Shackled: female criminality, aggression, and gender-power, "craziness," and implication in representations of violent women

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"Shackled: Female Criminality, Aggression, and Gender – Power, ‘Craziness,’ and Implication in Representations of Violent Women"

by

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Thesis Advisor

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My Three Ring Circus

Ring One:

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Abstract:

This paper uses the women's liberation hypothesis – a criminological theory that suggests a positive relationship between increases in women's "liberation" and women's involvement in criminal activity – as a starting point to learn more about the influences of second-wave feminism and female representations of aggressive, violent, and/or criminal activity. These influences and representations were located in second-wave literature, as well as a number of visual and literary cultural productions. In the paper, the contradistinction of two identified responses of the female characters depicted in the films "Born In Flames" (1983), "Set It Off" (1996), "Thelma and Louise" (1991), and the texts Foxfire (1994), by Joyce Carol Oates, The Bell Jar (1971), by Sylvia Plath, Girl, Interrupted (1993), by Susanna Kaysen, and Prozac Nation (1994), by Elizabeth Wurtzel, as well as their plot lines, and subtexts are analyzed in search of these kinds of messages. As a result of this exploration, several cultural messages about concepts such as feminism, women and violence, depression, and "craziness," and their meanings, uses, and implications are revealed, and, consequently, critiqued.
Introduction:

During the “second wave” of the feminist movement, a theory referred to as “the women’s liberation hypothesis” surfaced among criminal theorists. This theory, which is still cited today, suggested that there was a positive relationship between female liberation and female crime. Specifically, as women were increasingly released from their gender-roles of domesticity into the public workplaces of men, they would be exposed to the same stresses and frustrations as their counterparts, thus simultaneously increasing their potential to engage in the criminal practices most common to men.

The women’s liberation hypothesis, clearly, is a bold assertion with many implications. It not only presumes motivations for criminal activity and males’ assumed predisposition to crime, but, also, women’s responses to “liberation”. Perhaps the most obvious assertion of the hypothesis is that it attributes second-wave feminism with having a rather substantial influence on female crime.

The hypothesis does not indicate a direct influence of second-wave feminism on female crime rates. Rather, the theory suggests that it is feminism’s implicit effect on women’s changing gender roles in society that consequently encouraged their migration into the public sphere of male work, thus increasing their exposure to stress. It is important to remember that even the women who did not abandon their gendered domestic duties were experiencing more stress during the time period of the 1960’s and 1970’s in another way: women, and women’s issues, had become much more public in general, and their social responsibilities
drastically increased. As popular criminological "strain" theories detailing the effects of stress on crime rates have long purported, this shift in itself could easily have led to crime, or at the very least the inclination for risk taking.

By using the women's liberation hypothesis simply as a starting point, this paper seeks to do three things. First, identify specific elements within second-wave feminism that seemed to be rather influential on women. Second, locate those elements in U.S. culture in order to see if the women's liberation hypothesis contains credibility and to examine the ways in which the public was responding to these identified aspects of feminism through character representation. The third goal of this paper, and that which is probably the most important, is to analyze what the character representations mean. In other words, what can we discern, what are we learning about the intersections of women, feminism, and criminal behavior in American culture? What ideological insights regarding the cultural attitudes about these areas are deduced or unveiled?

To begin the first task of identifying specific elements within second-wave feminism that the hypothesis indirectly purports to be rather influential on women, second-wave primary sources needed to be reviewed. Upon commencing this exploration, three particular themes surfaced: separatist rhetoric and female unification, women's depression due to their assigned domestic sex-roles, and man-hating. Furthermore, a much more general theme highlighting varied definitions and consequent labelings of "craziness" was also apparent. Lastly, at a somewhat homogenizing first glance, women seemed to fall into one of two categories: women who were anxiety-ridden and depressed over their expectation
to fulfil gendered sex-roles, or women who were angry about this expectation, therefore participating in somewhat “aggressive” feminist rhetorical arguments and/or activism.

Presupposing that feminism’s second wave was influential enough to increase female criminal activity, evidence of feminist ideology within U.S. culture needed to be located. Cultural production is visible in a variety of shapes and forms. To do the second task of locating the identified second-wave themes in U.S. culture, it made sense to look at examples of cultural production that seemed to directly communicate cultural ideologies through the use of language, such as books and films. Primary consideration for sources included representations of violent women, but, because feminism seemed to also trigger responses, or highlight the conditions of depressive women, sources representing this group were also sought after. When determining the time period from which these sources would originate, the two decades of the 1960’s and the 1970’s was the primary target. However, several works produced in the following decades, were also included. This decision was made because, as the hypothesis suggests, female crime will increase as women’s liberation increases. While the extent and meaning of women’s “liberation” can easily be contested, many would agree that women are more “liberated” than they were forty years ago, thus proposing that there should be more female criminal behavior, and representations of that behavior, in contemporary culture.

Connections between the themes teased out of the feminist second-wave discourse and representations of character’s engaged in aggressive, violent, and/or
criminal behavior, as well as character representations of anxiety and depression were found in an exploration of a series of films and texts. However, these connections established the credibility of the women's liberation hypothesis, only to the extent that the examples included both second-wave feminist elements of separatism, man-hating, depression, and "craziness," and female characters who commit criminal acts. These examples did not indicate that it was women's liberation or increasing involvement in public work that motivated them to act in criminal ways. Also, a few examples included character representations of women who were anxiety-ridden and depressed about their expectations to fulfill their gender roles and only fell deeper into their mental instability as a result of their desire to reject these expectations, suggesting that women's aggression/criminal activity was not the only response to a second-wave feminism that challenged those very roles.

Upon this discovery, it was determined that it would be useful to include an exploration of this somewhat secondary, perhaps subordinate response, because of its interesting juxtaposition to what seemed to be a much more common response of aggression, violence, and/or criminal activity. Specifically, the frustration, anger, or anxiety that women felt in regards to their subjugated positions in a patriarchal society caused responses that seemed to manifest in one of two ways: external projection of their feelings through criminal behavior, or internal projection, causing deeper depression. In other words, feelings of frustration, anxiety, and sadness were internalized, resulting in self-destruction, or, externalized, resulting in outwardly destructive behavior.
Also linking these two “responses” is the label of “crazy.” In the film and literary examples, both women engaged in criminal behavior as well as women who “responded” in self-destruction are labeled “crazy.” The use and implications of this label, which, in the examples explored, consequently, necessarily, pushes the characters outside of the boundaries that contain what is considered normal in society, is something that this paper seeks to investigate fully.

The third goal of this paper – that which is probably the most important – is to analyze what the character representations mean on a larger scale; What can we discern, what are we learning about how people conceptualize feminism, women’s violence, and “craziness”? What messages do these sources communicate, and how do they intersect?

In section one, a brief overview of relevant historical trends in criminal theory (as it pertains to women), as well as a more detailed explanation of the women’s liberation hypothesis and responses to the hypothesis, is provided. This will help the reader to not only better understand the ways in which criminologists have approached the area of female crime thus far, but also begin to think about various methods for examining female criminal activity. In section two, the three themes of second wave feminism, in addition to references of “craziness,” are presented and made clear for easier identification of the influence of these themes in the sources selected. Section three contains visual and textual sources of female violence and criminal activity. “Born in Flames” (1983), Joyce Carol Oates’ Foxfire (1994), “Set It Off” (1996), and “Thelma and Louise” (1991), are
all excellent examples of women engaged in “primary response” – aggressive, violent, criminal – behavior that include second wave themes. In addition, the “craziness” of the characters is a prominent issue in all of the movies; particularly, how it is determined and who determines it. Section four includes the literary sources of Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* (1971), Susanna Kaysen’s, *Girl, Interrupted* (1993), and Elizabeth Wurtzel’s, *Prozac Nation* (1994). The three books depict female characters’ struggling with a “secondary response” of depression and are depicted as anxious about the expectations for them to marry. The literary examples chosen also provide evidence of the blurring of the line that distinguishes what is normal and what is “crazy.” In section five, a thorough investigation of the implications of linking the themes of second wave feminism to female activity as portrayed in the visual and literary examples, is provided. Theoretical, cultural, and practical meanings associated and attached to these implications, including deliberations on women’s responses to the themes deduced from second wave feminism, violence, psychosis, and the use of the label “crazy.” Included in this section will be a theoretical discussion on women and empowerment, specifically as that empowerment relates to psychosis and violence. Finally, the conclusion section of this paper presents a summary of the discussions previously presented, as well as further thoughts, which might complicate the arguments presented, as well as future areas for research consideration is given.
Section 1: Relevant historical trends in criminal theory, the women liberation hypothesis, and responses to the hypothesis.

Although females have always participated in deviant behavior, they have never been placed at the center of criminal theory. Prior to the middle of the twentieth-century, criminologists saw little importance in investigating female criminal activity. The field of criminology was, and still is, male-dominated and male-centered. Up until the mid twentieth-century, theories developed from research on male criminal activity were believed to suffice for female activity as well. However, around that time, criminologists began developing theories for causes of delinquent/criminal behavior in women.

The theories of the 1950's shifted from predominantly biology-based criminal explanations into explorations of prescribed gender roles for women. This work concluded that when women fail to adhere to prescribed gender roles, they encounter strong resistance from society. This led to further work on women’s criminality, including reworking definitions about terms such as “masculine” and “feminine” work declaring that women had a relatively “hidden” status in society.¹

During the 1970’s, vast amounts of literature began circulating within criminal theorists circles suggesting that rise in female crime across the United States was linked to the women’s liberation movement. The literature asserted that as the feminist movement of the 1970’s progressed, women would experience

increased amounts of “liberation” from traditional gender roles, enabling them to disengage from their “feminine” ways, and start engaging in “masculine” behavior. In other words, the feminist movement would liberate women from the traditionally female domestic sphere and allow them to participate in the traditionally male public sphere. Here, they would become exposed to the everyday frustrations and stresses that men are exposed to and that, as criminal theorists believed, exist as the reasons why men partake in criminal activity. As this transition takes place, women will tend to emulate the behaviors of their male counterparts in order to survive the public domain; consequently, women’s likelihood and opportunity to commit crime will increase.2

In their book, *The Female Offender* (2004), Meda Chesney-Lind and Lisa Pasko report that female crime rates have steadily increased since feminism’s “second wave.” “[B]etween [the years of] 1960 and 1975, arrests of adult women went up 60.2% and arrests of juvenile women increased a startling 253.9%. In specific, nontraditional crimes, the increases were even more astounding. For example, between 1960 and 1975, the number of women arrested for murder was up 105.7%.”3 This trend continued on into the late 1970’s and 1980’s. “Between 1978-1988” Chesney-Lind and Pasko cite, “the number of women arrested for violent crimes went up 41.5%,” as compared to just 23.1% for men.4

Despite these statistics, Chesney-Lind and Pasko, among others, adamantly refuse to support notions of a link between increasing crime and

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2 Ibid., 237-245.
feminism. In 1980, James and Thornton questioned almost 300 young women about their personal feelings/responses to feminism and, also, about their delinquent tendencies. Through the responses, the study concluded that the females' attitudes toward feminism had a relatively minor direct effect on their commission of status offenses\(^4\) but a more indirect (although still minor) effect on their tendency to commit crimes of property, or what’s considered “aggressive” delinquency.\(^5\)

Chesney-Lind urges us to probe statistical records even further and consider important contributing factors for criminal activity, such as race and class. She suggests that the women’s liberation hypothesis contains elements of racism, as the women who were involved in criminal activity at the time were not the same women who were involved with, or influenced by, the political organizations of feminism’s second wave. She writes, “women offenders of the 1970’s were unlikely targets for the messages of the largely middle-class women’s movement. Women offenders tended to be poor, members of minority groups, with truncated educations and spotty employment histories.”\(^6\)

In a recent search on the U.S Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics webpage, data for the years between 1976 and 2000 does not confirm

\(^4\) Ibid., 33.
\(^5\) “Status offenses, in contrast to criminal violations, permit the arrest of youth for a wide range of behaviors that violate parental authority: [such as] ‘running away from home’; being ‘a person in need of supervision,’ ‘a minor in need of supervision,’ ‘incorrigible,’ ‘beyond control,’ ‘truant’” etc. For further information see note 3, 10.
\(^7\) Chesney-Lind and Pasko, *The Female Offender*, 112.
that there was an increase in female criminal activity. Clearly, the data are inconsistent.

In recent years, a number of feminists and feminist criminologists have contributed a great deal of literature to the area of female delinquency and criminology. Meda Chesney-Lind is probably the best known feminist criminologist. She categorizes feminist-based delinquency theories as those that point out females’ vulnerable relationships with males due to their subjugated positioning in society. This vulnerability can be attributed to physical, mental, economic and political dominance that men have, and maintain, over women in a patriarchal society.

Perhaps most importantly, Chesney-Lind argues that women’s reactions to male domination are crucial to understanding female delinquency, and several other criminal theorists have adapted this concept. Attempts made to gain control, poor economical situations and class struggle, the belief that male supremacy has led to the consistent subjugation of women throughout history, and that male violence (battery, rape, women reacting in self-defense) launches women into the criminal system through incidents of self-defense are all commonly held explanations. Although this theory does not directly support or counter the purported motivations for female crime described by the women’s liberation

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hypothesis, it does, however, provide a lens through which one can analyze and interpret women’s involvement in criminal activity.

As women gradually gained status as a subject within the field of criminology, several competing theories explaining female criminal behavior emerged. Among these theories was the women’s liberation hypothesis, which connected increases in female crime rates with the influence of second-wave feminism. While the correlating data and application of this theory are inconclusive, a small number of feminist criminal theorists have articulated their responses to the hypothesis. These responses include the teasing out of racist and classist elements, and by placing women’s reactions to male supremacy first.

To better understand the ways in which feminism might have influenced female incidents of criminal activity, an exploration of second-wave feminism is necessary.
Section 2: The three themes of second wave feminism, and “craziness.”

The history of feminism is broad and complex, and, like any given subject, it is best understood when viewed as a whole. However, clear divisions within the movement detailing patterns in rhetoric and thought are easy and even necessary to discern. In reviewing the feminist literature of the second wave, three distinct, yet related themes emerge. The first theme centers on separatist rhetoric, and the formation and importance of unified all-female organizations and political groups. The second theme addresses two variations of the term “crazy,” in its application to two groups of white, middle-class women. The third theme focuses on feminists' positioning of man as “the enemy,” and the transformation of physically “aggressive” rhetoric into action.

During a time in American history when political wars were being waged across the country, women experienced an increase in their opportunity to rally for social change. The goals were varied, although they originated in their interests in helping black men and women achieve rights equal to those granted whites. Eventually, white, middle-class women began applying the rhetoric of racial equality to their own circumstances, and, placing gender rights over racial rights, they developed their own political agendas.

Witnessing the dissolution of a number of black civil rights groups, the women who had formed together to fight gender inequality recognized the necessity and importance of group cohesion. Mixed political goals would result in nothing but ineffective attempts to bring about social change. As organizations
became unified, focus was placed on maintaining that unification, preventing
disintegration, and identifying what they wanted to change in society. A number
of feminists, such as Iris Marion Young and Nancy Cott, felt that one of the
"essential elements of feminism [was] the deliberate creation of solidarity among
women." 9

Most groups believed that gender inequality was a result of patriarchal
institutions in the culture, but patriarchy, as a concept was difficult to locate. As a
result, most feminist groups pointed their fingers at men, since they were the ones
who benefited from patriarchy while women suffered. Some feminists attempted
to eliminate everything that they associated with male-patriarchy from their
organizations. They refused to assign their members to hierarchical positions of
responsibility therefore eliminating the use of titles such as "president" and "vice-
president." Instead, members shared in all of their responsibilities, concerning
themselves more with "sisterhood" than leadership.

At times, feminists’ efforts to maintain female group cohesion became
militant in nature. "The Feminists," one of many New York City-based groups,
detailed an explanation of the steps necessary to prevent "infiltration" in a
declaration piece titled, "A Political Organization to Annihilate Sex Roles"
(1969). For The Feminists, not only men, but also any woman associating with

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9 Dawn Keetley and John Pettegrew, eds., Public Women, Public Words: A Documentary History
xv, xvii.
men, were viewed as detrimental to the focus of the group, an offense that constituted expulsion.  

Betty Friedan's book, *The Feminine Mystique*, was published in 1963 during the very beginnings of the second wave. Addressing the troubling social and psychological confinements of women due to their designated primary sex-role of domestic caretaker, Friedan pinpointed what seemed to be plaguing white, middle-class housewives across America. Women, whose lives consisted of housework, childcare, and attending to their husbands, were becoming bored and dissatisfied with their lives.

Presented with very few options for work outside of the domestic realm, women were socialized to locate their worth and responsibility in dirt-free kitchen floors, marriage, and properly behaved children. Therefore, the lack of interest or fulfillment from these activities resulted in intense feelings of guilt, depression, confusion, and in some cases, "craziness" or psychosis.

Further augmenting these feelings was the lack of communication between and about women regarding their experiences. Doctors themselves could not, oftentimes, provide discriminating diagnoses for female clients experiencing depression. Women oftentimes attempted to drown out their feelings with tranquilizers and other drugs which only worsened women's conditions, muddled public responses to these conditions, hindered proper medical assessments, and further silenced women's issues. Some people began to regard these women as "crazy."

10 The Feminists, "A Political Organization to Annihilate Sex Roles," in *Public Women, Public *
Simultaneously, many radical feminists were being tagged with a similar label of "craziness." As media coverage of various feminist coalition demonstrations increased, a general distaste for feminist activity within more conservative societies grew. These groups quickly dismissed feminists as abnormal and inappropriate. Many reporters perpetuated this thinking by selectively documenting the more "aggressive" protests and actions.

Observing feminist behavior through a lens of lunacy was visible on multiple levels. For example, while feminist Gloria Steinem worked as a journalist, she stated that she personally saw memos sent out to talent bookers for the Johnny Carson and David Frost shows that referred to feminists as "nuts." \(^{11}\)

Also, the FBI, under the direction of J. Edgar Hoover, maintained surveillance on [several] groups of women.\(^{12}\)

As women's political involvement matured, emphasis shifted from talking about women's problems to doing something about them. While most feminists did not pose any physical threat to society, a very marginal number of groups did push societal boundaries of safety. Some of these groups voiced outright hatred towards men, and within these groups "Man-hating" became a popular term of expression. However, the thinking in other groups moved beyond hatred towards the violent belief that in order to successfully combat their oppression all men must systematically be eliminated from society.

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Words, 23.


\(^{12}\) Ibid., 141.
Several feminists addressed the philosophical aspects of viewing man as the enemy, such as Pamela Kearnon, Jayne West, and, most notably, Valerie Solanis, who wrote the “SCUM (Society to Cut Up Men) Manifesto” in 1967. Solanis in particular insisted that SCUM members “always operate on a criminal as opposed to a civil-disobedience basis.”

One notable example of feminist “aggressive” activity is the sit-in event in the office of John Mack Carter, editor-in-chief and publisher of Ladies' Home Journal. A group of women who sought Carter's replacement by a woman, in-house company day-care facilities and created the opportunity to produce their own issue of the magazine, among other propositions, arrived unannounced. When Carter “refused to negotiate,” a small group of women, including one who called herself “Destroyer,” stormed his desk “intent on Carter’s forcible eviction.” Eventually, John Mack Carter agreed to a very modified settlement, but “by the time the sit-in ended, the women ‘had smoked the cigars on [his] desk, taken over the men's room, and left the editorial offices in a mess.”

Separatist rhetoric, variations of the term “crazy,” feminists’ positioning of man as “the enemy,” and the transformation of “aggressive” rhetoric into action are all obvious themes located within second-wave feminism. Before the larger cultural and ideological components of the women’s liberation hypothesis can be unwrapped, evidence supporting the connection between second-wave feminism and female criminal activity must be located. In the section of this

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14 Davis, Moving the Mountain, 112.
15 Ibid., 113.
paper, a grouping of textual and visual sources that nicely represent this connection, as well as some of its implications, is explored.
Section 3: “Aggressive” or criminal women and the naming of “crazy.”

“Born in Flames,” *Foxfire*, “Set It Off,” and “Thelma and Louise,” are all excellent examples of films or text that represent women enacting in “aggressive,” criminal, and violent behavior. In each source, the women are shown navigating through a situation or set of circumstances that challenges their authority. Almost all of the actions depicted in these examples are a response to that challenge.

Second-wave elements are evident in these films and text. The first of these themes is of separatism and female unity. In each case, the women identify a either a particular goal, or some sort of force that they need to protect themselves from, thus forming cohesive, all-female relationships to more effectively achieve that goal or defend themselves. This cohesiveness is best represented in the films that depict the actions and experiences of “gang-like” groups of women, or, specifically, female units of more than two, such as “Born in Flames,” and “Set It Off.” The book *Foxfire* is a wonderfully appropriate example, as it is a story about an all-female teenage gang. However, even in “Thelma and Louise,” it is absolutely crucial for the two leading female characters to maintain solidarity.

The next second-wave influence evident in every visual and literary examples provided is that men are routinely depicted as the enemy. This depiction is most explicit in *Foxfire*, and “Thelma and Louise.” However, evidence of this opposition towards men can still be located in “Born in Flames” and “Set It Off,” as the only resistance that the female characters encounter in
each of the two movies is predominantly male. It is important to remember that
only a marginal number of women actually identified themselves as “man-haters,”
and that even fewer women felt that the elimination (killing) of men was
necessary. However, it is necessary to keep this ideology in mind not only
because the actions and thinking of the characters represent the views of the
people who created these movies, but also because this helps us to understand,
and possibly gleam what, exactly, the characters’ motivations are. We are
interested in motivation, in part because we want to see how the women’s
liberation hypothesis holds up, but, also because it communicates something to us
about women’s experiences.

Finally, the most interesting element evident in every single example
provided is that which addresses the mental stability of the female characters. At
some point in the films and book mentioned, the female characters and those that
they associate themselves with are referred to as “crazy.” The people who most
often do this naming, are those attempting to prevent the women from engaging in
aggressive, criminal or violent behavior. Intriguingly, however, in some
instances, such as “Thelma and Louise,” the women actually embrace labeling
themselves as well as each other. Through these various examples, we start to-
discover how powerful this term is, so that when a thorough analysis is provided
on the visual and textual sources on not only violence, but also women’s
depression/psychosis, we can see what significance the label holds. This
significance is dependent on who uses the term, why they use it, and how the
category of “crazy women” subsumes women’s violent and depressive responses in negative ways.

“Born in Flames” (1983) is a blend of science fiction, feminism, and action. The movie marks “the ten year anniversary of the war of liberation,” the most “peaceful revolution” during which a socialist government steps into power. The movie details the lives of ex-blue-collar worker and the leader of the Women’s Army, Adelaide Norris, and Honey, a laid-back, funky radio personality, as it documents the “terrorist” activities of the female members of the Women’s Army in its battle to fight oppression.

In one of the first scenes of the movie, a woman is shown walking down the street past a group of men, who proceed to harass her as she passes. When the men begin to sexually assault her, it appears as if the energy that accompanies the ten year anniversary celebrations will be channeled in a very negative way. However, out of nowhere, a piercing whistle-like sound is heard. As it grows louder and louder it becomes evident that what is causing the noise is about fifty women riding bicycles and blowing whistles, and the women are headed right for the attackers. They pull the men off of the women and beat them, disappearing almost as quickly as they appeared.

The women on bikes are members of the Women’s Army, a group of women engaged in a fight against oppression. While the oppression that the Women’s Army fights is never explicitly articulated as oppression due to gender inequality, the messages communicating that the women are in a “war” against

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16 Born in Flames, Lizzie Borden, dir. (USA, 1983), 80 min.
men is clear. As first evidenced with the bike-riding women, the Army is only shown in situations countering men.

Another group of men that the Women's Army is up against is a team of male investigators. Like the handful of second-wave feminist groups monitored by the FBI, investigators are secretly watching the Women's Army. In the movie, the investigators worry about the increasing momentum of the organization, likening them to “terrorists” and pointing out that the women's army is “starting to appeal to women who had written them off as lunatics years ago.” Clearly, not only are the investigators concerned about the growing power of the Women's Army, but they are also concerned about the transition of a public perception of the Army shifting from viewing them as “lunatics.” As the other sources in this section and the following section are explored the uneasiness that the investigators reveal will consistently be repeated. Consistently, the investigators are depicted as the enemy of the Women's Army, both interfering with their efforts, and, eventually, causing the death of, Adelaide Norris.

One of the most pivotal points in the movie occurs about halfway through when, Adelaide is fired from her job as a construction worker. She becomes very frustrated over her job loss, and decides that she must do something to combat the oppression of various minorities, particularly women. Adelaide decides to approach the popular radio personality “Honey” to ask her to consider merging Honey’s group of friends from the radio station with the Women's Army.

Honey is unsure about the merger. Although she knows that there will be “strength in numbers” if the two groups merge, Honey, as well as some of her
radio friends, are hesitant to join the women’s army because it seems to be “all rhetoric and no action.” When Honey eventually voices her reasons behind her hesitancy to Adelaide, Adelaide is initially not interested in directing the Women’s Army towards a much more “active” organization. However, after Adelaide consults with her dear friend and mentor, she becomes convinced otherwise. Zelia, who is an ex-political warrior herself, explains to Adelaide that the Women’s Army has a right and a need to take increased action in their fight against oppression because “…all oppressed people have a right to violence.” Based on Adelaide’s decision, the two groups merge, and the Women’s Army begins to take action.

This scene is depicted as being so pivotal perhaps because it highlights some of the very issues that second-wave feminist’s struggled with. In determining which groups individual women wanted to unify with, the particulars of that group, such as goals and the means by which they intended to achieve those goals, needed to match their own interests. Furthermore, the debate between rhetoric and action, or even violent action, was also something that was discussed in feminist groups.

As the movie continues, it becomes clear that Adelaide’s decision to lead the Women’s Army in a more actively violent direction has come at a price. After she returns from taking up arms in Libya, she is intercepted by the male investigators at the airport and put in jail. Within just a few days, Adelaide mysteriously dies in her jail cell.
Adelaide's death infuriates the Women's Army, and acts as a catalyst for them to begin taking much more serious and intense action in their fight against oppression. The group repeatedly breaks into news stations such as CBS. In one such instance, the women point guns at the television workers, forcing them to interrupt regular broadcasting and air footage of Zella Wiley speaking out about Adelaide death. In this particular broadcast, Zella Wiley, who is referred to by the investigators as a "walking lunatic," declares a war against oppression.

In the final scenes of the movie, women are shown constructing a bomb that is subsequently placed on the roof on the World Trade Center, destroying the antennae on top.

*Foxfire* (1994), by Joyce Carol Oates, is a book about five young teenage girls who form an all-girl gang. Like the Women's Army, the FOXFIRE gang commits a variety of illegal acts, only targeting men. The book documents the major events in the "FOXFIRE" gang's lifespan, and, although they never declare a "war against oppression," the girls are very obviously fighting the same battle as the Women’s Army. Like the women in "Born In Flames", the FOXFIRE girls create an all-female alliance that view men as "the enemy," and, also, are often referred to as "crazy."

The fictional 1950’s FOXFIRE gang originally consisted of five girls from upstate New York. Similarly to how the Women’s Army is first introduced in "Born In Flames", the FOXFIRE gang is formed as a result of one of the member’s falling victim to the sexual advances of her mathematics teacher. Mr.
Buttinger. However, instead of riding up on bicycles and blowing whistles, the FOXFIRE gang daringly paints Mr. Buttinger's car with obscenities for revenge.

FOXFIRE member Maddy “Monkey” Wirtz narrates the story. In the beginning of the book, she quickly points out to the reader that she has chosen to document the experiences of the FOXFIRE gang to prevent “distortions,” “misunderstandings,” and outright “lies” about the group’s decision to form. In defense of the gang she writes, “Yes we committed what you would call crimes. And [yes] most of these went not only unpunished but [also] unacknowledged — our victims, all male, were too ashamed, or too cowardly, to come forward to complain. It’s hard to feel sorry for them! You’ll see!”

Almost intuitively, Maddy senses that the girls’ gang is something that all of the members will have to defend at some point. For some reason, she is painstakingly typing out pages of information about the gang, almost in order to provide an explanation for their “criminal” behavior despite her declaration that most of their behaviors were unacknowledged. Further, Maddy also seems to suggest that the gang is defending themselves not only from their male victims, but also from those who might feel sorry the men that the gang has targeted.

FOXFIRE was a great source of pride and power for its members. They intentionally differentiated themselves from the all-male gangs in their town and stated that their gang was a true sisterhood...not a mere mirror of the boys [gangs] and that “the very sound ‘girl gang’ had the power to send the blood racing!”

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18 Ibid., 44.
19 Ibid., 35.
This feeling of power is similar to that which Adelaide Norris and Honey felt as they joined forces in the Women's Army, and, as FOXFIRE eventually proved, this feeling provided them with a similar ability to take action.

One day, when Maddy is walking down the street past her Uncle's clothing store, she notices an old typewriter in the trash. When she approaches her Uncle to ask if she could have it, he tells her that she must buy it from him. Despite the fact that he was throwing it out, Maddy and her Uncle agree on a price of five dollars. However, five dollars quickly rises to eight dollars after he verbally manipulates and hasses Maddy. Maddy eventually agrees, but when she finally returns with the money, he lures her into his office and raises the price once more, unless she performs a sexual "favor" on him.

Maddy flees the store to find safety in her FOXFIRE sisters. The gang is furious over what has happened to Maddy, and together, they plot, and carry out, a brutal revenge:

They pummel him. They tear at him — clothes, and flesh. They kick him. There is a point early on when Maddy...pulls feebly at the others' hands suddenly worried [her Uncle] might have a heat attack or a stroke but her FOXFIRE sisters rightly ignore her...[FOXFIRE sister] Boom-Boom's hyena laugh, Boom-Boom...straddling...slapping and punching and squeezing cruelly, 'Giddyup fatso! Giddyup you prick!' Legs in a transport of bliss her eyes a}
boxer shorts down past his thrashing naked thighs, knees, ankles, feet, and off, in singleminded fury kicking him as he kicks, or tries to kick, to protect himself but there is no protection against FOXFIRE.  

Clearly, FOXFIRE shares in the same mentality as Zella Wiley; “all oppressed people have a right to violence.” For most of the remainder of the book, the FOXFIRE gang continuously engages in violent behavior in order to overcome various forms of oppression: When Legs discovers that a dwarf-woman is being held prisoner in a house by her brother and raped every night, she and another FOXFIRE member burn down their house with both of them inside; when a man attempts to assault Legs during an interview, she quickly draws her switchblade out of her jacket and cuts the man on his face, allowing him to “buy her off” with jewelry, a camera, and money; and when Maddy is almost raped while “hooking” Legs delivers a “skull fracturing” blow to the man’s head.  

However, towards the end of the book, FOXFIRE develops a very risky scheme to kidnap a wealthy millionaire, simply to make money off of a rich man. Maddy and some of the other FOXFIRE members are uncomfortable with the plot, but she is the only one who decides to leave the gang, and is ostracized by the group.  

FOXFIRE’s kidnapping plan goes fatally wrong; the police show up and the gang dissolves in attempt to escape, and four of the members end up missing after a car chase with the police ends in a terrible crash. As Maddy concludes her

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[20] Ibid., 77.
recollection of FOXFIRE’s life, she realizes that her choice to leave the gang saved her own.

Unfortunately, the four female characters in the 1996 Hollywood action movie “Set it Off,” do not pull out of their “gang” and, consequently, do not have their lives saved like Maddy. When Francesca “Frankie” Sutton, Lida “Stony” Newson, Cleopatra “Cleo” Sims, and Tisean “T.T.” Williams, decide to rob a handful of banks to compensate for their lack of money and “the system” which has caused them pain, three out of the four women are killed – the only remaining friend forced to leave the country and live alone.

When Frankie loses her job as a bank teller due to her inability to “follow standard procedure,” during a bank robbery, she joins her three friends, Stony, Cleo, and T.T., working for a night cleaning service. The four women begin to spend a great deal of time with one another, hanging out during the day and working together at night. One day, Frankie is particularly disgruntled and expresses her anger over losing her job and complains that due to her faulty responses during the bank robbery, she is unable to get a recommendation from her previous employer that would allow her to work at another bank.

In response to Frankie’s frustrations, Cleo speaks up and says that the women should consider robbing a bank themselves. T.T. tells Cleo that her idea is “crazy,” but Cleo responds, “No really. The four of us could take a bank”; that if the “crack-head” who robbed the bank where Frankie used to work could do so successfully, then they could too. However, Stony agrees with T.T. and thinks

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21 *Set It Off*, F. Gary Gray, dir. (USA, 1996), 123 min. 28
that Cleo’s idea is crazy. She states, it’s “too bad we ain’t some hard up crack-head mother fuckers. Sure we could do some suicidal shit like rob a bank. But we ain’t crazy, so we can’t.” Frankie responds immediately to Stony and asks her if she “makes the rules.” The two go back and forth in their opinions for a while and when Stony tells Frankie that none of them are going to rob a bank Frankie replies, eventually saying “You’re right, we ain’t gonna rob no bank. Let’s just go in there and blow it the fuck up!”

However, the women do end up deciding to rob the bank. All of the women are in desperate need of money, Stony’s brother has been killed, and T.T.’s child has been taken away from her by child services; they are angry and frustrated. The women rationalize their plot with the claim that they are “just taking [money] away from the system…that’s fucking [them] all anyway.”

At the moment the women begin the bank robbery, T.T. gets nervous and backs out of the plan. Regardless, the bank robbery proves successful. The women are delighted with the amount of money that they have managed to get away with, and very proud of their work. However, Frankie is very irritated with T.T. for backing out, and decides that she should not receive a “cut” since she didn’t participate. Frankie argues, “She didn’t do anything, [so] she doesn’t get anything.” T.T. pleads with her, and explains to Frankie that she needs the money in order to prove to child services that she is able to take care of her son. The other women support T.T. and question not T.T.’s, but Frankie’s loyalty to the group. Eventually, Frankie folds, and tells T.T. “It ain’t you I’m mad at. I was trippin’. You my girl.” and hands T.T. the money.
Although Frankie, Stony, Cleo, and T.T. do not appear to view men as "the enemy" in "Set It Off," their interactions do reveal second-wave themes of female cohesiveness and the labeling of "crazy." In fact, it is these very two themes that are directly addressed by the character’s themselves; Stony is almost completely aware that in order for the women to engage in criminal behavior such as robbing a bank would necessarily determine their "craziness," while T.T. and Frankie battle over the importance of group, female solidarity. But perhaps more interestingly, "Set It Off" is the third example explored that seems to communicate a rather dismal fate for its female characters who have chosen to engage in aggressive or violent behavior.

Towards the end of the movie, the women’s good luck runs out. When a former employer steals all of their robbery money from them, and, later, T.T. shoots him during an altercation, the women suddenly find themselves broke and scared. Faced with nothing but the very same circumstances that they were faced with prior to having robbed any of the banks, the four friends decide that they must rob one more bank.

However, the man that Stony has fallen in love with manages the bank that the Cleo decides that the women will rob. Consequently, Stony is torn. Almost as if Stony is aware of the disastrous fate that will fall upon her and her friends if they decide to once again engage in criminal behavior, her decision to betray her lover and remain loyal to her friends is depicted as extremely difficult to make. None the less, she rejects her boyfriend joins her friends one last time.
The final bank robbery is cataclysmic. The women take too much time inside the bank collecting the money and the police arrive on scene. T.T. gets shot while in the bank and dies shortly after in the getaway car. Cleo, Stony, and Frankie drive as fast as they can to try and escape the police, but, like the FOXFIRE members as they try to flee from their kidnapping disaster, they do not get away unharmed.

Trapped in a tunnel, Cleo tells Stony and Frankie to get out of the car and run on foot. This is the last time the three women will ever see each other. Cleo, whom police surround, is shot while stepping out of the car and Frankie, is also shot while running away from a police officer. Stony, the only one to survive, sneaks onto a bus to hide and witnesses the shooting of Frankie from her window-seat. As the bus is driving away, Stony makes eye contact with the officer who has killed Frankie. The officer, however, does not move away from his position near Frankie, and thus allows Stony to escape.

The final scene of the movie shows Stony in a warm place that appears to be outside of the United States. However, the viewer is reminded that her escape is only a result of the police officer's, as well as her former lover's, decision to let her get away. Before she drives off into the sunset, Stony first makes a phone call to her former lover, whom she suspected knew about her bank robberies, thanking him for not turning her in.

In “Thelma and Louise” (1991), the two main female characters spend the entire duration of the movie avoiding being “turned in.” After Louise shoots

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22 Thelma and Louise, Ridley Scott, dir. (USA, 1991). 129 min.
and kills the man who was attempting to rape Thelma outside a bar on the first night of their road trip, the two best friends make a run for Mexico.

On their way, the two examine their dissatisfaction with their lives, and, although this movie only details the experiences of two women rather than a group, gang, or army of women, Thelma and Louise do continuously prove their commitment and loyalty to each other. Furthermore, as the women progress further away from their domestic origins, they shed their bantam roles of “little housewife” and waitress, and partake in a series of criminal actions. In this sense, then, this movie is the best example that supports the women’s liberation hypothesis; as Thelma and Louise transition from their predetermined gender role into one that is more “liberated,” the two do engage in more criminal activity.

However, as has been the case in every example examined thus far, the movie seems to suggest that not only are the women engaging in criminal behavior as a response to negative experiences with men, but also a very important message—not unlike the ones communicated in “Born in Flames,” Foxfire, and “Set It Off”—that if women do not adhere to specific female-gendered roles, they are “crazy” and will be punished.

The day after the murder, Louise decides that in order for she and Thelma to succeed in their escape, they must first obtain some money. Louise phones her boyfriend, Jimmy, and asks him to wire them money. Jimmy agrees to wire the money to a hotel in Oklahoma, and Thelma and Louise decide that once they receive the money, they should head straight for Mexico.
On the way to the hotel, Thelma instantly becomes taken with a young man named J.T., and eventually begs Louise to allow him to hitch a ride with them out west. Louise declines at first, but when they uncannily run into the young man again, the two offer him a ride.

When the three of them arrive at the hotel, Jimmy has not wired the money to Louise; he is there in person. It is clear that Jimmy wants to talk with Louise and so the women decide to stay the night in a motel; Louise retires to a room with Jimmy and Thelma to a room with J.T.

Louise spends the night breaking up with Jimmy and Thelma and J.T. become intimately involved. During Thelma’s time with J.T., he confesses to her that he is an “outlaw,” wanted for bank robbery. After Thelma probes for more details, he tells her about his experiences robbing banks and performs his “hold-up” routine.

The next morning, Louise says goodbye to Jimmy, and Thelma joins her for breakfast in a diner near the hotel. As Thelma excitedly tells Louise about her night with J.T., the two quickly realize that he has been left in Thelma’s room with the women’s money. They hurriedly return to Thelma’s room, but, it is too late; the money is gone and so is J.T. Louise becomes utterly distraught: She is frustrated with Thelma’s carelessness and fears what will happen to them. The two, unsure of what their fate will be, reload into Louise’s car and once again head for Mexico.

After driving a short distance, Thelma and Louise stop at a convenience store. While Louise waits outside in the car unknowingly, Thelma is inside,
robbing the store. As she performs the robbery, she recites, almost word for word, the routine that J.T. had shown her. She gathers the money from the store clerk and races out of the store screaming to an oblivious Louise to “drive!” Thelma is absolutely thrilled with her success, laughing and smiling as the two drive off. Louise, who is shocked at Thelma’s behavior, yells at her, “you are disturbed!” Thelma proudly replies, “yeah, I do believe I am.”

The incidences leading up to Thelma’s convenience store robbery are very significant, as Thelma’s character has undergone a transformation. In support of the women’s liberation hypothesis, it seems as though when Thelma slipped out of her role as a wife by sleeping with J.T., she consequently also slipped out of her role as a “normal” citizen by shortly thereafter robbing convenience store. However, while this character example does represent a woman who engages in criminal activity after she is “liberated” from her domestic gender role, there are three elements about this instance that are worth further examination. First, Thelma’s robbery can easily be attributed to the fact that J.T. stole the two women’s money, which, in another reflection could suggest – as several of the other film and text examples have shown thus far – that not only women engage in criminal activity in response to negative encounters with men, but that women are punished for acting outside of their predetermined gender roles. This conclusion is only strengthened when referencing how Thelma, who hadn’t asked her husband “permission” to go on the road trip with Louise, was almost raped the first night of the trip. Second, women learn about aggressive and/or criminal behavior from men, and are simply mimicking that behavior. Just as Thelma
robbed the convenience store by performing the routine she learned from J.T., the women in “Set It Off” decided to rob banks because they were introduced to the idea as a result of Frankie’s experience witnessing a bank robbery. Third, as all of the film and text examples reviewed seem to suggest, when women engage in aggressive and/or criminal activity, they cross over the line that separates “normal” from “crazy.”

All these elements are further reinforced throughout the remainder of the movie, most evident in the friends’ encounter with the policeman, the truck driver, and their death.

When Louise is pulled over by a police officer for speeding she is very concerned. The friends know that with just one call into police headquarters they will be quickly identified and arrested, so, Louise is very cooperative, even when the male officer strangely tells Louise to sit in the passenger seat of his car and take off her “eyewear”. However, Thelma is clearly tired of cooperating with people, and, as she apologizes for her behavior, stating that “three days ago neither [she nor Louise would’ve] pull[ed] a stunt like this... [but that if he was to] ever meet [her] husband [he would] understand why,” she points her gun at him and orders him out of the car. The policeman, who has shifted very quickly in his disposition from authority to fear, begs the two women not to hurt him, explaining that he has a wife and children at home. This disclosure apparently strikes a cord with Thelma, who first tells him to “be sweet to [his family], especially [the] wife,” because [her] husband wasn’t sweet...and look how [she]
turned out” (my italics) and then forces him into the trunk of his car. Once again the two are off.

After a short while of driving, Thelma and Louise become in their second significant encounter. During their migration towards Mexico, the women have repeatedly passed by the same truck driver on the highway. Each time they pass this man, he yells obscenities at the women and performs a variety of sexual gestures. As Thelma and Louise flee from their encounter with the police officer, they pass the trucker yet again. This time, however, the women motion him over to the side of the road.

The man is shown excited; slipping off his wedding ring, it is obvious that he thinks that the women will finally meet his advances. However, as he approaches them, the women being to interrogate him similarly to how the police officer began questioning them just moments before. Louise tells him to take of his “shades” and Thelma tells him that they think he has “really bad manners.” Surprised that his anticipated romp has turned into a scolding, the trucker becomes confused and angered by the women’s behavior. When they demand an apology, he curses at them and tells them that they are crazy. Louise, responds in a proud, matter-of-fact tone, “You got that right!” and her and Thelma’s demand for an apology. When the trucker refuses, the women pull out their guns and aim at him; they eventually shoot at his rig, blowing it up, and drive off for their final time.

On the road, Thelma confesses to Louise, “I know it’s crazy, but I feel I have a knack for this.” When Louise replies, “I believe you do,” the “craziness”
of the women's actions is reaffirmed. However, it is clear that Thelma and Louise aren't the only ones who comment on their "crazy" behavior. Not only does the truck driver almost immediately label them "crazy" but also, when the police ask Thelma's husband about his wife's criminal activity, he states that his wife is a "nutcase." But this encounter is more importantly significant for the way in which it demonstrates when and why Thelma and Louise are "crazy" and when they're not. Obviously, both women were "sane" to the man when he thought he was going to have sex with them, but their sanity quickly disintegrated as they began to assert their authority, and control the direction of the situation by challenging his inappropriate comments and gestures. Furthermore, this passage suggests that something happens when one is assigned the label of "crazy"; they are subordinated, dismissed, pushed outside of the acceptable realm of "normal", and rejected.

Lastly, most would agree that the women's decision to blow up the trucker's rig was an action extreme enough to question the appropriateness of the characters' behavior. However, it is interesting to note that prior to the explosion, prior to the drawing of their guns, it is Thelma and Louise whose sanity is questioned as they demand an apology, while the sanity of a trucker, who drives around simultaneously thrusting his pelvis, wiggling his tongue out the window, and shouting "ready for a big dick?" is never disputed.

The idea that women are punished, rather than liberated, for stepping out of their gender roles is confirmed in the final scene of the movie, just as it has been confirmed in all the film and text examples cited thus far.
At the end of the movie, the police eventually catch up with Thelma and Louise. After a short car chase, the ladies manage a narrow, but temporary, escape. Soon the two are confronted with the edge of the Grand Canyon. When they try to turn the car around and drive in the other direction, they realize that law enforcement officials surround them. Like the FOXFIRE gang, and the women in “Set It Off,” Thelma and Louise decide that they are not going to surrender. Instead, the two decide that they will face their other option, death: They embrace, clutch each other’s hands, and drive right into the Canyon.

In “Born in Flames,” *Foxfire*, “Set It Off,” and “Thelma and Louise,” the female characters are shown engaging in “aggressive,” criminal, and violent behavior. The criminal actions of the characters as well as representations of the previously identified second-wave themes of female cohesion and man-hating were used as a framework for locating evidence of the women’s liberation hypothesis within these visual and text examples. The result of this attempt revealed that just one film, the movie “Thelma and Louise,” seems to match with the tenets of the women’s liberation hypothesis. The main female characters in this film are the only two women in the examples examined that are shown tossing aside their domestic roles, “liberating” themselves into criminality. In contrast, not just one, but all of the other sources, including “Thelma and Louise” seem to offer readings that suggest that the women’s “corrupt” behavior was largely in response to negatively enforced male authority.

More importantly, in the process of attempting to locate evidence that supports the women’s liberation hypothesis, several significant implications of
women's involvement in aggressive, violent, or criminal behavior were revealed. Situated among these implications was the frequent use of the label "crazy" when referring to the female characters engaged in transgressive actions. All of the implications will be explored more fully in the analysis section of the paper.

But first, if women's aggressive, violent, and/or criminal behavior is purported to occur as a response to their increased liberation from their primary sex-roles as wives, mothers, and domestic caretakers, it is useful to glimpse at the experiences of women who did not respond, or, perhaps, as suggested, responded another way. As it has already been mentioned, a large number of women experienced dissatisfaction, frustration, depression, and even psychosis due to their lack of fulfillment and interest in their domestic roles. A lack of communication about these women's experiences only worsened their conditions, and, in many ways prevented alleviation. The fact that these women did not reject their roles as domestic caretakers not only flaws the women's liberation hypothesis, but also raises questions several interesting questions: Which women internalized second-wave feminism? How was this feminism internalized? What were some of the types of responses to this internalization?

All of these questions are provocative and important. However, for the purposes of this paper, it is the responses that we are interested in. The aggressive, violent, and/or criminal behavior is an external response; the frustration and unhappiness is turned outward as one acts out against others. Perhaps, then, women who did not respond, or did, but either chose not to or were prevented from abandoning their sex role assignments, had a much more internal
experience, turning their dissatisfaction inwards. Thus, these women did, in a sense, create the same destruction as their criminal counterparts – but against themselves rather than others.

In an attempt to locate some of the responses of women, who struggled with their socialization to carry out a domestic sex-role, three literary examples, *The Bell Jar* (1971), written by Sylvia Plath, *Girl, Interrupted* (1993), written by Susanna Kaysen, and *Prozac Nation: Young and Depressed in America* (1994), were reviewed. The juxtaposition they provide when paired with the exploration of examples on women’s criminal behavior helps to further highlight the various implications of how American culture was interacting with second-wave feminism and women’s experiences. Another aspect to consider is, again, the labeling of crazy, and how it connects the “primary” and “secondary” responses. Lastly, as the paper moves closer towards an analysis of the character representations and the implications of the cultural messages being communicated through them, it is important to begin to think about the character representations in section three and in section four in specific theoretical frameworks. In other words, what is suggested about women’s experiences and behaviors, women’s responses, and the motivation for those responses, and, the labels that are used to explain these elements.
Section 4: Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*, Susanna Kaysen’s *Girl, Interrupted*, and Elizabeth Wurtzel’s *Prozac Nation*; female depression and the labeling of “psychosis.”

*The Bell Jar, Girl, Interrupted, and Prozac Nation: Young and Depressed in America*, are all autobiographical memoirs of young women who spiral downward into depression. In each narrative, the author describes her life experience dealing with mental instability while concurrently trying to function “normally” in society. The characters of Ester, Susanna, and Elizabeth (or Ellie) all express anxiety over the pressures they feel to have a boyfriend and eventually marry. This anxiety is due to a combination of societal messages about the importance of marriage and the characters’ own frustrations with those expectations. This anxiety is only compounded as the characters are reminded by family and friends to conform to their gendered expectations.

Another theme present in all three books is the blurring of the line that divides what happens inside a mental hospital with what happens outside, or in other words, the difference between normalcy and insanity, thus challenging what constitutes and influences being “crazy.” This blurring is most evident and articulate in *Girl, Interrupted*, but is also noticeable in *The Bell Jar* and *Prozac Nation*, as Ester ponders when she will slip in and out of the control of the “bell jar,” and Ellie haphazardly manages to function in society. Further, as the blurring of this line becomes obvious, it reminds us to consider the ways in which the label of “crazy” was assigned in the examples reviewed in the previous
section; a label of control and dismissal, given when women were acting in roles not in accordance with their gender.

Through reflection and the character Ester Greenwood, Sylvia Plath shares the story of her own mental instability in *The Bell Jar*, written in 1971. She begins this reflection with her one-month summer stay in New York City in the mid 1960’s, and traces it through to her fall into depression, residence at the McLean mental hospital, and her committee release hearing.

Ester is consistently plagued throughout *The Bell Jar* with a deep contradiction between the ideology she’s been taught to believe – which suggests that she should marry and serve men – and the need to reject that ideology and become an independent woman. In the book, this is most obviously illustrated through the character of Buddy Willard, Ester’s ex-boyfriend. However, this troubling dynamic surfaces in each of Ester’s encounters with men. For example, after she is first introduced to Constantin, a young man that takes her on a tour of the UN, she imagines what it would be like settling down with him in marriage. She writes:

> [i]t would mean getting up at seven and cooking him eggs and bacon and toast and coffee and dawdling about in my nightgown and curlers after he’d left for work to wash up the dirty plates and make the bed, and then when he came home after a lively, fascinating day he’d expect a big dinner, and I’d spend the evening washing up even more dirty plates till I fell into bed, utterly exhausted.

This seemed like a dreary and wasted life for a girl with fifteen years of straight A’s, but I knew that’s what marriage was like...

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Girls have been, and still are, socialized from a very early age to think of their wedding day as the most important day of their lives. As a result, most young girls harbor idealized notions about marriage. However, this passage clearly reveals that Ester is not enthusiastic about “washing dirty plates” and “dawdling in her nightgown.” But, despite this lack of enthusiasm, she almost seems to accept that she will, in fact, get married – almost as if marriage is what she must do. The resulting combination of her unenthusiastic response and her perceived obligation is a conceptualization of marriage that is riddled with anxiety.

Even when Ester is not directly confronted with the pressures of societal norms her family and friends remind her of them. In fact, when Ester attempts to tell her Buddy Willard that she does not plan on getting married, Buddy declares, “you’re crazy.”

This example, in particular, is particularly poignant because Ester does go crazy. Shortly after her return from New York she receives notice that she was not accepted into a writing program that she applied to. She is utterly distraught about the rejection, something that is only exacerbated by her mother’s suggestions that she abandon her dreams of becoming a writer and enroll in a shorthand class, which would mean that Ester has to work for a man, “transcrib[ing] letter after thrilling letter.” Ester states that she “hate[s] the idea of serving men in any way.” That, instead, she “wanted to dictate [her] own thrilling

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24 Ibid., 103.
letters” as an independent writer. Very distraught and not receiving any support for her desires – only reinforcement to be domestic and servile – Ester attempts suicide.

As a result, Ester is admitted to the famous McLean Hospital in Massachusetts in an attempt for her to recover from her depression. She receives shock treatments, medication, and therapy. She falls in and out of bouts of depression for quite some time, and the reader is uncertain about whether or not Ester will ever reach full recovery. Ester herself refers to her lapses of sanity and insanity and her slipping in and out of them when she refers to the “bell jar” wondering when it will descend upon her, encasing her in another bout of depression. Ester does not seem to be convinced of her own insanity, and the lucidity with which she contemplates issues in her life makes the reader just as skeptical.

The culmination of Ester’s narrative happens when she enters into the room where a mental hospital committee will review her case and decide upon whether or not she should be released. Because we never hear the outcome of this meeting, her recovery, just like her “craziness” is left ambiguous.

What is particularly interesting about the end of the narrative, however, are the defining moments that take place just before Ester is considered for release. Having been granted off-campus privileges, Ester makes herself an appointment with a gynecologist for a diaphragm “fitting.” The fitting, she believes, will set her “free”: “...[f]reedom from fear (of getting pregnant) [and]

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25 Ibid., 83.
freedom from marrying the wrong person."²⁶ Because Ester is haunted with thoughts of marriage and, what she expects will naturally follow, children, she associates “freedom” with escaping the confines of both.

Shortly after her fitting, Ester loses her virginity to a young male professor at Cambridge named Irwin, and, only a few days later, Ester receives a visit from Buddy Willard. Throughout the book, Ester’s anxiety regarding marriage typically becomes stronger when Ester is reminded of Buddy, particularly after she has been admitted to McLean, when she really starts to worry about who will date her now that she’s been in a mental hospital. However, at the end of the novel, Ester is relatively unaffected by Buddy Willard’s visit. What’s more, immediately after her final visit with Buddy, she telephones Irwin. When he asks Ester when he will get to see her again, Ester promptly tells him “never” and resolutely hangs up the phone. She explains to the reader the significance of the hang up “I was perfectly free.”

This example indicates that her conclusive rejection of her dependency on men enabled her to achieve freedom. This assumption is only strengthened when, just two pages later, she is called into the meeting in which her release will be debated.

Like so many of the women who were unsatisfied with their roles as housewives and domestic keepers, Ester is fearful of what her life will become when she is married. She feels the tremendous societal conditioning common during the 1960’s and 1970’s that communicates that she must find a husband

²⁶ Ibid., 251.
and, consequently, fulfillment in him and her future children. As Ester’s own goals and plans become thwarted, she finds herself being drawn further and further away from her sense of independence and attempts to escape through suicide. While her recovery is ambiguous, she does achieve her own sense of freedom at the end of the novel – a freedom that is achieved by overthrowing the domestic pressures of marriage represented by Buddy Willard and, finally, Irwin.

In Susanna Kaysen’s 1993 memoir, Girl, Interrupted, Susanna is also preoccupied with the same socialization that plagues Ester. Although she is admitted to McLean for different reasons than Ester, during her stay in the hospital, she contemplates her potential for obtaining a boyfriend and the possibility of marriage, and, like Ester, she is reminded by those around her of the importance of becoming married. Also, Susanna seems to directly address women’s responses to “liberation” as she distinguishes between the actions of the women inside the hospital and those outside. to general public perceptions of “crazy” people. Lastly, Susanna poses some very interesting questions about the “realness” of her insanity, touching upon how, as evidenced in the visual and text examples reviewed thus far, “crazy” is a fluctuating definition.

Susanna’s life at McLean is largely comprised of her interactions with the staff and other female patients of her wing of the hospital. However, the dialogues about women and their sex-roles easily permeate the walls of the hospital. The people around her reinforce Susanna’s conceptualization of marriage as a recognized and respected obligation, despite Susanna’s enthusiasm towards the idea. For example, when Susanna informs her hospital friends that
she has received a marriage proposal and her friend Georgina asks her what will happen to her once she becomes married. After a few minutes, she states that she believes that absolutely nothing will happen to her as a result of marriage, because marriage is “quiet,” “like falling off a cliff... I guess my life will just stop when I get married.”27

This response is very similar to Ester’s thoughts as she pondered what it would be Constantin. Neither Susanna nor Ester seems to be enthusiastic about getting married, but as a result of the societal pressures, they do feel compelled to get married.

This compulsion comes in very direct ways in Girl, Interrupted. It is perhaps most evident during Susanna’s conversation with her social worker just prior to her release from McLean. When Susanna tells her social worker that she would like to be a writer, she condescendingly tells Susanna that while writing might be a nice hobby, she must be realistic and suggests a career in dental hygiene.

Just as Ester is told by her mother to abandon her dreams of becoming a writer and work as a shorthand transcriber, Susanna is also told to abandon her dreams as well. As the book continues, is becomes obvious that battle between the “realistic” perspective of the social worker and Susanna’s interest in becoming a writer symbolizes the kind of battle that is taking place inside Susanna. Fully aware that her release from the hospital is contingent upon her ability to successfully transition from McLean into a gender appropriate role in the “real”

world, Susanna struggles with compromising her own aspirations in order to become released from the hospital.

This suggestion is reaffirmed when Susanna tells the reader about her release from McLean. Instead of referring to her “recovery” as a means of letting the reader know that she was ready to be released, Susanna informs us that “luckily [she] got a marriage proposal and they let [her] out.” She states, almost as if responding back to the social worker, that while it was difficult for her to get people to understand that she wanted to be a writer, “[i]n 1968, everybody could understand a marriage proposal.”28 Clearly, in order for Susanna to be determined “sane” and be released from McLean, her thoughts of a single life as a writer would have to be subsumed by the proposal of marriage.

Throughout the book, Susanna’s character is able to draw explicit parallels between the social movements of the time and the condition of mental health patients, blurring the line between mental patient and “normal citizen.” Unlike Ester, who was only permitted to travel beyond the vicinity of the hospital grounds at the very end of *The Bell Jar*, Susanna provides the reader with quite a bit of information regarding life outside of her institutionalization.

Susanna seems to be constantly aware of the world that exists outside of McLean, oftentimes commenting on the similarities between what was taking place inside and outside the hospital. At one point in the book, Susanna mentions watching political demonstrations on the television set in the commons room of her ward. She recalls the death of Martin Luther King Jr., Robert Kennedy, and a

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28 Ibid., 133.
general feeling of disarray and sadness. She states how during these times, the staff had it particularly easy because all of the patients’ anger and frustration was “being acting out for [them]” on TV. She writes, “[p]eople were doing the kinds of things we had fantasies of doing: taking over universities and abolishing classes, making houses out of cardboard boxes and putting them in peoples way, sticking their tongues out at policemen. We’d cheer them on...[w]e thought eventually they’d get around to ‘liberating’ us too.”

Susanna reveals to the reader that her experiences, thoughts, and actions while living in McLean were directly influenced by her awareness of the events taking place in the world. She suggests an almost vicarious emotional and physical link between herself and the people she viewed on television. Furthermore, Susanna seems to almost directly address the internal and external responses in women to second-wave rhetoric. She explicitly states that their desire to engage in aggressive behavior was acted out for them.

However, Susanna is also very aware that this link was at times, rather superficial. She later notes that the people on the television screen didn’t liberate Susanna and her hospital friends. Expressing frustration and feelings of immobility, she points out the fact that in the hospital, they were already locked up with “rages and rebellions”, thus already determined “crazy.” Regardless of what they did or said inside the hospital, they were quickly dismissed – “a smile, a shake of the head, a note in [their] charts [stating.] ‘Identification with protest

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Ibid. 92.
movement.” Just like the women in the movies, Susanna was tossed aside as not mattering.

This line that separates those from “crazy” and not crazy is very unstable, as already evidenced by several of the movies, including Thelma and Louise, where the women were not crazy to the trucker until they started challenging his behavior. This is also illustrated in Girl, Interrupted, when Susanna recollects one afternoon when she and her hospital friends are watching television. On the television is an image of a black man in a Chicago courtroom in chains. In response to this image, another young female patient, Cynthia, makes a startling comment when she excitedly exclaims that what has happened to the man on the screen has also happened to her, during her stay at McLean. Susanna tells the reader that Cynthia’s comment is accurate; oftentimes patients are restrained with chains, and gagged when receiving shock therapy. In this instance, the boundary between the McLean patients and the black man in the courtroom vanishes. However, the patient Lisa quickly points out, “It’s different...they have to gag him because they are afraid people will believe what he says (my emphasis).” And at this point Susanna concludes that the man on the screen has “the one thing that [they] would always lack [while in McLean]: credibility.”

This example only supports the idea that women, out of a variety of possible responses, seemed most likely to respond to the influences of feminism either in internally self-destructive, or externally aggressive, violent, or criminal behavior. However, what is particularly interesting about this example is that it

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30 Ibid., 92-93.
helps establish not only the juxtaposition between these two responses, but the bridge of the label “crazy” that links them together. As Susanna and her friend Lisa so clearly point out, both groups of women are being restrained for their craziness. While the women who are not institutionalized do possess a certain “credibility” that the women at McLean do not, both groups are gagged, and, consequently, silenced, as a result.

Susanna continues to further dismantles the boundaries between the outside and the inside, normal and insane, when she shares in her experience in visiting a bookstore years after her release to look up her original diagnosis. As she pages through a book on mental disorders, she speculates as to whether or not “she’s still in there.” Upon finding and reading her original mental “label” she reports that she was admitted to McLean due to “instability of self-image, interpersonal relationships, and mood... uncertainty about... long-term goals or career choice...” When finished, she questions whether or not she ever was “insane.” She rhetorically asks the reader, “[i]sn’t this a good description of adolescence? Moody, fickle, faddish, insecure: in short, impossible.”

Clearly, Susanna’s dismantling of the boundaries separating the outside and the inside, the sane and insane, only further support the conclusion that these boundaries are established for purposes of control, dismissal, and, convenience.

In Elizabeth Wurtzel’s 1994 memoir, Prozac Nation, the main character of Elizabeth provides further insight into the naming of women as “crazy,” and shares in Ester and Susanna’s intense exposure to gender socialization. The

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31 Ibid., 152.
daughter of a frenzied, broken mother and an absentee father, Elizabeth easily slips into depression in her early teenage years. The book traces her struggles with depression from its onset in her early adolescence, through her tumultuous college years, leading up to her continuous confusion as a young adult during the years of the late 1970’s and the early 1980’s.

Elizabeth is completely terrified about her mental instability. Unlike Ester, and particularly Susanna, who is quite critical about her diagnosis, Ellie spends most of her time thinking about “how far gone” she is. She constantly obsesses over finding a cause for her depression and is constantly fearful of being “locked up” or “losing it.” As evident in the previous two books, this fear is most often surfaces as a result of Ellie’s anxiety and resistance to traditional gender expectations of women.

Ellie’s mother contributes to her daughter’s thoughts about men and marriage. For example, when Ellie begins dating a boy named Zachary, her mother is quick to point out what she believes to an improvement in her daughter’s disposition. Ellie writes that she knew that her mother perceived an improvement in Ellie only because she had a boyfriend. In the past, Ellie’s mother had repeatedly told her to “be peppy and bright for boys, no matter how bad you felt inside,” and to never “let him see how crazy you are. No one wants anyone who’s down like you.”32 But Ellie tells us that despite her mother’s

prodding, she actually wasn't happy because of Zachary, and "that underneath [it] all [she] was feeling as loose and lost as ever."33

Clearly, Ellie is trapped between the expectation for her to be happy, which is equated with her having a boyfriend, and her depression, exaggerated by her inability to meet that expectation.

Ellie’s anxiety and fear is most obvious to the reader when she recollects on her sexual experiences with Abel, the older brother of her friend. While delighting in the sexual experimentations, she feels as though she must keep the act between her and Abel a secret. She admits, “I am somehow afraid of how weird he is, afraid that he will turn me in and then they will send me away, lock me up in a prison for unchaste girls. I am scared that they will throw me into an institution not because I am depressed, and need help, but because I am a girl...”34

Most young girls are not comfortable with their sexual desires. But what is interesting about Ellie’s fear is that not only is she scared, she is scared of Abel because of the power that she believes he has over her. What’s more, she immediately connects this fear and power to her potential institutionalization. Furthermore, Ellie does not want to keep her relationship with Abel a secret because of her adolescent discomfort about her sexual desires, and she is not afraid of being “locked up” because of her depression or her need for help: Ellie is afraid because she is “a girl.”

In a prior section of Prozac Nation, Ellie addresses the connection between gender and institutionalization as she contemplates her own sanity more

33 Ibid., 100-101.
cynically. Recalling information about her great grandmother’s death in a mental hospital she writes, “I could...easily dismiss the thing about my great grandmother dying in the asylum as insignificant. After all, back then they put women away for wanting to work for a living or for asking for a divorce.”

Ellie’s concern directly speaks to the naming of women as mentally unstable as a result of their resistance to traditional female gender roles, once again demonstrating that the label has very specific and purposeful applications.

Ellie, like Susanna challenges the boundary between what distinguishes a person who is determined insane from someone who is not. Susanna blurred this line in her reference to the pictures on the television screen and her research after her release into the categorization of mental disorders. Ellie similarly blurs this line when she shares her frustrations in talking to her therapist about the causes of her depression. She writes,

I try to think of some explanation for my depression that will make sense to her, but I can’t imagine what will. I can’t even explain it to myself. I can’t even look her in the eye, and say, Well, I had a tough childhood, because it sounds like a line, an excuse, a boulder I’ve conveniently placed on my shoulder so that I can live with all my misery. It’s not like I was beaten regularly, it’s not like I was raised by wolves, it’s not that I’m an exceptional case.

However, in the beginning of the book, Ellie does, in fact, offer a possibility. She asserts “that being born smack in the middle of the Summer of Love (July 31, 1967)”– with “the confluence of social revolutions from no-fault divorce to

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34 Ibid., 60.
35 Ibid., 32.
36 Ibid., 129.
feminism to free love to Vietnam [must] have had something to do with [her depression].”

This seems to suggest that Ellie's depression was, in a way, a response to some of the political movements, specifically feminism, in the same ways that Susanna suggested that her fellow McLean patients were subdued because the people they watched on television were acting out their issues for them.

The female characters in *The Bell Jar*, written by Sylvia Plath, *Girl, Interrupted*, written by Susanna Kaysen, and *Prozac Nation: Young and Depressed in America*, all clearly exemplify the struggles of women to compromise their desires for independence and succumb to the severe pressures of gender socialization. This pressure most often came from the characters’ family members and casual social encounters, and was accompanied by extreme anxiety in the case of Ester and Ellie brought on from their dating relationships. Susanna, in contrast, almost seemed to numb herself to the propositions of marriage, despite her knowledge that marriage was what would enable her to be released from McLean. But regardless of whether the characters experienced anxiety or numbness, in these examples, the character’s response to this pressure was self-destructive: Ester, Susanna, and Ellie all attempted suicide.

The characters’ “responses” in these literary works seem to incorporate more of feminism's second-wave than the characters engaged in criminal behavior. While neither of the two groups seems to respond directly to second-wave feminism, Ester, Susanna, and Ellie at least seem to be responding to the

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37 Ibid., 23.
struggles in their lives that has at least been brought on by attempting to reject their gender determined sex-roles.

Both groups of female characters, however, are connected by being labeled “crazy.” This labeling, in each section, has been used in very controlling and patriarchal ways and needs to be further explored, especially when thinking about issues of agency and empowerment. Following a review of the thrust of this paper, in the next section, this issue, as well as several others will be addressed.
Section 5: Investigating the implications

There are links between feminism and female crime. However, these links are much more complex than the criminal theorists’ women’s liberation hypothesis suggests. While exploring the feminist literature of the second wave, several themes were easily identifiable, particularly separatist rhetoric, women’s depression associated with their domestic-bound sex-role, man-hating, and the importance of aggressive action over rhetoric.

Criminologists have concluded, and since debated, the validity of women’s liberation hypothesis, as well as the influence of patriarchy on women’s tendencies to engage in criminal behavior. While the hypothesis has, at times, been discounted, it is still circulating, and, as a result, provokes thinking about the connections between feminism and crime. After an examination of female characters representations in film and literature, that provocation has led to a conclusion that the women’s liberation hypothesis, purporting rises in female criminal activity in response to an indirect influence of second-wave feminism, is true, but only to the extent that second-wave themes are identifiable in sources where women engage in criminal activity. In contrast, the films and text reviewed seem to suggest that the motivation for the characters aggressive, violent, or criminal behavior is linked to negative experiences with male figures rather than their “liberation.” Furthermore, a review of literary sources that involved women who suffered from mental instability seemed to suggest a stronger connection
between female depression and feminism than between criminal activity and feminism.

Even though the characters primary and secondary characters responses are not direct responses to second-wave feminism, they still, however, are responses to elements present in a patriarchal society. Thus, they necessarily pose questions about what effects they have upon that society, if they affect it at all.

At first glance, the two seem to exist in contradistinction: one group’s more aggressive behavior an external extension of the internal, self-destructive frustration and anger directed inward by the other group. Initially, it seems far more likely that if the aim of the characters that engage in aggressive, violent, or criminal behavior, is to reject and displace the antagonizing factor, that they will be more successful than the group of self-destruction. After all, none of the characters from the texts dealing with depression actually did anything. One of the complications, however, of suggesting that depression is less subversive then violence, is that as the films and texts depicted female violence reveal, most of the women who do react in violent or criminal ways find themselves, at the ending of the plot, dead, in hiding or captivity.

Thus, it could be argued that women who respond in depressive ways find temporary, if not permanent opportunities to “leave” their oppressive environments – either physically through their institutionalization, or mentally, through their own psychosis. In other words, these women supercede the strides made by those who engage in criminal behavior. Ultimately, the women who are mentally ill can escape the “real world” and retreat into safety, whereas, in
contrast, after the antenna is blown up, like in “Born In Flames,” another will be constructed in its place, and if not, there are still millions of antennae all over the world. In this sense then, the psychotic woman has achieved more than her criminal counterpart, especially if the criminal woman is imprisoned or killed in the process.

In her book, *The Madwoman Can’t Speak: Or Why Insanity is Not Subversive* (1998), Marta Caminero-Santangelo explains that feminists have long held onto the glorification of the female character of insanity in literature. She argues, however, that from a theoretical standpoint the “search for the subversive madwoman...not only involves some violent repressions of its own...but also is fundamentally misguided, since the symbolic resolution of the madwoman as an alternative to patriarchy ultimately traps the woman in silence.” In other words, because the madwoman is, in fact, “mad,” Caminero-Santangelo asserts, even when she speaks, no one is there to listen. The madwoman is locked up in an institution, not, as some would suggest, subversively escaping the tortures of oppression, but, rather, marginalized, her voice no long audible and her words no longer credible.

This logic undoubtedly prompts a discussion on both medical and societal definitions of insanity, for if one is not labeled insane, what prevents them from being observed as something other than “normal?” This line has already been challenged in almost all of the literary and text examples in section three, as well as in the literary sources in section four, as the fluid fluctuations between

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38 Marta Caminero-Santangelo, *The Madwoman Can’t Speak: Or Why Insanity is Not Subversive*
normalcy and insanity are observed. Caminero-Santangelo is also interested in this boundary, as she examines the literary work of feminist Kate Millet who wrote the novel, *Loony-Bin Trip* (1990). In Millet's personal account of her own "forced" institution following her refusal to continue taking Lithium, she writes that if no one had told anyone around her that she was mad, then, none of those people would have presumed her to be. She states that if they hadn't been informed then they would have had no reason to "imagine it and [would] act accordingly."^{39}

In her discussion of the book, *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* (1964), by Joanne Greenberg, Caminero-Santangelo points out yet another example of this blurring when the protagonist character, Deborah, describes one hospital attendant in particular as "want[ing] people [in the asylum] to be crazier and more bizarre than they really were so that he could see the line which separated him... from the full-bloomed, exploded madness of the patients."^{40}

But it is Susanna’s character in *Girl, Interrupted* who so wonderfully articulates the necessity for the boundary and the reasons for why it is continuously, vigilantly, upheld:

> There [is] always a touch of fascination in revulsion: Could that happen to me? The less likely the terrible thing is to happen, the less frightening it is to look at or imagine. A person who doesn’t talk to herself or stare off into nothing is therefore more alarming than a person who does. Someone who

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acts ‘normal’ raises the uncomfortable question, What’s the difference between that person and me? which leads to the question, What’s keeping me out of the loony bin? This explains why a general taint is useful [to the world].

In another telling example, Caminero-Santangelo refers to the character of Virginia in the book, *The Snake Pit*, who claims that because her doctor is “always talking about hearing voices [he is] never hearing [her own].”

When we look to the characters of Ester, Susanna, and Elizabeth, it is evident how there is usefulness in critiquing competing definitions of sanity. All three women experience difficulty in getting people to take them seriously, and, what’s more, they have difficulty in trusting their own conclusions. This dilemma is probably best illustrated when Susanna and Lisa comment on the “gagging” of the person on television. They state that while both the patients at McLean and the person on television are considered crazy and worth silencing, ultimately, it is the person on television that must be gagged, because, as mental patients, they will always lack credibility.

Caminero-Santangelo suggests that this is precisely why the madwoman is silenced and not subversive. She states that because their credibility is challenged by society and each other, “the ‘mad’ cannot organize.” When referring back to the detailing of the movies “Set It Off,” the characters of Stony, T.T., and Cleo are only able to successfully manage robbing their first string of banks because of

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their ability to organize into a cohesive group. Likewise, in “Born in Flames,” Honey stresses the importance of women coming together when she tells her friend that “there’s strength in numbers.” At first, the remainders of the movies seem to prove this statement true; the women in “Set It Off” pull off a number of successful robberies and when a group of ten women is arrested from the Women’s Army, they have at least fifty more members prepared to take their places. However, because, as Stony tells Cleo, they must be “crazy” in order to do something like rob a bank, these women, too, are trapped in their insanity.

In these two examples, the fate of the characters is doubly reinforced by their criminal behavior. However, when referring back to the characters from The Bell Jar, Girl, Interrupted, and Prozac Nation, it is solely their mental instability that dictates their outcomes. Perhaps, then, while the images of institutionalized women overcoming the misogynist doctor, the patronizing nurse, “dramatic[ally] ripping and tearing the bonds that bind them” conjure up images of the kind of energy and zeal one would hopes any person would possess when faced with incredibly opposition, the patients themselves seem to respond in a very different way.44 The characters Susanna and Ellie assign attributes of valor to women who attempted suicide in more garish ways than they had. Susanna asserts that a fellow patient, Holly, had “courage” for lighting herself on fire,45 and, in Prozac Nation, Elizabeth reveals that she “used to wish – to pray to God for the courage

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44 Ibid., 32.
45 Kaysen, Girl, Interrupted, 17.
and the strength – [to] have the guts not to get better, but to slit [her] wrists and get a whole lot worse so that [she] could land in some mental ward.\textsuperscript{46}

These references seem to suggest not only a severe mental health problem, but, also, the desire to delve even further into despair and unhappiness – even further away from "normal" society – into the confines of the institution. Because Susanna and Ellie communicate that making the transition from normal to insane is brave, even heroic, it suggests that they recognize the seriousness of this transition. Susanna, in particular, speaks to this seriousness directly. She explains to the reader her recognition that Polly’s chances of “recovery,” or reintegrating back into society, are severely hampered because while she herself “might get out sometime, Polly was locked up forever in that body [of burns].”\textsuperscript{47}

Perhaps another similarity between these two responses can be located in the examples of female criminal activity where we catch glimpses of a similar “bravery” or heroism attributed to the more “crazy” actions a character engages in. For example, the FOXFIRE gang lives on as a legend because of the wild risks that each member took while involved in the gang. Likewise, the legend of Thelma and Louise and their adventures extends itself with greater poignancy precisely because the women drove off into the Grand Canyon. Furthermore, the female characters that engaged in criminal behavior were also contained in similar ways as the institutionalized characters, as the criminal who is caught, and subsequently sentenced to prison, is also “locked up.” Even if imprisonment is not

\textsuperscript{46} Wurtzel, \textit{Prozac Nation}, 70.
\textsuperscript{47} Kaysen, \textit{Girl, Interrupted}, 19.
a consequence, an arrest record will haunt this woman, and even if she “gets away,” she will never escape her “outlaw” status.

Thus, the logic would follow that if being determined heroically crazy due to severely self-destructive or criminal behavior equates with either institutionalization, imprisonment, a life in hiding, or death, then the avoidance of being assigned that label would be of the utmost importance.

There are a few examples of characters reinforcing the “craziness” of one another in the films and text examined in section three, however. In “Thelma and Louise,” Louise tells Thelma that she is “disturbed!” after she witnesses her rob a convenience store. Thelma’s response, however, is a satisfied, “Yeah, I do believe I am.” In another scene of the movie, when Louise is demanding an apology from the obscene trucker, he tells her she’s crazy and without flinching she matter-of-factly tells him “you’ve got that right!” Also, in Foxfire, while the gang is initially terrified that Legs has been sentenced to the Red Bank State Correctional Facility for Girls, they almost boast about her attendance later on.

In the other films, the potential for pride in one’s craziness is discounted. Stony repeatedly tells the other three female friends in “Set It Off” that they could easily engage in “suicidal” ways and rob a bank if they were crazy, but because they aren’t crazy, they can’t. In “Born in Flames” none of the women refer to themselves as crazy. Rather, it is a pejorative term used by the male investigators to describe Zella Wiley and the members of the Women’s Army.

The dynamic between reinforcing and disowning the label of ones craziness, specifically here when talking about aggressive, violent, and criminal
behavior, is interesting because it highlights the ways in which the term is applied and what it means when the characters reference it. In both circumstances, the characters seem to have a need to embrace the label in order to fully engage in this behavior. Or, in other words, the label excuses or dismisses the behavior.

This insight not only raises questions about what kinds of behavior necessitate this kind of categorization, and, what’s more, who feels the importance of this need.

To answer these questions, the effects of labeling of the female criminal and depressive women as crazy must be explored. If, as established, the naming of someone as “crazy” leads to the lack of their agency, credibility, and authenticity, the person assigning that label is doing so because of a need for them to maintain social structures that provide them with the very things that the term takes away. This is much more necessary when dealing with incidences of female aggressive, violent, and/or criminal behavior, because, as mentioned, the institutionalized person is already locked up, unable to organize, and completely silenced. In contrast, while the female criminal might eventually become locked up, she is capable of organizing – herself and others – in active ways. In addition, while she might also eventually become silenced, she does, in the meantime, have the potential to communicate through her aggressive behavior. This potential is enough to suggest that the prevention of this type of behavior is a real investment for some, as well as that aggressive, violent, and criminal behavior means, in some sense, power.
In other words, in order for violent or criminal women to lose some of their agency, credibility— in a word, power— by being determined crazy, because of that behavior, the violent or criminal actions must contain power. Thus, it follows that those who are interested in maintaining their own power, or their own ability to engage in those violent or criminal ways, must administer a label like crazy to displace others from having access to this power. In an analysis of the majority of films involving depictions of female violence, editors McCaughey and King identify, in their book, *Reel Knockouts: Violent Women in the Movies* (2001), four other maneuvers aside from this labeling, that do just that. According to McCaughey and King, women who are depicted as engaged in aggressive, violent, or criminal behavior are shown in ways that are too unrealistic— so that the threat of violence is contained within a context that is recognizably not real (not threatening), too sexy— so that the women’s bodies are a pleasing distraction from their criminal behavior, too emotional— so that whatever strength the characters might gleam from their activity is lessened by their lack of control over their feelings, and/or too co-opted— so that negative messages of racism or homophobia, for example, are inserted into the movie to take away from the overall message.48

Quite similarly, a number of feminists have also criticized representations of female violence in the media for its hyper-dramatization of women, which responds to and reports instances of violent or aggressive activity differently, depending on whether or not it is a male or female involved. This vein of thought

48 Martha McCaughey and Neal King, eds., *Reel Knockouts: Violent Women in the Movies* 66
is specifically mentioned in Barbara Miller’s essay, “The Gun-in-the-Handbag, a Critical Controversy, and a Primal Scene,” which looks at the “critical controversy” that occurred following the release of “Thelma and Louise.” She cites that the movie “Terminator 2” was released at almost the same time as “Thelma and Louise,” and contained much more violent action, but while “Terminator 2” went relatively unscathed by movie reviewers and the public eye, “Thelma and Louise” incited roaring protest.\(^4^9\) Miller tells us that some respondents even compared Thelma and Louise’s escapades to those of female serial killer, Aileen Wuornos and her lover, Tyria Moore.\(^5^0\) Also, in the movie, “A Question of Silence” (1982), a film about the determination of the sanity of three women who do not know each other yet murder the owner of a boutique one day, this double-standard is addressed directly.\(^5^1\) One night, when the husband of the psychiatrist assigned to the murderous women expresses his disgust over the photos of the victim’s dead body, Janine asks him if he’s ever seen photos detailing the atrocities of war. After asking him this question, she suggests to him that the ways in which men kill men on the battlefield are quite similar to the ways in which her patients’ murdered the boutique owner. When he tells her that for the men, it’s “different,” she insightfully responds “you mean acceptable.”

The dramatization of female violence supports the same patriarchal structure that allows women’s violence to be called “crazy,” while men’s violence


\(^{5^0}\) Ibid., 203.

\(^{5^1}\) *A Question of Silence*, Marleen Gorris, dir. (Netherlands, 1982). 92 min.
goes unnoticed and is normalized. This positioning of women and men into gender roles that attributes aggressive, violent, and/or criminal behavior only to men is detrimental. When any type of a stigmatizing role is assigned, the inability to step outside of that role can be frustrating and harmful and this becomes true for both men and women. Not all men choose to engage in this type of behavior. Furthermore, while this paper does not seek to condone violence or further its ability to bring power to some through the destruction of someone or something, it does, however, seek to challenge the ways in which women are denied this access to power.

This power predominantly falls into the hands of men and, because it is, simply, a source of power, their participation in aggressive, violent, and/or criminal behavior benefits them, even if erroneously. Men are given more power through violence because of their physical strength and aptitude, evidence of which can be found in the thousands of popular male action, and action-hero, movies. These types of films are “rivaled” only by movies such as “Barb Wire,” starring Playboy icon Pamela Anderson, the “Catwoman” action-hero, who is, after all, still situated in relationship to Batman, and the rare Uma Thurman-type character in the almost animated, blood-splattered movies “Kill Bill” volumes one and two.52

Women are consistently denied opportunities for access to this type of empowerment, and, it is most often men who deny them. This assessment is only

strengthened when one considers men’s responses to female-male assault. Aside from the obvious experiencing of feelings such as humility, helplessness, and fear, men also experience a higher degree of isolation. For while women’s centers, shelters, and twenty-four hour counseling hotlines are available for female victims of assault, the converse reveals a dearth in resources. Therefore, while it is very common for female victims to hesitate in using these services, male victims have even fewer resources, making it harder for men to get help.

This lack of resources for male victims of assault undoubtedly has to do with the normalization of male violence and the high frequency of male perpetration of violence on men. According to the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics for homicides alone, it is revealed that men were 3.2 times more likely than women to be murdered in the year 2000, and that “most victims and perpetrators are male.” Clearly, males dominate the sphere of violence in society, but in ways specific to men acting in violent ways with men: Women committed only 7.2% of the murders against men taking place in the United States during the year 2000.

Thus, the degradation that men must feel when women assault them must be severe. There is an extreme necessity for patriarchal cultures to resist normalizing female aggression. Particularly in character representations of women who engage in this behavior, there seems to be an even greater necessity to declare this type of behavior “crazy,” and, consequently eliminate her. As if the “New York Radical Feminists” were directly speaking to the examples of

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"Born in Flames," *Foxfire,* "Set It Off," and so forth, in their 1969 piece titled, "Politics of the Ego: A Manifesto," they write that "this male need, though destructive, is in that sense, impersonal. It is not out of a desire to [literally] hurt the woman that man dominates and destroys her; it is out of a need for a sense of power that he necessarily must [wound] her ego and make it subservient to his."\(^4\)

"Crazy," becomes a definition, then, of a female who is pushing the boundaries of the behaviors that protect male privilege. Anne Campbell, in her article titled, "Female Gang Members' Social Representations of Aggression," states that oftentimes, for girls in gangs, who are "less physically strong and more sexually vulnerable, the best line of defense is not attack but the threat of an attack...[that t]here is nothing so effective as being in a street gang to keep the message blaring out: 'Don't mess with me – I'm a crazy woman!'\(^5\) Campbell's assertions helps explain why certain female characters, such as Thelma and Louise, provide affirmation for each other's craziness, rather than help each other evade the label. They also account for the ways in which the insanity of the characters is absolutely paramount to their ability to engage in criminal behavior and incite worry in the men.

Mental diagnoses, therefore, appear to be effective only to the degree that the women recognize their crossing of the boundary of sanity to be "courageous," and/or to communicate the insinuation, or potentiality, of "threat." In Campbell's

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article she addresses this particular sentiment by explaining that “[w]omen [use] quite a different rhetorical framework [than men] – one of expressive aggression…where the emphasis [is placed] upon self-control rather than interpersonal control.” Put another way, “[w]omen,” she writes, who were interviewed about their violent actions, “spoke at length about the psychological tension between anger and behavioral restraint and saw aggression as a failure to hold back the internal frustration – even fury – that they were feeling” and concludes that “[t]he aim of the aggression was cathartic – to release the unbearable anger that they could no longer suppress.” Thus, “[t]heir aggression served not to dominate their antagonist but to elicit some acknowledgement of their frustration.”

Campbell’s assertions suggest that men are more inclined to use aggression and violence to control others, whereas women use it as an expressive manifestation of their internal feelings. Undoubtedly, anyone who engages in violent behavior must contain feelings of frustration or inadequacy. However, according to Campbell, it is the motivation behind the violence that differs for men and women. Perhaps, then, it would serve well to explore the various motivations for the provocation of those feelings in the characters discussed in section three.

The women’s liberation hypothesis, as mentioned, is one perspective on female criminal motivation. However, as demonstrated, this hypothesis does not seem to contain much merit, and is severely hindered, for example, by the actions

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56 Ibid., 249.
of the women in “Set It Off,” who seem to engage in criminal activity precisely because they are not liberated.

In “Born in Flames,” Foxfire, and “Thelma and Louise” the impetus appears to exist in the insulting, obscene, and harmful behaviors of men. In the very beginning of “Born in Flames,” the news reporter remarks that the assaults on men committed by the whistle blowing, bike-riding members of the women’s army are unprovoked, but, only seconds later he states that eye-witness accounts suggest “that the men may have been attempting to assault the women.” In Joyce Carol Oates’ book, the FOXFIRE gang was created because of Rita’s encounter with her mathematics teacher, Uncle Wimpy was beaten up because of his advances on Maddy, Legs burned down the house of the dwarf-woman and her brother because he was holding her hostage for men to rape, cut the face of the male prospective employer after he tried to assault her, and possibly killed the man who Maddy “hooked” because he was trying to rape her. Lastly, in “Thelma and Louise” the two friends’ criminal activity begins when Louise shoots and kills the man who attempts to rape Thelma, Thelma robs the convenience store to replace the money that J.T. has stolen from them, and when the two blow up the trucker’s rig, it is because of his obscene gestures and refusal to apologize.

In their book, The Female Offender, Meda Chesney-Lind and Linda Pasko seem to support this reading as she argues that given the statistical data on the frequency for domestic abuse experienced by women, it is a surprise that more women do not commit murder.\(^5\)

\(^{5}\) Chesney-Lind and Pasko, The Female Offender, 97.
An alternative reading of the women's motivation can be found in returning to Campbell's statement that female aggression does not serve to dominate an antagonist, but to express something or elicit an acknowledgment of their frustrations. Perhaps, then, "getting into scuffles," "throwing a punch," and "taking a hit," which is all language created exclusively for communicating about male fighting, is a framework that women need to insert themselves into in order to communicate their frustrations using a language that men will understand. In other words, assuming that women are attempting to express themselves in a way that will be recognized as serious by women and men, women must mimic the aggressive behaviors of men in order to effectively communicate what it is they are trying to express.

However, in his article titled, "From Patriarchy to Gender: Feminist Theory, Criminology, and the Challenge of Diversity," James Messerschmidt argues that in girl gangs, in particular, which are typically considered "copies" of the familiar boy gangs, that girls are not, in actuality, "doing masculinity." He concludes that it is through girls' participation in the gang, which allows and facilitates female aggression, that girls are able to explore and "dismantle" conceptions of femininity. This exploration, in turn, provides them with the space to "construct" a specific type of femininity – one that enables them to challenge preconceived notions about gender roles.58

Messerschmidt's article is incredibly uplifting because it presents the feminist critic with a possibility of grasping female empowerment within the

58 James Messerschmidt, "From Patriarchy to Gender: Feminist Theory, Criminology, and the
context of the text and films. If viewers are able to catch a glimpse of Thelma and Louise’s resistance to their oppression, and that resistance is communicated in ways that prompt viewers to reflect on that resistance, the characters’ suicide-death at the end of the movie doesn’t seem so painful.

Perhaps this resistance and consequent empowerment can be located if we believe that the criminal characters of section three are cognizant of their eventual, or at least potential, demise, just as the characters in section four also seemed to be aware of the seriousness in transitioning from normal to insane. In other words, if we believe that the characters are cognizant of where their criminal or violent actions will lead them, then we can also believe that they are consciously choosing to make the decisions to engage in them.

The films and text do certainly seem to suggest that the characters are aware of their fate. Upon hearing of the mysterious death of Adelaide Norris, Honey responded as if she had anticipated Adelaide’s outcome; Maddy withdrew from the gang because she recognized that FOXFIRE would undoubtedly come to an end as a result of the crimes they had committed; Stony is shown in great premonitory turmoil while making her final decision to join her friends for one last bank robbery; and Thelma and Louise spend almost the entire movie worrying about whether or not they will make it to Mexico.

This not only reinserts agency into the make-up of these characters, but also helps to subvert the power in labeling of the characters as “crazy.” Of course, one can still hope for the creation of more Women’s Army bombs, that the
missing FOXFIRE gang members aren’t really missing, but enjoying themselves in some far away warm climate, like Stony hopefully is, in order to truly afford these types of characters the same leniency of their male counterparts. Or, maybe, we could just give them the chance to blow a few things up, kill a few civilians, and make it through the end of a move alive like Mel Gibson character in “Lethal Weapon” one, two, and three, and four.59

To restate, these suggestions are not to reiterate Solanis-like rhetoric, to rally for the drawing of guns every time a sexist slur is uttered, or to condone violence in general. Likewise, important distinctions between fictional representations and “real” life can be made. However, when the options for female characters of violence are jail time, a life in hiding, or death, seeing images of women simply standing up for themselves is refreshing. After all, if these female characters must be punished, or, ultimately, “contained” at the end of the plot line, they might as well push, step over, or blow up that sturdy boundary line while they’re at it.

59 Lethal Weapon; Lethal Weapon 2; Lethal Weapon 3; and Lethal Weapon 4, Richard Donner, dir. (USA, 1987; 1989; 1992; 1998), 112; 113; 118; 127 min.
Section 6: Conclusion, and further thoughts

Using the women’s liberation hypothesis, which assert a positive relationship between increases in female liberation and increases in female crime, as a starting point to learn more about the influences of second-wave feminism and female representations of aggressive, violent, and/or criminal activity, several cultural messages about concepts such as feminism, women and violence, depression, and “craziness,” and their meanings, uses, and implications were revealed. Among these things was the identification of themes of second-wave feminism, such as female solidarity, man-hating, depression, as well as an overarching theme of “craziness.” During this identification, the juxtaposition of two identified responses of women who engaged in feminist thinking was also discovered. Women seemed to act either in external ways, projecting their frustrations with their domestic gender roles onto others in varying degrees of aggression, or internally, by directing that same frustration inside, producing anxiety and struggle. When the films “Born in Flames,” “Set It Off,” “Thelma and Louise,” and the texts Foxfire, The Bell Jar, Girl, Interrupted, and Prozac Nation, were reviewed in an attempt to locate evidence of not only the women’s liberation hypothesis and second-wave influence, these two types of responses were also located.

As a result of this paper, several conclusions have been determined. First, the women’s liberation hypothesis was not proven to exist in culturally produced film and text examples. While it was concluded that feminist second wave
discourse did promote ideas of freedom for women from their sexual and
domestic roles, as well as provide them with increased opportunities for
employment, the sources reviewed did not suggest that the criminal behavior of
the characters was due to this influence, this “liberation,” or the stresses that
accompanied both. Furthermore, after the two types of responses were identified
through a review of second-wave feminism, it was later determined that women
do not always respond in criminal or violent ways. Lastly, when we evaluate the
women’s liberation hypothesis’ suggestion that men commit crimes due to stress
from their employment, and that, women who are employed in the same types of
work must also experience stress and commit crimes, we are continuing to
interpret female crime through a male-dominated perspective. Not only are we
not acknowledging the ways in which men and women have not only been
socialized to think about criminal activity – as well as violence and depression –
in very different ways, but we are also not acknowledging the types of
employment that men and women are involved in.

Second, in identifying women’s responses to their internalization of
feminist rhetoric, it is made obvious that there is a range to these responses. Deep
anxiety and depression seems to result when women feel trapped by the social
expectations for them to fulfil their domestic sex-role, and, in juxtaposition,
women also seem to become interested in active, aggressive, and even violent
behavior as well. But, in particular, when looking at women’s violence and
women’s depression as primary and secondary responses, not only do the
implications of these responses become clear, but the bridge of “craziness” that
connects them is revealed. Since both responses involved the crossing of the boundary that distinguishes between “normal” and “crazy,” both responses also provide information on how and why that boundary is crossed is various ways. Women who become depressed and riddled with anxiety are labeled crazy and sent away from society, consequently dismissing and silencing them. Likewise, women who engage in aggressive, violent, and/or criminal behavior are also labeled crazy, and similarly dismissed and silenced. Both groups will forever bear the label that has been assigned to them; the mentally ill women will always be haunted by the instability of their soundness, and the criminal woman by her arrest record, imprisonment, or, as evidenced in section three, their death.

However, because the psychotic woman escapes the oppression rather than fighting it, the conclusion follows that aggressive women posses more agency, and potential for resistance.

Lastly, several implications of women’s violence and craziness, and how the two appear to be linked by power have been articulated. Violence, in many ways, means power. Oftentimes, men control this type of power. When women begin to engage in this type of behavior, they threaten the power of men. Thus, it becomes necessary to disable to female aggressive in order to prevent the male from losing his power. This is done through the assignment of the label of “crazy,” as being named crazy immediately means the lack of ones credibility, agency, both elements contributing to ones power. This exchange between men and women, as evidenced in the female characters in section three, prevent women from responding to negative stimuli in an aggressively expressive way.
that is different from men. The result of this paradigm is the continued subordination of women through a limitation on their range of expression, and, a continued dominance of all things violent and criminal by men.

There are several explanations and avenues that this paper did not explore, but, rather, served as a starting point for the beginnings of important conversations. Similarly, there are a number of elements both present, as well as not included, which might have changed the direction of this paper. For example, there are a number of other films and texts that do not contain elements of the women’s liberation hypothesis, feminist rhetoric, struggles within the characters over the conflict of female independence and cultural influence, and criminal behavior motivated by these elements. For example, the movie “Thirteen” (2003) which explores the downward spiral of the young teenager Tracy, depicts Tracy’s involvement with drugs, sex, and delinquent behavior as a result of her befriending the popular Evie, a dangerously manipulative girl whom Tracy idolizes. When Tracy steals a wallet from the open purse of a woman, she does so to impress Evie, not because of work, and not because she is mimicking the behaviors of boys around her.

Similarly, there are several examples of sources that comment on the connection between women’s increases in sexual freedom with increases in crime, a tributary of the liberation hypothesis not addressed in this paper. An example of this tenet would be the depiction of Thelma’s character being “released” from her sexual boredom when she sleeps with the outlaw J.T. Keeping the women’s

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60 *Thirteen*, Catherine Hardwicke, dir. (USA/UK. 2003). 100 min.

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liberation hypothesis in mind, it is interesting to note that the next day she robs a bank, something that might, in some sense, support the hypothesis. Other examples that could have been elaborated on were Ellie’s encounters with Abel, and the fact that the majority of the women’s army members are lesbians.

Finally, there are also several examples of sources where in addition to evidence of the characters’ struggle with or embodiment of, feminist rhetoric, there are other messages communicated in the text that rally in their necessity for critical examination. One example is the movie, “Looking for Mr. Goodbar” (1977). In the movie, Diane Keaton’s character, Theresa, juggles a career as an instructor of deaf children with her desire for multiple sexual encounters. As she becomes more and more involved in the frequenting of bars, she begins to experiment heavily with drugs, and becomes careless in her self-preservation. In the end of the movie, she picks up a random man, who, due to his struggles with his homosexuality, murders Theresa just before they are to sleep with each other.

In this example, a detailing of Theresa’s experiences would be a brilliant illumination of feminist influence as the film is produced in 1977, and contains direct referencing to women’s frustrations present during the second wave. It would also provide a framework for further examining women’s depression in relationship to that influence, as Theresa is depicted as mentally unhealthy. However, the homophobic messages communicated in this movie are, in some ways, debatably more intense, and, so a decision was made to not introduce that film, and rely on sources that didn’t contain competing elements of importance.

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In conclusion, to proffer theories, establish connections, or, even to
dismantle the structures that support the creation and production of the textual and
visual sources was not the intention of this paper. Rather, a detailed exploration
of the ways in which ideas and concepts such as feminism, women and violence,
and “craziness” intersect was intended as this exploration permits the unwrapping
cultural production, enabling insightful clues to the meanings and implications of
these things to appear. These “clues” are essential in discovering what normative
thinking is, how it oppresses certain groups of people, and how it is reproduced.

Perhaps, the result of this paper might be to consciously attempt to
recognize ways in which seemingly simple and innocent things, such as a criminal
theorist’s hypothesis, can actually reveal a great deal about our culture and the
ways in which we continuously produce and reproduce that culture. While this
reproduction is not always a bad thing, it is absolutely imperative to critically
assess the things around us that also seem simple and innocent, such as language,
or, an action movie. The implications of these things are just as severe and
important as the implications of the connections we make and the messages we
communicate.
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Vita

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