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Riot in Girls Town: Remaking, Revising, and Redressing the Teenpic

BARBARA JANE BRICKMAN

AT THE EMOTIONAL CLIMAX of Jim McKay's polemical teen film *Girls Town* (1996), a group of close female friends avenge the rape of another friend by beating the alleged attacker on the streets of New York. To punctuate the message of female empowerment and resistance to victimhood, a soundtrack of Queen Latifah's feminist anthem "U.N.I.T.Y." leads into the next scene, which depicts the girls in a slow-motion strut down a city sidewalk, mimicking a Scorsese-esque gangster set up. At the first close-up of one pair of the girls' feet, Latifah's vocal bursts onto the soundtrack as she demands, "Who you callin' a bitch?" As the song continues (with Latifah insisting "you gotta let him know, you ain't a bitch or a ho"), the camera moves down a door in the girls' bathroom at school, where one of the friends, Emma, has written "Subvert the Patriarchy" and started a list of names of guys who "will fuck with you." (The list alludes to a real-life incident at Brown University.)

In this scene, as throughout the film, the filmmakers both declare an overt political message and respond to a tradition of representing female teens in popular culture. One might even say that the film is a remake of several

teen films. Critic Eleanor Ringel makes a connection between *Girls Town* and an obvious precursor, *Boys Town* (1938), with a definite preference for the original. "Where is Father Flanagan when you need him?" she asks, and goes on to assert that the film is "no *Boys Town*," with no "warm'n'fuzzy father figure (or mother figure) to tell this film's roughnecks how to get their lives together," an absence that is, for her, unfortunate (19). Criticizing the lack of "spit and polish" in Jim McKay's independent, low-budget response to teen films such as *Boys Town*, *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982), and *American Graffiti* (1973). Ringel overlooks the aim of this revisionary "remake," which offers central roles to strong female adolescents by any means necessary.

In his comprehensive taxonomy of the hundreds of Hollywood remakes, *Make It Again, Sam: A Survey of Movie Remakes*, Michael Druzman defines remakes as "those *theatrical* films that were based on a *common literary source* (i.e. story, novel, play, poem, screenplay), but were not a sequel to that material" (9). The ambiguity in the phrase "based on" means that a remake may not necessarily be constrained by source material.¹ While money is the reason most often cited for remaking a film, the desire for revision must also be considered.² In his article "Twice-Told Tales," Leitch defines the remake—in his terms, the "update"—as a film with a "revisionary stance," one that revises its source material by "transposing it to a new setting, inverting its system of values, or adopting standards of realism that implicitly criticize the original as dated, outmoded, or

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irrelevant" (143). Moreover, several other critics have refashioned this revisionary model into a generational conflict, often figured in terms of what Mazdon calls a "quasi-Oedipal relationship" (4).³ As Leo Braudy argues, this conclusion almost feels inevitable: "When we imagine a combat of generations that reflects the tides of history, it seems invariably male/male, in a kind of masculine cultural parthenogenesis. No wonder then that so many remakes are concerned with generational (often father/son) contests of meaning, and conflicts over the proper uses of authority and power" (332). Nevertheless, while "masculine cultural parthenogenesis" seems natural in a patriarchal society, Braudy argues for other types of combat, such as "female/female" or "male/female," and he calls for "genealogies of female remakes to compare with the male versions."⁴ To proceed from Braudy's appeal for female-centered revisions, I would like to consider the 1959 *Girls Town*, which responded in its own way to seminal films of the teen film genre such as *Boys Town* and paved the way for films like its 1996 namesake.⁵

I believe such a study will complicate and unsettle the self-perpetuating father-son closure central to critical work on the teen genre.⁶ If, as Braudy contends, the remake is "always concerned with what its makers and (they hope) its audiences consider to be unfinished cultural business, unrefinable and perhaps finally unassimilable material that remains part of the cultural dialogue" (331), then the place of women in society, the treatment and representation of women and girls, and the treatment of racial minorities in the United States should seem like perfect topics to the producers of remakes. To address "unfinished cultural business" or, as Leitch's category of the "update" proposes, to redress a corrupt or outmoded system of values, films such as *Girls Town* (1959) can adopt a revisionary stance, remaking teen films by placing the focus on daughters, sisters, lovers, friends, and mothers instead.⁷ Working through the "unfinished cultural business" of earlier films within the confines and conventions of the "teenpic," or the teen-film genre, *Girls Town*

revises by playing with or parodying and reversing specific genre conventions.

The Teenpic at Cross Purposes

Films intended for the youth audience, such as action serials, have existed since the beginning of the film industry. However, as detailed by Thomas Doherty in his influential study on the "juvenilization" of mainstream American films in the 1950s, the "teenpic" came of age with the affluent, youth culture of the postwar United States. Doherty contends that this demographic's affluence and its devotion as audience members were not fully recognized by Hollywood until after World War II, when "exploitation" films began to feed this exceptional audience. As it developed from the mid-1950s to the early-1960s, the teenpic, often B-quality fare from independent producers such as Sam Katzman, exploited a number of topical or sensational issues. Hundreds of films appeared, with topics ranging from juvenile delinquency and rock 'n' roll to teenage monsters and drag racing, which turned into generic cycles of their own. Made for very little money, these films were produced quickly in order to capitalize on current crazes and sensational events, making them "triplely exploitative, simultaneously exploiting sensational happenings (for story value), their notoriety (for publicity value), and their teenage participants (for box office value)" (Doherty 7). This last point indicates one of Doherty's major arguments—that these films were produced by adults, who exploited the teen marketplace for easy profit, and therefore reflected adult sensibilities. In an effort to explain the presence of the "good" adult authority in these films, Doherty defines the "essential duplicity" of the teenpic: "A product of parent culture peddled to teenage subculture, it receives its marketplace validity only from the latter but its textual values mainly from the former" (73). With narratives that reproduce "the values of the creator, not consumer culture" (73), teenpics "deliver generational reconciliation, the cultural challenge introduced in the opening happily defused by the finale" (74).

From this perspective, the teenage viewer happily consumes the formulaic and cheaply made fare that the parent culture believes she or he wants, and the films themselves, in an uncomplicated way, advance or “deliver” the values of parent culture.

Doherty’s focus on the production and exhibition practices surrounding the teenpic provides numerous insights into the ways these cultural products were constructed and sold, but his argument leaves little room for the particular ways ideology works through generic conventions; for possible resistance to or negotiation with those ideologies by the teen audience; or for the contradictions or ambivalences within the films themselves. Although his work considers numerous examples within each subgenre, for James Hay his evaluation of the significant implications of or broader thematic concerns in the films “frequently ignores the conflicted nature of their construction,” showing “little understanding of potential ambivalence by the audience about these meanings and themes” (336). Hay emphasizes the notion of “conflict,” common to most studies of adolescence or youth culture, and ties it to teen narratives, which typically work through the problems of the self within peer culture and of youth against parent culture, what Hay calls “defining, negotiating, and resisting differences between youth and adulthood.” Furthermore, he identifies conflict as formative of the genre conventions of the teenpic, which “emerged out of, co-opted, parodied or resisted the preferred narrative practices of US film culture,” including traditional (i.e., adult) Hollywood genres. This intergenerational exchange of genre features, whether co-opted or resisted, creates, for Hay, exactly the sort of contradictions and ambivalences in the narratives for which, he feels, Doherty does not account—complications such as “the ideologically contradictory ways that ‘teen films’ construct ‘the minor’ and positions of dominance” (336). I would like to briefly consider a possible source for this ambivalence within a broader history of the youth film genre.

Before the 1950s, films about young people,

but not necessarily meant for a youth audience, tended to fall into two larger categories: exploitation-entertainment and social problem–polemic. As early as the 1920s, a number of films had addressed the topic of youth, often portrayed as a problem or reason for concern, including *Our Dancing Daughters* (1928), *Dead End* (1937), and *Boys Town* (1938). Those films focus on juvenile delinquency or crime as a problem to be either domesticated or disciplined through fair-mindedness, compassion, and a dose of morality. On the other hand, films about errant youth, such as *The Road to Ruin* (1932) and *Reefer Madness* (1936), represent the exploitative side of filmmaking. According to Steve Neale, these films use “youthful deviance as a framework for dealing with exploitable ‘adult’ topics like drugs, prostitution, unmarried motherhood and venereal disease,” which are meant to excite the viewer (219). Recognizing the continuation of these two types of youth films into the 1940s and 50s, in crime drama–social-problem films like *City Across the River* (1949) and exploitation-type films like *I Accuse My Parents* (1944), Neale insists that “distinctions need to be made between those films which sought, at least ostensibly, to condemn juvenile delinquency, those which sought to understand it, and those which sought, either way, to use it to appeal either to a teenage or adult audience” (218). However, making a clear distinction between these elements, between having a socially relevant message and appealing to audience desires, is often hard to do in regard to the teenpic.

Teenpics from the 1950s, using elements from several different genres, are exceptionally difficult to pin down. At one moment the films crusade against the dire problem of juvenile delinquency; the next moment they revel in the spectacular display of that delinquent behavior. Produced by mainstream Hollywood studios and small, B-budget independent companies, they seem to express at once both adult and teen sensibilities, values, and desires. Teenpics maintain the status quo and dominant values, while also depicting rebellious, disturbing, uncontrollable otherness. In a film like *Girls Town*,

these contradictions and ambivalences come to the fore. Referring to a classic social-problem film from the late 1930s, *Boys Town*, it also exhibits the generic free-for-all common in exploitation films of the 1950s (particularly drive-in or B products). Merely by inverting the gender of the central characters, *Girls Town* highlights the significant ambivalences and “unfinished cultural business” of the earlier Spencer Tracy–Mickey Rooney vehicle, but by combining two major trends in youth film (social problem and exploitation), the 1959 girl gang film exposes the contradictory values and desires in the teen film genre.

MGM’s *Boys Town*, with its crusading Father Flanagan and his “home” for the boys society forgets, neglects, or unfairly arrests, exemplifies the attention that Depression-era Hollywood liked to focus on social problems. During that era, Hollywood tackled social issues and concerns, even suggesting, according to David Considine, “that its products were useful social documents capable of playing a valuable role in the debate over juvenile delinquency” (169). To this end, Considine claims, “Hollywood showed no hesitation in pressing itself upon the courts, the schools, and the police force.” *Boys Town* serves this purpose by holding a mirror up to society and saying, through its mouthpiece, the savior-hero Flanagan, that “there is no such thing as a bad boy,” only bad social environments and corrupt institutions. The social-problem film’s righteous (and profitable) attempts to “pinpoint corrupt officials and make sometimes eloquent pleas for urban renewal and better relations between parents and children” were not necessarily antiauthoritarian, since films like *Boys Town* also endorse myths of American opportunity and of equality through democratic participation. For Considine, they “present articulate and forceful arguments for providing young people with the opportunity to experience responsible participation in the democratic process and share in the goals of the American Dream” (170). In other words, while *Boys Town* might point to the poverty in urban centers and the effects of parental

neglect, to the harm done by early arrest and tough reformatories (where troubled boys are “schooled” in the ways of crime), the film also promotes dominant American values. For example, it puts faith in the democratic process through the mayoral elections at Boys Town, and it endorses the Puritan work ethic and Libertarian populism of the “American Dream” in its montage sequence of the funding and building of a new Boys Town campus (also a nod to Roosevelt’s Depression-era policies).

The exploitation film, on the other hand, is defined by less lofty goals. Like the social-problem film, the exploitation film gravitated to social trends or problems (drug use, the supposed white slave trade), but it used them to titillate and excite the audience. The earliest examples of these films were shown, according to Randall Clarke, “under the guise of being informative and alerting the audience to social problems, but producers used the films’ supposed educational nature as an excuse to include many titillating sights of such things as drinking, gambling, ‘necking,’ and scantily-clad women” (35). Worse still, Clarke finds that by the 1950s, teen exploitation films “would also address social problems in lurid ways” but would often lack the “heavy-handed moralizing” inserted into the earlier films to give them “educational” legitimacy (42). This notorious moment for Hollywood saw a loosening of the grip of the Production Code and a desperation on the part of producers and studios after a dramatic drop in attendance, and critics such as Doherty attribute the escalation into “the bizarre, the licentious, and the sensational” to these factors. Doherty identifies three essential elements in the 1950s exploitation film: “controversial content, bare-bones budgets, and demographic targeting” (9). The timely, sensational happenings exploited by the films involved one demographic—the teenager—thus initiating the teenpic. In the “remake” *Girls Town*, a number of these sensational, licentious, or bizarre elements are disturbed by contradictory elements, excess, and parody, and the result is an attenuated subversion of the male-dominated teenpic.

There's No Such Thing As a Bad Girl? Remaking *Boys Town* at the Drive-In

It is hard to deny the commercial motivations behind MGM's *Girls Town*. In simple terms, the film epitomizes the financially motivated remake. *Boys Town*, a film based on the real-life efforts of Father Edward Flanagan to build a home for homeless and troubled boys in Nebraska, brought MGM (and Spencer Tracy) great success in 1938. In addition to an Oscar-winning role for Tracy, the film also featured an eighteen-year-old Mickey Rooney, whose popularity as the star of the successful Andy Hardy films was near its peak. Nearly twenty years later, when the youth market and its seemingly insatiable desire for entertainment convinced even major studios to produce exploitation films, MGM could essentially recycle the *Boys Town* material for an easy profit. However, publicity for *Girls Town* did not highlight the connection; it emphasized instead the promise of exploitation, with a poster advertising the "last stop on the road to nowhere," sensational images of Mamie Van Doren in a come-on profile, and Paul Anka crooning his hit "Ave Maria" to the heavens. *Variety's* review in September of 1959 minced no words, declaring the film a "crude and vulgar exploitation item" and characterizing the screenplay as "flimsy as a G-string, and designed for somewhat the same purpose."⁸ Indeed, *Girls Town*, even though produced by a major studio, has all the hallmarks of a youth exploitation film or teenpic: a small budget, rock 'n' roll plot devices and soundtrack, juvenile delinquency, and a direct (and sensationalized) attempt to market the film to the teenage audience. In other words, as the *Hollywood Reporter* noted at the time, it was "expertly geared for young audiences" (qtd. in McGee, *Rock and Roll* 51). And it made money for MGM.

However, remaking a 1930s social-problem film like *Boys Town* in the context of 1950s youth culture, and doing so using exploitation production and marketing strategies, results in a number of complications, not the least of which is the making strange of both the original

and the remake. But the act of making strange was not unusual for independent producers and production companies such as American International Pictures, who specialized in the teenpic and who, according to Steve Neale, managed "to defy or at least test the limits of the Production Code and the bounds of 'good taste' as established by the MPAA" (219). Pushing boundaries and challenging the adult perspectives of films such as *Boys Town*, the teenpic addressed baser *teenaged*, as well as adult, desires and contained unconcealed ambivalences (about changing gender roles, about sexuality, and even about the influence of black culture on American youth culture). These ambivalences and contradictions enable a teenpic remake like *Girls Town* to critique and comment upon the "unfinished cultural business," in Braudy's terms, of the original film and of its own time.⁹ At the very least, by changing the focus from boys to girls, the film offers a female version of the original and points to "cultural business" of gender in both the 1930s and the 1950s.

While much of the film finds the lead character, Silver Morgan (played by veteran vixen Mamie Van Doren), in a home for wayward girls known as Girls Town, true to the teenpic genre, there are also several exploitation elements at play. Silver finds herself in Girls Town after being accused of murdering her sexually aggressive boyfriend, an act obscured mysteriously in the opening scene to prevent the viewer from seeing the girl's face. Although her alibi, provided by a local male gang (the Dragons), should free her, she must go to Girls Town to serve out her probation from an earlier altercation with a teacher. Girls Town, run by a group of quirky, unconventional nuns, brings out the softer side of the tough-talking Silver, whose younger sister, still at home, finds herself in trouble. The leader of the rival hot rod gang, the Jaguars, who witnessed the murder of his friend Chip, kidnaps the little sister, Mary Lee, and Silver must break out of Girls Town with the help of her new friends there and rescue her. And this is not to mention the rock 'n' roll elements, musical numbers by an eighteen-year-old Paul

Anka and the Platters, or the daring drag race involving a reluctant Mary Lee and a dramatic crash. Such an amalgam of sensational plot elements is not unusual for the teenpic; rather, as Doherty asserts, “Few teenpics of the late 1950s relied on only one exploitation hook. Combining the double-bill strategy into one picture, they mixed two or more exploitation items—rock ‘n’ roll, drag racing, high school vice—in inventive hybrids. The result was a bizarre cross-pollination of gimmicks, a kind of exploitation overload” (93). However, going against a major norm, *Girls Town* centers this “exploitation overload” in a female protagonist, one who seems almost aware of the ridiculousness of the excess.

Girls Town, for all its exploitative pleasures, is also, on one level, a female revision of MGM’s *Boys Town*. From its opening prologue, the earlier film announces both its crusading mission and its male-dominated focus: “This is the story of Father Flanagan and the city for boys that he built in Nebraska. There is such

a place as Boys Town. There is such a man as Father Flanagan. This picture is dedicated to him and his splendid work for homeless, abandoned boys, regardless of race, creed, or color.” Despite the apparent dedication to non-discrimination and equality (racial diversity is not, in fact, the film’s strong-suit, but more on that later), this list of differences does not consider the question of sex. The film champions Flanagan’s crusade without ever considering homeless, abandoned girls.¹⁰ Furthermore, the plot rehearses and magnifies (with hundreds of boys) the ways in which patriarchal order is supported and continued through a savior-hero simply (and unambiguously) known as “Father.” The Father reforms even his most destitute and hardest case, Whitey Marsh (Mickey Rooney), and the film concludes with the young man’s new respectability bringing him authority as “mayor” of Boys Town, proving yet again that “there is no bad boy.” However, and fittingly for female-centered revision, *Girls Town* establishes in its precredit sequence its



Photo 1. A poster advertising *Girls Town*, the “last stop on the road to nowhere,” emphasizes Van Doren’s “powerhouse” figure in profile and the film debut of singing sensation Paul Anka.

departure from *Boys Town's* quasioedipal plot. The bad boy, who might have been redeemed in the 1938 film, would-be-rapist Chip, accidentally plummets to his death while in the act of attacking his date, leaving her to flee in terror and closing off his chance for redemption.

While the film might not be an exact reversal, *Girls Town* does revise the exclusively male world of the earlier film and performs, as well, a commentary on relations between the sexes in the 1950s. Significantly, the remake replaces Father Flanagan with Silver Morgan, so to speak; the central figure, in other words, is not an authority figure but the female version of Whitey Marsh. *Girls Town* does include an understanding, if unconventional, authority figure in Mother Veronica, the Catholic nun who runs Girls Town, but her voice and her participation in the plot are secondary to Silver's. This change illustrates at least one way that the adolescent audience of teenpics determined the focus and content of the films. Rather than offering an adult perspective on youth problems (and an adult, fatherly solution to those problems), *Girls Town* pursues a teenage point of view, validating the identity and market power of its audience. Furthermore, it offers a *female* teen perspective, violently introduced in the opening precredit sequence. This scene is set up through the eyes of a couple "parking," both of whom know Chip and witness from afar his assault on his mysterious date. The scene then moves inside the assault itself, conveyed through a series of rapid, close-up point-of-view shots, mostly of their feet or hands. This cutting (and camera distance) gives the sense of being involved in the struggle, and the girl's offscreen cries of "Leave me alone!" and "Let me go!" further emphasize her perspective. Allowed a better view than are our spectator stand-ins watching from a parked car, we are brought into the experience of this victim, whose screams accompany the bird's-eye views of Chip's body at the bottom of the cliff and return as a sound effect in the theme song ("Girls Town," by Paul Anka and Mamie Van Doren), which plays during the credits. A young woman's screams initiate this narrative, and,

interestingly, it will be another woman (her sister) who saves her.

The character of Silver and her maturation under the influence of Girls Town do, for the most part, echo the action of the original film, especially once Whitey Marsh enters. The place itself is introduced by Mother Veronica as "a home for girls who've had problems with the law, who can be rehabilitated if placed under the proper influence, girls that have no parents, so we try to help." She insists later that "there's no such thing as a bad girl." The girls there abide by the "honors system," and they even have their own "court" to decide justice in Girls Town, just as, in *Boys Town*, Whitey must go to "court" for fighting. Furthermore, Silver fits the part of the hardened Whitey Marsh: a father in prison, a mother whose whereabouts are "unknown," residing with an aunt "on relief," and picked up by the police three times, twice for being out after hours and once for assaulting a teacher.¹¹ Like Whitey Marsh, Silver is meant to be tough, wise-cracking, and beyond help. She stands Chip up at the beginning to go to a Dragon party where she meets another "date," she ridicules Girls Town ("This pad spooks me!"), and she rejects or mocks all authority figures, including Chip's father, to whose accusation of murder she replies, "I always thought Chip was a sick kid, now I know why." But, of course, under that bad girl demeanor beats a heart of gold, especially in regard to her sister, for whom, in the end, she prays to St. Jude, or "Saint-Whoever-You-Are, supposed to help people who haven't got a chance." After she has won the help of Mother Veronica and the other Girls Town residents (who witness her praying) to free her kidnapped sister, Silver recognizes the value of the place, and as Van Doren sings in the theme song at the end, "You will always find / You come out with peace of mind / From Girls Town, Girls Town, Girls Town!"

However, placing a female protagonist in this coming-of-age, or coming-into-sociality, narrative, particularly in the 1950s, not only points to the erasure of females in *Boys Town* (and any number of other youth films), but it also highlights gender troubles of its own

period. Silver Morgan, a “high school senior” played by the twenty-eight-year-old Mamie Van Doren, appears in ideal feminine form, but she defies expectations of her gender. Like Marilyn Monroe and Jayne Mansfield, Van Doren’s bodily proportions verge on the “cartoonish” (Doherty 75), almost grossly exaggerating her feminine features. One critic, Mark McGee, suggests that she was aware of the near-parody, “parad[ing] her pulchritude through a number of Zugsmith pictures” (McGee and Robertson 92). Described by Warner Brothers, which released her film *Untamed Youth* (1957), as “the girl built like a platinum powerhouse” (qtd. in Zalcock 24), Van Doren was a sort of B-movie Marilyn Monroe, and she played that role as if it were a performance of femininity or female seductiveness, pushing at the boundaries of acceptability. When we first see her in *Girls Town*, the camera introduces her through a shot that verges on cinematic ogling. The camera begins at her feet, slowly tilts up her body (entwined with someone else’s), and stops on her face: she is kissing a swarthy Dragon named Stan. Her platinum hair is emphasized by his dark features, and her “powerhouse” figure stands out in silhouette. But unlike Marilyn, Van Doren, as Silver, does not shy away, play the dumb blonde, or feign innocence. Contrary to 1950s rules of gender, she plays the bad girl who speaks her mind, and she gets away with it. When Fred (Mel Torme), who witnessed Chip’s untimely demise, breaks up the Dragons’ party looking for Silver, she delivers a winning line. He asks her why she stood Chip up, and she replies, “I got tired of you cats with the fast cars and slow heads.” Even after she finds religion, she triumphs over Fred and the other slow-headed cats and has the last word, as her refrain of “Girls Town” on the soundtrack ends the film.

It is necessary now to explain briefly the context and the system of rules in which Silver/Van Doren is making her own way. A simple way to understand the period, and in particular the double standard working against women, is to look more closely at Marilyn Monroe. As noted above, Van Doren is often described, literally,

as a cheap imitation of Monroe, who, for many, is *the* icon of ambivalence about female sexuality in the 1950s. Richard Dyer, in *Heavenly Bodies*, proposes that Monroe, both in her films and in other popular representations such as pin-ups, came to represent nothing more than an enactment of her gender; she was known simply as “the Girl,” for example, in *The Seven Year Itch* (1955) (21). In this essentialized role, Monroe is the object of male desire and objectification, “placed within the frame of the camera in such a way as to stand out in silhouette, a side-on tits and arse positioning obsessively repeated through her films” (21); at the same time, she bears the contradictions inherent in the period’s anxious concern with virginity (27). Here we have the infamous double standard of the 1950s, obsessed with sexuality but insisting at the same time that women and teenage girls enforce traditional codes of purity and decorum.

Marilyn Monroe, true to her pose in the first issue of *Playboy*, encompasses both these contradictory strains through a perceived “naturalness” that carries with it “authenticity, spontaneity and openness,” or, in other words, “purity in sexual delight” (32). Furthermore, Dyer differentiates her from “look-alikes such as Jayne Mansfield and Mamie Van Doren” because they do not possess her naturalness (35) or her innocence—both “sexual innocence” and a general sense of being “untouched by the corruption of the world” (36). Monroe succeeded on such a large scale because she could express these seeming contradictions, being desirable but not actively desiring, available but untainted by prurience. Also, Dyer stresses, she is not aggressive, but “looks like she’s no trouble, she’s vulnerable, and she appears to offer herself to the viewer” (45). Unlike women such as Mamie Van Doren, for example, who show “active sexual interest in men” and who might, therefore, be “labeled, popularly and psychoanalytically, predatory and neurotic” (53), Monroe remains natural-innocent, passive, *and* openly sexual. In *Girls Town*, Van Doren displays femininity and sexual allure, but she counters the expectation that she be in-

nocent or passive with aggressive knowingness and desire.

Unlike the notorious virgins of the 1950s—Doris Day, or the sexually innocent Monroe—Van Doren exhibits active sexuality and an awareness of her own power and needs.¹² As already noted, Silver refuses one man to date another, whom we witness her kissing, and then she becomes involved in the fight between the Jaguars and the Dragons, initiated by her suggestion that Fred and his friends “get in your cars and blow.” When Chip’s middle-class father accuses her of murder and then indicates that he does not know what his son saw in her, Silver replies, “Oh no?” and looks down at her own legs. She recognizes that she may not be the older man’s “type,” but then his son did not end up being her type either. Once at Girls Town, she approaches the first man she meets, a deliveryman (played by Van Doren’s real-life husband, Ray Anthony) who is actually a private investigator hired by Chip’s father. She convinces him to take her out to a club the next Saturday, but when she discovers his identity, she rejects him too. At one point she even jokingly refers to herself as “the body” (as in, “Where do I park the body?”). Certainly, while the presence of Van Doren and her famous “body” is designed to titillate and please the presumed male viewer of this teenpic (originally, the film even included a shower scene with Van Doren, but at the request of Cardinal Spellman, it was removed), Silver’s control of her own pleasure and her awareness of and use of her sexual power deviates from contemporary norms around gender.¹³ She does not appear vulnerable or passive, and she certainly cannot claim innocence. Moreover, she rejects the key Monroe feature of naturalness, drawing attention to her cartoonish proportions and the effect of her body and, thereby, emphasizing the performance of femininity and female sexuality.

However, this subversion of or near-parody of contemporary gender norms and contradictory messages about sexuality occurs in other parts of the film and involves more characters

than just Silver Morgan.¹⁴ As the opening pre-credit sequence implies, much of the film is concerned with a stereotypical struggle from the 1950s—the battle between the teenage heterosexual couple over “how far to go” (in the back seat, at the drive-in, while parking, etc.). This struggle between teenage boy and girl, directed by the “double standard” on sexuality, involved constant maneuvering by the girl, who had to feign disinterest in sex in order to appear respectable, while simultaneously giving out scraps of intimacy in order to keep the prospective husband interested. Moreover, as Susan Douglas asserts, the male partner had a no-more-flattering role to play: “Girls, who didn’t have much, if any, sexual desire, had to protect themselves from boys, who were, from the age of fourteen on, completely governed by their crotches” (63).¹⁵ This battle of the sexes is represented in several scenes.

At the Dragons’ party, which appears to be nothing more than an outdoor opportunity for couples to fall to the ground kissing, one couple most graphically represents the struggle described above: the girl seems reluctant to kiss her date, but when she squirms away from his embrace, he follows, attempting to hold her still. Even when the fight breaks out between the Dragons and the Jaguars, this same boy is pushing himself onto the girl and grabbing at her arms. In fact, only the credit sequence separates this couple from Chip and Mary Lee’s (Silver’s sister) similar struggle to the death; as Mary Lee describes it, “Then he started to get too fresh with me and I ran away. Chip caught me and tried to throw me down on the ground and then the rocks slipped out from under his feet and he fell.” Still again, in all of Mary Lee’s interactions with the Jaguars, particularly with Freddy (Chip’s friend), she is grabbed, pulled into cars, and wrestled onto beds. While one might propose that all of this excites and pleases the male viewer, the number and the increasing seriousness of these actions (ending in Mary Lee’s kidnapping) begin to signify a critique—the recognition of a problem. Through exces-

sive examples, the film offers a commentary on the unfair expectations in the 1950s for teenage boys and girls, particularly girls, a critique reinforced by the contrast between the “innocent” Mary Lee, who obeys the rules and is attacked, and the “bad” girl, Silver, who is aggressive and gets what she wants but is also sent to Girls Town.

While I recognize that the film does present these contemporary problems in lurid ways, possibly titillating the viewer in the opening sequence, for example, with the threat of rape, *Girls Town* also highlights, through excess, the assumptions or values of 1950s culture. At times, these points of excess result in a kind of disruptive parody. In her article analyzing the work of Stephanie Rothman, “‘Exploitation’ Films and Feminism,” Pam Cook suggests that the low-budget features that define exploitation films—the unconcealed manipulations of stereotypes, generic features, or cultural anxieties and fascinations (for instance, about women)—also give those films a subversive or disruptive potential.¹⁶ For example, while it seems obvious that, to a large extent, exploitation films “depend for their financial success on an overtly coded, fetishised image of woman as sexual object” (123), they also fail to conceal their reliance on this fetish. By revealing stereotypes or cultural myths as overt manipulations, these films expose “ideological structures embedded in the [film] form itself” and, therefore, allow for critical distance (124–25). In other words, the exploitation film might be capable of exposing the ideological work of Hollywood film, which is normally concealed by the classical style of filmmaking (continuity editing, verisimilitude, cause-effect narrative coherence, etc.). The exploitation remake of *Boys Town*, I argue, has exactly this revelatory effect, exposing Hollywood’s conservative reinforcement of the status quo, and exposing as well the dominant cultural myths in the 1950s. This argument, moreover, directly contradicts Thomas Doherty’s analysis of the cultural work of the teenpic.

Untamed (Female) Youth: Excess in Black and White

According to Doherty, the teenpic may have been consumed by teenagers, but as a product controlled by parent culture, it reflected dominant or parent-culture values. Moreover, he claims, this control solidified in the late 1950s when the parent culture, armed with a better idea of the desires of the teenage market, introduced the “clean teenpic.” With the teenage demographic attracting the big studios, the end of the decade “saw a concurrent trend toward unabashedly wholesome entertainment that was at once teen-targeted and parent-approved” (153). This trend is best represented by the incredible (in all senses of that word) success of Pat Boone, “‘the first teen idol even Grandma could love,’” portraying the “higher income levels of teenage culture” and, according to Doherty, finally reaching out to the female teen audience (154). Creating a division between early teenpics, which depicted “a reckless, rebellious, and troubled generation beset by problems” and appealed “to the male half of the target audience,” and later clean teenpics, which were “light, breezy, romantic, and frankly escapist” and catered to girls (159), Doherty claims the end of the decade offered “the prospect of warm, familial acceptance and reconciliation with parent culture,” characteristics associated with domestication and, clearly, feminization (161).

Simply put, *Girls Town* directly contradicts these claims. A shining example of that “occasional reform school girl or hot-rod hellcat” briefly mentioned by Doherty (160), Silver Morgan appears at a time when her kind is supposed to be out of favor, and, worse still, she seems to be exposing the workings of those dominant values apparently in control of the teen market.¹⁷ Unlike the “subordinated” roles offered teenpic actresses, who were “daintily pretty and enticingly postured sights” for male viewers supposedly buying “most of the tickets” (160), Silver is dominating, not exactly dainty, and subversive of norms about gender

and sexuality, exposing double standards and cultural myths about women. Another difference between *Girls Town* and Doherty's representation of the late-1950s clean teenpic is its attention to class and the legal benefits of class privilege, an attention that may reflect the residual influence of its *Boys Town* source and that disrupts its exploitative teenpic pleasures. When Silver is brought into the probation officer's office and accused of murder by Chip's middle-class father, she repeatedly draws attention to the law's inequitable treatment of working-class or low-income youth. With the camera tight in on her face, she defends herself: "What's my crime, dad? For not having as much money as this jerk? Cause my old lady isn't in the social register?" And then, in one of the funniest (and most accurate) lines in the film, she warns, "If you think your green stuff is gonna keep me locked up, you're tuned in to the wrong channel!" Additionally, as befits her role as the Father Flanagan stand-in, Mother Veronica has already hinted at the same inequity or discrimination: "We can't expect to operate *Girls Town* without occasional difficulties. They have problems at Vassar." One might even say that *Girls Town*, with its exploitation license, can go a step further than *Boys Town*, killing off the only higher-income teenager in the film in its opening scene.

On the other hand, one of the ways *Girls Town* revises its 1938 source, while simultaneously emphasizing the "unfinished cultural business" of the 1950s, is through its (compulsive) repetition of whiteness and of contrasts between black and white. Silver's excessive whiteness, one of those "overt manipulations" of exploitation film, highlights perhaps parent culture's most significant anxiety about (white, middle-class) youth culture in the 1950s: its dangerous proximity to minority, especially black, cultural influences. In *Boys Town*, although the prologue promises equality regardless of "race, creed, or color," the only gesture toward tolerance comes at the saying of grace before meals, when Mo Kahn, Whitey's eventual confidant and friend, can declare his

Jewish faith in prayer. In fact, the film's clearest allusion to nonwhite racial identities comes when Mo plays a prank, painting Whitey's face (could it be more obvious?) with boot black, so that he appears for roll call in blackface. Typical of a late-1930s film, this is played for laughs, and Whitey seems fittingly embarrassed, denying his connection to any "mammy singer."

Twenty years later and in the middle of the civil rights movement, *Girls Town*'s racial purity seems strained indeed, if not parodic. Silver, whose own name, along with her platinum hair, announces her ties to whiteness, becomes the focal point of this discussion. As noted above, when Silver is introduced, she is entwined with a tough, hunky gang member whose jet-black hair provides the perfect contrast for her platinum locks. In fact, this contrast exists with most of her costars, from Ray Anthony to Paul Anka and even to the habited Maggie Hayes. While MGM was undoubtedly trying to save money by shooting the film in black and white, this choice also serves to wash out Van Doren's hair entirely, transforming her blondeness into the starkest white in nearly every scene—an effect heightened by her star status, which guarantees her the key light. Her sister, Mary Lee, also has platinum hair, but hers is often pulled back or is obscured by a scarf, as in the opening scene.

Silver's embodiment of hyperwhiteness is illustrated by her grand entrance into *Girls Town*. In the long shot that sets up her welcome in the foyer of the main building, she is alone on the right side of the frame, set in opposition to the two nuns sent to meet her, one of whom is Mother Veronica. Their faces and bodies are obscured by their black vestments, and their dominance of the left side of the frame darkens the background as well. On the right side stands Silver in a tight white sweater and light skirt, her long platinum hair pulled around the back of her neck to rest on her right shoulder. Two sets of white sheer curtains with daylight pouring through them flank Silver in the right background. Even when Mother Veronica moves to center frame in order to shake Silver's hand,

the white curtains separate the two women. Furthermore, as the mother superior extends her hand, the left side of the frame is filled with black and only the luminescent Silver seems to provide light. This contrast between black and white, echoed by the nun's habit itself, almost dehumanizes the figures in the scene, particularly as Silver is lead upstairs by Mother Veronica. Turning to go upstairs, the mother superior transforms into a mass of black, with Silver's shapely figure of white sashaying behind, at one point obscured from view entirely by the other black forms (sisters) remaining below.

While one might contend that this magnificent display of whiteness is only Van Doren's compliance with 1950s standards of seductiveness and the filmmakers' attempt to highlight this seductiveness, the use of white is rarely ideologically neutral. In describing Marilyn Monroe, Dyer succinctly outlines the significance of this type of whiteness: "To be ideal Monroe had to be white, and not just white but blonde, the most unambiguously white you can get" (*Heavenly* 42–43). Emphasized by her character's name and her hair, Van Doren as Silver stands for whiteness, and thus she should, for Dyer, represent the ultimate goal, "the most highly prized possession of the white man" (43), because she is "racially unambiguous" (44). But the symbolism extends to Christian notions of purity as well, as sin is associated with "darkness and sexuality" and virtue with "light and chastity" (44). In *White*, Dyer connects this dominant symbolism to film tech-

niques such as light from above, where the key light is used to indicate the "celestial" (118), or backlighting on blonde hair to suggest its connection in Christian tradition to heavenliness (124). As in Silver's interactions, "the sense of man being illuminated by the woman is a widespread convention," in which the darker man, associated with sexuality, yearns toward and is lit by the light/white woman (134); for example, he cites Monroe, Tony Curtis, and Jack Lemmon in *Some Like It Hot* (1959) where the men "look on from darkness at the woman in, and seemingly emanating, the light" (138).

However, Dyer's claims are premised on the idea that the white woman is pure or ideal, that she "glows" because she is idealized and prized. Van Doren's Silver, on the other hand, possesses the sign of purity, in fact even glowing in her scene with Ray Anthony in the nightclub. But she is anything but pure, despite her prayers to St. Jude; instead, she proves to be a kind of exploitation subversion of the A-picture, blonde bombshell Monroe. She is given the lighting, the contrasting dark male (and female) figures, and the platinum hair, but her behavior and suspect background undermine all of these signs. In fact, one might say she is a parody of the value system they represent, reversing the connection between darkness and sexuality or between lightness and purity—a reversal also performed by her costars in the scene above, who as nuns should epitomize Christian purity but who take up the position of the dark other. Contrary to the dichotomy Dyer sets up in his



Photo 2. Seated across from real-life husband Ray Anthony, Van Doren "glows" as the locus of hyperwhiteness in *Girls Town's* nightclub scenes, although her platinum hair symbolizes anything but purity.

Screen article “White,” wherein Bette Davis-Jezebel’s red (and therefore dark, in black and white) dress signifies her association with sex, sensuality, and life and differentiates her from whiteness, passivity, and purity (56), Silver disrupts this symbolic system with a hyper-white instance of life and sexuality, while the nuns wear the dark dress. This is not to say that Silver completely subverts this dominant mode, since she is ostensibly redeemed at the end of the film through her prayer to St. Jude and her actions as one of Mother Veronica’s “henchmen,” saving wayward girls such as her sister—a redemption to which she is entitled because of, or which is determined by, her whiteness.¹⁸ However, unlike Davis’s female transgressor in *Jezebel* (1938), whose narrative trajectory, for Dyer, ends in “punishment”—that is, the concealment and eventual erasure of “her defiance and energy”—Silver’s path is decidedly less determined. She leads a pack of reform-school girls and their guardian nuns to rescue her sister from the Jaguars’ hideout and then somewhat gleefully leaves *Girls Town* in a convertible with Paul Anka.

Moreover, another reversal points directly to the film’s concern about the influence of nonwhite others on (white, middle-class) youth culture. In a nightclub with her dark-haired date and in the presence of the Ottawa-born, Lebanese singing sensation Paul Anka, Silver stands out as the only platinum blonde in the room (even the cigarette girl has black hair). In an extreme long shot of the audience, Silver is easily spotted in the right bottom corner of the frame because of her illuminated white head. When Anka’s number ends, an establishing shot of the next performers, the popular all-black group the Platters, views them through a metal screen. The background singers, three men in tuxedos flanking a female vocalist in the center, face the camera, but the lead singer is obscured. Regardless of the actual reason for this strange framing—it was possibly meant to hide the fact that Tony Williams, the lead singer, had left the group (McGee 51)—the shot appears to indicate a reluctance to represent the black performers straight on.

The next shot, closer but from a low angle, gives an unobstructed view of the background singers, the center of which is singer Zola Taylor in a white satin dress, the sole other white form in the room, rivaling Silver’s glow. The only evidence of the lead singer, however, is at first one and then a pair of dark hands outstretched in the right bottom corner of the frame, and a disembodied voice on the soundtrack. Despite several different views of the group (from a reverse angle and then again from the low-angle medium shot), the viewer never sees clearly the source of the lead voice. Therefore, while Zola Taylor’s glowing white satin dress is certainly a confusion of racial coding, the other significant point here is the erasure or disfigurement of black musical sources.¹⁹ The scene displays the ghostly presence of the black musical tradition upon which rock ‘n’ roll is based, as if the film cannot help returning to the scene of the crime. Significantly as well, the shots of the Platters are intercut with shots of Silver and her date discussing the crime of which she has been accused. A crime has been committed, in fact—the erasure of black culture and the almost complete exclusion of minorities from teen films since 1938—but the film can only represent it obliquely. However, in its strange excess again, *Girls Town* exhibits or fails to conceal the dominant culture’s anxieties and manipulations.

Considering its exploitation status, a redemptive reading of *Girls Town* can only go so far. While I believe that the ambiguities and tensions surfacing in the film, as well as its inability to mask its stereotypes and manipulations, do disturb the easy work of ideological coding performed by Hollywood films, it is also undeniably an exploitation product; it relies on (exploits) the titillation provided by Mamie Van Doren’s mature female body and, more seriously, by aggression toward women. As Pam Cook must eventually admit about the aggressive heroine she locates in certain exploitation films, “while the positive-heroine stereotype rests on the possibility of woman becoming the subject rather than the object of desire, that desire is seen totally in terms of male phanta-

sies and obsessions" (126). *Girls Town* begins with the frenetic action of an attempted rape, amusing the spectators within the film (Freddy and his date), and, although Chip dies, the aggression against women does not end there. In fact, it is transferred to the viewer, Freddy, who thereafter never misses an opportunity to grab or handle women (he even abducts one).

Furthermore, the aggressive and sexually available Silver, like any good femme fatale, can act as both a threat and a lure—a fairly standard male fantasy well represented in the history of narrative film. One might even say that the ambivalences about and ambiguities in social change, whether changing gender norms or blurring boundaries between races, create an aggressive response. In other words, according to Sharon Willis, "[r]epresentations that focus on the social boundaries of race, class, culture, and sexuality often exhibit ambivalent mixes of desire and violence that respond to collective anxieties about shifting borders" (2). But, like Willis, I do not believe we should discount these "ambivalent mixes of desire and violence" that "mobilize social anxiety" only to recontain it (3) because, first, they "often expose our most highly contested social and cultural sites" (2), and, second, the effort to contain ambivalence and ambiguity will always fail. This failure, I contend, explains the resurfacing, again and again, of the unfinished cultural business that characterizes the remake.

Girls Town, with its B-movie excess and its perverse combination of exploitation and social-problem residue, seems to revel in its inevitable failure to contain the ambiguities of teen film. Parking "the body" of Silver Morgan directly in front of the viewer, the film exposes and parodies the troubling ambivalence of films supposedly produced by (patriarchal) parent culture for an uncritical (male) youth audience. By returning to the material of *Boys Town*, the film not only reveals some of the ideological work performed in the name of "Father" (Flanagan), it also highlights the gaps and contradictions always intrinsic to that work. While Mamie Van Doren's final words,

"many girls need love, many girls need care," in the title song, express a critique or revision of a *Boys Town* (or teen-film) tradition that has not cared for or even recognized girls, the film ends on a typically ambivalent note: following the warning that if girls are "not attended to, there's trouble everywhere," a scream like those that opened the film overwhelms the lyric, reestablishing the titillating danger and "trouble" (for girls) that make for successful exploitation fare. Clearly, the cultural business surrounding gender and race and embodied in Silver's parodic figure remains unfinished—a fact that explains the appearance in 1996 of another gang of riotous teenage girls remaking the teenpic and redressing the representations of adolescent girls in *Girls Town*.

NOTES

1. Horton and McDougal also struggle to define the term: "remakes—films that to one degree or another announce to us that they embrace one or more previous movies—are clearly something of a special case" (3). First, however, the word "embrace" does not account for all the movies that compete with or attempt to revise the "mistakes" of an earlier version; second, any number of films allude to, plagiarize, cite, or rework elements of "one or more previous movies" but would not be considered remakes. See Milberg for a comprehensive list of categories of remakes.

2. Druzman attributes the existence and prevalence of remakes to their commercial value for the studios, who, during the 1930s and 1940s, met the incredible demand for films by recycling stories (13), the rights to which the studios owned "in perpetuity," thus avoiding "additional payment to the author" for every new version (15). Furthermore, Leitch describes the studios' view of their products as somewhat disposable: "this year's films no more competed with last year's than today's newspaper with yesterday's. A budget-minded studio like Warners could not only recycle *The Maltese Falcon* three times, but could release dozens of unofficial remakes of its own films (e.g., the circus film *The Wagons Roll at Night*, based on the boxing film *Kid Galahad*)" (139). While this recycling seemed to provide limitless content, the business of movie-making remained cut-throat even in the case of the remake. Leitch notes the case of Thorold Dickinson's *Gaslight* (1939), which MGM remade in 1944 under Cukor's direction "after purchasing and destroying the negative of the British film" (145).

3. Leitch discusses Orson Welles's Shakespeare films as competing both with Lawrence Olivier's film

versions of the plays and with the plays themselves, since Welles is “not content to occupy a subordinate position to the literary classics,” asserting the representational and narrative techniques specific to the cinematic medium (143). Similarly, Gabbard traces the changes within the filmic world (plot, character, resolutions, etc.) and in the social and historical context of many different versions of *The Jazz Singer*, itself a kind of remake of the oedipal scenario. See also Greenberg’s “Raiders of the Lost Text,” which takes the “quasi” out of the relationship by examining Victor Fleming’s *A Guy Named Joe* (1943) and Steven Spielberg’s less successful remake *Always* (1989) as one filmmaker’s attempt to compete with a parent film. In his afterword to the collection in which Greenberg’s article appears, Braudy insists that the remake is less often an homage than a “effort to supplant its predecessor entirely” (327), and he locates the crux of the oedipal reading of remakes in the question of “either the superiority of the original—or its necessary supersession” (329). Obviously, all of these critics owe some debt to Harold Bloom’s notion of the “anxiety of influence.”

4. Braudy suggests an examination of the connection between the “remake and melodrama, particularly through the cycle of female generations focused on in fiction, films and plays such as *East Lynne*, *Stella Dallas*, *Mildred Pierce*, *Back Street*, and *Madame X*” (332). This is true as far as it goes, but the woman’s film is not the only place for female combat, and the mother-daughter dyad is not the only generational conflict for women.

5. Jim McKay, director of the 1996 film, asserts that it is not a remake, admitting to me in an interview that he has “never seen *Boys Town* or the first *Girls Town*.” But he also said he made the film in order to put “women on screen” whom he “hadn’t seen before,” and he said he thought it was tragic “that a girl who wasn’t white, skinny, and wealthy would go to the video store and feel so invisible” (11 May 2005). While not directly remaking an earlier film, McKay’s *Girls Town* does take revision or rewriting as its primary goal.

6. Lewis concludes that teen film, in general, presents a desperate attempt to reinstate or reinvent authority: “while sociologists argue that the rapid succession of youth subcultures since the Second World War seem to have rejected the convention of authority *tout court*, the teen film has rather enthusiastically negotiated the reverse. By and large, the teen film presides over the eventual discovery of viable and often traditional forms of authority” (3). Furthermore, the means for discovering this authority remains the relationship between father and son, reasserting “the family ideal” (27).

7. As the work of Su Friedrich reveals, feminist remakes are possible. Friedrich’s *Damned If You Don’t*

(1987) reworks *Black Narcissus* (1946), inserting it into a meditation on lesbian desire and spectacular pleasures. Combining footage from *Black Narcissus* with lesbian oral and written histories as well as a narrative of her own, Friedrich plays on the melodramatic elements of the earlier film in the context of a contemporary lesbian romance. Holmlund refers to the film as a “makeover,” capable of “highlighting how much *Black Narcissus* and melodrama in general are predicated on the assumption that all desire is heterosexual” (224). Similarly, Kotz includes both *Damned If You Don’t* and Cecilia Dougherty’s *Grapefruit* (1989), a video remake of Yoko Ono’s account of her own life, in her discussion of lesbian filmmakers’ subversion of dominant culture through “entry into and impersonation of dominant cultural materials” (92). *Girls Town* (1959) remakes in a more traditional sense (through recycling a source film, source characters, etc.), but nevertheless it highlights the assumptions and dominant ideologies of the earlier films.

8. A brief overview of the publicity materials reveals, in fact, no attempt to connect *Girls Town* with MGM’s earlier prestige property starring Tracy and Rooney. The poster features several scenes from the film, including a shot from the party scene at the beginning of the film, which *Variety* called “intended to be as stimulating carnally as is possible,” and an image of Van Doren on the ground surrounded by fellow inmates in a stock pose from “women-in-prison” films. The pressbook features these same items, with the prison-like image larger and in the center of the cover, but it also adds the promise of drag races and an anything-goes attitude. With suggestions of Mamie Van Doren look-a-like contests and information about the second-generation Hollywood kids in the film (Harold Lloyd Jr., Charlie Chaplin Jr., and Cathy Crosby), the promotion seems firmly placed in the exploitation market, which might explain why reviews like the one in *Variety* never considered the connection to *Boys Town*, despite acknowledging the centrality of the rehabilitation home “operated by Catholic nuns.” Finally, and also characteristic of a teenpic intended for that particular audience, none of the publicity materials I saw pictured a single nun, not even Maggie Hayes–Mother Veronica; the *Boys Town* materials, in contrast, emphasized the pairing of Rooney and Tracy and made Father Flanagan part of the central focus.

9. Not every critic is impressed by the challenges to good taste made by exploitation teen films. Considine dismisses their quality but still recognizes their importance: “While it is difficult to take any of these films seriously, it is equally difficult to ignore the new trend they represented. If their quality was poor, their style substandard, then their statements were decidedly familiar and echoed the decade’s classier products from tinsel town” (183).

10. A full listing of the cast reveals that there were three actresses in uncredited roles as nuns. Their role in the film, as helpmates in the infirmary, barely earns them any notice, and, for the most part, they are silent.

11. This detail about assaulting her teacher points to another possible influence on the film, or another film that *Girls Town* is revising in its own peculiar way—*Blackboard Jungle* (1955). This film, which has been credited with starting the teen-film craze in the 1950s (along with *Rebel Without a Cause* and *The Wild One*), also takes place at an all-boys school and relies on an attempted rape by the “bad seed,” Artie West, to force a resolution. Doherty places the film in the tradition of social-problem films like *Pinky* (1949) or *Boys Town*, but with a difference: “Throughout *Blackboard Jungle* was a real sense that the terms of the social contract between young and old had changed. On film at least, the relationship had never been so frightening, ambivalent, or antagonistic” (58). He locates this antagonism in the “unfocused, sociopathic violence of teenage hood Artie West,” a troubled kid worlds away from the young men in *Boys Town*. However, with the exception of the female victim-lure, the film focuses on an all-male struggle for power and control. Interestingly, *Girls Town* evokes *Blackboard Jungle* in its very casting: Maggie Hayes, who plays Mother Veronica, also played the music teacher, Lois Hammond, who is nearly raped in *Blackboard Jungle*.

12. See Haskell: The films of the 1950s “were all about sex, but without sex. The fabulous fifties were a box of Cracker Jacks without a prize; or with the prize distorted into a forty-inch bust, a forty-year-old virgin” (235).

13. McGee cites Van Doren’s autobiography for this information about the shower scene. Apparently, producer Zugsmith took the film to Cardinal Spellman for “his approval” and the Cardinal “disapproved of Mamie’s bare shoulders in a shower scene” (50). Zugsmith is supposed to have replied, “But your grace, even bad girls take showers” (50). However, another scene of Van Doren changing does reveal some of her body and it stayed in the film. Furthermore, Breines contends that sexual experimentation initiated by girls did happen during the period, despite cultural prohibitions, and in fact some of the girls may have used this experimentation to defy or subvert the society sending them mixed messages. She connects this defiance to the growing women’s movement: “Girls experimented within these contradictions and in the process subverted the codes they were expected to live by. The situation was full of possibilities whose legacy would be not only sexual confusion, anger, and discontent, but the youthful women’s liberation movement with its focus on intimacy and fulfillment and a culture finally forced to respond to women’s sexual concerns” (88).

14. One of the failures of both criticism and histories of youth culture in the 1950s is their inability to recognize that lesbian relationships were one of the alternatives to normative heterosexual relationships. While *Girls Town*, of course, obsessively returns to heterosexual desire and coupling, it also highlights the negative side of enforced gender norms and heterosexual roles in the male aggression of Chip and Freddy. Moreover, it hints at lesbian relationships, predictably, in the confines of *Girls Town*, evoking again the “women-in-prison” stereotype, a favorite of exploitation film producers. Touchingly, during Jimmy Parlow’s (Paul Anka) performance at *Girls Town*, one of the girls asks Silver to dance and she rejects her outright. However, other girls do pair off and dance.

15. On the double standard, see Ehrenreich, Hess, and Jacobs; Breines.

16. Without denying the commercial motivations of the films, which “take up, ‘exploit’ the success of other films—replaying the themes, star stereotypes and genres of more lavish, up-market productions” (122), Cook looks past these motivations to what the low-budget constraints create. Unlike prestige Hollywood productions, which can naturalize and conceal the work of ideology, exploitation films must rely on “overt manipulations of stereotypes and genre conventions,” thus allowing the viewer to “see that language is at work” (124). Lack of continuity, for example, upsets the naturalized form, and the “aggressive-heroine stereotype” (126) common in exploitation films serves as a reversal of gender norms, producing “contradictions, shifts in meaning which disturb the patriarchal myths of women” (127).

17. There is one reference to *Girls Town* in Doherty’s book, but it only notes Paul Anka’s clean-teen “Ave Maria,” not his duet with Van Doren (162). Furthermore, Van Doren is not mentioned in the book, not even for her roles in Warner Brothers’ *Untamed Youth* (1957) and MGM’s controversial *High School Confidential* (1958), costarring Russ Tamblyn—who was reluctant to be in the film after his successful role in *Peyton Place* (McGee 62).

18. I would like to thank one of the anonymous readers of this article for suggesting this other example of Dyer’s reading of whiteness.

19. The common practice was for major record companies like RCA or Columbia to “produce a ‘cover version’ of an R&B tune originally recorded by a black artist on a small independent label” (Doherty 45). Backed by enormous advertising budget and extensive distribution outlets, and, according to Doherty, “consumer racism,” the record companies could dramatically eclipse the original recording. He also notes that Decca and RCA exceeded the rest by nurturing “their own in-house rock ‘n’ roll” acts, for example Bill Haley and the Comets, whose “Rock around the

Clock" was not the "first authentic rock 'n' roll tune" but the best distributed and marketed (46).

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