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# Landscape, Vitality, and Desire: Cross-Dressed Frontier Girls in Transitional-Era American Cinema

by LAURA HORAK

**Abstract:** Cross-dressed frontier women allowed moving pictures to capitalize on cherished American frontier mythologies while offering new, uniquely cinematic attractions. These figures provided the spectacle of a triumphant white body navigating the American landscape, while fixing both the neurasthenic middle-class family and the sexual dilemma of the gender-imbalanced frontier.



Figure 1. Eva (Anna Little) rears up before galloping off to find her injured sweetheart in *The Post Telegrapher* (Bison Motion Pictures, 1912). Courtesy of EYE Film Institute.

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Upon receiving a telegraph message that her sweetheart's regiment has been ambushed by Sioux, Eva Reynolds (Anna Little) slips into men's clothing, mounts a white stallion, and gallops with a group of cavalymen across arid California hills to the scene of the ambush. Dead men and horses lay strewn across the ground and the cavalry rides on. Eva rears up on her horse and gallops to a telegraph pole, where she finds her sweetheart, Bob Evans (Francis Ford), collapsed at the bottom. She lifts him onto her horse and carries him to the safety of the fort. The film is Bison Motion Pictures' *The Post Telegrapher* (Thomas H. Ince and Francis Ford, 1912). Of Little's performance, the *Moving Picture World* wrote:

One woman sweeps on the screen like a whirlwind. She is Anna Little, a corking rider, full of vim in action, and one of the best actresses in her role I have ever seen. . . . It is a pleasure to see a heroine who can do something more than smile, roll her eyes, and embrace. The American girl is best typified by those of energy, never by the chalk-faces who stand at street corners on the Rialto.<sup>1</sup>

In a Bison film released five months earlier, *A Range Romance* (1911), the foreman of a cattle ranch grows close to a young cowboy. One day when taking the boy's hand in his, he notices how small it is and accuses the boy of being female. The boy—Bessie—confirms his suspicion, and the foreman leans in to kiss her. Before their lips touch, the film cuts to a new location, but again the foreman leans in to kiss the “boy.” These two scenarios—a cross-dressed young white woman on horseback dashing across spectacular American landscapes or working alongside a male ranch hand who falls in love with her—appeared regularly in American film between 1909 and 1913 but have received little attention in scholarship on early cinema, the Western, or cross-dressing in film.

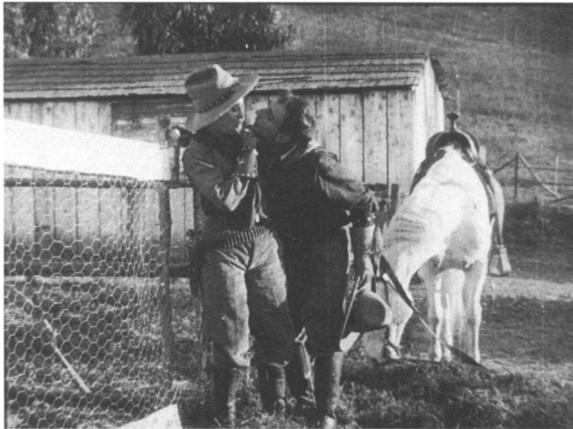


Figure 2. A ranch foreman (right) tries to kiss his boy companion (left), who is a girl in disguise, in *A Range Romance* (Bison Motion Pictures, 1911). Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

In this article, I argue that these films exploited audiences' twin fascination with tough, masculinized young women and the American landscape, juxtaposing the two in a fashion that surpassed even David Belasco's remarkable stagecraft. Transitional-era American films depicted masculinized young white women as positive, national ideals—courageous, athletic, and self-reliant. They expanded familiar narratives through uniquely cinematic means. The two scenarios above—what I call the cross-dressed

1 Louis Reeves Harrison, "The 'Bison-101' Headliners," *Moving Picture World*, April 27, 1912, 320–322.

chase and the range romance—were built upon the potentially threatening possibilities of women taking over for incapacitated men and of sexual desire between men. Yet American moving pictures celebrated cross-dressed “cowboy girls” and “girl spies” as long as the girls’ masculinity was confined to a particular time, girlhood, and a particular space, the frontier or battlefield. This temporary female masculinity was distinguished from permanent gender “misalignments” among people of color and politicized, East Coast white women. These displays of cross-dressed women were not simply a form of female emancipation; they also participated in nationalistic, racialized frontier ideology and the production of a vital, white, American race and the middle-class, heterosexual family. As production companies increasingly moved west, the films helped align the moving-picture industry with American frontier vitality.

**Cowboy Girls and Girl Spies.** The frontier and the battlefield have long been imagined as exclusively male spaces. White women are either excluded entirely or function as small force fields of “civilization,” while women of color are relegated to the landscape.<sup>2</sup> This approach, however, obscures the contribution of female bodies to ideals of American masculinity and erases the historical presence of masculine women—and female-bodied men—on the frontier and the battlefield, as well as their presence in representations of these spaces.<sup>3</sup> I use the phrase “female-bodied men” here rather than “passing women,” to legitimate the gender with which these individuals identified rather than the identity assigned by state or medical authorities.<sup>4</sup>

In recent years, however, film historian Richard Abel has called attention to the presence of cross-dressed heroines in transitional-era American Westerns and Civil War films.<sup>5</sup> In *Americanizing the Movies*, Abel writes that “what a good number of the westerns so popular here and abroad in the early 1910s had at their center was a vigorously active heroine, a ‘Western species’ of what the Europeans perceived as a distinctly *American New Woman*.”<sup>6</sup> Juvenile book series such as *The Ranch Girls* and female

2 For an excellent analysis of the American frontier myth, see Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Atheneum, 1992); Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1996).

3 On the contribution of female bodies to American masculinity, see Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998). On trans men and women on the frontier, see Peter Boag, “Go West Young Man, Go East Young Woman: Searching for the Trans in Western Gender History,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (2005): 477–497; Clare Sears, “‘A Dress Not Belonging to His or Her Sex’: Cross-Dressing Law in San Francisco, 1860–1900” (PhD diss., University of California, Santa Cruz, 2005); Clare Sears, “All That Glitters: Trans-ing California’s Gold Rush Migrations,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 14, nos. 2–3 (2008): 383; Peter Boag, *Re-Dressing America’s Frontier Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011). The most comprehensive of the many books on female soldiers in the Civil War is Richard Hall, *Women on the Civil War Battlefield* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006). On the Revolutionary War, see Linda Grant De Pauw, “Women in Combat: The Revolutionary War Experience,” *Armed Forces and Society* 7 (Winter 1981): 209–226.

4 For an explanation of this approach, see Erica Rand, *The Ellis Island Snow Globe* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 82–85.

5 Richard Abel, *The Red Rooster Scare: Making Cinema American, 1900–1910* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Richard Abel, *Americanizing the Movies and “Movie-Mad” Audiences, 1910–1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

6 Abel, *Americanizing the Movies*, 119.

Wild West performers, Abel notes, provided an important context for these films.<sup>7</sup> “As working women characters and actors,” he writes, “they embodied a healthy, active, even strenuous, often single way of life that had an enormous appeal for young women who . . . even then were forming the core of an emerging ‘picture fan’ culture.”<sup>8</sup> Not all frontier heroines cross-dressed, he notes, nor were all “cowboy girl” films “school of action” films.<sup>9</sup>

While my research largely supports Abel’s findings, I have found that frontier heroines were not always aligned with the concept of the “new woman.” One 1915 brochure for the Miller Brothers 101 Wild West Show, for example, asserted that the 101 Ranch cowgirl “is a development of the stock-raising West[,] comparing with the bachelor girl and the independent woman of the East. She is not of the new woman class.”<sup>10</sup> I build on Abel’s research by considering the formal structure of surviving films and investigating the “range romance” films that fall outside his investigation. While I agree with Abel’s observation that cross-dressing was not required for female characters to take active, heroic roles in “cowboy girl” films, I trace the rather rapid rise and fall of cross-dressing in frontier and Civil War films, and of these settings in cross-dressing films.

Comparative media scholar Nanna Verhoeff treats the “young wild women” of early Westerns more theoretically, arguing that they illustrate her more general point that “film inherently deconstructs the categories it puts forward.”<sup>11</sup> Cross-dressing is a powerful expression of western women’s symbolic and spatial mobility, she argues, and demonstrates the instability of stereotypes even as it requires those stereotypes to achieve its effects. Verhoeff echoes Marjorie Garber’s argument that cross-dressing enacts “not just a category crisis of male and female, but the crisis of category itself.”<sup>12</sup> While she, like Garber, sees cross-dressing as inherently and fundamentally transgressive, I contend that the cross-dressing in question, while offering white women a temporary freedom from the burdens of middle-class femininity, also worked narratively and ideologically to support white-supremacist, heterosexual American national mythology.<sup>13</sup> Like Abel, she contends that “women of the West . . . are embodiments of the ‘New Woman,’” a claim I contest.<sup>14</sup>

Abel also discusses the popularity of girl spies in Civil War films during the same period. These films, according to Abel, drew on the storytelling tradition of Revolutionary and Civil War “confidence women” and perhaps offered a “model of

7 Ibid., 118.

8 Ibid., 119.

9 Ibid., 118.

10 “The 101 Ranch Cowgirls, Bless ‘Em,” Miller Brothers and Arlington 101 Ranch Real Wild West show program, August 8–9, 1915, Marland’s Grand Home, Private 101 Ranch Collection, Ponca City, Oklahoma, quoted in Nancy Floyd, *She’s Got a Gun* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008), 97.

11 Nanna Verhoeff, *The West in Early Cinema: After the Beginning* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 391.

12 Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 17.

13 Verhoeff also counts cases in which women assume male roles but not male clothing (e.g., *The Craven* [Rollin S. Sturgeon, 1912], *How States Are Made* [Rollin S. Sturgeon, 1912]) as cross-dressing.

14 Verhoeff, *The West in Early Cinema*, 401.

transformation for immigrants and particularly working class immigrant women.”<sup>15</sup> Jane Gaines has pointed to Gene Gauntier’s pioneering girl-spy series for the Kalem Company as an important model for the serial queens, and Tom Gunning and Susan Courtney have analyzed the pathos of gender inversion of *The House with Closed Shutters* (D. W. Griffith, 1910).<sup>16</sup> Building on this work, I pull out a trope that the girl spy and cowboy girl films share—the cross-dressed horseback chase—and analyze its relation to previous entertainments, the unique attractions moving pictures offered, and its relation to better-known “race to the rescue” sequences and later serial queen antics.

I include Civil War films in my study of the frontier girl because there was profound slippage between the frontier and the battlefield in the popular imagination during this period. Essentially, the frontier was a battlefield—a prolonged, shifting front in which the “white” and “red” races faced off.<sup>17</sup> Both spaces were imagined to be temporary, predominantly male, and beyond the bounds of bourgeois civilization. When the frontier closed, Theodore Roosevelt and others argued that the United States should look for new battlefronts to preserve the country’s frontier virtues.<sup>18</sup> Thus, the battlefront could function as a new frontier. While the Civil War and the frontier were imagined to be spatialized along different axes (north-south versus east-west) and racialized differently (“white”-“white” versus “white”-“red”), both narratives helped forge the symbolic boundaries of the American nation and the virile character of its citizens. Also, in both spaces young women could embody the most prized traits of a powerful, masculine, American identity.<sup>19</sup> The Civil War girl spies in these films display what were understood to be distinctly “frontier” virtues, such as athleticism, horsemanship, and other outdoor skills.

As film subjects, both the frontier and the Civil War provided filmmakers with the opportunity to set spectacular conflicts in the American landscape. Abel writes, “Bison-101’s decision, in the summer of 1912, to begin making Civil War films inextricably linked them with westerns . . . as uniquely American sensational melodramas focused on war.”<sup>20</sup> Indeed, reviewers evidently considered frontier and Civil War cross-dressing films to be variations on each other. When Champion released *A Western Girl’s Sacrifice* (1910) a month and a half after Biograph’s *The House with Closed Shutters* (1910), *Moving Picture World* wrote:

While the picture is strongly dramatic it suffers somewhat because a similar picture was put out by another firm a short time ago. Whether it was merely

15 Abel, *Americanizing the Movies*, 143, 163.

16 Jane M. Gaines, “World Women: Still Circulating Silent Era Film Prints,” *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 51, no. 2 (2010): 283–303; Tom Gunning, “The House with Closed Shutters,” in *The Griffith Project*, ed. Paolo Cherchi Usai (London: British Film Institute, 2000), 4:141–146; Susan Courtney, *Hollywood Fantasies of Miscegenation: Spectacular Narratives of Gender and Race, 1903–1967* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 43–49.

17 Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*; Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence*.

18 Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880–1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 186.

19 For a further elaboration on silent film, war, and gender, see Elizabeth Clarke’s forthcoming “War and the Sexes: Gender and Militarism in American Film, 1898–1927” (PhD diss., Wilfred Laurier University).

20 Abel, *Americanizing the Movies*, 142.

coincidence, or whether one or the other producer was duped into accepting a scenario already used by another, one cannot say. But with location changed this is the same story as was told in "The House with the Closed Shutters."<sup>21</sup>

In transitional-era moving pictures, frontier and Civil War settings offered a surprisingly interchangeable field upon which young white women could display their athletic heroism.

These early frontier and battlefront films also expand our understanding of cross-dressing in cinema. While the range romances more or less fit into the "temporary transvestite" genre that queer film scholar Chris Straayer has identified, they actually demonstrate only around half of the genre's twelve characteristics.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, the films' setting complicates the comedic absurdity characteristic of the temporary transvestite film because audiences likely knew about real-life female-bodied people who lived as men on the frontier and in the Civil War from popular autobiographies and newspaper stories. The chase films, however, fall completely outside the temporary transvestite genre. They are action thrillers, not comedies; the disguised women excel at "male" tasks; the gender disguise is often convincing to the film audience; the disguised character is only sometimes unmasked; and there is only occasionally a heterosexual love story.

These frontier and war films were just two of many types of female-to-male cross-dressing popular in American cinema during the silent era. At least one hundred American films featured cross-dressed women during this first wave of popularity, from 1909 to 1913.<sup>23</sup> Of those, 60 percent were girls and women performing boy characters, many performed by Marie Eline, known as "The Thanhouser Kid." Of the remaining 40 percent, more than half were the kind of frontier and war films I discuss here, and the others were a mixture of anti-suffragette slapstick comedies, genteel comedies of mistaken identity such as *Twelfth Night* (William V. Ranous, 1910), and miscellaneous films. Interestingly, the physically active ideal embodied by cross-dressed frontier girls diametrically opposed the Victorian ideal of passive, feminized boys that female actresses were also performing in film and theater at the same time. This suggests that the gendering of American childhood was actively contested and

21 "A Western Girl's Sacrifice," *Moving Picture World*, October 22, 1910, 938.

22 While these films do display a "narrative necessity for disguise," "adoption . . . of the opposite sex's specifically gender-coded costume," "visual, behavioral, and narrative cues to the character's 'real' sex," "heterosexual desire thwarted by the character's disguise," "an 'unmasking' of the transvestite," and "heterosexual coupling," only a few of the films use slapstick or make the disguise unbelievable. The films do not exhibit "the transvestite character's sensitization to the plight and pleasures of the opposite sex," "references to biological sex differences," "accusations of homosexuality regarding the disguised character," or "romantic encounters that are mistakenly interpreted as homosexual or heterosexual." Chris Straayer, "Redressing the 'Natural': The Temporary Transvestite Film," in *Deviant Eyes, Deviant Bodies: Sexual Re-orientations in Film and Video* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 43–44.

23 It is likely that there were more examples than the ones I have been able to identify. Between 80 percent and 90 percent of American films from this period are lost, many were never reviewed, and cross-dressing was so commonplace that reviewers did not always mention it. Although the figures listed here should be understood as approximate, they can offer some general trends. For a fuller discussion of cross-dressed women in American silent cinema, see Laura Horak, "Girls Will Be Boys: Cross-Dressed Women and the Legitimation of American Silent Cinema" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2011).

reworked during this period and that cross-dressed women could embody both sides of the debate.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, anti-suffragette comedies ridiculed politically active women for being unattractively mannish, either by depicting ugly women in men's clothing or by casting men as female suffragettes. These comedies have dominated some accounts of female-to-male cross-dressing during this period, but they were not as common as the more positive portrayals.<sup>25</sup> However, the negative valence of the mannish suffragette and the positive valence of the disguised cowboy girl do not necessarily contradict each other. As the 101 Ranch brochure makes clear, the "good" masculine athleticism of western women was often constructed in opposition to the "bad" masculine psychology of East Coast suffragettes. This strategy intentionally obscured western women's suffrage activism and political successes.<sup>26</sup> Though not as numerous as women in male roles, cross-dressing cowboy girls and girl spies were consistently popular with critics and resonated with contemporary struggles over national identity.

The American landscape was imagined to be key to American vitality. In particular, as medical historian Alexandra Stern writes, eugenicists "conceived of the West as a savage frontier where men afflicted by neurasthenia and the deleterious effects of urbanization and industrialization could be restored through mountaineering, bare-back riding, and communing with the primeval forest."<sup>27</sup> Many feared that the shocks of city living combined with the deadening routine of white-collar and factory work would sap individuals' physical and mental vitality, thus endangering the health of the white American "race."<sup>28</sup> Men and boys, as well as some women and girls, flocked not only to the West but also to local recreation areas and city parks in the hopes that active contact with the American out-of-doors would restore their physical, and the nation's racial, vitality. Mocked as "Jane Dandy," for example, the young Theodore Roosevelt famously retreated to a Dakota ranch to refashion himself as a powerful western frontiersman.<sup>29</sup> The varied, rugged topography of the American landscape offered an obstacle course for the aspiring outdoorsman (and woman) to hone his or her physical abilities. The requirements of outdoor living (e.g., hunting, fishing, constructing a shelter) cultivated stamina, endurance, toughness, and strength of character. More metaphysically, some eugenicists believed that organisms could inherit traits directly from their environment and promoted California as the ideal setting from which to construct a vigorous new race of man.<sup>30</sup>

24 For more on this point, see "Moving Picture Uplift, Cross-Gender Casting and the Victorian Ideal of Boyhood," and "Range Romances: Landscape, Vitality, and Desire in the Frontier," chaps. 2 and 3 of Horak, "Girls Will Be Boys," 43–73, 74–111.

25 See, for example, Kay Sloan, "Sexual Warfare in the Silent Cinema: Comedies and Melodramas of Woman Suffragism," *American Quarterly* 33, no. 4 (1981): 412–436.

26 On the politicization of western women, see Rebecca J. Mead, *How the Vote Was Won: Woman Suffrage in the Western United States, 1868–1914* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

27 Alexandra Stern, "California's Eugenic Landscapes," in *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 120.

28 I use the word *vitality* to condense the many adjacent concepts circulating at the time, such as energy, activity, strength, and health. These characteristics were applied to individuals as well as to entire "races."

29 Matthew Basso, Laura McCall, and Dee Garceau, eds., *Across the Great Divide: Cultures of Manhood in the American West* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 1.

30 Stern, "California's Eugenic Landscapes," 131.

American landscapes were also used to symbolize the might and majesty of the United States. Exploiting the popularity of landscape painting, photography, illustrations, and postcards, American film companies marketed their unique ability to present “real” American landscapes. Essanay, for example, advertised films “made in the West . . . amidst scenes of beauty which are alone well worth viewing. The Essanay Western pictures are genuine, and that’s the reason they are so successful.”<sup>31</sup> The outdoor settings in which films were shot tapped into important cultural meanings that had been assigned to American landscapes.

Cross-dressing frontier women who take over for weak men and make visible same-sex desire offer an important counterpoint to film history’s dominant accounts of men racing to the rescue of confined women and the assumed unrepresentability of same-sex desire. They demonstrate the importance of female bodies to the construction of American masculinity and of masculinity to American womanhood. They exceed the generic conventions of the temporary transvestite genre and demonstrate how important ostensibly deviant expressions of gender and sexuality were to the construction of normative, national ideals.

**The Chase.** Cross-dressed cowboy girls and girl spies were few and far between before 1909. Although the Edison Company filmed the famous sharpshooter Annie Oakley in 1894, she wore her trademark corset and dress. The Selig Polyscope Company’s *The Girls in the Overalls* (Harry H. Buckwalter, 1904) was a notable early example, however, and depicted a day in the lives of seven sisters who run a Colorado farm. The film contains many elements that characterize later cross-dressing films. It explains women in men’s clothing as a practical necessity for frontier labor and part of an ostensibly authentic glimpse of western life. At the same time, the clothing functions as a comic spectacle and a symbol of women standing in for incompetent men. A few years later, Selig released *The Female Highwayman* (G. M. Anderson, 1906), perhaps inspired by national news stories of a “female highwayman” in Kentucky, and *The Girl from Montana* (G. M. Anderson, 1907), in which a cowgirl rides to the rescue of her boyfriend, although she does not disguise her gender.<sup>32</sup> Vitagraph’s *The Spy, a Romantic Story of the Civil War* (William V. Ranous, 1907) was released the same month as the latter film, and it is the first cross-dressing Civil War film I have found, though it is impossible to know whether there was a chase sequence in this lost film. In 1909, however, cross-dressing heroines in frontier and Civil War films took off. The cross-dressed chase sequence was an essential element of the films that survive.

Cross-dressed chase sequences united the attractions of stage melodramas and Wild West shows with cinema’s unique ability to present real-world outdoor space in order to display white women physically triumphing over rugged American landscapes. Where the standard race to the rescue used parallel editing to depict vulnerable white women pursued into ever-smaller interiors, cross-dressed chases used simpler

31 As quoted in Abel, *Americanizing the Movies*, 64; Eileen Bowser, *The Transformation of Cinema, 1907–1915* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 151.

32 On the real-life “female highwayman,” see “The Female Highwayman,” *Salt Lake Tribune* (Salt Lake City, UT), February 6, 1905; “Female Highwayman,” *New State Tribune* (Muskogee, OK), October 24, 1907, 9.

linear editing to depict white women riding or running through a series of outdoor spaces, successfully evading a band of male pursuers. The same kinds of sequences appeared in both frontier and Civil War films. While the narratives played on contemporary anxieties that the economic and political gains of middle-class white women were linked to the physical and psychological decline of white men, they also proffered women as embodiments of a national ideal.<sup>33</sup>

One of the first surviving examples is *On the Western Frontier* (Edwin S. Porter), released in April 1909.<sup>34</sup> In a convoluted plot, a frontier girl discovers that her sweetheart, an officer tasked with the delivery of a message to his commander, has been drugged while eating dinner at her house. She borrows his clothes and horse and takes the message to his commander. Like *The Post Telegrapher*, we see her leap onto a white horse and gallop off. When she delivers the message, however, she sees that it is an order for the arrest of her brother. Horrified, she rides back to the house to warn him. This time we see her gallop along a series of dirt roads, with officers on horseback in pursuit. The girl beats the officers and warns her brother, who manages to escape. As the men arrive, the girl embraces her now-awake sweetheart and the film ends.

This film displays typical characteristics of the cross-dressed chase: a young woman steps in for an incapacitated man, navigates a series of outdoor spaces faster than the men who pursue her, and shows off her horseback-riding skills. What makes this early example different from the ones that would follow, though, is that the majestic western landscape behind the girl's cabin is represented by a painted canvas backdrop. The spaces she rides through, however, are real, although the dirt New Jersey roads are not nearly as spectacular as the California and Florida landscapes in later films.

Indeed, cross-dressing action heroines proliferated in frontier and Civil War films starting that year. Frontier examples included: *A Cowboy Argument* (Lubin, 1909), *The Red Girl and the Child* (James Young Deer, 1910), *A Western Girl's Sacrifice*, *The Sheriff's Daughter* (Pathé: American Kinema, 1911), *The Post Telegrapher* (Ralph Ince, 1912), and *A Girl Worth Having* (Kinemacolor, 1913).<sup>35</sup> As Gaines and Abel have written, Gene Gauntier, a pioneering director, screenwriter, and actress at Kalem, launched a popular "girl spy" series in March 1909. This series, directed by Sidney Olcott, included *The Girl Spy: An Incident of the Civil War* (1909), *The Further Adventures of the Girl Spy* (1910), *The*

33 On anxieties surrounding women's political gains, see Gail Bederman, "Remaking Manhood through Race and 'Civilization,'" in *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880–1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 1–44.

34 There is some debate as to whether the 1909 film was actually a rerelease of a 1904 film. While the Library of Congress lists the film's copyright as April 3, 1909, the film's opening title states: "Copyrighted 1909 by Edison Mfg. Co., Patented (Reissue) Jan. 12 1904." In private correspondence, Richard Abel suggested that there might have been a 1904 film, but Charles Musser argued that the 1904 date refers to a patent renewal on the technology, not an earlier film. The film is at the National Film and Sound Archive in Australia.

35 *The Red Girl and the Child* is held at the Museum of Modern Art. A complete print of *The Post Telegrapher* with Dutch intertitles is at EYE Film Institute and an incomplete print (the first reel) with English intertitles is at the Library of Congress. I use the character names from the English titles. None of the other three films is known to survive. Three films titled *A Sheriff's Daughter* were released in 1911. The one to which I am referring was produced by Pathé Frères on the American Kinema label.

*Girl Spy before Vicksburg* (1910), and *The Love Romance of the Girl Spy* (1910).<sup>36</sup> Gauntier reprised the role in *The Little Soldier of '64* (1911) and *A Daughter of the Confederacy* (1913). Kalem made a variation set in South Africa, *The Girl Scout; or, The Canadian Contingent in the Boer War* (Sidney Olcott, 1909), and D. W. Griffith directed two significantly more melodramatic versions at Biograph, *The House with Closed Shutters* (1910) and *Swords and Hearts* (1911).<sup>37</sup> Selig joined the trend belatedly, with *Pauline Cushman*, *Federal Spy* (Oscar Eagle, 1913).

As Abel reminds us, not all action heroines in frontier and Civil War films disguised their gender. The difference that cross-dressing makes is that it provides a visual referent to the women's assumption of a male role. It also provides the spectacle of a novel costume and connects the films to cross-dressing traditions on stage and in literature. On the one hand, the gender disguise could be considered conservative, as it implies that women must temporarily stop being women in order to achieve agency. It also preserves the maleness of the frontier and battlefield. On the other hand, male guise allows female bodies to participate in and contribute to masculinity, and it evokes stories of real-life passing women and female-bodied men.

Last-minute rescues by girls on horseback were not an invention of moving pictures but a common expedient on the melodramatic stage. In one popular stage melodrama, *Winchester* (1897), for example, the heroine races on horseback to secure a pardon for her boyfriend.<sup>38</sup> In 1897, the sequence was staged with a treadmill and moving backcloth, but in 1902 a moving-picture projector was added.<sup>39</sup> Equestrian melodramas brought horses and riders to the stage, and melodramas of all kinds went to new lengths to bring exterior locations into the theater. In *The Girl of the Golden West*, for example, Belasco rolled a giant painted backdrop to "pan" from a mountain



Figure 3. Miller Brothers 101 Ranch poster, printed by the Strobridge Litho Co., Cincinnati and New York, 1911. Photo courtesy of Cowan's Auctions Inc., Cincinnati, Ohio.

- 36 *The Girl Spy* is at the National Archives of Canada (Ottawa). *Further Adventures of the Girl Spy* (1910) is at the National Film and Television Archive (London) (under the British release title, *The Adventures of a Girl Spy*). *The Girl Spy before Vicksburg* is at the EYE Film Institute (Amsterdam). *The Love Romance of the Girl Spy* is not known to survive. While Sidney Olcott is the credited director of these films, Gene Gauntier may have shared directorial responsibilities.
- 37 *The House with Closed Shutters* and *Swords and Hearts* are widely available. I have consulted the versions on the Kino Video DVD, *The Birth of a Nation and The Civil War Films of D. W. Griffith* (2002). Neither *The Girl Scout* nor *Pauline Cushman* is known to survive.
- 38 David Mayer, *Stagestruck Filmmaker: D. W. Griffith and the American Theatre* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2009), 133.
- 39 Gwendolyn Waltz, "'Half Real—Half Reel': Alternation Format Stage-and-Screen Hybrids," in *A Companion to Early Cinema*, ed. André Gaudreault, Nicolas Dulac, and Santiago Hidalgo (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 367.

peak down to the valley below, and he spent three months trying to achieve a California sunset.<sup>40</sup> In outdoor arenas, Wild West shows displayed women's riding and shooting skills more easily, but only by divorcing them entirely from the western landscape.

Moving pictures, however, could combine the attractions of an athletic, cross-dressed young woman on horseback with real views of the American landscape. In fact, Anna Little, who plays Eva in *The Post Telegrapher*, was one of the many Wild West performers that the Bison label acquired when it merged with the Miller Brothers 101 Ranch to become Bison-101.

These chase sequences offer a useful counterpoint to the better-known race-to-the-rescue sequences in films like *The Lonely Villa* (D. W. Griffith, 1909) and *Suspense* (Lois Weber, 1913).<sup>41</sup> In the climactic final sequence of *The Lonely Villa*, for example, a group of male thieves break through one door after another to get at a white woman and her three daughters, who retreat farther and farther into the house, while the husband races home in a gypsy wagon. The film cuts between the thieves, the women, and the husband. The trope of the imperiled white woman retreating into ever more claustrophobic spaces occurred in a wide variety of films, even those like *The Lonedale Operator* (D. W. Griffith, 1911) that invest the woman with a certain amount of ingenuity.

However, the cross-dressed chase sequences that appeared at exactly this same time were quite different. For one, they are initiated not by a threatening man but by the young woman herself, who sallies forth to deliver a dispatch, complete a secret mission, lead enemies away from a sweetheart or brother, or rescue an injured man. Where films like *A Lonely Villa* split hero and victim roles along gendered lines, in these films young women are both hero and potential victim. In this, they anticipate the combination of "power and peril" that Ben Singer attributes to the serial queens—female action stars who populated serialized adventure films from 1913 onward.<sup>42</sup> But where the serial queens are often imperiled through confinement (being tied up in a burning house, for example), these earlier action heroines are always on the move. In fact, I have not yet found an example in which one of them gets caught. *The House with Closed Shutters*, for example, highlights a cross-dressed girl's mastery of space by comparing her heroic ride to her brother's earlier terrified flight. Of this film, Tom Gunning writes: "The space of war that Charles enters is an unsettled, constantly changing and threatening environment. . . . Once on horseback, Agnes rides through the same open and threatening spaces as her brother, but exults in her mastery of the danger and her discovery of her own power."<sup>43</sup> The only examples of confinement in these cross-dressing films that I have come across are when Gauntier hides first down a well

40 Helen M. Greenwald, "Realism on the Opera Stage: Belasco, Puccini, and the California Sunset," in *Opera in Context: Essays on Historical Staging from the Late Renaissance to the Time of Puccini*, ed. Mark A. Radice (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1998), 288.

41 For foundational analyses of *The Lonely Villa*, see Rick Altman, "The Lonely Villa and Griffith's Paradigmatic Style," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 6, no. 2 (1981): 123–134; Tom Gunning, "Heard over the Phone: *The Lonely Villa* and the De Lorde Tradition of the Terrors of Technology," *Screen* 32, no. 2 (1991): 184–196.

42 Ben Singer, "Power and Peril in the Serial-Queen Melodrama," in *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 221–261.

43 Gunning, "The House with Closed Shutters," 144.

and later in a potato sack in *Further Adventures of a Girl Spy*. However, these tight spaces are only pauses in Nan's unstoppable trajectory.

Rather than merely reversing the gendered positions of the traditional race to the rescue, the cross-dressed chase uses a simpler, linear trajectory through space and time. While many of these films employ parallel editing at other points, during the chase sequences they depict only a single line of action. Imitating the chase films of 1903 through 1906, we first see the girl enter the frame, ride or run across it, and exit the frame. The pursuers follow the same trajectory. The camera then cuts to a new space, and the action repeats. The chase ends when the pursuers ride past a path the girl has taken or when the girl has reached a protected space (e.g., fort, encampment, house).<sup>44</sup> This sequential style of editing, with long waits as all the characters get across the frame, was already fairly old-fashioned by 1909. Perhaps it still had the possibility to captivate viewers due to the added visual attractions of the cross-dressing and of seeing a woman pull off athletic outdoor stunts. The other major attraction, as critics attested, was the landscape.<sup>45</sup> That these linear edited chase sequences managed to thrill audiences is evident in *Moving Picture World's* review of *The Girl Spy*, in which the critic found "not a moment of dullness," and of *A Girl Spy before Vicksburg*, which possessed "a succession of thrills which will satisfy the most obdurate audience."<sup>46</sup>

The relationship between hero and victim becomes more complex when the young woman impersonates her brother or sweetheart to mislead his pursuers. This occurs in *A Cowboy Argument*, *On the Western Frontier*, *A Western Girl's Sacrifice*, *The Sheriff's Daughter*, *A Girl Worth Having*, *The House with Closed Shutters*, and *Swords and Hearts*. In these films, the man is initially vulnerable, but the woman takes on his vulnerability. In *The House with Closed Shutters*, for example, a Confederate soldier, Charles (Henry B. Walthall), is too frightened to deliver an important dispatch, so he rides home and passes out. His patriotic sister, Agnes (Dorothy West), cuts her hair, takes his uniform and horse, evades enemy soldiers, and delivers the message. Once on the front, she leaps over the barricades to rescue a Confederate flag but is shot from behind and falls toward the camera, the flag in her hands. To save the family honor, the mother makes Charles hide at home for the rest of his life, posing as his sister. Of this film, film scholar Susan Courtney writes: "Stepping into his uniform and the heroic image he cannot sustain, Agnes takes on the role of masculinity he cannot bear to play. . . . [S]he does not just die in the likeness of her brother, but for him, taking on the risk and the pain from which he ultimately hides."<sup>47</sup> Courtney argues that this film, along with *Swords and Hearts*, illustrates a broader shift in Griffith's films in which male failure is transformed into female suffering.<sup>48</sup> While Courtney's perceptive analysis is helpful for these films, I am not convinced that this same shift can also be found in Griffith's wider body of

44 Of the surviving films, the only exceptions to this structure are *The Post Telegrapher*, in which the racing girl rides with the cavalry, and *Swords and Hearts*, which cuts back and forth more dynamically between the girl and her pursuers.

45 See, for example, "Further Adventures of the Girl Spy," *Moving Picture World*, April 16, 1910, 598.

46 "The Girl Spy," *Moving Picture World*, May 22, 1909, 672; "A Girl Spy before Vicksburg," *Moving Picture World*, January 14, 1911, 88.

47 Courtney, *Hollywood Fantasies of Miscegenation*, 46.

48 *Ibid.*, 40–49.

work at this time. In fact, of all the cross-dressed chase films I have found, *The House with Closed Shutters* is the only one to stress the pathos of a young woman stepping in for a man. The film's depiction of the brother's emasculation is particularly hyperbolic—Charles has a hysterical fit, wears a feminine smoking jacket, and is literally imprisoned within his mother's house. Although we might think that this message of male incapacity would be unpleasant for audiences, *Moving Picture World* praised the film's "exquisite pathos" and noted, "No picture that we have seen for many days in Keith's, our favorite stamping ground, so roused the enthusiasm of a large audience."<sup>49</sup>

More typically, films stressed the dynamism of the chase more than men's failures and resolved lingering gender trouble through heterosexual coupling. In fact, Griffith's next cross-dressed chase film, *Swords and Hearts*, is much more characteristic of this type of film. A Confederate officer, Hugh Frazier (Wilfred Lucas), visits his sweetheart, unaware that Yankee soldiers are pursuing him. His secret admirer, Jenny Baker (Dorothy West again), borrows his jacket and horse to mislead his enemies. Though she is shot, she recovers fully and marries Hugh at the end of the war. The heterosexual resolution suggests that Jenny's appropriation of male risk is merely a temporary, wartime aberration. Likewise, *On the Western Frontier*, *The Post Telegrapher*, *The Little Soldier of '64*, *Swords and Hearts*, and *The Girl Scout* all end with the formation of heterosexual couples and, often, the end of a war. Gauntier's girl-spy films are some of the only examples that eschew a love story altogether—in fact, the second and third film both end with the girl spy still in male guise. However, the series as a whole concludes with a heterosexual union in *The Love Romance of the Girl Spy*. *Moving Picture World* evidently appreciated this resolution, as it called the film "the last and perhaps the best picture in the series" and noted that it "contains in addition [to exciting incidents] an interesting heart story to increase its attractiveness."<sup>50</sup> These films legitimize female masculinity as a necessary expedient during a temporary disruptive period, which dissolves as soon as the period is ended.

*The Post Telegrapher* is one of the few examples in which a woman actually races to the rescue of a threatened man. The Sioux's "circle of death" confines Bob's regiment to a smaller and smaller space, although they are outdoors rather than inside, as female victims usually were. However, by the time Bob manages to send a call for help through the telegraph wires, the audience (if not the heroine) knows that his regiment is already decimated and the Sioux have already departed, so Bob is in little further danger. The heroine's race to the rescue is too late even before it starts, although she is able to bring her injured sweetheart back to the fort. Furthermore, the female-led rescue is followed by a more predictably gendered rescue—in the film's climactic finale, the cavalry rush back to the fort to defend it from the attacking Sioux.

The interaction of the active female body and the landscape is key to the appeal of these chase sequences. An important difference between the traditional race to the rescue and these chases is that the cross-dressed women succeed exclusively because of their physical and outdoor skills—not by commandeering trains, planes, cars, boats, or even horse-drawn carriages, as the racing men and later serial queens often do.

49 L.R.H., "The House With Closed Shutters—A Dramatic Poem," *Moving Picture World*, August 20, 1910, 402, 407.

50 "The Love Romance of the Girl Spy," *Moving Picture World*, May 14, 1910, 784.

Through superior navigation of diverse, rugged American terrains, the cross-dressed heroine embodies a national fantasy of spatial mastery. The women gallop at full speed from the moment they land on a horse—down country roads, through tall grass, and over streams. Although the films are full of men on horseback, they visually emphasize the woman's horsemanship. In *On the Western Frontier*, *The Post Telegrapher*, *The House with Closed Shutters*, and *Swords and Hearts*, for example, the girl hero is the only character to rear up on her horse's hind legs.<sup>51</sup> These films consistently oppose the lone girl hero with a group of male pursuers.

Generally, this triumphant conquest of nature was accorded only to white bodies, but *The Red Girl and the Child* is a rare exception. The film stars Lillian St. Cyr, a Winnebago Native American who performed under the name Red Wing. This is one of the few films in which a nonwhite woman disguises herself as a man. More common were films that produced and then ridiculed Native American women's ostensibly innate masculinity and compared them unfavorably to tomboyish young white women, as in *The Taming of Jane* (Harry Solter, 1910) and *Mickey* (Richard Jones and James Young, 1918). Perhaps the film's depiction of St. Cyr as an admirable, gender-flexible hero is because it was directed by her husband, James Young Dear (born J. Younger Johnson), who was also Winnebago. Yet Native women, like Native men, were imagined to have horsemanship and outdoor skills potentially exceeding those of white frontiersmen. There was, however, an important difference between white women's and Native American women's relationship to the environment: while the white woman, like her male brethren, was imagined to triumph *over* nature, the Native woman was presumed to be *of* nature. In films apart from *The Red Girl and the Child*, Native women's masculinity was not a healthy phase, but a racial defect.



Figure 4. Nan (Gene Gauntier) races across a narrow plank in *The Girl Spy before Vicksburg*. Courtesy of EYE Film Institute.

Although the landscape is important to all of these films, the way the films engage with it

depended on where the film was shot. Gauntier's girl-spy films, shot in Florida, use the exotic, diverse landscapes as an obstacle course that Nan must go under, over, around, and through. In *The Girl Spy before Vicksburg*, for example, Nan dashes across a stream on a narrow plank while an enemy soldier wobbles and falls in.

51 It seems likely that this also occurred in many of the films that don't survive, although it is not specifically mentioned in reviews.

In another scene, soldiers awkwardly follow her into a lake, but Nan hides underwater and waits for them to pass. Likewise, in *Further Adventures of a Girl Spy*, Nan first lowers herself into a well to hide and later climbs a tree and jumps from a branch onto an enemy soldier's horse. In each case, she proves herself more adept than the men who chase her. Gauntier's stunts are shot in long and medium-long framings so that viewers can clearly see her athletic stunts and the roughly human-size obstacles she encounters. In the Florida swamps, the density of the foliage would prevent views from a distance. Gauntier treats the natural world like a playground, much as Douglas Fairbanks would do in the years to come, as film historian Gaylyn Studlar has observed.<sup>52</sup>

By depicting the athletic white girl navigating this space triumphantly and even playfully, the film echoes and supports the recreation and scouting movement that sought to refigure the American out-of-doors itself as a playground for neurasthenic urbanites.

*The Post Telegrapher*, in contrast, which was shot in California, uses extreme long shots to show off the contours of the landscape. In these shots, humans are miniscule compared to the enormity of western geological formations. This framing exploited conventions of western landscape painting that emphasized the monumentality and untamable nature of the land.



Figure 5. The disguised Eva (Anna Little) blends in with the cavalry in an extreme long shot in *The Post Telegrapher*. Courtesy of EYE Film Institute.

However, shots that made the contours of the landscape legible made the body and costume of the cross-dressed woman illegible—at such a distance, the woman was indistinguishable from a man. This framing sacrificed the spectacle of the cross-dressed female body for the spectacle of the landscape, so that in a sense, the

film's attention to landscape in these shots dissolves the cross-dressed frontier woman into the frontier man. Later films like *Rowdy Ann* (Al Christie, 1919) used the gender illegibility of a figure on horseback seen from afar as a sight gag.

Finally, in films shot in New Jersey, like *On the Western Frontier*, *The House with Closed Shutters*, and *Swords and Hearts*, the landscape is less of a spectacular attraction. Framed in long shots, women ride down dirt roads through deciduous forests and grasslands. Still, their ability to navigate this space more quickly and cleverly than men enables them to elude the enemy and accomplish their mission. While the *New York Dramatic Mirror* griped, regarding *A Cowboy Argument*, that “[a] cowboy picture acted in Eastern

52 Gaylyn Studlar, “Building Mr. Pep: Boy Culture and the Construction of Douglas Fairbanks,” in *This Mad Masquerade: Stardom and Masculinity in the Jazz Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 48–65.

country is not as satisfactory as one performed in the West,” the other films were warmly received.<sup>53</sup>

Instead of the claustrophobic retreat typical of white women in race-to-the-rescue sequences, these cross-dressed chases depict white women heroically penetrating a series of outdoor spaces. Showing off their horsemanship and outdoors skills, they embody an American ideal of physical vitality and courage. The pathos of male failure is converted to thrills and is often resolved through heterosexual union. After 1913, however, cross-dressing heroines became rare. When female characters temporarily donned men’s clothing, it was usually to make an escape rather than to rescue someone, as in, for example, *A Mysterious Gallant* (Frank Montgomery, 1912) and *The Ragged Earl* (Lloyd B. Carleton, 1914). While the serial queens exploding onto the screen in the mid-1910s were renowned for their athleticism and fearlessness—as Shelley Stamp, Ben Singer, and Jennifer Bean have documented—they very rarely disguised themselves as men.<sup>54</sup> Of the approximately three hundred different serials made in the United States, each of which included between ten and one hundred episodes, only five cases of female-to-male cross-dressing have been identified: one episode of *The Red Circle* (Sherwood MacDonal, 1914), *The Romance of Elaine* (George B. Seitz, 1915), and *The Adventures of Ruth* (George Marshall, 1920), and series-long plotlines in *The Broken Coin* (Francis Ford, 1914–1915) and *The Mystery of the Double Cross* (William Parke, 1917).<sup>55</sup> While there were likely more instances than these, it seems safe to say that gender disguise was not a key strategy of the serials.

Instead of using male disguise to justify women taking on dangerous tasks, the serials feminized the women who displayed ostensibly masculine skills and character traits. Where the heroines of the earlier chase sequences wore little makeup, wore men’s clothing that hid their breasts and hips, and appeared no closer to the camera than medium-long shots, the serial queens wore feminine makeup and fashionable clothing that revealed the shape of their bodies, and they appeared closer to the camera. Though the changing distance of the camera was likely due to changing industry norms, the serials exploited the closer shots to emphasize the feminine attractiveness of their stars. Rather than appropriating men’s clothing to accomplish spectacular rescues, serial queens piloted airplanes, scaled buildings, and leapt across train cars in silk stockings, chic dresses, and stylish hats. Even when serial queens adopted erstwhile men’s clothing—like pants—it was in a style that emphasized their feminine body. Jodhpurs, for example, were much more common on serial queens than the previous generation’s straight-legged trousers. Thus, the women’s femininity was made visible even when wearing ostensibly masculine clothes.

53 “Cowboy Argument,” *New York Dramatic Mirror*, March 27, 1909, 13.

54 Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity*; Shelley Stamp, *Movie-Struck Girls: Women and Motion Picture Culture after the Nickelodeon* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Jennifer M. Bean, “Technologies of Early Stardom and the Extraordinary Body,” in *A Feminist Reader in Early Cinema*, ed. Jennifer M. Bean and Diane Negra (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002): 404–443.

55 Ben Singer lists *The Romance of Elaine*, *The Adventures of Ruth*, and *The Mystery of the Double Cross* as instances of cross-dressing in *Melodrama and Modernity*, 231. Jennifer Bean alerted me to *The Red Circle*. Pearl Gaddis notes Grace Cunard’s cross-dressing in *The Broken Coin* in “He, She, or It,” *Motion Picture Magazine*, July 1917, 30.

Journalists, too, emphasized the serial queens' femininity and beauty, as if this could compensate for their "masculine" skills and tastes. *Photoplay*, for example, wrote: "In private life Kathlyn Williams furnishes a genuine surprise. So closely associated has she been of late with deeds of daring and dangerous exploits that one expects to find a dashing, mannish woman arrayed in more or less masculine attire. So it is almost disconcerting to find a decidedly womanly lady."<sup>56</sup> Rather than using male disguise to justify women's athletic heroism, these films and discourses used attractive femininity to counterbalance their masculine behavior.

When female characters did cross-dress after 1913, it was usually in comedies that emphasized their incapacity to take on even the most basic of male tasks. In *Her Father's Son* (William D. Taylor, 1916), for example, a Southern girl disguises herself as a boy to receive an inheritance but chokes on a sip of alcohol, sneezes at a pinch of snuff, and ignores a gift of dueling pistols in order to admire her cousin's flouncy dress. When women cross-dress to join the armed forces in films of later decades, it was either in slapstick comedies or in World War I romantic comedy-dramas. In neither type of film do the cross-dressed women exhibit anything like athletic heroism.<sup>57</sup>

The decline of cross-dressing by female action stars in 1913 was likely due to the development of the star system, the increasing connection of the film and fashion industries, intensified debate around woman suffrage, and the growing legitimacy of athletic women.

**The Range Romance.** During the same period, 1909 to 1913, a number of films focused on the relationship between an older man and a disguised girl in a frontier setting. Where the chase films displayed the cross-dressed body traversing diverse terrain, the range romance maintained a tighter focus on the intense, homosocial relationships cultivated by gender-imbalanced, communal frontier living. Typically, a young woman enters the frontier as a boy to find work as a ranch hand, gold miner, or cook. An affectionate relationship develops between the disguised girl and an older male worker. The instant the older man discovers that his companion is female, he kisses her or proposes marriage, or both. A wedding often means a return to the East.

In these films, cross-dressing offered a narrative justification for women doing hard physical labor in the frontier but also provided a means of visualizing the homoeroticism of gender-imbalanced frontier spaces. Examples include *Billy the Kid* (Laurence Trimble, 1911), about a "Western kid brought up as a cowboy" who marries a fellow ranch hand; *The Argonauts* (Selig Polyscope, 1911), about a disguised girl who falls for a gambler on a steamboat to California; *A Range Romance* (1911), about a disguised girl who works alongside her father at a western ranch before marrying the foreman; and *Making a Man of Her* (Al Christie, 1912), about a disguised girl who works as a ranch

56 Richard Willis, "Kathlyn the Intrepid," *Photoplay*, April 1914, 43, quoted in Bean, "Technologies of Early Stardom," 426.

57 Slapstick examples include *Navy Blues* (Harold Beaudine, 1923), *A Peaceful Riot* (Marcel Perez [Fabre], 1925), and *One Hour Married* (Jerome Strong and Hal Yates, 1927). Romantic comedy-dramas include *Finders Keepers* (Wesley Ruggles, 1928), *Marianne* (Robert Z. Leonard, 1929), and *She Goes to War* (Henry King, 1929).

cook before, also, marrying the foreman.<sup>58</sup> Only the latter two films survive. Variations of the range romance also appear in *The Cowboy's Best Girl* (Otis Thayer, 1912), *The Death Mask* (Jay Hunt, 1914), and *She Would Be a Cowboy* (1915), as well as a few prestige films from the late 1910s, such as *The Snowbird* (Edwin Carewe, 1916) and *The Girl Alaska* (Al Ira Smith and Henry Bolton, 1919).<sup>59</sup> Where the chase films presented the spectacle of white women's physical vitality, the range romance narrativized the process of revitalizing white womanhood. Furthermore, these films simultaneously made visible and undid the affective bonds between men that frontier spaces cultivated.

These films worked from the kinds of stories that had circulated in newspapers, dime novels, and folklore. In one late-nineteenth-century cowboy song, for example, "The Stampede; or, The Cherokee Kid from the Cimarron Strip," the narrator describes his special affection for a young cowboy with a "lithe" and "slim" waist.<sup>60</sup> When the "Kid" is run over in a stampede, the narrator discovers that the Kid is female, and the Kid confesses her love for him. The narrator kisses the Kid passionately but she (he) dies in his arms. Historian Dee Garceau and sociologist Clare Sears have argued that rumors of frontier boys being girls helped legitimize men's same-sex desires in these sex-imbalanced spaces.<sup>61</sup> One implicit reason for girls disguising themselves as boys—or for fathers disguising their daughters as boys—was to prevent sexual predation. In these films, however, the strategy ends up sexualizing the figure of the boy. This brought out a layer of desire that was already implicit in some frontier literature. Literary scholar Geoffrey W. Bateman argues that late-nineteenth-century frontier literature, such as Horatio Alger Jr.'s novels of gold rush California, idealized affection between frontier men and boys.<sup>62</sup> Bateman writes that, by "deploy[ing] a colonial imaginary in order to see California as an untrammled paradise, [Alger's western novels] open up a space within which [boys] can cultivate sentimental bonds with older men who guide them on their journey through adolescence, the empty beauty of this paradise purifying their desire for each other."<sup>63</sup> Cinema's range romances tell similar kinds of stories but recuperate pederastic relationships by turning the boys into disguised girls. The acceptability of sentimental bonds between boys and men on the frontier helps explain how the pair are permitted to flirt in these films, even when the older man believes the boy to be male.

58 *A Range Romance* is at the Library of Congress. *Making a Man of Her* is held at the Library of Congress and the EYE Film Institute (Amsterdam), both with Dutch intertitles. Neither *Billy the Kid* nor *The Argonauts* is known to survive. *Billy the Kid* quote from "Brief Newspaper Squibs for Vitagraph Life Portrayals," *Vitagraph Bulletins*, July 31, 1911. Interestingly, Edith Storey, the cross-dressing protagonist of *A Florida Enchantment*, who sometimes went by "Billy" in real life, stars in *Billy the Kid*.

59 *The Snowbird* is at the George Eastman House (Rochester, NY). *The Death Mask* and *The Girl Alaska* are at the Library of Congress. The other two are not known to have survived.

60 Powder River Jack Lee, "The Stampede; or, The Cherokee Kid from the Cimarron Strip," in *Jack Lee, Cowboy Songs*, p. 44, K. Ross Toole Archives, Mansfield Library, University of Montana, Missoula.

61 Sears, "All That Glitters"; Dee Garceau, "Nomads, Bunkies, Cross-Dressers, and Family Men: Cowboy Identity and the Gendering of Ranch Work," in *Across the Great Divide: Cultures of Manhood in the American West*, ed. Matthew Basso, Laura McCall, and Dee Garceau (New York: Routledge, 2001), 149–168.

62 Geoffrey Bateman, "The Queer Frontier: Placing the Sexual Imaginary in California, 1868–1915" (PhD diss., University of Colorado at Boulder, 2010), 102–162.

63 *Ibid.*, 132.

Range romances suggested that a frontier “boyhood” could make white girls into physically vital adult women. Just as psychologist G. Stanley Hall argued that boys should go through a “savage” phase to retain their virility when forced to play by the rules of industrialized adulthood, feminists argued that girls should experience a “boy” phase to retain their health when forced to play by the rules of bourgeois womanhood. For example, one lecturer at Chicago’s Hull-House recommended: “Make Buster Browns of lace bedecked, frilled and tucked little daughters; cut their hair short, put them in overalls, and do not let them realize that they are not of the same sex as their brothers. . . . Elaborate clothes keep the little girl from muscular development—they retard healthy physical and mental growth.”<sup>64</sup> As with men, the western frontier provided the ideal setting to cultivate women’s health, vitality, and physical fitness. Feminist writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman, for example, attributed her own psychological and physical recovery to the eight years she spent in California. She wrote a series of novels and short stories describing neurasthenic girls and women who grew tall, strong, and independent by riding horses, climbing hills, and gardening in Edenic California ranches.<sup>65</sup>

In these films, innocence, childhood, and maleness are associated with the frontier, whereas sexuality, adulthood, and femaleness are associated with the East. We



Figure 6. In the final shot of *A Range Romance*, Bessie and her husband hold up their glowing white child as Bessie’s parents, Bob and Mary, embrace in the background. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

can see this play out in *A Range Romance*. In the film’s first scene, we see a disgruntled woman, Mary, throwing down her embroidery and arguing with her husband, Bob, in a claustrophobic middle-class living room. Rather than allowing their young daughter, Bessie, to follow in her mother’s footsteps, Bob disguises Bessie as a boy and takes her out west with him. They work as ranch hands for ten years. When a ranch foreman

realizes that his boy companion is a girl, he proposes marriage. Three years later, in the film’s final scene, we are back east, in virtually the same middle-class living room, but this time with a newly revitalized family.

Bessie and her husband are strong, healthy, and energetic. Laughing, they hold up their glowing white child. Bessie’s western boyhood has immunized her from her

64 “Put Girls in Overalls,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 12, 1904.

65 Gilman’s western fiction includes the novels *What Diantha Did* (1910) and *The Crux* (1910) and the short stories “Bee Wise” (1913), “Dr. Claire’s Place” (1915), and “Joan’s Defender” (1916). Bateman also argues that *Herland* is essentially a version of California. “This Land Is Herland: Queer Belonging in the Feminist Frontier of Charlotte Perkins Gilman,” chap. 4 in Bateman, “The Queer Frontier,” 222–269.

mother's hysteria without obstructing her maturation into an entirely feminine adult woman. Moreover, Bessie's physically fit body has produced a robust, glowing white child—an optimistic symbol of the white American race's continued potency.

The conflation of adulthood, femaleness, and heterosexuality is comically clear in a plot synopsis of the lost film *Billy the Kid* in the *New York Dramatic Mirror*: "'Billy' is a girl but the boys on the ranch don't know it until she is sixteen, then she marries her pal."<sup>66</sup> The synopsis implies that Billy's symbolic entrance into adulthood (her sixteenth birthday), femaleness, and heterosexual union happen nearly simultaneously. Although *The Argonauts* and *Making a Man of Her* do not have such an explicitly developmental time frame, the girls' shift from male to female occurs almost simultaneously with their entrance into sexual availability and marriage. Similarly, films from the late 1910s often sent frontier tomboys to the city at puberty to learn how to be properly female.<sup>67</sup> Even though these tomboys never disguise their gender, the films frame their childhood as a frontier boyhood.

The range romance is a version of the temporary transvestite film that speaks to the "problem" of sexuality in gender-imbalanced frontier spaces. This was particularly acute in gold-rush towns like San Francisco, in which, according to official estimates, women formed only 2 percent of the population in 1849 and 15 percent in 1852.<sup>68</sup> Likewise, the long-range cattle herding of the 1860s through 1880s cultivated an "all-male nomadic subculture," Garceau writes, and cowboys developed alternative structures of sociality, pairing up as "bunkies" on the range, patronizing prostitutes, and cross-dressing at dances.<sup>69</sup> Refusal to acknowledge the presence of Native and Mexican women and prostitutes of all races compounded the perceptions of gender imbalance. Sears writes, "The problem of 'too few women' in gold rush California . . . was more accurately a problem of 'too few women acceptable for marriage to Euro-American men.'"<sup>70</sup> While real-life white frontier men had sex with prostitutes of every race, had families with Native and Mexican women, and had long-term male companions, in the sanitized mythology of the frontier, the lack of respectable white women meant that white frontiersmen were consigned either to solitude or to platonic male friendships.

An additional paradox of frontier ideology was that the individualist, hypermasculine frontiersman was essentially unfit for the company of women. Theodore Roosevelt, for example, wrote of the first generation of American frontiersmen: "There was little that was soft or outwardly attractive in their character; it was stern, rude, and hard, like the lives they led."<sup>71</sup> Thus, even if there were respectable white women around, the hypermasculine frontiersman could not be reconciled to them or to

66 "Advertisement: Vitagraph Company," *New York Dramatic Mirror*, August 9, 1911.

67 See, for example, *Sunny Jane* (Sherwood MacDonald, 1917), *Patsy* (John G. Adolphi, 1917), *The Sunset Trail* (George H. Melford, 1917), *Mickey*, and *Rowdy Ann*.

68 Sears, "All That Glitters," 383.

69 Garceau, "Nomads, Bunkies," 154.

70 Sears, "All That Glitters," 385.

71 Theodore Roosevelt, *The Life of Thomas Hart Benton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1887), 21, quoted in Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 180–181.

married life. The cross-dressed frontier girl allowed these men to keep their orientation toward hypermasculinity even as they were assimilated into heterosexuality. The sleight of hand that turned the boy into a girl made visible even as it dissolved same-sex desire. Although these films never explicitly acknowledged the possibility that a white cowboy could partner with a nonwhite woman or hire a prostitute, the cross-dressed girl—who is always white in these films and has never been so much as kissed—implicitly saves him from these possibilities. Thus, the cross-dressed frontier girl had the power to recuperate the hypermasculine frontiersman for both heterosexuality and racial purity. She also catalyzed the dissolution of sex-segregated space. In *Making a Man of Her*, for example, the man-“boy” romance starts a matrimonial domino effect. In this film, the ranch foreman’s marriage proposal to the formerly cross-dressed girl inspires two cowboys to imitate him and propose to some women themselves. The women, who previously would have nothing to do with the cowboys, happily accept, to experience mimetically the happiness of the coupled foreman and former “boy.”

At the same time, the repeated cinematic elaboration of intimate relationships between men and disguised girls made the possibilities for same-sex romance on the range visible. Like later temporary-transvestite films, *A Range Romance* lingers on images of two apparent men flirting, falling in love, and embracing.<sup>72</sup> Although we may know that one partner is really a girl, these kinds of images encourage simultaneous hetero- and homosexual readings, as Straayer has pointed out.<sup>73</sup> Although a certain amount



Figure 7. The foreman pulls the disguised Bessie toward him for a kiss, but there is a cut before their lips touch. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

of affection between men was acceptable, kisses between the foreman and the “boy” seem to have crossed the line of acceptability. The first time the foreman goes to kiss Bessie, there is an abrupt cut just before their lips touch. It’s not evident whether the production company, local censors, or an exhibitor made the cut, but it suggests a certain amount of unease. In the following scene, the foreman leans in again for a kiss, but Bessie stops him at the last second, and they look around guiltily to see if anyone has seen them. The film thus denies the viewer the sight of the bivalent kiss that would become a stock convention of the temporary-transvestite film. However, I have not found any evidence that censors, critics, or audiences objected to the film’s homoeroticism. *A Range*

72 Straayer, “Redressing the ‘Natural.’”

73 *Ibid.*, 54.

*Romance* evidently played in small towns across the United States and even made it as far as Australia and New Zealand, where it was advertised as a “Bison exclusive drama.”<sup>74</sup> While *Moving Picture World* questioned the story’s plausibility, it praised the unknown actresses who played Bessie and Mary.<sup>75</sup>

Kisses between men and disguised women were less common in these films than in the ones Straayer describes. In *The Argonauts* and *Making a Man of Her*, men wait for the disguised women to change into dresses before making a move. But even so, the films depict men’s feelings of affection and desire for an apparent boy, and vice versa. The disguised girl thus allows cinema to visualize same-sex attraction while fixing this ostensible problem of the homosocial frontier.

Interestingly, a contemporaneous group of films about groups of women taking over western ranches also narrated the dissolution of homosocial space, but with only minor amounts of cross-dressing. *The Cow Boy Girls* (Selig Polyscope, 1910), *The Cowboys and the Bachelor Girls* (William F. Haddock, 1910), and *The Girl Ranchers* (Al Christie, 1913) depict both the women’s college and the western ranch as utopian homosocial spaces of fun and camaraderie, but they undo both spaces as part of the country’s inevitable development. While the films initially realize Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s dream of an all-female western settlement, assaults by bears, Mexicans, and Native Americans eventually reconcile the women with the ousted cowboys. In fact, when uppity eastern women went west, it was not uncommon for films to use the threat of racial and sexual violence to scare them into adopting a more traditional gender role.<sup>76</sup>

Range romances also displaced the pathology attached to gender and sexual deviance onto racialized bodies. In *Making a Man of Her*, for example, a black woman played by a white man in blackface drag acts as a foil to the white, cross-dressed protagonist. The white boy-girl and the mannish mammy compete at the employment office for a cook position that the white boy-girl gets.

In the film’s concluding “joke,” the owner hires the mannish black mammy to guarantee that his cowboys will not try to marry the cook. Like many early films, the “joke” relies on the assumption that an older, dark-skinned black woman is utterly unrecoverable to white male desire—unlike, as it turns out, a white boy. Like the cross-dressing comedy *A Florida Enchantment* (Sidney Drew, 1914) released two years later, the film posits cross-racial desire as more unimaginable than same-sex desire.<sup>77</sup>

Alternately, *A Range Romance* uses a feminized Chinese man as a counterpoint to the white boy-girl. The film cuts from an image of the foreman flirting with the disguised Bessie to an image of a stereotypical Chinese man with a long queue (pigtail) running

74 *A Range Romance*, 1911; “Advertisement: *A Range Romance*,” *Fort Wayne (IN) Journal-Gazette*, December 8, 1911; “Advertisement: *A Range Romance*,” *Mansfield (OH) News*, December 15, 1911; “Advertisement: *A Range Romance*,” *Sydney (Australia) Morning Herald*, March 14, 1912; “Advertisement: *A Range Romance*,” *Evening Post* (Wellington, New Zealand), March 29, 1912; “Advertisement: *A Range Romance*,” *Lethbridge (AB) Herald*, July 26, 1913; “Advertisement: *A Range Romance*,” *Daily Courier* (Connellsville, PA), July 25, 1914.

75 “*A Range Romance*,” *Moving Picture World*, December 16, 1911.

76 See, for example, *The Suffragette*; or, *The Trials of a Tenderfoot* (Marshall Stedman, 1913).

77 On interracial versus same-sex desire in *A Florida Enchantment*, see Siobhan Somerville, “The Queer Career of Jim Crow: Racial and Sexual Transformation in Early Cinema,” in *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 39–76.



represented by the frontier and the Civil War. Romances between men and disguised boys were increasingly projected into an aristocratic, European past in films like *Nell Gwynne* (1914) and *The White Rosette* (Donald MacDonald, 1916). Man-“boy” romances set in the urban present, such as *The Subduing of Mrs. Nag* (George D. Baker, 1911), *My Brother Agostino* (Lubin, 1911), *Cutey's Waterloo* (James Lackaye, 1913), and *Mabel's Blunder* (Mabel Normand, 1914), continued during and after this period, but unlike the range romances, these were slapstick farces that emphasized the absurdity of gender disguise. In the late 1910s, some production companies returned to the dramatic range romance but set it in more spectacular frontiers, like Alaska and northern Canada. *The Snowbird*, which envisioned a perverse, sadomasochistic relationship between a violent frontiersman and his “boy” in northern Canada, was critically lauded, but other, less polished attempts were not as successful.<sup>79</sup>

Range romances created a fantasy vision of a frontier boyhood for young women that could make them energetic and physically fit but ultimately happy to surrender their masculinity and independence. They provided a way of visualizing same-sex desire even as they dissolved homosocial spaces in favor of heterosexual coupling. While a young white woman's experience of frontier boyhood could revitalize her and reinvigorate her family, her temporary deviance—and white men's same-sex desire—was legitimated through contrast with the ostensibly permanent deviance of mannish black and Native American women and effeminate Chinese men.

**Landscape, Vitality, Desire.** In a sense, cinema's “adolescence” was a time in which female characters were allowed to experiment with different kinds of gender and sexual expression, in a fashion similar to the new leeway permitted to young women during their teenage years. Cross-dressed chase sequences and range romances expanded frontier mythology that had circulated in newspapers, plays, and Wild West shows by offering the spectacle of heroic women in real outdoor settings and visualizing the homoerotic attachments of the gender-imbalanced frontier. Cross-dressing symbolized women's ability to take over for incapacitated men but also girls' revitalizing experience of frontier boyhood. These films converted pathos to thrilling spectacles and contained female masculinity by limiting it to a temporary developmental phase, set in a temporary space. While women's heroism and “masculine” physical talents continued in the serials, they were increasingly counterbalanced by a visual emphasis on actresses' attractive femininity.

However, between 1909 and 1913, young, white women in men's clothing embodied a national ideal of fearless, athletic engagement with the American outdoors. Moving pictures allowed these active women to be pictured in real landscapes, in motion, for the first time. Even as cross-dressing was increasingly abandoned, American actresses became permanently associated with the “masculine” vitality of the American frontier girl. In 1911, one Vitagraph actress opined, for example, that the high quality of California actresses was due to their apprenticeship to “the men folks of California,” who taught them how to ride, swim, camp, fish, throw a lariat, and “rough it.” “The Western girl,” she concluded, “generally possesses the accomplishments of

79 For an analysis of these films, see Horak, “Range Romances,” 104–111.

both the men and women of other sections.”<sup>80</sup> Although the cross-dressed frontier girl was never again as popular as she was during the transitional era, moving-picture women continued to take over heroic and athletic roles formerly reserved for men. Looking back in 1920, *Photoplay* remarked: “The early years of the twentieth century brought to American women the same vast, almost fabulous changes that came to their grandfathers in the middle of the century preceding. What the expansion of the West and the great organization of industry opened up to many a young man, the motion picture spread before such young girls as were alert enough, and husky enough, and apt enough to take advantage of it.”<sup>81</sup> \*

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80 “Why Players Come from California,” *Stage Pictorial*, n.d. Although the article was not dated in the scrapbook, it was likely from 1911, because it describes the Vitagraph Company as being located in Santa Monica. Vitagraph opened a studio in Santa Monica in 1911 but moved to Hollywood the next year. Scrapbook \*ZAN-T213, reel 56, “Billie Burke,” Billy Rose Theater Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

81 Julius Johnson, “The Girl on the Cover,” *Photoplay*, April 1920, 57.