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# “WHORES AND OTHER FEMINISTS”

## RECOVERING *DEADWOOD*’S UNLIKELY FEMINISMS

ANNE HELEN PETERSEN

The very first vision of the female form in *Deadwood* is one of ultimate despair: the woman sits alone in the corner of a room, hysterically weeping, her face swollen and bruised with beating. A man sits across the room, a bullet through the temple, barely alive. He was beating her; she responded with a Derringer shot to the head. Moments later, the woman is on the ground in her pimp’s office, his boot square on her neck. She writhes beneath him, nearly strangling to death before whispering through bloodied lips: “I’ll be good.” Meanwhile, the other prominent female character of the camp is obviously hopped up on dope, barely tolerating her dude husband as he clamors after gold. Such is our dismal introduction to the women

of *Deadwood*: as punching bags or as bored drug addicts. As a young feminist, I found my initial attraction to *Deadwood* troubling—how could I continue to watch, or even find pleasure in watching, a show that so blatantly debases the female? As Julia Lesage proclaims, “as a woman I must ask how the media can so seduce me that I enjoy, either as entertainment or as art, works which victimize women as one of their essential ingredients.”<sup>1</sup> I understood that series creator David Milch intended to reconstruct his *Deadwood* with meticulous accuracy—violence, profanity, and, of course, the pervasive female subjugation that characterized the age. But women being beaten, sworn at, debased, and humiliated—could I rationalize my pleasure in that?

As I grappled with that question, I found myself hooked. The complexity of plot, character, and language had pulled me into the world of *Deadwood*. Over the course of three seasons, I’ve begun to search for traces of feminine agency, and while I resist the problematic syllogism of “I am a feminist; I like *Deadwood*; *Deadwood* must be at least somewhat feminist,”<sup>2</sup> I do believe the text, perhaps in an untraditional, unexpected way, highlights and

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affirms the advances of women. For the history of feminism has been marked with progress and regression, gains and losses, conservatism and radicalism—a dynamicism that equally characterizes *Deadwood's* treatment of the female. The series begins with the above-described portrait of subjugation, but with time, the women of *Deadwood* consistently (and successfully) resist the strictures of patriarchy that surround them, achieving autonomy, self-expression, even, in all its complexity, happiness. Yet their advances teeter in the balance as George Hearst (and the modernity and civilization he embodies) takes root in Deadwood. While *Deadwood's* narrative is yet to close—a pair of mini-movies will air sometime in 2007 on HBO—I read the tenuous state of the camp as a caution. It seems the lesson is, while much has been gained, much may equally be lost.

This essay traces the trajectory of *Deadwood's* unlikely feminisms, evident in forms of characterization, subjectivity, and speech. By focusing on Trixie and Joanie Stubbs (both prostitutes) and Alma Garret/Ellsworth and Martha Bullock (the proper Victorian woman, the “helpmate”), I hope to illuminate both ends of the spectrum of female *Deadwood* experience.<sup>3</sup> Cinema (the Western in particular) is commonly recognized for its ability to reflect current concerns back at the audience—as Milch emphasizes, “nothing you see in *Deadwood* is irrelevant to our contemporary reality.”<sup>4</sup> Milch is no doubt referring to the themes of encroaching civilization, greed, and the organization of the lawless into the lawful, yet the treatment of women intersects and influences each of those themes, emphasizing the “contemporary reality” of twenty-first-century women. Ultimately, conclusions concerning *Deadwood* feminisms form an implicit comment on contemporary feminisms—more specifically, postfeminism.

#### POSTFEMINISM

Angela McRobbie defines postfeminism as part derivative, part response, part backlash, “an active process by which feminist gains of the 1970s and 1980s come to be undermined.”<sup>5</sup>

With the ideas of the “foremothers” no longer relevant, postfeminism “positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasize that it is no longer needed, it is a spent force.”<sup>6</sup> Women who followed the advice and/or capitalized upon the opportunities provided by 1970s feminism found themselves bored, alienated, and unsatisfied, still faced with the unchanged reality of glass ceilings, sexism, and lower wages. As Susan Douglas jokingly explains,

I would think postfeminism would refer to a time when complete gender equality has been achieved. That hasn't happened, of course, but we (especially young women) are supposed to think that it has. Postfeminism, as a term, suggests that women have made plenty of progress because of feminism, but that feminism is now irrelevant and even undesirable because it has made millions of women unhappy, unfeminine, childless, lonely, and bitter, prompting them to fill their closets with combat boots and really bad India print skirts.<sup>7</sup>

With consumerism, beautification, and male-oriented fantasy demonized by '70s feminist rhetoric, where was fun (or happiness) to be found?

Beginning in the early '90s, feminists sought to bring the “fun” back into feminism, banishing its ascetic image in favor of ostensibly empowering “women's genres.” Charlotte Brunson explains that “the feminist defense of . . . fashion, soap opera, and women's magazines is permissive and even enthusiastic about consumption. Wearing lipstick is no longer wicked.”<sup>8</sup> If Madonna, the soap opera, Danielle Steele, lipstick, and *Cosmopolitan* magazine served as harbingers of postfeminism, then Bridget Jones, chick lit, *Real Simple*, Rachel Ray, and the neoconservative values of the Bush administration firmly announce its arrival. In other words, feminism is out of style; its “waves” have ceased to crash and remake

society. In their place: complacency. While the female sex trade, domestic abuse, female circumcision, self-immolating wives, and male-dominated workplaces persist worldwide, postfeminists fancy *Sex and the City* as evidence that women can be fashionable, sexual, and independent, neglecting the fact that each (white, educated, upper-class) character ends in a hetero-normative coupling at series' end.

Unlike *Sex and the City*, *Desperate Housewives*, *Pretty Woman*, and other postfeminist productions, *Deadwood* serves as an abrasive wake-up call to its drowsy female audience. Painting a stark portrait of the female subjugation from which we've come, *Deadwood* permits celebration of feminist progress but highlights the very real regression that takes place when we succumb to the pressures of society and capital. My analysis may appear a justification, grabbing for signs of feminism amidst the violent, misogynistic world of frontier, a space historically characterized by masculine domination. In my defense, I recall the words of Adrienne Rich: "If we conceive of feminism as more than just a frivolous label, if we conceive of it as an ethics, a methodology, a more complex way of thinking about, thus more responsibly acting upon, the condition of human life, we need a self-knowledge which can only develop through a steady, passionate attention to *all* female experience."<sup>9</sup> In other words, such "steady, passionate" attention must be paid to even the most male-focalized of creations, as the experience of these characters—the 'lady of the night,' the repressed Victorian schoolmarm—is no less integral to any history of female experience.

Returning to the question of fandom, I choose to view mine as an asset—as Henry Jenkins points out, fandom produces "new insights into the media by releasing [the critic] from the narrowly circumscribed categories and assumptions of academic criticism and allowing [her] to play with the textual materials."<sup>10</sup> Feminist Lisa Johnson builds on this point, explaining that "the creative energy that comes from playing with texts—as opposed to holding them at arm's length as agents of

cultural dupery—will lead ideally to more complex theories of representation and pleasure."<sup>11</sup> In other words, my status as a fan allows me to delve deeper into the complexities of female spectatorship and feminist critique. To echo Jenkins, a text's meaning is created in its reception. My interpretation, like the others in this collection, are added to the responses of so many other fans, collectively suggesting how a text "means."

#### WOMEN IN THE WEST: THE WORLD'S OLDEST PROFESSION

In the fictitious land of screen and page, the Western prostitute is romanticized, renamed, and refigured as "soiled doves" or "red-light ladies." The foreword to Chris Enss's *Pistol Packin' Madams* exemplifies this historical revisionism: "Hard workin', hard livin', and hard lovin', these pistol-packin' madams were the brave and colorful business women of the Old West. What an inspiration."<sup>12</sup> Butler and Siporin point to the fallacy of this construction, emphasizing that "actually, prostitutes lived out a difficult life with many forms of social, economic, and political constraint. The ranks of the West's poor and uneducated supplied the region's boom era of the nineteenth century. Women entered the profession at an early age. . . . [M]any of the women could not read or write and had few opportunities to extricate themselves from their lives."<sup>13</sup> Prostitutes haggled with drunken customers over prices, endured special brothel "taxes," spent wages on bribing town officials, and suffered from malnutrition, tuberculosis, botched abortions, and alcoholism.<sup>14</sup> Ronald Lackmann emphasizes that "actual saloon girls of the Wild West were usually hard, not soft boiled eggs. They not only prostituted themselves, but drank and smoked . . . and were not averse to 'rolling' a drunken customer and relieving him of his cash."<sup>15</sup> Yet these ugly realities of prostitute life are conveniently and consistently elided in songs, books, historical landmarks, plays, and film.

Throughout film history, the prostitute has been visually and narratively stereotyped.



FIG. 1. *Gem Theatre, Deadwood, SD*. Courtesy of Adams Museum, Deadwood, SD. [98-202]

Certain visual cues—dark lipstick, body language, position at the bar—consistently connote her profession. Yet she is also narratively stereotyped, with her choices and function predetermined. As Russell Campbell explains, the filmic prostitute represents “in varying proportions an object of desire, representing those qualities in life for which the male experiences an aching want, and an object of hatred, symbolizing everything in the female other he wishes to deny or destroy.”<sup>16</sup> Thus, when the Hays Code required that “pictures shall not infer that low forms of sex relationship are the accepted or common thing,” prostitution was effectively sublimated; the exoticized, loose, passionate female character came to represent the unrepresentable. In films like *My Darling Clementine*, the prostitute character, Chihuahua, is marked as ethnic and destructively passionate—her dangerous sexual appetite necessitates either death or domestic

reform. Conversely, the “independent” prostitute is returned to her “proper” place, either through domestication (*Pretty Woman*) or death (*Dishonored; Farewell My Concubine*).<sup>17</sup> The prostitute is clearly a troubling narrative force that demands neutralization, either through literal elimination or the elimination of her troubling sexuality.

Following the dissolution of the code in the early '60s and the rise of second-wave feminism, films like *Klute* and *Working Girls* tackled the issue of sex work with greater nuance, resisting traditional means of narrative neutralization. Revisionist Westerns (*McCabe and Mrs. Miller* and *Unforgiven*) continued to deromanticize the prostitute, engaging the dark underbelly of the frontier myth and painting their discoveries in bleak, abrasive tones. In these films, the quintessential American form (the Western) is appropriated as a means to *critique* American ideology. The idea of “Western justice” proves



FIG. 2. Trixie (Paula Malcomson on the far right) and the Gem Girls. From *Deadwood*, season 1, episode 9, "No Other Sons or Daughters." Courtesy of Home Box Office, Inc. (HBO). Photo by Doug Hyun/HBO.

arbitrary and hollow; evil taints us all, and we all suffer in turn. While the prostitute may figure more heavily in the narrative, her plight, like those of the men who surround her, is hopeless. The narrative refuses to rescue her from the harsh fate prescribed by American (patriarchal) ideology. For the feminist, the revisionist Western is problematic: while its realism undoubtedly challenges romanticized visions of the past, female characters are nevertheless subject to abuse or empowered exclusively through sex work.

As a revisionist Western, *Deadwood* resists the stereotypes established by dime novels, classic Westerns, *Gunsmoke*, and the Western myth they labored to create. Through the squelching muck of the streets, the palatable rot of the miners' clothing, and the human carcasses thrown to the pigs, combined with general crassness and cutthroat sensibilities, *Deadwood* immediately establishes its revisionist charac-

ter.<sup>18</sup> The prostitutes of Al Swearngen's Gem Saloon are dirtied, bruised, and bored; their faces appear sallow and hollowed out. The audience is "disabused very quickly of the idea that consorting with prostitutes is fun . . . for any of the participants."<sup>19</sup> Clearly, the woman does not choose to sell her body—rather, society, embodied by her pimp or poverty, forces her to do so. The wardrobe of the whores offers the first visual indication of their dismal situation. As costume designer Katherine Jane Bryant explains, once confronted with their clothing, that "we really feel for the girls and the life they've ended up with," emphasizing "how bad their life was, how dirty the men were." Bryant employs underpinnings—the loose, sagging, soiled undergarments donned by the Gem Girls throughout the series—to convey desperation and vulnerability.<sup>20</sup> We repeatedly see the Gem Girls leaning against doorframes or lounging atop each other—their lives are punctuated

only by a weekly visit from Doc to check for sexually transmitted diseases. With the exception of Trixie, the whores appear as a massive, largely indistinguishable mass, emphasizing their lack of subjectivity. The palpable bleakness of their situation debunks any romanticized notions of frontier prostitution. Like the gold, horses, or whiskey, they are bought and sold in *Deadwood*, debased and stricken of their humanity.

Swarengen acquired his whores from the very orphanage where he was left by his prostitute mother, perpetuating a cycle that he sees as inevitable. His frank pragmatism characterizes the revisionist Western: one can never escape society and its ideology, save through death. Men desire sex; women will sell it when it becomes their sole means of survival. Such is the situation at the Gem, where the prostitutes dare not challenge Al's ultimate control over their lives and bodies. Living in fear of Al's volatile temper, Trixie, like the other whores, has been "disciplined into a passive and obedient servant, an object of male desire and sexual consumption whom Swarengen habitually ushers to the brink of death." Our first introduction to Trixie comes in the form of a gunshot. Al stands at the near-empty bar, pouring a drink for Ellsworth, when he hears a muted shot from upstairs. He yells at his henchmen Dan Dority, "That's her Derringer . . . I warned you about that loopy cunt!" At this point, "she" is little more than a "loopy cunt"—female, and thus able to turn a trick, which marks the extent of her worth. Her self-defense against a john proves her "loopy," a description that readily conflates female volition with insanity. Al and Dan run up the stairs, and the camera cuts to a medium shot of Trixie, hysterical, crying over and over, "I said not to beat on me, I told him!" Trixie wears a soiled laced camisole, her hair is disheveled and dirtied, and her skin is incredibly white. With hunched shoulders and heaving breast as she repeats her defense, she looks like a wounded bird. The background is unpeopled and out of focus, making Trixie appear desolate and very much alone. Al quickly shuts her up, yelling, "No one

asked for your version!" After the john dies, Al grabs her arm, pulling her to his office.

The scene breaks here, jumping to Wild Bill, Calamity Jane, and Charlie Utter as they make their way into camp. The pause between Al and Trixie's exit from the room and entrance into Al's office is disconcerting: before we return to Al's office, each moment spent on other characters is one in which Al could be beating Trixie. When the narrative at last returns to the Gem, the scene commences with Trixie's back to the camera. In these moments, her character is little more than a female frame. What matters, as the camera helps us to understand, is Al's reaction to that frame. Trixie recollects the john's backstory—his plans to return East after "one last piece of pussy." Al again dismisses her defense, growling, "None of that's anything to me." Clearly, her words of exculpation mean nothing, as he's already decided how he'll respond. In this first episode, his judgment applies to women's words in general: they mean nothing, he can't hear them, they're absolutely unwanted. No one wants a woman's version—it's suspect, "loopy," and above all, inconsequential.

Al approaches Trixie, bending down to examine her wounds. "He beat the living shit out of you," he sighs, holding her face almost tenderly. She looks down at the ground, unable to meet his eyes, and cries, "Do what you're going to do to me," a command that infuriates him. He looks her straight in the eyes and yells, "Don't tell me what to do!" and throws her forcefully across the room. Trixie's body flies as if a rag doll across the screen, falling inanimate on the ground. Al walks over, puts his boot on her neck, and commands, "Either way this comes out, we'll only have to do it once. . . . What's it to be, Trixie?" Whether he kills her or teaches her a lesson, it's her call. This false choice—submit or die—encapsulates the options open to the frontier whore. Trixie chokes for several seconds before lifting her eyes to the ceiling and gasping, "I'll be good." The camera cuts between reaction shots: from Trixie on the ground to a low-angle shot of Al above her, the juxtaposition emphasizes

his dominance over her and the situation. *Deadwood* is thus introduced as a misogynistic, patriarchal society; its whores are hopeless, broken, and thoroughly subjugated.

#### THE VICTORIAN WOMAN

In classic Westerns, the Victorian Woman, like the whore, is consistently stereotyped—she functions as a necessary narrative device that moves the film (novel, comic, song) toward hetero-normative conclusion. The schoolmarm, the mother, the helpmate—all are civilizing forces that threaten the individualistic self-reliance of the frontier. Feminine forces (domesticity, monogamy) thus pull men from their “natural state” in the wild into the suffocating domesticity of the home. *Deadwood*, however, revises the significance of the Victorian Woman. While Alma Garret (Molly Parker) appears to fulfill the role ascribed to her by society, the narrative points to the ways in which her marriage (and the ideology that encourages it) represents a high-class form of societally sanctioned prostitution. She may reside, literally and figuratively, high above the dismal life of the whore, but beneath the fancy clothes and immaculate manners lies a deep despair.

Alma has submitted to her societal role: she has obeyed her father, entered into a proper (albeit loveless) marriage, and accompanied her dullard husband to seek gold out West. As the series unravels, Alma’s past comes to light: she is “a high-class whore whose father pimped her out so that he could pay his creditors. She can’t find enough space in her loveless marriage to express her true nature, so she takes dope.”<sup>21</sup> In other words, she is a whore in nicer lace, with prettier words, subjugated sexually and emotionally—and completely unhappy. Laudanum was a common escape of the time: a means to reconcile the world one desires and the world one inhabits, with echoes in both the Valium-blurred ’50s and the current dependence on antidepressants. Dope helps the intelligent, educated woman to calm the rage that would naturally result from treatment as a second-class citizen.

In the first episodes of *Deadwood*, Alma fulfills her submissive role. Her hands tremble as she redopes herself and continues to placate her husband; the vacancy in her eyes and the draping of her dressing gown recall that of the whores. When her husband animatedly recounts the manner in which he bought his claim, Alma ostensibly engages in the conversation—she replies when spoken to, she greets him with a smile—but her eyes are elsewhere throughout. When he reveals the fact that he spent all of their \$20,000 on the claim, the camera cuts to her face for a reaction shot. She takes a sharp breath, looks momentarily as if ready to vomit, and complacently responds, “Oh well.” Not in resignation, but in utter disengagement. Her self-seclusion and boredom remind the audience of the limited options available to even the most refined of women. For the contemporary feminist, this presents a startlingly realistic yet disconcertingly dystopian vision of the past—but it also serves as a starting point. In contrast to the harsh reality of the beginning episodes, any of the small feminist steps to come merit celebration.

#### CHANGE IN THE CAMP: “ALL ARE NECESSARY”

Television productions enjoy protracted character and plot development, and while each episode of *Deadwood* spans only twenty-four hours (give or take), the series takes place amidst the gold rush of the 1880s, a period characterized by rapidly accelerated change. In a week’s time, buildings rise, technologies (the telegraph, the bicycle) arrive, and claims are found and forsaken. The mercurial character of the camp is manifested in the narrative: in the span of four episodes, Jack McCall shoots and kills Wild Bill, Cy Tolliver arrives to establish the Bella Union, an orphan “squarehead” (Scandinavian) is found and put in Alma’s care, and Alma’s husband “accidentally” topples from an outcropping to his death, leaving her with a claim and a new ward. This is all to say that by episode 5, “The Trial of Jack McCall,” serious changes have come to Deadwood. Thus

begins *Deadwood's* expansion of the revisionist template: as the narrative extends, *Deadwood* begins to present the first traces of feminine subjectivity.

For Wild Bill Hickok's funeral, the Reverend Smith chooses a verse from 1 Corinthians, giving what journalist Mark Singer has called "the emblematic speech of the series."<sup>22</sup> The reverend introduces the passage, explaining,

St. Paul tells us from one spirit are we baptized into one body, whether we be Jew or Gentile, bond or free, and have all been made to drink into one spirit. For the body is not one but many. He tell us: 'The eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee; nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of thee.' Nay, much more than those members of the body which seem to be more feeble . . . and those members of the body which we think of as less honorable—are all necessary. He says that there should be no schism in the body but that the members should have the same care one to another. And whether one member suffers all the members suffer with it.

Singer interprets this oration as a call to cooperation—that only through interdependency can the camp come to function as a "single organism."<sup>23</sup> The oratory also emphasizes the fact that Jew and Gentile, bonded and free, man and woman—all are members of one body. If one suffers, all will suffer. Put differently, the "body" of society cannot function, let alone function *well*, until all parts are recognized, healthy, and in cooperation. Significantly, Joanie Stubbs is in the audience, listening attentively to the reverend's message. She has defied her pimp (Cy Tolliver) and taken leave from the Bella Union to attend the funeral. Like Trixie and Alma, she is just beginning to step out into fresh air and exercise her freedom. The notion that these women are as important as men; that they are of equal worth and deserve equal treatment; that when one who is bonded suffers, all suffer—this is the rhetoric of women's liberation.

"The Trial of Jack McCall" also marks the point at which the women of *Deadwood* begin to explode the stereotypes they're meant to inhibit, demanding recognition as unique subjects. Alma Garret may be the most "refined lady" of the show, but her complicated, conflicting personality lifts her above such classification. Molly Parker (who plays Alma) explains that her character "is full of contradictions. The part of her that is a junkie is compulsive and obsessive, and critical, and self-righteous, and mean. She is also quite a compassionate soul. She's a bad person trying to be good."<sup>24</sup> In other words, she's a dynamic, fully nuanced creation. Resisting the good/bad woman dichotomy that Shulamith Firestone famously delineated in *The Dialectic of Sex*, Alma is both good *and* bad; she is a mother figure, especially to her young ward, but also a desirable, even sexual woman, as well as a competent and forward-thinking businesswoman. When Alma frees herself of her laudanum habit in "Bullock Returns to Camp," she sits with Bullock following the burial of her husband. Speaking freely, she exclaims, "Please forgive me for making you uncomfortable, Mr. Bullock. I had better manners before I began to abstain." Bullock regards her, with kind surprise in his eyes, and tells her, "You are changed." Alma *has* changed: her eyes are clearer and her "true self"—the spirit she dulled with dope to endure her marriage—has begun to emerge.

Milch's resistance to character stereotype is additionally evident in his treatment of prostitution. In his essays on the underlying ethos of the show, collected in *Deadwood: Stories of the Black Hills*, Milch emphasizes that

bought sex is a grim business that is always disrupted by an awkward truth: the women are human. In *Deadwood*, the humanity keeps asserting itself. . . . [W]omen individuate themselves invariably and inevitably, even as men dehumanize them. The stubborn fact of their humanity continues to reassert itself.<sup>25</sup>

Their humanity is embodied by Trixie and Joanie: these two prostitutes shed the tradi-

tional role of the filmic prostitute—instead of mere narrative device, both women become subjects in and of themselves.

*Deadwood* presents the harsh reality of life as a prostitute but opens the narrative to allow these women to explore their sexuality, the potential for love, and the perils of sudden emancipation, but never in a manner that unrealistically elides their past. Trixie is conflicted and confused—her full heart is scarred by an equally quick temper. In the first episodes, she appears willingly bound to Al, submitting fully to his desires. Even after Al beats her, at night's end, she finds her way to his bed. The aerial shot of the bed emphasizes the paradox of her situation: she puts her back to him in defiance, but is nevertheless in his bed, of her own volition. By "The Trial of Jack McCall," however, Trixie has begun to deliberately defy her master. Called to Al's office to answer for her disobedience, Trixie stands before him, bathed and nicely dressed for her duties with Alma. The deep bruises from her previous beating remain, but only as a faint purplish reminder. Al sarcastically remarks, "Ain't you a picture?" calling attention to the physical and psychic evidence of change. He lectures her, calling her out on her defiance of his orders before crossing the room to grab her. He violently thrust his fingers up her vagina, physically reminding her of his masculine control of her body. Al holds Trixie this way for several moments, but she looks him straight in the eyes and argues back.

Directly before meeting with Al, Trixie had taken Alma's ward, Sofia, browsing at Star and Bullock's hardware store. Star teases her, announcing a "get acquainted with those we'd like to get acquainted with sale." She holds Sofia close—her stature is that of a caring mother, an image reinforced when Charlie Utter tells her "she [Sofia] favors you. She could be yours," suggesting Trixie's potential for motherhood. The ease with which Trixie slips into the role of mother and nurturer contradicts her status as violent, sexual whore. When E. B. Farnum brings word for Trixie to come meet with Al, he warns Sol, "Do you know who that is?" Sol replies, "I know that she works at the Gem," to

which Farnum, amazed, responds, "And even so, admit her to your trade at public hours. . . . Congratulations on your advanced thinking." In this exchange, Sol acknowledges her place but resists the societal rules that demand that she stay there. Her subjectivity is recognized by Sol and Utter alike, emboldening her for the forthcoming encounter with Al, in which she responds to him not as his whore but as an individual.

As the series progresses, Trixie's devotion is subject to constant oscillation. She works at Alma's, receives "Jewish lessons" on accounting from Sol, yet repeatedly returns to Al in times of crisis. Her feelings for Sol swell and abate; as Paula Malcomson (who plays Trixie) elaborates, "She finds she can fall in love with Sol Star. And then she gets confused, and that's the way that we live our lives, as men and women both. We stay confused until we die."<sup>26</sup> Her character resists the narrative expectations of the whore—even though she could forsake her past and fall completely for Sol, her connection to Al is too strong, her emotions far too complicated. She maintains her fierce independence, resisting the plans that any man—Al, Sol—may have for turning her into something she's not. In season 3, she makes a deposit in the bank under the name "Trixie the Whore." She no longer sells her body for money, but her past remains an intrinsic part of her identity. While this may appear as a refusal to escape her subjugated past, "Trixie the Whore" is, more than anything, an acknowledgment. Progress cannot be made without fully acknowledging the places from which we've come and the progress that *has* been made. She has self-identified as a whore for her entire adult life. As she explains to Sol in "The Whores Can Come" (episode 23), "a lifetime of habit is hard to change." Cutting off that label would equate to cutting off an appendage. A woman's "present" necessarily includes her sexual past—to gloss over that fact would be to deny an essential aspect of female identity. However, acknowledgment of the past does not foreclose a new future: as Trixie once again tells Sol, she's willing to try a new "habit" of living.

The character of Joanie Stubbs offers an alternative look at the life of a prostitute. Where other films, series, and novels have reduced the experience of an entire profession down to variations on the selfsame theme, Milch deconstructs the stereotype, closely following the lives of two prostitutes with very different narrative paths. While both women were sold into prostitution at a young age, the similarities end there. Following the death of Joanie's mother, her father took her on as a mistress, forcing her to seduce her sisters in order to open them up to his own sexual advances. Joanie begins working in the Bella Union, a much more "refined" saloon than the Gem, and her ornate dresses, perfect curls, and overall toilet contrasts sharply with the disheveled look of the Gem Girls. Joanie's relationship with her pimp (Cy) is tumultuous. Like Al, Cy is a ruthless and business-minded; unlike Al, Cy wields a cold, untouchable edge. Joanie seems to have penetrated Cy's exterior, but dangerously so—he seems to both love and loathe her, despising her for the desire she creates.

Joanie pushes Cy to emancipate her, but once he does, she is at a complete loss as to how to live. Kim Dickens describes the feelings of her character, explaining, "She steps out into the world, and she is like a sea creature setting food onto dry land for the first time—still believing she belongs back in the water, and yet experiencing herself standing upright and breaking air."<sup>27</sup> Freedom, in other words, may not be the bliss it is believed to be. Like a convict set free, Joanie has no conception of how to live her life outside the whorehouse and the rhythms and ethos that attended it. If this were a classical Western, the narrative might have her struggle, soon find her footing, and eventually capitalize on the obvious affections of Charlie Utter. But *Deadwood* rejects such neat narrative closure—Joanie, like the rest of the camp's female population, emerges as likable as she is pitiable, progressive as she is frustrating. In this way, the women of *Deadwood* embody feminism's tumultuous past: loathed and loved, co-opted and denied, our affection (or ambivalence) toward Joanie, Alma, or Trixie mirrors

the alternating acceptance of (and apathy toward) feminism.

#### FINANCIAL EMANCIPATION

As the series unfolds, each woman begins to shed the shackles of patriarchal control. Their freedom manifests most obviously in a burgeoning sense power and control. Sol could have easily "bought" Trixie from Al—either paying for her daily affections or paying for her emancipation. Instead, Trixie begins to learn math and accounting under Sol's tutelage. In essence, Sol teaches Trixie the skills to emancipate herself. Knowledge truly is power, as Trixie may now earn money through a means other than her body. Joanie Stubbs takes initiative in starting her own whorehouse, purchasing a building, giving it a name, and heading up its furnishing. Granted, the bloody fate of her business, the *Chez Ami*, is a horrifying reminder of the recurring violence of patriarchy. But the construction of a rival to the fiercely masculine Gem and Bella Union requires gumption and power—not only is she free from Cy, but she's freeing herself of any need to please him. On the other end of the social spectrum, Alma takes control of her gold claim, joins with Sol Star to back Deadwood's first bank, and handles its transactions. She hires Trixie to work beside her, presenting a culmination of Trixie's education and emancipation from her life of prostitution. Power and agency allow each woman to assert her subjectivity, leaving her traditional, silent, subjugated role behind.

#### VERBAL POWER: PROFANITY AND PRECISION

Throughout *Deadwood*, subjectivity is suggested through language. Profanity is particularly effective in this manner—cocksucker, cunt, fuck, prick, dick, and shit, in all of their various creative and elaborate variations, distinguish the language of the show. Milch explains cursing as a means of "disavowing that passivity of language which might unman [a character]."<sup>28</sup> Profanity, in its power to offend,

is literally a line of offense: it blasphemies and terrorizes the language that has so often fostered hegemonic control. As a mode of protest, it is a means of resistance and assertion of self. As such, the variations one chooses in structuring his or her profanity reveals character—as Singer explains, "The goal is not to offend but to realize the character's full humanness."<sup>29</sup> For example, the structure of Al's profanity—the Shakespearean clauses, the amalgamation of curses—reveals the ordered quality of his thinking.

But profanity is by no means limited to the male mouth. While best exemplified by Calamity Jane's creative formulations, Trixie's use of profanity defines her character and grants her a means to communicate with men. Her language is oftentimes elliptical, meandering through her meaning. The words themselves have little import—instead, the way in which she speaks them creates an impressionistic cloud that conveys her intent. In "Complications" (episode 17), having discovered that Alma is with child, Trixie barges into Doc's office without knocking, exclaiming, "Congratulations, Doc, on your high and holy bullshit. It's water off a duck to some, but others still got feelings." Confused, he inquires "of whom are we fucking speaking?" to which she launches into another diatribe: "One who might die in childbirth, more likely than us lucky others, but so sponged down in disapproval when she was kicking the fucking dope, she's afraid now to seek your care." Doc is seated throughout the scene, and Trixie lords above him, a high-angle shot emphasizing her anger and disapproval. She speaks freely, albeit in code, of Alma's dilemma, and Doc agrees to stop by and see her under some other pretext. Satisfied, Trixie begins to storm out, but Doc calls after her: "You've as *miserable* a disposition as your employer!" She pauses and deliberately responds, "I ain't exclusive to him no more." As evidenced by her entrance and dominance (verbal and physical) over Doc, Trixie has begun to free herself of the subjugation so evident in *Deadwood's* beginning episodes. Speech will continue to liberate Trixie, allow-

ing her to articulate her freedom from both Al and her history as a whore.

Profanity also provides a path for its user to escape the confines of proper speech. At the beginning of the series, *Deadwood* is unincorporated territory—quite literally outside the law. Societal rules are broken down on the level of the word, emancipating both men and women, creating a new, community-generated language. Trixie's ability to swear is thus her ability to both participate and individuate herself. In the words of Reverend Smith, she may "drink into [the] one spirit" that forms the camp, but does so with a language that is very much her own.

Alma shies from profanity, replacing it with precise verbal control. Her power over language resists the Victorian call for subservience and silence; indeed, she is perhaps most eloquent when angered, capable of fighting aggressively with words. Alma's speech is marked by powerful allusions, fecundity, sarcasm, and irony. She understands and deciphers the profanity of others, countering the passivity of language with eloquence and clarity. When Al comes to her room to inform her of the Pinkertons' plan to blackmail her, she proves his verbal and rhetorical equal. Sofia becomes anxious at the sight of Al, a reaction Al explains with "I'll have that effect." Alma immediately and straightforwardly counters with "I think specifically it was you plotting against her life." While Al elaborates on his dislike of the Pinkertons, Alma interrupts, "So you'd side with me on principle?" The calm sarcasm exemplifies her control of the language, just as her lack of hesitation in interrupting Al presents her control of the situation. Even though Al arranged her husband's murder, plotted to kill her ward, and is currently poised to have her framed for murder, Alma administers the conversation, requesting that he limit his profanity. Having heard the case against her, she inquires, "And what warrants would I have against repetitions of this interview?" exhibiting her keen understanding of the camp and Al's capacity for deception.

Throughout the conversation, the precision of Alma's language is reflected in the precision

of her posture and visual engagement. She uses the tools of her education—a vast vocabulary, attentiveness to diction—to her own end. Alma's clear-eyed engagement with Al serves as a stark contrast to the doped interaction with her former husband. Once languidly complaisant, she is now thoroughly engaged in her own survival. At conversation's end, both Alma and Al rise to say goodbye. The camera closes in on both heads in profile, their eye lines exactly even. Alma meets Al's gaze and returns it, acknowledging his strength yet asserting her own. Words, and the ability to make oneself heard, can be power: in Alma's case, her power over language, and the exercise thereof, allows her to break free of the feminine passivity that her gender once implied.

#### CROSS-CLASS COMMUNITY

The women of *Deadwood* form friendships that transcend class and occupation, ignoring the social divides that often neutralize feminine threat. So many of women's steps toward equality have come as the result of solidarity: despite tremendous differences, as feminists, we suffer; as feminists, we must act as one. The necessary communion parallels the necessary unity of the camp: if one suffers, all suffer. While the women are, at first glance, demarcated by dress, language, occupation, and dwelling, *Deadwood* persists in blurring such lines, turning whores into affectionate caretakers, transforming masculinized cowgirls into affectionate nursemaids. The unlikely friendship between Alma and Trixie is tumultuous, yet marked with honesty and concern: it is Trixie who first helps Alma shed her addiction, who detects her pregnancy and encourages Ellsworth to propose marriage, and who risks her job in order to protest Alma's return to dope. When Sofia becomes Alma's ward, Alma suggests that Trixie take her to New York, all expenses paid, to start a new life. At this early point in the series, Trixie is still wed to her identity as a whore, and thus deeply offended that Alma would be so brash as to consider her fit for such an option. As the series progresses,

however, the difference between their lives collapses: both are attentive businesswomen, both are troubled by conflicted hearts. They model friendship for young Sofia, granting her a diversity of perspective on what it means to be a strong, assertive woman.

Martha Bullock likewise destroys all expectations of her role as formal "helpmate." Having married her dead husband's brother, she travels to Deadwood out of duty. Once in Deadwood, her son is killed; with that which held her in Deadwood gone, Martha is free to leave. Yet she stays—not out of duty or despair but to establish a school, following her own desires as an educator. Perhaps more importantly, she befriends and encourages Joanie Stubbs and Calamity Jane, validating both women as worthy and information-filled subjects. By allowing them to help, speak, and play with the schoolchildren, Martha exhibits the acceptance and tolerance fundamental to successful feminism. The burgeoning bond between Joanie and Jane serves as yet another study in unlikely friendship. Joanie, with her curl and corsets, seems the least likely companion to the dirty, callous Jane. Nevertheless, their quiet love delivers Joanie from her guilt over the murder of the prostitutes at the *Chez Ami*—the presence of Jane calms her, gives her someone to care for and trust. Conversely, Jane begins to recover from her prolonged drunken grief over the death of Wild Bill. Jane is saved from her own self-destructiveness by their friendship, a bond distinguished by a homoerotic love that, in its very essence, rejects the patriarchy.

#### STEPPING BACKWARD: SOCIETY COMES TO DEADWOOD

Over the course of the series, the Deadwood settlement moves toward annexation. With annexation comes organized society: law, order, education, and ideology. George Hearst's arrival late in season 2 announces the presence of organized, steamrolling capitalism. While lawlessness presented a set of problems for the camp, the order imposed by capitalist greed sets a new sort of order, obvious in the rapid

reversion to the prefeminist conditions. Just as the women of Deadwood begin to stretch out in their newly found freedoms, society, embodied by Hearst, effectively puts them back in their "places" as submissive, dependent, disposable accessories.

Drawing parallels to the present, the position of the women in camp, post-Hearst, serves to emphasize the regression of contemporary society under postfeminism. As essential as first- and second-wave feminism have been to the opportunities available to today's woman, patriarchy and gender oppression nevertheless endure, and the society it creates can readily compromise any advances. The potential for destruction is foreshadowed late in season 2, when our first introduction to Hearst arrives in the form of his messenger and head geologist, Mr. Wolcott. A rigid man with a proclivity for sexual violence, Wolcott slaughters three whores at the Chez Ami, including Joanie's fellow madam, a woman Joanie later explains "wasn't scared of no man—the first I'd ever met." The Chez Ami—the very manifestation of Joanie's emancipation from Cy—closes in the wake of the murders. With the death of her empowering feminist role model, Joanie is emotionally (and financially) destroyed. The fact that Wolcott was Hearst's representative is no accident—his violent misogyny serves as a harbinger for the stultifying masculine threat to come.

Hearst's actual arrival in camp seems, at first, innocuous. Upon hearing of Wolcott's transgression, Hearst quickly fires him and appears ready to work in cooperation with the camp. But as season 3 unravels, so too does the camp's resistance to Hearst's anti-union, anti-human techniques. With his dominion over the gold claims challenged by Alma's holdings, Hearst pressures her to sell, first verbally, then physically. He initially arranges for his goons to fire at and frighten Alma, but as she, Bullock, Al, and others sustain their resistance, Hearst resorts to offing her husband, the overseer of her claim. Ellsworth's body is driven through town, permitting Alma to "accidentally" catch a glimpse of her murdered husband. Her characteristic control over language is lost; her composure

compromised. Al comes to her aid and quickly ushers her to the Gem, emphasizing her renewed dependence on men for protection.

Trixie also witnesses Ellsworth's body as it passes through the camp, a sight that instantly brings her to tears. Understanding the implications of the murder, she immediately heads for Hearst's room. Unbuttoning her blouse to fully reveal her naked breasts, she charges through the hotel, knocks on Hearst's door, lifts her skirts, and shoots him in the shoulder. For the first time since season 1, Trixie resorts to her sexuality and her gun, morphing into the violent whore of her past. Her actions present a clear reversion to prefeminist strategies: in that moment, sex and violence seem the only path toward justice. She flees to Star's Hardware, begging Sol to take her life, but he brings her to the Gem, enacting a physical return to her former societal role. Trixie is placed in a room that visually quotes the room of the injured John, a similarity only further amplified by her collapse and hysterics. Indeed, when Al comes to speak to her, he greets her with the same phrase that served as her introduction to the audience: "loopy fucking cunt."

Ellsworth's murder serves as a catalyst: it galvanizes the camp, forcing its men to take drastic measures to protect both Alma and Trixie. Al and Bullock make it clear to Alma that she must either sell her claim to Hearst or face continued harassment—if she resists him, he will most likely come after Sofia. Alma is forced to choose between her responsibility as a mother and her role as a businesswoman, a dilemma that amplifies that of the contemporary woman: protect one's career or one's duty as a mother? However, the arguments of the half-dozen men who serve as her counsel quickly convince Alma of the proper choice. She must renounce her claim for the good of her child and, in essence, the good of the camp. Feminine self-sacrifice is thus affirmed as an essential element to patriarchal control.

Meanwhile, Hearst demands retribution against the woman who attacked him, commanding the body of the blond whore from the Gem be delivered for his inspection. As



FIG. 3. Alma (Molly Parker) steadied by Swearngen (Ian McShane). From *Deadwood*, season 3, episode 35, "The Catbird Seat." Courtesy of Home Box Office, Inc. (HBO). Photo by Doug Hyun/HBO.

Hearst is clearly myopic toward all things but "the color," he has no recollection of Trixie's face. Understanding this, Al decides that Jen, another blond Gem prostitute, will be sacrificed and offered in Trixie's place. The scheme works; clearly, Hearst, like the societal forces he embodies, refuses to individuate one sex object from the next. The tragedy of Trixie's situation is clear: her actions to protect Alma result in the death of an innocent. For her to live, another must die; for her to succeed, another must fail. In essence, the very antithesis of feminist advances.

For all of the repugnance in Alma's eyes as she signs her claim over to Hearst, for all of Trixie's remorse at the death of Jen, as season 3 draws to a close, there can be no doubt that the bold signs of female subjectivity have been thoroughly negated. Angela McRobbie reminds us that postfeminism is an *undoing* of the gains of feminism—an undoing enacted "through an

array of machinations."<sup>30</sup> In other words, it's not just wife beaters or sexual harassers who are undoing the work of feminism. Rather, it's a whole ideology. It's the way we think of the woman's body, where it belongs, who it belongs to, and its potential and value in the world. When we first glimpsed the sodden streets of *Deadwood*, the women were subjugated, filled with hopelessness, its hierarchy a holdover from the society from whence its inhabitants arrived. In the absence of society, however, up grew feminism: freedom from one's past, friendship across class, articulation of one's desires. Hearst brought organized, bludgeoning capitalism to *Deadwood*, reintroducing its patriarchal ideology: women are interchangeable, of pure utilitarian value, and necessarily disenfranchised. In the wake of Hearst's arrival, feminist advances are undone in the name of security and survival, just as they continue to be undone today. For the end of season 3 parallels our current moment,

when apathy, the resurgence of amatory myths, Rush Limbaugh, conservative Christianity, and other forces work to demonize those who would persist in raising their voices against women's inequality. Granted, the blame cannot rest solely on the left—Hilary Clinton, criticized by the left for her liberal politics, is equally criticized on the right for forgiving her husband's infidelity. In truth, feminism has turned on itself: mothers against daughters, business-women against sex workers, Christians against Muslims, lesbians against heterosexuals. In a massive act of self-sabotage, we have reinforced the very machinations that have constructed us as less-than and second-class.

At the end of season 3, I found myself disconcerted—unsatisfied, unfulfilled. At first, I couldn't put my finger on the source of my unease—I understood that the series' conclusion was yet to come, but I sensed something very purposeful in my discomfiture. This paper has been an exercise in isolating and analyzing that discomfort, proving that my unease is not simply a hook to coerce me into tuning in next fall. Instead, it is a parable—a call for appreciation from where we've come, but a warning of where we may end. Milch is a well-known disciple of Robert Penn Warren, and in interviews and essays he often quotes his mentor's poetry, including: "This / is the process whereby pain of the past in its pastness / May be converted into future tense / Of joy."<sup>31</sup> This verse readily applies to *Deadwood*, where Milch presents his audience with the bittersweet memory of our feminine past. Watching the show, realizing the work is not yet over—that is the process whereby the past may be converted, in some future tense, on some future day, to joy. Postfeminism—our own, contemporary, ambivalent Hearst—may or may not endure. It's up to the inhabitants of our modern-day "camp"—male, female, feminist—to decide how proactive we wish to be in eradicating its memory.

#### NOTES

1. Julia Lesage, "Artful Racism and Artful Rape in *Broken Blossoms*," *Jump Cut* 26 (1981), [http://](http://www.uoregon.edu/~jlesage/Juliafolder/brokenblossoms.html)

[www.uoregon.edu/~jlesage/Juliafolder/brokenblossoms.html](http://www.uoregon.edu/~jlesage/Juliafolder/brokenblossoms.html).

2. I borrow this syllogism from *The Scholar and Feminist Online's* collection of essays reconciling feminism with HBO's "quality television." Lisa Johnson, "Way More Than a Tag Line: HBO, Feminism, and The Question of Difference in Pop Culture," *The Scholar and the Feminist Online*, 3.1 (2004), <http://www.barnard.columbia.edu/sfonline/hbo/intro.htm>, 12 February 2007.

3. I acknowledge and bemoan the inability to further explore the fascinating feminisms employed and embodied in Calamity Jane, Jewell, Aunt Lou, and others. Space constraints prevent a fully comprehensive investigation of every female character in *Deadwood*. For a compelling reading of Calamity Jane's character, see Janet McCabe's "Myth Maketh the Woman: Calamity Jane, Frontier Mythology, and Creating American (Media) Historical Imaginings," in *Reading Deadwood*, ed. David Lavery (New York: I. B. Tauris and Co., 2006).

4. David Milch, *Deadwood: Stories of the Black Hills* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2006), 5. As Richard Slotkin notes, "'historical epic' Westerns, popular from the late 1930s to the early 1970s, offer historical models for defining and confronting present crises." *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth Century America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 292.

5. Angela McRobbie, "Post-feminism and Popular Culture: Bridget Jones and the New Gender Regime," *Media and Cultural Theory*, ed. James Curran and David Morley (New York: Routledge, 2006), 59.

6. *Ibid.*

7. Susan Douglas, "Manufacturing Postfeminism," *In These Times*, April 26, 2002, <http://www.inthesetimes.com/issue/26/13/views1.shtml>.

8. Charlotte Brunsdon, *Screen Tastes: Soap Opera to Satellite Dishes* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 85.

9. Jill Nagle, *Whores and Other Feminists* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 4. I take the title of my essay from this fascinating work on sex worker feminisms.

10. Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 5.

11. Lisa Johnson, "Way More Than a Tagline: HBO, Feminism, and the Question of Difference in Pop Culture." *The Scholar & Feminist Online*. (New York: The Barnard Center for Research on Women, 2004) vol. 3 no. 1, <http://www.barnard.columbia.edu/sfonline/hbo/intro.htm>, 12 February 2007.

12. Chris Enss, *Pistol Packin' Madams: True Stories of Notorious Women of the Old West* (Guilford, CT: Two Dot, 2006), foreword.

13. Anne M. Butler and Ona Siporin, *Uncommon Common Women: Ordinary Lives of the West* (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 1996), 93.

14. *Ibid.*, 91-96.

15. Ronald W. Lackmann, *Women of the Western Frontier in Fact, Fiction, and Film* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1997), 83.

16. Russell Campbell, *Marked Women: Prostitutes and Prostitution in the Cinema* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 27.

17. *Ibid.* Campbell explains that "sex for hire . . . is at the opposite pole to romantic love. The prostitute love story deals with this opposition, seeking to resolve it by drawing the prostitute away from her job. If in the fallen woman narrative the virtuous female loses her innocence, the love story aims to reverse the process, redeeming the heroine so she is a fit partner for the man who cherishes her," 319. *My Darling Clementine*, DVD, directed by John Ford (1946; Beverly Hills, CA: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2003). *Pretty Woman*, DVD, directed by Gerry Marshall, (1990; Burbank, CA: Buena Vista Home Entertainment, 2005). *Dishonored*, VHS, directed by Josef von Sternberg, (1931; Universal City, CA: MCA Universal Home Video, 1993). *Farewell My Concubine*, DVD, directed by Kaige Chen, (1993; Burbank, CA: Distributed by Buena Vista Home Entertainment, 1999). *Klute*, DVD, directed by Alan Pakula, (1971; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2002). *Working Girls*, DVD, directed by Lizzie Borden, (1986; Troy, MI:

Anchor Bay Entertainment, Inc., 2001). *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, DVD, directed by Robert Altman, (1972; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2002). *Unforgiven*, DVD, directed by Clint Eastwood, (1991; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2007).

18. The series will, however, persist in pushing and playing with the boundaries of the revisionist Western.

19. Milch, *Deadwood*, 83.

20. "Trixie and the Gem Girls," HBO Online: Costume Design, "Trixie and the Gem Girls," HBO Online: Costume Design, [http://www.hbo.com/deadwood/behind/sets\\_and\\_costumes/costumeDesign/](http://www.hbo.com/deadwood/behind/sets_and_costumes/costumeDesign/), 15 February 2007.

21. Milch, *Deadwood*, 67.

22. Mark Singer, "The Misfit," *New Yorker*, February 14, 2005, [http://community.livejournal.com/new\\_yorker/19702.html](http://community.livejournal.com/new_yorker/19702.html).

23. *Ibid.*

24. Milch, "Alma Garret," in *Deadwood*.

25. Milch, *Deadwood*, 81-90.

26. *Ibid.*, 90.

27. Milch, "Joanie Stubbs," in *Deadwood*.

28. *Ibid.*, 25.

29. Singer, "The Misfit."

30. McRobbie, "Post-feminism and Popular Culture," 59.

31. Warren, Robert Penn, "I Am Dreaming of a White Christmas," *The Collected Poems of Robert Penn Warren*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998, 275.