than presenting them as how we wish them to be, I continue to ask (like Tompkins in 1992) when watching Westerns, what about women? Has the status of women in American culture really undergone change—or is the improved status of women in America a convenient fiction put forward that my daughter and her generation will have to debunk? It is my hope that *Women in the Western* will prompt others to ask, "What about women?" off screen, while acting as a staging point for travelers who wish to journey West. I look forward to the conversations that *Women in the Western* will generate and hope that opportunities for further study will continue as long as more Westerns are made.

NOTES

1. For more on DeMille's extended career and reputation among Hollywood's classical era directors, see David Blanke's *Cecil B. DeMille, Classical Hollywood, and Modern American Mass Culture, 1910–1960* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).
2. Arguably, the most famous Indian captive in American history, Cynthia Ann Parker was born in Illinois around 1827. She moved to Texas with her family in 1833. The Parkers helped build Fort Parker in what is now Limestone County. In 1836, the Comanche attacked the fort. At the age of nine, Parker was taken captive and spent the next twenty-four years with the Indians. She married Peta Nocona, with whom she had two sons and a daughter. In 1860, Texas Rangers and federal soldiers rescued her (and her infant daughter) during an attack on a Comanche encampment in north Texas. Reunited with her natural family whom she did not remember, she was unable to assimilate successfully a second time. She died in 1871 and was buried in Anderson County in East Texas. Her son, Quanah Parker, became the most important Comanche leader of his day, representing southwest indigenous Americans to the United States legislature.

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