



BECOMING QUEEN

Barbara Stanwyck's Postwar Westerns

CATHERINE RUSSELL

“Don’t try to make me into something I’m not. If you want someone to tiptoe down the Barkley staircase in crinoline and politely ask where the cattle went, get another girl. That’s not me.”

—Barbara Stanwyck¹

THE Hollywood Western in the 1950s was overhauled in many ways, including the widescreen color aesthetics that helped the film genre persist despite the rise of TV Westerns. After the war, as the civil rights movement gained ground, a renewed relationship with Indigenous peoples and an ever-so-slight retraction of the myth of Manifest Destiny enabled the genre to entertain more complex narratives in which psychology, moral ambiguity, and social justice were increasingly prevalent. It could be argued that the postwar Western was a revisionist genre across the board, as it became more about the myth of the “Last Western” than about the settling of the West itself.²

Women played an important role in this revisionist project, although they were still often relegated to the roles of wives, mothers, and sweethearts. Still a long-standing trend of women-centered Westerns became especially prominent in the 1950s. Its precedents include *Destry Rides Again* (1939, starring Marlene Dietrich), *Arizona* (1940, starring Jean Arthur), and *Duel in the Sun* (1946, starring Jennifer Jones). For Barbara Stanwyck, the genre helped her revive a career as an older woman. In 1950, she was forty-four, and had proudly let her hair go grey. She was actually singled out as one of the most active stars in 1950,³ a year in which she released three films and made two more, while many other actors were feeling the effects of the Paramount decision that forced studios to abruptly end long-term contracts with their “stables” of stars.

Stanwyck had never had such a long-term contract, but had worked on a freelance basis, making short-term and single-picture deals since the 1930s. She felt an affinity

for the Western genre for various reasons, one of which was her sense that it lacked the “artifice” of contemporary settings, as it was close to nature. In fact, as we shall see, her contribution to the genre was a performative one, pushing the Western into a theatrical modality. She herself owned a ranch in the 1930s in Van Nuys, close to Los Angeles, and in the 1930s and had learned to ride fairly well.⁴ She lobbied for many years for her own TV Western series, which she finally got in 1965 with *The Big Valley*, a tremendously successful show that ran for four years and earned her an Emmy and multiple award nominations.

Big Valley solidified Stanwyck’s status as a Screen Queen, not because she was a diva, but because of her character Victoria Barkley, who exuded a beneficent matriarchal power that tended to be equated with Stanwyck’s off-screen role as a queen of any set she was on. She was much loved not only by directors, but also crew members and younger cast members who she mentored and gifted with thoughtful presents. Her professionalism was unparalleled and she was also reputedly sharp with actors who were unprepared, late, or pretentious. Her second husband, Robert Taylor, called her “Queen,” while she called him “Junior.”⁵ They divorced in 1950 and she never remarried, keeping her personal life extremely private, and inspiring unfounded rumors about her sexual orientation.⁶ The nickname was originally bestowed on her by her friend William Holden and was perpetuated by her colleagues and fans, and is sustained at the time of writing by her online fan site.⁷

An analysis of Stanwyck’s postwar Westerns is a method of assessing the emergence of a “strong woman” during an era of profound misogyny. Stanwyck’s career is not at all typical, but it highlights the challenges and contradictions that a woman had to face to break through normative codes of Hollywood heterodoxy in the 1950s. Moreover, analysis of the roles she played re-centers the genre around ideological themes that have not often been remarked upon, including the crucial role of homes, homesteads, ranch houses, and real estate. In Stanwyck’s Westerns, the usual iconography of horses, cattle, landscape, violence, Indigenous people, gambling, and “frontier justice” are all in place, but the quest for home, the defense of home, and the architecture of the settler become prominent. To be sure, this is a long-standing theme of the genre, but we shall see how it is foregrounded in films with a queenly protagonist. A queen needs a home, and the size of the home defines the queen. Moreover, the theme of real men and real women, identities that are constantly being tested in the American Western, become especially prominent in Stanwyck’s Westerns as she steps boldly out of the conventions of femininity.

Queenliness is a popular term in Hollywood discourse, applied not only to women who rise to the top, but also to characters who make spectacles of themselves. Burlesque queens, glamour queens, and movie queens are terms that denote power, but a superficial power that is rarely omnipotent. The 1950s was a decade of bad mothers epitomized in films such as *Rebel without a Cause* (1955) and *Strangers on a Train* (1951), and the term “Momism” was coined by Philip Wylie to effectively reify the psychoanalytic misogyny of the times.⁸ For Wylie, women had become fetishized as ideals, while also gaining emotional power over men through popular Freudian psychodramas; and as

women assumed authority in the home, the workplace, and as patriots, he compares them to tyrants. The authority of Stanwyck's queens was thus symptomatic of the culture at large, as was her challenge to the norms of women in the West, used to being mere helpers to the heroes.

Stanwyck's matriarchs were not all good all the time by any means, but neither were they all bad. Unpacking Stanwyck's queenliness is a means of getting at the double standards applied to female stars in postwar America as well as the way that the Western genre opened a space for performativity and role playing, particularly at the point where the founding myths of manifest destiny were beginning to crumble. Stanwyck's Westerns open another door onto the genre, in which the tired old men make room for new identities, and in the process, expose the genre's preoccupation with issues of real estate, home ownership, and the places where queens reside.

Stanwyck's cycle of postwar Westerns were bracketed by two color films: *California* (1947) and *Roustabout* (1964). In the former she plays a saloon queen who manages to become the mistress of a California robber baron and ex-slave trader, through cunning and good looks, and ends up living the sunny life of a viticulturist in love with Ray Milland's reformed army deserter and gunfighter. The film celebrates the founding of California as a democratic process, at the end of the Westward trek and as the end of Western corruption and violence. In 1964, paired with Elvis Presley in *Roustabout*, Stanwyck plays a Midwest carnival owner dressed in jeans, who is Presley's boss, but not his lover. The West is little more than a distant memory in this film, reduced to a small town fairground, and the queen is a struggling business owner.

Between these two films, *California* and *Roustabout*, one of which celebrates the triumphant end of Westward expansion, and the other that celebrates the emergence of a new generation of American legends, lie ten Western-themed films starring Barbara Stanwyck. Her queenliness in this cycle includes vengeance-seeking women, gun-fighting frontierswomen, gang leaders, and colonial white women, most of whom live to the end of the story. Her characters relive the frontier narrative again and again, tweaking it each time, and not always toward more diverse or humanist outcomes. Her subsequent television career is also dominated by frontier narratives, as the frontier theme is recast as one of capitalist power, greed, and corruption.

The question of Stanwyck's queenliness is not only a question of an older woman's survival in a medium that increasingly catered to young people. It's also about the persistence of a working woman whose politics were increasingly at odds with the emergent counterculture. She survived the Cold War in Hollywood by sticking to her conservative Republican values, even if her on- and off-screen status as an active, powerful woman was more in line with the nascent woman's movement than she herself was ready to admit. Stanwyck off-screen was a woman of few words. Even during the HUAC hearings, while she stood by her man, Robert Taylor, who named names, she herself remained on the sidelines. One of her biggest career disappointments was losing the role of Dominique in Warner Brothers' production of Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead*, a property that she herself had brought to Jack Warner in 1943, saying she was born to play the role of Dominique, the book's central female character.

Rand's philosophy of individualism has emerged as a pillar of neoliberal ideology, and Stanwyck's affection for it is indicative of her contradictory status as a heroic American woman, even if it runs counter to our expectations of a feminist hero. Rand managed to provide an aesthetic character of rebellion, resistance, opposition, and dissent for the "capitalist subject",⁹ which was arguably manifest in Stanwyck's queenly status. What power her characters achieve onscreen is always at the same time a potential challenge to the patriarchal status quo. Even if that potential is repeatedly undercut, "contained" and closed off, the aesthetics of gender reversals are closely tied to the assertion of heroic agency and self-determination. In fact, in postwar Hollywood, success in a man's world remained on men's terms.

Stanwyck's long-standing interest in the Western genre led her to read voraciously about Calamity Jane and other Western stories and novels, and she also had a personal collection of Remington portraits of pioneer women. She believed that the characters that emerged from the Buffalo Bill show, such as Annie Oakley, were "America's aristocracy," which was a sentiment she borrowed directly from President Eisenhower.¹⁰ She had the opportunity to play Annie Oakley in the 1935 film of that name, a studio-bound tale of *Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show*. She became well known for wanting to do her own stunts—which she frequently did, she said, to ensure the integrity of the shoot, and she was regularly injured because of it.

Although Stanwyck was inspired by the women who got down and dirty, building the west with their own hands, it was in fact an authoritative, matriarchal role that she ended up filling more often, although rarely as an actual mother. The fifties were a challenging decade for women actors of Stanwyck's generation. Fewer and fewer good roles were available, and their salaries lost par with men of their age.¹¹ From 1950 to 1957, Stanwyck performed in twenty features, even though audience demographics shifted to a younger male audience, and new method-trained stars such as Montgomery Clift and Shelley Winters were on the rise.¹² During the 1950s Joan Crawford made only thirteen features during the 1950s, and Bette Davis starred in only ten, although like Stanwyck, they had also become active in television. Not only did Stanwyck continue working in Hollywood, by the end of the decade she was a millionaire, whereas many of her colleagues had fallen on hard times.¹³ Toward the end of her cycle of Western films, Stanwyck's characters assumed the mantle of women who outlived the myth, keeping pace with the aging heroes played by John Wayne, Gary Cooper, and Jimmy Stewart.

Stanwyck's strong Western women are queenly, in part, because they live on beyond their time, gaining viewers with their campiness. Somewhat ironically, given her own preference for nature over culture, Stanwyck's performance as an older woman endowed her with a larger-than-life quality, enhanced by the blond and orange wigs she wore to compliment the bright colors of spectacle, but also by her ability to bring men to their knees in fear. Stanwyck had a trademark ability to deliver strong-worded speeches loaded with moral authority, and she performed these in dozens of different contexts, to men and women who could only quake in their boots. The films frequently open themselves up to new interpretations and readings that can separate the critical contours of

Stanwyck's performances from the narratives that tend to close down their potential to shake up the status quo.

Stanwyck's hardworking reputation was well deserved, although it meant that she sometimes accepted roles when the scripts didn't deserve her ability to create engaging characters. Nevertheless, throughout the 1950s she retained top billing, or co-starred with her male partners and was thus instrumental in "selling" the films. Even as a star in the 1930s and 1940s, Stanwyck was rarely paired with strong actors, as her large hard-fought-for salaries precluded matching salaries for male leads. In the 1930s she emerged as a star of pre-Code films with a daring style of performance linked to the "New Woman," and in the latter part of the decade she became known as a woman's film woman, triumphing in the coveted leading role of *Stella Dallas* in 1937. Her career peaked in the early 1940s with the successes of *The Lady Eve* (dir. Preston Sturges, 1941) and *Double Indemnity* (dir. Billy Wilder, 1943), films that showcased her talent for comedy and for conveying dangerous duplicity. Thus her Western roles are nourished by decades of melodrama, comedy, and noir. A tour through Stanwyck's late career takes us into the margins of the industry as the studio system dissolved into the multimedia landscape brought on by TV. Stanwyck made several excellent film noirs in the late 1940s and early 1950s, several melodramas, including two with Douglas Sirk, and a string of painful gothic women's films, but the Westerns constitute half of her filmography for the 1950s, and helped her leverage her way into two-and-a-half more decades of TV roles.

THE FURIES AND THE VENGEANCE OF WOMEN

In Anthony Mann's 1950 film *The Furies* Stanwyck plays Vance Jeffries, the daughter of T.C. Jeffries (John Huston), owner of a vast ranchland bearing the same name as the film. The shadowy black-and-white cinematography sustains a permanent dusk of day-for-night shooting. Mann flirts with Freudian scenarios of illicit desires, as Stanwyck and Huston playfully tangle verbally and physically. She scratches his back just the way he likes it, and she puts her feet up on his desk as if taking his place in front of his face, meeting his gaze with laughing eyes. Vance haunts her dead mother's bedroom, dons her wedding dress, and coddles luxurious gifts from T.C. "The Furies" is also a Greek myth about the vengeance of women, and when her father wrongs her, Vance follows through with panache. Stanwyck is posed repeatedly with her hands on her hips, legs spread, and head high—the image of a hero.

Philosopher Jacques Rancière says of Mann's Westerns, that "the film fable is a thwarted fable."¹⁴ Storytelling and narration are challenged by the visual style, so the "fable" of *The Furies* may be about land ownership and succession, but the promise of a new social order and the power of angry women are counternarratives to the tale of corrupt capitalism. For Rancière, the "visual order" of Mann's cinema tends to outstrip the



FIGURE 17.1 *The Furies* (1950, dir. Anthony Mann).

director's control,¹⁵ but in this case, it's possible that Stanwyck outsmarted her director. In 1957 Mann said that "women do not have much importance in Westerns," that they just get in the way,¹⁶ apparently forgetting or dismissing his work with Stanwyck, and Rancière also claims that the heroine constitutes "an eternal problem of Western narration."¹⁷ And yet, in *The Furies*, Vance's power is underscored by the parallel powers of other angry women who help her along the way, unlocking and taking advantage of the deep contradictions within the genre.

The opening titles of *The Furies* celebrate TC as the "king" who "wrote this flaming page in the history of the great Southwest," obscuring Vance's central role in the story. She appears in every scene, and her actions propel the narrative, meeting all Rancière's criteria for a Mannian hero who is not a moralist but one who acts: Rancière says "And that's it. He does some things."¹⁸ Vance is from another time, which is postwar America, revisiting the "period of the end of the Western, that moment when its images were being severed from its beliefs and put to use in a new game."¹⁹ Rancière says that Mann explores the "potential" of legends, the means by which a myth becomes a fable. Here the fable is nevertheless a game of "what if" a woman was to inherit everything, and if the problem of narration is precisely the problem of the hero's success, Vance's final triumph is tainted. At the end, she wins the ranch, but she also marries her father's nemesis, Rip Darrow (Wendell Cory), so her child will bear the name Darrow, and thus her victory

is compromised. The patriarchal law of succession is the only cause for the doom-laden skies over the couple's final return to the ranch. The wrought iron sign for "The Furies" under which they pass is filmed from the "wrong" side, backwards, signifying the inversion that the film has accomplished.

Vance challenges the established order from the outset, in her transgressive relationship with the Mexican "squatter" Juan Herrera (Gilbert Roland). Vance and Juan share a ritual of breaking bread together, as they have been "best friends" forever; and yet their kiss suggests much more than friendship. However, Vance nevertheless turns on Juan abruptly, intoning her father's feudal logic, shifting from lover to master, before kissing him. These are daring images of miscegenation, and the passion of their meetings tested the limits of censorship at the time.²⁰ Vance's empathy for the Herrera family points to a more modern, utopian vision of the American frontier that is violently crushed by her father when he has Juan hung in front of his daughter's eyes.

Vance unleashes the full force of her anger against her new stepmother Flo, played by Judith Anderson, throwing a pair of scissors in Flo's face, right in her dead mother's bedroom. Her impulsive frenzy and outburst of violence raises Stanwyck's character to the status of psychological hero with untapped wells of anger. Her open-eyed expression and quick movement are stunning and surprising, importing a film-noirish dark fever into the Western setting. When TC needs a bailout, the disfigured stepmother finally refuses, striking her own blow against the patriarch. The most furious fury in *The Furies* is Juan's mother, Mrs. Herrera (Blanche Yurka), who finally shoots TC in the back, killing him on the main street of town. With his last breath he compliments her on her marksmanship, and announces the end of an era: "There will never be another like me." Mrs. Herrera is referred to repeatedly over the course of the film as "the witch," and she is indeed the embodiment of all those disenfranchised and broken by Western expansion and imperialism.

Of all the women-centered Westerns made during the studio era, *The Furies* is perhaps the darkest. Mann's fable of a man's last stand is also an opening for those he has wronged: women and marginalized peoples. The Old West is dead, again, as it would repeatedly die over the course of the decade. The point is made here, that the West inherited by women and those who have crossed the white patriarch is not the mythical West of the open frontier, but a violent terrain of ethnic cleansing, misogyny, corruption, and—given Darrow's side business as a brothel owner—sex trafficking.

GIRLS AND GUNS: REAL WOMEN BEAR ARMS

The woman is only considered a "problem" for the Western when the theme of the genre is taken to be cowboys, masculinity, and heroism, which most canonical accounts of the genre take for granted,²¹ but the woman problem is actually fundamental to a genre obsessed with the recognition of real men and real women, perhaps because on the frontier it can be sometimes difficult to draw a clear line between them. The frontier is a

testing ground, outside the infrastructure of “civilization” even though women are expected to embody that theme in the role of housekeepers. “Real women” bear children and have families, fending off the loose ladies of the saloon along with other challenges to the heterosexual compact. Moreover, as Jane Tompkins observes, men in Westerns disdain women’s talk and their obsession with language,²² but in her Westerns, Stanwyck is active, and also talks a lot, letting the “inner life” out loose on her tongue, telling people what she thinks of them. Stanwyck never played a demure character like Grace Kelly’s “Amy” in *High Noon* (1952), although she did play several closer to Katy Jurado’s saloon girl Helen in the same film. Real women are also on the right side of the law, and in *The Moonlighter* (dir. Ray Rowland, 1953), Stanwyck is deputized to hunt down an escaped outlaw played by Fred MacMurray; in *Cattle Queen of Montana* (dir. Allan Dwan, 1954), she likewise helps to restore order on her father’s land, and in both films, she is armed.

In one of her best action scenes, Stanwyck cleverly kills Ward Bond’s character in *The Moonlighter* (1953) by running and ducking around boulders in the desert, dressed in a smart checked jacket. Stanwyck’s character Rela is deputized as Sheriff, but as she leads Fred MacMurray to justice, she slips and falls down a waterfall, slipping through dangerous rock crevices and bouncing to the river below. Stanwyck claims that she performed this stunt herself because the stunt woman was not available that day, against the wishes of the producers.²³ However, after MacMurray saves her, she falls in love with



FIGURE 17.2 *The Moonlighter* (1953, dir. Roy Rowland).

him and forgives him for his crimes and the film ends with a repeat of the treacherous crossing, but this time MacMurray is in the lead, and they make it safely to the other side and romp away together to live happily ever after. Stanwyck's own hero was Pearl White, action queen of early American cinema, and in *The Moonlighter* she gets to show off her agency and agility, only to have it drowned in a whitewash of romance. Her lover remains a hunted dangerous man with plenty of prison time in his future, but instead of sticking to the law as one might expect of a "real woman," she follows her heart and falls in love with the male lead, taking another track to confirm the status quo.

In keeping with Hollywood's addiction to romantic heterosexual closure, Stanwyck's heroic characters in Westerns were frequently curtailed by romance plots that contained and controlled her authority with a final kiss. Despite the title of *Cattle Queen of Montana* (dir. Alan Dwan, 1954), Stanwyck's character Sierra Nevada Jones is not yet a "queen," and more like an aspiring princess. In this ostensibly "pro-Indian" Western she befriends a "good" Indian named Colorados (Lance Fuller, a part-Cherokee actor) as well as a cowboy named Farrell (Ronald Reagan) who turns out to be a spy for the US Cavalry, with whom she predictably falls in love. Although she makes a young Indian woman, Starfire (Yvette Duguay), jealous, Jones does not have a romantic relationship with Colorados, but uses him to help with her land claim against an evil white land baron.

Jones defends the land that her father has title to, and for which he is brutally killed by the "bad Indians" in the opening scenes. It is a familiar Western narrative of land ownership and the triumph of virtue, achieved through violence and genocide. The land of the "free" is available to those who rise up and triumph over smaller men and women. Sierra Nevada Jones shocks the local townspeople by befriendng Colorados, who also doubt her platonic relationship with him. Sierra Nevada Jones is a crack shot, even though Farrell shoots a pistol right out of her hand in one of their first encounters. Predictably only Starfire and Colorados's nemesis Powhane (Rodd Redwing) die, while Jones and Farrell end up riding away, happily ever after, and Colorados is "assimilated" to the side of law and order. *Cattle Queen* was trounced by the critics as a formulaic genre film.²⁴ Despite the progressive discourse of "good Indians," most of the other Indigenous people (except Colorados and Starfire) are depicted as vicious, drunk, and savage. However, the *L.A. Daily News* led off their review with the statement: "We are witnesses, it would seem, to the death of a Hollywood era. . . . that gallant age when Western heroines were a sweet and gentle race,"²⁵ although Stanwyck herself dismissed the picture as "awful."

The phrase "all you need to make a movie is a girl and a gun" is a theme in Jean-Luc Godard's *Histoire du Cinéma*. For Godard, a girl with a gun may constitute the thrilling potential of sex and violence in the movies, but the phrase also points to the critical threat of women and power that Hollywood films usually seek to contain and control within the narrative mechanics of their storylines. Stanwyck's portrayal of Sierra Nevada Jones exemplifies the spectacle of a girl and a gun, but her character also poses the question of a woman's power and desire in settler mythology. Jones's agency, like a man's, is closely aligned with the freedom to bear arms, settle the land, and train Indigenous

people to play along, but she uses seduction along with gunplay and pathos to disguise her true power.

Stanwyck's friendship with Ronald Reagan, which began long before the production of *Cattle Queen of Montana*, helps to explain Stanwyck's affiliation on- and off-screen with the ideology of liberal individualism. It is of course Reagan's America in which neoliberal state power intensified, and came to eschew government support of citizens in favor of the mystified "moral core" of American virtue—which includes and is ideologically grounded in the right to bear arms.²⁶ For Sarah Anker, American melodrama is a key site where individual heroism becomes aligned with the state in a grand nation-building project grounded in myth and legend.²⁷ As melodramas, even the "pro-Indian" Westerns of the 1950s clearly continue the moralizing authority of the liberal state. In *Cattle Queen*, Farrell and Sierra Jones are ordinary people who become extraordinary through their moral integrity and mastery of violence. Anker concedes that although such heroism is typically gendered male, "gender norms of melodrama have never been tidy,"²⁸ which is exemplified in Stanwyck's Western roles.

In *Cattle Queen* Starfire, the Indigenous princess, is shot and dies in the arms of Sierra Nevada Jones. Stanwyck wears buckskin and returns the woman's gaze in a "Pietà"-like pose that symbolically registers an affinity, sympathy, and empathy between the two women. While woman-centered Westerns are not necessarily any more melodramatic than their more familiar male-centered counterparts, scenes such as this crystalize the emotional affective pull that the genre produces.²⁹ As Anker explains it, "The national identity constructed out of melodrama can thus elide the unequal realms of freedom, as they are lived in the daily particulars of American lives marked by . . . unequal access



FIGURE 17.3 *Cattle Queen of Montana* (1954, dir. Allan Dwan).

to power.”³⁰ The “assimilated,” educated, Indigenous people that are included in the “pro-Indian” Westerns are incorporated into a melodramatic nation-building theme, which is enabled by the ascension of the girl and a gun to heroic status. However, along with the white woman, they remain in the shadows of the embrace of the heroic white man. During breaks in the production, Reagan combed the region for real estate deals, continuing the practice of the land barons before him.³¹

BAD QUEENS ALWAYS DIE

Stanwyck’s proven versatility enabled her to play complex characters such as Vance in *The Furies*. Her stunning attack on her stepmother in that film comes from a character whose impulses transgress the usual codes of female decorum. She plays even more dangerous characters in *Blowing Wild* (dir. Hugo Fregonese, 1953) and *The Violent Men* (dir. Rudolph Maté, 1955). The former is set among oil wells in mid-twentieth-century Mexico, a different kind of frontier, featuring the generic Western iconography of horses, a rural setting, Mexican bandits, violence, and a ballad-like theme song, not to mention the expropriation of resource-rich land. Stanwyck’s character Marina Conway is married to Paco (Anthony Quinn), but is in love with his new business partner Jeff (Gary Cooper), who loves another woman dealing blackjack in the local saloon. *Blowing Wild* is more melodrama than Western perhaps, but Stanwyck has a couple of great riding scenes through the Mexican countryside.

After one of her rejections by Jeff, Marina pounds out her distress by riding across through streams and under ancient bridges, accompanied by the “Blowing Wild” theme song, until she finally dismounts and collapses crying on the ground. In another scene, she races Jeff and Paco, who are driving a 1940 Packard Custom Super Eight while she rides a big white stallion, beating them within seconds. Like many of Stanwyck’s riding scenes, these scenes create a spectacle that briefly disrupts the narrative like a song and dance number, only with horses and scenery. Eventually Marina shoves her husband into a pumping oil well, before being killed herself by the Mexicans trying to reclaim their stolen land from the American interlopers. Her violence against Paco is as vengeful and horrific as her scissor thrust in *The Furies*. These are frontier women with deep anger and a ferocious temper.

Stanwyck’s character Martha Wilkinson in *The Violent Men* is one of her most treacherous and wicked characters. Stanwyck plays the wife of land baron Lew Wilkinson (Edward G. Robinson) who has been wheelchair-bound since he was wounded in a battle over ranch land that he has not stopped fighting. Martha conspires with her lover and brother-in-law Cole (Brian Keith) to displace her husband and run the “entire valley” on her own. One of Stanwyck’s first lines to Cole is that she is tired of being married to half a man, explicitly linking her malicious power to her husband’s disability. She finally leaves Lew to die in a burning house, throwing his crutches over the balustrade. However, in this fast-moving film, in which local rancher Parrish (Glenn Ford)

ultimately usurps Wilkerson's aggressive land grab and assumes it peacefully, through marriage to the nice daughter Judy, Stanwyck is killed in the end by Cole's jealous Mexican mistress.

In keeping with the still-relevant PCA guidelines, bad women are punished, and Stanwyck was willing and able to take the hit. To offset her violent and vengeful women, who accuse men of not being "real men" for not doing their jobs as heroes, both *Blowing Wild* and *The Violent Men* feature younger women with fewer scenes to fulfill the promise of romantic closure, and allow Stanwyck to deliver bossy monologues that make men quake in their boots. However, the tendency throughout her cycle of postwar Westerns is to come out on top, as Queen, landowner, and romantically linked to a gunslinger (or lawyer in the case of *The Furies*), despite the heaps of bodies that lie in her path.

WHITE WOMEN AND THE COLONIAL FRAME OF THE WESTERN

In *Escape to Burma* (Allan Dwan, 1955) Stanwyck prowls through a studio-built jungle in the thinly disguised World Animal Jungle Compound in Thousand Oaks California, in widescreen technicolor (Superscope). She plays Gwen Moore, the owner of a teak plantation, a colonial landowner barking orders to her staff of elephant herders and house staff in overpronounced English. Technically not a Western, *Escape to Burma* closely follows the Western template of rural life, colonialism, social hierarchies, outlaws and undercover lawmen. Gwen Moore's plantation is not unlike a ranch, and her home is not unlike a ranch house that she has inherited from her father. The film offers the viewer an escape from the banalities of everyday life in America by indulging in an Orientalist fantasy of adventure, romance, and colorful spectacle, shot in full color by John Alton. None of the characters in the film actually escape to Burma, as the *New York Times* critic noted at the time—underlining the Technicolor dreamscape of the art direction: "Everyone is in Burma, or a back lot decked out to look like Burma, so how can you escape to a place you're already at?"³² The parallels between the Burmese-set narrative and the Western can only foreground the colonialist origins of the Western mythology.

In this action-packed film, Gwen Moore at one point tracks a tiger with a shotgun. However, her new friend Jim Brekan (Robert Ryan) is right behind her and fires the fatal shot when she accidentally falls down a cliff and the tiger leaps at her. The tiger is never in the same frame as the actors, so the sequence remains a fantasy in which Gwen Moore (and Stanwyck) is robbed of her prize. She nevertheless hires Brekan to work for her, despite all the clues that he is on the run from someone for something. In fact he is accused by the Burmese King of killing the Prince and stealing royal rubies. Mr. Cardigan (David Farrar) is hired by the King to arrest Brekan, setting up a chase scenario between two white men in the jungle. Gwen joins in to help Cardigan, and the three of them of course get lost among the dense blue-lit vegetation.

One of the most evocative scenes in this rather absurd film is when Gwen Moore and her two buddies Brecan and Cardigan find themselves surrounded by the Burmese army inside Gwen's Oriental ranch house. They barricade themselves inside and shoot through the holes in the decorative grills in a situation evocative of the assault on the homestead in the Western. Many natives are killed before Ryan finally surrenders, fearing for Gwen's life, and Cardigan finally hauls him off to the King. Gwen describes her sprawling bungalow as her father's pride and joy, positioning herself within a patriarchal lineage of land ownership. The house is indeed spectacular, filled with kitschy Orientalist artifacts in a blue-green wash of light, and is embedded in the jungle with a continuum of potted plants and flowering vines. Gwen may breed elephants instead of cattle and horses, but the colonial settings of the American West and the Burmese rainforest are otherwise identical.

Within the stylish pastel palette of the art direction, Stanwyck's character is fluidly integrated into the fantastical *mise en scene* in which white supremacy is "naturalized" by style. The aesthetic is distinctly antirealist. She is the Queen of the jungle, on equal footing with the Burmese King, paralleling his hierarchy with her own. He owns Cardigan as his errand boy, and she ends up with Brecan, with whom she ends up living happily ever after once again. Colonial and patriarchal hierarchies are fantastically inverted, at the expense of nature and realism. The artifice of nature in *Escape to Burma* should be regarded as a cinematic ecosystem in which nature is subordinate to technology, rendered mute and invisible. Jennifer Petersen has made this argument with respect to *Brigadoon* (1954), suggesting that Hollywood's studio-built landscapes mark the margins of the Anthropocene.³³

Stanwyck's whiteness is also a critical element of her character in *Trooper Hook* (dir. Charles Marquis Warren, 1957) a film that uses the Western genre to explore issues of racism and miscegenation. *Trooper Hook* is the most bleak of all of Stanwyck's Westerns. She plays the most victimized of all the characters in her entire career, the most silent, and the most submissive. Cora is a white woman who has been held captive by an Indigenous chief, and is rescued by Joel McCrea (the eponymous Trooper Hook) with her half-breed child, which is in some ways a familiar captivity narrative of American film and literature. *Trooper Hook* poses as a "pro-Indian" movie, and we certainly have some sympathy for Cora when she is snubbed by whites for having the child of an Indigenous man, but the film is not without racist sentiment by any means. Cora tells Hook that Nanchez, the Chief whom she slept with, treated her fairly, but the "squaws" were mean until she "became one of them. Looked like them, smelled like them."

Nanchez (Rodolfo Acosta) executes most of Hook's platoon in the film's opening scene, including his C.O., and is the epitome of the "savage Indian" stereotype. Dozens of Indians are killed in turn by the cavalry before Hook is delegated to escort Cora back to her husband. When they find him, he is not impressed, rejecting both his wife and her child. The Indigenous people remain stereotyped as primitive savages, so that the film's message of tolerance seems more inspired by the civil rights movement of the time than by any real revisiting of Indigenous rights. Nanchez stalks the stage coach as Cora and Hook traverse the desert and finally kills the racist husband, who kills him in return,



FIGURE 17.4 *Trooper Hook* (1957, dir. Charles Marquis Warren).

thus perpetuating the cycle of retributive violence that sustains the genre and reifies the image of the Indigenous man as terrorist.

Far from being queenly in *Trooper Hook*, Stanwyck's character is helpless without a man to protect her, just because Cora had sex with an Indigenous man. Her relationship to the child is cold and mechanical, and Stanwyck's performance is curiously restrained. *Trooper Hook* is largely shot in studio using process shots to depict the couple's travels by stagecoach across the desert. Enhancing the sense of awkwardness and discomfort (on the part of Cora, but also on the part of the viewer unused to seeing Stanwyck in such a submissive role). In the final shot of Cora, Hook, and Quito riding off into the sunset, the jiggling background landscape takes up much more of the frame than the actors. It is the most unsettling of the process shots because they are now seated on a buggy, rather than a stagecoach, superimposed on the blank, featureless landscape. Laura Mulvey calls such shots a "clumsy sublime"³⁴ because process shots tend to register a double temporality, and the studio performances can seem almost like a tableau vivant, given the limited movements possible within the set-up.

Like the fake jungles of *Escape to Burma*, the "clumsy sublime" of *Trooper Hook* foregrounds the dangerous currents of gender as they intersect with race in the discontinuous terrain of the Anthropocene. Stanwyck's characters are heroic in their own new ways, as they push the limits of colonialist ideology. Even as a mother she is "unnatural" in the film's stumbling vocabulary of racial tolerance; at the same time, in *Trooper Hook*, she is also homeless, as if the Western stripped of its spectacle—including the spectacle of saloon queens and cross-dressed women like Calamity Jane—is unable to settle. The artifice and discontinuity of these films enables her persona as the tough action heroine

to articulate new forms of imperfect race relations as the colonial ideology begins to show cracks.

GANG LEADER

The saloon queen, like the related tropes of brothel queen, dance-hall queen, and burlesque queen, is a familiar Western sobriquet, and many women in Westerns, if they aren't patiently waiting for the men to return home, can be found in the saloons that double as brothels and hotels. Women could become business owners in the Western narrative, owning casinos, bars, and other women. Stanwyck played many such women, including Kit Banion in *The Maverick Queen* (dir. Joseph Kane, 1956). Her entrance in this film is in a window over a saloon called "The Maverick Queen Hotel," identifying her character from the outset as a landowner. Kit is not ashamed of her career trajectory. However, she is getting tired of it, this being like all 50s Westerns about the lateness of the genre.

Both the original Zane Grey novel *The Maverick Queen*, and the 1956 film include the familiar Western legendary characters Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, who are leaders of the Wild Bunch, alongside Kit Banion. It is clear in the novel that Kit has built her empire by branding calves rustled from other people's herds. She herself is an outlaw, but she is ready to go straight and betray the Wild Bunch, and thus trigger the end of the Wild West. She plans a successful train heist, carried out by the gang, but she falls for a traveling gangster/outlaw (Barry Sullivan) who turns out to be a Pinkerton



FIGURE 17.5 *The Maverick Queen* (1956, dir. Joseph Kane).

detective in disguise. She dies in his arms when the law catches up to the Wild Bunch, but the detective ends up living happily ever after with Lucy Lee (Mary Murphy), a cattle queen in her own right. In fact, Lucy might as well have walked right out of *Cattle Queen of Montana*, a younger Sierra Nevada Jones, although Lucy is significantly less active, mouthy, or bossy.

In *Maverick Queen*, Stanwyck's "excess" as a bossy, powerful, splendid, active woman is in the end curtailed by her turn to the law and, finally, her death in a gun fight. In the survival of the young morally upstanding Lucy, the film exhibits a splitting of the female which is a familiar strategy of containment in Hollywood scriptwriting. The film's publicity features Stanwyck dressed much as Crawford in the *Johnny Guitar* (1954) publicity, wearing black pants, bright colors and posed in a power stance. The campiness of the film's marketing, along with Stanwyck's star power, and a theme song by Victor Young, make Stanwyck's character, the *Maverick Queen*, the center of the film.³⁵ Killing off Kit Banion is ostensibly a sign of the end of the Old West, but at the same time, it undercuts everything the film has promised.

The parallels between *Maverick Queen* and *Johnny Guitar* are not coincidental, as both films were produced by Republic Pictures. The Stanwyck film shares many plot details with *Johnny Guitar*, including the female lead, the stranger in town, and a gang holed up in a remote home called "the Hole." For *Maverick Queen* Republic added a new wide-screen technique called Naturama for an even more spectacular image that ironically creates a tangible world of artifice in which the colors pop with vibrant hues. In her indoor scenes, Stanwyck, fitted out with a long red wig, wears gaudy, glittering gowns, and wields a turquoise feathered fan that complements the baroque gilt of the interior décor. In the film's latter scenes, Kit cross-dresses in black pants, a gun belt, and a Stetson, riding and shooting like a true outlaw. *The Maverick Queen* lacks the rich double-layered dialogue of *Johnny Guitar*, as well as Nick Ray's casual pacing and careful framing, but it can nevertheless be read as camp.

Stanwyck's last real Western film, *Forty Guns* (1957) is her campiest, but also her strongest Western, perhaps because Sam Fuller recognized the potential she offered for a Western that would be fully revisionist, but would retain the intensity, drama, and action that the genre promised. As Jessica Drummond, Stanwyck once again leads a troupe of outlaws, but this time, as the title boldly announces, there are forty of them. Fuller used black-and-white widescreen, a format that highlights the storytelling, legend-making, meta-commentary of its "Late Western" thrust. He also uses kinetic editing, extreme close-ups and long shots, slow dissolves, special effects, and extra-long tracking shots in a Cinemascope framing that seems to have its own inner violence. It is not as dark as *The Furies*, but it is nevertheless darkened with passing clouds and a full-blown tornado.

The working title was "Woman with a Whip," which becomes the theme song, crooned repeatedly by Jidge Carroll, who also plays the owner of the town bathhouse. Stanwyck has a fabulous entrance, galloping across the landscape on a white stallion followed by forty men riding in formation, evoking Marlon Brando and his biker gang entering *The Wild One* (1953). Dressed all in black, she commands through her swagger and her husky voice. Jessica Drummond is larger than life, a caricature of a powerful "baroness"



FIGURE 17.6 *Forty Guns* (1957, dir. Samuel Fuller).

or authoritarian landowner. Her overwrought mansion is fronted by columns and hung with heavy curtains and chandeliers, evoking the familiar hierarchies of plantation culture that will outlast the legends of the West. She lords it over her forty guns and the whole neighborhood; and yet Stanwyck makes this woman deeply sympathetic, charming, and vulnerable, as well as tyrannical and fearless.

The image presented by Jessica Drummond is best described as a dominatrix, and *Forty Guns* is above all, a campy fantasy of female empowerment. Its satirical flavor and ironic display of Western iconography, language, love, and gender is an excellent incarnation of the myth of the last Western; at the same time, this film initiates a new cycle of stylized Westerns insofar as Fuller's formal excess was taken up by Sergio Leone and Akira Kurosawa in the 1960s. Fuller's script was rejected by Darryl Zanuck so Fuller produced it independently.³⁶ It played as a B movie and as popular drive-in fare, and was revitalized when Jean-Luc Godard paid homage to it in *Breathless* (1969) which ensured the film—and Fuller's—longevity.

Camp is a slippery concept because it involves both performance and spectatorship. As Susan Sontag argues, "To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing a Role. It is the farthest expression, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theatre."³⁷ As an unfixed cultural economy of taste and production, camp is not only a mode of performance, but is also a critical tool that can help to unpack textual contradictions, particularly around gender coding. Stanwyck's Westerns routinely failed at the box office, but as Hollywood texts they are important because they actively produce a constructive ambivalence around female sexuality. She is performing imaginary characters, testing the limits of Western legend and mythology as it had been solidified in the Hollywood genre, and to do so she needs to step out of all the conventions of "real women," just as her characters are constantly pointing up the failures of the men to be "men." Male characters, for their part, constantly doubt her characters' abilities and leadership, but she persists in every case. There may be no men or women in the Myth of the Last Western, but a constant series of new men and new women on the American Frontier, in a state of becoming.

Fuller refused to cast Marilyn Monroe who desperately wanted the part and was on contract with Fox, because he saw in Stanwyck the kind of maturity and performativity he wanted for the role.³⁸ Even if *Forty Guns* is comedic and satirical on one level, it enables Stanwyck to create a dynamic, performative, character. It's not only Fuller's flashy stylistic techniques that makes *Forty Guns* an important transitional film from "Classical Hollywood" to the modern independent cinema of the post-Classical era,³⁹ it's Stanwyck's "knowing" characterization of a Western performer. She is playing a role, which is absolutely necessary for a woman to gain authority over forty men.

Stanwyck's Jessica Drummond is unusually explicit about sex, and about the conventions of genre. In her first scene with Barry Sullivan who plays the Federal Marshall Griff Bonell, Jessica asks if she can "feel it"—Griff's trademark Colt—and he reluctantly hands it over. She flips it expertly in her hand, and he warns her "it might go off in your face." The film is riddled with such sexual innuendo, delivered in deadpan, along with casual references to violence and guns. She offers him the job of Sheriff, saying "a popular killer like you is sure to be elected." Griff, like so many Westerners, is a "retired" gunslinger, haunting the West with unconvincing pacifism, as he triggers a chain of reciprocal violence. Griff doesn't take the Sheriff job, but persists in his mission to arrest the outlaw he is seeking (one of Jessica's forty guns). The man is, however, conveniently killed under Sheriff Hogan's watch (Dean Jagger)—for which Hogan is whipped and insulted by Jessica—and so Griff needs to kill the man's killer, Charlie Savage. With the help of his brothers, he kills Savage, but then his brother is killed on his wedding day by Jessica's brother Brockie, so he has to kill Brockie, which, eventually, he does.

Stanwyck's bravura performance is casually undermined by the theme song for *Forty Guns* that analogizes the woman with a horse that needs breaking. The ending likewise sees Jessica capitulate to domesticity when she runs after Griff as he leaves town, proving the song right after all, that she's "only a woman after all." Although Fuller says that the ending was forced on him by the studio, it was exactly the way he wrote it in his original and revised scripts.⁴⁰ It is a disappointingly "classical" ending to a very unconventional and surprising plot. After the final shootout between Griff and Jessica's brother, Griff wounds Jessica, but strolls by her prone body, saying "she'll live," which would have been another place to end the story, and would have allowed the ambiguities and contradictions of her character to remain unresolved. However, Jessica pops up in a frilly white dress and runs until she can get on Griff's moving wagon, which is definitely surprising, but not what we expected of a tough-as-nails gang leader.

Stanwyck notoriously did her own stunts in *Forty Guns*, insisting on being dragged by a horse for three takes as Fuller and cameraman Joseph Biroc adjusted their lenses. She was badly bruised, but she proved (at least to herself) that age is not an obstacle for a performer who really cares about her role. Stanwyck's dominatrix performance in *Forty Guns* is perhaps the climax of the cycle of woman-centered Westerns of the studio era, and she pulls it off with the panache of a drag king. Darryl Zanuck had rejected Fuller's script because he saw Jessica on the page as "an artificial construction and a phony,"⁴¹ but Fuller persisted in making a larger-than-life Western, and Stanwyck managed to turn Jessica into a strong character who is proud rather than comic. Her cross-dressing

makes her more authoritative than intimidating and she fully inhabits the paraphernalia of the Western outlaw, including the black hat, boots, studded belt and gun holster, and leather whip. She rides fast and straight, and delivers her orders in the deep, commanding voice that she was known for.

The Old Men of the west, like John Wayne and Barry Sullivan's Griff Bonell in *Forty Guns*, get tired as they become iconic, but Stanwyck's Jessica Drummond comes alive in her iconicity. Stanwyck's performance is role playing of the highest order, and yet it is not simply empty style, but a critical twist on the Western genre. As David M. Halpern argues, camp "enables us to see identities as compelling acts of social theatre, instead of as essences."⁴² He claims that camp as a mode of viewing and aesthetic appreciation is "the foundation of a political strategy of social contestation and defiance."⁴³ Stanwyck's contribution to the Western genre, and to the culture at large, was in part, to present alternative modalities of femininity, creating characters who bucked heteronormativity, all the while remaining within the boundaries of acceptability. She was still, in 1958, at the top of her game, with star billing, even if the film roles she was offered after *Forty Guns* became fewer and fewer.

TELEVISION QUEENS

After *Forty Guns*, Stanwyck made three feature films, but she also she made dozens of TV episodes, including her own anthology series in 1960-1961, *The Barbara Stanwyck Show*. Unfortunately, that series included no Western roles comparable to those of her 1950s films. She guest starred in four episodes of *Wagon Train* in 1962 and 1963, two of which featured her character Kate Crawley, a woman running a freight line dressed in men's clothing. Her performance in these two episodes is the closest she came to embodying the legendary Calamity Jane. A more femme version of that character was in fact first created for an episode of *Zane Grey Theatre* in 1958 called *The Freighter*, in which Stanwyck demonstrates her expertise with a whip. In 1962 she appeared in an episode of *Rawhide*, playing a selfish, power-hungry wife of a cavalry captain who usurps his role only to endanger many (white) lives. In that episode, as in TV Westerns in general through the 1960s, Indigenous people are usually treated as wild savages, reverting to the genocidal frontier narrative of prewar cinema.

After almost a decade of Stanwyck's cajoling, *The Big Valley* was finally launched by ABC in 1965 and ran for four years, cementing Stanwyck's status as a Western Queen. The series starred Stanwyck as the widow Victoria Barkley in a role that came to define her for an entire generation unfamiliar with her screen roles. Her four adult children inhabit a large Plantation-style home from which dozens of guest-starring actors playing a range of travelers come and go on their adventures, but almost every episode ends up with a conciliatory sherry by the fire. A Black man-servant Silas (Napoleon Whiting) is part of the furniture of the Barkley living room, along with the fresh flowers and busy Victorian furnishings. The ostentatious home effectively stands in for the vast land



FIGURE 17.7 *The Big Valley* Season 3, Episode 17 (1968).

holdings that the Barkley family own, manage, protect, exploit, and expand. This empire was built by Victoria's late husband on the basis of resource extraction—mining and logging—and cattle ranching. The family behave like paternalistic feudal landlords as the three sons exercise frontier justice and Victoria and her daughter Audra (Linda Evans) routinely need saving from one threat or another.

Each standalone episode of *The Big Valley* sees the family engage in some kind of moral drama, often involving less fortunate people than themselves. Stanwyck herself is usually found at home, doling out advice and taking in guests, with only sporadic action scenes. Stanwyck disliked her TV series being called “*Bonanza* in drag,”⁴⁴ and she spoke out more readily to the press during the series’ four-year run than at any other time in her career. She is said to have insisted that the producers respect her as a “tough old broad from Brooklyn,”⁴⁵ although she left Brooklyn as a teenager and never looked back. She may have recognized that her toughness lay in her streetwise accent, and not necessarily in her horseback riding, but she also claimed her innate right to the role because “I’ve had my own ranches. I am a horsewoman . . . The west was tough, hell-country, full of fights and wrongs and hardness. Pontifical wiseacres did not survive long out there!”⁴⁶ In fact, Stanwyck’s “Marwyck” ranch that she co-owned for five years (1935–1940), breeding racehorses on the outskirts of Los Angeles, could hardly be compared to frontier living. The West, for Stanwyck, and for the Barkleys, is

primarily a place for the exercise of feudal power disguised as liberal humanism and rough naturalism.

Stanwyck did not appreciate the comparison to *Bonanza* because she thought that her TV family worked things out together through dialogue, arguments, and the occasional fist fight, whereas Lorne Green, the star of the other popular single-parent Western series of the time, “pontificates” and “passes judgement.”⁴⁷ Her role as queen of the Barkley Ranch is to exploit resources and distribute justice to the peons of many colors whose business intersected with her own. She finally ascended to the position of true American aristocracy, a kind of legendary benign authority respected by all who lived on her land. Her army of three rough and ready sons, plus one pretty daughter/princess, ensured that they were able to defend their wealth and privilege, and of course reach a wide audience demographic.

The 1960s fantasy of the American West was eventually reconfigured in the form of the 1980s TV series *Dynasty* (1981–1989) and *The Colbys* (1985–1987), popular sagas of the super wealthy and their corrupt, twisted, and luxurious lifestyles. The frontier in these series moves to high-rise towers in Denver in *Dynasty*, and to California mansions in *The Colbys*. It is testimony to Stanwyck’s cultural sway that she was cast in both series as a matriarch, even if she was stripped of her power in supporting roles. Her domineering “queenly” attitude was not as much appreciated on the *Colbys* set,⁴⁸ however, and she did not sign up for a second season. Nevertheless, *Dynasty* was a huge camp classic, extremely popular among gay men, and was instrumental in establishing Stanwyck as a gay icon.⁴⁹

Before embarking on *Dynasty*, Stanwyck did win one more Emmy (her third) for her Queenly role in *The Thorn Birds*, one of the first TV miniseries, in 1983. The widow Mary Carsen is another feudal Queen who uses her position to manipulate her family and her priest, Father Ralph (Richard Chamberlain). In one of her most remarkable performances, her 75-year-old character (Stanwyck’s own age at the time) is passionately in love with Father Ralph. Her desperation and pleading points to a deep desire for a man who has taken Holy Orders and gently resists her advances. Chamberlain is one of the few actors who can match Stanwyck’s talent for pathos, their scenes together are among the best love scenes of her career. Unrequited love becomes the major theme of the series, but the impossible love affair is taken up by her niece Meggie (Rachel Ward) and Stanwyck’s Mary Carsen dies at the end of the first (two and a half hour) episode. The sweeping cinematography of *The Thorn Birds* establishes Mary Carsen’s power in its lush depiction of her huge cattle ranch. Shot in California, its ostensible Australian setting enables a kind of limitless scope to the landscape and to Mary Carsen’s power. She essentially buys Father Ralph a promotion from the Vatican as her final wish, cruelly cutting her brother and his family out of her will and at the same time, demonstrating the scope of her power. As a coldhearted Queen, her passion unmasks her as human. Stanwyck’s portrayal of an older woman with bodily desires makes her much more sympathetic than she might otherwise have been.

After a sixty-year career, Stanwyck received a lifetime achievement Oscar in 1982 to make up for her four failed nominations. Her survival in a cutthroat industry, especially

as the studio system transitioned to a more complicated multimedia landscape, entailed plenty of compromises. She was in every way a team player, despite the endemic misogyny of the system. Being a screen queen also meant that Stanwyck's image extended far beyond her (and her publicist's) control, and she became an exemplar of fluid sexualities despite herself, simply because she inhabited her roles of female power and authority with such conviction. In the context of the Western genre and its endemic themes of colonization, occupation, resource extraction, and real estate, Stanwyck's characters tend to expose all the corollary themes of racism, exploitation, subjugation, and misogyny, while at the same time owning those tropes as her own royal privilege.

In the Myth of the Last Western, the woman is clearly not a problem but a key component of the revisionist project. In her claim to the home, and the real estate on which it sits, the Western woman insists on her status as settler. The frontier is a wild new space where she can shape-shift as desired to fill the roles necessary to occupy the territory. Stanwyck's aristocratic status betrays her adherence to the nation-building mystique of the Western genre, just as the studio-based context of her stardom ensured the containment of her unorthodox and gender-bending energy. Finally, even if the rise of television extended her career into the 1980s, it also, for the most part, set the genre back fifty years. Even so, Stanwyck's TV characters Kate Crawley and Mary Carsen—along with her film roles of Jessica Drummond, Vance Jeffords and others—look toward a future when women such as Maggie Greenwald (*The Ballad of Little Joe*, 1993); Kelly Reichardt (*Meek's Cutoff*, 2010); and Jane Campion (*Power of the Dog*, 2021) could take the Western genre into their own hands and continue to renew it.

NOTES

1. This essay expands on ideas that were introduced in my book *The Cinema of Barbara Stanwyck: Twenty-Six Short Essays on a Working Star* (Champaign-Urbana, Illinois: University Press, 2023).
Also see Al Diorio, *Barbara Stanwyck* (London: W.H. Allen, 1983), 185; Ella Smith *Starring Miss Barbara Stanwyck*. (New York: Random House, 1988), 283; Gary A. Yoggy *Riding the Video Range: The Rise and Fall of the Western on Television* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008), 327. Smith probably got the quote from the *New York Journal-American* 1965.
2. While the concept of genre revision is widespread, the "Myth of the Last Western" has its origins, for me, in a graduate course I took in the early 1980s with Professor Bill Simon at NYU. The article that was most influential at that time was John Cawelti, "Myths of Violence in Popular Culture," *Critical Inquiry* 1, no. 3 (March 1975): 521–541.
3. Anon, "End of Era for Stars and System: Swanson Cues Comeback," *Variety* January 3, 1951, 3.
4. See my video essay for more detail on her riding skills and performances: "Barbara Stanwyck Rides Again," video essay, *[In]Transition: Journal of Videographic Film and Moving Image Studies* 8, no. 3 (October 2021), <https://mediacommons.org/intransition/journal-videographic-film-moving-image-studies-83-2021>.
5. Axel Madsen, *Stanwyck* (New York: Harper-Collins, 1994), 271.

6. Rumours of Stanwyck as a lesbian were first openly promoted by Boze Hadleigh, *Hollywood Lesbians* (New York: Barricade Books, 1996), and by persistent suspicions that her marriage to Taylor in 1939 was a "lavender wedding." Madsen cites an undated and uncredited Dana Henninger as speaking for lesbians: "We weren't too impressed with her earlier career . . . She was a little too coy back then, but in her Westerns, yes. And *Big Valley*! There was no male testosterone in her Victoria Barkley. We were all just crazy about her," Madsen, *Stanwyck*, 338.
7. "Barbara Stanwyck: The Queen," <https://www.barbara-stanwyck.com/>.
8. Philip Wylie, *Generation of Vipers*, (New York: Pocket Books, 1942; repr., 1955), 184–196.
9. Simon Schleusener, "Neoliberal Affects: The Cultural Logic of Cool Capitalism," *REAL: Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 313.
10. Madsen, *Stanwyck*, 209. See <https://www.eisenhowerlibrary.gov/eisenhowers/quotes> for Eisenhower's endorsement of Wild Bill Hickok.
11. Emily Carman, "'Women Rule Hollywood': Aging and Freelance Stardom in the Studio System," *Celebrity Studies* 3, no. 1 (March 2012): 13–24.
12. Carman, "Women Rule," 21.
13. Madsen, *Stanwyck*, 349.
14. Jacques Rancière, *Film Fables*, trans. Emiliano Battista (New York: Berg, 2001), 11.
15. Tom Conley, Review of *Film Fables*, *Screening the Past* November 2006, <http://www.screeningthepast.com/2014/12/film-fables/>.
16. Rancière, 73.
17. Charles Bitsch and Claude Chabrol, "Interview with Anthony Mann," *Cahiers du Cinema*, March 1957, repeated in Criterion DVD *The Furies*, 2008, 22.
18. Rancière, 78.
19. Ibid.
20. A memo from the Breen office summarizes the PCA's dispute with Hall Wallis over an "open mouthed kiss" that they wanted removed from the film. It is not clear to which kiss they are referring, as in both the film and the memo, there are several such kisses, all of which are either cut short or darkened in a compromise solution to the dispute. The sub-text of the complaint is that a) Vance kisses an Hispanic man and b) she kisses two different men in alternating scenes. January 25, 1950. MPPDA File on *The Furies*, Margaret Herrick Library.
21. Several "canonical" essays are collected in *The Western Reader*, ed. Jim Kitses and Gregg Rickman (New York: Limelight Editions, 1998). These include Robert Warshow's "The Westerner," which identifies the entire Western genre with the male hero on the frontier; André Bazin's "The Evolution of the Western," in which he denounces the postwar "Superwesterns" mainly for their erotic appeal and sexy women; Jim Kitses's structural analysis of the foundational ideology which does not even mention women; Raymond Durgnat and Scot Simmon's "Six Creeds that Won the Western" which is all about the cowboy and his moral code.
22. Jane Tompkins, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 66.
23. Smith, *Starring*, 247.
24. Holl, "Barbara Stanwyck and Ronald Reagan in Program Western," *Variety*, November 17, 1954, 6; William R. Weaver, "Cattle Queen of Montana," *Motion Picture Daily*, October 6, 1954, 8; A.W. "At the Globe: 'Cattle Queen of Montana,'" *New York Times*, January 26, 1955, 22. The *Motion Picture Daily* reviewer seemed to think it was hard to tell the good Indians

- and bad ones apart so it might not be suitable in areas where “spectators are exacting in their requirements”
25. Roy Ringer, “Gun Gal Role for Stanwyck,” *Los Angeles Daily News*, Sept. 12, 1954.
 26. In later life, the real Annie Oakley taught society ladies to shoot, and part of her rationale for this activity was the need for women to defend themselves—and she also suggested they could contribute to national defense if necessary. See Sarah Cansler, “Annie Oakley, Gender, and Guns: The ‘Champion Rifle Shot’ and Gender Performance, 1860–1926,” *Pursuit: The Journal of Undergraduate Research at the University of Tennessee* 5, no. 1: (2014): 173.
 27. Elizabeth R. Anker, *Orgies of Feeling: Melodrama and the Politics of Freedom* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 26.
 28. *Ibid.*, 82.
 29. The role of melodrama as an ur-drama of Hollywood genre films is convincingly argued by Christine Gledhill in “Rethinking Genre.” In *Reinventing Film Studies*, ed. Linda Williams and Christine Gledhill (New York: Arnold, 2000), 221–243.
 30. Anker, *Orgies of Feeling*, 87.
 31. Madsen, *Stanwyck*, 306.
 32. “At the Palace,” *New York Times*, May 21, 1955.
 33. Jennifer Peterson, “Ecodiegesis: The Scenography of Nature on Screen,” *Journal for Cinema and Media Studies* 58, no. 2 (Winter 2019): 142–168.
 34. Laura Mulvey, “A Clumsy Sublime,” *Film Quarterly*, 60, no. 3 (Spring 2007): 3.
 35. Pam Robertson has made similar claims for Joan Crawford as a camp performance in *Johnny Guitar*—see Pamela Robertson, *Guilty Pleasures: Feminist Camp from Mae West to Madonna* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996).
 36. Lisa Dombrowski, *Samuel Fuller: If You Die I’ll Kill You!* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008).
 37. Susan Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” in Fabio Cleto, *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 54–65.
 38. Sam Fuller, “Stuffed with Phalluses,” excerpted from *A Third Face: My Tale of Writing, Fighting, and Filmmaking* (Lanham, MD: Applause, 2004); also in *Forty Guns* DVD Criterion Collection 2018.
 39. See Joe McElhaney, *The Death of Classical Cinema: Hitchcock, Lang, Minnelli* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2006) for a full account of the transitional aesthetics of late classical cinema.
 40. Dombrowski, *Samuel Fuller*, 111.
 41. *Ibid.*, 109.
 42. David M. Halperin, *How to Be Gay* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 194.
 43. Halperin, 195.
 44. *Variety* Sept. 22, 1965.
 45. Diorio, *Barbara Stanwyck*, 185; Ella Smith, *Starring*, 283; Yoggy, *Riding the Video Range*, 327. Smith probably got the quote from the *New York Journal-American*, 1965.
 46. Diorio, *Barbara Stanwyck*, 187.
 47. *Ibid.*, 326.
 48. Madsen, *Stanwyck*, 358.
 49. Mark Finch, “Sex and Address in Dynasty,” in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*, ed. by Fabio Cleto (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 143–159.