TWILIGHT AND SHADOWS:
THE LESBIAN PRESENCE IN FILM NOIR

DISSESTATION

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By

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* * * * *

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines lesbian representation in film noir during its classical period in American cinema from 1941 to 1958. Using feminist and lesbian theories of representation, the study explores how lesbianism is configured as an absent presence in film noir. In spite of film noir’s preoccupation with anxiety, paranoia, instability, and obsession, which often centers on the femme fatale, the evocations of the lesbian presence in these films have been as spectral in critical studies as they have in the films themselves. Indeed, these characteristics as well as the influences on film noir (World War II, the Cold War, the Bomb, a changing urban landscape, changing gender roles, etc.), with few exceptions, have been examined only from a white, heteronormative viewpoint. Focusing on Mildred Pierce (1945), Double Indemnity (1944), The Strange Love of Martha Ivers (1946), Sorry, Wrong Number (1948), and In a Lonely Place (1950), this study delineates three signifying strategies of film noir in its depiction of female homoeroticism: the representation of the femme fatale, within whom butchness seems to coexist with, and oftentimes contradict, stereotypical femininity; the existence of female homoerotic triangles; and the presence of non-femme fatale supporting players, whose representation, with varying degrees of explicitness, is suggestive of lesbianism. Additionally, notions of the “apparitional” and “spectral” can
be seen to inflect all of these strategies. A reading of these films through their various anxieties and displacements about female homoeroticism allows us to see lesbian desire—a re-appearing, through the interplay of the text, the reading of the text, and the star image, which challenges both the presumed erasure of lesbian desire within Hollywood films, as well as the presumed masculine contours of film noir.
Dedicated to my parents,

Richard and Shirley Moore
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Like the term, “Classical Hollywood Cinema,” film noir can be conceptualized both as a type of film produced during a specific historical period (generally agreed upon as beginning in 1941 with the release of The Maltese Falcon and ending in 1958 with Touch of Evil and as a description of similar films whose origins do not lie within these historical perimeters (Kaplan 1; Telotte 2). Unlike the former term, however, a debate about which films constitute film noir and whether film noir is a genre, a cycle, a movement, or simply a style of filmmaking has been ongoing since 1955 when Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton published their “pioneering overview of noir,” Panorama du Film Noir Américain (Telotte 5).

Although the arguments about whether or not film noir is a genre are not intrinsic to this project, a review of discussions about what characterizes film noir is essential. As Elizabeth Cowie notes in “Film noir and Women”:

Whether it is a genre, a cycle of films, a tendency or a movement, film noir has been extraordinarily successful as a term. As ‘the genre that never was’—since the term was not used by the studios themselves, or by audiences at the time, except perhaps in France where the term originated—the claims for the category lie in a post hoc analysis of similarities and in a set of elements that provide a ‘core’ of characteristics that are identified in certain films. (121)
Later in her essay, she delineates these elements as being “thematic, such as the role of fate or of a duplicitous woman, but also formal: the use of flashback . . . and hence of voice-over, the frequent undermining or shifting of character point of view, and the investigative narrative structure, which requires the posing of an enigma, or several, which the film attempts to resolve” (126). Higham and Greenberg describe the ambiance of film noir as “a world of darkness and violence, with a central figure whose motives are usually greed, lust and ambition, whose world is filled with fear” (27). It is a “world of dark, slick city streets, crime and corruption,” “almost always American in setting,” in which “alienation or obsession” are the predominant emotions (Schrader 54; Silver and Ward 3).

Janey Place and Lowell Peterson, while taking note of other features associated with film noir, emphasize the importance of visual style as a defining aspect of the term: “The characteristic film noir moods of claustrophobia, paranoia, despair, and nihilism constitute a world view that is expressed not through the films’ terse, elliptical dialogue, nor through their confusing, often insoluble plots, but ultimately through their remarkable style.” (65) They continue that “the low-key noir style [of lighting] opposes light and dark, hiding faces, rooms, urban landscapes—and, by extension, motivations and true character—in shadow and darkness which carry connotations of the mysterious and the unknown” (66). Cowie describes other components of the visual style associated with film noir:

. . . the use of chiaroscuro effects; strongly marked camera angles, either low or high; jarring and off-balance shot composition; tight
framing and close-ups that produce a claustrophobic sense of containment. The films are predominantly urban, the action taking place at night and filmed night-for-night on location, to produce a strong contrast between the enveloping dark and intermittent pools of light. (126)

Sylvia Harvey, however, believes that the visual style of noir films cannot be separated from their “plot and thematic development” (22). Positing that “[t]he defining contours of this group of films are the product of that which is abnormal and dissonant,” she continues that these “dissonances, the sense of disorientation and unease . . . are . . . always a function of the visual style of this group of films” and that “these strained compositions and angles . . . form the semantic substance of the film” (22-3).

Although, as the previous examples suggest, there is some general agreement among film critics and theorists about the visual style of film noir, J. P. Telotte, in Voices in the Dark: The Narrative Patterns of Film Noir, disagrees. He argues that a number of different “‘looks’” and “combinations of them” characterize film noir, a result of influences as diverse as German expressionist films of the 1920s, Italian neorealist films of the post World War II period, American documentaries and newsreels during World War II, and the surrealist dream sequences of certain mystery/suspense films of the 1940s (10). For Telotte, then, the noir style is “inadequate for accurately defining the form” and since the “subject matter” of noir films is “curiously diverse” also, he argues instead for the importance of narrative structure as the defining element of film noir (10). Focusing on 130 noir films made
during the historical period of noir (1941-1958). Telotte discovers four dominant structuring devices: "(1) the classical, third-person narrative, (2) the voice-over/flashback style [which, although frequently designated as the hallmark of noir structure, surprisingly is found to be less dominant than (1)], (3) the subjective camera technique, and (4) the documentary mode" (12). He emphasizes the idea that in its use of these narrative strategies, "[t]he film noir shows a singular awareness of a general failing in our discourse and of a particular inadequacy in our received cinematic language that would frustrate efforts to accurately describe the reality of modern life" (32). In the final chapter he concludes:

For unlike earlier reflections of our cultural failings ... [film noir] lays bare the more fundamental problem of talking about, making sense of, or giving formulation to our world. The film noir thus not only depicts certain problems but also explores the terms under which we perceive and respond to them. ... [N]oir refocuses attention on what much of our discourse leaves out, even on what that discourse seems incapable of fully articulating. And that may ultimately be the form's most disturbing aspect--its revelation of our difficulty in ever seeing or speaking the truth of our human situation. (217)

In summary, then, Telotte's emphasis on the narrative patterns of film noir posits an innate deconstructiveness of the form, which exposes the futility of naming our "human situation," but which simultaneously, because it makes "an effort at speech, at making something dark and obscure understandable, despite all obstacles" becomes, "especially in the ways it speaks of and to our human darkness ... a genre of life" (218,223).
While Telotte's analysis of film noir's narrative patterns is enlightening, his elision of questions and categories of gender and sexuality as irrelevant to his analysis of film noir's representation of the "human situation" is extremely problematic. For example, in order to make the previous point about the importance of film noir's "effort at speech," Telotte quotes dialogue spoken by Sam Spade in The Maltese Falcon "as he tells Brigid O'Shaughnessy, 'Listen. This won't do any good. You'll never understand me, but I'll try once and then give it up'" (218). For Telotte, this remark epitomizes film noir's attempts "at making something dark and obscure understandable, despite all obstacles" (218). However, what neither the innate deconstruction attributed to film noir by Telotte nor Telotte's own deconstruction of film noir point out is that rather than being emblematic of the "human situation," this remark seems to signify a "male" situation (or perception) (emphasis added). For as this snippet of dialogue suggests, the "obstacle" to understanding is the female herself: she is the one who will "never understand" and who makes Spade's attempt at communication an exercise in futility. Also implied by this line of dialogue (and overlooked by Telotte) is that Brigid, too, is a mystery, "dark and obscure," to Spade; she hires him initially and seduces him, but he is deceived by her. Eventually he realizes that she is a murderer and that he has been used by her, but for most of the film he is unaware of her treachery. In other words, by ignoring the centrality of gender in Spade's remarks --that they are being spoken to a woman and focus on the inability of
men and women to communicate successfully--Telotte negates the importance of film noir’s obsession with women as the enigmas to be solved, as well as film noir’s compulsive dissection of gender relations.

In an earlier discussion of the significance of the femme fatale/spider woman (or what Telotte calls the “‘black widow,’ the treacherous and destructive female who figures in so many films noir [sic]”), embodied by Brigid O’Shaughnessy in The Maltese Falcon, Telotte comments that Janey Place’s “critique of woman’s place in the noir world, explaining how she must suffer because she threatens or has usurped male dominance, typifies how film noir has been deconstructed to reveal a significant and previously repressed cultural truth” (Telotte 33). Unfortunately, he continues, “However, this perspective is limited, as is evident when we consider how these films already carry out a persistent and even sweeping cultural critique, in effect how they often already deconstruct our cultural images” (33).

Thus, according to Telotte, a discussion of the function of gender in film noir is merely superfluous because “no institution or set of human relationships . . . is immune to their questioning” (33-4). To engage in such a feminist analysis would be “limit[ing]” since noir films are already deconstructing the human condition. Telotte adds, “For this reason, Robert Porfirio describes its typical character as one who finds himself ‘set down in a violent and incoherent world’ that he must deal with ‘in the best way he can, attempting to create some order out of chaos, to make some sense of his world’” (emphasis added) (Telotte 34). However, the unacknowledged limitations
inscribed within this quotation through both its use of pronouns and its masculinist assumptions about what constitutes the world of film noir, as well as the previous discussion of *The Maltese Falcon*, suggest that contrary to Telotte's belief, feminist investigations of film noir may shed light on some of the debris left behind by noir's "sweeping cultural critique."

For example, the attempt to "create some order out of chaos" noted in the previous quotation is particularly significant for feminist critics. As Christine Gledhill observes:

[T]he plots of *noir* thrillers are frequently impossible to fit together even when the criminal secret is discovered, partly through the interruptions to plot linearity and the breaks and frequent gaps in plot produced by the sometimes multiple use of flash-back, and partly because the processes of detection are for the most part displaced from the centre of the film by other features... Frequently the female figure exists as a crucial feature within the dangerous criminal world which the hero struggles with in the course of his investigation, and as often as not constitutes the central problem in the unravelling of truth... Thus the place of the female figure in the puzzle which the hero has to solve often displaces solution of the crime as the object of the plot... ("Klute" 15)

In other words, just as the line of dialogue from *The Maltese Falcon* implies, the "chaos" which needs to be "order[ed]" or contained is often Woman. This observation comprises the first feature, "the investigative structure of the narrative," which Gledhill delineates as being intrinsic to film noir (14).

Gledhill's discussion of this and the other four elements which she identifies as the "main structural features of *film noir*" emphasizes how they "produce a specific location for women and somewhat ambiguous ideological effects" (14). In examining
the second feature, "plot devices such as voice-over or flashback, or frequently both," she points out that "[o]ne way of looking at the plot of the typical film noir is to see it as a struggle between different voices for control over the telling of the story" (16). Usually this involves a "struggle" or tension between the male and female discourses of the text. The third characteristic, "proliferation of points of view," means that the "image" of woman produced is "fractured," which opens up a space to see both the "artifice" of the image and "the place behind the image where the woman might be" (17). In her examination of the fourth feature, "frequent unstable characterisation of the heroine," Gledhill concludes that while film noir characterizations of the female "superficially confirm popular stereotypes about women, in their stylisation and play with the surfaces of the cinematic image they arguably foreground some of the features of that image. This is not to claim the progressiveness of the cycle but merely to assert its ideological interest for feminists" (18).

Finally, in her description of the fifth characteristic, "an 'expressionist' visual style and emphasis on sexuality in the photographing of women," she notes that this style "is commonly seen as [film noir's] defining characteristic through which its formal excesses carry and submerge the incomprehensibility of plot and contrarioriness of characterisation--or rather turn these features into a further expression of the existential angst carried by the films' 'expressionist' lighting-schemes and camera-angles" (18-19). Based on these features and historical considerations regarding the origin of film noir (e.g., "the ongoing production of the private-eye/thriller form of detective fiction," "the post-war drive to get women out of the [public] work-force and return them to the
domestic sphere,” and the “perennial [i.e., ahistorical] myth of woman as threat to male control of the world and destroyer of male aspiration”). Gledhill concludes that these films “both challenge the hegemony of the family and in the end locate an oppressive and outcast place for women” (19).

On the other hand, in “Women in Film Noir,” Janey Place argues that even though women are “defined by [their] sexuality” in these films, film noir “gives us one of the few periods of film in which women are active, not static symbols, are intelligent and powerful, if destructively so, and derive power, not weakness, from their sexuality” (35). Although her discussion now seems somewhat dated because of its focus on what she names the “female archetypes” of noir—the “spider woman” and the “nurturing woman”--the significance of the “spider woman”/femme fatale in film noir remains an important theoretical issue. Perhaps more importantly though, her emphasis on the “particularly potent stylistic representation of the sexual strength of women” (“expressed in the visual style by their dominance in composition, angle, camera movement and lighting”), in tension with a “regressive ideological function on a strictly narrative level,” is an important observation which hints at the ambiguity that characterizes film noir (as well as mainstream cinema in general), particularly in terms of female spectatorship (36, 45, 54).
In a more recent analysis, "Film Noir and Women," Elizabeth Cowie further explores this ambiguity while "attempting to challenge . . . the tendency to characterize film noir as always a masculine film form." She continues:

Even though this masculine bias is considered critically, the tendency is still to see women characters as occupying a subordinate position in the films. This obscures the extent to which these films afforded women roles which are active, adventurous and driven by sexual desire. Nor is this observation necessarily discounted by the fact that these roles were frequently undertaken by villainesses. (135)

Noting that "[t]he connection between film noir and melodrama has been made by a number of writers, but usually in order to distinguish film noir as a form of male melodrama, in contrast to the woman's film and female melodrama," Cowie "examine[s] the melodramatic in film noir in order to overturn this rigid sexual division" (129, 130). She argues that film noir is "a kind of development of melodrama so that whereas earlier the obstacles to the heterosexual couple had been external forces of family and circumstance, wars or illness, in the film noir the obstacles derive from the characters' psychology or even pathology as they encounter external events" (136).

Although this argument is interesting and useful, particularly in terms of theorizing the appeal of film noir for female spectators, it is also occasionally problematic. The primary weakness is that it relies too much on examples of films which are unusual within the historical film noir canon (e.g., those with female protagonists or duplicitous men). Additionally, however, at one point, it implies that because some female characters are not duplicitous, but rather are simply sexually
desirable to the male protagonists, the subsequent downfall of the male protagonist can
be attributed to “his own duplicity and weakness,” rather than to generic conventions
and the demands of the narrative structure regarding the construction of Woman
(Cowie 134-5).

Nonetheless, one of the points that Cowie makes about punishment is critical to
this project in another sense. While noting that “the Production Code was egalitarian”
in its demand that villains, whether male or female, be killed, she also emphasizes the
importance of the psychoanalytic underpinnings of the desire for punishment, “for in
the punishment the reality of the forbidden wish is acknowledged” (135-36). She
states, “The fantasy of the woman’s dangerous sexuality is a feminine as well as
masculine fantasy, and its pleasures lie precisely in its forbiddenness” (136). Although,
like the observations of every critic cited thus far, this statement is considered only in
heterosexual terms, it is in this space that we can locate lesbian desire, the unspoken
specter which haunts the previous critical discussions.

For just as Telotte’s analysis is limited by his elision of gender and difference
into the category “human,” so are most analyses of film noir, feminist and otherwise,
circumscribed by their negation of both sexual identity and race--in spite of film noir’s
preoccupation with these issues. The influences on film noir of German
Expressionism; Italian neo-realism; U.S. documentaries and newsreels; the publication
of the “hard-boiled” fiction of Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, James Cain, et al.
in the Thirties; European existentialism; as well as anxiety about World War II itself;
and then post-war worry about the atom bomb and McCarthyism, are of undeniable
importance during the classic period of film noir production.\textsuperscript{1} However, other events have been noted by critics as being equally crucial to the stylistic and thematic concerns of film noir and it is these phenomena which have particular relevance to film noir's fascination with sexual identity and race.

As Sylvia Harvey, Janey Place, and Pam Cook discuss in \textit{Women in Film Noir}, the World War II entreaty that women leave the private sphere in order to work in factories and the subsequent post-war demand that they return to the domestic sphere, created anxiety about female autonomy which is manifested in film noir in the films' preoccupation with gender relations and in its representation of women (25-27; 35-37; 68-69). Another important influence on film noir, as noted by Frank Krutnik in his analysis of film noir and masculinity, is a "popularised version of psychoanalysis" which, "[b]y the 1940s . . . had become entrenched in Hollywood's productions" (45). Krutnik explains that the idea of "subjectively-generated criminal impulses [rather than the depiction of crime as a "social problem"] or as the result of "organised gangs"] has widely been recognised as a crucial characteristic of 1940s \textit{film noir}" (xii). He continues that it also "proved a useful means of circumventing some of the institutionalised restrictions of the Hays Code . . . enabling a more elliptical and displaced mode of representation which could be 'decoded' by audiences familiar with popularised psychoanalysis" (xii). Similarly, the urban landscape frequently is listed as one of the defining characteristics of film noir by critics as diverse as Schrader, Cowie, Hirsch, and Silver and Ward (57; 126; 13-17; 3). Indeed, the urban focus of film noir has even become the focus of a book-length study, Nicholas Christopher's \textit{Somewhere}
in the Night. However, missing from these discussions of the importance of the city to film noir is an analysis of how the urban landscape underwent a radical change during and after World War II—a change which may account for film noir’s depiction of the city as the site for crime, alienation, paranoia, and instability.

Thus, while the phenomena mentioned above have been cited as influences on film noir, their relevance has been examined—with few exceptions—only from a white, heteronormative viewpoint. So, for example, although the urban motif is referred to frequently, it is not usually discussed in terms of the changing racial make-up of the city and how this change may be at least partly responsible for the urban settings of so many films noirs. An exception to this tendency to elide race completely is Julian Murphet’s “Film Noir and the Racial Unconscious,” in which he mentions the migration of “hundreds of thousands of Southern African-Americans . . . north and west during the mid-1940s, both to escape the Jim Crow South, and to find work in the munitions factories, aircraft plants and shipyards in the metropolitan industrial centres” (28). Simultaneously, he notes that the Housing Act of 1949 led to the suburbanization of white Americans and the subsequent “alienation of the white petit-bourgeoisie from . . . the retail and service sector of urban downtowns” (29). He continues, “Film noir seeks to produce a new white man, able to withstand the shocks of this urban transformation” by “displac[ing] . . . racial antagonism” onto misogyny and the construction of the femme fatale (30-31). Believing that this displacement occurs because “the direct expression of that racism would be impossible, given the U.S. national ideology, and the general liberalism of the filmmakers themselves,” Murphet posits that this “racial
unconscious” also is manifested in film noir’s “jazz score; the chiaroscuro black/white cinematography; the ‘dark,’ ‘black,’ ‘night’ and ‘shadow’ of the films’ instantly recognizable titles . . .” (31).

While Murphet’s focus on race is long overdue in film noir criticism, his assumption that “U.S. national ideology” would prevent the blatant expression of racism is naïve—at best—given the existence of legal segregation (including the World War II troops), and ongoing discrimination in the workplace, education, and housing, as well as racist media representation—all of which necessitated the civil rights activism of the period (Giddings 230-58; Lott 89). Similarly, his negation of gender in the process is problematic, unnecessary, and even offensive:

I have already recommended that women in film noir are not to be read as ‘women’ in any literal sense (any number of vulgar interpretations relating noir paranoia to women’s employment during and after the War must simply be laid aside), but as allegorical figures for a new consumerism; but I also wish to postulate that they should be seen as surrogate figures for African-Americans . . . (27)

Thirty years of feminist criticism reveal Murphet’s desire to rid the field of “vulgar” interpretations of women in film noir as “‘women’ in any literal sense” as mind-bogglingly ridiculous and his conflation of sexual and racial differences as dangerously simplistic.

To the contrary, what is lacking in much film noir criticism are analyses which elide neither gender, race, nor sexual identity. Given the proliferation of terms like “black widow,” “the dark woman of film noir,” and even the word “noir” itself, Eric Lott asks “why no one has yet challenged the association in these films of the self’s and
society’s darkness with a racial dimension and why that dimension in the form of black appearances on screen has seemed merely marginal, local, and insubstantial” (83).

Noting the aforementioned African American migration to urban centers, as well as the “zoot-suit riots” of 1943 which took place in twenty-seven U.S. cities, and the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, Lott argues:

Noir responded to these specific social threats not by presenting them outright but by subsuming the social energy associated with them into the untoward aspects of white selves. The ‘dark’ energy of many of these films is villainized through the associations with race that generated some of the energy in the first place.

What such films appear to dread is the infiltration into the white home or self of unsanctioned behaviors reminiscent of the dark figures exemplified in the 1940s and early 1950s imaginary by zoot-suiters, pachucos, and Asian conspirators. What the films cannot do is completely remove these figures from the picture, though noir may stave off their most fearsome shapes or place them safely elsewhere. (91, 95)

Thus, Lott’s argument is similar to Murphet’s in his discussion of how racism is connoted and even displaced in film noir, but unlike Murphet, he makes his point without eradicating either gender or society’s racism.

Likewise, in his discussion of neo-noirs directed by African Americans, Manthia Diawara notes, “From a formalist perspective, a film is noir if it puts into play light and dark in order to exhibit a people who become ‘black’ because of their ‘shady’ moral character” (262). According to Diawara then, “formalist criticism runs the risk of reducing films noirs by noirs to a critique of patriarchy or of capitalism, and thus of minimizing on the one hand the deconstruction of racism in the renewed genre, and on the other hand a delineation of a black way of life in America” (263). So, Diawara
instead focuses on “a thematic or content-based criticism” (263). However, his
discussion also reveals the strategic importance of feminist criticism when it refuses to
elide difference: “Through its focus on formalist devices, feminist criticism exposes film
noir’s attempt to paint white women ‘black’ in order to limit or control their
independent agency, their self-fashioning” (Diawara 262). This statement suggests that
at its finest, a feminist formalist approach can point out a culture’s conflation of race
and sexual difference and the simultaneous intertwining web of racism and sexism.

Just as sustained analyses of race and racism such as the former are rare in film
noir criticism, so, too, a critical engagement with film noir’s preoccupation with sexual
identity is uncommon—in spite of U.S. culture’s obsession with sexual identity during
the 1940s and 1950s. For example, the cultural tension and anxiety created by
wartime and post-war female autonomy have been discussed only in feminist, rather
than lesbian feminist terms. However, as Lillian Faderman argues in Odd Girls and
Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America, World War
II created “all-female worlds” in the armed services and in the factories, apartments,
and social gathering places of the home-front, “[leading] to the establishment of a much
larger, unique subculture of lesbians such as could not have occurred at any previous
time in history” (119-20). In spite of the sweeping nature of this generalization, it is
likely that the ideology of the Rosie the Riveter/G.I. Jane culture (in which traditional
definitions of femininity and of women as weak, dainty domestic goddesses had to be
put aside for the duration), as well as the proliferation of societally approved “all-female worlds,” created opportunities for working-class and middle-class lesbians which had not existed before the war.

Indeed, another change in the urban landscape of the 1940s and 1950s, also unacknowledged in criticism of film noir, involves the creation of more visible lesbian communities and culture in larger metropolises. “Many women . . . came to big cities in order to work in factories during the war and they, like ex-military women, stayed because they found the anonymity of a big city to be more compatible with what became their life choices” (Faderman 127). This “migration . . . of large numbers of women who identified themselves as lesbians during and after the war meant that for the first time in America a number of bars could survive economically if they catered exclusively to lesbians” (Faderman 127). Thus, according to Faderman, “the changes in women’s lives that were triggered by the war—not only through experiences in the military or in factories, but also through social configurations such as the expanding bar culture”—were responsible for both the conception of lesbianism as a “lifestyle shared by many other women” and an “incipient lesbian political consciousness” (127-28).

John D’Emilio, too, asserts that “one can hardly overestimate the significance of the 1940s in restructuring the social expression of same-sex eroticism. . . . A sexual and emotional life that gay men and women previously experienced mainly in individual terms suddenly became . . . a widely shared collective phenomena” (38).
However, these developments, as well as the mass dissemination of watered down and distorted Freudian psychoanalytic precepts during the period, also meant that the heterosexual public’s awareness of the existence of gay men and lesbians was increasing during the 1940s and 1950s. As Krutnik notes in his discussion of the influence of popularized versions of psychoanalysis on film noir, in these “accounts there was a strong association between Freudian psychoanalysis and hidden or illicit sexuality” (50). Additionally, with the publication of Kinsey’s Sexual Behavior in the Human Male in 1948 and Sexual Behavior in the Human Female in 1953 (which in popularized accounts often was reduced to the startling report that fifty percent of U.S. men and twenty-eight percent of U.S. women had “homoerotic interest in the same sex at some point in their adult lives”), that awareness—and fear—of both homosexuality and homosexuals themselves only escalated, culminating in post-war heterosexual hysteria over sexual identity (Faderman 140).

D’Emilio notes that after the war, “the reaffirmation of normative gender roles and stable heterosexual relationships made those who lived outside them appear more clearly deviant” (38). Thus, for example, despite the military’s tendency during the war to overlook all but the most blatant “displays” of male and female homosexuality, “between 1947 and 1950, 4,954 men and women were dismissed from the armed forces and civilian agencies for being homosexual” (Faderman 140). This cultural homosexual panic was manifested in the literature of the time, not only in tabloids, but also in
publications like Human Events and Jet (Faderman 146). Even more importantly, though, the notion of the “homosexual menace continued as a theme of American political culture throughout the McCarthy era” (D’Emilio 43).

In June, 1950 the U.S. Senate “authorized an investigation into the alleged employment of homosexuals ‘and other moral perverts’ in government” (D’Emilio 42). Since members of the medical establishment were describing homosexuality as “inherently pathological,” and religious leaders were declaring homosexuality “immoral,” there was a widespread belief that “the government would be assuming a grave burden if it allowed such morally contaminated persons to remain in its service” (D’Emilio 42). Additionally, since the Kinsey report stated that homosexuals did not necessarily look or act any differently than their heterosexual counterparts, the fear that traitorous homosexual “perverts” were everywhere (just like Communists) justified an attempted purge of homosexuals from the military, government service, the entertainment industry, and other arenas (D’Emilio 42). The guiding assumptions were that “sex perverts” lacked “emotional stability,” had “weaken[ed] . . . moral fiber” and thus, not only were liable to blackmail because of the “social stigma,” but also “lacked the character to resist the blandishments of the spy” (D’Emilio 42-3). The resulting witch-hunts of Communists and homosexuals destroyed innumerable lives while this spectacle played out in newsreels, newspapers, periodicals, and radio and television broadcasts of the period.
As the previous examples demonstrate, the increasing visibility of gay men and lesbians, as well as the preoccupation with homosexuality in the public imagination, overlap the period designated as the classical period of film noir (1941-1958). Thus, if Diawara is correct in his assertion that “[f]rom a formalist perspective, a film is noir if it . . . exhibit[s] a people who become ‘black’ because of their ‘shady’ moral character,” it is not far-fetched to surmise, given the period’s homosexual obsession and rampant homophobia, that the presumed “shady” moral character” of homosexuals, in and of itself, almost mandates the homosexual presence in the texts of film noir—and may do so without racist transference mechanisms (262). Nonetheless, discussions of the homosexual presence are almost as infrequent in film noir criticism as analyses of race. This is true in spite of the fact that as Krutnik notes, even the first full-length study of film noir thirty-eight years ago, Borde’s and Chaumeton’s Panorama du Film Noir Américain, mentions that in these films “[o]ccasionally, abnormal sexual relationships can be guessed at, or even perversions—as in Gilda, where a few clues indicate troubling relations between men” (50).

In general, then, observations of the homosexual presence in film noir have been relegated to offhand, underdeveloped, and even homophobic, remarks like the one noted above. Frequently, film noir criticism exhibits the simultaneous invocation and dismissal of the homosexual presence. For example, the homoerotic relationship between the male protagonist, Walter Neff, and his confessor, Keyes, in Double Indemnity is mentioned by Telotte, but only so that he can negate its importance in
favor of a reading which purports to show that in their relationship, "discourse itself has been privileged over sexuality and revealed as the true route of desire" (Telotte 51). Likewise, Claire Johnston, in her invaluable essay on *Double Indemnity*, presents a detailed and sustained analysis of the relationship between Keyes and Neff which, nonetheless, is envisioned only in terms of the Oedipus Complex and thus, is relegated to the realms of narcissism and repression (102). Similarly, Nicholas Christopher, in his discussion of *The Big Combo*, notes that there is "a pair of openly gay hit men" in the film. He describes his rationale for this conclusion in the next sentence (they "work, relax, and eat together, and they even sleep in twin beds in the same bedroom in their apartment") and then ends the sentence by concluding that this is "surely a Hollywood first, previously reserved to the domain of farce, as in the Marx Brothers, Laurel and Hardy, or the Three Stooges" (195). Aside from the fact that this film was released in 1955 and that this was, therefore, not a "Hollywood first," the point is that the homosexual presence is rarely looked upon in film noir criticism as anything more than a quirky plot element which adds to the kinky film noir ambiance.

Exceptions to the critical disregard of the homosexual presence in film noir include works by Richard Dyer, Robert Corber, Jonathan Buchsbaum, and Brian Gallagher, but their analyses (with the exception of Dyer) focus almost exclusively on male homoeroticism. Negligible attention has been given to the function that attraction between women plays in these films. In discussing lesbian representation in Hollywood films, Andrea Weiss observes:
The lack of lesbian images, or of certain kinds of lesbian images . . . is therefore not a mere omission, but serves an important ideological function: that of monopolizing the representation of female sexuality with images of passivity and male dominance, images of being desired but not having desire. The absence or repression of lesbian images works to create and maintain the heterosexual 'sex/gender system' and the economic, social and political system it makes possible. (52)

This observation is equally relevant to the erasure of lesbian representation within the critical dialogues around film noir—an erasure which occurs in spite of film noir’s obsessive preoccupation with sexuality. Indeed, the femme fatale, the embodiment of the “excesses of female sexuality” and perhaps the critical signifier of both male and female sexuality in film noir, is usually discussed only in terms of her relationship to heterosexual masculinity (Kaplan 3). What is repressed in these discussions is her simultaneous relationship to other women and to heterosexuality in crisis (as well as any mention of the significance of these other women, non-femme fatales in film noir, in these same terms).

Indeed, in the context of the critical studies mentioned throughout this chapter, none makes note of the fact that the elements ascribed to the femme fatale coincide with those historically inscribed as “lesbian.” In Janey Place’s essay, for example, the spider woman is characterized variously as “want[ing] independence,” “combining . . . aggressiveness and sensuality,” embodying “the original sin of the film noir woman”: “self-interest over devotion to a man,” being “comfortable in the world of cheap dives, shadowy doorways and mysterious settings,” possessing “‘unnatural’ phallic power,” and displaying a “strong, dangerous, and above all, exciting sexuality” which the male
characters in film noir “need to control in order not to be destroyed by it” (Place 46, 46-7, 47, 41, 45, 36). Similarly, Krutnik characterizes the femme fatale as “inherently ‘deviant’ with respect to the male-defined cultural norms (and hence excluded from them)”; as a creature whose “otherness simultaneously attracts and disturbs the hero because of its difference from the male regime . . .”; and as one who, in her “manipulat[ion] [of] the desire men hold for [her],” engages in the “inversion or perversion of conventional or legitimate sexual relations” (141, 140).

Given the elision of lesbianism in critical studies of film noir, this project is an attempt to shed light on film noir’s shadows in order to explore their lesbian configurations and how their presence alters our perceptions of the visual, thematic, and ideological terrains of film noir. Sighting/siting the lesbian, however, involves more than just a furtive glance. As Andrea Weiss has observed: “[I]n pre-1970s Hollywood films, her lesbianism is dependent upon visual codes such as stereotypes, visual associations with deviance through camera angle, lighting, dress, etc, or her disruptive, menacing narrative function” (70). In discussing the construction of gender, Teresa de Lauretis states that gender is “both the product and process of its representation”--a point which also applies to the construction of lesbianism (5). In these films, it is through this “process” that the traces of the lesbian emerge. Jennifer Terry’s account of the task for the deviant historiographer has particular relevance in this context:
The new archivist is a reader-against-the-grain who recognizes traces of deviant subjects revealed through conflict within dominant accounts. Instead of positing a fixed deviant subject position, the archivist finds a provisional position corresponding to a discursively fashioned outlawed or pathologized sexual identity—the location from which a resistant historiography can be generated. (59)

The task of this project, then, is to examine how film noir attempts to manage the threat of lesbianism and how that threat erupts nonetheless.

Examining media representations of lesbians in 1977, Caroline Sheldon identified three stereotypes: "the butch/mannish lesbian (bar dyke/foot-stomper, often working-class and dominant in her relationships with other women), the sophisticated lesbian (often an older woman, who is rich and successful in a man's world), [and] the neurotic lesbian (often femme or closet)" (12). Although in the twenty-one years since this study was published, the shortcomings and simplicity of the "images" approach to representation have become clear, this is not to dispute the fact that such stereotypes have been and still are very much present in the filmic depiction of lesbianism. Nonetheless, to restrict oneself to a search for such physical embodiments of lesbianism is to ignore the "process" noted above and thus, the traces and effects which frequently constitute the lesbian presence. In other words, while Sheldon's analysis locates the lesbian in the text itself, this study attempts to show that the lesbian also can be sighted haunting the reading of the text and the star image itself.

Thus, Krutnik's observation (noted earlier) that the "psychoanalytic frame of reference . . . enable[d] a more elliptical and displaced mode of representation which could be 'decoded' by audiences familiar with popularized psychoanalysis," has
particular significance (xii). This is not to suggest that the lesbian presence can be reduced to a return of the repressed, but rather to suggest that meaning can be a product of many different codes. Place’s and Peterson’s earlier description of the visual style of film noir exemplifies my point. They mention that film noir’s low-key (lighting) style has the effect of “hiding faces . . . and by extension, motivations and true character— in shadow and darkness which carry connotations of the mysterious and the unknown” (66). It is in these shadows where we are likely to discover the connotation of “the mysterious and the unknown” lesbian.

According to Barthes in *S/Z*, “connotation is a secondary meaning, whose signifier is itself constituted by a sign or system of primary signification, which is denotation” (7). That is to say that connotation, symbolic meaning, builds upon what is construed to be literal meaning, denotation. Barthes continues:

> Analytically, connotation is determined by two spaces: a sequential space, a series of orders, a space subject to the successivity of sentences, in which meaning proliferates by layering; and an agglomerative space, certain areas of the text correlating other meanings outside the material text and, with them, forming ‘nebulae’ of signifieds. (8)

In other words, connotation is produced by both the patterns of clues unearthed within the film itself, as well as extra-textual associations.

Building upon Barthes’s theories and using Hitchcock’s *Rope* as an illustration, D.A. Miller, in “Anal *Rope,*” theorizes that the fear of denotation characterizes most classical narrative films (as well as other “cultural productions”) which conjure up
homosexuality only to "construct a homosexuality held definitionally in suspense on no
less a question than that of its own existence. . . . " (125). He notes:

Until recently, homosexuality offered not just the most prominent--it
offered the only subject matter whose representation in American mass
culture appertained exclusively to the shadow kingdom of connotation,
where insinuations could be at once developed and denied. . . .

Yet if connotation, as the dominant signifying practice of
homophobia, has the advantage of constructing an essentially
insubstantial homosexuality, it has the corresponding inconvenience of
tending to raise this ghost all over the place. . . . [C]onnotation thus
tends to light everywhere, to put all signifiers to a test of their
hospitality. . . . (For if unprovable [by denotation], connotation can at
least be probable, by virtue of an accumulation, a redundancy of
notations.) (124-25)

The point, then, is that most texts produced by the dominant culture refuse/cannot
depict homosexuality literally--which in the case of Rope, for example, would mean
actually showing gay sex. However, Miller’s argument also contends that in Rope (and
possibly then in other classical narrative films), the film actually revolves around this
absent denotation. In other words, a text’s design to negate the actuality of
homosexuality only serves to affirm its centrality. This is not to suggest, though, that
there is a hierarchy of meaning with denotation as the top rung and connotation
constituting the lowly rungs one climbs in a futile attempt to reach the towering
stability at the peak. It is a mistake to see denotation as being any more stable than
connotation, for it, too, is culturally determined. In this sense, then, perhaps
denotation and connotation are not so far removed from each other.

Miller’s use of words like “shadow” and “ghost” to explain the phenomenon of
connotation is particularly significant, not just in the context of film noir, but also
because of the ground-breaking studies on the spectral presence of lesbianism in literature by Terry Castle and in film by Patricia White. Similar to Miller’s point that Rope actually centers itself around the absent denotation of homosexuality, Castle, in her analysis of the “apparitional lesbian” in Western literature from the eighteenth century onward, notes that the “ghost . . . is a paradox. Though non-existent, it nonetheless appears. Indeed, so vividly does it appear—if only in the ‘mind’s eye’—one feels unable to get away from it” (46). Patricia White observes that “[t]his making visible, giving body to the spirit of the text, is an important function of lesbian criticism,” but she adds that the incorporeality of the lesbian in the text also can mean that “[t]hrough its inscription in narrative, desire itself, rather than its object, is made representable” (98). Earlier in her discussion she states:

The Motion Picture Production Code formalized Hollywood’s normative vision [of “hierarchical racial and national ideologies, male discursive authority, and heterosexual hegemony”] by stating what could not be stated or shown, and ‘sex perversion’ was among those prohibitions. Arguably, the Code thus instituted a regime of connotation: if it was intended to help the movies instruct the public in middle-class, even traditionally ‘female,’ morals, in the process it taught viewers how to read in particular ways. If homosexuality dares not speak its name in the classical cinema, the visual medium allows for other signifying strategies. (9)

This study will focus on three “signifying strategies” of film noir in its depiction of female homoeroticism: the representation of the femme fatale, within whom butchness seems to coexist with and oftentimes contradict stereotypical femininity; the existence of female homoerotic triangles; and the presence of non-femme fatale supporting players, whose representation, with varying degrees of explicitness, is
suggestive of lesbianism. Additionally, Castle’s and White’s notions of the “apparitional” and “spectral” can be seen to inflect all of these strategies. The three categories are not necessarily clearcut, and in many cases they overlap; my purpose in proposing them is to understand the structural and thematic ways in which lesbianism inflects film noir.

In the first instance, the depiction of a butch femme fatale, I am using “butch” in terms of “style and visual presentation,” as Judith Mayne does in her pioneering study of Dorothy Arzner, but also in the sense of a female who occupies traditionally masculine space—through possession of the gaze, in shot construction, or in dialogue (183n). Although as the previous descriptions of the femme fatale have indicated, there is something inherently masculine about this figure (in her attempted usurpation of power and control) there also is a distinction between film noir’s femmes fatales (e.g., Rita Hayworth in Gilda; Joan Bennett in Woman at the Window, et al.; Gene Tierney in Laura) and its femmes fatales (e.g., Barbara Stanwyck in all of her film noir appearances; Claire Trevor in Raw Deal; Joan Crawford in Mildred Pierce; et al.). Thus, I am using “femme” in the sense of “style and visual presentation,” also, to suggest a character who adheres more closely to the cultural construction of femininity. This differentiation is implied by Hirsch’s description of “noir’s fatal women” as being “hard or soft, mannish or womanly” (157).

Similarly, in the last strategy, film noir’s use of supporting players who connote lesbianism, this sometimes is manifested through the construction of butchness (e.g.,
Martha [Ruth Gillette] in In a Lonely Place or Ida [Eve Arden] in Mildred Pierce) in the sense of “visual presentation” noted above and, thus, is a product of both the text itself (and Hollywood’s signifying codes), as well as a particular reading of the text. In other instances, however, the connotation of lesbianism circulates around a more femme character (e.g., Sally [Ann Richards] in Sorry, Wrong Number; Lola [Jean Heather] in Double Indemnity; Toni [Lizabeth Scott] in The Strange Love of Martha Ivers) and can be a product of both the reading of the text, and in the latter two instances, the inflection of the star image itself.

The third manifestation of the lesbian presence, female homoerotic triangles, also builds upon the work done by Terry Castle in The Apparitional Lesbian. In discussing “the archetypal lesbian fiction,” she notes:

[B]y plotting against what Eve Sedwick has called the ‘plot of male homosociality,’ [it] decanonizes, so to speak, the canonical structure of desire itself. Insofar as it documents a world in which men are ‘between women’ rather than vice versa, it is an insult to the conventional geometries of fictional eros... As a consequence, it often looks odd, fantastical, implausible, ‘not there.’ . . . (90-91)

While film noir is about as far removed from “archetypal lesbian fiction” as one can get, nonetheless, readings of its texts reveal triadic and dyadic configurations in which desire circulates between women. This desire is signified visually through shot composition, parallelisms, and patterns, but it also is produced through dialogue and through the star image.

In order to provide an overview of how these strategies inflect film noir, I begin, in Chapter Two, with an analysis of Mildred Pierce (1945), a film which
embodies all three of the above categories. The character of Mildred Pierce is a woman who succeeds (and then fails) in a man’s world, with the attendant masculinization of her role. Joan Crawford is an actress often associated with butch characteristics—a deep voice, a forthright manner, and a style of dress that emphasizes masculinity. Central to the dynamics of the film are constantly shifting homoerotic triangles, with the excessive devotion of Mildred to her daughter, Veda (Ann Blyth), defined as a threat to normative heterosexuality. Mildred’s business associate and female sidekick in the film is Ida, played by Eve Arden, who represents the ways in which classical Hollywood cinema both evoked and marginalized the stereotypical lesbian. Left out of this economy altogether is Lottie, Mildred’s African American maid (played by Butterfly McQueen).

In Chapter 3, I consider further the ramifications of the butch femme fatale and homoerotic triangles with an examination of three films noirs featuring Barbara Stanwyck, the actress most emblematic of film noir and the most celebrated embodiment (after Double Indemnity [1944]) of the femme fatale. Focusing on Double Indemnity, The Strange Love of Martha Ivers, and Sorry, Wrong Number, I argue that throughout Stanwyck’s career as the femme fatale of film noir, lesbian associations characterize her roles, as well as the dynamics of her relationships in the films, particularly those involving femme supporting players. Based on Richard Dyer’s work on star images, I argue that these associations are due in large part to the circulation of lesbianism around her image.
Missing from the previous chapter, however, is any discussion of the butch supporting character (since Stanwyck’s presence has the tendency to make every supporting female player seem femme by comparison). Thus, in Chapter Four, I examine what is perhaps the most striking embodiment of the lesbian supporting character in classic film noir: Martha (Ruth Gillette), the masseeuse and confidante to Laurel (Gloria Grahame), the female protagonist of In a Lonely Place. Although Martha’s role is small, it exercises a powerful effect on the film as a whole, including, but not limited to, the construction of a homoerotic triangle which creates much of the film’s momentum.

Since in spite of critical disagreement over which films constitute the film noir canon, all five of these films appear in the eight filmographies which act as standard referents, lesbian representation in these films can be seen as typical, rather than aberrant. (See Chapter Three endnotes for a discussion of this disagreement.) In other words, this study does not rely upon obscure or unusual examples of film noir to make its point. On the other hand, as my earlier discussion demonstrates, the lesbian presence in the classic configurations of film noir may well be rendered marginal by both the films themselves and their critics. However, a re-reading of these films through their various anxieties and displacements about female homoeroticism allows us to see lesbian desire—a re-appearing, through the interplay of the text, the reading of the text, and the star image, which challenges both the presumed erasure of lesbian desire within Hollywood films, as well as the presumed masculine contours of film noir.
NOTES

1. For discussions of these influences, see Telotte, Silver and Ward, Krutnik, Schrader, Hirsch, and Porfirio.

2. One exception is Lenz, but her essay focuses not on the lesbian presence in film noir, but rather on how Gilda was reconstructed in a lesbian play by Holly Hughes. However, the increased visibility of lesbianism in the neo-noir film, especially since 1992 (when Basic Instinct appeared), has been explored by Holmlund.
CHAPTER 2

PEERING THROUGH SHADOWS IN MILDRED PIERCE

*Mildred Pierce*, an adaptation of the James Cain novel, is a film about a mother (Joan Crawford) who works to achieve financial success and along the way experiences separation and divorce, a love affair, remarriage, the death of a daughter, the betrayal of another daughter, and the murder of her second husband. Released in 1945, the film reflects the historical moment in its representation of the dangers of women who function in the public sphere instead of returning to the domestic sphere where many resided before they heeded the call to work in WWII factories. Speaking specifically of film noir produced in the mid- to late forties, Tony Williams notes that they "illustrat[e] the insecurity of male control when attempts were made to reintroduce the pre-war patriarchal status quo" (Silver and Ursini 131). As is suggested in the introduction, however, these films also may embody the panic created by the growing visibility of the lesbian.

Critics also have noted how this film functions as both a woman's melodrama (in its depiction of a mother's struggle to gain financial security for herself and her two daughters), as well as a film noir (in its depiction of the murder and the unveiling of the perpetrator). As a hybridization of film noir and melodrama--both characterized by
perpetrator). As a hybridization of film noir and melodrama—both characterized by excess, both engaged in the construction of a pathological domestic space—Mildred Pierce manifests an overabundance of excess. This may be why it alone, of the films involved in this study, exemplifies all three categories of the lesbian presence: the butch femme fatale, female homoerotic triads and dyads, and the butch supporting character with a lesbian tinge. Three of the four major supporting female characters, Ida (Eve Arden), Veda (Ann Blyth), and Kay (Jo Ann Marlowe) are a part of these configurations. However, the fourth character, Lottie (Butterfly McQueen) is configured outside of these relations because of her race—in spite of the fact that she is the only one of these supporting characters who is still with Mildred (at least by implication) at the end of the film.

Mildred's story (the woman's melodrama) begins in an evenly lit, cheery kitchen with her baking cakes in order to support the consumerist lust of Veda, the daughter from hell. Her husband, Bert Pierce (Bruce Bennett), is unable to hold down a job and may be having an affair with Mrs. Biederhof (Lee Patrick), so they argue and he leaves. Left on her own with two daughters to support, Mildred searches for a job, but has no qualifications. Eventually, she is hired as a waitress by Ida Corwin, the hostess at a restaurant. In a series of montage shots, we see her learning the business until she becomes the best waitress in the place.

Meanwhile, at home, Mildred hires an African American maid, Lottie, and expands her home baking business in order to earn extra money. She wants to provide
her daughters, Kay and especially the teenage Veda, with all of the trappings of a middle--or even upper--class existence. Eventually, she decides to open her own restaurant and with the help of Wally Fay (Jack Carson), lawyer, realtor, night club owner, friend and (unrequited) suitor of Mildred, she manages to buy a house belonging to Monte Beragon (Zachary Scott). Monte comes from old money, but is now cash poor and maintains his social standing by being a gigolo. The house is converted into a restaurant, with Ida as its manager, and again through a series of montage shots, we see Mildred's climb to success, as the single restaurant becomes a chain of prosperous restaurants. Along the way she begins a love affair with Monte, but pays a steep price. While she is shown having a romantic interlude with him, Kay, at a lake with Bert and Veda, succumbs to pneumonia and dies a few minutes after Mildred is summoned to her bedside at Mrs. Biederhof's. Thus, the familiar trappings of the so-called "weepie," or woman's film, are all present in this film.

However, although Mildred's story begins chronologically with the kitchen scene noted previously, the film itself is structured non-chronologically in order to give precedence to its film noir content. Thus, the opening scene takes place at a much later period in Mildred's story after she has become successful and has married Monte Beragon. There is a shot of a car at night with its headlights on parked outside a house. Then follows the sound of gunfire and a cut to the shadowy interior of the house.
where we see a man clutching at himself and falling to the floor as the gunshots continue to strike him. As he lands on the floor, he whispers one dying word:

"Mildred."

The scenes after this show a woman, soon revealed to be Joan Crawford, at the Santa Monica Pier. She seems to be contemplating leaping into the water and taking her own life, but is stopped by the sound of a policeman’s nightstick on the railing and then his verbal admonition not to do it. She leaves and the camera follows her as she passes a bar. A man inside knocks on the window and urges her to come in. He comes out to get her and when they are inside drinking, we learn that the woman is Mildred and the man is Wally. She seductively convinces Wally to go to the beach house with her and when they arrive, we see that this is the house where the murder took place. Mildred deliberately spills a drink and then tells Wally she needs to change her dress, but instead she locks the house and leaves.

Eventually realizing that Mildred is no longer there, Wally discovers the body. In a series of shots which emphasize overpowering shadows and askew angles, and thus Wally’s desperation and feeling of entrapment, he runs through the house attempting to find an exit. Finally, he breaks a window and gets out just as the police pull up and shoot to stop him from fleeing the scene. Later, Mildred, Wally, Bert, and Ida are all gathered at the police station for questioning regarding the murder of Monte
Beragon. It is only when Mildred is being interrogated by Inspector Petersen (Moroni Olson) that her story begins, initially as a voice-over to the dissolve to the cheerily lit kitchen mentioned earlier.

Thus, the film's opening moments construct Mildred as a murderer who has no compunction about using her sexuality in order to frame a friend for her crime. What the spectator does not realize until the flashback to the murder during the closing moments of the film is that in the opening scene, after the dying Monte utters "Mildred," what appears to be a missing reverse shot which would show Mildred standing over him with a gun, in fact, does not exist. The final flashback reveals that Monte's utterance is the reverse shot and that it is preceded by a shot of Veda firing the gun. This structuring has two main effects: first, by leading the audience to believe that Mildred is a murderer at the beginning of the film, everything she says after that is undercut by suspicion and distrust; second, by framing the film around the murder mystery, Mildred's story becomes de-emphasized and of secondary importance narratively. Throughout the film, the camera cuts from the events in Mildred's story back to the police station until finally the present of the melodrama and the present of the film noir are one and the same.

The closing scenes take place at the Los Angeles Police Department after Inspector Peterson reveals that Veda is the real murderer and takes her into custody. Then the inspector, the voice of law and order, symbolically raises the blinds in the police station, a gesture which eradicates the shadows of disorder and restores the light
of normalcy (See Cook, 74, for a similar description of this scene).Exactly what constitutes this normalcy is revealed in the last shot of the film when Bert and Mildred are reunited and stand together under the archway of this hall of justice in the light of dawn. Patriarchal order is restored and Mildred is back where she belongs—out of the public sphere (Monte had cheated her out of her business on the afternoon of his murder) and back in the private sphere of heterosexual relations. The two discourses in the film, one signified by the murder mystery and Inspector Peterson, the other by the woman's story of Mildred's struggle to succeed as both a mother and breadwinner, are apparently integrated at the film's conclusion, but throughout the film they are constantly in tension, creating noirish moments in the melodrama and melodramatic moments in the film noir.

In addition to this discursive tension, however, Mildred Pierce also represents the equivalent of a geological fault line in its depiction of the stress and strain created when heterosexuality occupies the same space as female homoeroticism. Patricia White theorizes that “women’s pictures” in general “popularized a ‘lesbianism’ that couldn’t be detected or located, but that was nevertheless ‘communicable’” (38). As Terry Castle states in The Apparitional Lesbian, her study of how lesbianism has haunted Western literature from the eighteenth century on, “within the very imagery of negativity lies the possibility of recovery—a way of conjuring up, or bringing back into view, that which has been denied” (7-8). Indeed, a close examination of Mildred Pierce uncovers homoerotic dyads and triads with Mildred, Veda, and Ida as the female terms,
and exposes the butchness of the femme fatale, Mildred. Additionally, Ida, as Mildred's sidekick, exemplifies the supporting character, "at once essential and marginal to classical realism and its narrative goals" who thus, "is a site for the encoding of the threat and the promise of homosexual difference" (White 194). In terms of this study, then, Mildred Pierce is paradigmatic of the three ways in which the specter of lesbianism is made manifest in film noir: homoerotic dyads and triads; the butch quality of the femme fatale; and the construction of the supporting character as lesbian.

At first glance, Mildred Pierce's depiction of the first of these manifestations, triangulated romances, may seem to be illustrative of heteronormativity, i.e., two males (first, Wally and Bert and later, Bert and Monte, and even later, Wally and Monte) vying for the attention of a female (Mildred). However, as the fluctuations in even these male-female-male triads suggest, such triangulations are far from stable in this film. Moreover, as Castle argues in her discussion of Eve Sedgwick's important work on male homosociality in Western literature, the function of such triangles not only is to stave off "the destabilizing threat of male homosexuality" to patriarchy (Sedgwick's point), but also to fend off female homosociality (69). Castle continues, "Even in works in which female homosocial bonds are depicted, these bonds are inevitably shown giving way to the power of male homosocial triangulation" (73). In other words, what these male-female-male triangles are repressing is not just the possibility of the male-male homosexual dyad, but also the emergence or discovery of the female-
male-female triad and thus, the possibility of the female-female dyad. Such “[f]emale bonding, at least hypothetically, destabilizes the ‘canonical’ triangular arrangement of male desire, is an affront to it, and ultimately—in the radical form of lesbian bonding—displaces it entirely” (Castle 72). In Mildred Pierce, the apparently heteronormative triangles mask (and not very successfully) various female homosocial triangles with Veda and Mildred as the recurring terms in all of them: Mildred-Veda-Bert, Mildred-Veda-Kay, Mildred-Veda-Ida, Mildred-Veda-Monte, Mildred-Veda-Ted Forrester, Mildred-Veda-Wally, Mildred-Veda-Monte (again), and finally, Mildred-Veda-Inspector Peterson. Obviously, what the similarities in these triads imply is the continuous attempted mediation of a dyad which dare not speak its name: Mildred-Veda.

The incestuous nature of the relationship between Veda and Mildred has been noted by many critics. Observing that "[i]n [James Cain's] novel, Mildred's relationship with Veda is represented as explicitly sexual, in the physical and emotional sense" (fn, 82), Pam Cook states that in the film, it is the "forcible and final separation of Mildred and Veda" which makes it "possible for Mildred to live with Bert in a ‘normal’ couple relationship" (74). Also speaking of the film, Judith Mayne notes that “[t]he relationship of parent and child . . .evokes the relationship of male and female” while Albert LaValley mentions that Mildred's "treatment of Veda suggests the role more of lover than mother" (Private 143; 12).² In Cook's discussion of this relationship in her essay, “Duplicity in Mildred Pierce,” she notes that Mildred’s “relationship with Veda,
coupled with her close friendship with Ida (played by Eve Arden, another actress who is an ambiguous sexual figure), represents an attempt to return to the pre-Oedipal bisexual state, a regression from patriarchy” (78). Interestingly, in an earlier analysis of Veda in this same essay, Cook states that Veda has a “problem with finding a sexual identity, since she has no father, and a mother who is also a father” (75). Although Cook’s analysis is invaluable as one of the earliest feminist studies of the film and has proven to be foundational for virtually every feminist examination of the film since, the juxtaposition of these quotes demonstrates the problems endemic to approaches which fail to recognize lesbianism. According to this analysis, these characters can be only bisexual, heterosexual, or “ambiguous” and somehow, in spite of the contradiction implicit in her reading of Mildred as a “father,” too, Veda’s relationship with Mildred can be only pre-Oedipal. In Cook’s reading then, as in the readings of most of the critics noted, incestuous undertones are noted, but rarely explored in depth.

Thus, many of these same critics, as well as others, have observed that Veda and Mildred are “double[s]” or “mirror images” with Veda as “Mildred’s unconscious in both its idealized and darker aspects” (Cook 78; Nelson 69; LaValley 41). This doubling is made explicit through the similarity of Mildred’s and Veda’s costumes, lighting, and shot compositions. However, to see their relationship only in terms of doubling, one would have to ignore the desire implicit in this bond. For doubling suggests identification and while we are certainly meant to see the mother and the
daughter reflected in each other, there is an excess in their relationship which cannot be accounted for by identification alone. Patricia White notes that such excesses... demonstrate not the impossibility of female desire, but its multifarious forms and distortions. For feminist theory, a lesbian reading of the maternal melodrama can test heterosexist assumptions by putting into play different iconic, emotional, and fantasmatc registers within privileged and conventional narratives of maternal 'bonding.' (139)

Indeed, it is this excess which configures their relationship as something other than incest; rather, they are two women obsessed with each other. It is Veda who wields the power by playing femme fatale to Mildred's hen-pecked butch.

The excess in the maternal bonding between Mildred and Veda is evident early in the film during the first flashback. The argument between Mildred and Bert which sends Bert packing revolves around his unemployment and relationship with Mrs. Biederhof, but also centers on Veda and Mildred's obsession with her. During this argument, Bert compares their two daughters, saying that Kay is a "nice, normal little kid," but that he is so "fed up" with Veda that "one of these days" he's going to "slap her right in the face." When Mildred screams back at him in an extremely threatening tone, "If you ever touch Veda . . .," Bert is shaken by the realization of his secondary (even tertiary) status in the hierarchy of Mildred's feelings. As Mildred continues rationalizing her rearing of their children, a subdued Bert eventually states, rather sheepishly, "There's something wrong, Mildred. I don't know what. I'm not smart that way. But I know it isn't right to . . ." His thought remains unfinished because at just this moment the phone rings, but the spectator doesn't have to be "smart that way"
either to read in the vaporous trail of the unsaid the implication that it’s not “right” to have such excessive love for someone other than one’s husband. Interestingly, in Albert LaValley’s notations on the screenplay of this film, he comments that in the shooting script, Bert’s line is “isn’t natural,” rather than “isn’t right to.” LaValley continues, “The film plays down any hint of unnaturalness in Mildred’s love for Veda, but it still condemns to some extent her displacing Bert in her affection for Veda” (241n).

However, such “unnaturalness” becomes apparent again a few scenes later. After a visit by Wally Fay on the night of Bert’s departure, Mildred goes upstairs to check on the children and finds that Veda is still awake and has heard Mildred’s conversation with Wally. Wally, displaying the most wolfish parts of his personality, had been putting the make on Mildred and Veda suggests to Mildred that marrying Wally is not such a bad idea. Mildred, shocked, draws back from Veda, exclaiming that surely Veda would not want her to marry for money rather than love. Hugging each other (in what by now has become the emblematic image of this film—Veda locked in the embrace of Mildred), Veda rescinds her earlier cold-heartedness and acts the part of the loving, dutiful daughter by exchanging vows of love with Mildred. However, when Mildred goes to kiss Veda, she pulls away, whining, ”But let’s not be sticky about it.”

This line is especially significant since it parallels a line delivered by Mildred in the opening scenes of the film when she has lured Wally to the scene of the murder in
order to protect Veda by framing him. When Mildred engineers the spilling of her
drink in order to fend off Wally’s advances and to provide herself with an excuse to
leave the room (and thus, the house), she says, “I feel sticky.” In one sense, Mildred’s
use of this line suggests the excessive maternal love with which she is slathered (since,
as the spectator learns much later, Mildred is once again going to extreme lengths in
order to protect Veda), but the erotic undertones cannot be ignored. Heard first in the
context of a late-night assignation, its later appearance as Mildred (now in the position
of Wally, the spurned and used would-be lover) attempts to kiss Veda, is haunted by
homoeroticism since Mildred’s maternal motivation is not known to the spectator at the
time she uses the line with Wally.

The implication that Mildred is more a “lover than mother” to Veda is made
cinematographically by the frequency of shots which emphasize Veda as the object of
Mildred’s gaze. Since a foundational (if problematic) tenet of feminist film theory, as
outlined in Laura Mulvey’s seminal essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” is
the notion that man possesses the gaze while woman is the object of the gaze, this
positioning of Mildred is conspicuous. The first time Mildred is located in this space
of male desire occurs (not coincidentally) immediately after Bert’s departure. Veda
goes upstairs to try on—and disparage—the new dress Mildred has purchased for her.
As Veda looks at herself in the mirror while criticizing the dress to Kay, Mildred lurks
outside the doorway surreptitiously watching Veda’s performance.
Later in the film, Mildred watches yet another performance by Veda when she sings onstage at Wally’s café. At this point in the narrative, Mildred and Veda are estranged because of Veda’s machinations. Veda had married the wealthy Ted Forrester (John Compton) for his money and then put her plan into action by faking a pregnancy and demanding a ten thousand-dollar settlement from his family at the meeting to discuss the terms of their annulment. When Mildred and Veda return home from the meeting, Mildred learns that the pregnancy is just a ploy used by Veda for financial gain. Mildred rips up the check and an enraged Veda slaps Mildred so hard that she knocks her down. Mildred orders Veda to leave her house and then she herself leaves on a long trip to Mexico to try to mend her broken heart. When Mildred returns, Bert calls her and takes her to Wally’s club where Bert has learned Veda is performing. Mildred, confused about why Bert would take her to a place she has “never liked,” soon learns the truth when Veda appears onstage in a skimpy costume. A series of cuts emphasize first, Veda singing, then a medium close shot of Mildred looking at her, then Veda again, then a group of sailors whistling at Veda, and finally, in medium close-up again, Mildred’s sorrowful/angry/jealous gaze at the sailors and then back at Veda. The attention to Mildred’s gaze here, as in the previous example, emphasizes the “unnaturalness” of her position vis-a-vis Veda. This is reiterated further by the cut back to Mildred after the shot of the sailors. Since classical Hollywood
cinema’s use of the shot/reverse shot pattern creates the expectation that the next shot will be of the object of the soldiers’ gazes, i.e., Veda, the cut to Mildred disrupts and subverts the heteronormativity of this pattern.

Through the use of parallelism, yet another disruption of a heteronormative pattern occurs in relation to the gaze as a signifier of Mildred’s desire. In one of the early scenes in the film after the policeman chases Mildred away from the Santa Monica Pier, as she walks by Wally’s café, there is a shot of Wally, framed by the café’s windowpane, rapping on the glass in order to get Mildred to notice him. This shot draws the spectator’s attention to Wally, but it does so in order to make a spectacle of his desire for Mildred. Indeed, when Mildred does stop, within moments she has convinced him to go with her to the beach house for what he thinks will be the consummation of his years of longing for her. Later, when Bert leaves Mildred, we see her looking after him, framed by the kitchen’s windowpane. Finally, when Mildred breaks up with Monte because she is tired of him spending her money and spending so much time with Veda, as this man whom she once loved leaves, Mildred looks through the glass of the restaurant’s office, once again framed by a windowpane. In other words, in every instance where such framing through glass occurs, the shot is charged with longing and eroticism.

It is no surprise then that the two other times that this shot composition occurs involve Mildred looking through a pane of glass at Veda. First, right before Mildred dumps Monte, she gives Veda the keys to a new car, her birthday present. As Veda
gets into the car, both Mildred and Monte observe her, framed by the same pane of glass through which Mildred will watch Monte’s departure moments later. Since Monte’s relationship with Veda is anything but fatherly (and eventually functions in a less than subtle way as a displacement of the incestuous relationship between Mildred and Veda), their shared space within this shot as they both stare at Veda evokes much more than parental love. Second, in a scene which I will elaborate upon later, when Bert ends the estrangement between Mildred and Veda by bringing Veda to Mildred’s new home, Mildred goes to the window of her mansion to see if Veda really is waiting outside and again her gaze is accentuated through this framing. Thus, as these examples and those discussed previously suggest, cinematically, Mildred is located in the space typically associated with the male with Veda as the object of her desire.

This desire which the text attempts to contain also erupts in an early scene between Mildred and Monte in which Veda is not even present. After Mildred purchases the property from Monte and begins the remodeling which will transform the house into a restaurant, Monte stops by and cajoles Mildred into spending the day at the beach with him. When they arrive, he takes Mildred into a room and tells her to pick out a bathing suit from a closet filled with them. Monte teases, “They belong to my sisters,” and Mildred sarcastically retorts, “Nothing like having a large family.” Later that evening (the evening that will end with Kay’s death from pneumonia), Mildred tells Monte that he drinks too much and he replies that he’s “spoiled.” She responds, “Too many sisters. And they all seem to be my size too.” Monte walks over
to Mildred, who sits on the floor in front of a fire, and says, "Yes. I like them your size." Raising his glass in a toast to Mildred, he continues, "To brotherly love." After a romantic exchange, the scene ends with caresses, a kiss, and a fade-out. These scenes attempt to displace the film's incestuous undertones into a series of jokes (which nonetheless seem to act as mating calls), but may be read symptomatically as a return of the repressed.

The film's juxtaposition of this scene and its fade to black with the scenes involving Kay's death implicate Mildred in Kay's death and punish Mildred for her illicit sexuality: while she is off having sex, her neglected daughter is dying. However, as the previous discussion suggests, Mildred's relationship with Veda is conjured up during this sexual liaison and therefore, she also is being castigated for it. A shot during the deathbed scene affirms this. While the nurse and doctor attend to Kay, Bert, Mrs. Biederhof (to whose house Bert has taken Kay since Mildred was not at home), Mildred, and Veda stand huddled in the doorway watching. This shot is particularly conspicuous since in order to frame the four of them in the doorway, the point of view is that of the wall behind Kay's head. Mildred stands with her arm around Veda and both Veda and Mrs. Biederhof stand between Bert and Mildred. Since Bert is assumed to be having an affair with Mrs. Biederhof, the composition of this shot implies that she stands as an obstacle between Mildred and Bert. Since Veda's location mirrors that of
Mrs. Biederhof, her function appears to be the same. Just as Bert’s entanglement with Mrs. Biederhof comes between Mildred and him, so too does Mildred’s entanglement with Veda.

After Kay’s death, Monte and Mildred continue to see each other, but his aforementioned consumption of both her financial resources and Veda’s attention eventually sour Mildred on the romance. However, when Mildred returns from her Mexican sojourn to find Veda performing at Wally’s, she is determined to bring her home. Veda refuses to return, though, saying that she “wants the kind of life that Monte taught [her]” and that Mildred will not give her that. Not surprisingly, the next scene finds Mildred at Monte’s mansion. Under the guise of buying his house—which is currently on the market—Mildred soon reveals the real business she came to conduct. She asks Monte to marry her, but because she had gone “to considerable trouble to get rid of [him] once,” Monte is baffled by her proposal. Mildred offers little explanation:

MILDRED. I have my own personal reason for wanting to marry you.

MONTE. A reason named Veda, I think.

MILDRED. Why should it be?

MONTE. Because your reason for doing anything is usually Veda.

After Monte makes it clear that he will marry her only if she signs over one-third of her business, Mildred agrees. As Monte leans forward to kiss her, Mildred blocks him by holding up her glass and toasts, “Sold. One Beragon.” Once again, Veda’s presence is palpable in spite of her absence. Early on, Veda urged Mildred to
make a business marital arrangement with Wally and now, in order to get Veda to return to her, Mildred substitutes Monte and does just that. Similarly, the gesture of the toast mirrors Monte's toast to "brotherly love" and given Mildred's motivation for the marriage, the connotations of the earlier toasting scene are reiterated.

When the deal between Mildred and Monte finally is consummated, Bert visits Mildred and brings Veda back to her as a "wedding present." The lack of subtlety in the use of this phrase is rather astounding. If, as feminist theory posits, women are objects of exchange between men, then Mildred again is located in a traditionally male space and Veda is the object to be possessed. When the exchange is complete, Mildred and Veda are foregrounded in an embrace, and Bert is in the background, displaced again by Veda.

Thus, as this particular configuration, as well as the previous triangulations, demonstrate, much of the movement of Mildred Pierce comes from the fluctuations in these triads as the film tries to repress the eruption of the Mildred-Veda dyad. Wally is seen first as a potential (loveless) marriage partner for Mildred in order to appease Veda; then he is partnered with Veda against Mildred in the Forrester marriage scheme; finally, he is used by Mildred as a pawn in an attempt to protect Veda. Although Monte is introduced as the third term between Mildred and Bert, his primary importance lies in his position as an object of exchange between Mildred and Veda. He is eliminated when he receives too much of Veda's attention, reinstated when Mildred needs him in order to regain Veda's affection, and then used by Veda (in a classic case
of displacement) when she has an affair with him. At this point, this discussion has barely touched upon Mildred’s friend and partner, Ida Corwin (a subject I will return to later), but she, too, is involved in these triangular permutations. Through her humorous, yet biting and insightful remarks, she tries to intercede between Mildred and Veda and Mildred and Monte in order to protect Mildred from their selfish machinations.

Because the narrative conventions of film noir and melodrama demand the elimination of many of the characters who function as third terms (Ted, Kay, Monte, and Bert), the possibility of the emergence of the Mildred-Veda dyad manifests itself. However, in yet another convention, this threat is recuperated through the removal of Veda, “whose monstrousness aligns her with representational strategies that depict lesbianism” (White 150). Thus, the film’s final triad, constructed in order to facilitate the expulsion of Veda, is that of Mildred-Veda-Inspector Peterson. When Veda is eliminated, Mildred is left in a dyadic relationship with this restorer of heteronormativity, but since he has fulfilled his function, the narrative also demands his deposition. Thus, the space is open for Bert to be reinstated as the beneficiary of Peterson’s legacy, a dyadic relationship with Mildred.

However, although all of the triangulations discussed attempt to mediate the homoerotic bond between Mildred and Veda, it is important to note that only in the final example is this mediation successful. In fact, the repeated attempts to deny the existence of homoeroticism through various permutations of heteronormative triads
end up drawing our attention to and conjuring up that which the film insists does not exist. In other words, if there is no homoerotic bond, why is it necessary to keep recapitulating this point? For in the film's construction of these many triads, yet another manifestation of female homoeroticism emerges: the butch femme fatale.

At first glance, the term butch femme fatale seems so contradictory and at odds with itself, that it appears to vaporize in a cloud of semiotic negation. Since "butch" connotes masculinity and "femme" connotes femininity, the implication is that the word itself will become the fatality. Joan Crawford's Mildred is unrelentingly glamorous, and her beauty is highlighted cinematically through all of the standard classical Hollywood cinema techniques: close-ups, key lighting, soft focus, framing, etc. These techniques emphasize her femininity, her femaleness and thus, her positioning as the object of the gaze. Nonetheless, in the aforementioned triangles, Mildred frequently is located in what typically is perceived to be male space: she has an erotic relationship with another woman; she uses men as commodities and objects of exchange; she expresses her (hetero)sexuality without fear of societal condemnation. Additionally, she appropriates the public sphere by running a successful business and by treating heterosexual relations as if they, too, were businesses. Thus, while Mildred's image serves as a constant reminder to the spectator that she is the embodiment of femininity, simultaneously, both her actions and the structure of the film itself place her in the seemingly paradoxical position of "acting like a man."
This position is reiterated further by Mildred’s possession of the gaze, as noted in the earlier analysis of her framing in windows, and by her costuming and demeanor. In the first flashback during the opening scenes of the melodrama, Mildred is wearing a rather frumpy, yet feminine, house dress. However, as she enters more and more decisively into the public sphere, there is a radical change in her appearance: “[h]er hair is now piled on top of her head, and her clothes become more severe and more mannish, her face haughtier and colder” (Farber 10). She wears tailored suits, accentuated by the infamous Joan Crawford shoulder pads, which signify that she is able to carry the weight of this man’s world on her own two shoulders. The increasingly butch costume combined with her steely glances (like the one she gives Bert when he threatens to hit Veda) and her deep, thraky voice emphasize the tension between her cinematically glamorized femme image and her butch persona.

Another example of this kind of tension occurs early in the film during Wally’s visit on the night of Bert’s departure. Immediately before Wally’s arrival, Mildred sits at the desk looking at bills. Her voice-over describes her feelings about her present situation—including the “great hopes” she once had with Bert. Her gaze rests upon a gun she finds in the open drawer of the desk and as the feelings above are spoken, her hand grasps it. In addition to the irony and tension created in the juxtaposition of this phallic gesture with the feminine domestic homilies uttered in the soundtrack, her grab
for the gun disrupts the auditory flow of domesticity and serves to undercut and critique heteronormativity. Thus, the ambiguity of the butch femme fatale is another way in which lesbian possibilities underscore the dynamics of the film.

The final manifestation of female homoeroticism in this film occurs in the characterization of a supporting player, Ida Corwin. The spectator is introduced to Ida in the opening noir sequence when she, Mildred, Wally, and Bert are all present in the police station. Ida already is seated when Mildred is escorted in and told to sit down. They lean toward each other as if to speak, but are prohibited by the detective’s, “no talking.” When Wally emerges from Peterson’s office and Ida is told to go in, as they pass each other, Ida immediately wisecracks, “Well what’s this? A class reunion?” This scene, then, immediately conveys a number of facets of Ida’s characterization: she has an intimacy with Mildred; she is a commentator on the world around her; and she is unbowed and even defiant in the face of male authority.

The development of Ida’s closeness with Mildred, as well as a display of Ida’s support for women, are emphasized in the early scenes of the melodrama. After a montage of images which emphasize Mildred’s unemployability as a single mother trying to rear two children, Mildred walks into a restaurant in which Ida is the hostess. When the waitresses around Mildred’s table begin arguing, Ida apologizes as she hands Mildred the menu and explains that they are understaffed. Immediately Mildred asks for a job, and although she has no experience as a waitress and Ida is a bit skeptical about her ability to succeed in the job, Ida gives her the chance that no one else would.
After Mildred starts her own restaurant, Ida is right by her side, helping her to manage all aspects of the business. As well as being Mildred’s business associate, however, Ida also is her friend, and as mentioned before, Ida, through her ironic comments, tries to protect Mildred from the manipulations of Monte and Veda. For example, it is Ida who tells Mildred when Veda has been using her position as the boss’s daughter in order to borrow money from the waitresses at Mildred’s restaurant without paying it back. Later, when Mildred returns from Mexico during her estrangement from Veda, she goes to her restaurant and almost immediately asks Ida if she has seen Veda. Ida tells her she ought to just “forget her,” and then continues: “Personally, Veda has convinced me that alligators have the right idea. They eat their young.” Thus, in addition to providing a sympathetic ear to Mildred, Ida also offers critical and ironic distance. As one of the more stable figures in the fluctuating triangulations of the film, she provides an anchor for Mildred. And as Mildred says to Wally in one of the film’s early scenes, “Friendship’s much more lasting than love.”

Ida’s irony and criticism are not limited to comments about Veda, though. In her role as commentator on the world around her, Ida, in the form of wisecracks, presents an incisive and insightful critique of the masculinist world in which she resides. Commenting on Monte’s freeloading gigolo lifestyle, Ida remarks that Monte was “probably frightened by a callous at an early age.” When she learns the perennially unemployed Bert has finally secured a job, she comments, “Well, the manpower shortage must be worse than we think.” Although incisive comments presented as
comic relief can certainly make them seem less threatening, amidst the emotional turmoil that characterizes the lives of most of the characters in the film, Ida stands amused, a cool remove away, a breath of fresh air in the film.

However, the coolness and remoteness which create her amiability are also made problematic by the film. She is able to stand apart from the heterosexual intrigue surrounding her because the film constructs her as a peripheral masculinized female and thus, in the logic of the film, asexual. This status is conveyed cinematically by a shot-reverse shot pattern between her and Mildred in which Mildred appears in the traditionally female framework of the close-up or medium close-up, while Ida is shown in a medium shot. In other words, she is represented in the typically male position of enunciation.

Another way in which the film attempts to distinguish Ida’s position from that of Mildred, in spite of Mildred’s own butch femme fatale ambiguity (and in spite of the similarity of their tailored butch costuming) is through its construction of three parallel scenes. In fact, in the logic of the film, Ida serves to defer attention away from Mildred’s butchness. This pattern of parallelism begins when Mildred goes to Wally’s office in order to purchase the property for her restaurant. Wally looks at her legs and remarks, “Hey, you know using your gams all day hasn’t hurt ‘em a bit.” This is followed by a cut to a close-up of the “gams” in question.

The next example occurs on the day Monte visits Mildred’s not-yet-opened restaurant in order to take her to the beach house. In a long shot, we see Monte enter
the restaurant while Mildred is on a ladder in the foreground of the image with her legs prominently displayed. Monte says, “You know, it’s moments like this that make me glad that nylons are out for the duration.” Contrast these two scenes, stereotypical of the objectification of the female body in classical cinema, in a later scene in the film, Ida has a similar encounter with Wally. As Wally leaves Mildred’s restaurant, Ida is at the cash register by the door, standing on a stool. Like the previous scene with Mildred, she too is in a long shot and attention is drawn to her legs because she lifts her skirt to adjust her nylons. As Wally walks past Ida, his gaze frozen on her legs, Ida says, “Leave something on me—I might catch cold.” Wally replies, “Just thinking. Not about you.” This exemplifies her status as an outsider in the world of heterosexual desire.

Other scenes in the film continue to reiterate Ida’s status. In yet another scene with Wally, he is dejectedly leaving Mildred’s office after she has told him that she might be in love with Monte. Ida is simultaneously entering the office, and as Wally passes her, he says “I hate all women,” and then looking directly at her he adds, “Thank goodness you’re not one.” During the conversation Ida and Mildred have after Mildred’s return from her trip, in response to Mildred’s remark, “You’ve never been married, have you Ida?,” Ida tells her, “No. When men get around me, they get allergic to wedding rings. You know, big sister type. Good old Ida. You can talk with her man to man. I’m getting awfully tired of men talking to me man to man.” The implication again is that the masculinized Ida is not an object of desire.
Interestingly, however, in spite of what would appear to be Ida’s contentment at her status—given the tenor of most of her wisecracks—as her final remark in the previous exchange suggests, the film attempts to mediate her disruptive presence in the narrative through dialogue which describes her unhappiness. Thus, earlier in the scene of Mildred’s return from Mexico, Ida tells Mildred, “I never yet met a man who didn’t have the instincts of a heel.” However, this disparaging observation is quickly followed by, “Sometimes I wish I could get along without ‘em.” In the implication that she cannot, the film attempts a recuperation of both a masculinist world and heteronormativity. The scene ends with Ida making the toast, “To the men we have loved. The stinkers,” followed by the clink of her glass and Mildred’s. In these instances then, it is not just that the discontentedness of the non-commodified masculine woman is being expressed, but also that the threat of the lesbian is being suppressed.

This is exemplified in LaValley’s description of Ida:

Her asexuality and matter-of-fact wit keep her from sharing Mildred’s more glamorous style and sense of power. Ida is all there at first glance. If she partly functions as an ideal to Mildred, she is also a warning. There is a slight lesbian edge to her personality and her relationship with Mildred. Yet Ida has surrendered her sexuality . . . Her freedom from men gives her the perspective to judge them cynically and correctly; she knows just what Wally and Monte are angling for. Yet this same freedom limits her power. She knows it’s a man’s world and she has nothing to bargain with. (40-41; my emphasis)

In a manner which is reminiscent of the film itself, he evokes the specter of Ida’s lesbianism only to deny that it is really there. As Patricia White notes, “Given the
virtual conceptual blank that is lesbianism in the culture at large, it is no accident that
the social types standing in for lesbians in Hollywood cinema are coded as ‘asexual’”
(225). Thus, despite the film’s encoding of Ida as a lesbian through her costume,
dialogue, cinematic representation, and interaction with Mildred, it schizophrenically
insists that she’s not really a lesbian, she’s just a frustrated asexual.

Additionally, Eve Arden’s portrayal of Ida—her flippant manner, her rolled-back
eyes, her sideways glances, her confident stride—works to undercut the film’s attempt
to contain her as a pathetic, if funny, woman without sexuality. This idea, as well as
the schizophrenia of the film’s construction of her, is made clear in a scene in which Ida
is left alone with Mildred’s male accountant. In an angry tone, he chastises Ida, saying,
“You always interrupt.” Ida shoots back, “It’s because I want to be alone with you.
Come here and let me bite you, you darling boy,” and follows this with a growl. The
accountant almost cowers during his hasty retreat out of the room. I want to suggest
that asexuality is unlikely to produce such a fearful reaction. The use of the word
“bite” is interesting in this context, too, since it conjures up not only female/lesbian
sexuality unleashed, but also vagina dentata, as well as vampirism.³

The film’s treatment of another supporting character also may be instructive in
terms of its attempt to contain Ida’s disruptive lesbian presence. When we first see
Mildred’s youngest daughter, Kay, early in the melodrama’s initial flashback, she is
dressed in overalls, covered with dirt, and involved in playing football outside. Veda
arrives and pulls her away from the game, and the contrast between them is striking.
Veda wears a prim, feminine, spotless dress and is as likely to be involved in a football game as she is to roll around in the mud with pigs. She chastises Kay for not acting feminine enough and Kay replies, “I shoulda been a boy.” Veda’s haughtiness and Kay’s earthiness are made immediately apparent. Kay scoffs at Veda’s suggestion that her behavior will change when she gets interested in boys because she “got over them when [she] was eight.” Kay is a classic tomboy and in spite of the fact that she is characterized by Bert as a “nice, normal little kid,” the narrative demands her death not just as an indictment of Mildred as a mother, but also because when tomboys grow up, many of them are no longer characterized as “nice” and “normal.” Thus, this pint-sized butch is quickly dispatched from sight.

That the grown-up Ida represents the threat of lesbianism also is suggested by the film’s ending. I have already noted that the elimination of Bert’s rival, Veda, is necessary in order for Mildred and Bert to live dyadically ever after, and that Mildred also must relinquish her business so that she can reside solely in the private sphere. However, just as her relationship with Ida emerges after Bert’s departure, so does Mildred’s relationship with Bert depend on the banishment of Ida. While Kay is killed off literally, Ida is killed off metaphorically. The loss of Mildred’s business also means the loss of the space in which their intimacy is located. It is clear from the last shot in the film that there is not room under that archway for the three of them.
This is exemplified in the final script for *Mildred Pierce* since it includes a scene between Ida and Wally in the main corridor of the police station immediately preceding the final reunion of Mildred and Bert:

WALLY (to Ida). You know something . . . I'm getting a little discouraged about her. (Indicating Mildred.) I'm beginning to think I haven't got a chance.

IDA (dryly). You're just a pessimist.

WALLY (looking over Ida carefully). Say, how about you cooking some breakfast for me?

IDA (as they start away). Okay. I'll give you some scrambled eggs . . . but that's all. I hate to wrestle in the morning. (LaValley 236, my emphasis)

Obviously, this scene is missing from the film—possibly because its inclusion would have detracted from the seriousness of the restoration of the Bert and Mildred dyad. On the one hand, this dialogue seems to typify the exchanges between Ida and Wally, but there is one glaring omission: Wally delivers no put-downs. This omission, coupled with Wally's turn from Mildred to Ida, followed by his evaluative, but not disparaging, gaze, suggests a heterosexual desire focusing on Ida that, as the previous discussion demonstrates, is absent from the film. Ida's response reiterates her lack of interest in anything other than "scrambled eggs," but nonetheless, her acquiescence and her reference to previous wrestling matches seems to undercut the film's attempt to construct her as asexual. This also may account for its omission from the film.

Another possibility is that its inclusion and the continuing presence of two figures from
the triangulations noted earlier, would disrupt the heteronormative dyad. At this point in the film, the very presence of Ida, regardless of context, conjures up the specter of lesbianism.

In a discussion of the function of supporting characters which has particular relevance here, Patricia White quotes Stephen Heath: “Narrative contains a film’s multiple articulations as a single articulation, its images as a single image (the ‘narrative image,’ which is a film’s presence, how it can be talked about, what it can be sold and bought on—in the production stills displayed outside a cinema, for example)” (121). Then she adds, “Supporting characters are sacrificed to the narrative image of heterosexual desire” (198). However, the fact that narrative closure demands Ida’s absence implies that her presence was overdetermined. Chronologically, Ida’s last appearance occurs in the film noir scene at the police station discussed earlier. However, her last chronological appearance is also the first time the spectators see her (since the structure of the film is non-chronological because of the flashbacks). She is the only character for whom this is true and on a metaphorical level, this contradictory synchronicity is emblematic of her schizophrenic representation within the film as a whole.

There is, however, another character in Mildred Piece whose representation has a unique quality. Although every other supporting character in the film becomes a part of its triads and dyads, Lottie, Mildred’s African American maid, is excluded from the film’s erotic economy. Exemplifying the objectification endemic to classical
Hollywood cinema's characterization of the African American as domestic servant, Lottie's function in the film is to provide comic relief—a comic relief which is predicated on racism. (For Ida, too, provides comic relief, but her comedy is a product of her intelligent and witty repartee. Lottie, on the other hand, is constructed as a buffoon who is laughed at, rather than with. Her "wit" consists of not knowing which end of the phone to speak into.)

Lottie appears six times: after Mildred secures her job as a waitress, Lottie is in Mildred's kitchen helping her make pies to sell to the restaurant; she is used as a foil by Veda against Mildred when Veda dresses Lottie in Mildred's waitress uniform; she is working in the kitchen of Mildred's restaurant on its opening night; she is outside the restaurant sweeping when Mildred returns from her Mexican trip; she announces Bert's arrival when he shows up at Mildred's and Monte's mansion with Mildred's "wedding present"; and finally, she is seen serving champagne and answering the phone on the night of Veda's birthday party (the night which will culminate in Monte's murder). Thus, Lottie, like Ida, is with Mildred from her days as a waitress to her days as a successful businesswoman.

Unlike Ida, however, Lottie signifies a difference which is constructed by the film as unproblematic. In the logic of the film, Lottie's race alone precludes the possibility of her involvement in any of its erotic triangulations because the idea that any of the white characters, male or female, would desire her cannot be envisioned. Indeed, in this film's racist fantasy, Lottie's one-dimensionality is so complete that she
exists only in relation to her role as servant to white people. This is exemplified in the scene of the restaurant’s opening night. While working in the kitchen, Lottie exclaims “This is just like my wedding night--so exciting!” The idea that working in the kitchen of white folks is equivalent to her own wedding night suggests the film’s conflation of her private and public lives as well as her sexuality and her role as worker.

In doing so, the film does not simply eradicate her sexuality; rather, as Lottie’s line of dialogue suggests, the film conjures up its presence only to make it immediately absent. In its spectrality, then, the film associates her sexuality with the illicit sexuality of lesbianism. However, in the film’s equation of Lottie’s paid service to white people with her wedding night, the film signifies another kind of illicit sexuality, as well as another predominant cinematic racist stereotype--the whore. In this instance, though, Lottie, as prostitute, is assumed to romanticize her servicing of white clients (“wedding night”; “so exciting”). Since it is Mildred’s “restaurant” which is “opening” that night, there is a trace of homoerotic desire here, but it is so much a product of a racist ideology that it is deeply problematic.

Simultaneously, the film suggests the possibility that women of color are objects of spectacle for white women. In the initial flashback of the melodrama, while Veda tries on the ruffled dress Mildred has purchased for her, Kay sits on the bed watching her while playing with a black doll. In a similar way, after Veda discovers that Mildred is a waitress (a fact Mildred was trying to hide from her because she feared her reaction), Veda “plays” with Lottie as though she, too, were a doll. In order to let
Mildred know that she has discovered her secret, Veda dresses Lottie in Mildred’s waitress uniform. When Mildred arrives home, she is shocked to see her uniform on Lottie, and her confrontation with Veda over this insult ends with her slapping Veda for the first and only time in the film.  

In developing his argument about the previous incident, Eric Lott begins by observing that Mildred “is shadowed at every step by . . . Lottie . . . who figures the proletarian fate Mildred is driven to beat and whose disabiling likeness suggests Mildred’s darkest dread. Lottie is the kitchen worker that always lurks somewhere inside Mildred” (97). Seeing the two women as “versions of each other,” he continues that there is “ambiguity in the meaning of Lottie--all that Mildred has left behind or her hidden unfitness?” (98).

Connecting Lott’s analysis with my discussion of “opening night” suggests that if there is homoerotic desire here at all, it is cast in terms of a narcissism which is a product of a racist fantasy. Its assumption is that what Lottie wants is not Mildred, but Mildred’s whiteness--a costume which Lottie is only too happy to wear.

Later in the film, Mildred arrives home to find Veda singing and playing the piano while Kay, dressed like Carmen Miranda, dances to this South American-inspired music. Mildred tells Lottie to take Kay upstairs to “wash all that goo off her face and give her a good scrubbing.” Like the tomboy dirt that covers Kay in the opening scenes of the flashback, this mask of otherness can be washed away. However, the film
repeatedly emphasizes that Lottie’s otherness is absolute, regardless of the racial cross-dressing in which she may engage. Thus, Lottie’s racial otherness makes her peripheral to the sexual economy of the film.

As an “archetypal film noir in style, story and even narrative,” Mildred Pierce exemplifies the ways in which lesbianism haunts film noir (Stephens 252). The three patterns that I have analyzed here—the homoerotic dyads and triads, the butch femme fatale, and the lesbian sidekick—occur throughout the canon, although Mildred Pierce may be exceptional in its explicit deployment of all three. Yet, I would argue that the apparently heteronormative triangles central to film noir are always haunted by the possibility of female homoeroticism, that the femme fatale is shadowed by her butch incarnations, and that the supporting female player conjures up the possibility of lesbianism.
NOTES

1. See, for example, Cook; Nelson; Williams.

2. Almost every critic who has written about Mildred Pierce has commented on the intimiation of incest between Mildred and Veda in the film. See also Mayne; Walsh; White.

3. Andrea Weiss, discussing the lesbian vampire film, notes how anxiety over the possibility of the lesbian’s possession of genitalia which was capable of female penetration, was “displaced and refocused on the mouth, another ‘feminine’ sexual orifice which combines the ‘masculine’ ability to penetrate, via the teeth. Thus the vampire embodies age-old popular fears of women which have been expressed through the image of the ‘vagina dentata,’ the vagina with teeth, the penetrating woman”—or perhaps, the “Piercing” woman (91). For a further discussion of the connection between lesbianism and vampirism, see Case.

4. For the contemporary spectator, this scene has additional implications when Mildred asks Veda, “What were you doing snooping around in my closet?” In addition to conjuring up an “outing,” it also echoes the film Mommie Dearest, since the closet holds the infamous wire hangers.
CHAPTER 3

BARBARA STANWYCK, STRANGE LOVES, AND CRIMES OF PASSION

In spite of the fact that Joan Crawford made a number of other films noirs after Mildred Pierce, including Possessed (1947), The Damned Don’t Cry (1950), Sudden Fear (1952), and Female on the Beach (1955), it is Barbara Stanwyck who is known as film noir’s “first lady” (Crowther 116). Although there were femmes fatales in film noir before Stanwyck’s turn as Phyllis Dietrichson in 1944’s Double Indemnity, it is her performance in this, her first film noir, which “create[d] one of the enduring archetypes of the American screen, the noir female” (Schickel 58). As the “greatest of the femmes fatales of film noir,” “the undisputed queen bee of noir,” Barbara Stanwyck “came to epitomize film noir” through her appearances in at least five, and possibly as many as twelve, films noirs (Crowther 138; Hirsch 7; Muller 63). This study will examine three films noirs in which she appeared: Double Indemnity, The Strange Love of Martha Ivers, and Sorry, Wrong Number. An exploration of these three films, made by the woman who “epitomize[s] film noir,” uncovers the three patterns of female homoeroticism which are emblematic of the films made during the classic era of film
noir. Most frequently represented as the embodiment of the butch femme fatale, Stanwyck occasionally becomes a figure in homoerotic triads, but always her character is inflected by the spectral presence of her butch image.

Stanwyck's success in film noir is due in no small part to her star persona. Christine Gledhill describes a star's persona as "form[ing] the private life into a public and emblematic shape [by] drawing on general social types and film roles, while deriving authenticity from the unpredictability of the real person" ("Signs of Melodrama," 215). She goes on to distinguish a star's image from her persona by stating that

the 'image' is spun off from the persona and film roles, both condensing and dispersing desires, meanings, values and styles that are current in the culture. However, this range of meaning-producing agencies and the internally composite structure of the star mean that the image itself is fragmented and open to contradiction. (217)

For the purposes of this study, however, these two terms will be conflated; for, in the case of a star like Stanwyck, it is not so easy to categorize the "persona" as a subset of the star "image." Additionally, this conflation emphasizes the way in which the image/persona and film roles work to construct each other—an essential point of this inquiry.

In discussing how stars affect their roles, Molly Haskell uses the example of Barbara Stanwyck in Stella Dallas (1937) and notes how instead of presenting the novel's "'woman as martyr,'" Stanwyck infuses the role with strength and "'outrageous[ness]'" and "brings us to admire something that is both herself and the
character; she gives us a Stella that exceeds . . . the temperate limitations of her literary model and all the generalizations about the second sex” (5-6). Later, Haskell describes Stanwyck as being “a rare blend of toughness and femininity, lawlessness and virtue” (197). This quality of “toughness” came to be associated with Stanwyck early in her career. Her first featured roles included women of “easy virtue,” women from “the wrong side of the tracks,” and criminals (Smith 13, 41). With a “passion for stunt work” which was well-publicized, many of her roles included a great deal of action (even in melodramas like Night Nurse [1931]) (Smith 1). The toughness associated with Stanwyck also made her a natural for westerns and beginning with Annie Oakley in 1935 and continuing throughout her career until 1969, when four seasons of television’s The Big Valley came to an end, she frequently was cast in parts in which she was at home on the range. (She even was inducted into The National Cowboy Hall of Fame and Western Heritage Center in 1973.) The point here is that Stanwyck’s image transcended—or brought new inflections to—genres. Whether in melodramas, screwball comedies, westerns, or films noirs, the qualities associated with her, as noted by Ethan Mordden, are “tenacity, temper, intelligence, and leadership” (177). Later he adds: “this is the Stanwyck image, of the hard-bitten prole who slaps men, cries, then slaps them more” (177).

If Stanwyck “slaps men” and “cries” as Mordden states, then Stanwyck’s image is contradictory, embodying both stereotypically masculine and feminine attributes. According to Richard Dyer’s ground-breaking book Stars, such contradictions are
essential to an understanding of the complexities of star images. He states, “[S]tar images function crucially in relation to contradictions within and between ideologies, which they seek variously to ‘manage’ or resolve” (34). A star’s contradictory image occurs in part because of the diverse elements which comprise that image: publicity, magazine stories, reviews and criticism, biographies, as well as the films themselves (Dyer 60). Like any star, then, Stanwyck’s image is constructed through this wide range of texts; but more specifically, and like a more limited range of stars, her on-screen persona itself also embodies contradiction, and in her case, it is a contradiction particularly rooted in ideology about gender.

There is much about the Stanwyck image that, at minimum, suggests gender ambiguity. Britton writes, “It has become a critical commonplace to take note of the gender ambiguity of many of the great female stars: Garbo, Dietrich, Hepburn, Davis, Crawford and Stanwyck are obvious cases in point” (39). Dyer notes:

Many of the stars in the independent woman category were characterized by sexual ambiguity in their appearance and presentation. This can be an aspect of their physical attributes—the broad shoulders of Joan Crawford and Greta Garbo, Katharine Hepburn’s height, the ‘tough’ face of Barbara Stanwyck, Bette Davis’s strutting walk. . . . (58)

The “‘tough’ face” of Stanwyck mentioned by Dyer exemplifies how physical attributes, as well as performance style, also contribute to a star’s image and in Stanwyck’s case, to the particular contours of her gender ambiguity. Stanwyck does not possess the glamorous look typically associated with women stars in Hollywood. In his explanation of why Stanwyck is the “queen bee of noir,” Hirsch focuses on the
two elements just mentioned and describes her as “hard, mannish, her face a taut mask, her eyes beady and suspicious, her voice honed to a cutting edge. Her acting is unrelieved by a moment’s softness or shading” (7). These characteristics, along with her assertive swagger and deep, husky voice, project an image of strength—even hardness—rather than sexual vulnerability. In other words, the butchness of her persona, combined with the butchness of many of her roles, exist in tension with her status as one of the screen’s leading “ladies.”

Perhaps to counter the gender ambiguity of Stanwyck’s image, both of her off-screen marriages were well-publicized. Although her first marriage to well-known vaudevillian Frank Fay ended in divorce, her marriage to Robert Taylor in May, 1939 received the attention one would expect from the union of two of Hollywood’s biggest stars. However, despite the infamous control and management of information about stars’ private lives by the studios, details about their marriage were unearthed and reported which suggested that their domestic harmony was less than melodic: they were ordered to get married by Taylor’s studio, MGM, after a scandalous article in Photoplay in January, 1939 featured them as one of “Hollywood’s Unmarried Husbands and Wives”; Taylor spent his wedding night with his over-protective and “hysterical” mother; Stanwyck and Taylor always had separate bedrooms so that her “chronic insomnia” did not disturb his rest (Madsen, Barbara Stanwyck 183, 186, 189).
Interviews in which Stanwyck made comments like, “‘No knitting, no petit point, and no darning, and furthermore, I don’t intend to try anything like that ever!’” did little to polish the veneer of wedded bliss (DiOrio 128).

More importantly, though, there always had been rumors circulating which questioned Taylor’s heterosexuality. In his biography of Stanwyck, Madsen states that long before the Stanwyck-Taylor wedding, MGM’s publicity chief, Howard Strickling, “worried... how to contain [them]” and “planted stories about Bob’s growing up in rugged Big Sky country, his affection for firearms and hunting” (129-30). Although Stanwyck and Taylor divorced in 1951, and he married again in 1954, Stanwyck never did—leading to speculation that she remained in love with him until the day she died (Madsen, Barbara Stanwyck 393). Thus, in spite of the contradictory elements in the public representation of their relationship, the veneer of heterosexual domestic bliss, although showing a few cracks, was maintained.

Nonetheless, the cracks and contradictions in Stanwyck’s image, as it is constructed by her film roles, her physical presence, and her performances on and off screen, create a space in which other readings of the image are possible. Mentioning the fact that “most examinations, of the star phenomenon... discuss stars as in some sense or other reinforcing of dominant values,” Dyer argues:

the system [mass media and ideology] is a good deal more ‘leaky’ than many people would currently maintain... [To assert the total closure of the system is essentially to deny the validity of class/sex/race struggles and their reproduction at all levels of society and in all human practices. (Stars 25)

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In addition to the “leak[iness]” of the system itself—which helps to create the contradictions in star images outlined previously—Dyer emphasizes “the role of the spectator in making the image subversive for her” (25).

It is not surprising, then, given the gender ambiguity inherent in Stanwyck’s image, that speculation about her sexual identity also has run rampant. Her appearance in 1962’s Walk on the Wild Side as Jo, lesbian madam, wife to a legless husband, and would-be-lover to Capucine’s Hallie, certainly did nothing to dispel those rumors. In his biography, Madsen suggests that Stanwyck was known to be a lesbian and implies that she was involved for thirty years with her publicist, Helen Ferguson (187, 89-92). In 1998’s Dark City: The Lost World of Film Noir, Eddie Muller also mentions the suspicion that the Taylor-Stanwyck marriage was “lavender”: intended to camouflage both partners’ rumored homosexuality” and then goes on to state that her relationship with Helen Ferguson “spawned decades of rumors that Stanwyck was Hollywood’s most famous closeted lesbian” (66). Additionally, she appears on the covers of Madsen’s The Sewing Circle: Female Stars Who Loved Other Women (1995) and Hadleigh’s Hollywood Lesbians (1994). (The latter appearance in spite of the fact that Stanwyck threw Hadleigh out of her house after he showed her a 1981 Hollywood Star article in which she appeared at the top of a list of “seventy bisexual Hollywood actresses” and then asked her if her marriage to Taylor was “arranged” [206-09].) The caption alongside her photographs in Hadleigh’s book’s centerfold is: “Barbara
Stanwyck[...]'My favorite American lesbian'--Clifton Webb.” Obviously, at least in recent years, the perception that Stanwyck is a lesbian has grown.

Continuing in this same vein, Madsen makes the rather overblown (on a number of levels) assertion:

To lesbians growing up in loneliness, lacking contacts with other lesbians, fearing parental shock and despairing of finding examples to emulate, the Barbara Stanwyck screen image defined her as ‘one of us.’ . . .

To a majority of lesbians of her day who saw marriage as the safest front and therefore the only viable choice, she was someone who arranged her life in such a way as to avoid public censure yet, on the screen, luminously defied respectability. (Barbara Stanwyck 92)

Madsen provides no substantiation for these claims (a point to which I will return), so skepticism about their validity certainly is in order. However, an earlier statement he makes about responses to Stanwyck’s image is less problematic: “the screen image of [a] gutsy, self-reliant, and self-assured woman she developed [,] combined with her reticence to tell the world about herself [,] made her a life-long icon of gay women” (91). Although overstated, this assertion rings true; there is no question that Stanwyck is an “icon” to at least some lesbians. This is exemplified in Caroline Sheldon’s observation that “lesbians’ interest in the cinema seems to be oriented towards those exceptional films made in Hollywood during the late 1930s and 40s” when the central characters were “strong and resilient women, played by such actresses as Lauren Bacall, Joan Crawford, Bette Davis, Marlene Dietrich, Greta Garbo, Katharine Hepburn and Barbara Stanwyck” (17). These last two examples elide the question of
Stanwyck's own sexual identity and instead, focus on how the ambiguity of her image has opened a space for a lesbian reading of that image, a point that is critical for the purposes of this study.

This is not to suggest, however, that the assumptions about Stanwyck's lesbianism should be discounted. Andrea Weiss makes an important point about the innuendoes which circulate around the sexual identity of celebrities:

Rumor and gossip constitute the unrecorded history of gay subculture. In the introduction to Jump Cut's 1981 lesbian and film issue, the editors begin to redeem gossip's lowly status: 'If oral history is the history of those denied control of the printed record, then gossip is the history of those who cannot even speak in their own first-person voice.' . . . It is this insistence by the dominant culture on making homosexuality invisible and unspeakable that both requires and enables us to locate gay history in rumor, innuendo, fleeting gestures and coded language--signs that should be recognized as historical sources in considering the importance of the cinema, and certain star images in particular, to the formation of lesbian identity in the 1930s. (30,32)

So, returning to Madsen's statements in the previous paragraph about lesbians' reactions to Stanwyck at the time of the release of her films, although his assertions would be more accurate if they did not assume a monolithic lesbian body, and if they were phrased as speculation, rather than historical fact, his attempt to gauge the impact of Stanwyck's image is understandable. As Judith Mayne states in Cinema and Spectatorship, what is significant is that for the gay spectator, conjecture about a particular star's sexual identity is "part of the complexity of the spectator experience" (163). She also contends that "much more than the narratives that unfold onscreen, the
‘text’ of an actor’s image is full of discrepancies and incoherencies,” but that as such, it “might well serve as a useful counter-example” of the impossibility of hegemonic textual readings of classical narrative (128-29).

Thus, we are back where we started--at the juncture of the Stanwyck image and the film noir text--and positioned to engage in what Mayne calls “referential spectatorship, that is, a reading of a film in terms of the purported real-life events surrounding it”—in this case, the singular event of Stanwyck’s persona (Cinema 169). Such a reading is dependent upon connotation (as outlined in the introduction) because of its inevitability in texts in which homosexuality is an absent presence. The gender ambiguity of Stanwyck’s image, the lesbian connotations surrounding her persona, inevitably inflect her films. Moreover, since that image is partially constituted by the film roles themselves, the relationship between the roles and the image potentially raises the specter of lesbianism in all of her films. However, because instability—especially in terms of sexual tension, domestic malaise, and the construction of Otherness—is a paradigm of film noir thematics, the instability of Stanwyck’s image—especially as it is constituted in relation to dominant ideology about gender—is particularly suited to these films. For these same reasons, film noir is particularly suited to accommodate her image. In other words, her appearances in these films engage a dynamic interplay of inflection.

In spite of (or perhaps because of) this connection between the themes of film noir and the toughness of Stanwyck’s image, Stanwyck herself was reluctant to accept
the part of Phyllis Dietrichson in her first film noir, *Double Indemnity* (1944). In *Starring Barbara Stanwyck*, Ella Smith states that in a 1968 television documentary, *Portrait: Barbara Stanwyck*, Stanwyck says she was “afraid after all these years of playing heroines to go into an out-and-out cold-blooded killer” (169). The character of Dietrichson was not as much of a leap as Stanwyck assumed, though; Dietrichson “bristles with the characteristic toughness and resilience of a persona developed in the ’thirties and ’forties through roles ranging from screwball heroines to melodramatic victims, giving as good as she gets in battles of wit or desire” (Evans 168).

*Double Indemnity*, of course, became an “establishing’ film, much in the manner of an establishing shot,” “perhaps the central film noir, not only for its atmospheric power, but as a junction of major themes . . .” (Tuska 164; Durnat 47). Richard Schickel makes the point that “the film’s success turned a style until then only occasionally resorted to into a full-scale commercial cycle” (16). Certainly the film marks a turning point for Stanwyck since her performance in this film initiated a cycle of appearances in films noir so that she came to “epitomize” this type of film (Muller 63). As Hirsch breathlessly intones, “Stanwyck’s performance created a sensation; never before in American films had a female character been presented as so devoid of softening, feminine touches, and never before had death and sex been linked so explicitly and powerfully” (7).

As this outpouring of praise suggests in its own excessiveness, there is much about *Double Indemnity* that exceeds its relatively straightforward plot. Walter Neff
(Fred MacMurray) is an insurance salesman for the Pacific All-Risk Insurance Company whose mentor is the company's chief claims investigator, Barton Keyes (Edward G. Robinson), the embodiment of patriarchal law, who can spot a fraudulent claim a mile away with the assistance of the "little man" in his gut. The film opens with Neff dictating a "memo" to Keyes which details his unsuccessful attempt to defraud the company through the murder of one of its policy-holders, Mr. Dietrichson (Tom Powers). His confession becomes the voice-over that introduces the flashback to the origin of this sinister plot, his initial meeting with Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck). The film continually cuts back to this present time moment with shots of Walter at the dictaphone, followed by his voice-over as the film cuts back to the past.

Arriving at the Dietrichson house to discuss the renewal of Mr. Dietrichson's auto insurance policy, Walter finds Mr. Dietrichson absent, but his wife, Phyllis, very present. Attracted to her because of her appearance and sexual provocativeness, Walter has subsequent meetings with her and before long is enmeshed in a plot to kill her husband by staging an "accidental" death on a train—which will mean that the insurance company will have to pay double indemnity. As taken with the idea of outwitting his mentor, Keyes, and his "little man," as he is with Phyllis, Walter designs a plan to kill Dietrichson first and then impersonate him on the train. Phyllis drives the car with her husband's body in it to meet the train at a designated spot, Walter hops off, and the two of them drag the body to the tracks so that it looks like Dietrichson met his demise by falling off the back of the moving train. Walter is certain that his
plan will work if he and Phyllis stay away from each other while the death is under investigation, but Keyes’s “little man” has other ideas and almost immediately Keyes becomes suspicious of the circumstances surrounding this death.

While Keyes becomes more suspicious of Dietrichson’s death, Walter becomes increasingly suspicious of Phyllis, especially after hearing some information from her step-daughter, Lola (Jean Heather). Lola believes that Phyllis is responsible for her father’s death because she also thinks that Phyllis engineered the death of her mother. Phyllis was hired as a nurse to the first Mrs. Dietrichson and Lola believes she killed her so that she could marry the dull, but financially secure, Mr. Dietrichson. To try to keep Lola from going to the police with her suspicions, Walter begins dating her.

When Walter discovers that Phyllis has become involved with Nino Sachetti (Byron Barr), who is supposed to be Lola’s boyfriend, he becomes even more paranoid. He decides that the only way he can protect himself from both Phyllis and Keyes is to kill her and pin her murder on Nino Sachetti. Walter arranges to meet Phyllis at her house late one night, but Phyllis, anticipating his plan, shoots and wounds him first. However, in a moment that demands a most incredible suspension of disbelief in the spectator, she is unable to fire again and finish the job because she suddenly realizes that she loves Walter. Walter, however, has no such revelation and as she embraces him, he returns the sentiment by firing his weapon twice. Outside of the house, he runs into Nino Sachetti and rather than framing him for Phyllis’s murder, he sends him back to Lola by informing Nino that Lola really loves him.
Instead of immediately escaping across the Mexican border, Walter instead drags his bloodied body to the office of Keyes where he feels compelled to dictate every detail of the above to him. By the end of this confession, he has lost so much blood that he can no longer make it to the border, but Keyes has shown up in person and the film ends, before the arrival of the police and ambulance, with a tender moment between the two men.

As the above summary suggests, the most romantic moments in *Double Indemnity* occur not between Phyllis and Walter or between Lola and Nino, but between Walter and Keyes. The homoeroticism between Walter and Keyes is signified by the repeated gesture of Walter “sparking” Keyes’s cigar with a match, a gesture which is inverted at the end of the film when Keyes uses a match to light the wounded and weakened Walter’s cigarette (apparently size does matter). Their relationship, marked not just by the repetition of this action, but also by Keyes’s tirade against heterosexual relations when he thinks Walter is seeing a woman named Margie (a cover for the phone call Walter receives from Phyllis when Keyes is in his office listening), his desire to take Walter on as his assistant, Walter’s repeated declarations of love for Keyes, as well as their rather poignant coupling at the end of the film, has been much remarked upon.²

However, what has received no critical attention is the mirroring of the Walter/Keyes relationship in the relationship between Lola and Phyllis. Given the fact that Lola and Phyllis share only one scene together and that in the second half of the
film, Keyes receives much more screen time than Phyllis, this particular lack is unsurprising. Nonetheless, though perhaps less critical to the film’s movement than the Walter/Keyes dyad, the homoeroticism between Phyllis and Lola does have narrative significance. If Phyllis is used “to mediate and diffuse male-male erotics” between Keyes and Walter, so, too, is Walter used to diffuse female-female erotics (Doty 11).

Intrinsic to any discussion of this erotic dyad/triad is an analysis of Phyllis and the butchness of her femme fatale characterization. As Christine Gledhill notes:

"[T]hough the heroines of film noir, by virtue of male control of the voice-over, flash-back structure, are rarely accorded the full subjectivity and fully expressed point of view of psychologically realist fiction, yet their performance of the roles accorded to them in this form of male story-telling foregrounds the fact of their image as an artifice and suggests another place behind the image where the woman might be. ("Klute 1, 17"

Indeed, the performance of femininity in the characterization of Phyllis is so over-the-top with excess that it becomes parodic; with the butchness of the Stanwyck image (constructed, as explained previously, by both textual and extra-textual events) behind the make-up, Phyllis frequently seems like a would-be drag queen with a really bad wig. Her blonde hair shimmering in the shadows, her ankle bracelet glimmering in the dusk, Phyllis waves both her head and legs at Walter during their first meeting and he becomes so enthralled that later he cannot get his vision "of the way that anklet of hers cut into her leg" out of his head. That this is a fantasy, perhaps encouraged, but not shared by Phyllis, is suggested by her initial activity when she comes downstairs to meet Walter. Intimating that her appearance is an act, even a mask, she immediately
heads for the mirror, saying, "I hope I've got my face on my straight," and Walter watches her apply her lipstick. Thus, the representation of Phyllis as a fetishistic object of spectacle exists in tension with the character's self-reflexivity about her image.

The potential subjectivity of Phyllis is further substantiated through another implication of this action. By "desiring control over her own image... [her] absorption in her own image disrupts the circuit of desire inaugurated by [Walter's] look: she sets herself outside this look by looking at herself rather than back at [Walter]" (Krutnik 248n). Her avoidance of and control over Walter's gaze recurs later in the film during their second meeting in the supermarket when Walter is so certain that Keyes and his "little man" are going to ensnare them for the murder that he tells her that they have to forget getting the money and "pull out." The dark sunglasses she is wearing during this exchange deflect any attempt by Walter to permeate her facade. After telling him that they cannot "go soft inside" now, she removes her glasses and fixing him in her steely stare, she commands, "nobody's pulling out. . . . It's straight down the line for both of us. Remember?" Her ability both to possess and to position herself outside the perimeters of the gaze also is established in an earlier scene. After a meeting at the insurance company with Keyes, Walter, and their boss, Norton, Phyllis calls Walter that night to say that she wants to come to his apartment because during the meeting she "wanted to look at [him] all the time." When she arrives,
however, she hears Keyes inside Walter’s apartment and waits outside in the hallway. When Keyes leaves, she hides behind Walter’s open door, effectively blocking Keyes’s gaze.

Just as Phyllis’s position in terms of the gaze locates her in traditionally masculine space within the framework of classical narrative cinema, so, too, does her position in relation to language. As the previous snippet of supermarket dialogue suggests, this particular butch femme fatale, in her desire to reach a satisfactory climax to their plotting, will permit neither reticence, impotence, nor lingua interruptus; she will allow him neither to “go soft” nor “pull out.” Her ability to top Walter in the linguistic realm (other realms will be put aside for now) is made evident during their first encounter when he comes on to her:

PHYLLIS. There’s a speed limit in this state, Mr. Neff. Forty-five miles an hour.

WALTER. How fast was I going, officer?

PHYLLIS. I’d say around ninety.

WALTER. Suppose you get down off your motorcycle and give me a ticket.

PHYLLIS. Suppose I let you off with a warning this time.

WALTER. Suppose it doesn’t take.

PHYLLIS. Suppose I have to whack you over the knuckles.
WALTER. Suppose I bust out crying and put my head on your shoulder.

PHYLLIS. Suppose you try putting it on my husband’s shoulder.

WALTER. That tears it.

Aside from the linguistic dominance she displays by winning this contest of witty repetition, it is also relevant to note that within the content of the exchange, gender roles are reversed and the specter of male homoeroticism is raised yet again.

Additionally, though, this exchange of hypotheses is a pattern which continually marks the conversations between Walter and Phyllis. Even before this extended repartee, their remarks to each other during their first meeting are frequently stated hypothetically. For example, Phyllis says: “Suppose we sit down...”; “Perhaps I know what you mean...”; “I guess...”; “I wonder if I know what you mean.” Walter “think[s]” he might like her name and later “wonder[s] if she wonder[s].” This dialogue of conjecture between them occurs throughout the film, culminating in their final scene together. As they both speculate on hypothetical endings to their story, Walter surmises that his set-up of Phyllis and Nino Sachetti as the murderers will be “good enough” for Keyes and adds, “And what’s good enough for Keyes is good enough for me.” Phyllis replies, “Maybe it’s not good enough for me, Walter. Maybe I don’t go for the idea. Maybe I’d rather talk.” Walter’s answer: “Sometimes people are where they can’t talk. Under six feet of earth, maybe” (my emphasis). What is implied by the unending repetition of hypothetical exchange between Walter and Phyllis is the
tenuousness of their connection. In an almost astonishing reversal of classical narrative conventions, it is their heterosexuality which is made apparitional.

Within this context, it is not surprising that immediately before this last exchange of "maybe[es]," and in a shot unlike any other in the film, Walter completely dominates Phyllis visually. He is shot standing behind her chair so that only her head and shoulders are visible in the very bottom of the frame. As he steps out from behind the chair, the camera stays in the same position so that Phyllis's head and shoulders are dwarfed by the empty space surrounding them. She is decapitated by the framing. As the possessor of a female body which is positioned outside the heterosexual economy (Walter does not want her now; he wants her dead), she has lost currency and her body has lost its substantiveness and relevance.

In the next shot, Walter is positioned in the right foreground of the frame in a blurry medium shot, while Phyllis, still diminutive by comparison, is in the background with her body now restored--the absent again made present. As she sits in the chair with her legs extended, her pose recalls the initial meeting between the two of them. The re-emergence of her now inessential body produces yet another inversion--this time of the discursive patterns within the film. Walter takes his final conjecture ("Sometimes people are where they can't talk. Under six feet of earth maybe.") out of the realm of the hypothetical and (literally) grounds it in reality by fatally shooting
Phyllis. Her removal allows Walter to return to Keyes and his “little man,” but since denotation is an impossibility, Keyes can only light Walter’s cigarette before Walter is dispatched either to prison or to his own “six feet of earth.”

On another level, though, the murder of Phyllis seems to be simply a response to the conventional narrative’s demand for the punishment of a woman in a position of power and control. According to this reading, “Phyllis is located unambiguously as a phallic woman who seeks to usurp the authority of the ‘father’ (in her desire for money, for the destruction of the family, and for control of Neff’s transgression)” (Krutnik 144). In prose which is at least as excessive as Phyllis’s appearance, Duvillars describes the relationship between the “man” and the femme fatale (exemplified for him by Phyllis): “She” has only to appear for the man, now subjugated, to lose all his vitality, all his will, all his personality. She is not content to suck out his blood; she sucks out his soul as well” (30).

The film’s construction of Phyllis as “phallic woman,” vampire, or plain old castrating bitch (men on crutches, men with bleeding wounds) predestines her demise, but not before she is punished by “los[ing] all [her own] vitality.” In the film’s final scene, then, although she does shoot and wound Walter, when he walks closer to her and asks why she does not shoot again, the barrel of her “phallus” droops. He presses closer. She embraces him and declares the love that she never felt for him “until a minute ago when [she] couldn’t fire that second shot” (my emphasis). Stating that he
is "not buying," Walter responds by firing two shots into her. "Her inability to fire the fatal shot signifies a weakness in her, suggesting that she cannot fully live up to her own phallic desire" (Krutnik 145).

In these heteronormative readings, the descriptions above can be deciphered as code words for the "mannish lesbian" and the lesbian vampire (Sheldon 12). However, in the contexts outlined previously, Walter's refusal to "buy" has a double meaning. On the one hand, he sees that Phyllis's supposed conversion is just another performance of femininity; on the other, she is no longer a part of the commodification of his desire. Either way, the narrative demands closure and thus, she must die. This reading seems more probable than the likelihood that Phyllis has undergone some sixty-second conversion to heterosexual romanticism.

Such a conversion on the part of Phyllis also is doubtful because Double Indemnity presents a consistent critique of the world of heterosexual relations. Although the critique is frequently misogynist (e.g., Keyes's story of his unhappy engagement, his criticism of Walter's "Margie"), this is not always the case. When Phyllis tells Walter about her marriage, her malaise is genuine and her description of evenings spent knitting and "sit[ting] around not talking" while her husband listens to ball games, drinks, and hits her does not create a portrait of domestic bliss. Her version of her situation is validated when the meeting between Walter and Mr. Dietrichson takes place and her husband is revealed to be "coarse and unpleasant" with an "indifferent and harsh demeanor" (Spiegel 95; Palmer, Dark Cinema).
Similarly, the reunion between Nino and Lola—which, in another example of apparitional heterosexuality, occurs off-screen and unseen—does nothing to restore faith in heterosexual unions. In his two appearances, Nino Sachetti seems to be as brutish as Lola’s father. He not only appears to be having a sexual liaison with Lola’s step-mother, but also he is so “hot-headed” that Phyllis plots to use him to kill Lola. Since this is the only heterosexual relationship still extant at the end of the film, it is a less than successful recuperation of that institution. “[I]t is obvious that the film implies heterosexual relations resemble a state of constant sexual warfare in which the parties seek not merely to aggress on each other, but to annihilate each other” (Gallagher 240).

However, as the previous discussion of the film’s ending suggests, “[u]ltimately . . . homoeroticism, like heterosexuality, becomes allied with death” (Gallagher 244). This alignment becomes just one element in the linkage between the Walter/Keyes and Phyllis/Lola dyads in all of their fluctuating triangulations. Walter wants to annihilate Keyes and his “little man”—at least metaphorically—by successfully “crook[ing] the house”; Phyllis wants to annihilate Lola—literally—in order to keep her house and the insurance money. Keyes wants to catch Walter (although he does not realize it) so that he will not get away with the double indemnity money; Lola wants Phyllis to get caught so that she will not have gotten away with two murders. Thus, Lola is Phyllis’s Keyes—a point which is substantiated by a play on the name of Barton Keyes. Early in the film Walter mentions that he “always carr[ies] his own keys”; later, a similar line is
repeated by Phyllis when she says that she and her husband “both have keys.” In other words, if Phyllis deflects the homoeroticism between Walter and Keyes, so, too, does Walter mediate the homoeroticism between Phyllis and Lola when he begins dating Lola.

This mirroring, though, is not the only example of the homoerotic dyad between Phyllis and Lola. The fact that they have only one scene together would seem to make such a dynamic impossible. However, as the previous chapter clarifies, the work the text does to suppress this bond, to create its apparent absence, can work inversely to make its presence all the more palpable. Their only shared scene opens with a medium shot of Lola playing Chinese checkers. She makes a move and then looks askance at her partner. Simultaneously, the camera dollies backward, and we see that her gaze is directed at Phyllis and that they are sitting together at a card table. The retreating tracking shot continues until Walter’s back is visible in the foreground of the left corner of the screen, with Mr. Dietrichson, sprawled out on the couch, in the right foreground. Because the card table is off-center and near the right corner of the screen, Phyllis and Walter are located across from each other. This diagonal positioning creates an elongated triangle with Walter at its apex, Lola and Phyllis at the other two corners, and Mr. Dietrichson outside the perimeter. Spatially, then, Walter is the third term between the two women.

Lola tells Phyllis that she’s bored with the game and Phyllis asks her if she’s “got something better to do.” Lola says she does, stands, moves toward the center of
the room, and asks her father if she can go roller-skating with her friend, Ann. Her father begins to interrogate her and out of the blue, Phyllis asks, “It’s not that Nino Sachetti again, is it?” Moments later Lola leaves the room and as she does, we see the gazes of both Walter and Phyllis, and then the camera itself, follow her, suggesting her position as an object of desire for both of them. As soon as Lola is gone, Phyllis moves closer to Walter and her husband. Only when Lola is absent is the heterosexual triad visually configured: Phyllis at the apex position in the left half of the frame and Walter, who has moved next to Mr. Dietrichson on the couch, and her husband sharing the right half of the frame.

Two other permutations of heterosexual triads mediating this homoerotic dyad occur after the murder. Walter begins dating Lola and Phyllis begins seeing Lola’s boyfriend, Nino Sachetti. Although this turn of events supposedly suggests what becomes the mutual betrayal of Phyllis and Walter and their relationship, the conversation they have about these liaisons suggests another reading. During the meeting in the supermarket between Phyllis and Walter after the murder, when Walter argues that she needs to forget about the insurance claim, he bases his case on the speculation that if there is an investigation, it might turn up information about Phyllis’s involvement in the murders of both Dietrichsons. In one of her most emotional moments in the film, Phyllis angrily spits out: “Lola’s been telling you some of her cock-eyed stories. She’s been seeing you.” Walter replies, “I’ve been seeing her if you want to know. So she won’t yell her head off about what she knows.” By now Phyllis
is speaking in a whispered scream when she says, “She’s putting on an act for you. Crying all over your shoulder. That lying . . .” Walter interrupts, telling Phyllis to “keep her out of it.” A few minutes later when Walter reiterates, “I said leave her out of this,” Phyllis pleads, “It’s me I’m talking about. I don’t want to be left out of it.”

The last remark would seem to imply that she does not want to be left behind by Walter. However, the raw emotionalism that characterizes her speech in these moments is inconsistent with a moment which follows when her voice hardens and she removes her sunglasses (as discussed earlier) and suggests to Walter that since he is the one who carried out the murder, he better not contemplate “pulling out.” What I want to suggest here is that she seems more upset about Lola’s involvement with Walter than vice-versa. This is also signified by the grammatical structure of her realization that Walter and Lola are dating. Under the circumstances--the discovery of a loved one’s betrayal--what is usually uttered is, “You’ve been seeing her.” Instead, Phyllis makes Lola the subject of her concern: “She’s been seeing you.” Walter is merely constructed as an object of exchange between them.

Since Double Indemnity has been read as the quintessential display of the femme fatale, and Stanwyck as its embodiment, the presence of the female homoerotic dynamic at play in the film suggests that there is far more to this role than readings of the film in relationship to heterosexual desire and male homoeroticism alone would suggest. For Phyllis Dietrichson is configured as a femme fatale whose butchness
makes her relationship to heterosexual love and desire quite tenuous. This role, then, also is a keystone for the subsequent explorations of the lesbian dimensions of film noir, particularly as embodied by Stanwyck.

The influence of *Double Indemnity* clearly can be seen in Stanwyck’s next film noir, *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* (1946). The opening title announces that the film begins in the town of Iverstown in 1928. Two adolescents, Martha Ivers (Janis Wilson) and Sam Masterson (Darryl Hickman), are hiding from the police in a boxcar. Martha, accompanied by her cat, has run away from her wealthy and heartless aunt, Mrs. Ivers (Judith Anderson), and Sam is helping her. Martha, infatuated with this boy from the wrong side of the tracks, eagerly agrees to accompany him later that night when escapes the town by joining the circus. However, before this plan can be put into action, the police, on orders from Mrs. Ivers, find them in the boxcar and although Sam gets away, Martha is returned to her aunt.

Back at the house, Martha’s aunt slaps her when, instead of apologizing to her for running away, Martha tells her that she is sorry that she did not succeed. When she is sent upstairs to her room, another young boy, Walter O’Neil (Mickey Kuhn), is sitting there with her cat (which must be kept away from her aunt because she hates it). Walter is the son of Martha’s tutor, and his father teaches both of them at Martha’s house in the often-stated hope that Mrs. Ivers will pay for his son’s Harvard education.
However, exhibiting the same generosity of spirit she showed Martha a few moments earlier, Mrs. Ivers tells Mr. O’Neil (Roman Bohnen) unequivocally that she does not care what happens to young Walter.

While Walter and Martha are upstairs in her room, Sam knocks at her window and Walter lets him in. If Sam is the confident, street-wise object of Martha’s affection, then Walter is represented as being a suited-up, fearful, object of indifference to Martha. He is clearly also jealous of Sam and wants to win both Martha’s attention and affection. When a power outage occurs, the cat slips out of Martha’s room and heads to the forbidden zone, the downstairs realm of Mrs. Ivers. Martha dispatches Sam on a mission to retrieve the cat, but he falls on the steps, bringing Mrs. Ivers out of the drawing room. Unbeknownst to Martha and Walter, Sam slips away in the darkness in order to avoid getting into trouble with the intimidating Mrs. Ivers. As Martha’s aunt ascends the stairs in search of the noise, she runs into the cat and proceeds to beat it to death with her cane. At the head of the stairs, Martha and Walter stand watching this grotesque action until Martha finally grabs the cane and knocks her aunt over the head with it, sending her spiraling down the stairs to her death.

Mr. O’Neil comes out of the drawing room and Martha states that a man came in and killed her aunt. Although Walter knows for a fact this is untrue, and his father obviously doubts Martha’s veracity, they are both motivated to support her story: Walter because of his devotion to her and fear of her, his father because he wants to control the estate of the dead Mrs. Ivers by acting as Martha’s guardian.
This scene ends with a cut to Sam waiting to hop the approaching circus train, immediately followed by another cut to Iverstown eighteen years later. The adult Sam Masterson (Van Heflin) is driving through the town, by happenstance, rather than design, but because of a car accident he is forced to stay. While there he meets Toni Marachek (Lizabeth Scott), a beautiful blonde who, he finds out later, has just been released on parole after serving time for a theft which her boyfriend had committed. According to the terms of her release, she must get out of Iverstown. Because of their rapport, Sam agrees to let her travel west with him after his car is repaired.

Meanwhile, Sam discovers that his old friend, “the little scared kid” Walter O’Neil (Kirk Douglas), is now running for re-election as district attorney, and that he is married to Martha (Barbara Stanwyck).

Although Sam seems to have little interest in renewing old acquaintances, when Toni gets arrested for violating the conditions of her parole, Sam goes to see Walter to try to get Toni released. Walter is still insecure around Sam and jealous of Sam’s past status with Martha, even though eighteen years have passed. However, Martha’s joy at seeing Sam again suggests that Walter may be more realistic than paranoid. It is apparent that the marriage of Martha and Walter is a loveless one (at least on her part), an arrangement of expediency and security rather than passion. Both Martha and Walter are certain that Sam knows what happened that fateful night eighteen years before; Martha is certain Sam will support her, as he used to in the past, by keeping silent, but Walter is equally certain Sam plans to blackmail them.
Martha contrives to make Sam's stay in Iverstown longer and is fairly direct about her continuing desire for him. However, the relationship between Sam and Toni has intensified, so Sam does not seem to reciprocate Martha's feelings. Meanwhile, Walter’s only romantic involvement continues to be with the bottle. Eventually, Sam succumbs to Martha's advances, even after learning that an innocent man, prosecuted by Walter years after the murder, was sent to the gallows for the crime Martha committed. She tells Sam that Mr. O’Neil frightened her into participating in the trumped-up prosecution. Sam, his belief in Martha unshaken, breaks it off with Toni, who immediately begins packing her suitcase so that she can catch the next bus out of town.

Later that same night, Walter realizes that Sam and Martha have been together and he summons Sam to the Ivers's house. He tells Sam that one of them will have to die and that if Sam does not kill him tonight, it will be Sam who will die later. Then he proceeds to tell Sam that Martha herself concocted the plan to prosecute an innocent man in order to preserve her power and standing in the community, and that she has had numerous affairs with strangers. When Sam realizes that Walter is telling the truth, he starts to walk out of the house, but Martha pulls a gun on him. However, she is not able to pull the trigger and Sam leaves. Martha tells Walter that their marriage will be different now, but she is still crying and looking through the window at the departing back of Sam. Martha and Walter embrace, but mistrusting her avowal, he pulls out the gun Martha had dropped and places it against her. She puts her hand on top of his and
forces the trigger. Upon hearing the gunshot, Sam, still in the front yard, turns to see Walter holding Martha in his arms as he places the gun against his own chest and fires. Sam keeps walking. The film ends with Sam and Toni (who had decided to stay in town in the hopes that Sam would change his mind) driving out of Iverstown and Sam implying that she will soon become his wife.

Although the ending of the film, with Sam and Toni traveling on their way to happily-ever-after, suggests that it has little in common with Double Indemnity, especially in its depiction of heterosexual relationships, such an assumption would be mistaken. For despite the conclusion, The Strange Love of Martha Ivers has several structural and thematic parallels to Double Indemnity—sometimes in even the smallest details of the film—like Walter's name. When Toni Marachek is introduced, the camera fragments her body and lingers on her legs in a manner which is reminiscent of Double Indemnity's introduction of Phyllis Dietrichson, a similarity which becomes even more pronounced because of Elizabeth Scott's blonde hair. Similarly, just as the lighting of cigars is an essential motif in Double Indemnity, so is the lighting of candles, cigarettes, and even a tree limb, a critical motif in The Strange Love of Martha Ivers. There are also analogous dialogic allusions. One example of this type of echoing occurs after Martha asks Sam when he will leave Iverstown. He replies, "I may have to pull out in a couple of hours," using a phrase which conjures up the conversation between Walter Neff and Phyllis Dietrichson in the supermarket.
Other parallels between the two films are even more significant. Martha Ivers is haunted by the Stanwyck image as it has been inflected by her performance as Phyllis. It almost seems as if when the blonde wig was removed from Phyllis’s head, the brunette Martha appeared. What appears to be a significant difference between the two characters, i.e., the idea that Martha, unlike the steely Phyllis, seems to have genuine feelings for another person, is revealed to be an illusion. Her desire is to possess rather than love Sam and in the filmic world of Martha Ivers, such greed is equated with dehumanization and ruin. Aunt Ivers’s stinginess turned her into a monster; Mr. O’Neil’s desire for upward mobility cost him his own soul as well as his son’s. Thus, while Martha engages in the hoarding of power and people, just like her aunt, the film’s hero, Sam, is a gambler who is willing to risk losing everything and who is neither dragged nor held down by possessions.

Martha’s location within the film as a successful, if unhappy, businesswoman places her in a traditionally masculine role. Even her marriage is a business transaction consolidated to buy the silence of the O’Neils about her role in the murder of her aunt, as well as the execution of an innocent man. As the earlier discussion of Mildred Pierce demonstrates, the depiction of a woman in a masculinist position of power results in the construction of a masculinized woman, but in Martha Ivers, this phenomenon becomes even more emphatic because of the Stanwyck persona.

Reading with the grain of the film, then, Martha Ivers is constructed as a stereotypical castrating bitch. In the film’s opening moments, when the young Martha
and Sam are in the boxcar, Sam is the one who brings candles and lights them. Soon afterward, when Martha is in her bedroom with Walter, the power goes out and it is Martha who has to light the candles because Walter is afraid. Given the phallic associations of the candles, and the film’s repetition of this motif, Martha is constructed as the phallic woman. This is mirrored by one of the film’s final scenes, when the candle is replaced by a gun and she is the one who pulls the trigger. Additionally, in the early moments of the 1946 section of the film, the marriage between Walter and Martha is revealed as being both loveless and sexless because of her rigidity and refusal to return his embrace, as well as his comment that he has not been in her bedroom for “a long time.” Thus, she is also constructed as frigid.

All of these misogynist stereotypes are conjured up in a scene late in the film when Sam finally succumbs to Martha’s entreaties and once again begins a relationship with her. The two of them drive to the hills above the town. Smelling smoke, Sam gets out of the car to “check it out.” He finds a campfire and as he starts to put it out Martha says, “Let it burn. Give me a cigarette, Sam.” Two things are signified by this exchange: Sam’s phallic power and his subsequent ability to melt the frigid Martha. As they sit around the campfire, Martha begins speaking of the past and asks Sam why he didn’t stop her from clubbing her aunt. When Sam tells her that he had left before this happened, Martha is stunned. She becomes even more distraught when Sam informs her that he knew nothing about her involvement in either her aunt’s murder or the execution of an innocent man until this moment. Martha completely loses control and
grabbing a burning limb from the fire, she attempts to club Sam with it. When he fends off this attack, she attempts to claw his eyes out, but fails at this attempt also. Sobbing, she finally she gives in to his persistent embrace and drops the limb. By this point, the phallic/castrating symbolism within this scene is overdetermined. Again, reading with the grain of the film, Martha can respond only to a real man who can carry his own candles and force her to drop hers. Walter, waterlogged with alcohol, can never hold a candle to Sam.

As a successful candle-holder herself, though, and as the previous examples suggest, Martha also can be read as connoting lesbianism. Like Phyllis Dietrichson, she wields discursive power. Even as a child, she has the ability to take speech away from two men: Walter and his father. As an adult, she makes her first appearance as a voice on the radio at the garage where Sam’s car is being repaired. She is campaigning, speaking in place of her husband because he has failed to appear. Later in the film, she announces to Walter that she will tell him when and if Sam needs to be killed. Repeatedly throughout the film, she controls conversations by stating: “Let’s talk about something else”; “Pick another subject”; “I don’t want to talk about it anymore.” Thus, it is not her “feminine wiles” which endow her with the power of the femme fatale; rather, it is her butchness.

This butch quality is bolstered by her costumes. Although Martha frequently appears in evening dresses, when she does, either they have a seemingly metallic trim, or they are sequined, or Martha herself is bejeweled, or they are accessorized by
Martha’s cold stares. Regardless, she has an icy appearance which is enhanced by her rigid deportment and demeanor. When she is not in evening clothes, she wears very tailored clothing—like business suits—and her hair is sometimes pulled back into a severe style. In contrast, Toni, her female counterpart in the triad, is dressed in clothing that seems soft and casual. Her hair always falls onto her shoulders, and she usually appears in soft-focus. These codes work to dichotomize the two women as Martha, the cold, castrating bad woman/ Toni, the warm, cuddly good-girl-next-door. From a less misogynistic position, though, they can also be signified as butch/femme.

However, the demarcation between Toni and Martha is much more fluid than it may seem both in terms of the film’s enounced, as well as its enunciation. Toni may not have committed the theft for which she went to jail, but she was involved with a man who did—a taint on her innocence. Martha lived with an abusive aunt who beat her cat and slapped her; Toni lived with an abusive father who kicked her. They both originally come from working-class backgrounds. They both are involved with Sam.

At the level of enunciation, it is their shared connection with the spectral Phyllis Dietrichson which creates ambiguity. Martha’s association is, of course, completely overdetermined since the character is reminiscent of Phyllis, and the actress actually was Phyllis. As mentioned earlier, though, both the blondeness of her hair and the establishing shot of her leg, ally Toni with Phyllis Dietrichson too. Her correlation with Phyllis is established even more emphatically in a conversational exchange between herself and Sam early in the film:
TONI. Maybe you think I’ve been trying too hard to get acquainted.

SAM. Maybe you have.

TONI. Maybe you think that’s wrong.

SAM. Maybe it’s too soon to tell.

TONI. I wonder what you’re thinking.

SAM. I don’t think you’ll take up too much room in my Stanley Steamer.

The first four lines, obviously, quote Double Indemnity’s “maybe” scene between Phyllis and Walter--a scene which is so distinctive that the reference is unmistakable. The fifth line, too, is an explicit allusion to yet another memorable exchange between Phyllis and Walter. Even though Toni’s “wonder” line has a completely different context, it still comes as a bit of a shock when Sam does not reply, “I wonder if you wonder.”

As a filmic inscription of Stanwyck’s star image, this scene may imply a recuperation of Double Indemnity’s cynical view of heterosexuality. In Double Indemnity, just about everyone is self-serving and untrustworthy, and doubts about the efficacy of heterosexual relationships are confirmed. However, like the “wrong man” hypothesis Diane Waldman discovered in her analysis of gothic films during the 1940s, Martha Ivers may suggest that in spite of the fact that there are evil women in the world who are the “wrong” choices for heterosexual liaisons, if a man finds the right woman, he can be happy (Waldman 37). In other words, according to this reading,
Sam and Toni would be viewed as the inversion of Walter and Phyllis. Such a reading is destabilized, though, by the recognition that the Martha (Stanwyck/Phyllis)/Walter pairing is the overdetermined evocation of the original pairing.

If the Stanwyck/Phyllis presence in Martha Ivers does require Martha’s appearance in any reconfiguration of the original Phyllis/Walter pairing, however, it is possible, given the butch/femme dynamic between Martha and Toni, as well as Toni’s connection with the spectral Phyllis (and thus, her connection with the Phyllis-inflected Martha), to read this reconfiguration metaphorically in terms of their homoeroticism. Like Phyllis and Lola in Double Indemnity, Martha and Toni have only one scene together and it does not occur until the last quarter of the film. Given the fact that two triads: Sam/Walter/Martha and Sam/Toni/Martha, create the film’s movement, the separation of Martha and Toni seems calculated. Indeed, when the scene finally does occur, their exchange, arguably, provides the most highly charged erotic moment in the film.

As Toni is in Sam’s hotel room, showing him her new halter-top skirt/shorts, Martha unexpectedly bursts into the room. The contrast between the two women is emphasized since Toni looks barely covered, while Martha, is enveloped completely by a hooded ensemble. After Sam introduces Martha to Toni, Martha turns toward her and remarks, “So. This is the girl.” As Toni introduces herself, Martha brazenly stares at her breasts for at least three seconds and announces, “The sunsuit looks very well on her, Sam. She’s got just the figure for it. She’s a very pretty girl.” If the gaze is a
mark of desire, then Toni is branded by Martha. When Martha is finished with her appraisal, she turns back to Sam, but not before Toni tells her, “I give another show at 8:00.” Martha’s reply: “In your room or here?” At this, Toni heads to her room and Sam reprimands Martha by accusing her of having “ice on [her] tongue.” While Sam’s remark connotes a number of possibilities, from rudeness to frigidity to oral sex, what is even more interesting is the final exchange between Toni and Martha. On one level, Martha’s sarcastic query about the location of Toni’s “show” is intended as an insult which suggests that Toni is a whore. However, in the trajectory of Martha’s gaze, it signifies sexual desire and the acceptance of an invitation.

In this context, Martha’s suicide at the end of the film suggests that death is the only pleasure she can receive in a phallic economy. She is clearly dissatisfied in her marriage and as Walter informs Sam, she has had frequent unsatisfactory encounters with men over the years. She waits eighteen years for her childhood crush to return only to find that this passion is illusory. When she declares her love for Sam on what will become the night of her death, she cries, “I’ve lived so much inside myself--so choked with wanting something else that lives and breathes” (my emphasis). A short time before this confession, as she and Sam sit in the on the hill atop Iverstown, Sam tells her not to look back—to remember what happened to Lot’s wife. At the end of the film, he tells Toni the same thing as they are driving out of town, but she does not hear what he says. So instead, he looks at her with a smile and begins talking about “Sam’s wife.” Although the story and its Sodom and Gomorrah connotation seem to have no
relevance for Toni as she races out of sight with Sam, the demise of Martha, required by the conventions of classical Hollywood cinema, suggests that she has been pilloried for looking for the site of desire.

Given that the Stanwyck image provides Martha Ivers with an excess of lesbian inflection, it is significant to note that for the post-1954 viewer of the film, that excess becomes boundless. In September, 1954, Confidential magazine printed an expose on Lizabeth Scott (Toni) which suggested, among other things, that she was a lesbian who “was taking up almost exclusively with Hollywood’s weird society of baritone babes” (Hannsberry 453). The third female member of this cast, Judith Anderson (Aunt Ivers), joins Stanwyck on the cover of Boze Hadleigh’s Hollywood Lesbians and joins both Scott and Stanwyck in its pages. The three actresses are united again in the pages of Axel Madsen’s The Sewing Circle. Thus, read through the star images of Scott and Stanwyck, the homoeroticism between Martha and Toni becomes overdetermined.

Sorry, Wrong Number (1948), like The Strange Love of Martha Ivers, harkens back to Double Indemnity, and analogous to these two films, its femme fatale, Leona Stevenson (Barbara Stanwyck), is killed at the end. However, unlike the other films, Leona is punished even before she is killed; she is a “hopeless invalid” (as she describes herself) who is bedridden and seemingly powerless. Only in flashbacks does Leona appear as a mobile and flourishing femme fatale. Nonetheless, Foster Hirsch argues that Stanwyck “has such a powerful screen presence that she is simply not convincing as anything other than a noir spider woman, ensnaring men in her web” (152). He
continues that although this role in *Sorry, Wrong Number* is “uncharacteristic . . . she plays it with such force that audience sympathy shifts to her downtrodden, would-be killer” (152).

Leona is first seen in bed, talking on the phone to an operator about her mounting frustration at being unable to reach her husband, Henry (Burt Lancaster), at his office because of a busy signal. She tries his number again, but due to crossed phone circuits, she overhears two men plotting the murder of a woman which is to take place at 11:15 that evening. In an attempt to trace the call, she calls both the phone company and the police, but no one is able to help her because she was cut off before she could hear the address where the murder was to take place. Her father, the powerful pharmaceutical magnate, James Cotterell (Ed Begley), calls her from their home in Chicago and although she tells him what she has overhead, he is more concerned with expressing his anger at his son-in-law for leaving Leona alone in their Manhattan apartment.

When she finishes speaking with her father, she calls Henry’s secretary, Elizabeth Jennings (Dorothy Neumann), in order to find out if Miss Jennings knows where her husband is. As Jennings divulges what she knows about Henry’s day, there is a dissolve and flashback to his office that morning which is accompanied by Jennings’ voice-over narration. Leona learns that a Mrs. Frederick Lord (Ann Richards) visited him and that they made plans to meet for lunch. Finding the number for Mrs. Lord on a message that her nurse had left for her husband, Leona calls her and discovers that
“Mrs. Lord” is the married name of Sally Hunt, a friend of Leona’s at college and the woman whom Henry was dating before Leona seduced him. Sally explains that she cannot talk, but says that she will call her back.

As Leona recalls Sally, there is another flashback to the meeting between Leona and Henry and Leona’s courtship of him. From the moment the “Cough Drop Queen” meets the working-class Henry, she is determined to possess him. Sally’s confession to Leona of her love for Henry and her belief that since he is “bitterly poor,” Leona’s interest and wealth will “turn his head” so that “he’ll never find himself again,” are disregarded and before long, Leona is explaining her interest in Henry to her father. Mr. Cotterell protests his daughter’s involvement with Henry, but when she collapses, he relents. There follows a dissolve to their wedding and a montage of their honeymoon.

The dissolve back to the present shows Leona’s face in close-up as she sneers, “Sally Hunt.” The phone rings and when Leona answers, Sally explains that she went to see Henry because she was worried that he might be in trouble. The structural pattern that began with Miss Jenning’s narration is repeated: a dissolve to a flashback with a voice-over. She discloses to Leona that her husband Fred (Leif Erickson) works for the D.A.’s office and that five weeks ago, when he saw an article in the paper about the Stevensons visiting New York for medical care for Leona, he ripped out the article because it was connected to a case he was working on.
After Sally hears her husband on the phone with a colleague planning to set a
trap for Stevenson, she plays detective and follows her husband and associates out to
Staten Island to a house owned by a Mr. W. Evans (Harold Vermilyea). Although she
has no idea what the significance is of what she sees, she visits Henry at his office in
order to “find out the truth” and to warn him that her husband is writing a report in
which he and Waldo Evans are mentioned continually. However, before she can do
either, Henry excuses himself from their luncheon table and, much to her surprise,
ever returns.

Sally’s call to Leona either is interrupted or terminated three different times
(twice because she is using a pay phone and her time runs out and once because,
coincidentally, her husband passes by and she does not want him to see her).
Nonetheless, she is able to communicate most of what she knows to Leona. By the
time Sally moves to a new pay phone in the subway station (because the drugstore
from which she was calling closed), she has discovered even more information: the
Staten Island house has burned down; three men have been arrested; and all of this has
something to do with Leona’s father’s pharmaceutical plant. Leona’s response is to
scream into the phone that she wants to know whether or not Henry has been arrested
and then to accuse Sally of trying to get back at her for taking away Henry because she
cannot stand to see Leona happy.

Sally’s phone call is followed by a call from Western Union with a message
from Henry that he had to go to a drug convention in Boston and will see her Sunday
morning. At this news, Leona is shown in close-up as snatches from all the conversations she has heard tonight run through her mind. When she hears the train outside her window, one refrain from the murderers’ conversation keeps repeating: “Then I wait 'til the train goes over the bridge.”

Frightened by this recollection, Leona calls her New York heart specialist, Dr. Alexander (Wendell Corey), and insists that he come over immediately. However, he is at a nightclub with a date and refuses. After much badgering, though, Leona learns from him that Henry has yet another secret. Again the flashback/voice-over structure is utilized as the doctor tells Leona that he had a meeting with Henry a week ago. He told Henry that Leona’s heart is healthy, but that she is a “cardiac neurotic” who should begin seeing a psychiatrist because “mentally, she’s very sick.” Similar to what occurs during Sally’s narration, there is another flashback within this flashback, when Henry, while speaking to the doctor, recalls that the first time he became aware of Leona’s heart condition occurred after they were married. He had canceled his lunch with Leona in order to keep an appointment with a man who was interested in hiring him, and when he returned to the house, he discovered that Leona had a heart attack at the thought of Henry leaving her father’s employ. Later, when Henry took her to see an apartment, the same thing happened, because she could not bear the thought of leaving the house of her father. After this flashback within a flashback ends, Henry asks Dr. Alexander not to visit her in person to explain her condition; instead, he has the doctor write the details in a letter which he tells the doctor he will deliver. Dr. Alexander is
quite shocked when he learns that Leona never received this letter, but he is not disturbed enough to abandon his night club revelry. He tells her to take a sedative and then the phone goes dead because she has hung up and is throwing herself on the bed, screaming, “Liars. Liars. Liars.”

Her hysteria is interrupted by the ringing phone. She answers it and hears Mr. Evans—who called for Henry earlier that evening before Leona had spoken with Sally—on the other end. He leaves a cryptic message for Henry that he burned down the house and that Morano was arrested so that there’s no longer any need to raise the money. Then he gives Leona the Bowery number where he can be reached after midnight. However, this message only increases Leona’s hysteria, so she insists that Evans tell her what is going on. There is another flashback and voice-over as Evans recounts how Henry encouraged him, as the company’s chemist, to become involved in the theft of pharmaceutical materials. These materials were then fenced through the mob and its representative, Morano (William Conrad), and the profits were split among the three of them. However, when Henry and Evans break with Morano, he goes to the Staten Island house which is the meeting center for the two of them and tells Henry that if he does not work with the mob again and give Morano $200,000 for lost profits, he will kill him. Morano knows that Henry’s wife has a heart condition, that she is not supposed to live longer than three more months, and that Henry is her beneficiary. He gives Henry ninety days to pay and forces him to sign an agreement. Evans tells Leona
that the ninety days were up four days ago and that Morano refused to grant Henry an extension. (In other words, the ninety day period ended three days after Henry’s meeting with Dr. Alexander.)

Although Evans has not seen Henry since that day, he tells Leona to try the Bowery number he has given her to see if he is there. After Evans hangs up, Leona calls this number and much to her horror, discovers that it is the number of the city morgue. She drops the phone, crying, but then picks it up again and dials the operator to scream at her to ring the police. When the clock chimes 11:00, she changes her mind and shrieking that she cannot be alone, she orders the operator to connect her with the hospital where she exhorts the staff to send out a nurse immediately.

Meanwhile, there is a cut to the outside of the house where a male figure raises the kitchen window and climbs through. A cut back to Leona shows her hysterically telling the hospital staff person that someone is in her house and is listening on the downstairs phone.

Terrified, Leona hangs up, but the phone rings immediately. It is Henry, calling from a phone booth in New Haven on his way to Boston. In a conversation marked by a series of quick cuts which is unique to this segment and which, subsequently, heightens the suspense, Leona gives him Evans’s message and tells him everything else she has learned. Sparked by the realization that Morano will link him to Leona’s murder, Henry shouts at her to get out of bed and go to the window and begin screaming or in three minutes, she will die. She says she cannot, and as the murderer
closes in on her, the police close in on Henry’s phone booth. We hear Leona’s scream and then there is a cut from her in medium close-up to her hand as it pulls everything from the night table. She touches the phone, but almost immediately, her lifeless hand falls away. The phone rings and then there is a cut to the phone booth where Henry is still screaming “Leona.” The film ends with a cut back to Leona’s phone as the murderer answers it and intones, “Sorry, wrong number.”

In discussing the discursive patterns in Sorry, Wrong Number, Telotte notes that the conventional use of voice-over/flashback in film noir (i.e., a single narrator), can “lend a kind of stability to the noir story... by establishing a perspective that, however ironically, implies a focal point...” (87). He continues, however, that a film like Sorry, Wrong Number, with its multiple narrators and viewpoints, “unleashes a nightmare of potential that always haunts the noir world--the potential of ambiguity, of multiple, indeterminate meanings, and of a self that is subject to unseen, unsensed forces” (86). Although Telotte’s focus is the “language system” and how Leona “comes to resemble but another signifier” in it, the language used in his description is telling: “haunts,” “unseen, unsensed forces” (86). Indeed, one of the “multiple... meanings” that “haunts” this film is the spectral presence of female homoeroticism, signified (as always) by the Stanwyck image, implicit references to Phyllis Dietrichson, and patterns within the text itself.

If the sexual allure of Phyllis Dietrichson is marked early in Double Indemnity by the shot of her legs as she descends the staircase to meet Walter Neff, then the initial
shots of the virtually immobile Leona Stevenson may be seen as almost perverse references to this archetypal femme fatale. Janey Place has noted the frequency with which femme fatales are introduced through shots which fragment their bodies—especially by focusing on their legs. She concludes that the “femme fatale is characterized by her long lovely legs,” but that, as punishment for her power, the narrative, through various means, makes certain that she “ultimately loses physical movement” (45). Thus, Leona Stevenson may be read as yet another resurrection of Phyllis, who, like the proverbial dead horse, is brought forth one more time in order to exact revenge. Tuska comments on the fact that the radio in Leona’s bedroom plays Schubert’s Unfinished Symphony—“which also serves as a background to a scene in Double Indemnity when [Walter] is walking with Phyllis’ stepdaughter on the bluff above the Hollywood Bowl” (175).

Other references to Double Indemnity abound. In both films (and in The Strange Love of Martha Ivers), the marriage of Stanwyck’s character is represented as a business arrangement. Telotte discusses how Leona “set about ‘acquiring’ Henry,” while Farber notes, “when she says fiercely, ‘I Leona take thee, Henry,’ it is a declaration not of love but of brutal possession” (79; 10). In discussing her heart problem as a symbol of “her inability to love,” Telotte continues that her “desire to control others has, in effect, led her to surrender control over herself, over her own body, resulting in a devastating schism, a kind of mind-body split, as Leona seems estranged from her own body” (78-79). His description is very reminiscent of a scene
in *Double Indemnity* described earlier when Phyllis appears literally to be separated from her body by a shot composition which decapitates her. However, probably the most explicit allusion to Phyllis in the characterization of Leona is the heart disease they share. At the end of *Double Indemnity*, Phyllis tells Walter that she is “rotten to the heart,” while in her reincarnation as the incapacitated Leona, she becomes a “cardiac neurotic.”

In spite of these similarities between Phyllis and Leona, Tuska argues that Leona is not a femme fatale at all, but rather is another type of film noir woman, equally dangerous: “the beautiful neurotic . . . [who] is still the *primum mobile* which brings both herself and the *noir* male protagonist to catastrophe” (203). However, although she may be a “beautiful neurotic” too, it is clear in the flashbacks that Leona is indeed a femme fatale. She uses her wealth to buy Henry away from the good woman, Sally; she leads him down a path of destruction; and she manipulates and dominates men through performance, gesture, and language, as well as through her wealth and sexual allure. It is this behavior which, in accordance with classical narrative conventions, demands first her temporary, and then her permanent immobilization.

In the flashback which portrays the history of her relationship with Henry, Leona, like Phyllis Dietrichson and Martha Ivers before her, enacts the butchness of the femme fatale. When she first sees Henry at the college dance with Sally, it is Leona who cuts in and asks him to dance, prompting him to remark, “Where I come from, it’s the man who does the picking.” Immediately, then, her actions and language locate her
in the space of the masculine. When Sally fights with her about her interest in Henry, she warns Leona that he is not someone “to play around with,” implying that he is the object, while Leona is in the subject position—a position that is marked visually by the repeated depiction of her possession of the gaze during her initial encounter with Henry. Her “masculine” power is reiterated further when she tells Sally, “If I want to make something of him that’s my business and if I want to marry him, that’s my business, too.” This statement exemplifies not just her assumption that she has the right to possess Henry, but also her assumption of dominion in the linguistic realm—once again she is in the subject position and the male is merely an object.

Similarly, after Leona and Henry are married, the montage of their wedding reception and honeymoon illustrates other manifestations of her butchness, including her possession of masculine space. At the wedding reception, when Henry waves to a waiter and signals his desire for more champagne, Leona sends the waiter scurrying by placing her hand over Henry’s glass in a gesture which subverts his agency. While they are in Paris on their honeymoon, Leona is seen both putting money into Henry’s wallet and taking out and ripping up a photograph of Sally which she finds there. This gesture not only displays a butch in control, but also has so many Freudian implications that it becomes over-determined. Like Dora and her reticule, Leona’s entry into Henry’s wallet not only masculinizes her, while simultaneously feminizing him, but also
her removal of Sally from the folds of the wallet, conjures up not simply a heterosexual triangle, but a triad which mediates female homoerotic desire (a possibility to which I will return) (Freud 95-96).

Although Leona’s positioning in the space of gender is more ambiguous after she becomes an invalid (i.e., in present time), her butchness is still in evidence, existing in tension with her feminizing incapacitation. Her invalidism, as well as her victimization by her murderous husband, would seem to engender both stereotypical femininity as well as the spectator’s sympathy. However, as Farber notes, “[W]e understand . . . her husband’s . . . resentment of her domination, and we feel she almost deserves the brutal murder that he plots for her at the end of the film” (10). Although Farber’s universalizing “we” is suspect, it is true, as is typically the case with the femme fatale, that Leona, in spite of her circumstances, is constructed in such a way to produce neither identification nor sympathy on the part of the spectator. However, it is Stanwyck’s performance and image which build upon the film’s plot elements and narration to attain this effect: “Stanwyck turns this potential victim into a virago, and though her only weapon . . . is her bedside phone, she uses it with the authority of a general dispensing orders to his men” (Hirsch 152).

Like the sovereignty over language Leona evinces during the flashbacks, her reliance on the telephone as a “weapon” during the present tense of the film implies that she is still in control. Her tone while speaking on the phone, whether she is shrieking or cajoling, remains both demanding and commanding. Moreover, she still is able to
force communication with those who would rather not speak with her (e.g., Dr. Alexander, Evans, operators, etc.). Thus, the fact that words ultimately fail her (she never succeeds in getting anyone to come to her bedside) and that she finally is reduced to uttering not words, but a scream, signifies, like her physical incapacity (her inability to flaunt her "long lovely legs") her punishment for her butchness. This containment of Leona also is mirrored by the narrative structure itself when the dominance of female discourse in the first half of the film, embodied by the voice-overs of Miss Jennings and Sally, is subsumed by the voice-overs of Dr. Alexander and Waldo Evans during the film's second half.

When the camera makes one of its frequent pans around Leona's bedroom in order to suggest her containment, entrapment, and claustrophobic existence, Henry's separate bedroom can be spotted (here, an allusion to Martha Ivers and the separate bedrooms of Walter and Martha). The implication is that her heart trouble makes sexual relations with Henry an impossibility. However, in the flashback of their relationship, as they are standing on deck waiting for the ship to leave so that they can begin their honeymoon, Henry attempts to kiss Leona, and she shakes her head "no."

In the context of the business arrangement which constitutes her marriage, her apparent heterosexual "frigidity" becomes (as it did for Martha Ivers) another signifier of her butchness. Labeled by her physician as a "cardiac neurotic," Leona also is reminiscent of the image of the "neurotic lesbian" which Sheldon describes (12). Just as her representation has elements of the butch femme fatale, as well as the "beautiful
neurotic,” so, too, can Leona be seen to embody characteristics of both the “mannish lesbian,” as well as the “neurotic lesbian.” Thus, her heart problem may function to construct her not just as a “hopeless invalid,” but also as an invalid heterosexual.

As Leona’s adventure with Henry’s wallet implies, the heterosexual triangle of Leona/Henry/Sally mediates the Leona/Sally dyad. Even before this incident, after Sally identifies herself to Leona during their first phone conversation, and while Leona waits for Sally to call her back, she leans back in her bed, repeating, “Sally Hunt.” Then in a medium close-up which reveals first a pensive, and then a smiling, even dreamy, Leona, there is a dissolve to the orchestra playing at her college’s dance. The image is almost startling because of its singularity in this film; the hardness which typifies the representation of Leona is nowhere to be seen. The repetition of Sally’s name, combined with the look of reverie on Leona’s face, and the juxtaposition of both with the sound and image of the orchestra playing a romantic tune intimates homoeroticism. Because of its uniqueness, it is an image which is not erased by Leona’s dismissal of Sally later in the flashback or by her sneering pronouncement of Sally’s name when the flashback ends. Rather, it exists in tension with these heteronormative moments.

A similar situation occurs during the flashback initiated by the voice-over of Miss Jennings. Henry’s secretary is coded “spinster” from head to toe by her schoolmarmish costume: lace-accented, dark, long dresses; tiny wire-rimmed glasses which accentuate her already pinched face; and hair which is gathered on top of her head in a
tight bun. To complete the picture, she resides in a hotel for women. Thus, in spite of her pseudo-feminine appearance, her unmarried state, angularity, and rigidity locate her in a space outside of the heterosexual economy. During her phone conversation with Leona, she mentions that she hopes Leona liked the flowers she sent this week because she thought “camellias might be sweet just for a change.” When Leona hangs up, she immediately turns to the flower arrangement next to her bed, grabs the card which says, “All My Love, Henry,” and rips it to shreds. Miss Jennings succeeds in her attempt to upset Leona by cattily disparaging the sincerity of Henry’s affection for her. This critique of heterosexuality also has a peripheral effect, though, since it points out that the spinster Miss Jennings is sending bouquets of flowers to the butch Leona on a weekly basis.

However, the flashback of Miss Jennings has additional significance which can be uncovered only in relation to a previous phone call made by Leona. In the first part of the film, when Leona calls the police station in order to get their assistance in tracing the phone call of the murderers, Sergeant Duffy is less than helpful. This is explained partially by his acquaintance with Leona and his apparent impression of her as a neurotic woman. Additionally, though, Duffy is completely preoccupied with trying to care for an African American baby whose mother cannot be located and who sits atop a desk, demanding his care and attention. Duffy clearly is frustrated and “in over his head” and therefore, he is anxious to get off the phone because he is finding it very difficult to watch the baby and talk to Leona at the same time.
In this instance, then, the African American child subverts Leona’s efforts to control and to command. On one level, this occurrence may be seen to reflect the racist paranoia which began to flourish among whites after the influx of African Americans to Northern urban centers following World War II. That is, it may represent the fear that these racialized others both will need and demand intervention and care on the part of the white majority and that this will result in attention being diverted away from the white population (where it belongs). In the context of the construction of Leona, however, it also is possible to read this incident as a marker of how far this butch femme fatale has fallen. According to this interpretation, which again is predicated on racist ideology, Leona, othered herself by her usurpation of masculine space and power, and subsequently, by her possible lesbianism, is situated so far down in the hierarchy of power, that even the needs of an African American baby take precedence over her own—despite her racial identity.

That this is an African American child, rather than an adult, is an important distinction, though, because it suggests that the needs of an African American adult might not be represented in this way, and thus, might not take precedence. In this context, then, it is possible to read this event as an identification of Leona with the child. She, too, is infantilized through her tantrums (with which Duffy seems to be quite familiar) and like the baby, she has limited mobility. She is helpless and should not be left alone. The implication is that both the African American child and the butch white

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woman are subject to the authority and whims of the dominant order, signified by Sergeant Duffy (Cliff Clark), a policeman, and thus the physical embodiment of the Law.

The scenes with Miss Jennings lend even more credence to this reading. After the scenes with Duffy, Leona receives a phone call from her father (another embodiment of the dominant order whose success can be measured by the predominance of stuffed and mounted heads on the walls of his mansion). Immediately following this short conversation with her father, Leona calls Miss Jennings. She is playing bingo in the lobby of her residence and is involved so completely in the game, that she waves aside the African American employee who attempts to tell her that she has a phone call. Thus, an African American man is used to mediate the connection between Miss Jennings and Leona. However, Miss Jennings, indulging in what she assumes is her right as a white person, negates his presence by treating him as someone/something not there: an absence, an apparition. As he waits, though, so does Leona on the other end of the phone.

While I do not mean to imply that race and sexual identity can be or even should be conflated, in this moment and in the previous moments in the police station, the film does seem to do just that. That this is ephemeral is made clear when Miss Jennings does finally answer the phone and becomes very deferential, according Leona the respect she never would consider bestowing on the African American servant. In this singular moment, however, this complex interplay of gender, race, and sexual
identity suggests an important point. Miss Jennings, a spinster who occupies a marginalized space herself, is able, because of her whiteness, to separate herself from her "kin," i.e., marginalized Others, and align herself with the dominant order. Thus, at the same time that the film seems to be conflating race and sexual identity, it emphatically declares the difference between them.

In yet another example of the emergence of an absent presence, probably the oddest lesbian referent occurs at the end of the final flashback when Evans is repeating the message that he wants Leona to give Henry. He finishes by stating that after midnight he can be found at Bowery 2-1000 and after she repeats the number, he thanks her and wishes her goodnight. As their final exchange is occurring, the camera dollies in to a painting of horses which is illuminated above his bed. This in itself is unsurprising since Evans's motivation for getting involved in the pharmaceutical scam was his desire to make his life-long dream of owning a small horse farm come true. Since the Bowery number is revealed to be the number for the city morgue, this symbolizes the death of his dream, as well as his own death. However, since Leona's voice also is a part of this scenario, and since the title of the work, as well as the name of the artist are clearly displayed, the fact that this is "The Horse Fair" by the lesbian artist Rosa Bonheur, is not insignificant. Not only is Leona's death foreshadowed by the city morgue phone number, but also an association is made between Leona and lesbianism, as well as lesbianism and death. This scene seems to inscribe the conventional narrative's demand for the demise of the lesbian.
These examples suggest that female homoeroticism is both allusive and elusive in *Sorry, Wrong Number*. Nonetheless, as the earlier discussion of Terry Castle’s work demonstrates, its presence also may be connoted from a recurrent pattern of apparitions, disembodied voices, and spectral presences which constitute, at least partially, the construction of both Leona and Sally throughout the film. For example, in the Evans flashback noted above, and in at least part of almost all of her other phone conversations, Leona is nothing more than a disembodied voice. The spectator sees only Leona’s caller or the flashback in which the caller is a participant, while Leona’s voice, tinny and distorted, floats about the room. Similarly, both Jennings and Sally address Leona during their conversations with her even though the camera remains on them. In other words, the physical presence of Leona is not visible to the spectator; instead, she is a presence only because of linguistic conjuring. In contrast, the cuts back to Leona during all of these conversations, if they occur at all, are short and usually are motivated by Leona’s speech so that there is congruity between the image and the voice, i.e., her callers are not made apparitional.

Leona is made a spectral presence in other ways also. In her conversations with Sally and Dr. Alexander, there are a number of times when both of them, apparently afraid that she has suddenly disappeared, ask whether or not she is still there. For example, after Sally’s time on the pay phone runs out the first time, she deposits another nickel and asks, “Are you still there, Leona?” After a moment’s pause, Leona replies, “Yes, I’m still here but this is one of the queerest things I’ve ever heard.”
Additionally, when the camera does place the spectator with Leona in her bedroom, its pans around the room have a function analogous to the situations described in the previous paragraph. Leona is out of the frame so that the viewer sees the room’s open window or other elements of the mise en scène, but once again Leona exists only as a disembodied voice. Furthermore, the film’s use of dissolves, rather than cuts or fades to black, as it moves from the present into a flashback and back again, functions literally to turn Leona, Miss Jennings, and Sally into vaporous apparitions, floating above the previous or next image.

Sally also is made a spectral presence, but in ways that differ from Leona’s construction as an apparition. When she has lunch with Henry, for example, his responses and questions to her frequently have no connection to what she has just said. Clearly, Henry is distracted, but the overall effect is to make it seem as though Sally is not even there. Even more blatant instances of Sally’s apparitionalism occur, not surprisingly, in relation to her husband. She frequently tries to disappear in her husband’s presence.

Sally’s attempts to evanesce (and to become unsightly) around her husband begin when Leona first calls her and Sally removes herself from her husband’s sight and hearing by placing herself in her son’s bedroom. Then in the flashback to the time when she secretly follows her husband and his associates to Staten Island, she constantly is seen hiding behind and peeking out from buildings and other objects, trying to make herself invisible. The sense that she is indeed a specter only is
intensified when she describes the island to Leona by saying, "[O]ther parts of it seem to exist in a kind of dream." As her husband and his partners leave the island, Sally again tries to disappear. She tells Leona: "All I thought was how to get out of their way so they wouldn't see me, as they were heading straight toward me." The last of Sally's spectral events occurs when she calls back Leona from the pay phone in the subway. Her husband and a colleague appear around the corner from the pay phone and she again makes herself apparitional in his presence, by backing around the corner into a wall so that she can go unnoticed. Moreover, her behavior during these moments has the added effect of making it look like she is having an illicit affair since it is characterized by over-the-shoulder looks, furtive glances, and a fearful visage.

Thus, just as Sally and Leona are themselves represented as apparitions, so, too, is lesbianism made spectral in *Sorry, Wrong Number*. As the previous discussions of *Double Indemnity* and *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* suggest, however, lesbianism is still very much present because of the recurrence of these apparitions, as well as the appearance of the Sally/Leona dyad, and the manifestation of the butch femme fatale. Although I am unable to present a detailed analysis of every film in the Stanwyck film noir oeuvre because of spatial constraints (and because I have not been able to see all of them), I want to emphasize that these three films, while emblematic, are not unique in their depiction of female homoeroticism as an absent presence in Stanwyck's films noirs. In the five other films in this oeuvre I have seen, the butchness of the Stanwyck protagonist and the mutual inflection of role and image are always conspicuous.
Even in the two films, *The Two Mrs. Carrolls* (1947) and *No Man of Her Own* (1950), in which Stanwyck is least like a femme fatale, her butch image inflects the heterosexual triangles constituted within both of these films. Moreover, in both of these films, there are dead women who haunt, metaphorically, the heterosexual relationships inscribed therein. In the other three films, *The File on Thelma Jordan* (1949), *Clash by Night* (1952), and *Crime of Passion* (1957), Stanwyck is, to a greater or lesser extent, a butch femme fatale who frequently is a reinscription of Phyllis Dietrichson. In addition, all three of these of these films depict homoerotic dyads.

In her final appearance in a film noir, *Crime of Passion*, more than just the patterns outlined above are present, however. Stanwyck plays Kathy Ferguson, an advice columnist for the *San Francisco Post*. Although Kathy is a career woman, in a rare moment of acquiescence to the demands of dominant ideology, she marries a police detective, Bill Doyle (Sterling Hayden), whose idea of upward mobility is limited to elevators. Almost immediately discontented in her new role as suburban housewife, Kathy soon involves herself in trying to advance the career of her husband by befriending the wife (Fay Wray) of her husband’s boss, Inspector Pope (Raymond Burr), and then by having an affair with Pope himself. Eventually, when Pope fails to name Bill as his successor, Kathy shoots Pope and then is arrested by her own husband. The final shot shows her being carted off to jail by Bill.

As this short summary suggests, Stanwyck’s butch femme fatale is very evident and is involved in a homoerotic dyad. Additionally, though, lesbianism is conjured up
not just by the film’s implication that some women are unsuited for a life of heterosexual bliss, but also by three other references, all of which occur in the film’s opening scenes. The first one is extra-textual: Stanwyck’s protagonist is named Kathy Ferguson; off-screen Helen Ferguson is the name of her publicist and companion for thirty years. In the first scene in her office, a colleague is reading over Kathy’s mail and decides to read one letter aloud. A young woman is involved with a married man and she wants advice about what she should do. The colleague turns to Kathy and asks what advice she would give the letter-writer. She replies, “Forget the man. Run away with his wife.”

Soon after this exchange, Kathy is assigned by her editor to cover the “woman’s angle” on a murder case. Mary Dana killed her husband in Los Angeles and is now at-large in San Francisco. It is through her connection with this woman that she meets Bill, one of two detectives sent from Los Angeles to retrieve and arrest Mary Dana. In an attempt to get Dana to contact her (an attempt which succeeds), Kathy addresses her in an open letter in her column. That her letter demonstrates an understanding of the hardships women face which can be understood only by another woman “who knows what [she] is suffering” is illustrated by the film’s use of montage. Women all over the city are shown reading the letter and nodding in recognition. In the one scene during this montage which is particularly relevant to this study, two female cab drivers are pictured. Both are attired in male clothing, both wear short hair, and
one dangles a cigarette from her mouth, as the other reads, “Let me stand by your side in your fight for justice and compassion in a world made by men and for men.”

In Crime of Passion, which becomes Stanwyck’s last hurrah as “the undisputed queen bee of noir,” which appears near the end of the classic film noir period, and which depicts the patterns that have characterized its representation throughout all of her films noirs, lesbianism makes its most explicit appearance. It is as if the cracks in the film noir narrative finally have been strained to the point that they must give way to the accumulated pressures established by Stanwyck’s recurring role as a butch femme fatale.
1. The incongruities in the number of films noirs in which Stanwyck appears are endemic to the problems that plague film noir criticism because of the disagreements about what exactly constitutes film noir. (See the introduction for a discussion of the problem of definition.) Examining eight filmographies (Durgnat, Ottoson, Selby, Silver and Ursini, Stephens, Telotte, Tuska, and Whitney) which act as standard referents in film noir criticism, I found that all eight placed Double Indemnity, The Strange Love of Martha Ivers, Sorry, Wrong Number, The File on Thelma Jordan, and Clash by Night in the film noir canon. After this temporary assentiveness, however, discrepancies flourish. Five of the filmographies include Witness to Murder; four add The Two Mrs. Carrolls and Crime of Passion; three mention No Man of Her Own; two incorporate Jeopardy and The Furies, while another counts Cry Wolf.

2. For a psychoanalytic analysis see Johnston. For other discussions see Gallagher, Buchsbaum, Maxfield, Copjec, and Palmer (Hollywood's Dark Cinema).

3. For discussions of Bonheur's life as a cross-dressing lesbian, as well as her almost sixty year relationship with Nathalie Micas, see Greer (57-60); Katz (334, 362-63, 365); and Faderman (216-18, 284-85).
CHAPTER FOUR
IN A LONELY PLACE

Although there is no question that Barbara Stanwyck’s image reflects her roles in film noir and intensifies the homoerotic presence, the patterns which signify female homoeroticism are present throughout film noir—as the chapter on Mildred Pierce indicates. In a Lonely Place (1950) exemplifies this and is especially significant for this study because the predominant pattern in this film involves the presence of a butch supporting character, a phenomenon which only has been touched upon (in the analysis of Ida in Mildred Pierce). The absence of such supporting players in the Stanwyck oeuvre is not surprising since it would be difficult to out-butch Stanwyck. Thus, the discussions of female supporting players in the three Stanwyck films (Lola in Double Indemnity, Toni in The Strange Love of Martha Ivers, and Miss Jennings and Sally in Sorry, Wrong Number) have—out of necessity—focused on configurations of the femme. On the other hand, the emergence of lesbianism in In a Lonely Place, is predicated on the relationship between its female protagonist, Laurel Gray (Gloria Grahame), and her butch masseuse, Martha (Ruth Gillette).

In a Lonely Place opens with a shot of a car driving down a road. Initially the spectator shares the point of view of the driver, then appears to be situated behind the
driver in the back seat and, as the camera tracks back, occupies the point of view of a more detached observer. As the car arrives at a stop light, another car pulls beside it and the woman in the passenger seat begins a conversation with the driver of the first car. She identifies the driver of the first car as Dixon Steele (Humphrey Bogart), and tells him that she was in one of the films he wrote. The woman’s husband expresses his anger at Steele for “bothering his wife” (even though she initiated the contact). Dix insults him, and it appears that a fight will ensue, but when Dix opens his car door, the other car speeds off. In the opening moments of the film, then, Dixon Steele is constructed as a man whose violent tendencies may erupt at the slightest provocation.

The next scene shows Dix arriving at a restaurant, Paul’s, where he is joined by his agent, Mel Lippman (Art Smith), and a director, Lloyd Barnes (Morris Ankrum). Paul’s clearly caters to the Hollywood contingent so Dix is known by those in attendance. He buys a drink for Charlie Waterman (Robert Warwick), an older Shakespearean actor who is now a drunken has-been. When a loud-mouthed studio executive insults Charlie, Dix immediately defends him by knocking the executive across the room. A woman who is watching the proceedings comments, “There goes Dix again,” substantiating the impression that Dix is a man for whom violent outbursts are typical.

A copy of the best-selling novel, Althea Bruce, has been left for Dix in the coat check room because a producer wants Dix to adapt it for the screen. Since Dix’s career as a screenwriter is flagging, both Mel and Lloyd, encourage him to read it that
night. Dix, however, is dismissive of the book, considering it to be beneath his talent. Since the coat check girl has just finished reading it and is very enthusiastic about it, he asks her to accompany him home to tell him the story. At first suspicious of his motives, the young woman, Mildred Atkinson (Martha Stewart), finally agrees to go because she is excited by the prospect of having a close brush with celebrity.

As they approach his apartment, a woman walks between them on her way to her own apartment which is across the courtyard from Dix’s. Although Dix does not know who this woman is, it is obvious that he is intrigued by her. Once he and Mildred are inside, and after only a few moments of her breathless recitation of the novel’s events, he grows bored with both the story of the novel and Mildred herself. As she continues her summary, he walks away from her and into another room where he looks out his window and sees the woman from the courtyard in a negligee on her balcony looking back at him. Soon after this exchange of looks, he asks Mildred if she would be willing to go around the corner to a cab stand to get a ride home, because he says he is too tired to drive her. She agrees, so he gives her twenty dollars, and walks her into the courtyard. Fade to black.

The next morning Brub Nicolai (Frank Lovejoy), who served under Dix in the army and now is a police detective, knocks on Dix’s door and asks him to come down to the station with him. When they arrive, Dix is told that the body of Mildred Atkinson was thrown from a moving car the night before and that because Dix was the last person seen with her, he is being questioned about her murder. Captain Lochner
(Carl Benton Reid) immediately is suspicious of Dix because of his cavalier and even joking reaction to the news of Mildred’s death, but Dix asks him if he plans to arrest him “for lack of emotion.” While Dix sits in Captain Lochner’s office, the woman from the courtyard, Laurel Gray, is brought in. She substantiates Dix’s story by saying that she saw the woman leave and that Dix did not go with her. For the viewer, however, ambiguity remains because there was no shot of Laurel watching Mildred depart. We never learn for certain whether or not this is a lie, although Laurel’s later suspicions about Dix imply that it may have been.

When Dix returns to his apartment, the loyal Mel visits him, concerned because the report of the murder has broken in the morning papers. Dix makes up a story which leaves Mel half-convinced that Dix did murder Mildred. Mel’s only concern, though, is how to get Dix across the border without being caught. When Laurel turns up at Dix’s apartment a few minutes later, Mel asks her if she is sure about her story and then leaves. Laurel asks Dix to keep her name out of the papers because she moved in within the last week to escape from a boyfriend, a wealthy real estate magnate named Baker. Dix wants to start seeing her, but she tells him she needs to think about it.

The next night, at the behest of Captain Lochner, Brub and his wife Sylvia (Jeff Donnell) invite Dix over for dinner. Sylvia seems a bit frightened of Dix and his intensity and her feelings of unease are only heightened when Dix theorizes about how Mildred’s murder might have occurred. With maniacal glee (emphasized visually by the illumination of his eyes with a strip of light), Dix suggests that Brub and Sylvia
reenact the murder and tells Brub how Mildred might have been strangled with just one
arm around her neck: “Squeeze harder, harder. It’s wonderful to feel her throat crush
under your arm.” Brub becomes so involved in his role that soon Sylvia is crying for
him to let go. Later, Dix tells them he has committed a number of murders—but all for
the movies. He adds that his “artistic temperament” would prevent him from throwing
a “lovely body” out of a moving car. After Dix leaves, Sylvia tells her husband that
“there’s something wrong with him.” Brub disagrees, saying, “He’s an exciting guy,”
but Sylvia replies, “He’s exciting because he isn’t quite normal.”

Later that night, Dix goes to Laurel’s apartment to see if she has made a
decision about dating him. She is on the phone with Martha, who, she explains, is her
masseuse and “all that’s left of [her] movie career.” Laurel tells Dix that she is
“interested” in him and they kiss. After the fade-out, it is a few weeks later and Laurel
is in Dix’s apartment pouring him coffee and fluffing the pillows while he writes. She
appears to be the embodiment of the “little woman”/muse who inspires Dix to write
prolifically.

Meanwhile, Captain Lochner has not relinquished his suspicion that Dix is the
murderer and calls Laurel down to the station again to check her story and to try to
make her suspicious of Dix. He recites Dix’s long record of violence to her, but to no
avail. The next scene opens in a club where Dix and Laurel are seated at a piano bar,
listening to the singer and sharing romantic moments. However, when Laurel sees one
of the detectives walk in the club with his wife, Dix and Laurel leave abruptly because
Dix is convinced that he is under surveillance. This is followed by a cut to Martha and Laurel. Martha is giving her a massage and she, too, is telling Laurel that Dix cannot be trusted and that he beat up and broke the nose of his former girlfriend, Frances. Laurel orders her to leave.

Once again a scene involving warnings about Dix is followed by a cozy, romantic scenario—this time Laurel and Dix are on the beach with Brub and Sylvia. In spite of Dix’s misogynist meanderings about the “Hollywood woman,” Sylvia tells Dix that he needs to marry Laurel and then mentions that Laurel promised Captain Lochner an invitation to the wedding. Dix becomes extremely agitated because Laurel did not inform him that she had been summoned to the police station again. Feeling that Laurel has betrayed him, Dix runs to the car, Laurel leaps in after him, and he begins driving erratically and at top speed without even acknowledging Laurel’s presence. He runs a stop sign and has a minor collision with another car. The young driver gets out of the car and because he calls Dix a “blind, knuckle-headed squirrel,” Dix jumps out of the car and beats him unconscious. As Dix picks up a rock to smash his head in, Laurel screams for him to stop before he kills him. Although Dix finally cools down, when he puts his arm around Laurel, it is the same gesture Brub used in the murder reenactment.

The next day Laurel is at Sylvia’s to apologize for the previous evening. It is obvious, though, that after witnessing Dix’s violent behavior toward the young driver, Laurel finally is beginning to have doubts about his innocence. She tells Sylvia that she
is afraid of him and Sylvia says that she should go away for awhile. Laurel had hoped that Sylvia would laugh at her fears, so she leaves feeling even more worried. That night Laurel has nightmares, shown in a montage, about Dix, the murder, and the warnings people have given her.

The morning finds Dix at Laurel’s apartment telling the maid, Effie (Ruth Warren), not to vacuum so that Laurel can sleep in, but Effie tells him that since Laurel takes pills, the noise will not wake her up. Dix is shocked about the pills, but nonetheless, when Effie adds that they should get married and go off on a honeymoon so that she can get some cleaning done, Dix seems to agree with her suggestion. When Laurel awakes, he tells her that he will fix her breakfast and goes to the kitchen to struggle with a grapefruit. After she joins him in the kitchen, he asks her to marry her and she looks stricken. Although she says that they do not need to rush into anything, he is determined that they will get a ring and look at houses that day, and have an engagement party and a Las Vegas wedding that night. She agrees, but it is obvious that this is not her idea of a good time.

A few minutes later Mel arrives and is ecstatic at Effie’s news that Laurel and Dix will be married. He rushes in to congratulate Laurel, but finds her on the phone leaving a message for Martha to call her. Mel is crestfallen when he realizes that there will be no wedding because Laurel thinks Dix is “too violent” and “doesn’t act like a normal person.” He also is worried about Dix’s reaction to this news, so he and Laurel agree that Mel should take Dix’s completed script to the producer because Mel thinks
that if Dix “has success, he doesn’t need anything else.” Meanwhile, Laurel is unable to complete her travel plans because Dix insists that they go shopping for a ring and a house.

That evening at Paul’s restaurant, the engagement party is in progress when Dix finds out that Mel gave his script to the producer without his permission. In spite of the fact that the producer loved the script, Dix is extremely angry and when Paul comes over to say that Laurel has a phone call, Dix insists that she take the call at the table because by now he is completely paranoid about everyone. Instead of handing the phone to Laurel, he answers it and, of course, it is Martha. When Mel tries to intercede on Laurel’s behalf, Dix slaps him viciously—which sends Mel off to the bathroom to nurse the cut over his eye. Dix goes after him to apologize and Mel agrees to continue his job as Dix’s agent.

Dix returns to the table and discovers that Laurel has left. He goes to her apartment and demands that she let him in, but she does so only after she locks her bedroom door, behind which are her packed suitcase and a “Dear Dix” letter with the ring. Noticing the missing ring, and believing that Laurel is planning to run away from him just like she did Baker, Dix finally gets into the bedroom. The phone rings and Dix learns that Laurel is indeed trying to get a ticket on a plane to New York. His suspicions confirmed, he begins choking her, but stops when the phone rings again. This time it is Brub, who tells Dix that Mildred’s boyfriend, Henry Kessler, confessed to her murder. Lochner then takes the phone, asks Dix to put Laurel on, and
apologizes to her, but she replies, “Yesterday this would have meant so much to us. Now it doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter at all.” Dix, realizing that there is no hope of a reconciliation, leaves. As Laurel watches him walk across the courtyard, she recites a variation on a line from his screenplay which they had spoken the night that he attacked the young driver: “I lived for a few weeks while you loved me. Goodbye, Dix.” Fade-out.

As this summary indicates, Dixon Steele’s violence and paranoia are recurring themes in this film. Given that In a Lonely Place was released in 1950, three years after the arrest of the Hollywood Ten during the Congressional hearings on the Communist presence in Hollywood, it is not surprising that the film has been read as a commentary on these times (Palmer, “In a Lonely Place” 203-05). Dix, a Hollywood screenwriter, is put under surveillance and accused of committing a crime based on a past record of violence which contains hearsay and rumor, as well as facts. He cannot rid himself of the accusation until it is too late and his life is destroyed. The metaphor certainly works, but as discussed in the introduction, another part of both the Congressional witch-hunts and social context of the post-war era has even more relevance for this study: the popularization of pseudo-Freudian psychology, the publication of the first Kinsey report in 1948, and the subsequent search for homosexuals under every bed.

In Homosexuality in Cold War America, Robert Corber notes that the Kinsey report “provided scientific evidence that gay men did not differ significantly from straight men” and that the homophobic response to these findings resulted in the fear
that if gay men could pass, "then they could infiltrate the nation's cultural and political institutions and subvert them from within" (10-11). Thus, suspected homosexuals were subject to the same scrutiny as suspected Communists. Corber focuses only on male gay characters and he argues that during this period, film noir tends to mark gay male characters in order to differentiate them clearly from heterosexual characters—which gives them visibility and thus, inadvertently, validates the gay male gaze. However, as the previous chapters have shown, film noir also reveals a preoccupation with the lesbian presence. This film's exploration of the construction of a tenuous heterosexuality becomes paradigmatic of the fear such a presence provokes.

Focusing on the investigative "'tough' thrillers" of the 1940s, Krutnik states that the "representation of masculinity... oscillates between... two extremes" which he characterizes as either "a psychopathic masculine assertion" (embodied by Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer) or "a masochistic impairment of the masculine" (in which "potency" or "knowledge" becomes "an unattainable ideal") (99-100). He casts Dixon Steele in the former camp, presumably because of his predilection to violence. Dana Polan points out that the film is "ambivalent about the cause of Dix's violence" (36). He continues that possible explanations alluded to by the film include: "the returned soldier as psychotic," "the aesthete's disdain for the ordinary world," or "Dix's own inability to resolve the question of just who he is: man of culture, average guy" (36).
Regardless, though, as Polan points out later, "In a Lonely Place shows a violence installed within the heart of the dominant culture, ready to break out at any moment" (46).

The idea that violence can be a part of everyday life, can be hidden beneath even the most calm demeanor, is reiterated a number of times by the film. The most blatant example is when Brub, all-around good guy and guardian of law and order, practically strangles his wife while play-acting the murder for Dix. Later, when Captain Lochner tries to convince Laurel that Dix should not be trusted, he pulls out a group of photographs of killers in order to stress their deceptive normality. Finally, when it is revealed at the end of the film that Henry Kessler killed Mildred, it is somewhat surprising because he looks "normal" too. Indeed, "[o]ne could easily read the film as a proto-feminist work that argues that men per se, not this or that murderous man, can pose a threat of violence to women" (Polan 46).

The most obvious ramifications of this possibility are in terms of heterosexual romance. If violence can lurk in the heart of any man, then this "contamination of [heterosexual] romance’s potential purity" may be "inevitable" (Polan 19). This is exemplified when Dix goes to Laurel’s apartment to find out if she has made a decision about becoming involved with him. She says that she does want to begin a relationship and they kiss. Dix then explains how he has been searching for someone and adds, "A girl was killed and because of that, I’ve found what I was looking for.” This almost sounds as if the death of a woman was necessary in order for him to find romance, but
at the very least, his comment is not the most swoon-worthy imaginable under the circumstances. The sense of imminent danger is heightened by the composition of the over-the-shoulder shot as he utters these words. His right shoulder fills almost two-thirds of the frame and because he looms over her, she is partially obscured. What is visible, though, is her upturned face, but his hand completely covers her neck. In other words, in what is supposed to be this incredibly romantic moment, he looks like he is strangling her. Later, of course, on the night that was to be their wedding night, he does begin to strangle her.

As these examples suggest, heterosexual romantic love seems to be a facade that needs careful maintenance. When Dix is in Paul’s on the night of Mildred’s murder, his former girlfriend, Frances (Alice Talton), comes over to his table and complains that she has been trying to reach him by phone to no avail. She asks, “Don’t you like to talk anymore?” Dix’s reply, “Not to people who have my number,” connotes more than just a phone number. Frances is, after all, the woman who was beaten up by Dix, so not only is she without illusions, but also her presence forces Dix to drop the facade. In this sense, Dix seems to envision his life as a screenplay, and as the writer, he believes he is in an omnipotent position. Thus, characters (Frances, Mildred) and scenes (Laurel’s resistance to marriage) that are not to his liking are thrown out or rewritten.

This vision of life as one long, unfinished script also explains Dix’s fondness for turning “real-life” events into one-act plays for his amusement. He toys with the police
the morning after Mildred’s murder. He makes Brub and Sylvia reenact the murder. He convinces Mel that he really did kill Mildred. He uses lines of dialogue he has written to express what he feels, thereby turning moments of intimacy into performance. When he talks with Laurel in the kitchen before he asks her to marry him, he tells her that “this is a real love scene.” Similarly, after he beats up the young driver, he recites lines from the screenplay he is working on to Laurel in order to express his feelings for her, but then he makes her repeat them because he wants to “hear how it sounds.” It is not surprising, then, that after Laurel explains to Mel why she does not want to marry Dix, she literally presents Mel with Dix’s screenplay, using both hands to give it to him as if it were a precious object. This has been her life, but now she trades her role in this artifice for her freedom.

That this idea of artifice extends to heterosexuality itself is evident from the previous examples. As Laurel’s trade-off implies, like any other part of the script, there always is the possibility that heterosexuality will not work, so constant vigilance and surveillance are required to insure that the structure does not collapse. The fragility of its existence is suggested by Dix’s proposal of marriage itself since apparently, he proposes in order to acquiesce to Effie’s request that she be able to clean in peace. The implication is that if he and Laurel slept more soundly or if they got a new maid, such a step would be unnecessary. In many ways, then, In a Lonely Place takes the “normativity” out of heteronormativity.
However, if Dix’s heterosexual relationships are tenuous, the one relationship that remains solid is his friendship with Mel. Perkins observes that “unlike the lover’s love, [it] is without conditions or reservations” (229). When Mel thinks Dix is a murderer, he worries about getting him to safety in Mexico. When he learns that Laurel will not marry Dix, he figures out how to soften the blow. The homoeroticism in their relationship is hinted at when Mel, upon learning of Dix’s proposal, tells Laurel, “We’ll be such a happy family.” It becomes more blatant a few minutes later, though, when in response to Laurel’s declaration that she will not marry Dix because of his violence, Mel tells her that violence is “as much a part of him as the color of his eyes. The shape of his head. He’s Dix Steele and if you want him, you’ve got to take it all--the bad with the good. I’ve taken it for twenty years.”

That he will “take it” for another twenty is clear from the engagement party fracas. When Mel tries to get Dix to give Laurel the phone, Dix slaps him and cuts his eye. (In this context, though, the slap also may have significance since every other time Dix has hit a man, he has punched, rather than slapped, suggesting a feminization of Mel.) When Dix follows Mel to the bathroom and asks him if he “should get a new agent,” Mel, of course, refuses to abandon him. The only stability in Dix’s life, then, is provided by another man, rather than within heterosexuality.

As the discussions of films in previous chapters have demonstrated, the instability of heterosexuality is not unusual in film noir. Generally, though, this fragility is attributable to the femme fatale, who uses heterosexuality to her own ends.
However, most critics do not read Laurel as a femme fatale. For example, Andrew describes her as “freed from the conventions of the femme fatale”; Perkins says she has “the ambition of a tender-hearted gold-digger”; and Damico concludes that “the fatal woman has become completely trustworthy” (61, 228, 104). There is no question that Laurel Gray is no Phyllis Dietrichson, but neither is she Shirley Temple. Her previous relationship with Baker, for example, suggests that she is not immune to using men for their money. Nonetheless, it is impossible to picture Phyllis Dietrichson fluffing up pillows for her man, so there is a clear distinction between Laurel and the conventional femme fatale.

Although Laurel may differ in many ways from the femme fatale, one characteristic she has in common is her butchness. While her soft voice, “tender-hearted[ness],” and pillow-fluffing suggest that she is not butch in the same way as Stanwyck’s femme fatale (or Crawford’s Mildred Pierce), there are still shared qualities. Laurel may appear to be the perfect “little lady,” but as the earlier discussion of heterosexuality indicates, such constructions are tenuous. She completely controls when her relationship with Dix will begin and when it will end.

After their meeting in the police station, when Dix comes on to her, she seems like a dominatrix. He tries to kiss her and is spurned; he tells her that they will have dinner “tonight” and she replies, “We’ll have dinner tonight--but not together”; he tries to compliment her by confessing that he likes the fact that she is a woman who “knows what she wants” and she says, “I also know what I don’t want and I don’t want to be
rushed." During this same exchange, Dix tells her that she's a "good guy" (my emphasis). Additionally, even in the middle of their relationship while she is fluffing pillows, there are moments of instability, signs of artifice—a point to which I will return. Perkins points out some of these signs, though, when he notes that "Laurel is delighted to have Dix 'kind of dopey'" because she "'love[s] him that way'" (228). He continues, that at the end of the above scene, "[h]er avowal of love" is spoken to a Dix who has been up all night and is, therefore, "inactive [and] semi-conscious" (228).

Laurel's butchness is even more evident in terms of her positioning in relation to the gaze. When Dix first looks up at her on the balcony on the night of the murder, she returns his gaze. The following day, at the police station, "the film's insistence on Laurel's active role" is signified by a subjective shot of an empty coffee cup she is holding—an "image [which] signals the definitive entry into the narrative of a new subjectivity" (Perkins 227). Later that day, during the dominatrix scene discussed previously, Dix tells Laurel, "You know, you're one up on me. You can see into my apartment. But I can't see into yours." However, not only does Laurel possess the gaze, but as Andrew points out, "[A]s her doubts about Dix's sanity grow, Laurel increasingly avoids his gaze, even to the point of locking herself in her room—that is out of his sight—as soon as she has decided to leave him" (59).

That this construction of Laurel as butch and in possession of the gaze constitutes yet another threat to heterosexual stability is clarified further in the scene at the piano bar. As mentioned earlier, this scene is framed by scenes in which Laurel is
warned about Dix, first by Captain Lochner and then by Martha. Dix and Laurel sit at a piano bar with four other couples while an African American woman (Hadda Brooks) sings, "Till You.” Eric Lott observes in "The Whiteness of Film Noir" that in this scene, the singer “may express the fears and loneliness Laurel feels in her relationship with a man she suspects is highly unstable” (94). Thus, Lott finds the scene reminiscent of Casablanca because “a homosocial bond equal to and opposite from that of Bogart and Sam” is created “in which the black woman mediates white heterosexual desire” (94). One implication of this reading seems to be that the “dark underside” of Laurel’s relationship with Dix is projected onto the African American woman (94). In this sense, then, the interaction between Laurel and the unnamed singer becomes just another transaction in a racist economy.

There is, however, another possibility. The editing and shot composition of this scene create the impression that most of the time there is eye-line matching between Laurel and the singer. Laurel and Dix are seated at the end of the piano and Laurel, especially, is almost directly across from the singer. Thus, when the singer looks straight ahead (as she does most of the time), she appears to be looking in their direction, particularly at Laurel. The sequence of shots (before the disruption caused by the detective’s entrance) is as follows: long shot of the piano bar-- medium close-up of the singer--medium two-shot of Laurel, but not Dix, looking at the singer--medium close-up of the singer--medium two-shot in which Laurel is turning toward Dix (and apparently away from the singer)--tracking shot back with Laurel and the singer
apparently looking at each other while Dix (who is slightly off to the side) watches the
singer--medium close-up of the singer--medium two-shot of Laurel and Dix both
looking at the singer and smiling, but then Dix looks away. Thus, another possibility,
that the singer is singing “I hadn’t anyone till you” to Laurel, is opened up by this shot
structure. Since another pattern in this sequence of shots is Dix’s constant interruption
of the exchange of looks between Laurel and the singer, this reading becomes even
more likely. Every time Laurel looks at the singer, her gaze is disrupted by Dix’s
attempts to gain her attention: he places a lit cigarette in her mouth, or he looks at her
until she returns his look, or he speaks to her.

This sequence, then, seems to break through the fissure in the tenuous
construction of heterosexuality noted earlier. The artifice of heterosexual romance is
stripped bare by its undercurrent of violence and its performative nature. By pushing
the margins of heterosexual romance outwards, the butchness of Laurel and the
attendant pressures that it causes open up a space in which female homoeroticism is not
only a possibility, but a palpable presence. As this space for female homoeroticism is
exposed, there is an implication that Dix’s paranoia and desire for omnipotence and
narrative control center on his concern over falling for a “good guy” like Laurel.

That this is a concern shared by the film is suggested by the dissolve from the
nightclub to a remarkable low-angle shot of Laurel in close-up, her face lit from below.
In the right part of the frame, above Laurel’s naked shoulder (she is wearing only a
towel), a woman whose face is in half-shadow—in striking contrast to Laurel’s glowing
visage—lurches forward and begins rubbing Laurel’s exposed shoulder. In a tableaux vivant from a 1950s’ lesbian pulp, the spectral Martha, heretofore only an off-screen presence, is manifested as butch supporting player extraordinaire, the embodiment of the Lesbian Menace. Next to Martha, and in spite of her own butchness, Laurel does look like Shirley Temple. Durgnat’s homophobic (yet priceless) description of Martha suggests exactly what constitutes this menace: “Lesbianism rears a sado-masochistic head . . . between Gloria Grahame and a brawny masseuse who is also perhaps a symbol for a coarse vulgarity she cannot escape” (48).

While most critics recognize Martha as a “cliche of [a] butch wom[a]n,” an “interject[ion] of a lesbian undertone,” or a “butch lesbian stereotype,” Andrew ignores this coding and sees her as Laurel’s “subconscious” (Polan 40, Tuska 210, Perkins 228, Andrew 58). Perkins adds, however, that “Martha speaks the voices in Laurel’s mind” (229). Although perhaps not in the sense which they intended, Martha may indeed represent Laurel’s “subconscious” and “speak[k] the voices in Laurel’s mind”—as well as the voice that the paranoid Dix fears he keeps hearing. Polan notes that “the most pronounced moments of woman-to-woman intimacy are Laurel’s scenes with her masseuse Martha” (40). He continues, “Martha actively dislikes Dix, fuelling Laurel’s fear by spreading stories about his past violence, and she resents his intrusions into her private encounters with Laurel” (40).

Before further scrutiny of Martha’s presence in the film, though, it is necessary to contextualize her appearances by examining other fissures in the construction of
Laurel. The first time Laurel and Dix see each other, she walks between Mildred and him in the courtyard; Polan notes that she is a “passing spectral figure” (44). This description connotes Castle’s “apparitional lesbian,” “passing” as heterosexual. In Dix’s first conversation with Laurel after their encounter at the police station (the dominatrix conversation), Laurel tells him that she and Baker “were thinking of getting married,” but adds, “It wouldn’t have worked.”

As mentioned earlier, the night that Dix beats up and almost kills the young driver, he recites lines from his screenplay to Laurel, but then makes her repeat them. Her eyes straight ahead, her hands on the steering wheel (signifying her control in the face of his command), she recites: “I was born when she kissed me. I died when she left me. I lived a few weeks while she loved me” (my emphasis). In this medium two-shot, the spectacle of the pained expression on Dix’s face as he watches her and listens suggests that he has scripted a scenario in which his worst fears are made manifest.

When Laurel visits Sylvia the next day to apologize for Dix’s behavior, she ends up confessing her fears about Dix. As she walks around Sylvia’s patio she tells her, “This is what I’d like to have someday.” She pauses here and the expectation is that she will finish her thought with some reference to a domestic haven with Dix. Instead she concludes, “A small, cozy house near the ocean.” The elision is noticeable and not insignificant.

In light of the examples above, then, it is not a stretch to believe that Martha does “sp[ea][k] the voices in Laurel’s mind.” Although she makes only four appearances
(so to speak) in the film, they always arise at critical moments in the narrative of heterosexuality. The first reference to Martha occurs the night that Dix goes to Laurel’s apartment to find out if she will date him. When he arrives, Laurel is on the phone with Martha. She ends her conversation with Martha in order to talk with Dix, but her conversation is about Martha. She explains that she is “all that’s left of [her] movie career” and also says that Martha is about fifty with a son at UCLA. Given Martha’s “brawny” appearance, this description is as interesting for what it does not say as it is for what it does say. On one level, Laurel, who is about to enter into a relationship with Dix, seems to be trying to couch Martha’s butchness under a mask of heteronormativity in order to diminish any perception of her as a menacing threat. Thus, before Dix actually sees her, her presumably heterosexual identity will be established. On another level, the film itself is playing the same game with the spectator. It seems to be trying to have it both ways: conjuring up the butch menace, while simultaneously playing it Production Code-safe, by attempting (unsuccessfully) to negate her presence.

Laurel continues her description of Martha by explaining, “she comes to me twice a week, beats me black and blue, for which I . . .” At this point, Dix, in a very fidgety and agitated state, apparently decides he does not want hear more, and interrupts with “Have you thought about it for a second time?” (referring to the possibility of heterosexual romance with him). In the context of Laurel’s later refusal to tolerate Dix’s violence, the pleasure she receives from being “beat[en] black and
blue” by Martha presents an interesting (to say the least) contrast. Consensuality seems to be at issue here, but so is gender and thus, sexual identity. Mel has “taken it” from Dix “for twenty years” because “[h]e’s Dix Steele.” As Mel fairly shouts this last sentence at Laurel, the words are given visual emphasis by an abrupt cut from a medium two-shot of Mel and Laurel to a close-up of Mel. This added emphasis suggests that Mel is having a hard time understanding Laurel’s withdrawal because “his dick’s steel.” Unimpressed, Laurel still hands herself over to Martha.

Martha’s next appearance already has been described. The scene in which Martha gives Laurel a massage in the bedroom is the only time Martha is a visible screen presence, but it certainly leaves a lasting impression. As Martha looms over Laurel’s left shoulder, kneading her flesh, she seductively croons a criticism of Laurel’s relationship with Dix and tells her, “We should be . . . beside that lovely pool Mr. Baker built for you. . . . A girl like you should think about security. . . .” She follows this with a slap and “Okay. Turn over.”

As Laurel starts to do just that, with a slight smile (of anticipation?), there is an abrupt cut to Dix entering the apartment. Similar to his disruption of the exchange of looks between Laurel and the singer at the piano bar, Dix once again interrupts a homoerotic moment. A cut back to a medium two-shot of Martha and Laurel shows Martha scowling, with Laurel smiling as she shouts, “Dix.” Dix goes to the closed bedroom door and asks, “Are you decent?” Laurel’s reply: “No, I’m not. Martha’s
here.” Although superficially a comment on her state of undress, another connotation is that she cannot be “decent” because she is enjoying her time with the Lesbian Menace.

Dix orders Laurel to fix him an extravagant breakfast, (a command that does not go unremarked upon by Martha: “What? No caviar.”), and then leaves. Martha continues to work on Laurel by rubbing her arm as she leans over her chest and by continuing to share her suspicions about Dix. She mentions the unsolved murder of “that check-room girl” and then segues into the news that she “used to take care of” Dix’s old girlfriend, Frances, and that Dix beat her up and broke her nose. Laurel scoffs at this information. Martha warns her: “You can joke about it, Angel, but someday you’ll find out who your friend is. I only hope it isn’t too late. Because this isn’t going to be as easy to get out of as it was with Mr. Baker.” At this, Laurel leaps up, and angrily tells Martha to “get out.” Martha answers, “I’ll get out, Angel. But you’ll beg me to come back when you’re in trouble. You will, Angel. Because you don’t have anybody else.” Laurel’s response is to reiterate her order to “get out.” The implication seems to be that theirs is a relationship of long-standing and that like Mel for Dix, Martha will always “take it” from Laurel.

Martha’s words end up being prophetic, however, because when Dix leaves the apartment after Laurel has agreed to marry him, Mel arrives almost immediately afterwards to find Laurel leaving a message for Martha. Thus, Martha is indeed the person Laurel turns to get her out of heterosexual entanglements. Likewise, at the
disastrous engagement party, it is Martha’s phone call which Dix intercepts at the table, as he again attempts to stave off a disruption to his heterosexual script.

Although Martha is “merely” a supporting player in this film, her appearances at these defining moments reiterate Patricia White’s point that the supporting character “is a site for the encoding of the threat and the promise of homosexual difference” (194). In a rather famous moment in the film, when Dix goes into the kitchen to prepare breakfast for Laurel before asking her to marry him, he attempts to cut a grapefruit. Baffled that the knife is “bent,” he gazes at it, mystified, trying to decide on a course of action. There follows a cut to Laurel in her bedroom gazing at herself in a hand mirror. The juxtaposition of shots suggests the association of the “bent” knife with the “bent” Laurel. While Dix’s attempt to straighten out the knife is successful, Martha and the “voices in Laurel’s mind” assure that his attempt to straighten out Laurel will fail.
NOTES

1. The Oxford English Dictionary cites the first appearance in print of “bent” as “homosexual” in 1957 (61). Given that slang words frequently appear in the vernacular long before making the transition to print, it is reasonable to assume that this meaning was current at the time of the film’s production.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

When I originally conceived of this project, my plan was to do a study of the lesbian presence in neo-noir films, i.e., films made after 1958. In reality, however, my focus was going to be on films from the 1970s-1990s. My assumption (an assumption which is all too often shared by my contemporaries) was that a more modern focus was required in order to obtain the quantity of textual representations necessary for a thorough examination of the phenomenon of lesbians in film noir. I presumed that lesbianism did not exist in classic film noir except for the occasional—and completely peripheral—appearance of butch supporting players like Ruth Gillette or Hope Emerson (the sadistic matron in 1950's Caged). But these few and fleeting appearances were nothing to write home about and certainly were nothing to structure a dissertation around—nor so I thought. For research purposes, though, I began to watch films from the classic period and became increasingly astounded by what I saw. Soon I decided I would focus half of my dissertation on classic films and the rest of it on neo-noir. Obviously, that plan changed also. For what I discovered in the process of researching and writing this dissertation, is that films from the classical period of film noir are amazingly rich and complex in their explorations of sexual identity.
Indeed, the recognition of the lesbian presence in these films challenges the
collection of film noir as merely a male-centered universe and thus, demands its
reconceptualization. Likewise, this particular lesbian sighting/siting also undermines
the focus in much feminist criticism of film noir on the femme fatale and the attendant
opposition between the good woman and the bad woman, an opposition usually defined
in relationship to crises of masculinity. In other words, lesbian feminist readings of film
noir problematize its heteronormativity and emphasize the destabilization of
heterosexuality. In this sense, such readings emphasize film noir's obsession with
instability, paranoia, and anxiety, not just in terms of World War II, the Cold War,
changing gender roles, and criminality, but also in terms of the increasing visibility of
marginalized racial and homosexual communities. In fact, it is because of its
obsessions, its excessiveness, that film noir proves to be a particularly fertile realm for
the exploration of these issues.

The ramifications of lesbian representation in classic film noir for gay and
lesbian studies, as the works on other genres by Terry Castle and Patricia White
suggest, are far-reaching. For the 1950s, especially, is a decade which is often
envisioned as a time of gay and lesbian invisibility (an unsurprising assumption given
the political landscape). However, as Castle and White have shown in their work,
respectively, on pre-twentieth-century literature and on other 1950s' film genres, these
periods of presumed lesbian absence, may more properly be construed as periods of
absent presences. In other words, although it may not be easy to uncover a
proliferation of “real” lesbian bodies (for differing historical, political, and linguistic reasons), reconceptualizing a lesbian presence in terms of desire, a spectral presence, a trace, or an effect, rather than solely as a physical embodiment, reveals a profusion of representations. As White notes:

Without projecting our current experiences of lesbian identity and sociality onto the past, we can still recognize that mass culture spoke to women in ways [which] influenced the emergence of lesbian culture and the forms it has taken. Hollywood films have in part constructed our desire; the work of our readings of these films and the discourses and practices surrounding them is to construct the conditions of our own representability. (6)

However, as the films analyzed in this study suggest, the representations uncovered may not produce squeals of delight and identification in the contemporary lesbian spectator. Jennifer Terry points out:

Since the homophile movement of the 1950s, struggles over visibility and representation form the basis of lesbian and gay political theory and practice in the United States. How we are represented, why we are represented, and if we are represented are central issues of contemporary homosexual politics and identity. We are still in the midst of challenging a legacy of pathology in relation to which we have been constrained to exist. However... deviant subjectivity is itself evidence of our power, not victimhood. (69-70)

I want to suggest, then, that the re-search for lesbian representation in periods of presumed invisibility consists not of looking for “positive” images (whatever that may mean), but rather of discovering traces of lesbian existence and desire—a project defined by absolute necessity, as well as exquisite pleasure.

This, in turn, raises other questions about what was to be the original focus of my study: the representation of lesbianism in neo-noir. For, from the 1960s onward,
lesbian and gay characters have become increasingly visible in mainstream film. This may be at least partially explained by Hollywood’s recognition, at least by the late 1980s, that there was a sizable gay and lesbian audience and that it was one with substantial spending power. Simultaneously, a blurring of the lines between independent “cinema” and Hollywood “movies” has taken place—in acknowledgment of both the presumed general audience’s presumed desire for “something different” onscreen and the marketability of “niche” films to specialized audiences (i.e., not only white gay men and lesbians, but also people of color, heterosexual women, and most recently, teenage girls). Since independent films, historically, focus on narratives, techniques, characters, issues, etc., marginalized by Hollywood films, this hybridization also is responsible for the proliferation of gay and lesbian characters flickering on the cineplex screens.

At the same time that the love which, previously, dare not speak its name was (and still is) being blasted in “surround sound” to anyone in a one-mile radius of a movie theater, a resurgence of interest in classic film noir began to take place, accompanied by the production of a plethora of neo-noir films. A perusal of filmographies and essays on neo-noir reveals that few films characterized as neo-noir were produced in the 1960s and 1970s, but that they flourish in the 1980s and 1990s. Silver’s and Ward’s filmography of neo-noir is exemplary in this regard, in spite of the occasional laxity of its requirements (which sometimes seem to demand only a vague noirish influence—thus the presence of *Lethal Weapon* I, II, and III). Nonetheless,
whether a listed film reflects only a trace of film noir characteristics or is a full-bodied reincarnation, their filmography still illustrates the neo-noir boom: three films were released in the 1960s, twenty in the 1970s, seventy-nine in the 1980s, and seventy-three in the 1990s (Silver and Ward 440-42). These numbers may seem to suggest that neo-noir films are now on the wane, but the “1990s” includes only the years 1990-1992.

Since cultural preoccupations and anxieties are manifested in the products of that culture, and since as my earlier discussion suggests, film noir, in its excesses and obsessions, is particularly fertile ground for the manifestation of cultural anxieties, the incredible burgeoning of the neo-noir film indicates both a period of tremendous change and instability, as well as an abundance of paranoia, fear, and existential angst about those transmutations. I want to suggest that the simultaneous epidemic of neo-noir films and the increasing visibility of lesbians and gay men--as bodies and as constructs--is not a coincidence. The perception of AIDS as a gay (male and female) contagion which threatens an “innocent” (heterosexual) majority, the accelerating activism of the gay and lesbian movement, the appearance of “deviance” in spaces of “normalcy” (television, Congress, the cover of Newsweek, the high school prom, the house next door, and even the family dinner table), have created a cultural homosexual panic signified metaphorically in the neo-noir film and other texts, and literally in the crucified body of Matthew Shepard in Montana, the bullet-ridden body of Rebecca Wight along the Appalachian Trail, and other bruised and battered gay and lesbian bodies which litter the landscape in the rest of the country.
This is not to suggest that the increasing visibility of gay men and lesbians is the only factor in the resurgence of neo-noir films. Speaking of the neo-noir films of the 1990s, B. Ruby Rich notes:

[They] look to the psychotic years of late noir (already tinged with parody and subversion) for [their] inspiration. [Their] power stems from those end-of-the-line dramas in which nobody at all could be trusted and not even the final frame held any explanation. . . .

Whenever nobody can be trusted, society may disintegrate, but noir can flourish. Enter Neo Noir to rewire the genre's circuitry to the currents of the present, flashing across its screen some fascinating messages about the fears and dilemmas of our age. (8)

Indeed, the similarities between the cultural transformations occurring in the late 1940s and the 1950s and those taking place in the 1980s and 1990s are striking. Instead of the Cold War, there is anxiety about the end of the Cold War; instead of the Bomb, the proliferation of nuclear weapons; instead of white flight to the suburbs, white flight within suburbs to gated communities. Additionally, a lack of faith in the "system," which used to reflect only the lives of marginalized groups who felt the brunt of its failures, now permeates society because of various political scandals and corruptions, as well as other disenchantments. The continuing integration (often perceived as intrusion) of white women and people of color into spaces and levels of power (at least up to the glass ceiling) previously held by white men also is reminiscent of the transitions in gender and race relations described earlier as marking the classic period of film noir.

In this sense, it is not surprising to see these particular changes reflected in neo-noir films through the continuing association of people of color with "low-lifes,"
seediness, drug addiction, and crime (e.g., African Americans and Latinos) or with a corrupt and fascistic global, regional, or neighborhood power (e.g., Asian businessmen and Asian, Latino, and African American drug lords or cops). However, the presence of African American filmmakers has had an effect on the construction of some neo-noir films which undermines the racism that has been endemic to film noir. Rich observes, “Race may have been virtually absent from the first round of noir . . . but it has a singular capacity to reinvigorate the noir form” (10). Speaking particularly of Carl Franklin’s Devil in a Blue Dress (1995) and One False Move (1993), she notes that they “invert not merely expectation but the moral universe that they address” (10).

In terms of the location of women in neo-noir films, Rich comments, “The protagonists of Neo Noir are patsies just like they were in the old days of noir, but now they’re ennobled by their idiocy, with the women in turn demonised (big surprise) by their intelligence” (9). Linda Mizejewski notes the “recent emergence of the female investigator in contemporary crime films” and states that “[t]he representation of a legally armed woman who is the center of narrative knowledge and action signals a serious transgression of this genre’s formal conventions” (6). Many of these crime films, needless to say, are also neo-noir films. In her analysis of Blue Steel (1990) and Silence of the Lambs (1991) (both of which are present in Silver and Ward’s filmography), she concludes, “[T]he genre of female investigation stumbles at key moments, forgets its ‘danger zones,’ and remains constrained by previous scripts” (20).
In spite of the constraints mentioned by Mizejewski, her argument has less constrained ramifications in terms of the lesbian presence in neo-noir films. Early in her essay, she observes:

As the slang word for ‘cop/detective’ itself suggests, the ‘female dick’ poses a substantial threat to heterosexuality as organized by mainstream cinema. . . . Her mere presence threatens to disrupt established power relations, calling into question not just her own heterosexuality but that of the entire (homsocial) male milieu that she has infiltrated . . . (6).

Thus the ‘problem’ of the female investigator is most easily resolved through familiar heterosexual strategies. . . . An alternative resolution of the female dick problem in cinema has been to represent her as a Hollywood version of the lesbian, thereby associating her with another kind of ‘illegitimacy’ (7).

Thus, one radical change from classic film noir is the presence of a lesbian as a protagonist in some neo-noir films. However, like the older films, frequently this presence is a product of connotation. For example, although some viewers read both Clarice Starling (Jodie Foster) in *Silence of the Lambs* and Megan Turner (Jamie Lee Curtis) in *Blue Steel* as lesbians, this occurs only through the “accumulation” of signifiers as mentioned earlier in the discussion about D.A. Miller’s work (125). And, as is true of the films noirs of Barbara Stanwyck, in the case of Jodie Foster, the process of signification circulates not just in a particular reading of the text, or within the text itself, but also around her star image, as it is configured by rumors of her lesbianism. Again, I do not mean to suggest that denotation exists at a level above connotation, but I do want to suggest that in some ways, the lesbian presence in neo-noir films is as apparitional as it is in classic films.
Similarly, although Black Widow (1986) has many lesbian fans and although the kiss and mouth-to-mouth resuscitation between Catherine (Teresa Russell) and Alex (Debra Winger) seems to denote lesbianism, Holmlund states that “Black Widow is far more obsessed with heterosexuality than with homosexuality,” while de Lauretis believes that the film’s “heavy hints at lesbianism” exist “merely to blow the viewer’s mind” (“A Decade” 142; “Guerillas” 22). Although I do not agree completely with either of these assessments, I do think these different responses raise interesting questions about lesbian spectatorship, as well as the constitution of both lesbian corporeality and lesbian desire—questions that also were raised during the Basic Instinct (1992) controversy over its representation of lesbians and lesbianism.

For, in addition to these well-publicized connoted, and perhaps even denoted, lesbian presences in the four films noted noted above, the lesbian presence is manifested differently, yet similarly, in two early examples of neo-noir films: Klute (1971) and the British Mona Lisa (1976). In Klute, two explicitly lesbian minor characters are used to signify the downward spiral on which Bree Daniels (Jane Fonda) soon will be careening if she does not latch onto the coattails of stability which enrobe John Klute (Donald Sutherland). Simultaneously, though, in its depiction of the tenuousness and instability of heterosexuality, the film presents a rather radical critique of heteronormativity. In other words, like In a Lonely Place and the four neo-noir films mentioned previously, and as Judith Mayne has written about Black Widow, Klute tries “to have it both
ways... to articulate desire between two women and yet remain within the conventions of classical narrative by drawing a line between ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ behavior” (Woman 47).

In Neil Jordan’s Mona Lisa, as in his more well-known (non-neo-noir) The Crying Game (1992), the supposedly shocking surprise is the revelation of the female protagonists’ sexual identity. In Mona Lisa, the black prostitute, Simone (Cathy Tyson), is revealed to be a lesbian involved with a white woman, while in The Crying Game, the black hairdresser, Dil (Jaye Davidson—who bears a startling resemblance to Cathy Tyson), is revealed to be a gay transvestite who wants to have a relationship with a white man. In addition to the complexities of these racial transmutations, the idea of “surprise” as masquerade is relative since most lesbian and gay spectators find it unsurprising that Simone identifies as lesbian and know as soon as they see Dil that she is a man. Two points need to be noted here: first, how a film’s address also can inflect lesbian representation and second, how, as is the case in all of the Stanwyck films analyzed earlier, the figure of Woman, regardless of race, is still conceptualized, at least by white filmmakers, as a treacherous enigma, whether her lesbianism is a product of connotation or denotation. What I am attempting to suggest in this brief discussion of neo-noir films is that the lesbian presence, whether embodied in a protagonist or a supporting character, whether implicit or explicit, black or white, still is most frequently represented by the three categories which I have argued characterize the period of classic film noir.
However, just as Carl Franklin's neo-noir films have the potential to revolutionize film noir in their configurations of race, so does the Wachowski brothers' Bound (1997), offer the possibility of the same in terms of configurations of lesbianism. The denotation of lesbianism in Bound is marked by none of the three previous structuring strategies. Vi (Jennifer Tilley), a femme fatale, is "fatale" only in terms of her relationship to men. In her explicitly lesbian relationship with the other main protagonist, Corky (Gina Gershon), a butch Jack (or Jane) of all trades just released from prison, Vi is merely "femme." Bound also differs from many classic films noirs and neo-noir films in that it suggests a happy ending for the two women who end up with money, freedom from men, and each other. In other words, Bound performs the remarkable task of marginalizing heterosexuality within the contours of a radicalized film noir context. If Bound is the future of neo-noir films, the lesbian presence in film noir may emerge from twilight and shadows and reside in a place which is not so lonely after all.
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