A Woman's Gotta Do . . . What a Man's Gotta Do?
Cross-Dressing in the Western

A male reviewer wrote of The Ballad of Little Jo, “The film made me want to
go home and watch Bonanza.” And I thought: You want to go back to the
Western where there's no woman around telling these three guys that
they're not okay and where the Chinese man has no dick? That's where you
want to go back to?

Well, you can't. It's over.
— Maggie Greenwald, director of The Ballad of Little Jo

In the encyclopedia volume The BFI Companion to the Western, Edward
Buscombe writes in his lengthy and highly informative introduction, “It
seemed as though at the very moment of [the Western's] creation the
West was suffused with a rosy tinge of nostalgia” (1988, 52). In view of
the resistance on the part of some white male critics to new developments
in the genre, perhaps it could be said that male viewers who want to go
back to the always-already nostalgic cowboy stories of old are imbued not
with what Mary Ann Doane, in speaking of the female viewer, has called
the “desire to desire” (1987) but with the nostalgia for nostalgia. Indeed,
Buscombe himself seems to fall victim to this malady when he laments the
directions taken by the genre in the 1960s and 1970s: “The withering
away of the traditional audience for the Western had led by the 1970s to a
free-for-all, where in order to find a market everything was tried at least
once. There were Westerns for children, for blacks and hippies, for liber-
als and conservatives.” The list continues for a paragraph, and the next
paragraph begins, “There were good Westerns, too” (!) (1988, 51)—all of
which, it turns out, have white men as protagonists.

I would like to thank the National Endowment for the Humanities, which generously
provided a fellowship that allowed me to research and write this article and to interview
Maggie Greenwald.

1 Modleski 1995–96, 11. All quotations from Greenwald are taken from an extensive
interview I conducted with her on September 26, 1994, and later published in Film Quarterly
(Modleski 1995–96). If no page number appears in the text, the reference is to a remark that
was edited from the printed version.

[Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 1997, vol. 22, no. 3]
© 1997 by The University of Chicago. All rights reserved. 0097-9740/97/22/03-0001$02.00
In the nineties some white male critics seem again to sense that something is "withering away" and to feel renewed solidarity with the more traditional heroes who are presumably being crowded out of their terrain. Yet I would argue that while these critics identify with the cowboys they consider to be a vanishing breed, in reality they more closely resemble the railroad speculators seeking to gobble up all the land and to deprive anyone else of the territory they might legitimately claim for themselves. Thus, whether intentionally or not, they will often ensnare works such as Mario Van Peebles's *Pose* (1993) or Maggie Greenwald's *The Ballad of Little Jo* (1993) in a catch-22 logic: on the one hand, a film like *Pose* is liable to be dismissed as conventional—therefore derivative. Part of the problem of its being derivative, it is implied, is that it is false to the specificity of African-American existence (thus do ostensibly liberal white critics appear to speak on behalf of African Americans in the very process of eliminating them as competitors in the arena of popular culture). On the other hand, *Pose* is liable to be seen as a product of the marketplace's cynical strategy of trying everything at least once, as Buscombe puts it. The film may have a novel theme or unconventional characters, but these are regarded as mere gimmicks. Whereas films like *Pose* and *The Ballad of Little Jo* are doubly disqualified in these ways, a film like *Unforgiven* (1992) gets the benefit of the doubt in both directions. It is proclaimed truly revisionary—simultaneously a real Western and a work of art.

Certainly few reviewers in the mainstream American press have any stake in considering why marginalized groups would want not to discard but to rework stories that have, after all, shaped the fantasies of most people in this culture. Still less do reviewers want to consider what happens to the genre when, say, the shoot-out pits black cowboys against the Ku Klux Klan, or when the railroad companies deprive black people of living in the townships they have formed—as in fact happened after the Civil War. Are such plots not radically revisionary and recognizable Western? Are they not true to an ever-growing awareness of the American West as

---

2 That masculinity itself is at stake in defenses of the Western can be seen in the language of male hysteria used by some commentators on the genre. Thus, Tag Gallagher ends a spirited critique of his fellow critics, "Genre criticism tends to delete the sensuous from the dialectic between sensuousness and logic that creates art; in so doing such criticism emasculates cinema of its aesthetic dimension and transforms it into an effete conceptual vehicle. Art becomes an academic exercise, pornography or propaganda, raped of its capability, its aesthetic capability, to give us knowledge of ourselves and our world" (1986, 214).

3 The highly dismissive blurb on *Pose* in Leonard Maltin's *Movie and Video Guide 1995* calls the film "conventional" and "politically correct" (meaning, I suppose, that it is not about white guys) (1995, 1021).
containing diverse realities that suggest the comparative poverty of some of the older myths? For if, as Richard Slotkin has observed, the Western is caught up in a “dilemma of authenticity” — cultural tradition’s tendency to define “the West as both an actual place with a real history and as a mythic space populated by projective fantasies” — then the plots of the new Westerns might, as in the example here, be expected to refigure the relationship of historical reality to myth in ways that merit close mapping (1992, 234).

There are many compelling reasons to undertake such a mapping of *The Ballad of Little Jo*, not the least of which is that it does indeed reflect the new directions being taken in histories of the Old West that have increasingly focused on gender and on the ethnic and racial diversity of nineteenth-century frontier society. Further, as an imaginative work of popular art, the film provides an occasion to examine the history of male and female “projective fantasies” of the Old West and the Western landscape from the pioneer days to the present and to see how the very border between male and female worlds of popular culture shifts when a woman is working on what has hitherto been exclusively masculine territory. Whereas an earlier generation of feminist culture critics have posited a strict binary opposition between men’s fantasies and women’s fantasies of the West and the Western landscape, and have actually often reinforced the segregation of men and women in the popular culture sphere — either by bemoaning the “transvestism” forced on the female reader/spectator of Westerns or by asserting the superiority of female fantasies (of home and garden) to men’s fantasies (of the desert and the range) — a film like *Ballad* forcefully challenges this binary system, stirring up the kind of “gender trouble” celebrated by theorists such as Judith Butler (1989). In this regard, the film furnishes an opportunity to chart the distance feminist cultural criticism and theory have traveled in the past two decades.

Looking at *The Ballad of Little Jo* in a historical context, moreover, might help shed light on the current fascination with cross-dressing not only in feminist theory but, equally important, in popular culture and high culture (I am thinking not only of films such as *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything!*)

---

* In her book on spectatorship, Judith Mayne draws on the work of feminist historian Linda Gordon in order to account for various positions female spectators can take up in relation to the cinema. Mayne’s discussion allows us to see why the Western, as described by Slotkin, is a perfect genre with which to consider the relation between women’s history and mythmaking: “Gordon notes that contemporary women’s history has moved in two different directions: the one, empirical in scope, seeking to uncover the truth of women’s lives that have been obscured by the falsehoods of previous generations of historians; the other ‘rejecting the possibility of objectivity,’ defining history as myth-making and storytelling” (Gordon 1986, 22; Mayne 1993, 75).
Julie Newmar [1995] but of such films as Orlando [1993] and The Crying Game [1992]). In a fascinating article titled “Balladry’s Female Warriors: Women, Warfare and Disguise in the Eighteenth Century” (1985) Dianne Dugaw discusses the popularity of the cross-dressed female warrior in Anglo-American balladry, an art form that flourished from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries among the working class. Dugaw notes that ballads drew on the experience of many women in the working classes, who, for a variety of social and economic reasons, sometimes disguised themselves as men, often to join the military. In this regard it might be argued that the nineteenth-century dime novels, which I discuss below, inherited and prolonged the life of the character of the female cross-dresser so popular in the Anglo-American ballads. It is likely as well that both of these genres spoke to the actual experience of westering American women whose rugged lives necessitated their violation of feminine norms.

Given this history, it is highly interesting that Greenwald, without conscious knowledge of the ballad tradition, chose the ballad form (episodic verses, accompanied by ballad music) to contribute to the resurgence of interest in cross-dressing at the present time. Dugaw contends that the eighteenth century was “obsessed at all levels with disguise and cross-dressing” (1985, 15). Referring to popular theories of carnival as a space in which hierarchies of class and gender were temporarily upset, she writes: “For people in the eighteenth century, masquerade served not simply as a means of reversing roles or suspending authority for a day, but rather as an end in itself, as an experiment with identity. Ballads about women pretending to be men became best sellers, and people of all classes regularly feigned being who they were not on virtually any day of the week. In the eighteenth century disguise became a social fad, a literary trope, and a settled and ongoing way of conceptualizing behavior” (15; emphasis added). So, too, the current craze for cross-dressing in film and popular culture may also reveal a desire to put identity into question, a desire that may not be limited to a small coterie of feminist and queer theorists in the academy.

Finally, I want to look at The Ballad of Little Jo to consider how it deals with ethnic and racial diversity, for I believe it provides a way to see—and to see beyond—the unconscious racial dimensions of certain white female fantasies of the American West (both past and present) as well as of the theories of these fantasies in feminist scholarship. Here I do not wish simply to gesture toward a need for greater inclusivity in white feminist literary and film criticism, but to show precisely how the binary thinking of some feminist culture critics who have focused primarily on sexual difference has sometimes rested on untheorized assumptions about race.
This is not, however, to deny the force of gender binarisms even on non-white American culture and criticism. To take an example that is especially pertinent to the present discussion—in that the protagonist of *Ballad* becomes romantically involved with a feminized Chinese man—King-Kok Cheung (1990) has shown how some Chinese men have responded to Chinese women writers' alleged emasculation of Chinese men by stressing a warrior tradition and asserting the value of “fighting” over “feeling.” In this respect, Chinese-American letters is waging even today a conflict similar to the one that Jane Tompkins claims is at the heart of a “literary gender war” historically played out between the dueling genres of male Western narratives and female domestic, or sentimental, fiction (1992).

I want to begin by measuring the distance traveled by *The Ballad of Little Jo* from the classical Western, choosing as my example of the latter one of the films singled out for special praise by Buscombe and almost every other fan of the Western: Sam Peckinpah's *Ride the High Country* (1962). The film is set on the eve of the Western's decline and thus powerfully evokes that sense of nostalgia so pervasive in the genre. In the film, two aging cowboys, played by Randolph Scott and Joel McCrea, team up to deliver gold from a mining camp to the bank in the nearest town. In the beginning of the film, the two men, formerly partners, accidentally meet at a Wild West Show, in which one of them has been acting the part of Buffalo Bill. After deciding to take this final job, the men hire a younger man to accompany them, and on the way they encounter Elsa Knudsen (Mariette Hartley), a young woman living alone with her fanatical father, who, it is hinted, has been incestuous with his daughter. To get away from her father, Elsa invites herself along on the journey to the mining camp, where her fiancé resides with his all-male “white trash” family, who assault the girl on their wedding night. Describing the initial scene in which Elsa appears, Jim Kitse writes, “The enemy of feeling and instinct, the Knudsen household is deeply repressive, the girl Elsa stunted and hiding herself in ill-fitting men's clothes, growth and self-knowledge finally impossible here” (1970, 156). At the end of the film, when all the conflicts have been resolved, “Elsa’s growth,” Kitse writes, is signified by the girl’s “finally accepting a suitable costume” (158). As this description suggests, the film's narrative reveals with exceptional clarity how anxiety about the decline of male potency (and the threat of male sexual perversion) is linked to the fear that the Western is nothing but a show, nothing but theater, and that in such a world women may easily move out of their appointed place, and chaos will reign.
That a costume can be fraught with the kind of meaning and moral significance Kitses assigns to it suggests how even today a Western heroine like Little Jo who achieves “growth and self-knowledge” precisely through dressing as a man may represent a threat to male moviegoers. I would suggest that some of the hostile reaction of male critics to Greenwald’s film stems from the fear that the phallus may not be in its usual place: hence the sense of lack or “incompleteness” experienced by some of the male reviewers, the feeling that Little Jo’s actions and choices need to be explained in more detail—the costume seen through and the “real” woman revealed. Of course, such a demand is seldom made of male heroes, whose legendary status (one thinks of Shane, e.g.) is maintained through secrecy regarding their feelings, motives, and origins. Western heroes are supposed to be enigmatic: “Who was that masked man?” people asked as the Lone Ranger rode off into the sunset. Indeed, to supply a hero with motives that lie outside him would diminish his phallic self-sufficiency, which is revealed in his typically tautological appeal to a gendered identity whenever he is asked to give a reason for his actions: “A man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do.” By contrast, the woman must be psychologically understood, for she represents an intolerable double enigma: the enigma of the Westerner superimposed, as it were, on the enigma of woman.

Not that what is known about the “real” Jo Monaghan, on whom the character is based, clears up the mystery surrounding the woman. All that is known of her is that she was an Eastern society girl who had a child out of wedlock and was disowned by her family. Josephine Monaghan gave the child to her sister to care for and came out West, taking on the identity of a man sometime during her journey. “Her existence,” says Greenwald, “was pretty meager and lonely,” although she apparently was able throughout her life to send money to her sister for the care of the child.

Greenwald fleshes out this bare-bones plot by having her heroine, played by Suzy Amis, assume the identity of a man after she narrowly escapes being raped by two Union soldiers (Jo buys men’s clothes, cuts her hair, and scars her face by cutting it with a razor); she enters the mining camp of Ruby City and boards with a man named Percy (played by Ian McKellen), until one night Percy gets drunk and cuts up a prostitute. At this point, Jo takes on a job as a sheepherder working for a man named Frank Badger (Bo Hopkins), who is destined to become her life-long friend. Jo lives out in the wilderness with no company for months on end, teaching herself to tend the animals, learning to shoot the wolves that prey

---

5 “Many scenes seem incomplete or uncommented on” (Kronke 1993, 14).
on the flock, and finding a degree of fulfillment in the solitary life. Eventually she buys her own flock and a homestead near Frank's.

One day in town Jo encounters Frank Badger and a group of men “having a little fun” by taunting a Chinese man, “Tinman” (David Chung), whose neck they have placed in a noose. She forces them to cut the man loose and in return agrees to take him on as a houseboy. The two eventually end up as lovers, although their relationship reaches a crisis point when Jo, tempted to return home to her son, almost sells her ranch to the Western Cattle Company, which has been tyrannizing homesteaders who refuse to sell their land. When she decides to stay, she and Frank are forced into a shoot-out against the company’s hired thugs.

The film skips over many years, as a title informs the viewer, and fades into a long shot of Jo laboriously carrying water from the well and collapsing before she can get it to the house. By the time Frank gets her into town she is dead. As the undertaker prepares the body, the townspeople gather in the saloon to toast their friend, Little Jo Monaghan. Just as they are raising their glasses, the undertaker rushes into the saloon to tell them the secret of Jo’s identity, and in a comical scene they all rush to look at the body. As they stand gazing down at it, the one woman in the group begins to laugh. In a blackly humorous penultimate scene, the townspeople put the corpse of Little Jo on her horse and tie her to the saddle so that a photograph may be taken of her. At the end, Frank enters Jo’s cabin in a rage at the hoax perpetrated on him and begins to tear the place apart; in the process he comes across an old photograph of Jo (taken by the man whose child she bore), which gives him pause, and in the final image of the film, the viewer sees this photograph juxtaposed with the one in the newspaper of the cross-dressed female corpse seated on a horse.

By making Jo’s first lover be the photographer who takes both the Monaghan family photograph and the individual photograph of Jo herself, Greenwald calls attention to woman’s status in classic narrative as object of the gaze. Becoming in effect a victim of her biological femininity after she is seduced by the photographer, Jo is forced to become a man to avoid sexual victimization after she is cast out for bearing a child. At the end, when her sexual identity has been discovered, it is a female photographer who takes the picture—the woman behind the camera (a double, perhaps,

---

6 The name is their Anglicized version of the man’s Chinese name.
of the director) serving to provide visual verification of the heroine's successful male masquerade.

Greenwald's idea for the scene in which the corpse is placed on the horse came from looking at books of Western photography, which she notes are filled with photographs of dead people. In fact, when she first saw the photograph of the real Jo in the newspaper clipping she thought it was a death photo. Greenwald says that photography books were her primary research tool and that she wrote the screenplay surrounded by these books. For Greenwald,

Anything that was real was far more fascinating than anything you could make up. For instance, looking at the photographs it occurred to me to ask: what happens when you suddenly decide to build a town in the middle of a forest? You end up with tree stumps in the middle of the road and mud all over the place. Where do you get materials to build? The buildings are shelters in these photographs—well, what are they made of? And you suddenly notice that something's got a piece of paisley and that part of a roof or a window may be someone's scarf. It was a matter of using anything that was available to work with. I felt it was important to give the film that kind of texture. (Modleski 1995–96, 8)

Contributing to the rich texture is the film's interest in the details of work performed in the Old West—the laborious tasks involved in gold mining, for example. Although the details of women's work are depicted, such as the tending of the sick in the scene in which Frank Badger's wife, Ruth (Carrie Snodgress), doctors the ailing Tinman, spoon-feeding him kerosene, cutting up onions and taping them to the bottoms of his feet, and so forth, most of the work that is shown is work that was usually done by men. It is interesting that a woman director conveys the details of this work and of the material reality of the West more lovingly than have most male directors working in this action-oriented genre. In lingering over such details, the camera shows a fascination with things in themselves, with processes rather than goals; indeed, it might be said (were not such observations so discredited these days) that in this respect the film takes a traditionally feminine approach to the depiction of traditionally masculine activities.

One episode in Ballad shows the heroine learning how to tend sheep and to survive on her own in the wilderness. The first time a wolf preys upon her flock, Jo cowers in her covered wagon, terrified by the bleating of the sheep, the snarling of the wolf, the frantic barking of her dog. She determines to learn how to shoot, and scenes of target practice are intercut with amusing scenes in which Jo attempts to disentangle ungainly sheep
from the brambles and then tries to get them to move as they continue to
lie there. Such scenes, pleasurable in themselves, may be compared with
the brief early scenes in *Unforgiven* in which Will Munny (Clint Eastwood)
slides around with his pigs in the muck. Such scenes establish the initial
degradation of the hero, whom one character describes as a “broken-down
pig farmer,” and seem to be included solely to make the eventual resuscita-
tion of Munny’s gunslinger persona that much more spectacular. The pigs,
in themselves, are of no interest.

In *West of Everything*, Jane Tompkins argues that animals in the Western,
for all their ubiquity, are invisible. Speaking of cattle, she writes, “Lending
their energy and life to the moving picture, epitomizing its goal, yet hardly
ever recognized for what they are—sentient beings like ourselves, capable
of pleasure and pain—cattle are an enabling condition of Western narra-
tives. They cannot be seen for themselves.” She argues that if they were
to be truly seen, the Western would be rendered impossible, because the
“relation humans have” to animals “is the same one they have to their own
bodies and emotions” (1992, 118–19). The denial of the body is the funda-
mental truth of the male Western hero, Tompkins asserts. In *Ballad*,
however, the sheep are at least in part seen for themselves; moreover, there
is a recognition of a similarity between humans and animals—in this case
between Jo and the sheep. The feminizing of sheep and the activity of
sheep herding in the Old West is not new: for example, in *The Ballad of
Josie* (1967), a comic Doris Day movie with a title uncannily similar to
Greenwald’s, the heroine sets up a “sheep farm in what has traditionally
been cattle company, provoking a range war.” (In fact, historically sheep
were despised because of their association with “inferior peoples”: “the
dislike of sheep . . . carried class and racist overtones” because shepherding
was “traditionally an occupation of Spanish-speaking natives of the
Southwest or of Indian peoples such as the Navaho” (Buscombe
1988, 218).

Greenwald revives and tacitly politicizes the rather cliché association
between women and sheep: just as Jo learns to protect the sheep from
predators, so is she herself, in the course of the film, transformed from
sexual prey to a woman who is in control of her life. The day after the wolf
attacks the sheep, Jo comes down from her wagon and is confronted with
the sickening sight of a sheep’s bloody carcass. Later, when she shoots a

7 This is Pam Cook’s description of *The Ballad of Josie*, which I have been unable to see
(Buscombe 1988, 24). Cook’s lengthy entry on women in *The BEH Companion to the Western*,
some of which addresses the issue of cross-dressing, is by far the most interesting and complex
discussion of women in the Western that I have read. It is, as well, one of the most astute
discussions of the genre.
wolf that is attacking the sheep, the camera cuts to a shot of Jo sewing and then cuts again to a low-angle shot of Jo on her horse, silhouetted against the Western landscape, wearing a huge wolfskin coat. Rather than signify a transcendence of the animal body, the sequence and its final image suggest an apt metaphor for the female cross-dresser in the West—a sheep dressed in wolf’s clothing.

Cross-dressed heroines are not without precedent in the West or the Western genre. There was a significant subgenre of nineteenth-century dime-store Westerns featuring women dressed as men. These women did not appear on the scene all at once, however, but were part of a more gradual transformation of the Western heroine from, in Henry Nash Smith’s words, “the merely passive sexual object she had tended to be in the Leatherstocking tales” to a more active protagonist. One early plot device, notes Smith in Virgin Land, involved a form of cross-racial masquerade: the heroine was sometimes an Indian girl able to ride and shoot who later proves to be an upper-class white girl captured long ago by the Indians. He goes on to write, “A much more promising means of effecting a real development in the [white] heroine was the ancient device of introducing a woman disguised as a man or wearing male attire” (1950, 112). Calamity Jane of the Deadwood Dick series by Edward L. Wheeler is the most famous female cross-dresser in the Western and was, of course, a figure who survived well into the twentieth century. In Wheeler’s series, Jane, not unlike Jo, has a genteel background but has been transformed into a “ruthless Amazon” by “a great wrong,” her lover’s desertion of her. Jane’s marital prospects have suffered as a result of her having “grown reckless in act and rough in language,” and the reader is informed that she will probably never marry (Smith 1950, 118). By contrast, in the 1953 musical comedy Calamity Jane, starring Doris Day, Calamity does marry, thus returning to proper femininity, but only after a great deal of “gender trouble” has occurred (including a scene in which Wild Bill Hickok, attending a performance of a singer who is not who she claims to be, dresses up as an Indian squaw with a papoose; like the earliest heroines cited by Smith, his masquerade also has a cross-racial dimension).

The proliferation of masquerades, all seeming to extend out from Calamity’s transgression of gender norms, verges on exposing the Western as primarily about costume, poses, and theater. But, of course, various forms

---

8 See also the 1935 film Annie Oakley directed by George Stevens and featuring Barbara Stanwyck in the title role. Smith sees in early Westerns a pronounced manifestation of “the nineteenth-century fondness for disguises on the stage and in fiction, a taste which encouraged actors to exploit mimicry and make-up as a form of sensationalism” (1950, 92).
of travesty, especially gender impersonations, have always been the stuff of comedy; laughter is precisely what keeps audiences from seriously examining the rules and hierarchies they delight in seeing temporarily subverted. It is perhaps the desire for the reassurances provided by comic laughter and the comic ending that led some of Ballad’s detractors to complain about the film’s humorlessness. Critics like the one who faulted Greenwald for failing to exploit the “humor and suspense inherent in the story” (emphasis added) apparently want a Western version of Victor/Victoria (1982) (Levy 1993, 68). In fact there is much humor in the film; however, as the woman’s laugh at the end of the film suggests, the joke is on someone else for a change—not on the transvestite but on the people who were so easily fooled by the impersonation, the very people, paradoxically, who care the most about maintaining distinctions between the sexes (hence the early scene in Ballad in which Frank Badger and some other men force Jo at gunpoint to remove her shoes to show that her socks are not patterned in yellow and black stripes like those of a “dude” whom they had recently encountered).

The disappointment in not being presented with a cowgirl version of Victor/Victoria is no doubt what led some critics to deplore the film’s lack of “psycho-sexual cross-currents”; no doubt they had expected the kind of (invariably comic) plot in which the transvestite finds herself desired by a member of her own sex (Rainer 1993, F8). There does in fact remain in the film a small bit from a larger sequence, later dropped, in which a young girl named Mary falls for Jo. Thus, the suggestion of an attraction between women is at least registered in Ballad, although to be sure the film’s psychosexual energies lie elsewhere—in, precisely, a questioning of the Western male’s sexuality.

Much of this questioning of male sexuality goes on around the figure of Percy, the misogynist who “had a wife,” but who found wives to be too much trouble (as he informs Jo while competently skinning and cutting up a rabbit for stew); now, he says, he visits the girls in their tents every once in a while. He is curious about Jo, seems attracted to “him,” and initiates “him” into manhood, teaching “him” how to smoke, for example. But one night a drunken Percy slashes a prostitute because, as he explains to Jo, she would not “put it in her mouth.” Greenwald was very conscious of creating in Percy a character around whom to pose a question seldom asked in the Western genre and then only disingenuously: “Who are these men? Conventional Westerns are full of these marginalized men who are alone . . . and you don’t know who they are and they never really connect, and they are someone’s side-kick, or they’re someone who is scary and bad and does one good deed. The Western is full of them. Who are they? And it’s not just Westerns, but stories about seamen or pirates, anybody who
has run away” (Modleski 1995–96, 10). Usually, such questions, when they are asked at all in the Western (as in the lyrics of the song in John Ford’s *The Searchers* [1956]—“What makes a man to wander, to turn his back on home?”), must remain rhetorical. But while most Westerns unself-consciously play out homoerotic relations between men, like Doc Holliday and Wyatt Earp, Greenwald pauses to register the men’s sexual ambiguity. The casting of McKellen was particularly inspired since, as an openly gay actor who is clear about and confident in his sexuality, he throws into relief the problems of the sexually confused but straight-identified character.

After Jo has spent some months in the line camp, she returns to Ruby City and is confronted by Percy, who has read a letter sent to Jo by her sister and has consequently discovered her true identity. Percy attempts to rape Jo, feeling betrayed just as Frank Badger ultimately feels betrayed by the revelation that Jo is a woman, but she draws a gun on him, saying, “I’ll never forget the look on that woman’s face as long as I live.” This recognition of a common bond between Jo and the prostitute is an important aspect of the film’s “projective fantasy.” Given the historical division between “respectable” women and prostitutes in the West, and given the emphasis on this division by films such as the classic John Ford Western, *Stagecoach* (1939) (although to be sure, Ford reverses the usual values), such solidarity is to a certain extent utopian rather than indicative of actual class relations between women in the West. But it is more than that. The early sections of the film provide a feminist analysis of the grounds for such solidarity when early on it shows how Jo’s sexual fall and subsequent banishment from her high-society family would have led her straight into prostitution had she not struck on the idea of disguising herself as a man (indeed, unbeknownst to her, she is in fact sold to the Union soldiers by the tinker who pretends to befriend her at the beginning of the movie). The job of “reuniting women” who, in the words of Western historian Patricia Limerick, “would have refused to occupy the same room” is the job not only of the historian but of the artist as well (1987, 52).

Limerick and other revisionary historians of the American West stress the diversity of the West and the Western experience in relation not only to gender but also to race and ethnicity. To give a portrait of such diversity is also Greenwald’s aim—achieved most notably in the depiction of the Chinese man who becomes Jo’s lover and thereby sets the “psycho-sexual cross-currents” raging. Of all the ethnic and racial types of men peopling

---

* Despite this statement, Limerick’s sole intent in the eight scant pages she devotes to women in the West is to disabuse “anyone inclined to project a sentimentalized hope for women’s essential solidarity in the past” (1987, 50).
the landscape of the Western genre, the Chinese man has been the most invisible. This invisibility is ironic considering the centrality of Asia and the Asian man to the construction of the great white myths of the West. Not only was Asia Christopher Columbus's intended destiny, but it also figured largely in the thinking of the advocates of manifest destiny in the early years of the nation. Henry Nash Smith has shown how in the history of American thought the intense desire for an intercontinental link was gradually displaced by a preoccupation with internal borders, marked and remarked by the westward-moving frontier. This internal movement, of course, was made possible by the construction of the railroad, much of which was built through exploiting the labor of Chinese immigrants. In having Jo and Tinman become sexually involved, the film forges a connection to Asia undreamed of by proponents of manifest destiny (except perhaps in their worst nightmares); at the same time, by stressing the toll his labor has taken on Tinman, the film provides a new, but certainly authentic, take on the Western convention of the evil railroad. A similar reworking of generic convention occurs in the scene in which the white men threaten to lynch Tinman. While the lynch mob is a familiar sight in Western movies, it is certainly never acknowledged that the lynching of Chinese men in the West was part of a pattern of violence periodically visited on Chinese men by white men. Yet one male historian who reviewed Ballad ignored the fact that the film brings to light a mostly unacknowledged historical reality—the massacring of Chinese men by white men (Chen 1980, 46–47, 137, 139)—and complained instead about the "savage" depiction of white men in the movie (White 1993–94, 63). That this historian has earned his reputation by calling into question the ethnocentrism of Western myths is sobering testimony to the defensiveness white men continue to display when in rare instances they find themselves sidelined (see White 1983, 1986).

In the nineteenth century the white establishment had a stake in not recognizing Asians as distinct from other nonwhite groups in America. Limerick discusses the dilemmas of racist legal thinkers and Americans in general who in the nineteenth century were "wrestling with the questions

10 *Since I have been discussing both prostitutes and Asians, I should not neglect to point out the especially oppressed status of the Chinese women who often served as prostitutes in the American West and were "controlled as virtual slaves" (Limerick 1987, 268). For a discussion of Chinese prostitutes and their relation to anti-Chinese sentiment and anti-Chinese labor agitation, see Cheng and Bonacich 1984. For a lovely film about a Chinese woman who is sold into slavery in the Old West and escapes prostitution, see Nancy Kelly's *Thousand Pieces of Gold* (1990), which is based on a fictionalized biography written by Ruthanne Lum McCann (1988). I have analyzed this film in an as yet unpublished article.*
raised by Western diversity” and attempting to maintain a fiction of a “bipolar West composed of ‘whites’ and ‘Indians’” (1987, 261). If, as Marjorie Garber has argued, the transvestite represents a “category crisis” with respect to gender (1992, 16–17), it might be said that the Asian represented a category crisis with respect to nineteenth-century theories of race. In 1854, Limerick notes, Chief Justice J. Murray wrote an opinion designed to include Chinese people in a “united racist theory” so that discriminatory legislation could be made to apply to all nonwhite peoples: “Ethnology,” he wrote, “having reached a ‘high point of perfection,’ disclosed a hidden truth in Columbus’s error. It now seemed likely that ‘this country was first peopled by Asians.’” Therefore, Murray ruled, any statute discriminating against “Indians” applied to Asians as well (Limerick 1987, 261). Thus it may be seen that the tendency of the Western genre to jumble up all racial groups into an undifferentiated mass has a long and ignoble history. In this light, Greenwald’s decision to give a central role to the nearly invisible Chinese man and to give him as well a specific history of oppression (which he recounts to Jo in bed by telling her where he got the various scars on his body) may be said to strike a blow against the bipolar racial thinking so characteristic of American thought and myth. And, as seen in Greenwald’s treatment of women from different backgrounds, part of the projective fantasy is to suggest a link between oppressed people, in this case between the white woman and the Asian man.

Such a link between oppressed people is part of a complex history of relations between white women and Chinese men. In the late nineteenth century, Chinese men were often seen as competitors with white women for jobs, since Chinese men not employed by the railroad were limited to “service-sector” jobs typically held by women (hence, when the Western does afford a rare glimpse of a Chinese man, it is in the feminized role of houseboy—Hop Sing on the television show Bonanza being perhaps the most egregious example). Sarah Deutsch points out that in the last part of the century antagonism on the part of labor unions toward Chinese men was fomented around the issue of women’s sexuality: the unions claimed that “white women were drifting into prostitution because Chinese competition undermined their wages”; the unions thus called for boycotting employers of Chinese immigrants. “Yet white women were not party to the movement, and the boycott forced out of business several white female lodging house keepers who employed Chinese male servants. When these women asked the police for the much-vaunted ‘protection,’ the police refused” (1993, 116).11

11 But there were also occasions in which white women acted out of a threat to their self-interest. As Julie Roy Jeffery writes, “Chinese laundries . . . threatened women who made money by washing clothes. In Helena, Montana, the operation of Chinese laundries consti-
“The Western is haunted by the fear of miscegenation,” writes Pam Cook (1988, 242), while Slotkin points out that the stake of much Western fiction and film is “the defense of Western civilization (represented especially by the women and children of the White race) against savagery (represented by non-White natives and European tyrants)” (1992, 265). Given this stake and given the specific psychosexual and psychosocial dynamics governing historical relations between white women and Chinese men (in which white women’s sexuality was at issue, even though the “emasculated” Chinese man was viewed as a competitor with rather than for the white woman), it was a risky decision on Greenwald’s part to pose questions of sexuality and gender around the relationship of a white cross-dressing woman and a Chinese “houseboy” who has been physically debilitated by his years of working on the railroad. Considering how high the stakes are, it is particularly noteworthy that the characters are complex and the relationship lacking in sentimentality. One line in the film especially seems to prepare the viewer for a sentimentalized portrait of the love between Jo and Tinman, only to subvert it in a thoroughly humorous way; the line speaks volumes about the taboos the characters have violated and the utterly circumstantial nature of events that have resulted in this violation. When Jo and Tinman lie in bed after first making love (where he also teaches her to smoke opium), she shows him the old picture of herself and he says, “I like you better as you are.” Jo smiles and readies herself for the compliment she expects when she asks, “Why?” and Tinman replies, “Because that white girl would never have done this with me.” They are both also capable of a certain amount of cruelty toward one another and in their anger even taunt one another with the other’s gender deficiencies: Jo at one point calls Tinman “an ailing Chinaman”; on his part, when she briefly entertains going away and being a woman again, putting on a dress and smiling coyly at Tinman, he flies into a rage: “What kind of girl could you be somewhere else? What man would want you? You have no hair. Half your face is destroyed with that ugly scar. You can’t even make a pie,” and he plunges his hand into the mess of a pie she has concocted. Their roles (her masculine one, his feminized one) having been forced on them as a result of the gendered nature of their oppression (her sexual victimization, the exploitation of his labor on the railroad), each nevertheless comes to find some pleasure and an abiding satisfaction in the other and in the work each does.

At points in the film Greenwald is unable to avoid simply reversing the roles in depicting the relationship between Jo and Tinman. For instance,
Jo first experiences desire for Tinman when she rides by him on a horse as he bathes in a stream. The shot is taken from Jo’s point of view, and while he looks exceedingly virile, the gaze nonetheless fetishizes the image. At other times there is a kind of fluidity in the sexuality as it is conveyed by the film that prevents it from settling into stereotype. One time when Jo and Tinman are in bed together, the camera begins on an extreme closeup of Tinman’s long, dark hair, slowing panning upward; the shot is briefly disorienting until the viewer sorts out the fact that the hair belongs to the man and not the woman. The kinds of dissonances celebrated by lesbian postmodern feminists such as Butler in which sex, gender, and “performance” (to say nothing of race and class) are at odds with one another are at play throughout much of Tinman’s portrayal (1989, 137).

It is not surprising that a couple of critics were uncomfortable with the portrayal of Tinman, charging Greenwald with, as Ruby Rich put it, being unconscious of the stereotype she was invoking—by which I assume she means the stereotype of the feminized Asian man (although Rich also finds much of the play with gender roles in this relationship “subversive”) (1993, 18).12 Now, as I have shown, Chinese men in America were often made to perform work traditionally relegated to women and were prevented from doing the kind of work a man’s supposedly “gotta do” to be a man. Rather than ignore the historical reality, Ballad reveals the performative aspects of the racial stereotype, just as it shows gender to possess a performative dimension. For example, Tinman puts on an exaggerated display of servility whenever Frank Badger comes around so the viewer sees that the Hop Sing manner is an act. When Tinman is sick, Frank commiserates with Jo because he knows the two have a close relationship; he reassures her by saying that if Tinman dies, he will get Jo another Chinaman. Jo gives him a withering look, to which Frank, as ever, is oblivious. “By God,” he observes, “they make damn fine cooks and housekeepers, don’t they?”

Toward the end of the film Jo must make the kind of decision that most Western heroes face: whether to embrace the way of life associated with the East, with domesticity and civilization, or to remain apart from the forces encroaching on the wilderness and to live out her life as a rugged

12 Richard Fung, however, seems to regard the film as something of a landmark in its treatment of Chinese men: “It is only recently that Chinese men have begun to function as regular sexual beings on screen, mostly in films by white directors, like The Lover, Dragon, and Ballad of Little Jo” (1995, 296). Is it significant that of these, one, The Lover, was based on a novel by a woman (Duras 1985) and another, Ballad, written and directed by one?
individualist. Of course, for the male Westerner, domesticity and civilization are very often represented by a woman from the East. 13 In Jo, the conflict is necessarily played out as an internal one. The threat to the wilderness way of life in *Ballad* is represented by the cattle companies that are buying up all the land and intimidating and slaughtering those who refuse to sell, like the family of Russians Jo befriends. After witnessing the murder of the Russian woman, Jo is heartsick and feels torn between the desire to go back to her son, who has recently been told his mother is dead, and the desire to stay with Tinman, participate in elections ("You are a free white man," says Tinman, "and someday soon you will vote"), and fight the cattle company. In this weak moment she agrees to sell. But as Tinman lies sick in bed, possibly dying, Jo stands near the Eastern man from the cattle company who is signing the deed of transfer and looks out the window at his wife in the carriage scolding her son for not sitting still and for getting dirty. Then Tinman, a man from a different East, appears in the doorway and Jo smiles. She tells the director of the cattle company she has changed her mind. This scene is crucial not only because it satisfies generic requirements but because it suggests the extent to which Jo has grown to love her way of life and actually chooses it. Just as Suzy Amis’s performance seems more and more natural as the movie progresses, so too does Jo seem to grow into a life she never would have chosen at the beginning.

That a heroine retains the viewer’s sympathy and in a sense relinquishes her child not primarily for her own good but because in fact she has found a way of life she loves and does not want to give up is subversive in the extreme, given the tendency of popular narrative to demonize a mother who does not act out of pure self-sacrifice. The significance of Jo’s decision to remain a “man” and not go back to her son—that is, not accept her “proper” role in the domestic sphere—can be most fully appreciated by situating the film in a historical tradition of women’s fantasies and of the feminist scholarship that has explored these fantasies. In her study of the Western genre Tompkins, who herself has affirmed the “sentimental power” of women’s domestic fiction of the nineteenth century (1984), argues in *West of Everything* (1992) that Western myths developed as a response to the female domestic novel in which women asserted the superiority of their sphere over the public sphere in which men operated. Tompkins’s view is that male genres like the Western and female genres like domestic fiction actually waged something like a literary gender war, with the Westerner rejecting all that the domestic heroine represents—

13 It is true, however, that as John Cavelti points out, the hero also experiences an internal conflict, “a divided commitment” (1984, 53).
values associated with the home and the private realm of emotions and interpersonal relationships. Tompkins and other feminist scholars have responded to the Western's denigration of femininity by affirming the moral and political values of women's sentimental fiction, despite the constraints it places on heroine and readers alike.

Thus, while Tompkins herself speaks of an ambivalence toward the Western hero and at times expresses regret that male and female fantasies became so polarized, she nevertheless seems to privilege the sentimental fiction written by women and seems as well to support its views against the values of Western fiction and film. Indeed, Tompkins's own approach to the topic is sentimental, as when she avers that she cried when she realized she had excluded Indians from her book. This substitution of "female" emotion (crying) for "male" action (rewriting) testifies to the glaring need to find a way to bring "male" and "female" worlds into closer proximity (1992, 10).

At one point Tompkins invokes Annette Kolodny's book *The Land before Her* to argue that "when women wrote about the West, the stories they told did not look anything like what we know as the Western. Their experience as well as their dreams had another shape entirely" (Tompkins 1992, 42). Because Kolodny's text has led scholars to such conclusions, it is worth taking a look at it, even though it covers the period before the settling of the Far West. Kolodny is one of the few literary critics who have examined women's writings in order to understand women's fantasies—in this case of the Western landscape; her project is thus consonant with my own. Kolodny's thesis is that westering women viewed the wilderness in a way wholly different from the men, who saw the land as virgin territory to be conquered and subdued. Over and over again, Kolodny reads the writing of these women as projecting onto the frightening landscape "a garden's narrow space," in which women were engaged in "innocent . . . amusement"; thus women were able to avoid "male anguish at lost Edens and male guilt in the face of the raping of the continent" (1984, 7). Further, while men were invested in "the fantasy of the solitary, Indian-like hunter of the deep woods" and "sought sexual and filial gratifications from the land, . . . women sought there the gratifications of home and family relations" (12). Indeed, metaphors of intimacy, she notes, pervade women's writings (8).

For any modern-day reader who might be disappointed with aspirations that by today's standards seem "tame," "paltry," and "constricted," Kolodny cautions against judging the women who wrote about the West "by the ideological predispositions of late twentieth-century feminism" (xiii). One might appreciate the historian's tact while at the same time pointing out the impossibility of entirely preventing oneself from imposing one's "pro-
jective fantasies" onto the texts of one's pioneering forebears. Kolodny herself, for example, seems to indulge her own such fantasy when she speculates that the popularity among female readers of the captivity narratives written by women taken prisoner by Indians may be attributed to a displaced resentment toward their husbands, who without consulting them brought them into the wilderness. "The anger such women felt (but dared not express) toward the husband who had staked the family's future on the availability of rich lands on the frontier might thus, through the captivity narrative, vicariously be displaced onto the dark and dusky figure of the Indian, a projection of the husband's darker side" (33). Note the racism of the psychodynamics outlined by Kolodny, in which the Indians who were themselves victims of white male colonialism serve as scapegoats for women's hostility toward their husbands. If white women's dependence on white men actually served to exacerbate racism (and Kolodny's analysis is persuasive on this point, although she herself does not arrive at precisely this conclusion), such fantasies obviously cannot be represented as wholly positive alternatives to male fantasies. Insofar as Ballad suggests the desirability of striving for female self-sufficiency, it points the way out of a system in which the oppressed turn their resentment onto one another rather than onto those in power.

Looking at the fantasies discussed by Kolodny, a viewer of Ballad can see what was lacking in these early fantasies or what was perhaps buried deep within them. From the perspective of a twentieth-century spectator identifying with Little Jo, I would project two hypotheses back onto the texts of frontier women. I would speculate first that the captivity narratives were not devoid of psychosexual interest for their women readers. Kolodny's insistent yoking of eroticism with male aggression in effect denies the possibility of female sexuality altogether and thus reinforces the sexual repressiveness of domestic fantasies, the repressiveness that led to Josephine Monaghan's banishment from her family. Second, I would speculate that the very terror of the wilderness expressed by women in captivity narratives and other writings may have been a source of pleasure, if not to the writers, then to their readers. Kolodny's desire to posit a counterfantasy—of the garden, settlement, family—to male fantasies of conquest in the wilderness leads her to downplay the possibility of women's attraction to the sublime in nature, that is, to what in nature is wild and dangerous (and, hence, often associated with the masculine).14 Yet it is precisely a relation to the

14 Thus, when Kolodny encounters a passage that speaks about the sublime in a novel about a woman who makes her home with the Shawnee ("For the first time in my life I felt the force of liberty and the wild, sublime pleasures of an unshackled spirit. Every new thought which awoke in my heart in that deep wilderness was full of sublimity and wild poetic strength"), she observes that this was an "atypical image of a white woman: an unwonted
sublime in nature that Ballad offers viewers, inviting them to contemplate the magnificent vistas through which the heroine travels.

It is significant, however, that the film’s beautiful landscapes do not simply reproduce a clichéd masculine view of the West. Asked why she chose not to shoot in Cinemascope given her interest in conveying the vastness and majesty of the landscape, Greenwald responded that had she done so, the images would have been “out of proportion with the story. It would destroy the intimacy.” Recalling Kolodny’s observation that “metaphors of intimacy” abound in women’s fantasies, it could be said that Greenwald is not countering one, male, perspective with another, female, one, but is combining them to produce a text that pushes beyond differently gendered views, inspiring in the spectator both awe at the grandeur of the landscape and a sense of the intimate pleasures of interacting with the land and its diverse inhabitants.

Like Kolodny and Tompkins and other feminist literary critics from their generation who contributed to, as well as analyzed and critiqued, the polarization of male and female fantasies and male and female genres, feminist film theorists in the 1980s and early 1990s also tended to reject male genres and rehabilitate female genres, in particular the melodramas that were called “women’s films” and were often based on novels written by women (such films were in a direct line of descent from the sentimental and domestic fiction privileged by many feminist literary critics). Indeed, women who watched and enjoyed male genres such as the Western were said to suffer a kind of psychic transvestism, a condition that was largely deplored. Given the centrality of the figure of the female transvestite in feminist film theory, The Ballad of Little Jo presents itself as the perfect text from which to survey the history of the metaphor in feminist film theory.

While film critic Mary Ann Doane was far more critical than her literary counterparts of popular texts made by and/or for women, and saw them as reinforcing conservative notions of woman’s place, even she attempted to recuperate “female texts” by developing a theory according to which the female spectator could accomplish a resisting reading of these texts through performing a kind of feminine masquerade. Drawing on the work of psychoanalysts such as Joan Riviere and Luce Irigaray, proponent of the theory of feminine mimesis, Doane suggested that the female spectator can

and morally ambiguous Eve at home in a wilderness usually reserved for the isolate American Adam” (1984, 202).

15 Interview with Greenwald.
adopt an ironic distance from femininity by exaggerating (miming) its traits and hence exposing its artifice. The performance of such a masquerade was a way for the female spectator to evade psychic transvestism, to refuse the alien, masculine identity forced onto women by male-oriented Hollywood genres.

Other feminist critics such as Laura Mulvey (1988) also saw transvestism in a negative light but argued that the female spectator never wholly gave herself up to it. Rather—and on this point many film theorists agreed (Rodowick 1982; de Lauretis 1984)—the woman viewer was said to experience at best an “oscillation” between male and female roles that is uncomfortable, difficult, and even tragic. As Mulvey wrote, the heroine’s “oscillation, her inability to achieve stable sexual identity, is echoed by the woman spectator’s masculine point of view” (1988, 70; emphasis added). And again, “For women (from childhood onwards) trans-sex identification is a habit that very easily becomes second Nature. However, this Nature does not sit easily and shifts restless in its borrowed transvestite clothes” (72; emphasis in original).

It is interesting that Mulvey theorizes her concept of the female spectator’s transvestism by analyzing the 1946 Western Duel in the Sun, a film that relies on the very dynamic Henry Nash Smith detected in the early dime novels in which the heroine’s unfeminine behavior was explained by her being an Indian (who later proves really to be white). In this film the heroine, Pearl Chavez (Jennifer Jones), is the half-breed daughter of an Indian mother and an English father. (The father, played by Herbert Marshall, has a rather extraordinary last name for one of his nationality; yet the point of making him British and hence really Anglo seems to be to support the legitimacy of Pearl’s first name. Like the heroines of the stories cited by Smith, Pearl’s active, “masculine” pursuits—riding and shooting—are clearly associated with the Indian part of her identity. But unlike the fiction referred to by Smith, Duel in the Sun does not happily resolve the heroine’s two identities by making one of them disappear; rather, being a melodrama, it plays them out as a tragic conflict that ultimately destroys the heroine.

Mulvey suggests that in Duel in the Sun the brothers to whom Pearl is attracted—the good, progressive man of the law (Joseph Cotten) and the

---

16 The “instability” of mechanisms of identification with respect to gender, sexuality, and race is being affirmed by scholars such as Diana Fuss (1995). Well before Fuss, certain feminist critics used psychoanalysis to stress the importance for feminism of the failures of identification. The point was to show how the construction of “woman” is fraught with perils that are in the interest of feminism to exacerbate in order to subvert the oppressive aspects of the construction. See, e.g., Rose 1986.
sexually dangerous outlaw (Gregory Peck)—represent, respectively, the feminine (passive) and masculine (active, phallic, sexual) sides of Pearl. She goes on to speculate that, like Pearl, the female spectator is torn between masculine and feminine identifications and is involved in a kind of perpetual oscillation between these two poles. What Mulvey did not note was the extent to which the transvestism (the woman’s masculine identification) was made as visible as it was because it was projected onto an other, to whom the norms of femininity never fully applied in the first place. (It scarcely seems accidental that Lillian Gish plays the mother of the two men and is the model toward which Pearl futilely aspires, given Gish’s role in *Birth of a Nation* [1915] as the archetypal pure white woman whose sexuality the Ku Klux Klan defends against the threat of rape by black men.) Just as in the fantasies analyzed by Kolodny, then, the female spectators in Mulvey’s analysis (and to the extent that race was unremarked as a factor in her theory, Mulvey herself) were able to displace unacceptable feelings and desires onto the “dark and dusky” other.

Some years after Mulvey wrote about *Duel in the Sun*, Sue-Ellen Case wrote an article in which she criticized many white feminist film theorists not for racism but for heterosexism (1988–89). Case criticized these theorists for not acknowledging that concepts like masquerade and transvestism are traceable to the butch/femme role-playing common in some lesbian cultures. Although this was not her primary intention, in bringing the “butch” into the conversation, Case was affirming a figure who had been erased or implicitly condemned in much feminist film theory. By focusing on the lesbian, Case’s polemic sheds light on a key reason for the various displacements at work in the fantasies and theories of female fantasy I have been discussing: underneath the transvestite’s garments frequently lurks . . . a dyke. Surely the bogey of the lesbian (especially the mannish lesbian) accounts for some of the tenacity with which feminists have held to the theory of the masquerade, for it allows woman to be ultrafeminine (in a male-directed sense) and resistant at the same time.

The positive valuation Case places on the role of the “butch” coincides in the era of queer theory with a widespread reassessment of transvestism in cultural studies, most notably elaborated in Marjorie Garber’s voluminous *Vested Interests* (1992). While much of this work, in my view, has tended to overemphasize the parodic aspect of butch/femme role-playing and transvestism (thus perhaps unwittingly supporting those who, like the

---

17 But see also Epstein and Straub 1991. Numerous collections of essays that follow up on the insights of queer critics like Garber and Butler include Burroughs and Ehrenreich 1993; Senelick 1992 (the latter specifically deals with the performing arts).
male critic of *Ballad*, believed humor to be inherent in cross-dressing), some feminists have begun to go beyond a notion of parody in accounting for the effects and affects of cross-gender behavior. Arguing in a vein similar to Judith Butler, Teresa de Lauretis notes that in lesbian butch/femme role-playing, one experiences “the uncanny distance, like an effect of ghosting, between desire . . . and the representation, because the representation doesn’t fit the actors who perform it” (de Lauretis 1994, 109–10). But whereas Butler and others have focused on the parodic aspects of drag, de Lauretis suggests that butch/femme role-playing may be the source of erotic attraction as well as of humor. Indeed, de Lauretis sees the parodic element of cross-dressing and cross-gender imitation as much more characteristic of a *male* homosexual aesthetic than a female one (1994, 105n.). (At the same time that I raise these issues in the context of a discussion of *The Ballad of Little Jo*, I am uneasy about once again eliding lesbian difference; the lack of homoeroticism in the film disappointed some critics, notwithstanding the evidence of heterosexual activity in the “real” Jo Monaghan’s life.)

The character of Little Jo thus appears at an opportune moment in women’s cultural history to embody a condition—the transvestism of the male-identified woman—that in film theory has hitherto functioned primarily as a metaphor. In making a serious, that is, nonparodic, Western about cross-dressing, Greenwald both conveys the pleasures of transsex identification and suggests that what feminists have said of the masquerading woman is also true of the transvestite: she is not (to use Irigaray’s words [1985]) “wholly absorbed” in and by the role. Thus, on the one hand, the film depicts a woman who acquires many admirable traits in becoming a man and even proves herself to be in some respects more manly than the men (but then as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has observed, “Sometimes masculinity has nothing to do with . . . men” [1995, 12]). For example, whereas Jo feels deeply the solace of open spaces and comes to love the long solitary winters in the line camp, the men who take on the job go crazy without any company (and here we might recall that even the Lone Ranger was never really alone). On the other hand, Jo’s presence as a woman in the midst of men serves to throw into relief some of the more questionable aspects of masculinity—the aggression, the misogyny, and so forth. In addition, the film foregrounds the fact that masculinity is crucially inflected by race, and in doing so it helps to deconstruct the entire category.

Through the character of Little Jo, a figure at once male and not male,

---

18 Most of these critics, as Greenwald and I discussed in the interview, were, however, straight white male reviewers (Modleski 1995–96, 4).
Ballad suggests that having to choose between gendered alternatives may be the true source of people's "restlessness," to recall Mulvey's word. Rather than simply be forced to assume an alien identity and take up "the masculine point of view," the woman transforms the Western itself when she enters its landscape wearing the clothes that allow her to range freely across it. Doomed neither to comic laughter nor to tragic failure, the heroic figure in The Ballad of Little Jo represents one intriguing answer to the question asked so often by feminist critics about the female personae in and at the films of yesteryear: Who was that cross-dressed woman?

Department of English
University of Southern California

References


Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. 1995. “Gosh, Boy George, You Must Be Awfully Secure


