Outlaw Territories: Negotiations of Gender and Race on the American Inner-City Frontier in (Speculative) Urban Crime Films of the 1970s and 80s

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Abstract

This article seeks to elucidate how the American frontier myth with its specific narrative conventions, personnel and archetypes crucially informed a wave of urban crime film dramas from the early 1970s to the mid 1980s. Its special focus will be on the films' gender politics centering around a regenerative vigilante masculinity that these movies inherit from their Western ancestors. The basic gender script analyzed here is that of a white masculinity that re-establishes its seemingly lost or endangered position of superiority via the use of vigilante violence against an abjected non-white, underclass or female other situated in ethnic inner-city neighborhoods. While apparently undermining the state's legitimate power, the regenerative vigilante ultimately assists or calls for a greater presence of the state in such urban 'outlaw' territories. The article discusses how movies such as *Death Wish*, and *Fort Apache, The Bronx* reiterate or even reinforce the male vigilante script inherited from the American Western tradition and how 1970s Blaxploitation cinema and particularly speculative gang films of the early 1980s, from *The Warriors* to Carpenter's *Escape* films (partly) subvert or decenter this script. The personalized bracket of actress Pam Grier, who played characters in several of the above mentioned movies, will help to illustrate the various discursive framings of race, gender, violence and the state within these three strands of the urban frontier narrative.

In his seminal study *Gunfighter Nation*, Richard Slotkin follows the American frontier myth through a myriad of 20th-century cultural productions and shows how it was adapted to changing socio-economic and cultural circumstances in the U.S. After a period of almost thirty years roughly from 1940 to 1970, during which the frontier myth arguably reached its highest cultural prominence in a massive output of Hollywood Westerns, Slotkin notes that the Western experienced a sharp decline during the 1970s. This, however, did not entail a decline in the relevance of the frontier and its narrative, character, and gender codes within the American imagination. Rather, they merely seemed to change their disguise and setting, as

> the Frontier was displaced into genres dealing with metropolitan crime, […]. Between 1971 and 1977 urban crime dramas, featuring as heroes detectives, policemen, and "urban vigilantes," were the predominant type of American location action film. (Slotkin 634)

Strikingly, these urban crime dramas negotiated and made sense of mid/late 20th-century urban problems by way of essential elements of the American frontier myth, widely popularized in the Western movie boom of the previous thirty years. In doing so, these crime dramas relied heavily on established characters, tropes and narratives from the mythical American frontier along with its specific gender politics. They helped to re-actualize a white self-reliant, hyper-violent (vigilante) masculinity within a racially and sexually diverse urban space that was perceived as a threat to a society gone all-too liberal and a masculinity grown all-too soft. These films thus reiterated the discursive logic that brought about the mythic American frontier trope and its 'rugged' masculine ideal (epitomized in the cowboy figure) in the first place. In their essence, these ideals were constructed in the late 19th century by a group of white elite intellectuals and writers, among which Theodore Roosevelt and Owen Wister rank as the most prominent and influential ones.[1] Slotkin has convincingly shown how this group's discursive framing of the American West in social-Darwinist terms as an arena of existential struggle for racial survival between a white Anglo-Saxon race and non-white races (especially Native Americans, to a lesser extent also Mexicans) functioned as the response of a white male establishment to a general 'urban threat' emanating from "the debased political culture and racial character of the polyglot metropolis" (Slotkin 169-170). This threat was marked by

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[1] See Roosevelt's idolization of the cowboy and/or frontiersman as an ideal of both true masculinity and racial superiority in *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail* (1888) and *The Winning of the West* (1889), also visible in his own self-styled persona as rugged frontiersman during his years in South Dakota or as Rough Rider in the Spanish-American War; also see Wister on the racialized construction of the cowboy as pioneer and epitome of a superior race in his 1895 essay "The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher." Also see Slotkin on this (29-62, 169-183).

significant race, class and gender implications: not only did late 19th-century American cities house a growing number of non-Germanic immigrants, they were also the home of an increasingly organized and powerful urban proletariat (see Slotkin 18-21 on the class aspect).

The basic setting of these late 19th-century urban frontier myths was easily adaptable to the American 1960s and 70s. Just as back in the late 19th century, a white social establishment and its (conservative) intelligentsia perceived certain inner-city areas as dangerous urban frontiers complete with large disenfranchised non-white populations, a liberal-leftish political climate of revolt and protest embodied by a young white counterculture, Black and Latinx activist movements as well as burgeoning and increasingly visible LGBTQ communities (especially in New York City and San Francisco). In the mind of the white establishment, these urban zones and their inhabitants constituted an abjected 'other' to a white, heteronormative, middle or upper class American identity kernel. Judith Butler has captured the spatial dimension of this process of negative subject constitution through abjection in the following passage of her influential *Bodies That Matter* (1993) that rings true for any kind of frontier situation, no matter if located on the original Western frontier or displaced onto declining urban centers:

> The abject designates here precisely those "unlivable" and "uninhabitable" zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the "unlivable" is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject. This zone of uninhabitability will constitute the defining limit of the subject's domain; it will constitute that site of dreaded identification against which – and by virtue of which – the domain of the subject will circumscribe its own claim to autonomy and to life. In this sense, then, the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is, after all, "inside" the subject as its own founding repudiation. (Butler xxiii)

By way of staging inner-city urban milieus as abjected 'other spaces', as heterotopic zones of illusion[2], where the values and norms of a 'civilized' mainstream America are turned upside down via an abundance of social deviance, criminality, drug abuse, non-normative sexualities and gang violence, urban crime films of the 1970s and 80s became crucial instances of popularizing politically conservative discourses on urban ills as well as of demonizing inner-city areas and their 'savage' populations

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[2] Foucault distinguishes heterotopias of illusion from those or compensation in his influential article "Of Other Spaces": whereas the former constitutes a "space of illusion that exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory", the latter defines a space "as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled." This very distinction will remain productive for my argument in other parts of this article ("Of Other Spaces" 8).

(see Macek 37-70). They thus also proved central in legitimizing tough-on-crime, zero tolerance and harsh drug policies to be implemented from the 1980s onwards. Yet as long as the state remained absent from these abjected zones, such films—in full accordance with American frontier ideology—legitimized and perpetuated a vigilante violence that ultimately also functioned as a means to constitute a hyperviolent white male subject that finds its 'constitutive outside' in these zones. As much as American frontier history comes down to a collective and continual 'regeneration through violence' against a non-white other[3], the individual white male subject continues to be (re)constructed through violent acts against a non-white other, endlessly reiterated in narratives of the old Western and the more recent urban frontier.

This article seeks to do two things. Firstly, it sets out to explore Slotkin's hypothesis on the frontier coding of 1970s crime drama in greater detail. With his focus on war, adventure and a couple of Western films from that period, Slotkin misses the opportunity to elaborate on the crime film genre in his study. In focusing on this neglected genre, this article will first look at examples from the mainstream urban crime drama and Blaxploitation cinema and then focus specifically on a cycle of late 1970s and early 80s cycle of speculative gang films. An analysis of the first two movie strands will allow for a detailed assessment of how these gang films emulate or subvert (gender) scripts and tropes of the frontier narrative with a specific focus on depictions of frontier masculinity and violent conflict between abjected subjects and state forces. Secondly, this article will embed these fictional scenarios in a historical context, to show their correspondence with contemporary discourses and policies targeting urban crime as well as outline how the films supported, anticipated, subverted or criticized these discourses and developments. The specific thematic and temporal focus of this article, namely the representations of (speculative) urban crime films of the 1970s and 80s therefore also determines its source selection, even though these issues might also be explored in more recent media.

1. Gunslingers on the Urban Frontier: The Vigilante Hero and Regenerative Masculinity in Hollywood's Urban Crime Drama Cycle 1970 to 1981

Two of the earliest examples of the 1970s Hollywood urban crime drama already provided the basic character types and narrative conventions for the entire genre, both of them in striking congruence with the established codes of frontier mythology. Both released in 1971, *Dirty Harry* and *The*

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[3] For more on Slotkin's concept of 'regeneration through violence' see a summary in Slotkin 10-16 or in greater detail in his eponymous 1973 publication *Regeneration Through Violence. The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860*.

French Connection introduced cops that represented gritty "urban gunslingers, […] steely-eyed, cynical, fast on the draw, and likely to resolve the plot with a climactic gunfight," thus undeniably proving themselves to be "heirs of the hard-boiled detective, the gunfighter, and the Indian hater" (Slotkin 634). Harry Callahan and Jimmy 'Popeye' Doyle's kinship with the mythical heroes of the Western frontier is further reinforced in these films by individual costume and prop details, such as Harry's use of a Smith and Wesson Model 29 revolver or Popeye's signature pork pie hat. More importantly, however, these two cops continually prove their willingness to routinely work above the law and break police rules when hunting down "punks" or mobsters on the urban frontier of NYC or San Francisco's post-industrial wastelands, a behavior that gives them the air of vigilantes with a badge. Considering their often-blatantly racist and politically reactionary attitudes coupled with their frequent complaints about city officials' indulgent stance on crime, these cop-heroes' popularity also turned them into anything but subtle mouthpieces for conservative political and criminological discourses opting for much harsher strategies in 'managing' the problem of urban crime (see Corkin 103-111). As will become clear in the following passages, their modern vigilantism iconized in these popular films also served, much like the original ideal of the cowboy in traditional frontier fiction, as a gender script for regenerating an aggressive masculinity or a rugged 'manliness', to echo Roosevelt's preferred concept. Allegedly grown soft or effeminate in urban civilization, such true manliness can only be regained by white men through the use of violence within a 'savage', i.e., uncivilized, neglected or not properly state-controlled territory and directed against a racial, but often also gendered other.

The urban vigilante formula arguably reached its most perfect and influential realization in *Death Wish* (1974), also because it narratively connects its protagonist's vigilante rage to the archetypal frontier model. Similar to *Dirty Harry*'s lead actor Clint Eastwood, who rose to fame in the Western TV series *Rawhide* and several acclaimed Italian Westerns during the 1960s, *Death Wish*'s lead Charles Bronson was also primarily identified with his Western roles, most notably his role as the nameless harmonica player in *Once Upon a Time in The West* (1968). Following his appearance in *Death Wish*, which also inspired several sequels, Bronson quickly came to be known as the quintessential impersonator of avenging vigilantes. The early 1970s cinema audience could easily connect these actors' Western personas to the urban gunslingers they embodied in a range of crime films. One might even argue that Eastwood and Bronson simply transplanted their Western personas into the urban settings without changing too much in their basic frontier-shaped attitudes and

behaviors.[4] Along with these personas, they brought to the 1970s screen reactionary ideals of a violent masculinity that operated largely independent of the state, but nevertheless in its service or rather in that of a white national community deemed under assault by a criminalized racial and sexual other in the nation's urban centers.

Death Wish provides such an effective scenario because it closely charts the psychological transformation of its protagonist from a liberal pacifist into a merciless gunslinging vigilante who deliberately seeks to provoke violent confrontations on the nightly streets of Manhattan. Architect Paul Kersey, the protagonist of the movie, lost his father in a hunting accident as a child and swore never to touch guns again, thus turning into a conscientious objector who served as a medic in the Korean War. With his identity and masculinity thus defined by strict non-violence, the successful architect also seems to harbor a liberal social agenda, allowing him to ignore or even deride the media's outcry over sharply rising crime rates or his colleagues' bigmouthed tough-on-crime rhetoric. The clash of political attitudes on urban crime is aptly staged in an early conversation between Kersey and his colleague Sam Kreutzer:

> KREUTZER. Oh Christ, you are such a bleeding-heart liberal, Paul.
> KERSEY. My heart bleeds a little for the underprivileged, yes.
> KREUTZER. The underprivileged are beating our goddamned brains out. You know what I say? Stick them in concentration camps, that's what I say.
> (00:05:06 – 00:05:20)

Recalling the clashing perspectives evoked in the above scene, the movie's turning point comes about when Kersey's wife and daughter are violently attacked and raped in their Manhattan apartment, leaving the wife dead and the daughter traumatized to the point of permanent catatonia. Kersey's devastation is heightened by the police's obvious inability to solve the crime (the original perpetrators are never arrested, nor will they fall victim to Kersey's vigilantism). In this situation of existential crisis, Kersey comes to question his vow to non-violence, ultimately reconsidering his sense of self as a liberal pacifist as well as his sense of masculinity due to the fact that he was utterly unprepared to defend his family on a gloomy urban frontier of relentless gang violence. His development into a cynical and world-weary vigilante is further inspired by a business trip to Arizona. Here, in the heart of the old

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[4] There even exist a number of urban crime films with cowboys hailing from the modern-day American West that come to the big city in order to provide the law enforcement that an incompetent (because lacking a true frontier masculinity) urban police force appears incapable of. The first and most striking example, *Coogan's Bluff* (1968) even stars Eastwood and literally seems to mark his transition from the 1960s Western gunslinger to the 1970s urban detective. Other prominent examples include the TV series *McCloud* (1970-77), *Walker, Texas Ranger* (1993-2001) or the movie *The Cowboy Way* (1994).

American West, Kersey not only runs into a Western show with a reenacted standoff in an old Tucson Western town that used to serve as a film set. He is also invited to a gun range by the rugged, cowboy-styled local developer he is working for, who prompts him to touch and shoot a gun for the first time since his childhood days. Thus invigorated by the spirit and violent masculine ideal of the mythical American West, Kersey returns to the cesspool of New York City, only to discover that the developer's farewell present is a Colt Police Positive revolver. This revolver becomes a necessary item to fully complete his transformation into a vengeful urban vigilante and thus to overcome what the film presents as his effeminate pacifist urban masculinity.

Kersey's trip to Arizona serves as the ideologically transition from the old to the new (urban) frontier. While vigilante violence has been reduced to a mere simulacrum for entertainment in the new, state-controlled West, a real frontier has newly emerged in the increasingly non-white and state-neglected heart of American cities that cries for the same white, male vigilantism that was once a legitimate modus operandi in the old West. Yet, just as in its original frontier script, the urban vigilante tale is a narrative of male resurgence from indulgent or effeminate passivity through violence, exerted outside the realm of official law enforcement and in response to a (series of) real or perceived crimes or indignations. There is also the idea, present in all urban vigilante scenarios, that on the 'savage' outlaw terrain of urban frontier lands, vigilante justice is ultimately a legitimate, if not the only strategy of survival in the face of overwhelming inimical forces that the state fails to control. By claiming for himself the right to enact the kind of violence traditionally monopolized by the state, Kersey is also able to reclaim a position of racial and gender supremacy (within an increasingly diverse urban milieu) that the state and its institutions can or are no longer willing to protect. Thus armed and ideologically invigorated, Kersey henceforth roams the Manhattan streets and subways at night only to gun down any petty criminal trying to mug him or other unarmed civilians, incidents which take place at an excessively high rate.

Death Wish's staging of the urban frontier as a lawless arena overpopulated by young, male and exceeding non-white gang criminals harassing or attacking any white civilian within minutes after their stepping onto the streets provided one of the most powerfully distorted portrayals of inner-city plight of the mid-1970s, a portrayal that would inspire and legitimize harsh law enforcement policies for years to come. *Death Wish* also proved so unsettling in this regard because it addressed the insufficiency of urban law enforcement schemes implemented by the state: after a series of murders committed by Kersey on his nocturnal sprees, the whole city speculates about the identity and agenda of the

mysterious vigilante, with some even applauding his actions as a welcome response to soaring urban crime. With the ubiquitous menace of the vigilante out in the streets, city officials begin to register falling street crime rates and instruct the detective trying to hunt Kersey down not to arrest him (the policeman eventually lets him go under the condition of permanently leaving the city). In this way, the city officials integrate the vigilante phantom as an effective, if highly questionable deterrent into their law enforcement strategies (see Corkin 134-140). After all, the media as well as state authorities (even if such vigilantism undermines their monopoly of legitimate violence) also seem to tolerate the development of a parallel system of illegitimate law enforcement, because Kersey's vigilante rage ultimately defends and embodies the very system of white, male domination that they seek to maintain as well.

In the police drama *Fort Apache, The Bronx* (1981), the adaptation of traditional frontier scripts and motifs to the urban space is pushed to the extreme. Not only does the title already invoke a Western classic, John Ford's *Fort Apache* (1948), but the film also transplants this fortress to the utterly hostile late 20th-century urban frontier of the South Bronx, staged as an apocalyptic scenery of ethnic ghettoization, urban wastelands (as a result of both post-industrial plight and slum clearance), poverty, gang violence, drug addiction and prostitution. Upon handing over the precinct to his successor, the outgoing Chief Dugan introduces the neighborhood as a truly savage urban frontier with the usual discriminatory conflations of ethnicity, crime, non-hygiene, violence, unemployment, poverty, prostitution and insanity:

> DUGAN. This is Siberia […]. You got a 40-block area with 70,000 people packed in like sardines smelling each others' farts, living like cockroaches, […]. You got the lowest income per capita, the highest rate of unemployment in the city […]. Largest proportion of non-English speaking population in the city! […] Families that have been on welfare for three or four generations. Youth gangs, winos, junkies, pimps, hookers, maniacs, cop-killers […]. I mean this neighborhood'll bury ya. There's enough dirt in this precinct to bury every smart-ass cop in the city! (00:18:02 – 00:19:37)

This distorted picture of a nightmarish and malicious ghetto is confirmed by the movie's disturbing opening scene: a drugged Black prostitute approaches two cops in a police car, seemingly in order to offer her services to them, only to suddenly draw a gun and shoot both of them dead. The hostility of the inner-city territory is heightened still by a group of Black and Latinx teenagers that loot the dead officers without any sign of shock or emotional reaction.

Within this deeply hostile urban frontier space looms the safe haven of the 41st Precinct—nicknamed "Fort Apache" by the policemen—as a designated sanctuary of law and order, normative sexuality, masculinity, and whiteness (with few exceptions, but certainly in comparison to the

neighborhood's overwhelmingly Black and Latinx population). Similar to its cinematic namesake, this urban fort has to be defended when attacked by 'savage' local hordes and is used as a base camp for forays into the dangerous territory by a brave police cavalry.[5] After a riot breaks out in the neighborhood following the new police chief's tough apprehension methods applied in the search for the murderer of the two cops, the precinct is actually besieged by an enraged mob, which can only be dispersed after the use of tear gas. The reference to the mythic frontier trope of the Alamo is as much evident here as the reference to a number of Western siege scenarios. They typically feature a small, but heroic and homogeneously white Anglo-Saxon community under competent male leadership defending their position against a superiority of either a villainous foreign army, outlaws or, most commonly, throngs of bloodthirsty Native Americans.

In accordance with the same ideological script, the 41st Precinct in *Fort Apache, The Bronx* represents a last stronghold of white, male state authority in a vast territory of non-white aggression and sexual non-normativity. The entirely male police force therefore not only appear as rightful defenders of white superiority which has to be continually regenerated via sometimes excessively violent acts (tough apprehension policy and a murder committed by openly racist cops during a raid). While committed to this mission, they also pursue a much less obvious, but ideologically crucial quest of personal gender and ethnic regeneration. Male superiority not merely over the ethnic community is recurrently reinforced by the ultimately unsuccessful actions to hunt down the cop-killing prostitute (the ultimate subversive agent in a cosmos of male dominance) that have the air of a retributive campaign against the whole community due to its extreme scope and violence. These collective acts of reclaiming male dominance over the ethnic ghetto are repeated on the personal level with regard to female bodies, such as Murphy's romance with a Latina nurse, his help in delivering the child of a Latina teenager (an quasi-colonial scenario with Murphy as the white savior) or his partner's pertinacious attempts to force his (white) virgin girlfriend into having sex with him. The racial perspective is also of relevance here, as most modern cop/vigilantes differ from their Anglo-Saxon frontier models in terms of their (recently overcome) ethnic minority status: the surnames of some of the most prominent cop/vigilante protagonists in 1960s to 80s urban crime films—Coogan (*Coogan's Bluff*) Curran (*Joe*), Callahan (*Dirty Harry*), Doyle (*French Connection*), Murphy (*Fort Apache*)—all point to their Irish origin and thus to an ethnic group in the U.S. not considered fully 'white' until well into the 20th century. In *Fort Apache*,

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[5] Slotkin has also stressed that the movie "treats the violence of contemporary racial ghettos in terms of the standard cavalry/Indian paradigm" (634).

Murphy and his Italian-American partner Corelli are fully aware of their ethnic heritage, which puts them into an intermediary position on the urban frontier: not quite white, but not really non-white either. Their police service on the urban ethnic frontier thus also serves them to redraw the line between a white urban establishment and its racialized others in ways that allow them to continually stress their own whiteness and loyalty to the state in opposition to a Black and Latinx inner-city community.

The logic of contesting and reclaiming the position of white, male authority is rendered obvious when taking a closer look at *Fort Apache*'s most disturbing and disturbingly clichéd character, namely Black prostitute and heroin-addict Charlotte. As the urban frontier's 'satanic savage' she is the malicious siren luring white cops and civilian suitors near her in order to violently kill them. Charlotte functions as the movie's plot trigger via her initial murder of the two cops and the ensuing large-scale investigation. She is also central to the motif of the unsolved crime or rather to that of the unpunished delinquent, common to so many urban crime films of the time (such as the elusive attackers of Paul Kersey's wife and daughter in *Death Wish*). Charlotte herself is ultimately killed by a dealer whom she intended to make her next victim. With her body eventually disposed of in the roadside trash, her end proves both satisfactory and unsatisfactory in the sexist and racist logic of the contemporary urban crime film. Represented as the most malicious, transgressive urban reincarnation of the frontier narrative's satanic savage, Charlotte seemingly receives her 'just' fate when being consumed by the very ghetto violence that she herself represented. And yet her insidious crimes remain unsolved and she remains unpunished by the law. The movie's plot therefore denies any satisfactory retribution element in the sense of a reconstitution of white dominance over the non-white, female usurper. While her life is ended at the hand of a (non-white) man, she cannot be held to justice or overwhelmed by a white, male state authority and thus the very force she symbolically intended to undermine in her crimes.

Overall, many urban crime dramas seem to suggest that the urban frontier is far too "savage", its vice far too powerful and its endless chains of violent acts far too complex for any police force to properly solve crimes within the given political reality of inner-city laissez-faire and underfunding of urban law enforcement authorities. Given this situation, excessive police violence or even vigilante justice might arise as legitimate compensation. For all its obvious reiteration of frontier stereotypes and its political-ideological underpinnings, *Fort Apache, The Bronx* does not, however, amount to an entirely uncritical reflection of police work in the inner city. It problematizes excessive police violence through the case of two racist cops that kill a Puerto Rican teenager during a large police

operation by deliberately throwing him off a roof, an act that is ultimately reported by Murphy just before he himself quits his job in an air of absolute disillusionment. In his final discussion with the new police chief, Murphy also denounces his superior's confrontational police measures, which ultimately triggered the latest war-like clashes between officers and local mobs.

Fort Apache offers an early hint at, but also an early critique of tough-on-crime ideologies and mass incarceration policies which were just beginning to become popular with American law enforcement authorities at that point, before attaining the status of common sense by the 1990s (see Parenti 69-89). In an earlier scene, Murphy mocks the new chief's mass apprehension scheme by hypothetically thinking it through to its logical end: "So the jails will be full, the neighborhood will be empty and you won't be one step closer to solving those killings," he notes (00:54:02 – 00:54:07). Unknowingly, Murphy here delineates a scenario which would recur first as part of a dystopian vision in another strand of urban crime films, but then came true in actual policies of mass incarceration that have been dominating U.S. law enforcement for the past thirty years. These policies emptied American inner cities of its young male Black/Latinx population by locking them up for excessively long periods of time, often for only minor offenses. With politically conservative agendas on urban crime (also popularized in these films) and policymakers in power, the state and its institutions—in particular a militarized police force, racially biased drug legislations and a penal system of mass incarceration—were able to reclaim a strong role in securing white male dominance (see Parenti 161-210, Alexander 59-139). Yet even though such measures seemed to make individual vigilantism superfluous, the figure of the humiliated man seeking regeneration through violence on the urban frontier has not entirely vanished in popular media of the past forty years, be it only to stress and legitimize the ongoing necessity for a racially biased law enforcement system.

As outlined in this subchapter, mainstream urban crime dramas of that period prove to be deeply rooted in the narrative conventions and gender scripts of the frontier myth. While in many cases they appear to adapt these conventions in their racist and sexist logic of male regeneration through state-sanctioned or -tolerated violence rather uncritically to their contemporary urban situation, one should not overlook their revisionist potentials. Despite perpetuating many of the frontier script's problematic elements, urban crime films such as *Joe* (1970), *Taxi Driver* (1975) or *Cruising* (1980) also offer explicit critiques of their vigilante (anti-)heroes as reactionary, mentally unstable, if not psychopathic loners that project an imminent threat into their urban

environment in order to justify their eventual violence as a means to reclaim a position of white, male dominance.[6]

2. Black Subversions? Shaft, Coffy, Foxy Brown and the Ambiguous Race and Gender Legacies of Blaxploitation Cinema 1971 to 1979

The racist and sexist underpinnings of *Fort Apache*'s female satanic savage character Charlotte would have already been disturbing enough, if it were not for another striking symbolic dimension to this character which is crucially connected to the actress playing the role. Considering Pam Grier's prior film career as well as her significance for (Black) American cinema, her casting in the role of the malicious man killer haunting the ethnic ghetto suggests itself as a calculated decision by the filmmakers. In fact, Grier might be considered the most prominent female star of a cycle of 1970s films that came to be known as Blaxploitation cinema. These films with an often entirely Black cast focused mostly on urban crime narratives located within the Black American ghetto. In many ways, one might consider these films a variation of the mainstream urban crime dramas covered in the previous subchapter. Blaxploitation cinema partly emulated these mainstream urban crime dramas and thus also reinforced their problematic aspects, yet it also subverted their often blatantly racist undertones by telling its stories from a Black inner-city perspective, which is necessarily alien to the standard white cop and/or vigilante.

One of Blaxploitation's first great hits and still among its most prominent entries in film history was *Shaft* in 1971. It stars Richard Roundtree as Black private detective John Shaft who goes about his dangerous business in a crime-ridden Harlem and operates in between the conflict lines of a white police force, Black nationalists and mobsters. Shaft is a politically conscious Black man who has to face the violent reality of a largely mob-controlled Harlem—a place where the upwardly mobile Shaft no longer resides himself. Similar to many other films of the genre, *Shaft* reinforces a white mainstream's distorted image of the crime-infested, violent Black ghetto (see Corkin 74-96). Moreover, the character of Shaft embodies another racist stereotype that is a common and frequently criticized feature of Blaxploitation characters, i.e. his hypersexuality, showcased throughout the movie by his various sexual relations with a number of submissive women. Coupled with an often

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[6] Also, it is true that the urban crime genre showcased more and more diverse detective teams during this period: the gritty white cop is often joined by a non-white or female partner, such as in *Starsky & Hutch* (1975-79), later installments of the *Dirty Harry* series or the *Lethal Weapon* films (1987-98), even though such ethnically diverse pairings also have a well-established frontier model in asymmetric cowboy and Native American teams, such as most prominently Lone Ranger and Tonto.

openly misogynist machismo attitude, Shaft's exposed hypervirility may be read as part of his empowerment as a discriminated Black man. Yet, it is also a harmful reinforcement of a common racist stereotype of Black masculinity. Shaft is thus complicit with his white movie doubles in regenerating a subordinated masculinity into a hegemonic one via his continual dominance over a number of both Black and white women.

Yet the genre also proved open for subversive gender politics. Blaxploitation certainly reached its emancipatory prime with *Coffy* in 1973 and *Foxy Brown* in 1974, featuring Pam Grier as the eponymous street-wise female vigilantes. These vigilantes single-handedly fight against ruthless drug and prostitution cartels responsible for the drug addiction or murder of people close and dear to them. Distinct from normative roles as mere companions to heroic men, love interests or damsels in distress, assigned to women in mainstream urban crime dramas, Blaxploitation films offered the opportunity for presenting Grier's characters as sexually objectified, yet also and most importantly empowered female action heroes. This kind of character was unheard of in American mainstream films and even rare in the exploitation cinema of the time. Film posters for *Foxy Brown* introduced their iconic heroine with the words: "Don't mess aroun' with Foxy Brown / She's the meanest chick in town!", while the movie trailer presented Grier, already fully identified with her vigilante role in *Coffy*, as "that one-chick hit-squad." Already the movie's advertisement thus conferred crucial characteristics of the male white frontier hero and his 1970s urban heirs, such as self-reliance, aggressiveness, ingenuity and a defiant willingness to take the law into his own hands, onto her female character.

Wearing an afro hairdo, speaking in Black English Vernacular as well as harboring a vindictive sense of justice when met with racist humiliation, Grier's character is equipped with a specific Black Power style and ethos. But her urban frontier heroism is also coupled with and extended by a specific female performativity[7], which is necessarily inaccessible to or deemed unsuitable for the male urban detective or vigilante. Surely, Grier's characters do not break with a heteronormative sexuality and the often-voyeuristic staging of her body clearly is intended to cater to the male gaze, i.e. the assumed viewing pleasure of a heterosexual, male audience. And yet, her film personas are able to make strategic use of their female sexual appeal as well as a range of normative female behavior scripts in order to come close to the male objects of their revenge. In fact,

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[7] This term is used in the Butlerian sense that gendered behavior is not rooted in one's biological sex, but rather in the endlessly reiterated, quasi-theatrical performance of codified gender scripts for men and women. Subversive performances in contradiction with one's born-with sex are thus possible, but practically scarce as such acts are continually met with rejection and sanctions in most social contexts.

that very modus operandi might be described as Coffy and Foxy's most common strategy on their vigilante missions: in both movies, Grier's characters impersonate prostitutes[8] and specifically adapt their appearance and behavior to the preferences of white dealers, pimps and mobsters.[9] In this way, they are able to attract their attention and come as close to them as possible, only to suddenly transform from submissive sex objects and thus vehicles for male regeneration into 'phallic' vigilante avengers that gun their victims down without remorse.

The confusingly quick shifts of 'phallic power' from white crime boss or henchman to the Black female vigilante-gunslinger that recur as climactic moments in these films may be seen as their ideologically most subversive moments as they embody the violent disruption of common hierarchies of race and gender. After having overwhelmed all henchmen at the end of *Foxy Brown*, Grier's heroic character arguably performs the most blatantly phallo-clastic act in Blaxploitation cinema by handing the white female head of the drug and prostitution cartel a jar with the cut-off genitalia of the latter's racist boyfriend-accomplice.

As much as Foxy is stylized into the agent of a Black, female or even feminist subversion and usurpation of white, male domination here, her Black vigilantism in contrast to the male vigilante is not motivated by a need to reclaim a seemingly lost position of gendered power and dominance. She is not per se interested in undoing gender inequalities and stereotyped performativities (as can be seen in her normative behavior towards her boyfriend and her willingness to perform as a prostitute). Rather her subversive vigilante acts originate in a (maternalistic) urge to seek personal justice for her boyfriend's death. They also originate in her urge to free the Black community from organized crime. Despite the fact that her boyfriend operated as an undercover police agent, she cannot count on the help of a legitimate law

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[8] In general criticized for exploiting Black culture by way of "reconfirm[ing] white expectations of blacks [so as to] […] repress and delay the awakening of any real political consciousness," Blaxploitation films like *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown* may also be accused for inviting a double exploitation in the light of gender concerns (Guerrero 93). Not only are Grier's heroines visually exploited by way of a sexually objectifying staging, but even on their plot levels both movies involve the protagonist's deliberate and seemingly unproblematic self-exploitation by temporarily working or at least performing as a prostitute as a central strategy on her vigilante quest.

[9] A crucial feature of these Black inner-city counter-narratives seems to be the fact that the criminal organizations suffusing and intoxicating non-white neighborhoods with drugs, violence and prostitution are headed by (often openly racist) white men or women, yet aided by villainous and—at least from the perspective of a Black Power vision of ethnic solidarity—also treacherous and corrupted members of the Black community. One might even argue that the Black vigilante's struggle against white mobsters can be read as a regeneration of Black ethnic identity through violence or rather defense against white villains and oppressors.

enforcement that is unable or even unwilling to serve the Black community. In fact, the police are revealed to be customers of and thus involved with the very drug and prostitution ring Foxy seeks to be bring down. After undertaking her vigilante mission alone for a long time, she finally enlists the help of a Black Panther group. Only ethnic solidarity, it seems, can help the black vigilante on his or her quest for personal justice—without the help and often also against the agents of a racist, violent and corrupt state.

The very image of the Black female castrator and usurper of white male power that uses her female and 'exotic' appeal to lure male victims near her only to kill or humiliate them ultimately returned monstrously in the figure of cop-killing prostitute Charlotte within the male urban crime universe of *Fort Apache, The Bronx* in 1981. Grier reappears in her well-known role as an objectified (fake) prostitute with her attract-and-kill tactics, but this time not as a heroic vigilante empowered both as a woman and as a member of the Black community. In the racist and sexist logic of the mainstream urban crime script, subversive characters like Coffy or Foxy Brown can only be read as vicious threats to white male superiority, seductive succubi haunting the inner city that need to be exorcized by the guns of white policemen. By casting Grier in a distorted and ideologically reinterpreted version of her signature role, *Fort Apache* works to undo the emancipatory ideological rewriting of the urban crime narrative attempted in Blaxploitation's most daring moments. Furthermore, it opens up the harrowing vision of what might have happened to Coffy or Foxy within their inner-city homelands not only after the end of Blaxploitation and Black Power (at least the end of its heightened cultural visibility), but also in the light of the actual transformation of several urban ghetto communities into virtually apocalyptic wastelands by the late 1970s and 1980s. Reduced to a barely conscious and sexually exploited heroin-addict randomly murdering white men, Charlotte lurches through the literal and metaphorical debris of a broken community. Ultimately, her fate is a scenario that proves Coffy's heroic one-woman vigilante quest for avenging her sister's addiction and cleansing her community from crime, drugs and sexual exploitation devastatingly unsuccessful.

3. Outlaw Nations: Spaces of Coercion and Illusion in the Dystopian Gang Film 1979 to 1983 / 1996

As Blaxploitation cinema came to its end by the late 1970s another set of films based on the basic premises of urban crime cinema came to the fore. Similar to Blaxploitation films, this new group of sci-fi-esque films typically revolved around (ghettoized) urban gangs. Set in a near-future dystopian U.S., these speculative films reiterated and reinforced some of

the tropes and archetypes of the mainstream urban crime genre, but also questioned and subverted its fundamental ideological script in crucial points. The dystopian gang film's seminal installment was Walter Hill's 1979 movie *The Warriors*, whose key character types and aesthetics were imitated by most if not all other movies of that movie cycle. Set in a nocturnal NYC of the near future, the film follows the eponymous youth gang in their quest to return to their home turf in Coney Island, after a citywide gang gathering in the Bronx, defending themselves against attacks from both the police and rivaling gangs. *The Warriors* and its premise of a (potentially) gang-controlled city outnumbering the police three to one might, in fact, reinforce mainstream urban crime cinema's most nightmarish inner-city scenario, such as it is suggested in *Death Wish*, for instance. At the same time, this gang movie is marked by a significant qualitative difference in its choice of protagonists, as it shifts the viewer's perspective from that of the male white cop and/or vigilante to that of his abjected enemies, namely youthful, racially mixed street gang members. In doing so, the movie invites its audience to sympathize with the very villains or scapegoats of the dominant urban crime narrative, such as it was known from both fictional media and real-life political discourse. Thereby, films like *The Warriors*, but even more so the two *Escape* films (see below), allow their viewers to experience and question the media's and the state's increasing abjection strategies in the service of defining a white position of superiority from the very perspective of the abjected others. Targeted at a younger audience, the street gang personnel of *The Warriors* and similar movies also proved appealing because of their often playfully exuberant fashion styles. Largely reminiscent of certain contemporary sub-, youth or sports cultures, they also served to mark their ideological position within the frontier-shaped mainstream urban crime antagonism.[10]

Clearly influenced by *The Warriors*' subcultural style, John Carpenter's *Escape from New York* (1981) embedded the basic urban gang crime scenario within a larger, politically as well as ideologically provocative narrative framework: in Carpenter's dystopian vision of the year 1988, the United States is not only caught up in a Third World War, but has also answered skyrocketing domestic crime rates by transforming into a police state and adopting drastic mass incarceration schemes. As a consequence, the entire island of Manhattan (already established as a shady, gang crime-ridden horror land in 1970s urban crime cinema) has

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[10] One member of the Warriors literally does so by not only naming himself Conchise after the famous Apache chief, but also by wearing feathers and other adornments that symbolically link him to the Native American tradition. Some of his fellow gang members follow in the same frontier tradition with names like Cowboy or the gang position of "War Chief."

been turned into a heavily fortified maximum-security prison meant to house the country's exploding number of criminal subjects. Manhattan Island is less a correctional facility, though, than an early modern asylum for locking up everyone deemed undesirable by a future American society. As each inmate is sentenced to lifetime imprisonment, there is neither a social will nor a chance for personal rehabilitation ("The rules are simple. Once you go in, you don't come out" (00:03:49 – 00:03:54)).[11] This crude, yet effective solution to unmanageable urban crime has established a seemingly contradictory blend of heterotopias in the Foucauldian sense: at first sight, the prison island represents a space of absolute compensation and coercion by way of its heavy fortification and surveillance via helicopters and watchtowers on the opposite shorelines. At the same time however, it also is a space of total illusion and subversion as the prisoners are basically free to do whatever they please in the emptied-out urban spaces of Manhattan. Carpenter was very careful in fashioning the semi-political entity that has formed within the walls of the prison island, this literal nation of outlaws, as an almost complete illusion heterotopia, an upside-down reflection of mainstream American society. Ruled by the Black Duke of New York, this multiracial prison society is composed of all sorts of non-normative individuals free to express themselves in all sorts of playful subversions of race, class and gender dichotomies and hierarchies. Subversions in the field of gender, however, are not as thoroughly explored here as they are in the movie's 1996 sequel *Escape from L.A*.

Released fifteen years after the initial movie, *Escape from L.A.* (1996) featured an almost identical, but also crucially radicalized scenario that reflected major political events and developments of the past years, such as the rise of the Religious Right, the L.A. race riots of 1992, the increasing militarization of law enforcement (prisons in the movie are controlled by an army-like United States Police Force) and an

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[11] The idea of locking up each undesirable individual in one place as imagined here bears a striking resemblance to the early modern era's ideology of the 'Great Confinement', of incarcerating a sizable number of people deemed 'amoral' (only with the difference that in early modern times, the 'inmates' were actually supposed to be 'corrected' by way of hard work and religious instruction), as it was famously described by Foucault: "The walls of confinement actually enclose the negative of that moral city of which the bourgeois conscience began to dream in the seventeenth century; […]. In the shadows of the bourgeois city is born this strange republic of the good which is imposed by force on all those suspected of belonging to evil […]. From […] the opening […] of the first houses of correction, and until the end of the eighteenth century, the age of reason confined. It confined the debauched, spendthrift fathers, prodigal sons, blasphemers, men who "seek to undo themselves," libertines" (Madness 57). The early modern asylum thus served the same purpose of moral self-definition via abjection of everyone deemed amoral that also defines the future U.S.s' relation to its prison islands in the *Escape* films.

exacerbated mass incarceration policy that had turned into the dominant American penal paradigm by the mid 1990s. In Carpenter's updated scenario, the U.S. has transformed into a theocratic regime ruled by an evangelical president for life modeled after prominent pastor and televangelist Jerry Falwell. Following a massive earthquake, central Los Angeles has been separated from the mainland. This new inner-city island is subsequently remodeled into another vast, walled-off prison city, which functions as a "deportation point for all people found undesirable or unfit to live in the new, moral America" (00:04:17 – 00:04:24), namely everyone non-white, non-Christian, non-heteronormative or socially liberal.[12] Politically, this "island of the damned" is a no-man's-land, which no longer forms part of the U.S. and its resident-inmates have been stripped of their citizenship. And still, for those confined in it, this urban mega-prison also represents a heterotopic sanctuary, a safe haven, indeed a "dark paradise" (as the protagonist calls it) for actualizing their non-hegemonic identities as well as for establishing political entities and cultural forms not based on normative codes of race, class, gender, religion or sanity. In conversation with the two movies' rugged protagonist, Muslim woman Taslima points out this paradoxical freedom within incarceration that many of her inmates seem to share:

> SNAKE. Why are you here?
> TASLIMA. I was a Muslim in South Dakota. All of a sudden, they made it a crime.[13]
> SNAKE. I mean, why did you stay? You can go south, Mexico.
> TASLIMA. L.A.'s still the place, Snake. If you think what's happened on the other side of the world. That's the prison. This is the only free zone left, anywhere.
> SNAKE. Dark Paradise…
> TASLIMA. At least we get something out of the deal. A girl can still wear a fur coat if she wants to, for example. No, once you figure out this place, it's really not so bad. (00:46:47 – 00:47:28)

Both speculative movies stress their prison cities' subversive racial politics when presenting non-white characters to hold the most powerful positions within their outlaw nations. They do so by featuring the Black Duke of New York and the eccentric Latino communist revolutionary Cuevo Jones, outwardly modeled after Che Guevara, even though these characters are otherwise not depicted as specifically sympathetic or progressive individuals. In *1990: The Bronx Warriors* (1982), an Italian

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[12] Carpenter's vision of vast inner-city prisons seems to eerily fulfill Paul Kersey's colleague's fascist dream of locking up a demonized urban underclass identified with uncontrolled street crime into concentration camps in *Death Wish* (1974).

[13] Taslima's fate not only foreshadows the discrimination of the US Muslim population after 9/11 as well as during the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, but her entire persona breaks with common gender stereotypes about Muslim women as meek, traditional, religiously conservative and dependent on men.

movie pastiche of both *The Warriors* and *Escape from New York*, the Bronx is staged as a vast gangland no longer under the control of any state forces. Indeed, a Black man and a white woman, nicknamed "The Ogre" and "The Witch" feature as its most powerful (semi-)political agents. Yet despite these characters' efforts to single-handedly head the prison society, their positions are continuously contested and undermined by other less powerful gangs. After all, these non-white leader figures, especially the ones in the *Escape* films, prove to be imitators of their white counterparts outside the prison or, for that matter, the mainstream white vigilante: in their desperate urge to political and male superiority, they frequently draw on excessive violence against and spectacularized punishments for everyone defying their dominant position. And yet, their regenerative use of violence or compensatory 'state' rituals is not based on common hierarchies of race and gender. As non-whites[14] among other non-whites or non-conforming individuals, they can only demand allegiance. Such allegiance, however, is hard to enforce within a territory that still remains an urban frontier, an illusion heterotopia, where everyone "figur[ing] out this place" can "get something out of the deal", to echo Taslima's words. Despite their obvious insecurity and disorder, these cinematic prison communities evoke a different, more inclusive notion of America, the state, or even the frontier than their real and fictional counterparts outside the prison walls. Indeed, the latter societies' self-image has long been founded on the very paradigm of racial exclusion and polarization that has, among other things, led to an excessively inflated prison population.

The overall dystopian scenario of Carpenter's *Escape* films might be deemed their most intriguing and politically subversive part. Yet, when read as a critique of conservative discourses on race, gender, crime and incarceration, their characters and plot elements turn out to be rather generic and also operate along well-trodden frontier paths. In both movies, the original 1981 one and its 1996 sequel, important political figures (the President and the President's daughter, respectively) have been kidnapped and smuggled into the inner-city prison islands, thus formatting their plots as standardized captivity/rescue narratives. The (anti-)hero chosen to perform these dangerous rescue missions is former Special Forces war hero Snake Plissken, a traditionally masculine, heterosexual white man who has, however, fallen from grace after being convicted for robbing the Federal Reserve. With his athletic stature,

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[14] Each of these gang movies seems to deliberately reference the subversive race and gender legacy of Blaxploitation cinema by casting one of its stars in a role of authority, namely Isaac Hayes as the Duke of New York in *Escape from New York*, Fred Williamson as "The Ogre" in *The Bronx Warriors* and Blaxploitation's female star Pam Grier as transgender gangster boss in *Escape from L.A.*.

superior strength, practical ingenuity and cynical, monosyllabic ways, Snake likely embodies the most perfect modern-day reincarnation of the mythical cowboy figure in all urban crime/action cinema. And yet: not only is it difficult for the viewer to fully sympathize with an always moody, psychologically hermetic Snake. He also differs from most urban cop/vigilantes heroes of the time in terms of his ambiguous, never fully transparent allegiance to either the state or the demonized inner-city 'savages.' Once a distinguished representative of the state's military power, he has now turned to criminal activities and awaits his punishment by the state. For this state, however, he is nothing more than a means to an end, namely freeing the President (1981) or the President's daughter (1996) from the hostile prison netherworld.

When roaming the prison city, Snake appears to be an utter alien, clearly uncomfortable, if not even resentful to the inmates' non-normative 'freakiness' which could not be further away from his own reclusive and controlled masculinity.[15] As his—always defensive—violence against attacking prisoners and his credit as a well-remembered war hero serve to confirm Snake's dominant male position, he does not have to resort to compensatory violence against a racially and sexually diverse prison community. And even though on an official state mission, he bears no special allegiance to a state that (mis)uses him for its own purposes. He thus proves to be a less ideologically charged (modern) frontier hero than the manly, Anglo-Saxon warrior, animated with notions of racial and masculine superiority, as he was defined by Roosevelt and Wister in the late 19th century. It is because he is his own master free of racial and state allegiances, that he is willing and able to team up with a whole range of inmates in order to secure his own life and freedom—alliances which would be neither imaginable nor viable in the racist and sexist logic of standard urban crime scenarios. In New York, a white, heteronormative Snake relies on the help of the aged taxi driver "Cabbie", non-hegemonic male scientist "Brain" and his girlfriend Maggie. In Los Angeles, he cooperates with an even more diversified group of inmates, namely aged

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[15] In both movies Snake's male body and heteronormative gender identity frequently 'comes under attack' both literally and metaphorically: he often becomes the object of various inmates' hetero- and homosexual desires and thus has to fend off several advances. On other occasions, his body is also literally in danger of being taken apart in brutal fights. Yet none of these confrontations appears to be as disturbingly dangerous to him than his capture by the Surgeon General of Beverly Hills in *Escape from L.A.*. His own face a mere surgically reinforced mask, the general intents to 'farm' Snake and Taslima's bodies for specific organs and skin parts in order to provide his oddly disfigured patients, mere pastiches of foreign skin and body parts, with fresh tissue. This imminent mutilation threatens to turn Snake, just like the surgeon's other patients, into a patchwork of skin tissues and organs transferred back and forth from both male and female bodies, thus causing a literal transsexualization of his pristinely male body as ultimate safeguard of his heterosexual identity.

hippie-surfer "Pipeline", geeky non-hegemonic "Map to the Stars Eddie", self-reliant Muslim woman Taslima and trans woman of color Hershe Las Palmas together with her East Asian guards.[16]

Snake's relation with Hershe, played by Pam Grier and the movie's most clearly identifiable transsexual character, seems to be the most complex one among these and invites a number of interpretations: Snake and 'Carjack Malone' (Hershe's former male name) share a history as partners in crime until Carjack framed Snake during a joint coup some years ago. In the meantime, Carjack has been convicted and deported to the L.A. prison island, where, now living as Hershe, she has since established herself as a powerful gang boss residing in the dilapidated ocean liner Queen Mary, and was able to change her sex—something impossible to accomplish in the fundamentalist U.S. beyond the prison walls. Naturally suspicious of the person who framed him and initially confused due to her altered sex, Snake almost immediately gropes Hershe's crotch. Allegedly, he does not do so to check whether the sex change has entailed surgery, but to disarm her of a small gun that he knows Carjack always kept in this spot. Nonetheless, his action evokes the gendered violence of similar scenes in earlier crime drama, in which the male hero affirms his dominance by way of sexual aggression.

Ultimately, Snake's act of aggression also proves to have metanarrative significance, as the viewer is prompted to remember Grier's most iconic performances as gunslinging vigilante-seductress in *Coffy* or *Foxy Brown* with a similar habit of hiding a gun beneath her clothes in order to point it at her male victims in the most intimate moment. This detail not only establishes the gun once more as a symbol of phallic power to be seized by the female vigilante, it also ties Grier's character in this 1990s speculative film back to her other notable appearances in the urban crime genre discussed further above. At first, this scene might suggest a metanarrative act of male revenge against Grier's subversive, man-killing characters in *Coffy*, *Foxy Brown* and *Fort Apache* at the hand of Snake Plissken. Yet, the latter ultimately differs from the urban crime cinema's cops, vigilantes and gangsters, as he seeks cooperation with rather than literal or ideological confrontation with the urban frontier's diverse denizens: Snake eventually teams up with Hershe and her loyal

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[16] One might also argue that Snake's character exists as a safeguard to allow white action/crime audiences to identify safely with his non-allegiant white man's position rather than with that of the non-normative and often non-white prison population. From this perspective, the *Escape* films appear less daring than *The Warriors* or even *1990: The Bronx Warriors* with their non-white protagonists. Nevertheless, identifying with his position also invites white viewers to critically reflect on the state, its possible authoritarian elements or the future of its already existing race-biased mass incarceration policy.

guards in order to turn against Cuevo and secure their shared escape from L.A.

Conclusion: Pam's Journey through the Urban Frontier 1973 to 1996—Ideological Reinforcements and Subversions

Looking back, it seems that the characters impersonated by Pam Grier manifest the fate of many (Black) inner-city communities from the 1970s to the 1990s. First, the Black communities received a heightened cultural visibility, claimed greater social participation and a collective empowerment that crystallized politically in the Civil Rights and Black Power movements and culturally, among other things, in Blaxploitation cinema (with all its obvious deficits and shortcomings). Then, they suffered a harrowing demonization in neoconservative discourses that sought to construct a non-white urban underclass inherently prone to crime and all sorts of social ills into a generalized urban problem in dire need of 'management' by state authorities, such as it was popularized throughout the 1970s and 80s by mainstream cop and vigilante dramas. And finally, many Black inner-city neighborhoods faced the great lockdown of large parts of their populations as a result of a new mass incarceration paradigm and zero tolerance policies that were creatively and critically imagined into entire inner-city prison complexes in a number of early 1980s speculative gang films. Throughout this development, mainstream and alternative urban crime cinema have provided an arena for negotiating gender-based identities ultimately rooted in American frontier mythology. These identities have gone through ideological reinforcements in mainstream films, centering on hypermasculine, hyperviolent cops and regenerative vigilantes shooting their way through a hostile urban frontier space that proved threatening to their integrity and hegemony as white, male and heteronormative individuals as well as the white communities they represent. At the same time, these frontier identities have (partly) experienced subversions, disruptions or critical reevaluations within the realm of at least two strands of alternative crime films. Blaxploitation cinema attempted to subvert the standard scripts of white, male vigilante/cop vs. non-white ghetto by reinterpreting these antagonisms from a Black and/or female perspective. At the same time, it staged Black vigilantism as legitimate violence in the absence or even presence of racist law enforcement authorities that ultimately prove to be not an ally in the quest for justice, but rather another enemy.

Both currents of urban crime drama culminate in a cycle of the early 1980s inner-city prison gang films that provide an even more radical subversion of the general race and gender antagonism. Firstly, they fully shift the viewer's perspective and sympathies to those of the abjected populations locked up inside the walled-off inner-city spaces and/or

prisons. Secondly, they imagine alternative outlaw communities that undermine common divisions and hierarchies of race, gender, age and in/sanity present in the world beyond the prison walls, thus paradoxically turning these prison islands into actual harbors of freedom. In the same way, these scenarios champion characters that favor cooperation and solidarity instead of vigilante rage and its logic of compensatory domination via racialized or gendered violence. After all, these three strands of urban crime cinema follow the dichotomous logic of Foucauldian heterotopias: while mainstream urban crime films seek to compensate for seemingly lost (gender) identities by way of reinforcing them along normative lines of race and gender, Blaxploitation and speculative gang films (in different degrees) subvert and decenter all-too reinforced race and gender identities by diversifying and opening up new perspectives.

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