

Justice Doers: The Vigilante as a Mythic Figure and its Role in Creating a More
Violent Culture in America

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Abstract

This dissertation builds off the work of Richard Slotkin in examining the relationship between myth-making and violence in American culture. The specific myth this dissertation focuses on is the myth of the vigilante hero and its role in creating a more violent culture in America. The vigilante is a unique American term and figure, and while the figure has been connected to the myth of the American frontier, it has not been recognized as a mythic figure in its own right. This dissertation defines, outlines, and demonstrates the origin of myth of the vigilante hero; it then proceeds to examine how the myth gained cultural power through replication and revisions.

The dissertation argues that a vigilante cannot be understood outside of a narrative that the figure is placed within. It is the narrative pattern and formula for the vigilante that creates the myth of the vigilante hero. This narrative formula begins in historical and news narratives about vigilantes, but over time is widened into fictional narratives across diverse media forms. The narrative formula also allows for any political and cultural position, such as class, ethnicity, and gender, to be mapped into the myth. This will legitimate the vigilante figure as a hero, and in turn legitimate their extra-legal violent tactics. As a result, any violent actors pursuing their sense of justice can be made into heroes and have their violence legitimated once mapped into the myth. Therefore, this myth creates an unending cycle of violence in the culture so long as it is not being critically engaged, deconstructed, and exposed.

Dedication

This work is dedicated to my parents, Dave and Jean Mortensen, for all their support and encouragement through the whole of my schooling. You made me believe I could accomplish what no one in our family has done before, and now I have.

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Prologue – Where did it begin?

This work truly began in my third year of undergraduate studies at the University of Guelph. I had been introduced to American Literature in a new and thought-provoking way by Dr. Christine Bold in a course on American imperial culture. The course was focused on Westerns. It was a genre I was familiar with from my father's love of it--John Wayne and Clint Eastwood films in particular. The approach for the course was to look at how the Western frontier became popularized and mythologized to help support the imperial aims of America's wealthy and elite. One of the major texts we focused on in the course was *The Virginian*.

While I was engaged with these ideas I also began watching the show *Dexter*, and later began reading the books the show was based on. I noticed some interesting similarities between the novel *The Virginian* and the first season of *Dexter*. The Virginian was a cowboy who turned vigilante and had to lynch his best friend for cattle rustling. Dexter was a serial killer turned vigilante to murder murderers, and he had to kill his brother who was also a serial killer. I should say this is the case for the television series, but the novels did not have Dexter kill his brother.

Dexter was a popular show and character, and this was an interesting phenomenon to me. Why would people sympathize with a serial killer, and furthermore view him as a hero to cheer for? It is not because people think serial killers are heroic, but instead because Dexter is a vigilante. It is the fact that he is seen as a vigilante that makes him heroic; in the same way, the Virginian is a hero and therefore his vigilante actions were seen as righteous and heroic.

Dexter is a serial killer who was trained to kill criminals that the legal system cannot catch. He was trained by an adopted father who was a detective, and his adopted sister follows in her father's footsteps and becomes a detective. She learns of Dexter's vigilante actions and supports them. In the show that takes seven seasons to occur, but in the book series she learns about it in the end of the first book. The Virginian turns vigilante under the direction and support of Judge Henry who owns the ranch that The Virginian works on. In both of these narratives officials connected to law enforcement and justice offer guidance and support to the vigilantes.

This sparked my interest. I wondered what it was that makes the vigilante into a hero, even though a vigilante engages in criminal activity. I grew curious to discover if this was a larger pattern, and as this work will demonstrate, I discovered it was. The vigilante would consistently be framed as a hero figure, and in turn their violent actions would be justified and seen as heroic. The vigilante is a mythic figure that has important impacts within American culture to be further examined, and that is the project I took up.

It also seemed that many individuals feel that if certain things were done to them or a loved one, they would feel a compulsion to take the law into their own hands. This seemed to be an emotional reaction that is shared across humanity. The feeling seems to be driven by more than just revenge. Instead it seems connected with wanting to be the one who delivers punishment as part of the pursuit of justice. It is an impulse to restore order or balance to the world through one's own hands after an injustice is witnessed, experienced, or imagined.

Seeking justice is not a bad motivation, but why was the use of violence so often endorsed by any individuals who used it in the name of justice? The answer lies in the status of the vigilante as a mythic hero figure in American culture. This is part of why I saw connections

between *The Virginian* and *Dexter* because their narratives were being mapped onto the vigilante myth; this work will engage in describing, laying out the origins of this myth, and examining its transformations across time and space in American culture. This tracing of the myth illuminates the unending cycle of violence that it perpetuates in the name of justice. This myth leads to justifying not just the violence contained in narratives of vigilantes, but actual violence done in the name of justice in American culture and history: shaping an unending cycle of violence.

Introduction: American Myths

Before the specifics of the vigilante as a mythic figure can be addressed, the role of myth in culture, and in American culture specifically, must be explained and elaborated upon. In contemporary culture myth is associated as stories from ancient cultures that capture beliefs or sacred truths; however, myths do not exist only in the past. Myths are always rooted in the past, but they can be a powerful cultural force for making meaning in the present. As Roland Barthes wrote in *Myth Today*, “Ancient or not, mythology can only have a historical foundation, for myth is a type of speech chosen by history” (218). Myth operates as a form of selective memory from history. History is a narrative of the past that has been constructed to offer lessons, insights, and suggestions for the present with an eye to the future. In this way myth selects parts of historical narratives, and from particular perspectives within historical narratives, to offer a sense of truth about the lessons it offers. Barthes also writes that myth’s “function is to distort, not to make disappear” (231). This means that while history can take on a mythic role, myth always forms from a distortion of history.

As a result of myth being a distortion of history, it is more consciously constructed than history itself, but all of history is also a process of mythmaking to varying degrees. History is always a constructed narrative that is aimed to be reliant on evidence to support its perspective (this does not mean it does not have competing perspectives, interpretations and biases), but if myth distorts history then it is also not bound to be constructed by facts and evidence; instead, it can offer a narrative that functions to demonstrate occurrences as a given or an inevitable truism.

Myth elevates a particular construction of history, one particular perspective to promote an ideological position as *the position* – as a universal truth. These truths or lessons are formed and offered as a way to shape and influence the thinking of a culture, and the only way to resist the influence and power of the myth is to deconstruct the myth and expose its distortions.

The preeminent scholar to engage in such myth deconstruction within an American context is Richard Slotkin. The primary American myth that Slotkin seeks to expose and deconstruct is the myth of the frontier in America. Slotkin's understanding of how the myth functions in America aligns with Barthes description of the function of myth: "[t]he moral and political imperatives implicit in myths are given as if they were the only possible choices for moral and intelligent human beings" (*Fatal Environment* 19). This reaffirms the way myth limits perspectives to a position of universal truth from one specific and distorted historical perspective.

Slotkin examines the role of myth in America with a focus on the myth producer and the dialectic the producer creates between the text of the myth and its audience (31). Slotkin states that the object of his study is "to trace the historical development of a single major American myth and offer a critical interpretation of its meanings" (31). Part of the process of his work also has to account for "elements that make changes and innovations in mythic formulas" and those formulas are succinctly described as: "a set of narrative formulas that acquire through specifiable historical action a significant ideological charge" (31). It is the dialectic created between texts of the myth of the vigilante hero and the audiences of them that this work will engage in as well.

In his work *Gun Fighter Nation* Slotkin does discuss vigilantes in one of his chapters, but he examines vigilantism as a component of the frontier myth. There are important connections between the frontier and vigilantism, but Slotkin does not recognize vigilantism as a myth in its

own right. He views the lasting impact of the figure being associated with the way the nation frames its actions “when the nation faces a challenge from a power beyond its borders, the mythology of vigilantism reminds us that extraordinary violence by privileged heroes, often acting in despite of the law, has been the means of our national salvation” (193).

Slotkin also holds a rigid definition of vigilantism. He examines it as the application of violence and murder against criminals by a vigilance council. He ties it to the enforcement of law where it has not been properly established but does not draw out all the full complexities of the narrative examples that he draws upon. The vigilante is a complicated figure and term that is unable to be properly defined without examining the usage of the term itself in relation to the narratives constructed about the figure. A quick definition of a vigilante is an individual or group that uses violence to obtain justice. However, it is quickly complicated by the idea that justice itself is a subjective concept, and so the use of the term of vigilante is already relational to one’s perspective on justice. A rigorous examination of the term vigilante and its use will be offered in the following chapter.

Slotkin recognizes there is a mythic dimension to vigilantism, but only as it relates to the idea of a frontier. He examines how frontier vigilantism has been adapted to the understanding of the frontier existing beyond the borders of the United States in the myth’s contemporary use. While this point is well taken, it does miss some other important considerations. The myth of the vigilante has had a great deal of impact and use within the borders of the United States. It is its own narrative formulation that Slotkin mistakes as always taking the form of *privileged* heroes. Such a position only describes one facet of the myth of the vigilante hero that is drawn on to justify American action against threats from outside of the nation; however, it does not fully describe the myth of the vigilante hero. What is important to note from Slotkin’s ideas on

vigilantism is that the individual narrative is always subsumed into the national mythic formula. Slotkin misidentifies one of the variations of the narrative formula of the vigilante myth, as the full myth of the vigilante hero. It will be the goal of the first chapter of this work to define the term vigilante, and to explain the full narrative formula that creates and perpetuates the myth of the vigilante hero.

Chapter 1: The Vigilante as a Mythic Figure in America

When Batman launches himself from the shadows in his very first comic and sends a gangster to his death by knocking him into a vat of chemicals; it was to the delight and excitement of the readers. When a hero becomes judge, jury and executioner of a villain it is always portrayed as right. It is because Batman is the vigilante hero, and the other is a villain, a bad guy, and it is acceptable for them to die. This is a part of the myth of the vigilante hero. A reduction of positions that can be occupied by an individual through the process of myth making. In this case one becomes positioned as a good guy or bad guy, or in the terms Slotkin uses “Cowboy or Indian” (*Fatal Environment* 19).

The terms that require investigation from the title of this chapter are “vigilante” and “mythic figure”; we will start with the second term, and then return to the first. What does it mean for something to be mythic in a contemporary context? In this case, it does not mean that it is an ancient narrative or figure passed down through millennia. It is related to narrative, and the vigilante is a narrative figure. To be more precise, it is about the way the vigilante can be understood as narrative figure; and that this figure is constructed within the narrative to be interpreted as heroic by the repetition of a particular narrative formula.

Myth is commonly understood in contemporary society as a story from an ancient culture, which in the present is viewed as fiction, but at one point was recognized to hold sacred truths for its culture of origin. In the postmodern era the idea of truth, in a singular form, is very contestable. There is always more than one truth available on any given subject, and it is always

dependent upon perspective and context; this element of postmodern *truths* will be explored through the whole of this work. However, as the introduction described, myth aims to distort the accuracy of differing narrative perspectives. It seeks to limit the context of how a narrative can be interpreted. If the myth works successfully within the context of its culture it is not recognized as a myth, but instead as a given truism. In this case the truism is that the vigilante is good and a hero. As a result of myth being a form of narrative, it cannot be properly discussed without discussing narrative construction. The dependence upon context and perspective is a point worth keeping in mind about all narratives, and it is key to understanding how a narrative formula creates a myth. As Kerwin Lee Klein states in his *Frontiers of Historical Imagination*:

Narratives are not something we choose or reject at will, nor are they linguistic artifacts we measure against a nonnarrative universe. Stories are what we live in, and in them we find both our worlds and ourselves. We differentiate among them, we call some fairytales and others true stories, and we tend to believe that our favorite tale is one everyone should adopt. But we do this from within narrative traditions we can interweave with others but never entirely escape. As our traditions change, so do our histories; as our histories change, so do our worlds; as our worlds change so do our traditions (5-6).

This passage illuminates the importance of context and perspective in relation to narratives. When Klein discusses narrative traditions, this could be substituted for the word myth. Klein is focused on the changing understanding of the frontier, an issue this work will engage with more in later chapters, and how the understanding of frontier changed over time in American culture. The understanding of the frontier can change at the cultural level, but every individual in the culture could hold a different understanding of the frontier based upon their

unique cultural position. Klein is working to deconstruct the myth of the frontier as it has shaped and been shaped by American history. He focuses primarily on historical narratives, and how these narratives have informed the historical imagination of America. His work also offers another example of how there can never be a full separation between constructing historical narratives and mythmaking. The historical imagination of any country or community is linked with the idea of collective memory.

As Maurice Halbwachs argues in his work *On Collective Memory* the memory of any individual has their recall linked to the memory of their community and space. Any individual will have their memory shaped by the space they inhabit. He states that “[i]t is in this sense that there exists a collective memory and a social frameworks for memory; it is to the degree that our individual thought places itself in these frameworks and participates in this memory that it is capable of the act of recollection” (38). This process of recollection is bound to the historical imagination, a component of the collective memory in America, as well as the myths that are found in the collective memory of the nation.

The historical imagination that Klein discusses and the role of collective memory that Halbwachs puts forward are important components of American mythmaking. American myths are a construction of myth producers within America and they engage in shaping and being shaped by the historical imagination and collective memory. Myth producers create a narrative that reflects particular values, actions, and a specific historical perspective that its audience is meant to adopt. The power of a myth is formed through narratives. These narratives can shift and change, and as a result the mythic formula may shift and change. Not every citizen of America holds to the same myths about America, but all citizens hold to some myths that shape their understanding of America’s culture.

An example of an American myth that impacts one's perception of American culture is the myth of American exceptionalism. This myth is propped up by different variations of a mythic formula, and two of the variations of this formula are the *American Dream* and the *Self-Made Man*. These myths may not be understood the same by everyone who has encountered them, but the concepts of achievement through hard work and social mobility are believed as being a part of the nation's ideals. Of course, it may be understood differently whether it is the culture of America that allows for social mobility (*American Dream*), or an American individual that can rise because of the conditions the space of the nation has provided (*Self-Made Man*). One places more emphasis on the space of the nation in the accomplishment, and the other sees the individual as a reflection of the best of the nation's values and ideas. Whether the formula is understood from either position it reinforces the myth of American exceptionalism as a truth rather than a construction.

There is historical truth to the idea that America is a unique and exceptional nation. It was the first colonial state to engage in a war for independence against the imperial power that formed it and to win that war. It was also the first colonial state to engage in successful rebellion against an imperial monarchy and create a democratic government with its victory. These are unique occurrences in the history of the world, and in turn do demonstrate the truth of American exceptionalism. However, the historical fact of American exceptionalism in the context of world history is no guarantee or solid evidence for the supposed truth of the myth of American exceptionalism as it was described above. This is easily complicated by asking questions of how one currently defines who counts as an "American" in the contemporary context. The United States is also far more large, complex and diverse a space and state as a nation when the original truth of historical American exceptionalism was formed.

The historical fact of American exceptionalism as well as the mythmaking of American exceptionalism both have a part to play in the forming of the myth of the vigilante hero. It is the combination of objective truth and mythmaking of American culture as unique and exceptional that opened a new space for vigilantism to emerge and be forged into a mythic figure. It is the argument of this work that the vigilante is a reoccurring narrative figure, a mythic figure, held in common across American culture. The same way that a wide array of citizens are shaped by the myth of American exceptionalism, regardless of their understanding of the myth's formula, they are influenced by the myth of the vigilante hero. This is ultimately what is meant when the vigilante is referred to as a mythic figure.

The second term which requires a much more careful exploration to determine a definition is vigilante. The goal will be to create a working definition of the vigilante in the context of American mythmaking for this project. According to the Oxford English Dictionary a vigilante is defined as:

1. orig. *U.S.* A member of a vigilance committee. Also *transf.* and *attrib.*
2. A night-watchman. (OED)

The above definition is a starting point but leaves much to be desired for the way this term is used and applied in culture. The definition offered in Webster's Dictionary is not much better but gives a little more useful insight. This is not entirely surprising as Webster's Dictionary is an American dictionary, and American usage is the origin source of the word as the OED pointed out. Webster's definition is as follows:

1. A member of a volunteer committee organized to suppress and punish crime summarily (as when the processes of law are viewed as inadequate).

2. A self-appointed doer of justice. (Webster's)

Certainly, a vigilante can be a member of a vigilance committee or group, some such examples will be explored in this work, but they may also be an individual acting alone.

Vigilante groups are also not limited to vigilance committees, and as Webster's states it can be any self-appointed doer of justice. This also starts to establish that vigilantism holds links between the roles and actions an individual or community take on in relation to the roles and actions of the state they are governed by. The idea of a vigilante being both self-appointed and an individual or collective is recognized by the historian of American extremism, D. J. Mulloy. He defines vigilantism as "the process by which people take the law into their own hands with the paradoxical aim of upholding the law. Vigilantism can be undertaken by individuals or groups" (Mulloy 143). In this case a component missing from Mulloy's definition is that the vigilante is not always motivated to uphold the law. Nor is a vigilante always paradoxical when taking the law into their own hands to uphold it because in some cases it is the agents of the law who have engaged in criminal activity that citizens feel that they must police. The vigilante is not always acting in relation to the law, but instead they feel they are pursuing justice. This is a point that Webster's does include in its definition. Justice is an idea and term that can move beyond what the law allows or ensures. It is also a subjective concept that can be understood differently by any individual. In this way the vigilante's relationship to the state is always based on the perspective they hold of the state offering justice to them and the community they believe themselves to represent or be acting on behalf of.

Another important component of defining vigilantism that has not yet been addressed in the definitions given thus far is the methods used by a vigilante when taking the law into their own hands. Mulloy recognizes Richard Maxwell Brown as the most eminent historian to study

vigilantism in America and builds his definition and understanding of vigilantes upon Brown's work. Brown states that "the vigilantes, knowing full well that their actions were illegal, felt obliged to legitimize their violence by expounding a philosophy of vigilantism. The philosophy of vigilantism had three major components: self-preservation, the right of revolution, and popular sovereignty. Reinforcing the threefold philosophy of vigilantism was an economic rationale – this composed the ideology of vigilantism" (Brown 115). The economic rationale that guides vigilantism is linked to preserving the wealth of a particular group that may be threatened by others; this ideology of vigilantism also offers one interpretation of justice that can motivate vigilante action. It also helps to more clearly establish that vigilantes are acting outside of the legal codes of the state they take action under and in dialectic between state action and the vigilantes' subjective understandings of justice. The ideology of vigilantism, as well as the definitions provided by the dictionaries and Mulloy, start to form a more useful understanding of the vigilante in an American context. Combining these definitions helps give a more complex understanding of what is meant by the term vigilante, and Brown has now made clear the method of taking the law into one's own hands is through the use of violence.

Mulloy and Brown both recognize the importance of history in relation to understanding vigilantism, and this starts to move us towards the role that the history of vigilantism plays to create the myth of the vigilante hero. However, before the relationship between narrative and vigilantism can be explored, the conception of violence needs to be examined. As with most terms in a postmodern context there is more than one kind of violence. In this case the form of violence that is being discussed would be subjective violence as is argued by Slavoj Žižek.

Žižek discusses three modes of violence: subjective, objective, and symbolic (Žižek 11). The mode of violence which must be used in order for it to qualify as vigilante action is

subjective violence. This is often the most recognizable form, and it is physical violence that one agent or collective is enacting on another (10). Subjective violence is measured through direct physical harm from one agent to another. This is not meant to justify or ignore objective (systemic) and symbolic violence. In fact, it is often impossible to discuss vigilantes accurately without considering the other modes of violence – it is just that these modes do not qualify as violence engaged by individuals and groups in pursuit of justice. Therefore, such forms of violence do not qualify as vigilante action.

Systemic violence is inherently larger than one individual and is a product of multiple components or communities and their interaction. We wish for cheap products, so companies search out the cheapest ways to create those products. As a result, there are sweatshops and dangerous working conditions that develop in the Global South, and at the same time job opportunities and employment is lost for individuals in the Global North. This is a case of systemic violence that has little of direct interaction of a few individuals actively creating the violence, and it is not measured by only direct physical harm to others.

The state can also engage in systemic violence. It can engage in creating oppression through specific policies, or as larger systemic forms of oppression are built into the state apparatus. This is important in the American context to consider the Revolutionary War in relation to the systemic violence of colonialism under the British crown. Fanon argues “[t]he violence of the colonized...unifies people...Violence in its practice is totalizing and national. As a result, it harbors in its depths the elimination of regionalism and tribalism” (Fanon 51). The American colonials did band together through violence to unify and create their new American nation. However, it should also be pointed out that the new republic still found itself as a colonizing power towards Indigenous groups and various ethnic minorities of all colors –

including ethnicities that later American culture will recognize as white (Italian and Irish for example). In this way the new American nation created a space that is “not merely content to note the existence of tribes, it reinforces and differentiates them” (Fanon 51). It is such systemic violence that can create competing perspectives of injustice across American culture pushing individuals and communities to use subjective violence in the form of vigilantism to seek the justice delayed or denied. Specific case studies and further elaboration of this cultural dynamic will be explored in later chapters of the dissertation.

Žižek’s third category of violence is Symbolic violence. Symbolic violence is the violence held in language and ideas.¹ It can be hurtful emotionally and psychologically, but it is not the most common violent tactic that vigilantes will use. Names and racism can hurt an individual, but subjective violence can physically harm, maim and kill an individual. Vigilantes may engage in symbolic violence, and they may rise up to misguidedly resist systemic violence, or perpetuate it, through the use of subjective violence. However, they always engage in subjective violence to differing degrees of lethality.

Now we can return to the relationship of narrative and vigilantism. Both Brown and Mulloy deal with the term of the vigilante in relation to historical narratives, and accounts of contemporary cases of vigilantism; however, simply examining the vigilante from a historical lens is too limited for the argument of this project. Brown views American history in a limited way to support his arguments. He focuses on how the violence in American history, in connection with popular sovereignty, has shaped the common use of vigilante action in

¹ I should point out that I am not in full agreement with language and ideas qualifying as violence. While language and ideas can cause stress or mental anguish, so can many other things such as writing a dissertation. Just because something causes stress or anguish does not inherently mean it is violence. Violence is best understood as a direct and intended action that leads to physical harm.

American history. This is a useful point, and in some instances of vigilante action it is correct. The problem with this analysis is that it does not engage with the importance of how the concept of popular sovereignty is used by vigilantes. The idea of the people's right to govern and hold power over themselves creates a constant tension between the state and the individual within America. Depending on an individual's understanding of popular sovereignty in the American imagination, formed through cultural mythmaking, it can lead an individual to feel they are exercising popular sovereignty even if they are acting entirely alone.

Another limitation on Brown's historical analysis is that he does not engage with the multiple forms of violence that Žižek lays out, which exist within history, and need to be taken into account in the construction of historical narratives. Brown also presents historical events as purely objective and does not recognize the narrative construction that he himself, and the documents and records of the past vigilante actions he is discussing, have gone through. The complexities of interpretation of historical documents and ideas are dealt with in a more complex way by Mulloy when he discusses current vigilante militia groups' use of historical documents to legitimize their actions, in particular, the groups' uses of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. These documents are interpreted and examined at times without their historical contexts and filtered through the American mythmaking of the individuals and groups interpreting them. Scholar Lisa Arellano specifically explores shifts of historical vigilante narratives and argues that the positive portrayal of vigilante actions is challenged and altered by the work of Ida B. Wells in the middle of the 20th century. Arellano establishes that historical records of vigilantism on the Western frontier worked to justify and present vigilantes in a heroic light. That argument will be supported and expanded upon with the analysis of historical vigilante narrative that the second chapter of this dissertation engages in. While Ida B. Wells did

disrupt and change the perception of lynching with her work it did not change and alter the figure of the vigilante as heroic in American culture. This will be further elaborated on in the sixth chapter of this dissertation. Mulloy's exploration of contemporary militia movements will be returned to and explored in more depth in the third chapter of this work.

It is clear the vigilante cannot be defined simply as a historical figure because there is no such thing as a single history. This would mean that there could never be a single definition of the vigilante because there are competing historical narratives, and therefore there would be competing definitions of a vigilante from a given historical perspective. However, the vigilante is not simply a term or figure that is reserved for the past. It is a term that is used in current culture when examining militia movements, Antifa, comic books, and the many Hollywood films that draw on vigilante narratives. There are still vigilantes in American culture: fictional and not. This means that the vigilante must be defined and explored in a larger context than simply the historical lens. The position of a vigilante as a figure in historical narratives has been the dominant context of defining the term so far. It is also the most common way that scholars have examined the vigilante. However, if the vigilante is a narrative figure then it is important to examine the representation of this figure across time, differing narrative forms, and contexts to get a better scope the myth of the vigilante hero. Historical narratives are just one narrative form that vigilantes are represented within.

As stated above, Mulloy recognizes the construction of historical narratives, and that competing historical narratives are used to form identity. In turn, this adds to the vigilante ideology which Brown outlines; he also exposes that the right to revolution, popular sovereignty, as well as economic conditions, are a part of a shifting and competing set of contexts. Since the contexts of the ideology of vigilantism are always in flux, the understanding of the ideology of

vigilantism will also be in a state of flux as well. This can be examined more specifically in relation to case studies, which will illuminate moments of shifting understandings, or the shifting episteme, of vigilantism in the context of the American culture. The following chapter will examine such a case study to demonstrate this point. The definition/understanding of a vigilante can be made more nuanced by engaging with the understanding sociologist Ray Abrahams has of it. He explores vigilantism from a sociological perspective in a global context.

Unlike the dictionaries and Mulloy, Abrahams does not outline a simple one-line definition. Following Brown, Abrahams instead highlights a number of elements that are important to consider when defining and understanding vigilantism. He begins by outlining the common understanding of vigilantes: “[v]igilantes have arisen at many times in different regions of the world as defenders, often by force, of their view of the good life against those they see to be its enemies” (Abrahams 1). This is far too open a definition to prove useful for analysis of vigilantes, but Abrahams recognizes the importance of vigilante action being motivated by more than taking the law into one’s own hands. In this case the notion of defending “the good life” can be understood as another of the many potential understandings of the term justice.

“The power of vigilantism to generate ambivalence...lies in the notion of decent, independent, law-abiding citizens, anxious to live and work in peace, and to defend their right to do so if the state fails them. At the same time, many people fear vigilantism’s disturbing implications for the authority of police courts and other formal instruments of state authority” (3). The notion that vigilantism is met with ambivalence within culture is true, but part of this is a result of the way historians, critics, and theorists have discussed vigilantism with an ambivalent tone; this will be further demonstrated in coming chapters. The position of ambivalence towards vigilantism is something that this project will not replicate. The term vigilante is often applied in

different historical narratives, and it is not directly invoked in others when constructing a narrative conforming to the mythic formula of the vigilante hero. The vigilante is a figure that has been largely romanticized in American culture. This has been perpetuated as a result of an uncritical examination of the figure as a mythic figure, and the lack of injecting the repeated mythic formula of the narrative with all of the contextual complexities that impact each specific narrative case study. A rigorous application of contextual analyses of the vigilante will be the goal of this project to illuminate a more critical understanding of the vigilante figure, and how its mythic status has helped to shape a more violent culture.

Abrahams, more than the other scholars, offers a more fluid understanding of the term vigilante and its connection to narrative and mythic figure construction. As he states, “the different shades of meaning...reflect both the variety of forms of ‘vigilance’ in different times and places, and the wide range of attitudes they can elicit. The situation is, however, further complicated by the human capacity for deception, irony, and metaphor... It is not so much a thing in itself as a fundamentally relational phenomenon, which does not make much sense except in connection with and often in contrast to others” (5, 7). For Abrahams these relations are represented as a triangle where the three points are: Good Citizens, State, and Criminals. It is these categories and relational properties that Abrahams lays out that, if complicated, create a more complex definition of vigilantism. It is also worth noting that Abrahams is discussing the different shades of meaning in relation to different times and cultural contexts around the world, but these nuances of understanding are just as important within the context of American culture across time, region, and cultural context.

The triangle points that Abrahams lays out is too simple and needs to be complicated in a number of ways. The first has to do with the perspective one has, or rather what point one feels

they occupy on the triangle versus the point that others feel one occupies on the triangle. What makes the difference between a Good Citizen and a Criminal? It can be assumed that a Good Citizen follows the law and a Criminal does not. The label Good Citizen implies that the only citizen is one who follows the law and authority of the state, and if one is not good then they must be Criminal, and therefore are bad/evil. This creates a limited binary way of thinking, and at the same time seems to detach the State from being able to be a Good Citizen or a Criminal but instead makes it entity above such labels. The State, and its representatives, is itself capable of following its own laws or breaking them. At the same time, the layout that Abrahams offers presents the laws as inherently good, as to follow the law makes one a *Good Citizen*. The other problem with the relational positions that Abrahams sets up is that the common thread between the three points on the triangle seems to be law. An example that Abrahams draws on is that of Busangi witch hunters. The state has no formal laws recognizing witches or punishing them, but locals within Busangi, Tanzania are involved in hunting down and punishing or executing witches in their region. These individuals are filling a gap in the law, but also view themselves as good citizens who are punishing criminals that the state has missed. However, it would be better to consider the triangle points in relation to justice, and of course an understanding of what is just will always be related to a particular perspective and context that will never be universal. The villagers feel it is just to punish the witches, and these beliefs have little to do with their own conception of their relationship between their community and the state as citizens.

An image that I suggest may prove more useful than the triangle could be a sliding scale of citizenship within the state in relation to compliance or resistance. This compliance and resistance would be measured on an individual or group based upon the laws obeyed or ignored, but also on adherence to the ideology of the state, or the dominant cultural norms and institutions

within the state – in the context of this project it would be the cultural norms and institutions of America. On this scale a criminal is still a citizen and is not necessarily bad; as an individual or group who adheres more to the laws and regulations of the state is not necessarily good for being compliant to law if the law is unjust. In this way the Freedom Riders could be viewed as good citizens while resisting the cultural norms and law of the state. This also allows for the agents and organizations of the state to be placed upon the sliding scale. Therefore, it would allow police officers or organizations such as the FBI, to be viewed as resistant or on the lower scale of citizenship as a result of their actions in spite of their institutional position as agents of the state.

A second sliding scale should be created to examine the types of resistance or non-compliance used, as well as the tactics of those who seek to ensure compliance or quell resistance from others. It is on this scale where judgments of legitimacy/non-legitimacy and good/bad can be examined to determine where an individual or group occupying a particular place on the citizenship scale sits. It is also this scale that can be used in determining whether a particular illegitimate individual or group is a negative force to the culture; as well as if a legitimate group is actually a positive force to the culture in a given time and place. The measure of legitimacy should be firmly rooted in the use of subjective violence. If a group or individual uses subjective violence in their pursuit of justice they should be viewed as illegitimate and not represented in a narrative through a positive or heroic light. This has not been a practice used in the construction of vigilante narratives thus far.

These proposed scales will only prove useful in a case-by-case basis in relation to the web of contexts that can be applied to a given vigilante action. This is a more nuanced and complex approach to the evaluation and study of vigilantes that this project will undertake, and it gives a more useful relational understanding between vigilante action and the vigilante's

particular understanding of justice that is under consideration. The Montana Vigilantes engaged in lynching to protect their community. Here they are attempting to uphold a sense of law and order and are seeking to punish illegitimate activity, and as a result the narrative will present them as heroes. The complexities surrounding this narrative will be explored further in the next chapter, and by doing so the myth of the vigilante hero will start to be deconstructed and challenged.

It is through these relational dynamics that Louis Althusser's theories will be helpful. The idea of perspective on being legitimate or not, good or not, will depend on the perception of the one judging, but the evaluation will also have to attempt to explore the vigilante's self-perception of their context in relation to the proposed scales. From the perspective of the state any act of resistance or non-compliance is seen as both illegitimate and negative. Althusser explores this through the use of RSAs and ISAs. The State uses the two apparatuses: Repressive State Apparatuses (RSA) and Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA). One is used to force compliance through punishment – the Repressive State Apparatus. The other becomes a force of learning to have an individual train themselves into compliance – to make themselves a subject of the state by their own choosing. These tools of state can be viewed as legitimate and good, or as corrupt and abusive – depending on how they are used and whose perspective they are viewed from. It can also be dependent on the perception of what the state is attempting to make of its citizens. Therefore, the contextual exploration of any given vigilante will be incredibly important to bear in mind. A vigilante may be resisting what they view as immoral or illegal RSAs through vigilante action, but they may also be engaging in direct action against ISAs that create objective violence and injustice. This will be demonstrated in depth by examining vigilante actions in

Native communities, and the FBI's acts of violent repression through the COINTELPO program as a case study in chapter 5.

It is because of the ambiguous nature of the relation to the state that the producer of a vigilante narrative can hold that the vigilante is able to be treated with ambivalence as Abrahams claims. The state is not always good or just, and if a vigilante is perceived to work for what the majority of citizens see as justice, or any individual constructing the narrative of the vigilante see as justice, the vigilante is viewed as heroic; however, if vigilantes are not supported by the majority they are seen as criminal and a villain – often never being labeled as vigilante, but instead simply a criminal or terrorist. The rhetorical choice of term applied to a figure is important in relation to examining the meaning of a vigilante. The vigilante is a specific archetype but can hold the rhetorical power that terms such as terrorist or freedom fighter applied to a given individual can possess; some who have been labeled with the previous terms could be more precisely defined as a vigilante in the American context. Vigilante is often a term left for those viewed with ambiguity or seen as heroes. There is a problem with this definition though, for as the state can be viewed as corrupt based upon perspective - the idea of what constitutes justice is also based upon perspective. Therefore, there are many vigilantes that have not been named as such and should be. Not because they should be viewed with ambiguity or romanticized, but instead to demonstrate the illegitimacy and danger of all vigilantes and vigilante activity within American culture and its mythmaking. Labelling negative figures as vigilantes will help to dispel the myth of the vigilante hero and delegitimize the violent tactics that they use.

It is also worth noting that any individual or group would require several sliding scales of citizenship and resistance tactics, as all are subject to varying states, and these states may have

competing interests. In an American context there is the centralized federal state, but there is also smaller communities and groups (states) within the united whole that have their own governing body (whether officially recognized or not) and ISAs as well. All of these levels of state may have a set legal code, but also will have cultural norms and rules which shape their subjects/citizens/members. This helps form an ever more complex web around exploring vigilantes and vigilante action.

The relational conditions and varying perspectives of the state in relation to the sliding scales of citizenship and resistance foreground why the focus on narrative is so important in discussing vigilantism. It is a narrative that positions the relational elements into a set perspective. The narrative construction is responsible for the act of placing vigilantes, citizens and states into positions in the narrative that allow for ambivalence or even romanticizing of the vigilante to occur. It is in the narrative that the use of the term vigilante is applied or not, that a justification of vigilante action is offered, or that vigilantes are made heroic. The way in which they are described, and their actions demonstrated within a narrative will frame the meaning making for the reader in relation to fellow citizens, the state, and vigilantes. It is the narrative that helps shape the formula of the myth of the vigilante hero, and in turn future narratives are shaped by the mythic formula. This is equally true whether the narrative is historical, in contemporary news media, or in works fiction. The structure of a vigilante narrative itself lays out a specific perspective on the compliance and resistance, as well as the citizenship scale to the state. This is demonstrated through building on the theory of Tzvetan Todorov in his *Structural Analysis of Narrative*.

Todorov lays out an example of narrative structure based upon a selection of stories in the *Decameron*. He ends up with the following schema:

“X violates a law > Y must punish X > X tries to avoid being punished >

Y violates a law

Y believes X is not violating the law > Y does not punish X” (Todorov 2027).

The above schema laid out by Todorov becomes important when considering the structure of vigilante narratives. For Todorov X and Y are agents within the narrative. The vigilante narrative structure can be laid out, but the options are not what the acting agents in the narrative may do, but instead how their actions are to be understood and evaluated by one who is engaging with the narrative. The options will be determined based on the perspective of the narrator, or of the author (actual or implied) of the vigilante narrative. The narrative construction based on perspective of a vigilante action turns the narrative creator into a producer of the myth. It is important to note that this does not mean that a reader/viewer of the narrative can only accept the position and share the perspective of the narrative creator; there is always the ability to offer resistant readings/viewings of a narrative. It is such resistant readings to the myth that this project is engaging in with in all of its case studies; however, this does take a much more active and critical engagement with the narrative. Many individuals immersed in American culture and its myths will not engage in such tricky intellectual work. As a result, many of the vigilante narratives created will be mixed into American culture before being critically filtered, and as a result the mythic figure of the vigilante hero is produced. A structure of the vigilante narrative would look like this:

X perceives injustice because of Y > X perceives no legal route to justice > X uses
extralegal violence against Y in pursuit of their understanding of justice >

X is successful

X is not successful >

If creator of narrative shares perspective of X then X becomes a vigilante

If creator does not share perspective of X then the label is altered (criminal, terrorist, etc..)

This formula can be presented drawing on a particular narrative example, in this case the film *Death Wish* from 1974. Paul Kersey's (X) wife and daughter are brutally attacked and murdered. The legal system cannot find or catch the killers (Y). Kersey then turns to vigilante action to pursue any criminals he can find in the city. Kersey is successful and kills criminals. The narrative frames him as a heroic figure, and the police allow him to escape because they feel he is doing valuable work that they themselves are unable to complete (creator of the narrative is structuring it to view the vigilante as a positive figure).

There are some factors in this narrative structure which differ from Todorov's example and are helpful to consider. X can refer to an individual or a collective, as can Y. When any individual or group is placed into the position of X or Y it will depend on the narrative's constructed view of X or Y how the narrative will be shaped for X. Every time the narrative is told, or retold from a different source, the narrative may shift for X depending on the views of the narrative creator, or the shift of political position in the contexts of the time of the narrative's telling/retelling. This is all in relation to the narrator's or author's conceptions of justice, X, Y, and the state that they are all operating within. If the source perceives a lack of justice than X will be made a hero perpetuating the myth of the vigilante. In all cases of vigilante narrative, the extralegal means of seeking justice will consist of engaging in subjective violence. This should further elaborate the importance of context in relation to examining vigilante narratives.

The view of the vigilante figure being viewed as heroic or not is an example of the same principle that Todorov outlines in the violate or punish schema he presents. The violate or punish and the vigilante being a hero or criminal is related to the choice of the narrative constructor and the interpretation of the narrative by the reader/viewer (2028). This is the flaw to the narrative structure as it is. It must be revised so that X is not commonly viewed in a heroic light, but in a negative one as a result of the means used to pursue justice. The common practice, as will be seen throughout the whole of this project, is to romanticize the vigilante, and this in turn romanticizes the use of violence to solve problems in American culture: a dangerous and problematic element in need of revision.

Any individual or group will have competing views of what justice is, the state included, but anytime violence is romanticized as a valid tool for subjective pursuits it will create a cycle of violence that cannot be escaped. When facing injustice Mahatma Gandhi argued “[t]here are two ways of countering injustice. One way is to smash the head of the [person] who perpetrates injustice and get your own head smashed in the process... But through the other method of combatting injustice [non-violence], we alone suffer the consequences and the other side is wholly spared” (Gandhi 312-313). Gandhi makes clear that violence can only lead to more violence. Subjective violence can create more subjective violence. If subjective violence is used to overthrow systemic violence and then is used as a method to ensure a new form of state it is simply creating a new form of systemic violence that can result in another revolt through subjective violence against it.

This offers critique of Fanon’s argument that “[i]n its bare reality, decolonization reeks of red-hot cannonballs and bloody knives. For the last can first only after a murderous and decisive confrontation between the two protagonists...to have them clamber up...the famous echelons of

organized society, can only succeed by resorting to every means, including, of course, violence” (Fanon 3). However, if violence is lionized as a legitimate tool to decolonize in Fanon’s context – and this is just one perspective of injustice that can motivate vigilante action – then when another becomes oppressed through subjective violence from those seeking to escape systemic violence how can there ever be an end to the violence? Gandhi offers that potential through non-violence by interrupting the cycle of violence and breaking it. However, this is a very difficult tactic and approach to take in pursuing justice. It is seen as passive and weak instead being viewed as a path that takes greater strength and sacrifice as Gandhi argues (Gandhi 309). The repercussions of making vigilantes heroes and legitimizing their violent tactics will be demonstrated through case studies of vigilante narratives throughout this work.

Another complication with these narratives is that they always begin with perceived injustice, and the perspective of X will always be demonstrated through the narrative from that point. Consider the figure of Batman: his narrative begins from his parents being murdered in an alley by a robber in front of Bruce Wayne while he is a child. The perspective of the narrative’s source will immediately structure the narrative to support X’s perception, or to challenge it. This can be done by paying attention to the contexts that are offered in the narrative and those that are never raised or presented. However, the perspective of the narrative source and X is always in relation to a moment of change or flux that is retroactively constructed for the narrative. The perspective taken up in the vigilante narrative formula is always based upon a view of something being better before the shift that occurred through the structuring of the narrative. If a source shares the perspective of X great emphasis will be placed upon this shift from just to unjust, but if not, then the shift will be negated or explained as unrelated to Y. All these complications illuminate why the vigilante cannot be properly defined or theorized without a primary focus on

narrative. The vigilante is a construct of narrative, and it is a construct which must be challenged in the American context.

The idea of context is crucial to have a more critical understanding of the vigilante. Since the vigilante's goal is justice, it is more than the injustice of the unpunished breaking of a legal code that can have X perceive injustice. The breaking of legal codes can fall in relation to the state's use of RSAs or the state's unwillingness to act and uphold its laws. There are also non-legal codes created in a given state through ISAs. If these are perceived as breached by an individual or group, or viewed as corrupt by an individual or group, violence may be used to restore their perspective of justice. If this occurs, then the individual or group that has used violence has positioned themselves as X within the vigilante narrative schema for their actions. This opens up the idea of there being vigilantes committed to social justice. There are a great number of vigilante narratives that are about vigilantes of social and even economic justice, but the term vigilante has not always been applied in these narratives. Vigilantes of social justice will be examined in chapter 5 with the Native American vigilante groups, and economic vigilantes will be explored in chapter 4 in relation to romanticized thieves and the Virginian miners and mining company conflicts.

The role of cultural hegemony must be kept in mind to evaluate the contexts for X and Y in any narrative, as well as for evaluating the source of the narrative. The culture that the narrative comes from is not necessarily the same culture that it represents. The vigilante narrative is both synchronic and diachronic. Any given narrative is set in a synchronic moment of time, but the perspective of the source may be shaped by a culture which has shifted diachronically from the historical event. The retelling of narratives alter elements so it is always open to the potential for a shift in source perspective depending on a variety of factors: when the narrative is

being constructed, who it is being constructed by, and whom it is being constructed for. For example, during his trial Bernard Goetz used a defense that he was not seeking to encounter criminals when he shot people on the subway. However, after he was acquitted of charges, he later opened up a shop called *Vigilante Electronics*. This action offers a new narrative about himself that he has created. All of the above elements are important in relation to examining any presented narrative of vigilantism.

Story tellers and narrative constructors have a role in either helping preserve the cultural hegemony of their time or working to resist it and encourage subversion of it. Any narratives and narrative constructors will have a part in shaping the American collective memory and American culture. All of them can end up being myth producers, or myth exposers. The myth production is often done by authors, filmmakers, historians, and cultural critics. Intellectual engagement with vigilantes and vigilante activity is a complex situation where intellectuals can discuss the same events and figures involved, and be revealed as in support of vigilantes or against them based upon the narrative they are working on, and how they are constructing their analysis of that narrative. These shifts can be seen from the impact of other factors, which change the episteme of the vigilante as Foucault might call it - if he had specifically discussed vigilantes. In particular contexts the vigilante is viewed as a positive force and a hero, but in other contexts the dominant discourse on the vigilante has shifted in the cultural imagination to simply make it viewed with ambivalence. This operates in the same way that Foucault explained the shift in punishment towards incarceration and surveillance from older forms of physical punishment, or general cultural disinterest towards specific actions that at a given time were not yet considered criminal. The trouble is that if the intellectual is at all romanticizing any vigilante activity, constructing the

narrative to view the vigilantes as heroic or legitimizing the violence, they will be a part of continuing an inescapable cycle of violence created by the mythmaking of the vigilante hero.

Gandhi argued that violence is so easily turned to because history is largely understood as records of violence (Gandhi 318). Narratives of history are filled with violence and conflict, and often present it in such a way that one side's violence is more legitimate or a positive act against the other. This also aligns with Fanon's argument of the inevitable conflict of both protagonists in the aims of decolonization. The choice of term of protagonist by Fanon, and Gandhi's focus on history in relation to perpetuating violence speak to the importance of the relationship between narrative, state and violence. When these points are put in relation to vigilante narratives the best intellectual response is to advocate against violent vigilante action within the narrative by drawing out the complex contexts, and at the same time drawing attention to the positive counter-hegemonic ideals that can be acted upon from a perceived idea of injustice one may be sympathetic to. This can be aided by offering alternative forms of resistance to objective violence and injustice that is nonviolent. This will offer a way to counter the myth of the vigilante hero, and at the same time critique issues of injustice. This form of work on vigilante narratives aims at escaping the unending cycle of violence the myth creates.

Unless other narratives and arguments are being constructed to critique the mythmaking of vigilantism it will only continue to be legitimated within American culture. However, the most important reason to engage critically with vigilante narratives is that there is some good work present within the narratives of vigilante action that do not involve the vigilante tactics. An example of this is The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. This organization confronted and made clear the racism and social injustice for black communities in America. However, engaging in firefights with police and threatening armed violence to gain supplies for social programs are

not methods to be idealized as ways to combat the social issues. The productive work that can be done with this narrative is not in offering support or ambivalence to the vigilante violence, but instead engaging with what the perspective of the vigilante's perceived injustice was to engage in more critical discussions about how justice is understood and can be achieved. This can often link directly back to the modes of violence laid out by Žižek. Some vigilantes will engage in subjective violence to resist injustice of objective (systemic) violence.

While a vigilante who uses subjective physical violence as a reaction to other subjective physical violence is a relatively straight forward idea, it is unjustified as the law would hold the first perpetrator accountable for their violent actions. If it does not there is a flaw within the legal system, and recognition of this is useful to be able to rectify it. This reveals a new mode of violence or corruption of power. This is useful to assess and analyze in context, but there are better options of resistance than to engage in physical subjective violence. Public exposure in and of itself may be enough. There are, however, even more complex reasons that can create vigilantism, and always the root causes will be linked to the less visible forms of violence that must be analyzed. Hannah Arendt raises this idea in her work *On Violence* that violence is often used as a means to get attention (79). Again, the purpose is to expose the reasons for perceived injustice and offer options of resistance in a more ethical and non-subjectively violent way. This can be another reason of why historical narrative are filled with violence as Gandhi points out. The narratives of violence are constructed to create attention to the causes and effects of violence.

The systemic violence of capitalism can be connected to many vigilante actions of the past. It can work as a form of insurance to make sure no one will remove private property from those who have it, and this aligns with Brown's recognition that economics was underlining the

vigilante ideology. It has been used as a guard for economic and class position. At the same time this systemic violence of capitalism and has been resisted through vigilante action as a form of challenging the systemic violence to create a sense of justice for the vigilantes who resist it – the Virginian miners will be one example this work will look at that demonstrates this position. It has a negative effect to create historical narratives of the Virginian miners as class heroes against oppressive and violent mining companies as this ultimately idealizes violence as a useful and effective tool for change. The importance of these vigilante narratives is to see the damage and violence that exists within capitalism, and then to consider more effective ways of resisting this systemic violence without turning to vigilantism. Otherwise, there will be unending cycles of subjective violence being used to both support and resist the larger objective violence of the capitalist system as it is instead of seeking to envision or create something new. The links between the vigilante myth and American capitalist ideas are large and important connections. It will be specifically focused on in the fourth chapter of this work but returned to frequently in other chapters as well.

This chapter has demonstrated the complexity of defining what a vigilante is and how it operates as a mythic figure. At this point it would be useful to distill a number of the points that have been raised above to provide a working definition of vigilantism for the rest of this work. A vigilante is a narrative figure first and foremost. The narrative subject can be considered a vigilante whether a lone individual or it is a group using subjective violence in the pursuit of their perspective and understanding of justice. The vigilante has most often been romanticized in narratives, and as a result forms the troubling ideal of viewing violence as an acceptable and a traditional method to solve subjective issues within American culture. It is the focus of the vigilante as a mythic figure and constant attention to the shifting contexts of vigilante narratives

that is unique to this work from all studies of the vigilante done previously. This approach offers a more comprehensive analysis of the vigilante as a mythic figure across a wide array of narrative forms, allowing for understanding the vigilante as having been bound into a particular narrative formula to perpetuate the myth and legitimize vigilante violence across different times, regions and cultural contexts within America.

One way to counter this mythmaking within American culture is to offer critical readings and evaluation of vigilante narratives that have engaged with the term vigilante, and narratives that are following the form of the myth of the vigilante hero narrative even if the term is never evoked within the narrative itself. These critiques will help to counter the mythmaking and expose it. To be able to evaluate and examine critically the vigilante narratives a comprehensive analysis of the narrative in relation to the contexts within it, and outside of the narrative, need to be explored. To do this for all current vigilante narratives would be a near impossible task and would be complicated by the current vigilante narratives being rapidly produced. Instead, the vigilante figure will be explored through six major contexts in the following chapters. Each chapter will offer a broad overview of common elements of the vigilante narratives in relation to the chapter's given contextual focus, and each chapter will engage in some close reading of specific case studies.

The second chapter focuses on the context of historical narratives of vigilantes such as western vigilante committees to examine the trend of romanticizing and ambivalence that exist within the narrative constructions of this contextual approach of vigilantism. It examines how historical narratives of vigilantes distort the complexity of contexts to formulate the mythic pattern for late vigilante narratives. These issues will be demonstrated more concretely through examining different historical narratives of the Montana Vigilantes. The third chapter focuses on

the context of political policy and ideals being shaped and shaping the narratives of vigilantism in American culture. It examines historical issues of vigilante action against cattle rustling and criminals on the Western frontier, and how this was crafted into the genre of Western fiction. The chapter demonstrates the transition of the narrative formula of the vigilante myth from historical narratives to fictional narratives. The fourth chapter explores the context of class and capitalism on the vigilante figure by looking at vigilantes of economic justice. It examines issues of class dispute in the Western frontier and draws on the case study of the Virginia mining wars. The fifth chapter examines the narratives of vigilantes who are seeking social justice from hegemonic norms and oppressions. This is important to focus on given the rise of attention to diversity and inclusion within American culture, and at times the violent resistance to it and at times used in attempts to push for these aims. It will examine vigilante actions on the Pine Ridge reservation between competing Native groups, and the violent and repressive tactics of the FBI through their COINTELPRO operations against individuals and groups offering leftist dissent against the state. The sixth chapter examines the impact of gender on vigilantism and vigilante narratives. It explores how gender has inspired acts of vigilantism, and how vigilantes of different genders have been portrayed. It will also raise narratives that focus on the use of vigilante tactics to fight against sexism. The final chapter examines the integration of American religious and Christian ideals with the vigilante figure to legitimate their violence as righteous violence. This will be demonstrated through an analysis of Batman and the film *The Dark Knight*.

Chapters five and six are focused more on ethnicity and gender to examine vigilante narratives motivated by aims for social justice, and chapter four focuses on class to examine vigilante narratives motivated with aims to achieve economic justice or maintain control for an

economic elite; the contexts of these three chapters will often overlap with each other through the case study narratives that will be examined. This project is a large and ambitious undertaking, and it will not be able to be all encompassing. The aim is to provide useful assessments in broad in relation to some of the contexts of justice involved in vigilante narratives in America. At the same time, the project will offer depth of analysis on particular case studies to support larger claims, and model future work to be engaged in with any given vigilante narrative in existence. This project is building on Slotkin's approach to the myth of the western frontier but focusing on a different myth and its role in shaping violence within American culture. The hope is to encourage further examination and academic discourse in relation to the vigilante as a mythic figure in the American culture. By engaging in more critical discussion and examination of this myth it can hopefully be further exposed and deconstructed and in turn help delegitimize violence as an effective problem-solving method within American culture.

Chapter 2: Vigilantes in History: Foundations of the Mythic Figure and the Montana Vigilantes

While once history was viewed as an objective, almost scientific, enterprise, more-recent scholarship from the late 1970s and beyond has paid attention to the competing narratives and literary dimensions of history beginning with the work of Hayden White. Alun Munslow has given this issue focused attention in his more recent work *Narrative and History* (2007). It has also made more historians conscious of highlighting the perspectives they are approaching historical facts from and the ways they are constructing their historical narratives for a reader. An example of such a historian is Howard Zinn. His work *A People's History of the United States* (1980) sought to tell history differently from the dominant perspectives, and consciously constructed the historical narrative of the nation through the voices that have typically been ignored or silenced in the once “official” or “objective” history of America. This viewing of narratives from a different perspective will be utilized further in chapters 4 and 5 of this work when looking at vigilantes of economic and social justice.

The idea that differing historical narratives are the way for a pluralist democratic society to reach an agreement on what the public should believe about its nation's past is crucial to the exploration of historical narratives of vigilantism. While different vigilantes may be viewed as heroic or as criminal in particular historical records there will always be some narratives that will portray a given vigilante as heroic. What this suggests is that if the creator of the historical narrative agrees or sympathizes with the vigilante position, they construct the historical narrative to portray the vigilante as heroic. While the specifics of which vigilantes are viewed as heroic can shift and fluctuate in different contexts the core concept reinforced across different historical

narratives is that vigilante action can be viewed as heroic and their violent tactics can be justified. This forms the myth of the vigilante hero in history and creates a more violent culture by romanticizing the use of violent vigilante tactics. This issue becomes more complicated and complex when vigilantes of social or economic justice are considered, but for now let us focus on vigilantes who simply take the codified law of the region into their own hands in the way that Mulloy defined them. It is a concrete core concept of vigilantism to begin with, and then the layers of complexity can be added in later chapters. In the same way, the historical narratives of vigilantism are the best form of narratives to start with as they are the earliest vigilante narratives that were circulated through culture within the United States. After the historical foundation of the myth making is explored, we can add the layers of complexity of how different narrative forms help to build and establish the mythic figure of the vigilante hero.

To examine historical narratives of the space of a nation, the narrative creator must first determine what the starting point of that nation space is. For the purpose of this project, and to make it more manageable, let us assign the start of the national historical imagination shared within the collective memory to the opening of the Revolutionary War in 1776. If this is the starting point the earliest historical narratives of vigilantism come from Christopher Waldrep's historical examinations of lynching, and he locates the two earliest lynching narratives during the Revolutionary War. In *The Many Faces of Judge Lynch* Waldrep outlines two major narratives of questionable historical accuracy, and also provides records of the stories written at a later date in his lynching documents sourcebook. These are described as being of questionable accuracy by Waldrep as they are only available as written accounts after being transferred from oral stories within cultural memory. The story with more credibility from Waldrep's assessment is that of Charles Lynch, a judge and upper-class citizen of Pennsylvania County, Virginia. The individual

whose story Waldrep gives less credibility is that of William Lynch, a farmer, from Bedford County. Whether one figure is the correct origin is less important than the function of the narratives, and support they offer of vigilante justice. However, it is noteworthy that the figure of more social standing and power in the culture is assessed as more credible origin of the story as well.

In both narratives the Lynches, Charles and William, use violence against Loyalist conspirators. The Loyalists are trying to steal resources and power from the Patriots, and in the larger picture they are perceived as trying to steal the potential freedom and the right of the colonies to govern themselves. Given the limits of law during a war based on the issue of which government, as well as which government's laws, will rule a country, the legitimate legal procedures and operations within the space are a bit fuzzy. As a result, all violence can only be extralegal, as was the violence of the Revolutionary War itself. The British saw the rebelling colonists as criminals who needed to be punished, and violently put down as an example to fellow rebels, or potential rebels within the British Empire. The Patriots viewed the Loyalists as criminals, and therefore needed to punish them to ensure justice for themselves. The most interesting point of the Lynch's narratives is not just that they justify vigilante violence, but also that they justify it across class lines.

According to Waldrep's research Charles Lynch was said to be a magistrate, a leading citizen in the community, and a leader in the militia. He was a member of the elite of Bedford County community. Charles Lynch's use of vigilante justice reinforces the idea of the elite maintaining order and maintaining his position of power in the future American society. However, in the narrative of William Lynch it is a farmer, a common man, rising up in the name of justice to lynch the Loyalists and stop their plot. This narrative puts the power in the hands of

the common people. It also acts as a parallel to the narrative of the Revolutionary War with the weaker colonies rising up to defeat the stronger and more powerful British Empire. These two competing mythic narratives of lynching's origin hold competing ideologies around who holds power in America: the elite or the common people. It sets up a foundational myth to oppose or support populist ideals; no matter what political perspective one has aligned themselves with, there is a foundational narrative following the mythic formula that makes the vigilante activity heroic.

Both Charles and William Lynch can be read as vigilantes even though the term is never directly applied to them. As rebels they were throwing off the official laws and power structure that had been placed over them by the English crown. Their violent actions against the crown, and the Loyalists, were intended to procure what they saw as a just and good life, to which the British and Loyalists were an enemy. Both narratives are compiled by Waldrep from various sources of old newspaper clippings, letters, and folk tales. Given the imprecision of sources, the exact number of men who were punished through the vigilante violence is unclear. The sources also vary on if the lynching resulted in death, or only consisted of whipping. The common element to the stories is of Patriots taking the law into their own hands to punish Loyalist plotters and their supporters through violence.

In the narrative of Charles Lynch the Loyalists were seen to be trying to gain control of a lead mine near Bedford County to help assist the British war effort against the colonies. The Loyalist plot was stopped and punished by militia under the direction of the judge when the would-be perpetrators were heard expressing Loyalist sentiments and seeking to call other Loyalists to action. The story of William Lynch also focuses on using force against those that have Loyalist sympathy, but that the court system is unable to punish for any actual criminal act.

As a result, William, and possibly some others, used violence against Loyalist sympathizers of the lower class. These acts of lynching were understood as acts of justice to those involved and connect the actors to the vigilante ideology Brown put forward.

The revolution against the crown was largely based on an economic rationale against taxation without representation. Since this narrative is rooted in the Revolutionary War, like any war, the victorious side presents the narrative of the victors, the American revolutionaries, as holding the superior moral ground. Of course, the moral justifications of war are always difficult to validate. The narratives present these individuals as vigilantes seeking justice for themselves, and in turn all the people of the future American nation. The vigilante acts of the Lynch narratives were also a frontier phenomenon as the colonies were a new frontier within the British Empire, and the colonial space became a further frontier through rejecting the imperial nation that founded the colonies. It is also worth noting that this draws a distinction from other acts of rebellion in world history, such as the French Revolution, as the collective memory and historical imagination of the United States begins from the successful rebellion. There are not centuries of monarchy or imperial rule before being overthrown to become a democracy. The origin of the historical imagination and collective memory is unique for America, and this creates the unique mythic figure of the vigilante in American culture tied to these origins.

It is the positioning of Charles and William Lynch as vigilantes that legitimates their actions through their narratives, and in turn legitimates the act of lynching in its American origin. This is important to note as lynching is just one mode of vigilante justice that develops and transforms over time and across different locations in America. In both narratives the vigilante figures engaged in the violence publicly to act as a demonstration against would be Loyalists. There were several individuals involved as users of violence, and several individuals acting as

witnesses to it; Loyalists were killed through the violent acts, and the motivation to engage in violence was based upon the view that the Loyalists were stealing rights and power from the Patriots. All these factors position these early narratives of vigilante justice as part of shaping the narrative formula for the myth of the vigilante hero.

The main historical narrative of vigilantism that will be used as a case study for this chapter is the narrative of the vigilantes of Montana. This narrative makes an ideal case study because it has been examined and retold by various historians from different cultural contexts in time. It is also a narrative still known and celebrated within the region it originated within. There have been several books dedicated to exclusively telling a historical narrative of the Montana vigilantes who operated between 1863 and 1870. Four of these books have been selected for in depth analysis. The first book is Thomas J. Dimsdale's *The Vigilantes of Montana* originally published in 1866. The second is Nathaniel P. Langford's *Vigilante Days and Ways* published in 1893 and over twenty years after the vigilantes originally acted. The third is Frederick Allen's *A Decent Orderly Lynching* published in 2004 (the vigilantes return in a post-9/11 American with the Bush's administration increasing limits on American freedoms in the name of security). Finally, Mark C. Dillon's *The Montana Vigilantes 1863-1870* published in 2013 (the vigilantes are further explained and justified as cultural concerns are rising about surveillance of citizens during Obama's administration). This utilizes the two historical narratives written closest to the events when they occurred, and the two narratives that have been constructed with the greatest temporal distance from the original events that the respective works document and describe.

The Montana vigilantes were not the first organized vigilance council in America. Vigilante councils had been formed in other locations to create order in settlements where the law was not yet present or effectual, at least this is what the members of the vigilante movements

would claim. The vigilante historian Richard Maxwell Brown has identified 89 different vigilante movements that predate the Montana vigilantes (305-319). A number of these movements were small or medium in size, but several were large vigilante movements with more than a hundred members on the vigilance committee. The San Francisco vigilance committee was likely the movement to hold the most influence on the Montana vigilantes. As Brown argues:

The San Francisco committee of 1856 is pivotal in the history of American vigilantism, because it signals the beginning of the transition from the old to the new vigilantism. The San Francisco vigilantes likened the methods (hanging, expulsion) of the old with victims typical of the new: immigrant Irish-Catholicism an intricate San Francisco context including allegations of a crime wave, electoral irregularities, and municipal corruption as well as ethnic and religious prejudice. Not only was the committee of 1856 the largest and best organized vigilante movement in American history, but it was by far the best known. It received publicity on a world-wide scale and attracted the editorial approval of the eastern press. The San Francisco vigilance committee was copied widely and even more widely admired. And had much to do with creating the favorable image of American vigilantism in the nineteenth century. It marked the turning point in American vigilantism, from a concern with rural frontier disorder to a groping – and unsuccessful – quest for solutions to the problems of new urban America (134-135).

The San Francisco vigilance committee would have been an inspiration to a number of vigilante movements; however, since California had already experienced a gold rush and encountered the lawlessness and danger that accompanies mining camps and settlements, the

vigilantism that was used to curb this had been witnessed by men who travelled to Montana for the gold that was discovered there. Prospectors from California travelled to Montana and brought stories and the vigilante ideology with them. It is not surprising that an organized and large vigilante movement occurred in Montana after their arrival. It is also worth noting that the Montana vigilantes were a group that began as a movement of what Brown classifies as the “old vigilantism” and during their time they alter into the “new vigilantism.” For Brown the old vigilantism was about enforcing the law where it was not being enforced, and the new vigilantism was about preserving resources and power for a community; this often-linked vigilante actions to preserving economic position and racial superiority for the elite. It is this dual nature of the vigilante activities, the shift from old vigilantism to new vigilantism, that is also demonstrated by the case study of the Montana vigilantes.

It would be best to offer a brief summary of what led to the creation of the Montana vigilantes. In Montana gold mines were discovered outside of the two major settlements that had developed – Virginia City and Bannack. The gold discovery led to an increase of population in the area, as well as newfound wealth in the territory where organized government and law had not yet been well established. It was a fast-growing frontier region around mining claims and camps, and there were limited stagecoach and other travel routes and roads to get out of these settlements to more established ones within the territory. The lack of various travel routes is important because getting out of these settlements and camps was needed to trade the gold that was being discovered. A number of robberies and murders started to occur largely in pursuit of gold dust along these limited travel routes. In response to the crime and violence a sheriff was elected by the settlement: Henry Plummer. However, it is soon suspected that there was a gang of organized road agents, and the sheriff himself was the group’s leader. As a result, a vigilance

committee is formed, and they execute all suspected members of the road agent gang and Plummer. After that the vigilantes carry on removing anyone viewed as a criminal or undesirable element within the settlements. These actions continue even when more organized government and legal control is brought to the settlements. This bare bones account leaves out many of the details and specific cases of vigilante action. More of the details will emerge by looking at what the different narratives have to say about specific actions of the vigilantes. What can be said with certainty is that none of the narratives agree in all the details, and even the described levels of crime and violence that led to the formation of the vigilance committee are disputed among the historians because of limited sources to be found to support the claims of the crimewave. While a number of sources have been created about the Montana vigilantes, there is less record and documentation of actual crime details because of the frontier space before the vigilantes. Much of the news publication of the region was put out by Thomas Dimsdale – who ran the local newspaper and also wrote the first book about the Montana vigilantes.

Thomas Dimsdale's *The Vigilantes of Montana* was the first published history of the Montana vigilantes and is therefore the best choice of historical account to begin analysis from. In the forward to the book, R. E. Mather notes that Dimsdale's book was the first book published in Montana and holds a number of important merits as a historical document. He does offer some critique of the work for being a highly pro-vigilante narrative. Mather states, "Though Sheriff Plummer and the other lynched victims did not have the benefit of a trial, most present-day histories persist in declaring these untried men guilty, just as Dimsdale did back in the 1860s. Apparently our nation's concept of justice – which is that an individual must be considered innocent until proven guilty by a fair trial – is merely tossed out the window when writing that section of Montana involving the Vigilantes" (x). There is even dispute among historians as to

whether Dimsdale himself was also a member of the vigilante committee. The fact that the first book published in the state is a pro-vigilante history narrative lays the foundation of the mythic vigilante hero. It should also be noted that a lot of Dimsdale's book was put together drawing on articles he had written for the first newspaper in the state, *The Montana Post*; Dimsdale was also the editor of this paper. His control over the founding documents and narratives of the vigilantes that were produced helped to create the hero figure of the vigilante. The pro-vigilante perspective would become part of the collective memory of the region and shape the community's historical imagination. It should be stated that even if Dimsdale was not a member of the vigilance committee, there were other motivations to write as a supporter of their actions. Alan Valentine in his narrative of the San Francisco vigilante committee, *Vigilante Justice*, demonstrates the dangers to a press that is unsupportive of vigilante action. In the text Valentine notes that only *The Herald* newspaper was not supportive and valorizing of the vigilantes and because of this it quickly died as a publication (172). This information is offered to help establish how the early historical accounts of vigilante activities were often reported in the press, and they were overwhelmingly positive further forming the mythic formula of the hero figure of the vigilante.

Dimsdale published his text 1866 in the midst of continuing vigilante activity. His narrative outlines the shift from the original vigilance committee to the new one but does not have the full account of the new committee's actions as they were still acting when the book was published. Dimsdale's motivations for his historical narrative are made perfectly clear in his preface:

The object of this writer in presenting this narrative to the public is twofold. His intention is, in the first place, to furnish a correct history of an organization administering justice without the sanction of constitutional law; and secondly, to prove not only the

necessity for their action, but the equity of their proceedings...with the belief that its perusal will greatly modify the views of those even who are most prejudiced against the summary retribution of mountain law, and with the conviction that all honest and impartial men will be willing to admit both the wisdom of the course pursued and the salutary effect of the rule of Vigilantes in the territory of Montana. It is also hoped that the history of the celebrated body...will be edifying and instructive to the general reader (xix).

Dimsdale is building a narrative designed to present the vigilantes as the heroes the community needed to save them. The narrative also aims to establish that the view of the vigilantes as heroic and a positive force is the “correct” historical attitude and perspective to take towards any group of vigilantes. Dimsdale’s claim to show the equity of their actions will be returned to when looking at the historical account that Dillon offers of the vigilantes. The idea that Dimsdale wants his history to be instructive to the reader can be read in a couple of ways. One way is to view the narrative as a call to action for any community that finds themselves in circumstances where vigilante action may be beneficial. The second aim, when the text is read as a call to action against perceived injustice, is to instruct the public on how to think and view the vigilantes that rise up: as heroic. This demonstrates that the earliest historical account of the Montana vigilantes was being constructed to present them as a positive cultural force, and to lay the foundation of the vigilante myth onto a group that also shifts between old and new vigilantism.

A specific murder committed by the Montana vigilantes that will be examined through all the narratives is that of Joe Pizanthia. His death is particularly important as it is the action that signals a shift from the old to the new form of vigilantism by the Montana vigilantes. In

Dimsdale's account, as in others, Joe Pizanthia - a Mexican - is referred to as "The Greaser" and only given his name in brackets. This highlights the racial prejudice against him in the narrative and the community. After the vigilantes had hanged Plummer and his road agent gang – the identities of which were revealed by one of the gang members before his hanging – the vigilantes decided to target Pizanthia. He had not been involved in any crimes in the area that any of the narratives can accuse him of, though he may have committed criminal acts outside of the region. This seems to point to him being a target primarily as a result of his race. He is an undesirable element in the community, and the vigilante action against him signals the shift from the "old" to the "new" vigilantism.

All the narratives agree with the details of Pizanthia's murder. He was in his cabin when the vigilantes arrived and demanded him to come out. A shootout begins and one of the vigilantes is wounded and killed. The vigilantes then procure a mountain howitzer and blast apart the cabin. The vigilantes then strung up Pizanthia's corpse and fired an estimated one hundred rounds into it, and then tossed the body into the fire. With such an excessive display of racial hate and violence one would think it hard to justify these actions of the vigilantes, but Dimsdale does an interesting narrative sleight of hand to do so. In his text he states:

The popular vengeance had been only partially satisfied so far as Pizanthia was concerned; and it would be well if those who preach against the old Vigilance Committee would reflect upon the great difference which existed between the prompt and really necessary severity which they exercised and the wild and ungovernable passions which goad the masses of all countries, when roused to deeds of vengeance of a type so fearful that humanity recoils at the recital. Over and over again we have heard a man declaring that it was "a ___ shame," to hang some one that he wished to see punished. "___ he ought

to be burnt; I would pack brush three miles up a mountain myself.” “He ought to be fried in his own grease,” etc., and it must not be supposed that such expressions were mere idle bravado. The men said just what they meant. In cases where criminals convicted of grand larceny have been whipped, it never satisfied the crowd. The truth is, that the Vigilance Committee simply punished with death men unfit to live in any community, and that death was, usually, almost instantaneous, and only momentarily painful....In every case where men have confessed their crimes to the vigilantes of Montana they dreaded the vengeance of their comrades far more than their execution at the hands of the Committee, and clung to them as if they considered them friends. A remarkable instance of this kind was apparent in the conduct of John Wagner (135-136).

The above quotation offers several rhetorical moves that are worth noting. Dimsdale starts by generalizing the violence that can come from a community as an act of vengeance. He offers an alteration on the concept of *let he who is without sin cast the first stone*. In this case Dimsdale is saying that all communities can be terribly violent and excessive in the act of seeking vengeance, so it is wrong for any community to judge too harshly. This idea is aligned with René Girard’s argument in his work *Violence and the Sacred* (1988) that violence constitutes and creates a culture (294). It is the acts of violence against those seen to be a threat to the cultural norms of peaceful civilization held in the mind of the community that paradoxically helps create their peaceful civilization. This sidesteps the issue that Pizanthia had not actually been accused of doing anything wrong and had taken no criminal actions of which he could be guilty in the eyes of the community. Dimsdale then highlights that it is the general restraint of the vigilantes in their use of excessive violence in killing men that should be focused on. Dimsdale compares the difference of excessive violence between the vigilantes and the

criminals that they kill, and how the caught criminals view death by the vigilantes as a form of mercy. He then goes on to describe in his narrative the capture and orderly execution of John Wagner following the quotation offered above. Dimsdale focuses on how the vigilantes gave Wagner time to write a letter to his mother and pray before his death which he accepts calmly. This transition within the same chapter allows the reader to shift focus from the vigilantes' actions against Pizantia, and instead see them as restrained, compassionate and merciful. This choice in narrative construction ultimately works to reinforce a positive and heroic portrayal of the vigilante actions. The link of narrative construction to allow a man to pray may also be read as linking the vigilante actions to Godly work by righteous men. It is a violence that is constituting the culture and displaying evidence of civility in its restraint of excess. Excess by ordinary citizens has been put into the position of an assumed norm in relation to violence, and the vigilantes demonstrate themselves as more superior because of how often they can be demonstrated to show restraint and resist that norm. The choices made in narrative construction will also be taken up in examining Langford's *Vigilante Days and Ways*.

Nathaniel P. Langford's text also has a number of interesting rhetorical tools it uses to construct a heroic narrative for the vigilantes. He builds off Dimsdale's highlighting of how the criminals viewed the vigilante violence as a mercy and establishes how the criminals were in support of the vigilantes' actions themselves. It should also be noted that Langford was a member of the Montana vigilantes, and had a vested interest in making himself and them out to be heroes. Langford notes that when the vigilantes caught Red Yeager, the criminal who gave a list of all the road agents in the gang to the vigilantes, that he shook their hands before being executed and stated, "you're on a good undertaking. God bless you" (196). Nor is this the only criminal that Langford describes as offering prayers for, or support to, the vigilantes and their

actions before being hanged by them. Of course, only the vigilantes would know what was said by criminals at their death, so it is easy for Langford to claim any advantageous statements to have come from them that he wishes.

Langford sets out the purpose of his narrative clearly in his introduction. He states: “I offer these remarks, not in vindication of all acts of the Vigilantes, but of so many of them as were necessary to establish the safety and protection of the people” (10). He also mentions that he has no doubt that his text will be informative and instructive to the reader, and this can be read as instructive for both the way to view the vigilantes as heroic, but also to inspire vigilantism where it could be productive.

Langford opens his text, “[i]t is stated on good authority, that soon after the first appearance of Schiller’s drama of ‘The Robbers’ a number of young men, charmed with the character of Charles De Moor, formed a band and went to the forests of Bohemia to engage in brigand life. I have no fear that such will be the influence of this volume” (9). This opening points to the concern that the sections of the narrative describing the road agent gang could be accused of inspiring individuals to a life of crime. Langford is quite right that the impact of his volume is unlikely to inspire individuals to become thieves; it is much more likely to inspire others to become vigilantes when they feel that such action is required. Through his opening Langford reveals his awareness of narrative’s ability to inspire action in the world outside of it, and it is possible he could consider his text as inspiring future vigilantes. Regardless of the text’s possible impact to inspire vigilantism, it certainly creates hero worship for it. While Langford mentions that there are vigilante actions that he does not support, he offers little criticism of vigilantes throughout the text; what he says in his conclusion clearly states the view he wishes the readers to take of vigilantes:

It should never be forgotten that Montana owes its present freedom from crime, its present security of life and property, to the early achievements of these self-denying men, and their comrades who still survive; who established law where no law existed, spoke order into existence when all order was threatened with destruction, declared peace when all was anarchy, and laid broad the deep foundations of a great and populous State amid the perils of robbery and bloodshed. Equal in degree to the sacrifices made by the brave soldiers who saved our Republic, were the deeds of those who saved the Territory from rapine and slaughter. Like them, the graves of the dead should be crowned with flowers, and the pathway of the living be brightened with rewards of a grateful people (343).

This summation of the vigilantes' actions is pushing the image of the vigilantes as heroic much further onto the foundation of the vigilante myth that Dimsdale constructed. It seeks to attribute all that is good and prosperous about the state to the actions of the vigilantes. It is an interesting twist of language to present extra-legal murder as the way to bring law, order, and peace to a location. This becomes another narrative of the vigilantes that align with Girard's argument that violence makes a community and the community building is done by the vigilantes. It is also a paradox to consider that the criminal actions of the vigilantes provide a freedom from crime. The choice of terms - freedom, peace, and order - all resonate with the American populace. These terms have been linked to vigilantes not to justify their actions, but to elevate them to the status of hero no different than that of Union soldiers who give their lives for their country and community during the Civil War. It is also highly self-serving given that Langford himself was a member of the vigilante group that he labels "self-denying" men.

Langford structures his narrative around the murder of Joe Pizanthia, and this is the moment of the vigilantes transitioning from the old to the new vigilantism. He describes the same events that Dimsdale does, but Langford concludes:

He [Pizanthia] brought his fate upon himself. It was a brief interlude in Vigilante history, the terrible features of which, though they may be deemed without apology or excuse, need not seek for multiple precedents outside of the most enlightened nations, and the most refined societies in all of Christendom (230).

Langford also engages in some rhetorical sleight of hand using some of the same tactics as Dimsdale did. Langford states that no apology or excuse can be offered for the vigilantes' actions, but then he goes on to make an excuse. He uses the same excuse as Dimsdale that it is improper to judge the excess of violence because it is everywhere in civilized and Christian society. Using the term Christendom allows the reader to associate the idea of *let he who is without sin cast the first stone*. It also sets up excessive violence as the norm to again demonstrate the civilized order the vigilantes bring with the restraint they commonly showed in their acts of violence.

While Langford doesn't offer another restrained act of violence by the vigilantes to shift the focus from the excessive violence against Pizanthia, he does something even more interesting. Langford blames the victim. He states that Joe Pizanthia brought the fate upon himself by not surrendering to the vigilantes and starting a firefight with them. However, given that the vigilantes had just hanged several men, including Sheriff Plummer, there is good reason for Pizanthia to not turn himself in and suspect he would also be killed. Langford states in his narrative that the worst that could have happened to him is banishment by the vigilantes if he had

surrendered, but that is not what Pizanthia would be thinking. It is also worth noting that Langford can claim whatever he wants and there is no voice to be able to challenge it.

Pizanthia's murder by the vigilantes also falls into the period where Langford is in full support of the vigilantes. He only offers criticism later after the vigilantes started hanging some men who had not engaged in crimes worthy of a death penalty; one would think this would have been highlighted by Langford more in relation to Pizanthia as he committed no crime at all. Langford also offered criticisms of the vigilantes when they threatened the newly appointed governor and any individuals who spoke against the vigilantes or criticized them. However, when one revisits the concluding remarks about the vigilantes that Langford makes it is hard to see any criticism at all. The next historical narrative of the Montana vigilantes that will be explored offers much less support to the vigilantes as heroes and offers a very clear condemnation of the actions against Pizanthia.

Frederick Allen's *A Decent and Orderly Lynching* (2004) is far more critical of the vigilantes as a whole. Allen is a 21st century American historian, and the criticism reflects the changed views of the time Allen writes his text in. He is no longer openly praising the vigilantes as figures to emulate and that they are responsible for making the state what it is, but it will be seen that there is still ambivalence and room left for readers of the narrative to romanticize the vigilantes. Allen becomes particularly critical of the vigilantes as soon as they turned on Joe Pizanthia, and the continuing actions they engaged in after that murder. There is a complication with the narrative construction he puts forward. As soon as some of the vigilante actions can be seen as positive, or treated with ambivalence, then any other vigilante actions can be opened up to the same treatment from the narrative, as Dimsdale and Langford proved. Allen is limited on criticism for the vigilantes during their hunting down and hanging of the road agent gang and

Sheriff Plummer. However, there has never been definitive proof that Plummer was leading the road agents as Mather points up in his forward to Dimsdale's text. Allen's text seeks to give more context around Plummer's life before he became Sherriff but does not engage in much critique of the vigilante methods when they align with Brown's concept of old vigilantism.

While the earlier texts discussed the confessions of many of the road agents before they were hung this was not true of all of them. Plummer was one such man who never admitted guilt. Therefore, the vigilante narratives should be held up to more scrutiny, and more criticism and judgment of their actions should be used to start to dispel the mythic status the historical narratives offer vigilantes. Allen never mentions a mock trial that had been done to determine if Plummer was guilty or innocent though the trial had occurred before he wrote his text, but Allen may not have been aware it had occurred. Dillon discusses the mock trial in his book *The Montana Vigilantes* (2013). The mock trial was held by a school in 1993 in front of a judge to determine Plummer's guilt from the available evidence in the historical accounts. The jury came to a 6-6 deadlock, or a hung jury, so Plummer was stated to be "free to go" (348). This offers reasonable cause to question the guilt of Plummer, and potentially the other victims of the vigilantes that received no trial and simply had their names put on a list. It does offer further evidence that criticism of the vigilante actions could be stronger in Allen's text.

Allen's text ends on an interesting point. Instead of heaping praise on the vigilantes for the actions that they engaged in he offers a list of continuing vigilante actions in Montana that are associated to, drawing on the mythic and heroic status of the vigilantes. A second vigilante group was started by one of the Montana Vigilantes, Granville Stuart, who created a set of vigilantes to deal with cattle rustlers. The full implications of this action will be drawn out in the next chapter. This will help demonstrate how the myth of the vigilante figure moved from

history, to fiction, and as well as government policy and ideals. Allen notes how other hangings occurred by vigilante hands through the 1880s and into 1917 leaving the “mystic numbers” 3-7-77 which are associated with the Montana vigilantes, but the ultimate meaning of the numbers is unknown. Some theories attribute the numbers to the number of members, or for marking important dates or times of meetings and vigilante actions. In 1956 the Montana state police added a shoulder patch that also bore the numbers to “keep alive the memory of the people’s first police force” (Allen 360). This again legitimates the vigilante actions in relation to the law and continues to promote a heroic narrative of their actions. In a different way than Langford’s text this reinforces the state building aspect of the vigilantes. The idea of the vigilantes being the first police force makes for a useful transition to Dillon’s historical account. Dillon’s text focuses on examining the vigilantes’ actions from a historical legal perspective and aims to assess if they sought to follow the law in the context of their times during their extralegal pursuit of justice.

Dillon is a lawyer with an interest in the Montana vigilantes. He states he wants to hold a “non-judgmental historical tone” as he explores the narrative of the vigilantes of Montana from “the prism of American *legal* history” (387, xix). Dillon concludes his preface by stating “[v]igilantism has no place in our present society. Its existence in our history is symptomatic of the truly desperate state of affairs that existed in the Civil war era” (xix). The idea that vigilantism has no place in present society is an admirable position for Dillon to take as a historian, but the narrative constructed in the text still positions the vigilantes as a positive force. This is not just accomplished by his use of a “non-judgmental historical tone,” but also from the elements of the narrative of the Montana vigilantes that he glosses over drawing no critical attention toward them – such evasions will be examined below. Dillon links vigilantism to the Civil War era, but while the contexts of the Civil War Era and expanding frontier had an impact

on expanding vigilante activities, they do not account for the origin of it. Vigilantism existed prior to the Civil War era and has existed long after the Civil War era. The mythic status of the vigilante figure has allowed it to prosper. This is because, considering Dillon's wording, the desperate conditions created the vigilante. That choice of phrasing opens the door for any individual or community who finds their conditions desperate to feel legitimated to engage in vigilante action. Such a reading and interpretation of the historical narrative of the vigilantes of Montana offered by Dillon is further opened up by his aim to resist offering a critical history of the vigilantes. As Dillon states he has aimed at a non-judgmental approach.

A review of Dillon's book by historian Paul R. Wylie, and found on the book's cover, states "[i]ts careful, informative, judicial approach radiates a strong authority that will be recognized by academics and popular readers alike." This speaks to the aim to market the book to public and academic audiences. Many locals who would be interested on the new historical narrative are less likely to support and purchase a book that is too critical of the vigilante history. This is a result of the collective memory the community holds towards these figures. The evidence of locals being supportive towards the vigilantes as a default position is evidenced by the parades that have been held for the vigilantes in Helena since 1924 to the present day. "A long running social tradition in Helena is its annual Vigilante Parade. It was organized by Helena High School principal Albert J. Roberts...and the parade is his endearing personal legacy" (373-74).

In the early part of Dillon's narrative, he wants to explain the factors that led to the rise of the vigilantes. He explains that the gold rush created rapidly growing settlements that did not have organized law and government to protect them. He discusses the limited roads to travel in and out of the settlement, and the impact of recent wealth creation from the gold mines attracting

thieves as much as prospectors. He points out that not all the historians who have written on the vigilantes agree with the number of murders. Dimsdale and Langford both state that 102 people were murdered before the vigilantes rose, and Allen argues that the number cannot be relied upon and are instead a product of community consensus memory rather than fact; Dillon pushes past this dispute in his narrative by stating, “[t]he incidents of robberies and murders, whatever their exact number, eventually became high enough to prompt action in response” (61). While this does not offer high figures as a form of justification it presents the idea of a quota of crime that legitimates a call to take vigilante action in the pursuit of justice. After the introduction of a quota of crime Dillon uses the rest of the chapter to recount some of the noted crimes that have been described in the earlier vigilante historical narratives. By offering a catalogue of horrors, it structures the narrative to focus on the horror of the crime that demanded the need for justice through vigilantism. As Dillon mentioned, vigilantism has no place in current society, but that statement leaves hanging and implication that there was a place for it in the past. This leads to another repetition of the myth of the vigilante hero within American history. It also opens the idea that if vigilantism was needed in a historical context because of the conditions, if such conditions arose, or were perceived to arise again, a call to vigilante action would be justified.

Dillon also seems very eager to explain how the vigilantes should not be viewed as simply an effort of an elite to exercise control over the community, an element that was at work in the creation of the San Francisco vigilante committee. He states, “[e]arly vigilante membership reveals no discernible socioeconomic pattern. The early members of the Vigilance Committee represented a cross section of the general population of Alder Gulch, including at least one rancher, farmer, lawyer, blacksmith, freighter, brewer, and coroner and multiple prospectors, shopkeepers, miner’s court judges, and law enforcement officials” (127). Here the

aim is to justify vigilante action by demonstrating that they are a microcosm of the whole community. This is an example of community building action as they came together to forge “a society governed by some measure of law and order or, at least, by a measure more certain and reliable than the status quo” (127). All of this seems to idealize the vigilante action, and opens up for individuals to be inspired by, and interpret the historical narrative as being applicable to the present day. If one finds the current status quo of law and order in society to be unreliable or unjust they can come together as a community to take the pursuit of law and justice into their own hands through the use of force.

If vigilante action is offered as a community building exercise, as sections in all of these historical narratives posit, then how can this action not be considered a positive one? The colloquial use and understanding of the term community building in contemporary culture is always understood by the public as a positive action; therefore, any activity linked to this objective is broadly understood as bringing people together – even if the reality of such exercises is built on exclusion. This gets more problematic when it is established that the community building exercise was about bringing law and order, and that law enforcement officials were involved in working against the existent status quo of law and order.

Dillon states that law enforcement officials, miner’s court judges, and a lawyer were all a part of the committee. It demonstrates that there were courts, law enforcement, and lawyers. It would seem the use of these elements of law and order were ineffectual if the need for vigilantes arose. There were trials held in the mining camp, but the votes of the camp population would often lead to the accused being found not guilty and released. The narratives argue that this is because other criminals voted to keep them from being punished, or because they were popular in the camp, or the other camp members were intimidated by the criminal elements. However,

that is largely speculation from the historians constructing the narrative. There are no records or documents that indicate what the populations of the camp were thinking when voting to acquit. All that can be certain is that those who were accused in the court were not convicted as many of the members of this court joined the vigilantes. The court officials were unsatisfied with the results following the procedures of the law because it was not the guilty result they were seeking. It also becomes a case where the violence of vigilantism constitutes the culture over the use of law and order.

This ideal can be compared to an individual in present day not being happy with a court decision or legal ruling and seeking to take the law into their own hands to pursue justice. The historical narratives of the Montana vigilantes set up the extralegal actions of vigilantes as a method to reshape the community and laws to a system of order that they as individuals or a collective group of vigilantes see as more positive and progressive. The historical narrative that is being retold not only positions these actions as acceptable, but also as heroic given the discussion of the decades long annual parade held within the community. The parade is a symbol commemorating community building actions through vigilantism.

Since Dillon has stated that he wishes to present the narrative through the prism of legal history one would think that it would be worth pointing out these issues within the narrative, but Dillon does not. By ignoring them he instead is building a historical narrative that is mapped onto the mythic formula of the vigilante hero. Through the evasion of direct discussion of these issues the vigilante actions are being legitimated – the myth distorts the history. This aligns with Dillon's implied need of vigilantism in the past by the clear statement that it has no place in contemporary society. This implies it did have a place in the past community, and this further reinforces the idea of the vigilantes as community building. This is particularly troubling because

this narrative is the most recently constructed one, and it is still legitimating the vigilante actions through the formula of the myth of the vigilante hero. This is a trend that has been at work for the Montana vigilantes for well over a hundred years after they had disbanded. With all of the positive press it is little wonder the vigilantes have a parade dedicated to them. After all, it seems they are the reason the community was built and became what it was. This act of community building moves from legitimating vigilante violence to making it heroic. An act that will have those that engaged in it remembered and celebrated for their work more than a hundred and fifty years after the initial actions occurred.

Dillon's narrative becomes even more troubling in the way it handles the vigilantes' violence enacted upon Joe Pizanthia. Here is Dillon's account of the murder in his narrative, "[t]here was of course more work to be done while the vigilante posse was in Bannack. 'Greaser Joe' Pizanthia's name was on Yeager's list, and his log cabin was not far from Bannack. Pizanthia was Mexican. His nickname, 'Greaser,' reflects the racial prejudices that existed at that time" (146). While the name reflects the racial prejudice of the narrative's time, this small passage of the narrative raises many questions about how the history of the narrative is being distorted to strengthen the myth. Dillon makes clear in his text his use of the other historical narratives of the vigilantes that have been published and discussed already in this chapter. His narrative is filled with endnotes for the sources of the details of his narrative. In this passage there is no source cited for where his information comes from, and this is very important.

Dillon claims that Pizanthia's name was one of those given by Red Yeager before he shook the vigilantes' hands and extolled them for their virtuous actions before being hanged. However, none of the other narratives agree with this claim. In fact, all of the other narratives state clearly that after Sheriff Plummer was executed the vigilantes turned their attention to

Pizantia who was a Mexican and seen as an undesirable element but had been accused of no crimes or wrongdoing in the settlement. The vigilantes' actions against Pizantia signal a shift from "old" to "new" vigilantism, and for Dimsdale and Langford made them have to jump through rhetorical hoops to justify the vigilante actions against Pizantia and maintain the heroic ideal of the vigilantes to fit the myth. This indicates that Dillon has made an error in his narrative, and this error works to further legitimate the vigilantes' actions.

It is unlikely that Dillon could have read and worked with the other narratives so closely and not been aware of the fact that Joe Pizantia had no part in the road agent gang. The gang was the reason the vigilante committee formed. His book cites all the other narratives already discussed in this chapter, so it seems an unlikely conclusion for Dillon to reach after reading these earlier works that Pizantia was one of the road agents. Dillon also carefully cites all the evidence for his claims in the text and for the legal analysis he offers to them, but this claim receives no citation. This error has large effect in helping further idealize the vigilantes and have the narrative follow the mythic formula.

By making Pizantia a part of the road agent gang it makes it much simpler to justify the vigilante actions against him. If he was a known road agent and the vigilantes went to execute him, and he managed to shoot and kill one of them, a community favorite at that, the excessive violence used in his murder might seem more justifiable. This avoids having to do as much fancy rhetorical work to justify the vigilante actions. Instead it is a product of anger and racism of the times that can be overlooked because of the ultimately good work of dealing with a violent criminal. It was also a calculated decision to put only two paragraphs in the chapter about Pizantia sandwiched between the longer descriptions of the vigilantes' encounters and executions

with Sherriff Plummer and Dutch John Wagner. All of these narrative decisions help to distort the history and idealize the vigilantes and their actions.

Dillon concludes that the vigilantes failed to live up to the legal standards of proper procedure in their time. One would assume this to be the case when writing a history of vigilantes. It is worth noting that this is only brought out explicitly as his assessment after the account of all their deeds has been presented. He evaluates that by the legal standards of the day the vigilantes exceeded the due process of the law (387-390). It is only in the last few pages of his near 400-page text that Dillon levels criticism of the vigilantes. He demonstrates that as of 1864 there was a formalized governor that could be appealed to for assistance against crime, and there were judges who were appointed to the settlements. If these criticisms had been placed at the beginning of the narrative, and returned to throughout where they were applicable, it may have constructed a historical narrative that would be less idealizing about the vigilantes. A few pages of critique will do little to curb the enthusiasm a reader of the narrative may have for the romanticized vigilantes it has created for hundreds of pages prior to offering any criticisms. The final two paragraphs in the text dedicated to the vigilantes opens up some final issues and questions about the construction of this narrative:

To say that the vigilantes acted completely without due process is an exaggeration. Certainly, they did not provide the due process in the sense that we understand the concept today. Nor should they be held to today's standards, which have taken many court cases and several generations to develop. Even today's constitutional and statutory standards of justice are not perfect, While the significant bulk of current criminal and civil cases reach results that are just and proper, there are undoubtedly some instances which persons who have committed crimes are nevertheless acquitted by juries,

and, conversely there are persons innocent of crimes who are wrongly convicted. The best example of the later may be found among the defendants who years after their convictions are exonerated from crimes based upon today's DNA technology, which was not available at the times of earlier criminal trials. Therefore, were we to measure the level of vigilante due process against the due process standards of today, we should recognize that even today's expectations do not represent a standard of perfection (391).

The first paragraph seems to be offering a justification and an excuse for the vigilantes after the earlier criticisms of them. Dillon even goes so far as to say that if we were to evaluate the vigilantes by the standards of today that these standards have flaws and are not perfect. That seems to be saying that the vigilante actions and methods were not perfect, but neither is the legal system, so the vigilantes cannot be judged too harshly. His closing remarks could be interpreted as a defense of the vigilantes because mistakes can happen through both law and vigilantism. Both systems can be flawed and imperfect, and so one need not be seen as more positive than the other. As a result, this is another element of the narrative construction that continues the vigilante myth. Therefore, even if Dillon states there is no place for vigilante action in contemporary society, the narrative ultimately legitimizes vigilantism. While this may not be Dillon's intent, given the way the narrative has been constructed it is a text that can be read to justify vigilante action in the past; it can then also be read as a narrative that offers historical precedent of the value of vigilantism over the much sterner criticism of it that could be offered.

The second paragraph opens by stating that the vigilantes acted against their own bylaws, but the second sentence immediately works to excuse the vigilantes again by stating that most of the time they were involved in investigations and determined guilt to their satisfaction to legitimize hanging the victim.

Measured by due process concepts that were understood at the time, the Montana vigilantes oftentimes acted in violation of their own bylaws and hanged persons precipitously and without trials. For the most part, the vigilantes performed investigations and hanged those individuals when they were satisfied of the person's guilt. The instances in which the vigilantes acted outside of their defined bounds, and outside the crude concepts of due process that existed in their time, detracts considerably from history's judgment of their overall activities, as with the particular executions of J.A. Slade in Virginia City, James Daniels in Helena, and Leander Johnson in Deer Lodge (391).

Dillon mentions that when they went outside their laws then the judgment on the vigilantes will be harsher. Dillon specifically states "history's judgment," but this raises the question of whose history? The way Dillon states it he makes history seem an objective entity all its own, but history is a narrative form. It is always constructed by a particular individual or group, and so it is always up to the narrative creator how harshly they will judge the figure they are constructing a narrative about. It would seem that in the case of Dillon's narrative, despite his statement, he has opted to limit the criticism and judgment that could be placed on the vigilantes.

Dillon cites three specific executions by the vigilantes that exceeded the bounds and bylaws that the vigilantes set for themselves. That is another way of saying there are three deaths that the narrative is presenting as excessive and unjustified, but the rest are left to be assumed as legitimated by only singling those three out as problematic. It should be noted that Dillon includes a list in his book of all those executed by the vigilantes and there were 94 individuals in total. Out of 94 deaths Dillon only cites three as being particularly problematic. One of those three is not Pizantia, but the handling of this death in Dillon's text has already been raised. It

should be reiterated that all other narrators of the Montana vigilantes covered in this chapter have called attention to it as being excessive and without evidence of criminal action, even if they offer excuses in attempt to justify it. It should also be noted that in the chart of executions there are nine victims whose names are unknown. It would seem that the nine people hanged who are unknown should be mentioned when offering critique of the vigilantes. It is impossible to justify a death where the name of the victim is unknown. It is interesting that Dillon includes the information in a chart, so it is not being excluded, but draws no attention to it so only a careful and dedicated reader will notice. This is another act of not denying the history but distorting it in service to the myth of the vigilante hero. This trend of historical distortions, rhetorical narrative constructions, and limiting the full criticisms that could be brought against the Montana vigilantes successfully map them into the myth of the vigilante hero. Allen's text offered more criticism and deconstruction of the myth than the others, but still needed to push further. His positive work was also pushed back by Dillon's more recent text that repositioned the Montana vigilantes as community builders.

The aim of this chapter has been to establish how historical narratives of vigilantism were the first step to creating a positive view of the vigilante figure in American culture. Vigilantism has existed for an extended time in American culture, but it is in the 19th century that more published newspaper and book records started to be created documenting true cases of vigilantism in the country. It is press records and historical narratives that are the first major form of vigilante narratives, and these continue into contemporary times as Dillon's text proves. This chapter has also demonstrated the distortions of history to shape the myth of the vigilante hero through conscious narrative construction and limitations of criticisms that could be raised. The historical narratives are only one form of narratives that have helped create the mythic figure

of the vigilante hero. Another form is fictional narratives, and in particular fictional narratives that were informed by the historical narratives, or by encounters with active vigilante movements.

It is the combination of these two primary forms of vigilante narratives that over time help to create the mythic formula of the vigilante hero. In turn these ideals can be held up by communities and public figures as examples of being both heroic and American. These interconnections will be the focus of the next chapter, and it will offer some specific case studies to demonstrate how this combining of influence helped to strengthen the myth of the vigilante hero at the turn of the century, and have continued to reinforce this myth in contemporary times.

Chapter 3: The Literary Turn: From Securing the Homestead to Homeland Security

The last chapter established how the historical narratives of vigilantism laid the foundation for creating the myth of the vigilante hero. This chapter will demonstrate how the historical narrative foundations created repetitions of the mythic figure, not only in historical narratives, but how the vigilante figure was transferred into American fiction. This process helped to establish the full mythic status for the vigilante in the American imagination. As Richard Slotkin states in *Regeneration Through Violence*, “[t]he mythology of a nation is the intelligible mask of the enigma called the ‘national character.’ Through myths the psychology and world view of our cultural ancestors are transmitted to modern descendants, in such a way and with such power our perception of contemporary reality and our ability to function in the world are directly, often tragically affected” (3). The use of violence in American culture to achieve ends which are considered righteous by the partakers of the action, or the community the actions are made on behalf of, is a component of creating the formula of the vigilante myth.

The Montana vigilantes were presented by the narratives explored in the previous chapter as selfless men who rose up to resist criminals and protect their community. These actions already draw on mythic components that were being developed in the American imagination from earlier times; the idea of defense of the homestead by colonists from any outside threats is a powerful point of the American worldview that vigilantes are often attached to in narrative formation. The form of the threats to the homestead could change across time from Natives, to the Devil and witchcraft, to other colonists, and later to the British during the Revolutionary War. It also does not matter if the threat is real or is simply perceived by individuals as real in their worldview. The key component to the myth was that some individuals would rise up in

action to protect their family and community from real or perceived threats. Such actions transformed these individuals into heroes. Slotkin describes the mythic hero as an individual who “embodies or defends the values of his culture in a struggle against the forces which threaten to destroy the people and lay waste to the land” (269).

The Montana vigilantes fit the description of the mythic hero that Slotkin describes. Since Dimsdale wrote his pieces in the press and later expanded and turned them into his book, the vigilantes of Montana were cast into the mythic hero mold. Then every narrative to follow Dimsdale’s continued to build their heroic status in the past and in turn further the vigilante hero myth. Even if the narratives offered criticism they ultimately idealize and reinforce the vigilante actions as positive or necessary within the context of their time. It should also be remembered that those vigilantes were just one particular case study and that there were hundreds of vigilante groups of various sizes. All of them were having narratives told about them, in the press or orally, and over time this established the heroic and mythic status of these figures across the space of the nation. The repetition of key narrative characteristics is essential to how a myth moves from being a historical account into a meaning making pattern. As Slotkin states:

Repetition is the essence of this process. Certain instances of experience consistently recurred in each colony over many generations; translated into literature these experiences became stories which reoccurred in the press with rhythmic persistence. At first such repetition was the result of real recurrence of the experiences....Once in literary form, the experience became available as a vehicle for justifying philosophical and moral values which may have been intrinsic in the initial experience but which preoccupied the minds of the reading public....Thus the experience would be reduced to an imitable formula, a literary convention, a romantic version of the

myth. When enough literature had been written employing the convention, it might become a sort of given between writer and audience, a set of tacit assumptions on the nature of human experience, on human and divine motivations, on moral values, and on the nature of reality (Slotkin 20).

Slotkin describes the process of historical experience becoming a mythic pattern for literature in relation to the Indian captive myth that he traces throughout his work, but this is not the only myth in American culture that this can apply to. The myth of the vigilante hero has also been put through the system that Slotkin describes, though he never identifies this particular mythic formula in his work. It is clear from the previous chapter that several vigilante movements sprang up around the country and had the press speaking about them, and typically in resoundingly positive terms. The first narratives were written in relation to direct experience. The case study of the Montana vigilantes bore that out with the first two historical narrative books being written by eyewitnesses, or participants of the vigilante actions themselves.

Then the historical narratives and references to the vigilantes continue to be written as history proper, and the idealization of their actions in the context of their time continues. However, along with the historical and press coverage of the vigilante actions in their time there were also other vigilante narratives that sprung up. These were fictional narratives that positioned the vigilantes as heroes within the text, as the historical vigilante narratives had done. The formula for the vigilante myth, the literary convention of the vigilante narrative, was presented in the first chapter in relation to Todorov's structural analysis of narrative, but it is worth repeating now.

X perceives injustice because of Y > X perceives no legal route to justice > X uses extralegal violence against Y in pursuit of their understanding of justice >

X is successful

X is not successful >

If creator of narrative shares perspective of X or is sympathetic to X then X becomes a vigilante

If creator does not share perspective of X then the label is altered (criminal, terrorist, etc.)

Later in this work, narratives will be examined where the vigilante figure is viewed as a criminal/terrorist by some and for others they are viewed as a hero. However, for the moment it is more important to focus on the proliferation of narratives that establish the myth of the vigilante hero. The goal of this chapter is to present how the process of forming the vigilante into a mythic figure occurred before adding further layers of complexity that have become attached to this mythic figure through changing contexts that alter and reshape the myth.

The previous chapter demonstrated that during their time of operation the Montana vigilantes were strongly supported in the press, and that trend continued in the later narratives of their actions. The Montana vigilantes were inspired partly by the San Francisco vigilance committee who had also received positive press. Therefore, it is far from shocking that the Montana vigilantes themselves inspired other groups to engage in vigilantism. One such group was the Stranglers.

This vigilante movement was started by Granville Stuart, who had been a member of the Montana vigilantes. The group began engaging in vigilante action in the year 1884. Stuart

assembled a vigilante group to deal with the issue of cattle rustling that had developed throughout Montana. The actual group of vigilantes involved in the lynching of thieves may have been a smaller number than the Montana vigilantes, but they had the widespread support through the money and backing of the ranchers who were a part of the Montana Stock Growers Association (Dillon 341). Stuart was a member of this association, as was the future president Theodore Roosevelt.

This group formed because the ranch owners were having their cattle stolen and it was hurting profits, and the overall success of the industry. The ranchers decided that the only way to stop the thieving was to make the penalty for engaging in such an action much more severe: death. Roosevelt had suggested an army be raised to pursue and kill the rustlers, but Stuart objected to this as he felt too many honest lives would be lost in the process (341). Instead he formed the Stranglers to deal with the thieves in a way that would create for less armed and open conflict. Money was used to bribe individuals to point out who thieves were and where they could be found, so that they could be taken by the vigilantes and hanged. The Stranglers were viewed as a positive force for their stand against crime and ensuring the security of the rancher's cattle herds, as well as preventing unnecessary loss of life by avoiding open armed resistance against the criminals as Roosevelt had suggested.

It should be noted that if an army of cowboys had been raised to fight the rustlers this still would have been a vigilante action. There was going to be no use of law enforcement officials for the proposed cowboy militia, and there would be no arrests or trials. There were no arrests or trials involved in the Stranglers actions against the thieves either. Despite this, the local press offered strong support and idealized the Stranglers vigilante actions. The *Mineral Argus* stated: “[t]he most speedy and safe cure is to hang [the thieves] as fast as they are captured,” and the

Journal blamed an ineffective legal system as responsible for creating the need for vigilante action by stating: “[i]t is a sad commentary on common justice as administered by law when the rough exterior of a cowboy can be said in truth to cover a mind and head capable of better discerning and punishing crime” (344). The previous quotation manages to make a dig at the uncultured and sophisticated image of a cowboy in the American imagination while at the same time highlighting the ability to get the job done. The rough cowboy gets the work of justice done better than the presumed more sophisticated and complex American legal system.

It should also be pointed out that there is another vigilante narrative at play in relation to the Strangers: the acts of the cattle rustlers themselves. As the ranchers developed their ranches and became cattle kings in the region, they closed off land that had been open for free grazing. Without land it was harder for smaller cattle herds and stock enterprisers to exist as they once had as there was now nowhere to graze their herds. As a result, smaller stock outfits would not survive or be able to prosper, so they would resort to stealing the cattle of the large ranchers’ herds. This act of theft is not an act of subjective violence. If subjective violence was used against a rancher or his employees during this act of theft then it could be viewed as vigilantism. This is because the violent acts to assist the theft are motivated from a sense of restoring justice from the perspective of the free grazers. This would be a case of a vigilante working for an ideal of economic justice. The vigilantes of economic justice will be further explored in the following chapter.

The Strangers were also a vigilante group that was motivated to pursue economic justice. There was no threat to life or bodily safety for the ranchers through the act of cattle rustling. Individuals were not being harmed or murdered to obtain cattle as they were being harmed to obtain gold when the Montana vigilantes went into action. The motivation for the Strangers was

that of economic justice, but an economic justice from the perspective of the cattle barons only. It was a loss of income and profits that compelled them to kill other individuals outside of the procedure of the legal system and courts. This is a key difference in this example of vigilantism that sprang from the Montana vigilantes. The Stranglers hold stronger connections to the San Francisco Vigilance Council in its aim to protect the city's elite. It is also important that this movement gained support in the press, and that the lethal actions of the Strangles were considered an act of justice.

Roosevelt's connection to the Stranglers is worth expanding upon. Roosevelt not only offered financial support towards creating a private army to hunt rustlers but sought to join with the vigilantes when they went to hang thieves. However, they would not allow him to assist as they felt he was too "socially prominent" to be an effective vigilante (Morris 278). This is important because Roosevelt had clear vigilante sympathies and ideals, and he later went on to become President taking these ideals to the public at the national level. Roosevelt played an important part to further the myth of the vigilante in the American cultural imagination. This will be demonstrated first by examining his statements in his autobiography, as well as examining his role in what Christine Bold has called *The Frontier Club* (2013). This includes his personal influence on the author Owen Wister and Wister's portrayal of vigilantism through Western fiction into American culture.

A good place to begin looking at Roosevelt's ideals and links to vigilantism come from introduction of Edmund Morris's *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt* (1979). Morris states, "[t]he President certainly has an irrational love of battle. He ceaselessly praises the joy of righteous killing..." (12). The fact that Roosevelt wished to be a vigilante demonstrates that in his view the actions of the Stranglers were just – they were righteous. This follows the idealizing of the

vigilante groups earlier discussed as responsible for laying the foundation of the state and all the good that came to it afterward; a narrative conclusion Langford consciously constructed in his historical narrative of the Montana vigilantes to distort history and further the myth of the vigilante hero. Any vigilante that engages in violence and murder would be viewed as in battle with the forces of evil/chaos/injustice, and the vigilantes represent the forces of good/order/justice. These same ideals are espoused by Roosevelt in his autobiography (1913) when he discusses his experiences in the American West.

Roosevelt mentions the Stranglers in his autobiography. Part of the aim he had was to take and instill the values of the American frontier and bring them into the political policies he had as President. He considered the frontier experience essential to his approach of living the vigorous life. Of the Stranglers he states: “[t]he vigilantes, or Stranglers, as they were locally known, did their work thoroughly; but, as always happens with bodies of this kind, towards the end they grew reckless in their actions, paid private grudges, and hung men on slight provocation” (Roosevelt 113). While Roosevelt mentions that near the end their actions grew reckless it seems that most of the deaths the Stranglers caused were just the vigilantes doing thorough, righteous work. He states that in the end men were hanged with slight provocation. However, should the theft of cattle or horses result in the loss of life, and is not the murder of individuals for stealing from wealthy ranchers an exercise of paying private grudges already? Roosevelt offers little detail on what the changes were from the initial hanging of rustlers to the more questionable acts of the Stranglers; there has also been limited writing about the Stranglers themselves outside of larger overviews of the Johnston County Cattle War to fill in such details. It is worth considering how heartfelt Roosevelt’s minor critique of the vigilantes is since he may have harbored a grudge for not being allowed to participate with them. More of his views on the

links of using vigilante violence to obtain justice can be found from other moments in his reflections upon the American West.

Roosevelt discusses an encounter with a woman who ran a ranch along the Deadwood trail. He is recounting the story she told him of a potential vigilante situation where three Sioux natives could have become vigilantes.

...a white man had come and tried to run off with their horses. The Indians were on the lookout, however, and running out, they caught the man; but, after retaking their horses and depriving him of his gun, they let him go. "I don't see why they let him go," exclaimed my hostess. "I don't believe in stealing Indians' horses any more than whitefolks'; so I told 'em they could go along and hang him – I'd never cheep. Anyhow, I won't charge them anything for their dinner," concluded my hostess. She was in advance of the usual morality of the time and place, which drew a sharp line between stealing citizens' horses and stealing horses from the Government or the Indians (113).

The above anecdote offers several points to reflect upon. The first is that it establishes the norm of the environment in the West was to favor vigilante actions against thieves. No trial or law enforcement officials were needed, only a rope and a beam to throw it over. This is projected as an acceptable and righteous norm. Roosevelt refers to the woman as having an advanced morality because she sees no difference in the penalty that should be given for a crime regardless of the victim's identity. While ideals of equity are laudable, it is problematic that the equity is to pursue vigilante violence instead of addressing the systemic violence of racism. It is also worth noting that it is considered odd that the Sioux opted to not to engage in the vigilante violence when the ranch owner gives them permission and supports such an action. The use of vigilante

action is so strongly supported in the American imagination that the push to engage in the vigilante action is supported across different cultural/community lines. The Sioux and the female ranch owner are from two different communities/cultures that happen to be “sharing” similar physical space. The issues of social norms and interactions with the myth of the vigilante in American cultural imagination will be returned to in a later chapter; it will be examined across inter and intragroup relations related to case studies of vigilantism in Native communities.

At no point in either of the discussions of vigilantism in Roosevelt’s work is there a question raised about the legitimacy of vigilante action. The issue is not whether vigilantism should be engaged in, but only when vigilantism goes too far. From Roosevelt’s perspective this is when it ceases to be righteous or in pursuit of justice – his personal perspective of justice. If the motivation of vigilante violence is righteous then the action is considered justified, but if the action is not righteous then the vigilante violence should be viewed as a negative act. However, righteousness is a subjective measurement, and what may be viewed as righteous to one individual or community may not be righteous to another individual and community. Righteous violence also implies a religious aspect to a morally acceptable form of violence; as Girard argues, the violence constitutes the community by enforcing the values of the community through violence. The connections of vigilantism and religion will be explored in depth in the final chapter of this work.

Roosevelt’s statements in his autobiography present the ex-President as supporting vigilante violence when it is exercised for a just cause. However, as was established in the first chapter of this work, to use the term vigilante inherently sets up the narrative figure to be understood as a doer of justice. This allows anyone who reads Roosevelt’s text, and who perceives a given vigilante action as righteous, to feel that Roosevelt would lend his support to

the violent action as well. It allows for vigilantes to be interpreted as righteous heroes and as patriots, and certainly such interpretations and narratives around vigilantism were created. They were created through the histories written about vigilantes as has been demonstrated repeatedly, but they were also enshrined in the fictional narratives that featured vigilantism in the American West.

One such text is Owen Wister's *The Virginian*, and Roosevelt makes clear in his autobiography the role that Wister had in shaping the myth of the vigilante hero and the Western frontier in the cultural imagination of America. He states, "[f]ortunately, Wister and Remington, with pen and pencil, have made these men live as long as our literature lives. I have sometimes been asked if Wister's 'Virginian' is not overdrawn; why, one of the men I have mentioned in this chapter was in all the essentials the Virginian in real life...half of the men I worked with...played with...soldiered with...might have walked out of Wister's stories" (122). It should be noted that the Virginian is a vigilante in the novel; this will be examined shortly, but this quotation also shows a blurring of the boundary between the real individuals/actions of the American West and fictional ones. In this way historical vigilantes such as the Montana vigilantes and Stuart's Stranglers get transformed into literary figures of vigilantes that start to populate American texts and dime novels. Historical narratives and fictional narratives become intertwined, but the myth of the vigilante as a hero is what finds more and more iterations and repetitions in the growing market of fictional texts in America. This dissemination also occurred through adaptations of fiction works to stage plays, radio dramas, and later to film and television as technologies of popular culture further developed. However, it is Owen Wister's *The Virginian* that should be focused on as a key text that began this process.

In his introduction to *The Virginian* John Seelye states that “what the cowboy is, in terms of the American popular consciousness, must be credited to Owen Wister” (Wister ix). Many scholars of American culture, including Christine Bold, assert that Wister’s *The Virginian* is the quintessential Western novel (Bold 56-7). Wister created the framework for what would become common themes and conventions of this uniquely American fiction genre. This work also laid the foundation of the view of the American West and the Western genre within the American cultural imagination, and this can be understood as what Seelye is referring to when he talks about the American popular consciousness. Wister’s novel is a key component in creating the American mythic West and mythic cowboy hero figure. At the same time as he formed the mythic cowboy hero with the Virginian, Wister also wrote his Virginian as a vigilante. As a result, this important literary character establishes a cowboy mythic hero and a vigilante mythic hero at the same time.

At one point in the novel the Virginian is enlisted into a posse of vigilantes who are in pursuit of cattle rustlers who have stolen from the ranch where he works. The ranch owner is Judge Henry, but rather than using legal means to pursue the thieves he has a vigilante posse created to track and hang the thieves. Among the cattle rustlers who the vigilantes hang is the Virginian’s friend Steve. The Virginian tracks down his friend and his accomplices and stoically hangs them, but it is not only the Virginian who is stoic. When Steve and his men are caught they accept their fate, and even condone their deaths by lynching. As the Virginian states, Steve “took dying as naturally as he took living. Like a man should. Like I hope to.’ Again, [the Virginian] looked at the pictures in his mind. ‘No play-acting nor last words. He just said good-bye to the boys as we led his horse under the limb-you needn’t look so dainty,’ he broke off. ‘You ain’t going to get any more shocking particulars” (Wister 255).

There is a mutual respect held between those lynching and the individual being lynched. Despite the notion of there being no play-acting, both parties are taking on a role in a set narrative. A lack of resistance from the victim works to legitimate the actions of the group lynching them. It is the calm and easy acceptance of death that is respected in the code of the frontier cowboy. This resembles the historical narratives of the Montana Vigilantes in their descriptions of the criminals accepting and commending the vigilante violence used against them. The endorsement of vigilante action by its victims is transferred from historical documents into a fictional work. The fictional narrative is conforming to the formula of the myth of the vigilante hero shaped by the historical narratives.

In her work *West of Everything* (1992), Jane Tompkins describes how Wister's health suffered physically and mentally under the criticism of his mother and his wish to please her. He followed this same pattern with her as his father (135-136). After Wister's health turned, he took a trip to Wyoming, and there he recovered his health and found a space that his mother would have hated, but he loved. This offered him a space of safe rebellion against his parental pressures and offered him a physical and mental recovery (137). For Wister the space of the frontier and its culture was a place of freedom and recovery. It was a place of renewal and Wister links those ideals of renewal and recovery to vigilantism and support for it in his text. Tompkins offers a psychoanalytical reading of Wister's text discussing the way the hero of the novel is set up to desire domination over everything. This is a domination that Wister's mother held over Wister's life, and that Wister desired to have for himself (145). This desire for domination is linked to the idea of vigilante violence to offer justice from the perspective of the vigilantes, and this was in turn linked to ideas of control and security for those behind vigilante action in the West.

It should not be forgotten that the lynching in *The Virginian* is about defending the property of a wealthy and elite individual. Judge Henry is willing to allow men to be murdered to protect his stock, and as a judge it raises questions as to how extralegal actions can be condoned and instigated by a member of the court. The novel does not leave these questions hanging for the reader but answers them through a discussion between Judge Henry and Molly Wood – the Virginian’s fiancé. She asks the judge, “have you come to tell me that you think well of lynching?” (280). This is a question that the reader of the story could just as easily be asking as the character within the narrative. To this Wister offers a clever rhetorically strategic answer to justify lynching in the novel through the words of Judge Henry in his answer, and those words should be unpacked carefully. The Judge’s first response is “Of burning Southern Negroes in public, no. Of hanging Wyoming cattle thieves in private, yes. You perceive there’s a difference, don’t you?” (280).

In this example the Judge is putting some distinct limits on his view of acceptable vigilante action. Vigilante violence that is inspired by racism alone and turned into a spectacle is not justifiable, but vigilante action of a restrained form being used against a criminal is. However, this brief retort does not allow for further questioning around the difficulties of discerning a clear line between racist violence and punishing a criminal when the accused criminal is a visible minority. It is also telling that such a question is put forward by Molly. She is a school teacher and is also considered educated and cultured as she comes from the East, so if she can be persuaded by the Judge’s words and argument then it is likely that the readers of the novel with similar learning and culture in their background could be persuaded too.

Instead of holding her ground and pushing for more clarification Molly admits that the ways of these two forms of lynching are different. However, it is worth remembering the case of

Joe Pizantia from the accounts of the Montana vigilantes to demonstrate how difficult the distinction is to draw between these supposed different forms of lynching. From Judge Henry's position there is the clear distinction of one lynching form being an organized and orderly affair and avoids being made a public spectacle, whereas the other seeks to do the opposite. Molly does raise a question about how in both cases the ones performing the lynching are taking the law into their own hands, and as a result both forms should be considered wrong and immoral. This has a further complication within the narrative of the novel because Judge Henry represents the law and held no trials for the men he instructed to be hanged by his vigilantes. The judge, however, has a ready response for Molly's question about explaining legitimacy of taking the law into one's own hands. He gets Molly to trace how the courts gain their authority, and traces this from the courts, to the government, to the elected officials, and finally to the citizens who elected those government officials. The Judge then gives a stirring defense of vigilante action:

Call them the ordinary citizens,' said the Judge. 'I like your term. They are where the law comes from, you see. For they chose the delegates who made the Constitution that provided for the courts. There's your machinery. These are the hands into which ordinary citizens have put the law. So you see, at best, when they lynch they only take back what they once gave. Now we'll take your two cases that you say are the same in principle. I think they are not. For in the South they take a Negro from jail where he was waiting to be duly hung. The South has never claimed that the law would let him go. But in Wyoming the law has been letting cattle-thieves go for two years. We are in a bad way and are trying to make that way a little better until civilization can reach us. At present we lie beyond its pale. The courts, or rather the juries, into whose hands we have put the law, are not dealing the law. They are withered hands, or rather they are imitation hands made for show, with no life in them, no grip. They cannot hold a cattle-

thief. And so when your ordinary citizen sees this, and sees justice placed in a dead hand, he must take justice back into his own hands where it was once at the beginning of all things. Call this primitive, if you will. But so far from being a defiance of the law, it is an assertion of it – the fundamental assertion of self-governing men, upon whom our whole social fabric is based. There is your principle, Miss Wood, as I see it. Now can you help me to see anything different?’ She could not (281-2).

There are numerous ideas presented in this argument that must be examined carefully to demonstrate how the foundations of the vigilante hero myth are laid down in fiction. The judge is originating the power and authority over the law and country in the hands of the citizens by their using of vote and voice in American democracy. If it is the citizens who hold the power and only choose to give it over to law enforcement and the courts, it is acceptable for them to choose to take it back if they feel that the justice system is working ineffectively for them. The judge presents the lynching of black criminals in the South as flawed because these are often convicted criminals awaiting a death sentence that a mob takes to torture and burn as a community. However, by the judge’s arguments this should be considered acceptable as it is the community, the ordinary citizens, are finding the legal system ineffective. In this case the citizens feel the law is not as severe in its punishment as they feel it should be, so they take it into their own hands to punish the perpetrator. The judge is not even condemning the Southern actions as problematic because of their racist underpinnings, but because they are disrupting the mechanisms of the law; however, they are also allowed the disruption by his argument because they are asserting their beliefs and taking back the power they willingly gave over to the legal system.

The judge’s argument has other points that should be critiqued. He argues that vigilante justice is needed in Wyoming because the law, or rather the jury, are unable to enforce the law

from the perspective of the judge. This means the jury does not convict the criminals that the judge feels should be convicted, and so it is fair for the judge to use vigilante justice to enforce the law. This mirrors the narrative structure of the Montana vigilantes as going after individuals that the miner's court could not convict. Just like it was in the miner's court, the jury is made up of representatives of the public. The decision of the jury is made to reflect the public opinion, and presumably that public opinion does not find the cattle-thieves guilty of a crime. The public who find these jury decisions unsatisfactory are the ranch and large cattle herd owners such as the judge. This means that Judge Henry is using a rhetorical sleight of hand to position the wealthy elite of the community as the ordinary citizens and general public. The judge, being a ranch owner who organizes the vigilante actions against the thieves, is far from a common citizen. It is no longer the public in general taking power to enforce justice, but special interests who are doing so. This even matches the different principles that Judge Henry sees at work between public lynching in the South and private lynching of cattle-thieves in the West. It is a private event in the West because it is organized by special interests and not an angry mob or community pursuing their shared sense of pursuit of justice as is found in The South.

Judge Henry's imagery of weak and dead hands is contrasted to the strong and lively hands of the vigilante. This idea is even echoed by Charlton Heston as head of the NRA and linked to his film performance and roles in fictional narratives with his infamous "from my cold dead hands." The judge's imagery also speaks to the immediacy and power of action in the pursuit of justice that vigilantism allows compared to the drawn-out legal process of civilization. The vigilantes bring civilization, but at the same time are outside of it. The judge can be an advocate for vigilantism and organize vigilantes, but he himself does not participate. That would be improper given his civilized position as a judge in the legal system. Judge Henry manages to

remain a civilized and respectable figure of authority, wealth, and power in the community, and at the same time act as a spokesman for vigilante action that offers personal gain and protection for him. At the same time, the judge's actions manage to appear to be for the benefit of the community in general. His role as a court and legal official also acts as a way of having the courts and legal systems of the country endorse the use of vigilante action in America and legitimate their extralegal violence. In this case the legal officials of the state are using violence to ensure their power and control through the use of RSAs. However, the judge uses his explanation to enforce the ISA that accepting the use of vigilantism is endorsing the values and principles that founded the nation. These details of Judge Henry's argument and justification of vigilantism helps further the myth of the vigilante hero.

Of course, none of these issues are pointed out within the narrative of the novel. This is because of Wister's agenda to convince readers of the viewpoints he places into the mouth of Judge Henry. Christine Bold has thoroughly laid out this agenda and intention in the novel in her work *The Frontier Club*. Therefore, when Judge Henry opens himself up to be criticized or questioned, Molly Wood is unable to utter anything in contradiction of the views. This structures the narrative and the argument to bring the reader on board with the view that the vigilante action is a positive force and solidifies the frontier hero and the vigilante hero together into the same figure. This novel's narrative lays the foundations of the vigilante hero myth being transferred from historical narratives to fictional ones. It is also fitting that the novel was dedicated to Theodore Roosevelt who read drafts and offered criticism to Wister as he wrote it.

Roosevelt, much like Judge Henry, was a supporter of vigilante action, but found himself unable to participate directly given his elite and noted position in culture. He could simply benefit from it and promote it as a legitimate tool of civilization. This relationship of the

development of the myth of The West through the Virginian is nicely summarized by Bold, and her statements also have links to the founding of the vigilante hero myth in American fiction. “They grafted anglophile rituals onto the western plains, rationalized cattle barons’ violence, disguised the real status of cowboys, shut out ‘the natives,’ and developed a *modus operandi* for exploiting cattle, commodities, and people with heroic impunity” (Bold 79-80). The rationalization of violence and the exploitation with “heroic” impunity is where the roots of the vigilante hero can be found in the development of Western myth-making in the American cultural imagination.

The alterations the myth of the vigilante hero undergoes in different geographical regions as it becomes exported from the Western frontier will be explored further in following chapters, but it is worth focusing on how the vigilante as a hero has remained constant in the myth while shifting its contexts within the American imagination from its Western frontier roots. This can be done by giving a focus on more contemporary uses of the myth in relation to community security, from more contemporary political figures and in contemporary fiction.

Several case studies and examples will be explored in relation to the shifts the myth of the vigilante undergo in the 20th century in the coming chapters linked to particular contextual lenses that the myth will be filtered through, but the rest of this chapter will focus on the 21st century. Ray Abrahams states in his global sociological study of vigilantism in *Vigilant Citizens* that “vigilantes are essentially a frontier phenomenon” (2). It is worth pointing out that the frontier itself has mythic dimensions. This adds support to the idea that the contexts of the frontier myth can alter, and in turn alter the myth of the vigilante hero. Abrahams made his claim in relation to past vigilante movements in America, and contemporary groups that were active in other parts of the globe when he was writing. The frontier has different meanings and

understandings in the historical interpretation of the Western frontier – as Klein has outlined in his work referenced in the first chapter. Klein is working in dialogue with Fredrick Jackson Turner’s “Frontier Thesis.” Turner’s thesis argued that the frontier was the central feature that made American progress and identity possible. Klein examines how this theory impacted American culture, and how the mythic ideas of the frontier in America have shifted and changed in American culture since Turner first put forth his thesis. It should also be noted that Turner was another key member of the Frontier Club. However, the Western frontier does not exist in the form it once did, and it may have never fully existed as Turner presented it. In fact, Turner’s theory has been heavily criticized, but the frontier holds a place in the cultural memory of America. In turn, different forms of frontier have been created over time across America, and within the cultural imagination of its citizens. Two contemporary frontiers that will now be explored in American culture, and their role in relation to the vigilantism, are the frontier of the war on terror, and the U.S. Mexico border.

After the 9/11 attack there was a new push by the government to increase security at the expense of freedoms and privacy. The reasoning behind this was the idea that terrorists were not a clear enemy that can be attached to a country, but instead are created by ideology, and as result could be anyone. This holds some parallels to the red scares of the 1930s and 50s in the hunt for anarchists and communists. The attack on the twin towers led to new political policies instituted by the George W. Bush administration through the Patriot Act (Oct 26, 2001). Many of these actions struck down rights that had once been held by citizens, but more important than the government actions are citizen responses to the limiting of freedom and invasions of privacy. In the wake of the violence, and as a culture of fear grew, several militia groups began to become

more active and public in their actions against perceived threats from terrorists outside the nation, and against their own government they viewed as impinging on their rights and freedoms.

Various militia groups had come into existence throughout the 1990s from a concern of the Clinton administration weakening the FBI, CIA, and the American military in eyes of the militia members (Vinyard 300). According to D.J. Mulloy, a scholar of militia movements and American extremism, these movements find their inspiration in Western vigilantes, “conceptions of vigilantism finds expression within the militia movement. Militia’s see themselves as vigilant organizations, watching for and defending themselves, and the nation as a whole, against foreign and domestic enemies; They regard vigilantism as an effective means of resisting crime and lawlessness, and praise it as a valuable expression of collective community welfare” (Mulloy 145). The militia movements also draw upon the documents and ideals of the founding revolutionary fathers of America (though they can interpret and understand these documents in different ways than most citizens do). They view the importance of having the Second Amendment to protect and defend their community and country. Oddly enough after 9/11 the militia movements started to find new reason for organizing themselves, and a large part of it was to resist what they saw as a corrupt government. Some of the militia organizers in both the Michigan Militia (Norm Olson) and the Militia of Montana (John Trochman) thought that “the government was up to something, ‘nothing less than the creation of a police state’” (Vinyard 300).

The militia movements conduct training exercises, and patrol their communities in camouflage, bulletproof vests, and armed with automatic weapons, handguns, and other weapons. The groups and their members are also noted for the danger they represent in stockpiling arms (300). While there have been cases of violent shoot outs resulting in deaths

between militia extremists and law enforcement (such as Waco or Ruby Ridge), there have not been stories of citizens being harmed by the militia out on patrol. However, the groups will engage in violent action against their perceived enemies: they are not going around armed purely for show. At this point the perceived enemy of these movements is the government itself, and any citizens who wish to alter or remove the Second Amendment. All throughout their activities the groups view themselves as heroes who act to defend their country and community from threats, and to stand up for the rights of citizens. These same ideals are a part of what underpinned the armed protestors of the Covid 19 lockdowns in America.

The Michigan Militia movement also has ties that can be traced through the state's history of extremism from the political right. This is also traced with the history of KKK activity in the state that later transforms into support and participation of militia movements. This argument is laid out by historian Joellen McNerngney Vinyard in her work *Right in Michigan's Grassroots* (2011). In the movements of the Michigan Right, the vigilante ideals are being drawn on, and it is not surprising there are also militia movements in Montana that draw inspiration from the vigilantes of Montana. It should also be noted that these past historical vigilante groups create a link between the vigilante action and racist and xenophobic views from the members of the vigilante groups. This is not to say that all militia and libertarian groups have a racist aspect to them, but certainly such views are found within their ranks. There are always exceptions, but it does seem to be a common element amongst the groups and their members. The fears of who belongs or doesn't belong in a community, or who is truly American, have increased since 9/11. This uncertainty amongst citizens and between the citizens and their government has opened a new kind of frontier that is not linked to territory, but instead about the limits of power and trust between individuals, communities, and the state. It is also a frontier that is linked to new kinds of

spaces that are being policed and surveilled – particularly digital space and the exploitation of new technologies such as were exposed by Edward Snowden in his work *Permanent Record* (2019). This specific issue will be returned to in the final chapter of this work.

At the same time as there has been the development of militia movements, and growing visibility of the alt-right and white supremacists in America, there has been the development of another vigilante movement in America. That movement is the Antifa movement, and it has risen in response to the rise of groups on the right. Antifa was reported on by Michael E. Miller in the *Washington Post*. Miller writes:

If Trump's election has emboldened the far right, then it has also energized its enemies. Hidden behind masks, however, antifa activists remain mysterious. Are they everyday citizens guarding against the rise of a Fourth Reich? Or are they, as Trump has claimed, merely the "alt-left" — a lawless mirror image of the white supremacists they oppose?

This is a vigilante movement sprung up from the left aiming to attack and strike against any forms of Fascism that exist, or that are perceived to exist by its members. While they have been involved in several demonstrations they began gaining their most notoriety during the Charlottesville protests on August 11th and 12th, 2017. These grassroots movements in American culture are all extremist, but also are inspired by the mythic vigilante hero, and are seeking to embody and live as that figure to their respective communities. The Antifa vigilantes are best understood as vigilantes of social justice – another complication of the vigilante myth that will be explored in depth in chapter 5. While they are not acting with the same lethality as some of the vigilante groups connected to the political right, they are still engaging in subjective violence using their fists, at times objects as clubs, and should be labelled as vigilantes. The tensions

found between the extremists of the political right and left have been increased since the election of Donald Trump as President and the active pursuit of his policies. One of these is his push for stronger border security between America and Mexico; this issue becomes another important point of reference for a new frontier in contemporary American culture.

The border between Mexico and the United States is a frontier linked to a physical space, and it has been a complicated space ever since the war between the United States and Mexico in 1846-48. It is a frontier that has gained heightened attention in American culture in the last decade. One group related to the border that has also gained both public and academic attention is the Minutemen. This is a movement of individuals who police the Arizona and Mexico border in their free time. Their name has also been drawn from the name given to the citizen militia of the colonials from the Revolutionary War. The contemporary Minutemen have been studied by Harel Shapira in *Waiting for Jose* (2013), a sociological exploration of the people who are drawn to this movement, and why they may be engaging in it. There are several commonalities amongst the members that Shapira identifies. They are often middle-aged or older, Caucasian, veterans, and mostly male. While there are women involved in the movement, they often are often put in charge of feeding volunteers and doing more domestic forms of assistance that do not involve policing the border while armed (Shapira 59). This likely has to do with more of the members holding to more traditional ideals of gender roles. A full exploration of the impact of gender on vigilantism will be examined in chapter 6.

Shapira concludes that the members of the Minutemen are seeking a community within a nation that they do not recognize. They hold a nostalgia for a mythic past of the nation where there was an order and stability that never truly existed. Through their actions, the Minutemen are seeking to create their community by stopping their country from eroding further through

illegal immigration. As Shapira states: “[l]ike many Americans, the Minutemen feel alienated and alone, and they come to the border to assuage those feelings. But the Minutemen’s politics of community, indeed their enactment of community, motivated by principles of civic engagement, is rooted in exclusion and the establishment of boundaries. Instead of casting this unique community – right-wing, racist, fanatic – understanding it might require understanding the very nature of community as and exclusionary, but also a civic, project” (70-71).

This quotation captures the very essence of a vigilante impulse. Vigilantes always see themselves as acting on behalf of a community to restore or offer justice, and they act to bring this sense of justice. They view themselves as involved in an act of civic engagement and community building. This is how the narratives of the Montana vigilantes could structure the narrative to conform to the mythic formula of the vigilante hero that the vigilante actions laid the foundation for all that was good in the future of the state. The Minutemen acting as vigilantes are mapping themselves onto this same mythic framework.

However, to act as a vigilante means to defy or work outside of the established legal system and civic/government organizations. There is already authorized professionals and government agencies who have the job of policing and guarding the border between America and Mexico. These professionals have been authorized to engage in their actions, but when citizens take it upon themselves to go armed and police the space of the border they are breaking civic rules even if they feel they are acting as good citizens. As one of the Minutemen states to Shapira, “You know, they think this is theirs [America]...and they don’t obey our laws, they don’t understand what it means to be an American” (75). In the case of the Minutemen their vigilante action is about securing their country by keeping outsiders out, and those outsiders must be kept out because they are inherently seen as a threat to the country by entering illegally.

The above quote also demonstrates an interesting cognitive dissonance that the Minutemen member holds as they are protecting the country from law breakers by breaking the laws of the country.

The Minutemen and other militia groups are cases of real individuals that are engaging in vigilante action, but many fictional texts that establish the vigilante as a mythic hero have also been produced since the publication of *The Virginian* up to our contemporary times. A number of these will be explored in subsequent chapters, but for the moment I will focus on two 21st century fictional narratives. The recent Netflix and Marvel Studios series *The Punisher* released through 2017-2018 and the film *Sicario* released in 2015. Both of these texts directly engage with the new shifts in the understanding of the frontier that this section of the chapter has been exploring. We will begin by looking at the narrative of *The Punisher*.

In this iteration of the character, originally found in Marvel comics, The Punisher aka Frank Castle, is a marine whose family is murdered. He uncovers that they died as part of a sting operation against drug dealing that ultimately leads back to his best friend, corrupt military officers, and government officials responsible for the illegal activity. It becomes the story of an ex-marine using his training to kill and murder those who are corrupted and are responsible for deaths and harm of anyone Castle, and in turn the viewer because the narrative is constructed to be sympathetic towards Castle's worldview, sees as innocent civilians and citizens. He is brutally violent, but ultimately his tactics and methods are endorsed within the narrative by FBI and law enforcement agents throughout both seasons of this series. This aspect of the narrative also works to help legitimate the excessive force and brutality used by the government against suspected terrorists since the 9/11 attacks. This is another narrative pattern in more contemporary

vigilante portrayal that will be returned to in the final chapter. Throughout the narrative official agents of law enforcement assist and protect Castle.

Often in the fictional narratives of vigilantism the vigilante acts alone, but in historical cases and current militia movements, they also serve a social function as Shapira has argued. There is often an implication of lost family and connection, or a sacrifice of such connections to offer justice through their actions. In the narrative Castle builds new connections with law enforcement supporting his actions, and he is seen to sacrifice a normal life and potentials of new love to violently act in pursuit of justice. This helps further real vigilantes' self-view to be positioned as a hero through self-sacrifice for duty to justice, as well as a way to find community, and this is also found in the fictional narrative pattern of Punisher. Castle is often shown as saving women who wish to offer him the potential of a fresh start and new love for his heroics, but he always denies this and instead returns to what he views as his duty to punish the evildoers and criminals of the world. He keeps himself at a distance from potential friends and allies so they will not get hurt as he continues what he views as his service in killing to protect those he views as innocent. The ideas of self-sacrifice in pursuit of justice by the vigilante will also be returned to in the final chapter.

Having agents of law enforcement support the vigilante within the narrative acts to justify all that Castle does, and helps to legitimate him as a hero acting to secure the country from those that would abuse their power and do harm to its citizens for the sake of personal gain and profit. One FBI agent goes so far as to say in the second season of the show, "I used to be just like you thinking we all had to follow the rules and justice would be done. But sometimes someone like Frank Castle is the closest we get to justice." This is an alarming position to have voiced by an agent of law enforcement within the narrative. Considering that Frank Castle is a

mass murderer who has killed dozens of people, to have him be the embodiment of justice within the narrative poses a problem. The position of the law enforcement agent is that use of excessive force and violence is acceptable to pursue one's notion of justice. Any action that crosses legal limits of violence becomes acceptable when done in the name of justice and can also apply to government actions that cross the legal boundary such as torture and waterboarding. Ideas and links that will be made directly in *Sicario*.

Castle's past military service, his disillusion with the government and law enforcement, and his impulse to act and save his community/country have a strong correlation with the views and aims of the militia movements that have been discussed above. Castle also only establishes trust with fellow soldiers/law enforcement officers who have proven their worth through action with him. As a result, they build their own community together while acting against the laws and regulations of their own professional and civic roles. However, it is their willingness to break the rules and engage in extra-legal violence that frame all of them, and Castle most of all, as heroes to the audience of the narrative. This most recent iteration of the character has been the most brutal and violent yet to be depicted in film, and it still crafts the narrative to have the audience identify Castle as a hero they are rooting for.

In the second season of the show Castle is set up to believe he has accidentally shot three women who had not done anything violent or criminal. As a result, he is ready to go to prison and give up in his quest for justice. Before this occurs, it is exposed that the women were already dead when Castle shot up the room their corpses were in. This knowledge is sought by law enforcement agents to help pass on to Castle with the specific aim to inspire him to return to his vigilante action and resist accepting punishment for his numerous crimes. The information does have this effect on him, and in turn works to have the audience feel further encouraged to see

Castle as a hero because of the perceived guilt he demonstrates when he feels he has crossed a line. It should be noted that Castle does not view killing a woman to be crossing a line, or that they are always innocent: he kills several of them throughout the series. However, it is not easy to discern what Castle's true line of unethical action is as he also lets another mass murderer live and be free because he has children, and because he was manipulated by others using religious ideology to commit murders. However, one could argue many of the other people he kills were manipulated by various authority figures or capitalist ideals. This is not to mention that this killer was shown to be a white supremacist gang member before becoming a born-again Christian.

None of these complications are really engaged with within the narrative, and in the end anyone who does question Castle's methods becomes convinced that he is both right and necessary within the narrative's construction. This has the same effect for leading the viewer to accept Castle as a hero in the same way Judge Henry convinces Molly Wood of the positive value vigilantism has. It is proof of the recycling of the myth of the vigilante hero through the narrative construction and formula. Having the audience accept the myth of the vigilante hero is a worrying idea with the growing cases of gun violence erupting in American culture, and leads one to wonder how often those that perpetrate violent crimes feel they are doing something that is right, heroic, necessary, or just by their actions. In short, they are mapping their actions onto the myth of the vigilante hero. It should be noted that the original release date of the series was pushed back by Netflix because of recent mass shooting that occurred on October 1st, 2017 in Las Vegas. There seems to have been a certain awareness that this narrative could inspire individuals to action.

The other recent narrative I would like to discuss briefly is the film *Sicario* (2015). This film is exploring the extremes needed by law enforcement agencies to combat the drug war

against Mexican cartels. It involves a joint operation between CIA and FBI so that that CIA can legally engage in actions within the United States. Ultimately, the operations involve illegal incursions into Mexico, and the use of an assassin to kill an important drug lord. This assassin is also implied to use waterboarding torture on individuals to gain information within the narrative of the film.

The protagonist FBI agent is troubled by all the illegal actions but is compelled to sign off that everything she has witnessed has been done properly and by the book. She is told by the assassin that she should “move to a small town where law and order still exist.” He states that working security around the border she will not survive because “it is a land of wolves, and you are not a wolf.” This film presents a crisis of drugs and violence linked to the border between America and Mexico. It is framing this space as a new ‘wild west’ that needs to be tamed and civilized. The border between the two countries and the issues of drug and human trafficking have created a new sense of lawlessness that demands the use of extralegal violence to bring order and control. Law enforcement must act as *The Virginian* in a vigilante posse under the direction of Judge Henry, as law enforcement are moving beyond legal bounds with unofficial directives to remove the criminal elements. The narrative of the film plays on the fears of an American audience. It creates a sense of crisis about drugs and criminals coming into America from South of the border. These ideas in the narrative were the same ones that President Trump utilized in his presidential campaign a year later, and that underlie his adamant push for a border wall/physical barrier between America and Mexico.

The border and Mexico are represented as a wild space, a frontier, where there are predators and wolves and only the strong and violent will survive. It requires a predator’s mentality to hunt and kill. This same ideology is at play for the vigilante groups like the

Minutemen who take it upon themselves to go and police the border armed. These worldviews create a perception of the need for violent and vigilante action that inspires the volunteers of the Minutemen to act. It is the same worldview that shapes a perception of the would-be border crossers as the enemy (Shapira 75). The worldview expressed by the assassin in *Sicario* can find echoes in the worldview of the the Minutemen related to gender dynamics as well. They feel that being on armed patrol of the border is “too dangerous” for the women and this echoes the female FBI agent being told to move to a small town in the film and be out of harm’s way (48). This same gendered worldview seems built into the narrative formula of the myth of the vigilante hero in its origin, but there are shifts that have occurred with this aspect of the myth that will be further explored in chapter 6. The worldview that is held by the militia movements create a perception for the need to be armed to protect themselves from enemies – foreign and domestic. It feeds a perspective common to vigilante narratives: the us vs. them mentality.

There is a final instance of vigilantism worth discussing that ties all the contemporary elements of myth of the vigilante hero in this section together. It is a news story about Bob Maupin from the KPBS and *inewssource* investigation: *America’s Wall* (2017). This was an investigative journalism project that explored the efforts to secure the US and Mexican border and the impacts over time of building the wall on it. Part of the project offers profiles of different individuals that are affected by the debate and building of the wall between America and Mexico pushed by President Trump. One of the individuals this article profiles is Bob Maupin who has property along the American and Mexican border in California. He calls himself a vigilante and takes pride in this title. This can be demonstrated as he has chosen to apply the title of vigilante directly to himself. He polices his property with a bulletproof vest, a rifle, and his dogs. In the article, Maupin expresses perspectives similar to a number of the views that the militia

movements discussed above: “People breaking the law, that’s my problem. And the government not enforcing it.... Without borders you’re no longer a country” (Guerrero).

The above quotation demonstrates a civic concern, but one that is based on excluding individuals out of the community. It also demonstrates a link back to the Western frontier concept of protecting the homestead, as Maupin’s property is on the border between nations, and he has a part of the literal barrier on his property. It was originally erected by the country in the 90’s and he has since expanded it and added razor wire to further improve it. He is doing what he believes is correct and a civic duty, but it is framed through the threat of potential physical violence. However, a subtle detail in the article’s pictures is a very important point for revealing the power of the vigilante myth. On his bulletproof vest, Maupin has a badge that is the Punisher’s skull symbol, but instead of it being just the typical shade of white it has the colours and pattern of the American flag.

This badge is demonstrating that Maupin sees his actions aligning with the vigilante actions of Frank Castle, and this would explain his desire to apply the label of vigilante to himself as it is applied to Castle. In the article, Maupin also discusses how he wished to be a marine, but his wife would have been terrified if he had done that job, so he found work as an auto mechanic instead. The Punisher was a marine before becoming a vigilante. It is very worrying to think that this fictional figure and his actions are being viewed by Maupin as something to draw inspiration from, idolize, and seek to emulate. It is troubling that Castle’s violence and vigilantism can be made to represent what it means to be patriotic, heroic, and an engaged citizen. However, this is possible because the Punisher’s violence has been mapped onto the myth of the vigilante hero.

Maupin has not engaged in mass murder, and he has not been responsible for killing anyone, so it could be worth asking the question if too much is being made of the connections being pointed out. This chapter is not arguing that people cannot separate fiction from reality but is showing that cultural myths hold power and influence. Through mythic formulas narratives of history and fiction can tend to blend and blur together. It is also arguing that the ideals presented in narratives when repeated and replicated by the formula of a myth have an impact in shaping the cultural imagination and memory of America. This is a problem if the myth is creating a hero figure in the cultural imagination that legitimates violence for any individual to engage in the pursuit of their perceived sense of justice. That sense of justice may also be connected to their ideas of how to protect their community by ironically engaging in extralegal violence within it. As political tensions continue to rise and polarize within America, one commonly held aspect of both political positions can be the cultural myths, and the myth of the vigilante hero is one such myth. For many this can create a romantic view of vigilantes and the violence that they use, which has negative effects if we consider this as a common view held by citizens. One example of these harms is that these same citizens will make up juries for individuals who engage in violent crimes and position themselves to be viewed as vigilantes. However, there will always be others who will be inspired to direct action by the myth of the vigilante, and this is being seen in grassroots movements in both the right, Minutemen and militia movements, and the left, Antifa movement. This actively displays the continuing cycle of violence occurring in American culture that is being shaped, enforced, and legitimated by the myth of the vigilante hero.

Chapter 4: Pursuit of Economic Justice – Class Vigilantes- Bandits, Gangsters and Miners

The contextual focus of this chapter will be the relationship between class and the myth of the vigilante hero. This relationship creates narratives about vigilantes who pursue economic justice. While class is the contextual focus for this chapter, there is often intersections of class and race linked together in the identity of vigilantes of economic justice. Therefore, this chapter will also expand on the impact of race and vigilantism that has been touched on in the preceding chapters and will be the contextual focus of the following chapter. In chapter 1 it was established that there was often an economic rationale that underpinned vigilante action (Brown 115). The economic rationale can shift in vigilante narratives depending on the perspective that the narrative has taken. In Chapter 3 the discussion of *The Virginian* demonstrated the economic interests of ranchers in using vigilante action to stop cattle rustlers. This was a narrative position designed to support the elite's use of vigilantism to ensure their economic security and position of privilege. However, more contemporary narratives that explore the issue of ranchers closing off land open to free grazing have been explored from different class perspectives. One example of this is Kevin Costner's film *Open Range* (2003).

This film is set during the shift from free grazing to land enclosure in near Harmonville in Montana territory, and presents the development of private property by the elite ranchers of the upper class in the Western frontier. This film, much like *The Virginian*, is acting in a mimetic

fashion to explore the Johnson County cattle war. The film's central character, Charlie Waite, is a free grazer and this film engages directly with the injustice of the systemic violence of capitalism in relation to ranching on the frontier. Hannah Arendt has argued in *On Violence* (1970) that violence and power are linked, but that violence does not create power, but only obedience (47). That is not necessarily true, and since violence is unpredictable, as she also states, then perhaps the power violence can create is unpredictable. In particular, the economic power that violence can create will be a focal point in this chapter, and how the systemic violence of capitalism can create power and privilege. In the case of this film's narrative, the acts of violence in the past by elite ranchers in the West has led to a sympathetic view which supports the poorer, smaller operations and the free grazers in contemporary times.

Part of this sympathetic shift can be better understood with the rising critique of capitalism's systemic violence in the globalizing world of the late 20th century. The 1999 protests of WTO in Seattle help to illustrate these rising critiques, which were strengthened by the Occupy movement after the 2008 government bailout during the Great Recession. These were movements against the capitalist system that originated from the left of the political system, but during this period there were also movements from the right of the political spectrum such as the Tea Party movement and Yellow Vests. There was a larger critique at work of a political and economic system that were becoming entwined to benefit only a select few of society and being seen to not properly representative of most people on either side of the political spectrum. There was a growing dissent over the power of the wealthy elite in America, the 1%, and this could account for the shift of narrative perspective to demonstrate the systemic violence that has long been used by the wealthy elite of America as it is presented in *Open Range*. This is the same position that retrospective study of the historical period and narratives of expanding ranches and

enclosures of land have been taken by scholars discussing the issues such as Christine Bold. It has changed the perspective of the formula of the vigilante myth to construct a narrative from a position that supports the elite to one that supports the vigilante hero who resists them. *Open Range* is an example of such a narrative shift; however, the film still follows the mythic formula of the vigilante hero that reaches back to *The Virginian*.

In the film Charlie and his partners are harassed, threatened, and violently attacked by the big rancher in Harmonville. Because of the violent intimidation tactics to drive away and eliminate the free grazing operation, the free grazers rightly find injustice in the illegal actions done against them. However, no legal recourse is available within Harmonville because the rich rancher has control of the town and the law enforcement officials within it. Much like Judge Henry in *The Virginian* the big rancher is ultimately the law in the town. Therefore, towards the end of the narrative Charlie, and fellow free grazers, turn into vigilantes to resist and kill the elite rancher and his lackeys who are trying to exterminate them. This is a different approach than the rustlers in *The Virginian* take; those rustlers offer no resistance when caught. The problem with this narrative is it flips the vigilante hero perspective from *The Virginian* on its head, but still endorses and makes vigilante violence heroic through Charlie and his men.

The narrative points out the problems in the culture that must be examined in relation to systemic violence of ranching practices, but it again recycles the positive portrayal of vigilantism as a viable tool for success in defeating injustice. It presents the issues that created injustice at the historical juncture but finds the solution through a hero vigilante instead of a more effective, non-subjectively violent method of resistance. While there may have been limited legal options to resist that acts of the ranchers, that does not mean that the revisionist narrative of this frontier conflict had to be mapped onto the vigilante hero myth from the opposite perspective. This is

only perpetuating the portrayal of violence as a positive force for change, creating an endless cycle of violence between two opposing economic positions.

On the Western frontier, as was discussed in chapter 2 and 3, there was the use of vigilantism to eliminate bandits, and protect the people and economic interests of the early settlements, cities, and mining camps. In the narratives discussed the bandits were not viewed as heroic figures, and in the case of the Montana vigilantes there was a clear racial angle to their vigilante actions to eliminate unwanted people from the settlement, this frequently translated to non-whites. Two minority groups have experienced a lot of violence in historical narratives, specifically vigilante violence exercised against them in the history of the Western frontier, and in fictional narratives of the West – Mexicans and Natives. These communities were marginalized and viciously attacked by Anglo-Americans. As a result of the systemic violence used against them, when members of these marginalized and oppressed communities turned to crime to amass wealth and power in society using violence and fear; they could be viewed from members of their marginalized communities as heroic who fight back against the growing abuse of the American hegemonic society. These individuals are working to create a sense of balance and justice from the unjust oppression.

This is the argument that Eric Hobsbawm lays out in his work *Bandits* (2000). He states, “[i]nsofar as bandits have a ‘programme’, it is the defense or restoration of the traditional order of things ‘as it should be’ (which in traditional societies means as it is believed to have been in some real or mythical past). They right wrongs, they correct and avenge cases of injustice, and in doing so apply a more general criterion of just and fair relations between men in general, and especially between the rich and the poor” (29-30). This description makes many bandit figures positioned as vigilantes of both economic and social justice as they are often a part of an

oppressed minority, but the focus for this chapter will be weighted on class. The notion of the return to the way things should be that Hobsbawm describes as being rooted in a mythic or non-existent past can be aligned with Abrahams' idea of a vigilante trying to recapture their view of the good life. Hobsbawm is looking to craft a theory around social banditry from a global perspective, but any move to explore something globally and to find universal patterns will lose some of the contexts that can shape a social bandit in their respective communities and national contexts. In this way Hobsbawm's analysis of social banditry will become mapped onto the vigilante myth in an American context, but it is not noticed in his analysis because of his holding a global focus. These American bandit figures can be read as vigilantes of economic justice, and narratives about them will be shaped to conform to the myth of the vigilante hero even if the term vigilante is not applied to them within the narrative.

One such narrative that frames the bandit as a vigilante hero in an America context is *The Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murieta, the Celebrated California Bandit* (1854). This narrative presents the bandit figure as a vigilante of economic and social justice. It was also the first novel published in California and becomes another case of a vigilante narrative being the first of some form of a publication within a state, just as Dimsdale's history of the Montana vigilantes was. The interest of this text increases from the identity of its author. It was written by Yellow Bird (John Rollin Ridge), a Cherokee who has the distinction of being the first Native American to publish a novel in America. It is not surprising that a Native writer would create a narrative around a bandit, and in turn a vigilante of economic justice, as many of the Natives in the Western frontier sought for the past of their culture; Natives sought for things to be as they should be, as they were before the settlers arrived in the Americas and pushed West. California is a location where Mexicans and Spanish colonists would have a sense of the way things "should

be” before the American push into California in the 1850s during the gold rush. This novel idealizes the vigilante of economic justice and recycles the myth of the vigilante hero. The novel also seeks in its preface to present itself as holding some historical value and truth. The narrative again acts as a distortion of history in service to the vigilante myth:

The author, in presenting this book to the public, is aware that its chief merit consists in the reliability of the groundwork upon which it stands and not in the beauty of its composition. He has aimed to do a service – in his humble way – to those who shall hereafter inquire into the early history of California, by preserving – in however rude a shape – a record of at least a portion of those events that have made the early settlement of this state a living romance through all time.

Besides, it is but doing justice to a people who have been so far denigrated...to hold up a contradiction...to so sweeping an opinion with the character of a man who – bad though he was – possessed a soul as full of unconquerable courage as ever belonged to a human being...no man who speaks truth can ever deny there lived one Mexican whose nerves were as iron in the face of danger and death.

The author has not thrown this work out into the world recklessly, or without authority for his assertions. In the main, it will be found strictly true (viii).

Yellow Bird is presenting his narrative as one that captures the history of California, and the image it creates of the state as “a living romance” is “strictly true.” He is also presenting Joaquin as a figure of courage and admiration to the reader to call attention to the improper and racist views that Americans have for Mexicans. The rhetorical strategy of first admitting that Joaquin may have been bad, and this information is offered as an aside, to then continue the

thought heaping him with praise of his soul full of courage. The preface also makes clear Yellow Bird is writing his narrative for an American audience as it is unlikely a Mexican audience would hold a negative view of themselves, or that they would be reading the work published in English. Therefore, the audience intended for the narrative is an American audience in the time the book was first published, and with an eye to it being read in the future is also clear by the aims of making it record for the history of the state in its origin.

Every vigilante narrative conforming to the mythic formula needs an inciting event to occur where the vigilante figure perceives injustice, and in the beginning of this text the reason for Joaquin's turn to banditry/vigilantism is established. The injustice Joaquin experiences is because of his race. He is driven off his land twice by Americans who will not accept his claim to land and see him as an intruder (4). The complications over who has rights to the land have formed as a result of the Mexican war of 1846-48. The Americans also take it upon themselves to rape Joaquin's mistress when they run him off the land (3). After this Joaquin attempts to settle down in a mining camp but is soon confronted by a posse of vigilantes over a stolen horse his half-brother was seen with. They whip Joaquin and then they hang his half-brother (5). This becomes too much for Joaquin and pushes him to declare vengeance against the Americans for their abuse. He determines that he can deliver justice to them through violence and theft. This impulse of vengeance as a way to restore a sense of order and justice to Joaquin's worldview is what turns him into a vigilante in the narrative's construction.

It is a problem that the admirable Mexican for Americans to admire is a violent criminal – playing into one stereotype – but also this violent action can be forgiven and seen as courage and strength because it is used to create a sense of justice as a vigilante. This narrative will resonate with an American audience because it is constructed from one who is oppressed and

exploited, and the idea of violent resistance from economic underpinnings connects back to the motivations of the American Revolution. It is being constructed into the formula of the myth of the vigilante hero. The impulses for the American Revolution will be transferred to the vigilante figure, and in this narrative the Mexican Joaquín will take the position of the American while the Americans are made to stand in for the British. It is an interesting sleight of hand that ultimately reinforces the myth of the vigilante hero and legitimizes the use of violence; all the while, it is positioning this narrative as historical to offer a true view of how things were, how they should be viewed with Murieta as a vigilante hero.

The text opens with the following quotation: “I sit down to write somewhat concerning the life and character of *Joaquín Murieta*, a man as remarkable in the annals of crime as any of the renowned robbers of the Old or New World who have preceded him...The character of this truly wonderful man was nothing more than a natural production of the social and moral condition of the country in which he lived, acting upon certain peculiar circumstances favorable to such a result, and consequently, his individual history is part of the valuable history of the state” (1). In this opening Joaquín is positioned as a wonderful man and not a violent and dangerous criminal. He is a hero, and the events that turned him into a hero were a product of the space and context of where he lived: America. It is the space of the state of California that turned him into a vigilante of economic justice. His actions and the narrative they have been turned into are a “natural production” of the social and moral conditions of the country. This natural production could be read as the mythic formula for the vigilante hero. Therefore, the history of this vigilante of economic justice is the history of the state. The history of the state is tied to the creation of the vigilante hero, and this vigilante is important to understanding the state – similar to the positive impact of the Montana vigilantes on their state. The importance of Joaquín to the

history of the state and American cultural imagination may prove to be more true than Yellow Bird realized when he wrote it, and this idea will be expanded upon further below.

There are economic underpinnings to all the motivations of the Americans in their violent mistreatment of Joaquin, and as the author states: “shame that there should be such bearing the name [American]”, in the abuses they give to Joaquin. Land claims held high value in California during the gold rush, because any land could potentially have gold in it, and therefore all the Americans wanted to possess it. The vigilantes who hang Murieta’s half-brother at the mining camp are also using violence over the theft of property – the stolen horse. Ultimately, this narrative sets up Joaquin as a hero, but it is less focused on the vigilantism from Americans. This is important point to note in the narrative because in this narrative one community, Americans, engage in vigilantism and this leads another community to engage in it – the Mexican community represented by Joaquin and his bandits. This develops the us vs. them worldview that was outlined by contemporary vigilante groups in the previous chapter. It also acts as further demonstration of the endless cycle of violence that the myth of the vigilante hero can inspire.

The narrative presents many stories of Joaquin’s exploits, as well as the exploits of some of his group of bandits that are of note. They rob and kill Americans and manage to continually avoid capture, and all the while Joaquin is framed as a noble bandit as he refuses to rob the poor or harm anyone that has done him no wrong (52). Eventually, he outlines what his major goal has been by engaging in so much robbing and killing. He states, “I intend to arm and equip fifteen hundred or two thousand men and make a clean sweep of the southern counties. I intend to kill the Americans ‘wholesale,’ burn their ranchos, and run off their property in one single swoop so rapidly that they will not have time to collect an opposing force... When I do this, I will wind up my career. My brothers, we will then be revenged for our wrongs, and some little, too,

for the wrongs done to our poor, bleeding country” (60). It is this plan that can be read as an echo of the revolutionary impulse of America, and the myth of the vigilante hero that has since been connected to it.

Joaquin has been robbing and amassing funds to create an army to attack and drive out the Americans because of the oppression – part of which is economic – the Americans have put on him and his fellow Mexican bandits in the past. This can be read as being similar to the economic oppression that England placed on the thirteen colonies that inspired the push for revolution. The economic injustice perceived by the Americans was taxation without representation. The denied access to land claims, and the inability to participate as equals in the economy of early California, is what turned Joaquin into a bandit. The idea of economic injustices being the cause that pushed for revolutionary violence to obtain freedom and justice is being repeated to justify making Joaquin into a hero. The system was corrupted from his position, and so he turned to vigilantism and violence to correct it. However, it should be noted that this great plan does not come to pass in the text. This text is useful for drawing out the social and economic disparities and injustices that were a part of the history of early California, but the position of Joaquin as a hero and legitimating his violence by seeing him as courageous and a wonderful man is problematic. It may be safe to assume that the narrative was also constructed as a revenge fantasy for Yellow Bird from a Native position, but as a Native it would have been too difficult to try and publish a work making a romantic hero of a bandit who was a Native. Literary scholar Blake Hausman points out in his article “Indians in the Margins” that Yellow Bird would be forced to present Native perspectives embedded as subtext within the book because of racist American publishing practices (4).

One other episode of Joaquin's adventures should serve to further demonstrate how the text creates a hero of him. After he has killed many people, robbed many others, and discussed his plans to kill all Americans there is a moment where Joaquin intervenes with one of his men who kidnapped a young woman named Rosalie. Joaquin vows to return her to her mother and fiancé, and he succeeds in this. When he does return her, Rosalie's lover pulls a gun on Joaquin as he is aware of his identity and criminal past. When this happens, Rosalie intervenes on Joaquin's behalf saying, "[f]ie, fie Edward, you forget yourself. You wouldn't harm the man who has restored me to your arms? Why, Edward, would you make me despise you? I care not if he were a robber a thousand times, he is a noble man – shake hands with him" (Yellowbird 89). Joaquin's criminal actions can be forgiven, and he is made noble because his violence and crime is one designed to create justice for his community as a vigilante by punishing the oppressors. In the same way that his saving and returning Rosalie to Edward is noble and an act of justice.

The end of the narrative sees Joaquin die at the hands of a Captain Henry Love, and then Joaquin's head is pickled and placed in a jar to go on display and tour California as proof that the dangerous criminal has been killed. A couple of the ending paragraphs of the novel demonstrates that the narrative seeks to frame the vigilante of economic and social justice as a hero:

"The story is told. Briefly and without ornament, the life and character of Joaquin Murieta have been sketched. His career was short, for he died in his twenty second year; but in the few years that were allowed him, he displayed qualities of mind and heart that marked him as an extraordinary man, and leaving his name impressed upon the early history of this state.

He also leaves behind the important lesson that there is nothing so dangerous in its consequences as injustice to individuals – whether it arise from prejudice of color or from any other source. That wrong done to one man is a wrong to society and to the world” (136).

Once again, the narrative positions Joaquin in a heroic light, and an important figure in history. However, it must be remembered that he is a fabrication. This quotation also draws out a lesson to be learned from the narrative, but it is complicated by the narrative itself. Joaquin is presented as a hero by being a vigilante of economic justice, but he has also wronged individuals as much as he has been wronged, and he planned to wrong many other individuals for taking his land in the aftermath of the Mexican war simply because they are American. This seems no different than when he was originally targeted for being Mexican, but in the narrative those Americans are constructed as a shame to the name and Joaquin is a wonderful man. This is because of a sympathetic view constructed for Joaquin within the narrative. It demonstrates the formula of the myth of the vigilante hero at work. This entire narrative is fictional, but it is seeking to distort history through the fiction. The abuses Joaquin suffered have parallels to historical cases of injustice against minorities in the West, but there are no cases of American news publications or historical records from the times that portray Mexican bandits heroically. The figure of a Mexican bandit can only be made heroic in American publication by being mapped into the formula of the myth of the vigilante hero.

While Joaquin’s narrative is a good demonstration of a vigilante of economic justice, it is also an important narrative to start with to demonstrate the changes that occur with the context of class in relation to the myth of the vigilante hero. This can be achieved by examining other narratives and literary figures that draw their origins and inspirations from Joaquin Murieta. This

is another point that Hausman points out in his work. One such literary figure inspired by Joaquin Murieta is Zorro. Zorro was first introduced by Johnston McCulley in his short story – *The Curse of Capistrano* – in the pulp fiction journal *All-Story Weekly* published in 1924 (Curtis 6). In her official history of Zorro, *Zorro Unmasked*, Sandra Curtis draws out the connection between the two figures. “The Murieta legend may well have fueled McCulley’s imagination in creating Zorro. Murieta’s romantic prowess and aristocratic background, along with his concern for injustice to individuals, are certainly part of the Zorro legend” (75). However, Zorro is not a thief by trade, but a masked crime fighter. Often his vigilante actions are against the wealthy elite dons and the corrupt military that seek to oppress the people of California. There are also some points about Zorro’s economic position that are worth exploring.

While Murieta was once aristocratic, he loses everything and becomes a bandit. Diego de la Vega – the true identity of Zorro – never loses his aristocratic position and place in society. He maintains his wealth and position and uses this to learn more of the corrupt plans of elite so he can intervene against them in his alter ego of Zorro. He is working on behalf of the poor and powerless people, but he is not one of those people in the way that Joaquin was when he began his vigilante actions. The perspective of the narratives of Zorro always frame him to be seen as a hero because he works against the oppression of the poor by the wealthy elite; however, it is still a member of the wealthy and elite that is saving them through violence. It should not be ignored that even if a wealthy elite is working on behalf of the poor and not currently exploiting them, there is not a case where the wealthy elite did not gain their position and privilege from past exploitation. In the case of California, for Diego to have his large ranch and wealth it provides was by forcibly taking the land from Native groups. However, the vigilante myth can construct

the narrative to avoid these realities and details to create a sympathetic position to Diego as a vigilante.

This particular point of discomfort around Diego's economic position is purposefully altered and attention drawn to it in the character's iteration by Isabel Allende in her novel *Zorro* (2005). She focuses on Diego's childhood as this was a point less focused on in past narratives of the character. She presents Diego as a Mestiza, a child who is both a mix of Spanish colonist and Native background. In this way Diego, and later Zorro, has a more legitimate claim to his power in some ways, and heightens his awareness of injustice against all people. There is a specific moment brought up in the novel that is worth quoting at length to allow for analysis:

The Spaniard had herded his cattle into the mountains where one of the many tribes displaced by the colonists had taken refuge. Diego rode out there with his brother, and they got there in time to see the trail bosses, backed by a detachment of soldiers, burn the Indian's huts. Nothing was left of the village but ashes. Despite their terror at having witnessed such a scene, Diego and Bernardo ran to intervene. Without consulting one and other, as if one will, they placed themselves between the horses of the aggressors and their Indian victims. They would have been trampled unmercifully had one of the riders not recognized the son of Alejandro de la Vega. Even so, they drove them out of their way with their whips. From a short distance, the two boys watched, horrified, as the few Indians who stood firm were beaten down. The chief, an old man, was hanged from a tree as a warning to others. The attackers rounded up the men capable of working in fields or serving in the army and led them away, roped together like animals. The elders, the women, and the children were driven off to wander through the forests, hungry and desperate. Nothing of this was new; it happened more and more frequently, and no one

dared to intervene...In Monterey, the governor ignored complaints because Indians were not his priority. The officials in charge of the garrison were part of the problem, as they lent the services of their soldiers to the white settlers. They did not doubt the moral superiority of the whites who, like them, had come from far away with the sole intention of civilizing and Christianizing that savage land...Diego de la Vega never forgot that lesson; the bad taste of justice denied would remain forever in the deepest part of his memory, and would emerge again and again, determining the course of his life (83-84).

This event is established as the moment that inspires Diego to become Zorro in the future. The moment of a shift from the view of the world as just to unjust and in this narrative, it is not linked to a personal experience of injustice, but the injustices done to others. This is what sets Diego on the path to be a vigilante for social and economic justice. This event at first seems to establish Diego more as a vigilante of social justice, but as mentioned before, social and economic conditions are often intertwined, and this analysis will focus more on the economic contextual elements underlying this narrative. First, the major injustice that acts as a moment of inspiration is one rooted to access and ownership of land, an economic concern. It establishes that the Natives have been displaced by colonists but are now being further displaced by ranchers. This is a common occurrence across the Western frontiers of America. The economic injustice of the above passage is heightened by having the male Natives taken as slaves who were able to work the fields or be soldiers. Their labour and freedom is removed from them to be used to increase the security and stability of their oppressors. The women, children, and elderly are sent into the woods to try and survive after being displaced from their land, home, and resources.

The chief is also lynched, and this makes the rancher's and soldiers' actions another example of vigilante violence. Based on their view of white supremacy they feel it is justified for them to kill Natives, oppress them, and take possession of all the land they want. It is a vigilantism based on a particular worldview of what is socially just to the wealthy elite, and righteous violence is utilized to civilize and Christianize the land. This acts as another example of the vigilante impulse seeking to help establish and build community, but at the same time to exclude and remove others from that community. It is another example of the development of the us vs. them thinking bound to the formula of the vigilante myth.

The impact this narrative moment has in shaping Diego as a vigilante for the reader is very important. It has already been established that Diego will become Zorro, and it is also likely that no reader picking up this book will be unfamiliar with Zorro as a vigilante hero figure. However, some more discerning and critical readers of the narrative may have questions about accepting Zorro as a hero given his position as part of the elite acting as a vigilante on behalf of the poor. Most readers of Allende's novel are likely to already view Zorro as a vigilante hero regardless of how her narrative constructs him because of earlier portrayals of the figure. These include the stories of Johnston McCulley, early Zorro films starring Douglas Fairbanks, and the television series created by Walt Disney. It is worth noting that Disney was a prominent American myth-maker himself; it is not surprising that his aim to push wholesome American values will have Disney choose Zorro as the figure to focus on as an access point into the myth of the vigilante hero. In the Disney iteration of the character he is still a vigilante and uses subjective violence, but he is never lethal and rarely does any lasting bodily harm to others.

By making this witnessing of abuse against Native tribes the event that sparks Diego's sense of injustice, Allende presents him as having an awareness of the brutality of a racist and

exploitative system of government and social culture. This makes him have an awareness of what the audience will view as a corrupt and oppressive system, but because he is a child it also removes the reader from examining Diego's place in that system and the privileges he enjoys and is benefiting from it. As a child Diego is innocent of the actions that are occurring around him to give him his privilege and power. This helps to make him seem more heroic and sympathetic when he turns to violent vigilantism later in the novel.

Of course, Diego can only become the vigilante hero Zorro because of his wealth and privilege. As a member of the aristocratic class he has time to devote to developing the needed skills to become a vigilante. However, having an elite turn into the outlaw hero offers a figure who is willing to lay the privilege and security on the line to better others. It is a position of self-sacrifice for the greater good as the vigilante actions cannot better the position of the wealthy elite figure. The relation of self-sacrifice will be returned to again and explored deeper in the final chapter. Since he does not have to labour for his means, Diego has time to travel around the country and to see the developing cases of injustice examining and contemplating them. He also has the time to develop his skills with riding, acrobatics, fencing, and his whip. These skills become what allows him to be able to harm, threaten, and at times kill his enemies. He would not have these skills without the free time and resources to pursue them. This is very different from Murieta who has no ability to defeat his American oppressors at first, and instead develops his deadly skills as he engages in a life of crime. He develops his deadly arts as a means of survival and is ultimately killed after a few years; whereas Zorro is never defeated or killed – though the specific man behind the mask and holding Zorro's identity may change. This is demonstrated in the next Zorro narrative that will be examined.

The figures of Zorro and Joaquín Murieta become blended together in the film *The Mask of Zorro* (1998). The narrative of this film begins with Diego de la Vega acting as Zorro; he is working on behalf of the people as a vigilante and gets caught, arrested and sent to prison by his nemesis Don Rafael. Twenty years pass and eventually Diego escapes and returns to California. Rafael has also returned to California after spending time in Spain with Diego's daughter who he stole as a baby and has now claimed himself to be her natural father. Rafael plans to become wealthy at the expense of the peasants, and the help of a traitorous American soldier Captain Love. This plan is ultimately stopped because Diego finds Alejandro Murieta, the brother of Joaquín Murieta, and trains him to become a new Zorro.

Within the narrative of the film Joaquín and one of his other men, Three Fingers Jack (described in Yellow Bird's narrative as one of Joaquín's bandits) is killed and Joaquín's head is pickled by Captain Love. Captain Love is also the name of the soldier credited with killing Joaquín in Yellow Bird's novel. In this film the narratives are being intentionally combined to create a stronger relation between the figures, but while Joaquín was the inspiration to Zorro's writer, in this narrative Zorro trains his brother to be a vigilante. In the film Joaquín and Alejandro are portrayed as social bandits, and as young boys saw Zorro engage in his public acts of vigilantism that inspired them on their path. After Joaquín is killed Alejandro wants revenge, but Diego trains and motivates him to a higher purpose as a vigilante of social and economic justice.

Alejandro is both social bandit and from the peasant class. In this narrative Zorro not only works for the people of the poorer class, but as the man behind the mask changes he comes from the poorer class. Of course, Alejandro ends up becoming wealthy as he is supported by Diego to pose as an aristocrat, and ultimately has a position as a don that is obtained by marrying Diego's,

and Rafael's, daughter to inherit their combined fortunes given that both men die at the end of film. The narrative of the film establishes both Zorros as heroes, and it justifies the use of vigilante violence on behalf of pursuit of economic justice. The figures of Murieta and Zorro demonstrate the different shifts that can be done through different class perspectives in the formula of the myth of the vigilante hero.

In the P.S. section of the novel of *Zorro* Allende is interviewed and asked why people are still captivated in the 21st century by a figure created in the early 20th century. Her response is very telling to demonstrate the power of the myth of the vigilante hero in America. "Zorro is not a magical character. He is not like Superman, Spiderman, or so many other fantastic action heroes [vigilantes all]. He is a human being, a man who loves life, who is willing to take risks to defend the underdog, and who is brave, funny, and romantic. Maybe his appeal is that we can all have courage and live life to its fullest. Just give us a mask, cape, and a sword!" (10) In this brief response the author is describing Zorro in similar terms Yellow Bird used to describe the criminal Murieta, and at the same time is positioning Zorro as a figure to be inspired by and to emulate. In Allende's view of living life to the fullest is to become a vigilante and engage in violence for the sake of a cause we believe to be just. She does suggest we can all grab a mask, cape and a sword. A similar idea is presented by Curtis in the introduction to her history of Zorro when she states, "[j]ustice for all!" is more than a motto. It is Zorro's sacred trust. And although promoting the fox is our vocation, fostering his ideals is our avocation. We encourage others to join in Zorro's work, furthering the cause of social justice in their communities" (4).

Regardless of who else Zorro inspired, there is one more person worth discussing who was inspired by him, and in turn made their own alterations to the mythic narrative of the vigilante hero. That individual is Bob Kane – the creator of Batman. Bob Kane has openly

discussed the influence Zorro had on his creation of Batman (the original Douglas Fairbanks Sr. *Mask of Zorro* film in particular), and this is presented by Curtis in her text as well as by Will Brooker in his history of Batman titled *Batman Unmasked* (even the historical narratives written about the two figures are influenced by each other). No doubt there are some clear similarities one can immediately see between these figures. Both live dual identities, and both dress in black with a mask. Both are concerned with seeking justice, and both emerge from a cave acting as a hide out. The most important similarity for both figures for this chapter are that they are members of the wealthy elite.

Bruce Wayne is a billionaire whose full wealth is never fully established, and his wealth never seems to be reduced regardless of his expenses and he has a great deal of them. The vast wealth that Bruce inherits after his parents' murder while he is child was only able to accumulate at the expense of others. In different narratives and iterations of the character this issue is sometimes addressed, but often his parents were unaware of the corruption attached to their gaining of vast wealth. What is important is that he is one of the wealthiest men in the DC comics universe, and as a result has a great deal of leisure time. Much like Diego, Bruce uses his free time to train himself to become a vigilante. He travels the world studying martial arts, criminal activity, sciences, and technology. The time available from his class and privilege allow him to become Batman. It is also his vast wealth and company connections that allow him to develop all the technology and tools that he uses throughout his career as Batman. In some iterations of the character it is also his global corporate position as owner of Wayne Enterprises, a company that seems at one point or another to be engaged in every form of industry in the world, that sets the foundation for a worldwide incorporation of various 'Batmen' across the globe. A final aspect of Batman that is shared with Zorro is his existence as an ordinary man. He

has no magic or supernatural abilities. In the same way as Zorro he can be a representative of an everyman, in spite of his vast wealth, who decides to create a costume and become a vigilante in the name of justice.

Batman also creates a shift in the mythic narrative of the vigilante hero of economic justice. Batman returns the narrative perspective of vigilante of economic justice to become more palatable to the wealthy elite of American culture. Murieta was a social bandit who stole from those who had wealth and power to provide justice for those of his community. He became a part of the class of people he sought to offer vigilante justice to. Zorro acted on behalf of the poor and the oppressed, but he was not a part of that class. Batman loses the focus on being a vigilante of economic and social justice. He is interested in punishing criminals and preventing crime. He works to stop robberies, but his focus is not to dispense justice to the poor. In fact, often in the portrayal of criminals they are representative of minority groups within America who were denied the same economic advantages to white Americans, such as Bruce Wayne, and turned to crime as a way to gain the resources they felt entitled to. In this way the vigilante of economic justice narrative comes full circle and is more focused on securing and policing the power and privilege of the elite than championing the oppressed. This is a return to the economic rational the was discussed by Brown in the first chapter of the vigilance councils in the mid-nineteenth century. More will be said on the character of Batman in the final chapter of this work.

Batman first premieres in Detective Comics in 1939, and in his early comics the criminals he deals with are gangsters and organized criminals. These figures are presented as criminals in the Batman narratives, but in many Hollywood film narratives of gangsters they are romanticized figures. Not only are gangsters romanticized, but Hobsbawn points out how their criminal actions have been misread as social banditry. Not only have their actions been misread

as social banditry in America, turning them into vigilantes of economic and social justice, but gangster narratives have been consciously constructed in America to be mapped onto the myth of the vigilante hero. Hobsbawm argues that the anarchist confusion of reading “the gangster as a truly libertarian insurrectionary, but such simple activities as looting as steps towards the spontaneous expropriation of the bourgeoisie by the oppressed” (121). In America the gangster has become an ambivalent figure in film for audiences across the 20th century, and these film narratives have established the views held by members of the public who misinterpret the gangster as a romantic figure – much like the vigilante hero. The argument that this work is making is that the gangster, much like the social bandit, becomes another variation of the vigilante of economic justice in American culture. Fran Mason offers examination of the cultural tensions as an explanation for why this is the case in his work *American Gangster Cinema* (2002).

Mason’s analysis does not view the gangster as a social bandit in Hobsbawm’s sense, nor as a vigilante of economic justice. Gangsters were and are violent criminals, but in the early decades of the 20th century they became figures romanticized in Hollywood and their narratives were mapped onto the mythic formula of the vigilante hero, beginning with *The Public Enemy* (1931). The film opens with a title screen exclaiming that the film does not intend to glorify the figure of the gangster, but the very need to include such a title screen indicates that the audience could make that interpretation from viewing the film. At the time the gangster was already being romanticized in parts of American culture. The film narratives often seek to position the gangster in their family roles to make them relatable and sympathetic, and seeks to demonstrate a generosity to their family and immediate community, always a marginalized ethnic minority in America, that allows them to be viewed as vigilantes of economic justice.

This effect can be demonstrated by the three major classics of the gangster genre, *The Public Enemy*, *Little Caesar* (1931); and *Scarface* (1932). All three of these films opened with messages declaring that these films were meant to portray the menace and danger of the criminal element in society, and not to glorify it. There are a number of factors that would work to explain why the figure became romanticized in films. One factor is to consider that the gangster is portrayed by charismatic actors whom an audience enjoys watching, and as a result they create a character that the audience also enjoys watching. This could be considered in the case of James Cagney as Tommy Powers in *The Public Enemy*, or the more contemporary example of Denzel Washington as Frank Lucas in *American Gangster* (2007). One could even argue that Leonardo DiCaprio as Jordan Belford in *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013) has the same impact and raised questions at the time of the film's release of whether films should be made that seem to glorify negative individuals. When actors take on these roles, they often find themselves criticized for delivering a strong performance because it makes the character memorable and appealing to the audience.

It should not be forgotten that in the historical context of many prominent crime figures they themselves held a great deal of charisma amongst society. Not only were they seen as charismatic, but would often be considered heroes within their communities, which were outside the dominant power structures of society. They were figures who rose up and challenged dominant and racist power structures through violence and gained lives of excess. As a result, they were perceived as marginalized immigrants who achieved the American dream, and their victory would be cherished as a victory for the whole community they come from within American culture. This is not to say that all members of marginalized communities would share this view, but certainly some of them did given the celebrity status mobsters such as Al Capone

could be treated with by some citizens and press members of Chicago. Communities that gangsters could be seen to represent within America that created film narratives mapped onto the vigilante myth in the context of economic and social justice are: Italian-American – *The Public Enemy* (1931), *The Godfather* (1972), *Goodfellas* (1990) – Irish-American – *The Departed* (2006), *Road to Perdition* (2002) – Jewish – *Mobsters* (1991) – African-American – *Hoodlum* (1997), *American Gangster* (2007). In the case of television, the series *Boardwalk Empire* (2010-2014) has this impact for all the above listed groups. It is also a series that blends history with fiction, and in turn distorts history to service the mythmaking. It should also be mentioned that many of these figures are portrayed to do positive things for their community across all these various narratives that gives them a Robin Hood-like public appeal, but this is a misreading of their actions.

The other aspect from a historical context that should be considered is the portrayal of gangsters during prohibition. Many consider the bootleggers to be providing a service that many wanted, and again saw their efforts as heroic. Not all would hold this perspective, as the law was formed by temperance movements and coalitions, but many were opposed to the prohibition laws. Of course, as times changed the kinds of crime that the gangsters were portrayed to be heavily involved with would shift. As time passed it would demonstrate their involvement with drugs, but still work to make this seem respectable to the audience. This is demonstrated in *The Godfather* when it is demanded that the drugs not be sold in schools. Other times odd contradictions were exposed as in *American Gangster* when Frank Lucas is handing out turkeys through the Harlem community from his profits of drug sales of heroin within the same community harming it. Moments such as this expose how it is a misreading to compare gangsters as a Robin Hood-like figure. These moments show a crack in the imagery of the gangster as a

hero, but often do not show them enough to remove the romantic view of the gangster figure built by mapping their film narratives onto the formula of the myth of the vigilante hero.

This sympathetic portrayal of the gangster figure has been pushed further by using them in comedy films. An example would be *Analyze This* (1999). In this film Robert DeNiro is taking on the role of a gangster who is undergoing therapy as result of occupational stress and is working through his emotions to eventually lead to leaving a life of crime behind. This humorous content was taken more seriously in the HBO series *The Sopranos* (2000 – 2007). These make for a more sympathetic approach to the figures that allow audiences to identify with their emotional struggles. It is also common that a high amount of melodrama is found within these film narratives by portraying the romantic and family lives of the gangster. This narrative construction makes them relatable and humanizes them for the audience and encourages the audience to find parallels to their own life's challenges and conflicts, such as prioritizing and balancing their family life with their other duties and responsibilities. Often these figures will buy houses for family members, help them start legitimate businesses with money from criminal activities, and provide them with lavish gifts that they would typically be denied because of their social and economic status in American culture. This demonstrates a desire for those marginalized by race and class in American culture who hold these same desires to be influenced by the narrative's construction; it can lead such an audience to idealize the violence used to obtain these goals as it has been mapped onto the vigilante hero myth. As the opening line in *Goodfellas* states, "ever since I was a kid I wanted to be a gangster."

There is also something to be said for how the medium of film helps to present the figure of the gangster as a vigilante of economic justice. When thinking of the earlier gangster films, one can imagine the public from these marginalized communities going to see this film together.

As the community experiences the viewing of these figures together it helps develop the gangster further as the vigilante of economic justice to the audience. The audience sees one of their own community members represented in film by the gangster figure. These figures become a Joaquin Murieta for their respective communities, resisting oppression through violence and balancing the unfair economic oppression. The same narrative structure guiding the understanding of Murieta as a vigilante hero is attached to these gangster figures. They are glorified and seen as attaining the American Dream that has been denied or deferred to the viewing audience on account of their ethnicity. It is also an updating of the social bandit/vigilante of economic justice from the Western frontier of Murieta's times to the modern urban environments of the East in America. However, these figures that can be viewed as a vigilante hero of economic justice by their respective communities, are the same figures seen as the villains in the narratives of Batman comics. Batman becomes a vigilante to stop these criminals, and in turn acts as a member of the wealthy elite protecting the urban environment from criminals. This move of one vigilante figure rising to counter another is of particular interest in relation the gangster film genre, and again a demonstration of the unending cycle of violence the myth of the vigilante hero creates.

Another troubling aspect in the gangster film genre is a shift that began in the 1930's onward switching sympathetic focus to the government agents and law enforcement that pursued criminals. This would not appear to be an issue at first, but as the narrative shifts to focus on government agents of law enforcement those agents take on the violent tactics of the gangsters themselves. In these films the representatives of law would become excessively violent and use extralegal violence against the gangsters to defeat them. This starts turning representatives of the law into vigilantes. One of the movie lines that demonstrates this use of extralegal violence comes from Sean Connery in *The Untouchables* (1987): "if they bring a knife you bring a gun, if

they put one of ours in the hospital, we put one of theirs in the morgue.” Here Connery’s character is speaking to Elliot Ness about the tactics he and his government agents need to use against the mob. The most recent incarnation of this narrative construction is in the film *Gangster Squad* (2013). In this film a group of L.A. cops is put together to use any tactic necessary to destroy Mickey Cohen’s criminal empire. At one point, one of the police squad members actually asks what the difference between them and the gangsters are, but this is briefly answered and then pushed aside. Furthermore, the man who is cast as a doubter in the narrative is murdered by the mobsters, and this works to instill the ideal further that to beat the criminal underworld all forms of violent resistance are justified. These few examples establish that the legal authorities can also be mapped onto the myth of the vigilante hero while acting to enforce and protect the established law and order, and this means protecting the old financial order of the wealthy elite at times too.

One final case study, this time a historical narrative, will be examined in relation to vigilantes of economic justice in this chapter – the Virginian mining wars. This is a useful case study as it is a historical narrative that has also been adapted into a Hollywood film and fictionalized. The mining wars involved vigilantism of economic justice from the perspective of both the employers and the employees. The historical narrative constructed by James Green in *The Devil is Here in these Hills* (2015) and William C. Blizzard puts together in *When Miners March* (2004) are both constructed to sympathize with the miners as vigilantes of economic justice, but the violence used by the mining company is also an act of vigilantism aimed towards economic justice from the company’s perspective. It should be noted that William C. Blizzard was a young miner involved in the events of the narrative he constructs. This similar narrative pattern of sympathy for the miners is dramatized in the John Sayles’ film *Matewan* (1987). All

these narratives deal with the major events that lead to the gun fight in the town of Matewan in May of 1920, and the later battle between thousands of miners and thousands of deputies, volunteers and conscripts on Blair mountain in August of 1921. Ultimately, this conflict was one of a company seeking to make as much profit as possible and in the process heaping abuse and exploitation on its workers. As a result of the company oppression workers respond by trying to organize into a union to resist, and the forming of a union was illegal until 1933. The desperate conditions made the miners decide to turn to using violent vigilante action to resist the mining company.

James Green states the aim of his historical narrative in the opening prologue. “But this book is more than a litany of strikes and lockouts, evictions and blacklists, gun battles and armed marches-more than another gruesome chapter in the history of American violence. It is, above all, the story of a people’s fight to exercise freedom of speech and freedom of association in workplaces where the rights of property owners had reigned supreme” (6-7). This historical narrative is framing itself as telling a story of achieving and protecting rights, but this is also tied to making heroes of those who engage in violent action, and this narrative also exposes that vigilante action from both sides can be idealized depending on the perspective of the conflict that an individual has when engaging with the narrative by mapping it onto the myth of the vigilante hero.

These books and the film all draw attention to injustices that were occurring, but they frame the vigilante actions as heroic from the miners and those that were sympathetic to them. In this case the narratives establish the injustices that the miners are made to experience, and these are all linked to economic injustice. Coal mining was a dangerous and dirty job. The miners were not paid well, and on top of their poor pay they were made to buy all their food, equipment and

rent spaces to stay from the company that they worked for. The miners could not seek to buy anything from outside the company store. The company charged higher rates for materials and food than any other store would, and miners had little option but to accept these oppressive conditions. This led the miners to begin a strike, and when they went on strike, they were forced to live in tent towns off the company property. These camps would be attacked by gunfire from trains and the woods. These gun fights between the miners and mining company operatives are documented by Blizzard and Green in their texts.

Blizzard points out the difference of the legal protection offered to those that worked on behalf of the mining company. “[I]f you were a miner, and carried a gun or pulled a trigger your chances of becoming a convict were excellent. But if you represented the coal operators – as did DE FACTO if not DE JURE, the Baldwin-Felts guards, the railway detectives, the variety of special police officers and the state militia – and carried a gun or pulled a trigger, your chance of getting a good salary, a promotion, and praise from the Governor, were excellent. Both sides in the struggle, certainly, used guns. But for one side there were penalties. For the other, none” (66). This double standard is reminiscent of Judge Henry’s position as a wealthy ranch owner enlisting his men to vigilante action against cattle rustlers in *The Virginian*. All the violence used by the coal operators was done to ensure higher profits from limited pay to their miners and ensuring most of that pay would be returned to them by the miners providing for themselves and their family through the company store. The real irony is that the money used to hire the Baldwin-Felts detective agency workers could have been used to simply pay the miners more.

For the miners they begin to see the need to shoot and kill mine guards and Baldwin-Felts detectives because of the brutality that was directed at the wives and children of the miners by these men and not just at the miners themselves (49-51). We see the idea of defense of the family

and homestead underlying the miner's turn to violent vigilante tactics. The investigations that were mounted into the crimes were ignored, or charges against violent actions of murder were not brought against those working on behalf of the mining operators. Blizzard constructs the narrative to present the limited options that the miners had, and a turn to violence was necessary and just. This mirrors the impulse and push that is presented of Joaquin as a noble and heroic man. Vigilante violence in these narratives is again needed to counteract the vigilante violence that the mining operators were allowed to utilize. Again, demonstrating the unending cycle of violence the myth of the vigilante creates.

On May 19th in 1920 the sheriff of Matewan, Sid Hatfield and his deputies get into a gunfight with Baldwin-Felts detectives brought in by the mining operators. Hatfield was sympathetic to the miners' cause, and he turned vigilante as a law enforcement officer to engage in vigilante violence. He exceeds his legal role and office and turns vigilante – much like Judge Henry, but on behalf of the miners instead of the wealthy elite. It is interesting to note that one of the few times that the law is presented as working on behalf of the miners in the narrative is when the sheriff engages in vigilante action. This presents the idea that the only way to resist the extreme power of the corrupt mining company is not through legal means, but instead through extralegal violence.

There are non-violent options of civil disobedience that could be used. The miners could have organized into a union illegally, but this would have allowed for a non-violent form of resistance. Henry David Thoreau argues in his essay "Civil Disobedience" (1849) that individuals should sooner break any law "[t]hat it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another" (8). He argues that individuals should pull themselves and their property from the state as way to non-violently resist the injustice of the state (8). Thoreau was making this argument as

a push to abolitionists to grow more radical in their resistance to injustice, but to be more radical did not necessitate to be more violent. This is important as abolition is also a cause related to creating more social and economic justice within the nation, and the motivations behind slavery were also economic. However, civil disobedience is not a form of resistance that law enforcement is familiar with utilizing.

There is a logic that law enforcement who have changed their sympathy to those who are breaking the law will use the same oppressive force as they are familiar with using on behalf of the state. Therefore, an armed stand-off between the sheriff and his deputies and the company hired private detectives (also used to using state-like force tactics on behalf of their employers) results in a shoot-out. This shootout becomes the climax of the film *Matewan*. In the film Hadfield is killed in the shootout and so is the representative of the union who is working throughout the film to organize the miners and push for non-violent resistance. The way this film ends seems to reinforce that only the use of vigilante violence can resist the company power and offer the possibility of justice. This was the exact conclusion the miners reached with the battle between two vigilante groups on Blair mountain.

All of these narratives draw attention to the injustice that existed in the mining practice and was kept in place through violence and laws that protect the employer and not the workers. A great deal of the legal and political system was rigged against the workers as the laws were made by the politicians whose campaigns would get funding and assistance from the wealthy mine operators. It was only when the violence grew to extremes with thousands involved in gun fighting and use of canons and bombs on each other that politicians had to step in, or risk not being re-elected by the citizenry at large. This is because the general citizenry, who were not a part of the wealthy elite exploiting others, would also have sympathy for the miners. As Green's

text states, “[I]n a country born of revolution sparked by volunteer minutemen-a nation committed to the right of citizens to bear arms and seek redress of their grievances-government officials had tended to grant leniency to those who rebelled against injustice and defied government authorities in doing so” (296-297).

William Blizzard and the other miners charged with creating the miner vigilante army were acquitted, and this helps to further legitimate their actions and set them as heroes in the narrative. This is similar to the way Bernhard Goetz became viewed as a local folk hero after being acquitted of his subway shootings. While there was violence and corruption that occurred on both side of this conflict, the narrative is often presented to demonstrate the miners as the positive figures and idealize their vigilantism. I would like to say it would be difficult in contemporary times to construct a narrative of these events that attempts to side with the mining operators and legitimate their use of violence or breaking the law, but many politicians engage in doing just this, and there is no doubt that at the time the operators felt justified in their violent vigilante tactics in the same way Judge Henry felt justified in his.

A final point to raise that comes from Green’s narrative is that in an attempt to try and keep the miners more content the operators put in movie houses in the mining camps. However they “[took] care to select the films to be screened avoiding what one operator called the ‘lurid, unreal wild-west type’ that made heroes out of ‘bad men’ who used pistols to do their talking” (165). The worry about what Western films could represent are displaying a recognition of the power of the myth of the vigilante hero that could inspire miner violent action. The irony is that it was the mining operators who refused to negotiate with miners and first used guns to do their talking, only afterwards did the miners respond in kind. However, Sayles’ film and the texts of

Green and Blizzard all help to further replicate the myth of the vigilante hero because they all legitimate the use of vigilante tactics from an oppressed economic position.

While there may not have been many options, and it certainly may have seemed at the time for those involved in the conflict that violence was the only option, it must be remembered that it was only changing laws and legislation that brought any real resolution or justice to the conflict. What also needs to be considered is if the historical narratives should be constructed and released in contemporary times that present the miners as heroes and legitimate their violent actions. Certainly, the miners' oppression by the mining corporations and the complicity of government should have attention called to it in historical narrative. More focus should be made of what legal alterations were required and how those processes occurred to examine how pressure can be exerted without the descent into violence and vigilantism. There are dangers in presenting violent vigilante actions from the position of the miners as positive resistance. The focus of the narrative should be on the harsh exploitation and the legal issues that allowed such actions to occur, and heavy condemnation of vigilante tactics of the miners and those sympathetic to them, but even more so of the mining company and their hired guns. The violence of these narratives follows the formula of the myth of the vigilante hero, and they will only perpetuate a cycle of violence in the views and potential actions of labor relations. This is not an effective way to create change because no change will occur, but only a loop of violent action being sustained by the same myth being able to be mapped onto both class positions.

It is complicated to condemn the actions as illegitimate for a cause that in contemporary culture we view as just. The desire is to laud the struggle to progress towards justice in whatever form it takes, but it is likely to do more harm than good to support any use of violence in pursuit of economic justice. It makes heroes of violent employees, and of violent criminals alike; it can

also be used by those in power to legitimate violence to preserve the economic security they feel entitled to from their perspective whether the majority of society thinks the view is misguided or not. The complications of framing a vigilante as a hero who acts on behalf of social justice will be explored in the next chapter. Often social justice causes can be entwined with economic justice, and contemporary culture is more ready to champion all those who work on behalf of such causes. This will create new layers of complication for the myth of the vigilante hero, and the ways it creates cycles of violence that cannot be escaped from.

Chapter 5: Vigilantes of Social Justice: Natives, Competing Narratives, and Oppressive State Violence

The Native author Thomas King states: “[t]he truth about stories is that’s all we are” (2). King also quotes the Native writer Gerald Vizenor, “[t]here isn’t any center to the world but a story” (32). These precepts of Indigenous thought are essential to Native identity and Native worldviews. A focus on the construction of narratives and stories is also very relevant for the function of the formula for the myth of the vigilante hero in America. This chapter will explore case studies of narratives of different Native vigilante groups and the use of government vigilante tactics to highlight a particularly unique context of the myth of the vigilante hero: vigilantes of social justice.

In the preceding chapter the narrative of Joaquin Murieta was constructed and presented by a Native writer. This narrative turned the tables on the common perspective of the vigilante of social justice as vigilantes who sought to expel corrupting influences of non-white Americans when building their communities. There is a shared sense of injustice around the issue of land ownership, and land once belonging to Murieta, much like the land of Natives, being taken through violence by Americans. This is not a situation that Native communities are unfamiliar with in American history.

The differing communities of Natives in America offer a unique context that places them in a constant outsider position within the space of the United States. The spaces that they occupy and recognize as their land are spread between the two national boundaries of the United States and Canada. Natives have been placed onto reservations in both of these nations, and as a result

are seen by non-Natives and the government of these nations as present within the nation state, but also made to feel as outsiders of it. At the same time the governments of the nation states will interfere and seek to direct the affairs of Native populations within their borders. This all results in the Native experience within the United States still finding themselves colonized by the American government. The colonial experience for Indigenous communities, along with other ethnic minorities, did not end with the Revolutionary War.

The cited passage from Allende's *Zorro* in the previous chapter demonstrates the violence that was historically used to drive Natives off their lands. This aggressive use of force and violence against them left the only way for the Natives to offer resistance was through violence in the form of self -defense until they were defeated by the Americans in war. Like any conquered group, they were forced to accept a peace on the American terms as conquerors. This resulted in Native's land being reduced to reservations, limiting the access to services from the government, and at the same time being under the government's constant surveillance, interference, and control. The systematic oppression of Natives in America is laid out thoroughly by Dee Brown in his work *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (1970). For any Native population they are placed in a precarious position through colonization of being both their own nation, and a part of another nation, such as the United States that has colonized their land, conquered them or both; therefore, they are always placed in a liminal position. They are a part of a Native community, part of a reservation community, and also bound by the laws and regulations of the United States. This becomes a very important context of Native experience to be considered when examining Native vigilante figures.

If a vigilante is defined as an individual or a group who takes the law into their own hands through the use of violence in pursuit of their view of justice, it is very important to

consider whose law a vigilante is taking into their own hands. If a Native is always in a position of being within multiple national contexts, then there are already two different national laws influencing the thought and actions of these individuals. There are two different codes that this individual is aware of and trying to live within. These codes are not always complementary, and the two different codes of law are not going to be considered equal by each nation that a Native individual belongs to, nor may they be seen as equal by any Indigenous individual who is living in this liminal state. It is also true that every nation has its own culture and unwritten rules that police the behavior and actions of individuals in the society but outside of its legal codes. These are what Althusser is meaning through his discussion of RSAs and ISAs. The rules for Native communities imposed by the American Government, as well as by their own Tribal Councils, act as RSAs that can be upheld through force, but there are also the unwritten norms of the community and conduct within it that operate as ISAs which individuals impose on themselves from ideological positions associated to their state and community. These layers of complication will be teased out by examining the vigilante violence on the Pine Ridge reservation in the 1970s. The divisions between the corrupt tribal council leader, members of the American Indian Movement – AIM activists - and government agents culminate in violent vigilante action and murder as a way to resist oppression and obtain social justice. This historical case has also been adapted and fictionalized in other media forms to have the violence mapped onto the myth of the vigilante hero.

The experience of Natives within American culture is a colonized experience. There is a great deal of injustice experienced by all Indigenous groups. As Fanon explains “[t]he violence which governed the ordering of the colonial world, which tirelessly punctuated the destruction of the Indigenous social fabric, and demolished unchecked systems of reference of the country’s

economy, lifestyle, mode of dress, this same violence will be vindicated and appropriated when, taking history into their own hands, the colonized swarm the forbidden cities” (Fanon 6). Fanon points up the great systemic violence Natives endured because of colonialism, but he also points to the violence being appropriated through decolonization. The colonial violence of the American state is one linked to the ethos of the vigilante hero. It is this violence that Native groups will appropriate to undo the injustices they have experience. The systemic violence of colonialism is also an experience that unifies the colonizer – Americans – and increases tribal divisions among the colonized (Fanon 51). This aspect of the systemic violence will also be highlight through tewing the case study of the Pine Ridge reservation.

Althusser discusses the ways that a state uses force to control the behavior of its citizens through direct action – the repressive state apparatus (RSA), but there is also the ways that individuals will learn and then police themselves in relation to the ideas the state offers them as a norm – ideological state apparatus (ISA). One could also think of this in relation to the RSA being representative of the nation’s legal code, and the ISA being associated to the social rules/boundaries/conventions/norms of the nation’s/community’s culture. Native individuals are under the influence of two different sets of RSAs and ISAs as a result of their constant existence between two national contexts. This is seen with Natives who leave the reservations but cannot find a place within American culture because of the systemic racism. Many Natives who shared that experience went on to found and join AIM. Later when they returned to reservations for activist actions, as well as reconnect with their roots, they were not accepted as they were seen as outsiders who had left the tribe. This division was present on the Pine Ridge reservation and is explained by Peter Matthiessen in his work *In the Spirit of Crazy Horse* (1983).

When contradiction or conflict is found between the two systems at the level of RSAs, ISAs, or between a set of RSAs and ISAs, each individual is going to have to decide which system they wish to recognize as the correct system. Or another way of stating this is the individual must decide which system they feel is just. This issue is at stake with land claims that Natives have in relation to the federal and state level of government in America – the relationship to the Black Hills for both nations can be considered as a concrete example. It is a sacred site to Natives, but to American culture it is seen as an important resource for mining and tourism from carvings on Mount Rushmore. This land was gotten through a rewriting of a treaty without proper consent from the Natives, and when the chiefs refused to accept government declarations there was the threat of holding back food rations, relocating the Natives, and the army would seize the Native's guns and horses (Brown 300). Should Natives accept the ownership of land that the State government claims, or should they resist and assert their claim to the land that was stolen from them? Such questions display the complications of individuals and communities trying to determine which set of laws are proper or just. This is the same as selecting which story forms the center of their world – their worldview.

While the position of Natives is extra complicated, they are not the only group or individuals that can have conflict or contradiction between the legal law of a nation/RSAs and the social rules and norms of a nation/ISAs. If ISAs reflect and create the norms of a society or community then it means that those who follow and fit to these norms the best will have the greatest success within the space of that state or community. This will prove to hold even more truth if such individuals never transgress the legal codes/RSAs of the nation state. However, contradictions can exist between the two levels of a nation's legal code and its social norms. The structures that Althusser puts forward are not a perfect fit in an American context because of its

strong libertarian tradition; it is also important to consider the different levels of government at work from the federal government, state government and municipal governments. However, Althusser's argument helps to give some terminology and ideas around the complexities at work in the case studies of this chapter.

The tension between RSAs, ISAs from different perspectives in America was present from the inception of the nation with the drafting of the Declaration of Independence. The Declaration states that all men were created free and equal while the nation state was allowed to oppress and enslave minorities. Now if the nation does not accept minorities as men then it is not a contradiction, but the members of minorities, such as the Natives, are left to decide if they accept the position as less than human in the ISAs, or to resist it and develop their own ISAs. This is equally applicable to the black slaves within America's nation space as well. This is just one example of a myriad of possible examples that can be given in an American context. These examples also highlight the relationship between individuals, communities and the state in an American colonial context that Fanon describes as a "world divided in two...inhabited by different species. The singularity of the colonial context lies in the fact that economic reality, inequity, and enormous disparities of lifestyles never manage to mask the human reality...it is clear what divides this world is first and foremost what race one belongs to (Fanon 5). Fanon's arguments point up the experience of injustice that can push vigilantes of social justice, but also demonstrate the inescapable link of economic conditions linked to ideas of social justice. Those who benefit the most through the RSAs and ISAs will view both as being just in organizing the nation state, but for individuals and communities who fall outside of the norms of the state its RSAs and ISAs will be viewed as unjust. The difficult positions that individuals find themselves in are the unjust position that Thoreau argues should push individuals to resist the State and

engage in civil disobedience. Such civil disobedience was engaged in by factions and members of AIM, but at times they would also resort to vigilante violence.

The further outside of the norms of the ISAs one falls the more unjust the system/state will appear. This can and historically has led individuals and communities to utilize vigilante methods to pursue their sense of justice. Such methods become even more attractive when the myth of the vigilante hero allows those who use these tactics to become heroes within their community context. If the state RSAs and ISAs become altered to move closer to justice for all bound under them, then the original populations who benefitted the most from these codes could perceive the changes as unjust, and they may turn to vigilante tactics to regain what they have lost. Again, this demonstrates how the myth of the vigilante hero creates an unending cycle of violence. This complicated cycle of violence can be demonstrated by a case study of vigilantism on The Pine Ridge reservation that also reflects the complexities of the Native community existing within a liminal national context. The Pine Ridge reservation was a space reduced to house the Lakota tribe and was among the poorest reservations in the 1970s (Matthiessen xx-xxii).

It has slowly started to be accepted as common knowledge that the Natives have a long history of oppression, broken treaties, and violence being enacted upon them by the white, dominant culture of North America. This has been researched and publicized by authors such as Benjamin Madley. Most of the violence and oppression that was directed towards the Natives was considered legal. For example, in California throughout the 1850s a number of official militia movements were funded by the local governments with sheriffs deputizing individuals and providing them arms and ammunition to go and kill Natives (Madley 203). In cases where citizens were not being asked to volunteer into militia through official government channels, they

would instead form vigilante gangs to hunt Natives. These vigilantes were never held accountable for their actions because of the racist ISAs operating within the United States. “[V]igilantes feared no repercussions from state or federal authorities and they continued killing Indians” (226). As a result, the Native communities could find or perceive little justice in the actions and stories told by the American government and its people. When the Lakota tried to make treaties with the Americans these treaties were frequently broken, starting with 1868 treaty made with Red Cloud at Fort Laramie (Matthiessen 7). This treaty formed the Great Sioux Reservation in South Dakota, which kept getting shrunk in size until it consisted of four very small areas of land; one of these became Pine Ridge reservation and the other three became the Rosebud, Eagle Butte, and Little Eagle reservations.

The connection that a tribe has to their land is a spiritual connection and this concept is explained in Blair Stonechild’s *The Knowledge Seeker* (2016). Stonechild states that for Native communities the sense of self and wellbeing is a holistic approach tied to relationships – the relationship between physical and spiritual, the self and community, and the self and community to the environment (57). On the original Great Sioux Reservation, the Black Hills were a part of the land given in the treaty. The Black Hills, as mentioned before, were and are seen as a sacred site for some members of the Native community. The wish to maintain the connection and stewardship over their land and territory makes it easy to see how the loss of such land and spiritual sites would be viewed as unjust from the perspective of the Native communities. This injustice became heightened when the government turned the sacred site of the Black Hills into the gaudy tourist attraction Mount Rushmore. Moreover, on a lot of the reservation land there were uranium and coal deposits discovered, including all throughout the Black Hills, so the American government continued to push in and reclaim the majority of the land that was

originally ceded to the Natives in the 1868 treaty. The discovery of these resources led the white industrialists to seek control over them for profit and power. The inability to access them and make use of them because of the treaty, and the Native's non-interest in exploiting these resources in the land, was viewed as unjust from the American perspective. These two perspectives offer competing stories in relation to the land and the actions engaged upon it by both groups.

The two competing ISAs in relation to the land of the Great Sioux Reservation of 1868 are what led to two divergent perspectives and stories being told within the space of the Pine Ridge reservation in the 1970s as Peter Mathiessen lays out. On the reservation there were divisions formed between two groups of Natives – “the Bloods” and “the Skins.” The Skins were meant to represent the term redskin and was the group of traditionalists who sought to hold onto the old way of life and resist the changes being enforced by American government's RSAs and ISAs. The Bloods were meant to represent half-bloods; these distinctions are explained in Michael Apted's documentary *Incident at Oglala* (1992). The term Bloods was also meant to describe Natives who were considered progressives and wished to work with the United States government and Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). It is also worth noting that as of 1885 the BIA and American government had jurisdiction and control of investigation and punishment of major crimes on reserves because of the Major Crimes Act (Matthiessen 16). This again highlights the dual national context that the Natives on the reservation found themselves in. This also draws attention to the way that colonial systemic violence increases division and tribalism.

Richard “Dick” Wilson got himself elected as head of the Oglala tribal council on Pine Ridge reservation. He had lavish campaign spending, which the source of the money has not been made clear, but because he was “violently anti-AIM” it is suggested that the government

supported moving him into a position of power “despite a long history of previous exploitation of his people” (60). When he became head of the tribal council, he also became chief of the Tribal Police. Wilson used his position as head of Tribal Police to maintain political power and make money through controlling the funds given to the tribal council by the government. He also used his position as chief to assist in land leasing deals to get kickbacks from the government. Wilson was being opposed and resisted by Skins and traditionalists on the reservation, and in response Wilson created vigilante squads to use violence against any Natives who opposed his rule. Wilson and his vigilantes felt they were making good decisions for themselves in their decision making and governing choices. They viewed the actions of those opposing them as misguided and a product of being stuck in the past. This allowed Wilson and his vigilantes to view themselves as heroic and construct the narrative of their actions as justified. This narrative position that Wilson and his vigilantes held also made the BIA and government support Wilson and his actions as it was beneficial to their interests. Sometimes such support was shown through official inaction. An example of this is the lack of investigations made into the numerous assaults and murders that occurred on the reservation by Wilson’s GOON (Guardians of Oglala Nation) squad of vigilantes. Since the BIA would not respond to Wilson and the GOONs action on reservation, the Skins asked for AIM’s assistance in using vigilante tactics against Wilson and his vigilantes (100).

This now creates two different vigilante groups of Natives on the same reservation. One can see the two competing narratives at work, and both offer support of vigilante action and idealize it from two opposite perspectives. By examining a statement made by Dick Wilson we can see how he constructs his position as a positive force from his personal perspective in the narrative. “What has happened at Wounded Knee is all part of a long range plan of the

Communist Party...There is no doubt that Wounded Knee is a major Communist thrust...And when the Fed. Gov. has yielded, conceded, appeased and just short of surrender, we will march into Wounded Knee Tokas, wasicus, hasapas and spiolas...They want to be martyrs? We will make it another Little Big Horn!! And any of their beatnik friends can be a stand-in for Yellow Hair” (Matthiessen 73). This quotation clearly shows the violent intent of Wilson and his vigilantes, and it presents their murdering of agitators to the defeat of Custer – a moment of heroic victory in battle to the Native community. Wilson’s bringing Communism into the discussion shows his intent to have government and FBI support for his violent actions. This tactic was likely to work as Communism had always been a longstanding enemy of the state from the FBI’s position to use RSAs against. However, those opposed to Wilson would view his vigilante violence as akin to the crime of slaughter that occurred to Native civilians and families at Wounded Knee by the American government that Wilson was viewed as acting as a puppet for.

Wilson’s statement can be compared alongside part of a statement that Russell Means made. Means was one of the head figures of AIM and delivered the following statement at Wounded Knee during an occupation and armed standoff between AIM and Wilson. “You’re going to have to kill us. Because I’m not going to die in some bar room brawl. I’m not going to die in a car wreck on some lonely road on the reservation because I’ve been drinking to escape the oppression of this goddamn society. I am not going to die when I walk into Pine Ridge and Dickie’s goons feel I should be offed. That’s not the way I’m going to die. I’m going to die fighting for my treaty rights. Period...” (Matthiessen 76). This quotation is also establishing the vigilante ideals being put forward by AIM to justify and romanticize their armed and violent actions against Wilson and the United States government. Means is drawing on a narrative of

AIM being warriors of the Native nation at war against their oppressors. He is framing them as braves instead of as vigilantes or criminals that most of the mainstream media at the time was labeling them. Regardless of the terms being used the narrative Means is constructing is mapping AIM activists onto the myth of the vigilante hero. Both of these quotes are selected by Matthiessen to demonstrate the different ISA positions involved on the space of the reservation, but he does not draw attention to the implications of how both these ISAs connect with myth of the vigilante hero.

AIM was not a movement that developed in a vacuum, nor was it a coherent unity. It developed in the late 1960s growing and developing further into the 1970s. This was part of a Red Power movement following the lead of the Black Power movement of the Black Panthers – another vigilante group and movement that lacked a complete unity. Both the Black Panthers and AIM were viewed as heroes by their supporters, and within the growing separate chapters of the larger organizations. By the mainstream media and law enforcement they were branded as dangerous criminals. Both of these groups of vigilantes of social justice are seeking to us violence to find justice by becoming decolonized by the United States government. However, this is just perpetuating an inescapable cycle of violence by appropriating the violence of the colonizer. The precise nature of this cycle of violence will be further exposed by looking at the State's reaction to these movements.

As a way yo keep order and remove internal threats to the state, such as The Black Panthers, the FBI were engaging in their illegal COINTELPRO operations. COINTELPRO was an operational name used within the FBI for illegal surveillance, counterintelligence and disruptive operations against U.S. citizens. J. Edgar Hoover began these operations in the 1950s when he had craftily gotten attorney general Tom Clark to approve extending Hoover's powers

to wiretap and investigate at will because Clark was not carefully reading all the documents and requests in the unending paperwork and reports that Hoover constantly sent him (Gentry 324). This expansion of powers allowed Hoover to operate with limited oversight, and when questions were raised about what the FBI was doing he would claim an inability to divulge details for the protection of confidential informants. Many times, these informants were planted bugs or illegal wiretaps as was exposed later by ex-agent Wesley Swearingen in his work *FBI Secrets* (1995).

The illegal actions continued to grow throughout the 50s and 60s, and would involve inciting violence between different left-leaning groups, and helping encourage violence or taking credit for deaths of individuals the FBI was targeting when they committed suicide or were killed by other groups and factions. There is also strong evidence and the confession of another agent, Greg York, to Swearingen about the agencies direct involvement in assassinating the Black Panther leader Fred Hampton (Swearingen 88-89). The documents and details of all these crimes have been published and analyzed by Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall in their work *The COINTELPRO Papers* published in 1990. These actions meant the FBI became vigilantes to pursue what the agency, or more accurately Director Hoover, viewed as a just and ordered society. The question could be raised as to whether an entire agency such as the FBI can be considered vigilantes if they are all operating collectively as an agency. The reason the label of vigilante can apply is that vigilantes can be a group, and there is no limit on the size the vigilante group takes. The FBI were engaged in promoting and directly facilitating extralegal violence. The agency shared a worldview of persevering a sense of justice and values that was seen as being under threat. This perceived threat allowed them to justify their lawbreaking to themselves, but they also felt the need to hide their actions from government and public oversight and

scrutiny through recognition that not all may share the agency perception of a just and ordered culture.

The worldview that the FBI held was formed by J. Edgar Hoover from the top down. As one agent William Sullivan states comparing his work in the FBI to that of a soldier at war: “we did what we were expected to do. It became a part of our thinking, part of our personality” (Gentry 281). The vision put forward by Hoover and the FBI as an agent of the state speak to the unifying power of colonialism for the colonizer that Fanon speaks to.

In the early 1970’s the FBI switched the focus of the COINTELPRO program from the Black Panthers to AIM (Mathiessan 55-56). However, other historians of COINTELPRO do not support this and largely argue that the program ceased in the early 1970s. While there are extensive lists and dates for groups and individuals targeted by COINTELPRO supplied by David Cunningham in *There’s Something Happening Here* (2004), AIM is not among their specified targets. Ward Churchill argues that illegal government and FBI oppression continued after COINTELPRO exposure, but that it would be under new code names. “The reality of COINTELPRO’s continuation was masked not only behind dropping of the descriptive title, but a retooling of the terminology utilized to define its targets as well” (Churchill and Wall 304). All of this is to say that there is no clear evidence the FBI was not watching or interfering with AIM in another way, or through another program after COINTELPRO ceased its operations. It does not seem like too much of a stretch given all the illegal actions already exposed by investigation of the COINTELPRO operations.

This now presents two Native groups engaging in vigilantism and the FBI using vigilante tactics in their interventions against social activist groups similar to and that inspired AIM.

Wilson and the GOONS did this to maintain their power and privilege, which was their notion of a just society and norm. AIM viewed the status quo under Wilson and the United States government as corrupt, and vigilante action was needed to obtain a more just and ordered society out from under their power. The final vigilante group in the Pine Ridge shoot-out, based on Mathiessen's narrative and in Apted's documentary, is the FBI. They were breaking the laws they were designed to uphold to ensure the organization's perspective of a just and ordered society. As Curt Gentry summarizes of the FBI, "[h]aving been taught to disregard 'the niceties of law,' they continued to disregard them through the Cold War, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War and in the COINTELPROs – the FBI's own war on dissent" (281). All three groups are holding a different perspective to justify themselves, and to demonize their opposition, but ultimately these narratives justify and idealize the violent tactics of vigilantism in pursuit of social justice. Working on behalf of social justice is absolutely the superior moral position compared to oppression a group because of their ethnicity, but there are more productive ways to engage in resistance that does not turn to vigilante violence as other factions of AIM have demonstrated. The ultimate result of this three-way conflict of vigilantes is the deaths of numerous Natives who were a part of, or supporters of, AIM, as well as the deaths of two FBI agents. In this historical case study, all three ISAs are still in existence, and this leads to continuing narratives being reiterated that may support a different group of vigilantes, but ultimately supports vigilantism. The most productive story that can emerge from this case study is to recognize the error of vigilante tactics being used by all of the positions. Regardless of which one of the perspectives or narratives an individual sympathizes or aligns with, that position is mapped into the myth of the vigilante hero creating a cycle of violence as each group

turns to vigilante violence to confront the other vigilante group that is viewed as the enemy. It is constantly creating an us vs. them mentality between the groups.

It is not just the historical case study of these vigilantes of social justice that can be examined in relation to the Native narratives of vigilantism, but also fictional narratives have been inspired by the historical ones. This mirrors the pattern of move from historical narratives to fictional narratives that was presented in the third chapter of this work. Two specific fictional narratives of Native vigilantism will be examined are the film *Thunderheart* (1992) and the graphic novel series *Scalped* (2007-2012). Both of these fictional narratives draw upon, or mirror, the contexts of the historical events at Pine Ridge reservation, but they also present multiple vigilantes and vigilante groups contained within the narratives fighting for their particular perspective of social justice. *Thunderheart* is set in the 1970 and is presented as being based on similar events that occurred within the historical case at Pine Ridge to offer a wider audience a narrative perspective sympathetic to AIM activists over the dominant American government narrative of the events from the mainstream media at the time.

The film opens with Special Agent Ray Levoi being sent to a Native reservation to investigate a murder. Levoi was selected because his father was Native, so the FBI can claim that they are sending the Native community one of their own to investigate. He is partnered with a local agent, Frank Coutell, who is familiar with the local politics and dynamics on the reservation. Levoi is warned that a civil war exists on the reservation between the tribal council leader and his supporters and the vigilante group of Natives called ARM - a stand in for AIM. The Tribal council leader is named Jack Milton and he has a posse of vigilantes, and these are representative of Wilson and his GOONs. The film even calls Milton's vigilante group GOONs as well. All of the film's set up is reflective of the dual national context that the Native

community finds itself within, and as a result of this context has two different vigilante groups squaring off against each other.

As Ray begins his investigation, he is resisting recognition of his Native background, as well as resisting the aid of the one legitimate tribal police officer Walter Crow Horse who is not under Milton's control. As the film progresses, Levoi is having dreams and visions that are reconnecting him to his spirit memory because of being on the land of the reservation. This brings him closer to his Native heritage and to Walter Crow Horse. Levoi eventually has a vision discovering that his ancestor was a casualty at Wounded Knee, and as he embraces his Native identity, he gains greater success in investigating the murder. As the investigation moves forward there are numerous scenes of vigilante violence from Milton's GOONs being used against the traditionalists on the reservation and ARM members and supporters. Such vigilante violence includes shooting up the house of Maggie Eagle Bear, and results in gunshot wounds to one of her sons, and later in the film vigilantes murder Maggie.

Levoi eventually uncovers that the original murder on the reservation he was sent to investigate was done to cover up the land-selling deals that Milton and agent Coutell are putting together between the reservation and energy companies. These companies wish to come and harvest the uranium deposits that exist in the reservation. Armed pursuit of Levoi and Crow Horse leads to the two of them becoming trapped and nearly executed. They are saved by traditionalists and ARM members who show up armed and surround the other vigilantes planning to kill Levoi and Crow Horse. The armed pursuit against the law agents ends with a standoff between the two vigilante groups. While the film ends with the exposure of the plot going public, Levoi believes it will lead to little change. This ending is part of what presents the film as fiction as it offers a "happier" ending than occurred in the historical events the film's

narrative is drawing on. No eruption of armed conflict and further deaths between the two Native vigilante groups occurs, but in the historical stand-off at Wounded Knee there were a number of casualties and injuries. Part of this alteration from the historical basis of the film could be to give the American audience a greater sense or belief that justice has been partly delivered to the Natives. It is debatable if the film truly gives this closure or simply suggests that it is a momentary peace that will soon become another armed standoff again. This is a further product of the unending cycle of violence produced by the myth of the vigilante hero.

The narrative of this film condemns the vigilante tactics of Milton's GOONs and the corrupt law enforcement agents working on behalf of the government. However, it does support the vigilante tactics of Levoi, ARM members, and traditionalists throughout the film as their worldview is presented as the correct and just worldview. This is a moral position to side with, but the support of any one particular perspective that makes a hero of a vigilante and their tactics opens the door to letting other perspectives of vigilantes from differing positions be accepted as well. In the case of the Pine Ridge events this means that members of Dick Wilson's GOONs can see themselves as acting heroically for the good of the tribe against unlawful outsiders and agitators as a number of them did. It also can allow for the FBI and government agencies to justify their actions through the myth because of the good it offers for securing the nation from the threats that they perceived AIM to be.

The narrative offered in *Thunderheart* supports the vigilantes of social justice that exist on the left of the political spectrum. However other films have been made, and to great popular appeal that support a narrative of vigilante heroes acting for their view of social justice from the political right. An example of how a traditional social order needed to be preserved through vigilante violence can be seen in the film *Birth of a Nation* released in 1915. This film did align

with a more dominant racist ISAs in the time of its creation. Such ISAs have not vanished but are not held as widely through the nation space as they once were. However, the sympathetic perspective towards vigilantes seeking social justice by challenging such ISAs through violence always start with less support because of the existing racist ISAs they challenge. This film idealized and made heroes of the Klu Klux Klan by mapping them onto the myth of the vigilante hero as vigilantes of social justice to preserve the status quo, and the film did this to great critical and commercial success in its time. In fact, Woodrow Wilson “pronounced the tale sad but ‘all too true’” (Vinyard 47). It is the support of such racist ISAs that had a part in shaping Hoover’s worldview that turned the FBI into vigilantes. It is in resistance to such racist ideas and vigilante actions of the past that AIM turned to violent vigilante tactics as a form of resistance. This demonstrates the cycle of violence that the myth of the vigilante hero creates.

The second fictional narrative that will be explored in relation to the Native context in America is the graphic novel series *Scalped*. This text is written by Jason Aaron, an American writer who has no Indigenous background, and the main artist of the series is Serbian. Had the author been Native it would have been more direct connection of the Native community drawing on an American cultural vehicle for the myth of vigilante hero in contemporary times through the form of comics. In the case of this graphic novel series, and the film *Thunderheart*, arguments about cultural appropriation could be raised as those involved in the creation are not members of the Native community, but also reflect engagement and a developments of cultural competency of positions and histories that are different than the cultural position and history shared by the narrative creators. Both texts also raise consciousness to a wider community of the systemic violence and injustices that have and continue to damage Native communities. This may account for the reason there is not a great deal of critique of the narratives as cultural appropriation

because they are raising awareness and are sympathetic to the oppressed position of Natives in America.

The *Scalped* series was distributed by Vertigo comics, a branch of DC comics. This series is set in the present day on the fictional South Dakota reservation Prairie Rose. The reservation is run by Chief Red Crow. In the 1970s Red Crow was a young man and a part of AIM (this fictional narrative directly invokes the actual movement name), and he was involved in violent vigilante actions that resulted in two FBI agents being killed. Later he became chief and a gang lord on the reservation. He uses the tribal police and his own vigilantes to shut down drug operations on the reservation so he can have a monopoly. He also uses violence against those who oppose his rule or get in the way of his creation of a casino on the reservation. These are echoes of Dick Wilson's past as a bootlegger and his exploitation of his people (Matthiessen 60). Red Crow turned to crime and gangsterism as a method of social justice vigilantism from his personal perspective. He knew the racist ISAs of the United States would deny him equal access to wealth and power because of the long history of abuse his community had suffered at the government's hands, so he used violent means to gain it for himself within the space of the reservation. Most gangster narratives are about a minority figure who uses violence to obtain more wealth, power and status; these ideas were discussed in some detail in the previous chapter. These financial and social gains are something that they and their supporters feel is justified as part of their capturing of the good life: their sense of social justice.

The other important character who arrives on the reservation at the beginning of the narrative is Dashiell Bad Horse. He is introduced in a bar fight where he takes on and beats a number of Red Crow's men. As a result, Red Crow offers him a job as a tribal police officer, and hires him to act as one of his vigilantes. Bad Horse accepts this offer. He was raised on the

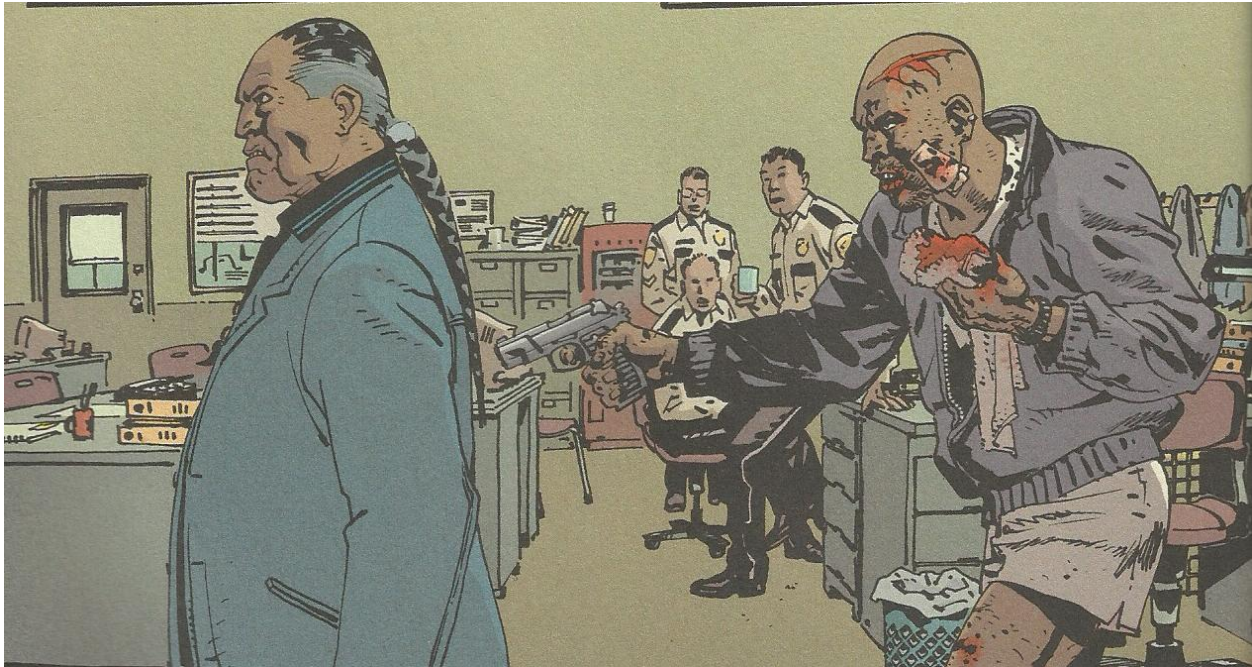
reservation by his mother but left when he was a teenager and has never returned since. Bad Horse has a conflicted relationship towards the reservation, his mother, and with his Native identity. It is also revealed that he is an undercover FBI agent there to find evidence of murder that can be used to arrest Red Crow. Bad Horse is another example of the liminal national context that Native's find themselves within. Even his name reflects this context as the name Dashiell's given is shared by the American hard-boiled author whose stories feature private investigators who are also vigilantes; the first name is mixed with the Native surname of Bad Horse. The below panel shows the visual depiction of Bad Horse. His shaved head gives a visual appeal of action stars that are noted for playing the "bad boy" vigilante hero types such as Dwayne Johnson, Bruce Willis and Vin Diesel. This imagery helps to replicate the formula of the myth of the vigilante hero and echo previous iterations of it in other narratives. Bad Horse's stance is one that is ready for violence and action, and this will be the method he consistently employs in his aims to improve conditions on the reservation.



Above – Dashiell Bad Horse

Dashiell's mother, Gina, is also living on the reservation and is part of an opposition movement against Red Crow. She is murdered, but the culprit is unknown; Red Crow is assumed to be the killer by many individuals, but he grows angry with every accusation as he loved Gina in the past. They were both a part of AIM and involved with the killing of a pair of FBI agents mirroring the historical events on Pine Ridge outlined above. Dashiell is being handled by an FBI agent named Nitz who was involved in investigating Gina and Red Crow back in the 70s but could not make anything criminal stick to press charges. As a result, he has a grudge and is seeking to take down Red Crow by any means necessary. Part of these questionable means involves protecting a second undercover operative who is murdering people on the reservation and keeping him from facing any consequences for such activities. Nitz is also happy to see Bad Horse get murdered if it will allow him to use the criminal action to finally nail Red Crow.

The image below demonstrates a common visual of the vigilante hero that is seen often in films. The heavily bleeding and injured hero eventually brings down his enemy. It is important to note that Bad Horse is actively holding a gun to Red Crow's unarmed back. Red Crow himself has a clearly Native appearance, but the profile view also calls to mind echoes of Marlon Brando in *The Godfather*. For both of these characters the way that they are drawn hold visual hints to Native identity, and non-Native identity. This can be interpreted as a visual representation of the liminal national context in America that all Natives are forced to occupy.



Above: Chief Red Crow being arrested by Bad Horse

The whole of this narrative is a web of various vigilantes, past and present, all seeking to uphold or achieve their worldview of justice. Many of the stories that the characters carry as the center of their worldview are extensions of the narratives of the various vigilante positions in the historical events on Pine Ridge in the 1970s. All of the narratives are given components to offer sympathy or possible justification for the characters actions. However, in each case it is left for the reader to decide which vigilante narratives they will align themselves with and idealize the vigilante actions engaged in by that character as justified. This mirrors the same way that a historical narrative of the events at Pine Ridge can be constructed to become sympathetic towards one group position over another and ultimately reinforcing the us vs. them mentality.

Some examples of various vigilante narratives placed throughout the graphic novels would be helpful. One of Red Crow's gangster aides is named Shunka. It is revealed as the series progresses that he is gay, and he is trying to hide this fact. He is also a brutal and violent man

and would be looked down upon if his sexuality was known within the hyper-masculine culture in which he is steeped. When he is visiting another reservation dealing with another corrupt and gangster-like tribal council, with which Red Crow has business, Shunka ends up killing all of them. He does this because of their derogatory language about another gay Native whom they had murdered and whom Shunka had once slept with. This violent act is meant to be understood as an act of a social vigilante, and it justifies the violence compared to other violence this character engages in against Bad Horse. Shunka is not engaging in the action to avenge the particular Native man whom he barely knew. He is instead acting as a vigilante to fight the oppressive homophobic views of the Native community, and the oppressive masculinity of the men he associates with in his work.

As the story progresses Agent Nitz is caught for crossing the lines and is going to be dismissed from the FBI for the way he has been running undercover agents on the reservation in his personal vendetta against Red Crow. Nitz plans to go out into the country and commit suicide, but he can't pull the trigger. Instead he finds a meth house and figures he will charge in with the aim of engaging in a gun fight to punish the criminals, and if he gets lucky, he too will die in the process. He ends up killing all of the criminals inside but Nitz also lives. It is then revealed that the men in the meth house were actually a terrorist cell, and Nitz is hailed as a hero and brought back into the FBI and made the head of a new counter terror task force. He decides to pursue anyone who conducted business or did deals with the terrorists, and conveniently for Nitz, Red Crow is one of those figures. This opens up the importance of choice of terms in this narrative as only this one group is labelled a terrorist. Others may be referred to as gangsters and criminals at points, but never terrorists. Regardless of the other labels applied to them, all of

these figures should also be read as vigilantes to demonstrate the danger of the cycle of violence the myth of the vigilante creates.

However, all of the competing narratives of vigilante violence simply perpetuate a constant cycle of violence, and lead to the observation of one of the reservation residents that “there is no center any longer and the sacred tree is dead” (Aaron *Indian Country* 120). The character who states this is named Catcher and is one of the few alive on the reservation that was involved in the historical events that link Red Crow, Gina, and Nitz together. In the end it is revealed that he is the man who killed Gina and is acting as a vigilante force to help bring change to the reservation. His aim is to wipe all the past away to make a new the potential of opportunity for the future of Natives. The idea that there is no center anymore because there is no story that can hold and make the world is an important idea to unpack. The core story of this narrative and many of the individuals in it is the myth of the vigilante hero, and that only leads to an unending cycle of violence. This offers the critique that all of the narratives of vigilantes woven into this text are flawed, and the romanticizing of the vigilantes is a mistake that will only upset balance rather than ever being able to restore it or offer a just position to all parties concerned. The irony of this critique is that the one figure who recognizes this flaw is also trapped by the myth of the vigilante hero because Catcher’s attempt to solve the problem is through turning to vigilante violence as well.

The risk of this complex narrative is whether a reader can see the critique being offered at this point in the series or are they instead simply being seduced by one or a couple of the vigilantes’ stories and worldviews. The issue is further complicated by the critique being raised as a result of vigilante violence. This risk of the reader being seduced by the myth of the vigilante hero is increased by using the form of the graphic novel, which frequently features

vigilante narratives framing the vigilante as a hero. However, the potential to offer lasting critique in the series vanishes by the end of the narrative, and it firmly reestablishes the myth of the vigilante hero from the narrative perspective of Bad Horse.

By the end of the narrative Bad Horse manages to bring down Red Crow, and to kill all of his gang members and vigilantes such as Shunka. He also ends up killing Nitz who was using him and crosses the line into vigilantism and corruption in pursuit of Red Crow. However, after all the bloodshed and violence Red Crow and Bad Horse strike a bargain. Red Crow ultimately views Bad Horse as a force to bring positive change. Red Crow held the same view of himself once as an AIM vigilante activist, and later as a gangster posing as a vigilante of social justice. However, he has now come to realize his gangster actions were a pose as a vigilante of social justice and failed in creating social justice for the community. The narrative ends with all the older generation who attempted to create change and offer resistance in the 1970s dying – Nitz, Gina, Catcher. All of them have died except for Red Crow who abandons his role as tribal chief and goes off to live independently in the wilderness – a return to cultural roots. The past has died, and this seems to fulfill Catcher’s vision of bringing a new center to the world, but this center ends up being the myth of the vigilante hero as represented by Bad Horse. It leaves a new collection of activists headed up by Bad Horse’s new girlfriend acting as the governing power on the reservation.

Bad Horse is being hunted for the killing of FBI agent Nitz; however, the reader is meant to see this as unfair because Nitz was corrupt and the narrative is constructed to make the reader sympathize with Bad Horse’s vigilante hero position. He leaves the reservation after operating as the violent force to bring a new era of social change and possibilities. Bad Horse fills the role of Slotkin’s notion of the man who knows Indians and makes way for civilization. Slotkin’s

conception was that the frontiersman acted as the bridge that could relate to, and ultimately offer dominance over the Natives to allow civilization to form. However, the frontiersman could not exist in the space of civilization as he was. He would need to adapt or vanish, and this mythic formula was played out across James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking novels. This was also true of the role of the frontier in Turner's thesis for its importance in shaping the history and the character of Americans. The frontiersman and space of the frontier were explained and presented in American culture as adapting or disappearing, and as a result this was also applied to the American perception of Natives who would adapt or become the vanishing Indian. Of course, a good deal of that vanishing would be at the hands of white vigilantes. Bad Horse offers the reservation, the world of the narrative, a new story to form its center because of his actions. However, he is a Native who opens the way for Natives in an inversion of Slotkin's idea. Bad Horse is the Indian who knows Whites because he left the reservation and associated himself to the institutions and systems of America when he joined the FBI. It was these experiences that allowed him to return and open up the new possibilities for the reservation through his vigilante actions.

Red Crow ends the narrative alive, but now is shown as a loner wandering in the country with a dog as his one companion on the reservation wilderness. He has walked away from power and status and is attempting to return to more nomadic roots. His crimes and oppressions seem largely forgotten and he will live out the rest of his days at peace. This end for Red Crow implies some support for his violent actions since they were largely directed by noble principles in the way the narrative perspective is constructed. It is the noble principles directing Bad Horse's vigilante actions that also put him forward as a hero in the perspective of the narrative. The harshest critique of Bad Horse is the juxtaposing of panels showing his new girlfriend is

pregnant as he is seen driving out of the reservation, presumably for good. At the narrative's end Bad Horse's identity as a father is being given more criticism than the violent vigilante actions he has engaged in.

The overall narrative manages to present many different vigilante positions, but both conceive of themselves as a vigilante of social justice, and Red Crow ends up seeing Bad Horse as a potential heir to lead the reservation in the proper direction. Bad Horse is recognized as a more effective vigilante hero than Red Crow was able to make himself to be. Red Crow's perspective on Bad Horse is offered up to be shared by the reader. The narrative takes the liminal context of the Native reservation and the ISAs within it, and neatly packages it into the myth of the American vigilante hero.

The vigilante of social justice is potentially the most dangerous form that this mythic figure can take. For those vigilantes of social justice who are portrayed as left-leaning or liberal on the political spectrum, the ends and motivations of many of these figures are easy to get behind. The ideals of equity, freedom, and security are all ideals that many individuals can be in support of and understand the desire for. This is precisely what AIM was working to achieve through their vigilante actions, as were the Black Panthers through theirs. While in the beginning the Black Panthers would focus on visibly marching and displaying arms as a method to police the police, they later started engaging in violent actions and opening fire on the police as Jake Winters did on November 13th, 1969 (Bloom and Martin Jr. 236-237). These movements had positive ideals, and at times the members would face violence and oppression in their pursuit of their goals. It is easy to view these figures as heroic and turn a blind eye to their violent vigilante tactics if not outright justifying their actions as necessary to acquire justice. This occurs because the audience of these vigilante narratives share political perspectives of the vigilantes and

therefore view them as being morally right. However, therein lies the danger. As soon as vigilante violence can be supported when engaged on behalf of what is deemed morally right it opens the door to the next important question: who is deciding what is moral?

There will be no consensus on this question because different communities and individuals have a different understanding of what is moral, and what is the “good” thing to do. So, if it is justified for one group to use vigilantism in its pursuit of good, then how can it be wrong for another group to do the same. If AIM is justified in their use of violence, then Wilson and his GOONS can be justified in theirs. This is not to argue that the two groups hold the same kinds of power and position in the community. Wilson was exercising violence from a position of authority that oppressed others. This is not a morally superior position to many, but certainly Wilson and his GOONS felt they were right to do what they were doing. If violent resistance for any cause is presented as a valid tool to gain social justice, then violence will be exercised in pursuit of the slippery idea of social justice. Often rhetoric around issues of oppression and social justice are couched in terms of survival and self-preservation from both sides of the political spectrum. This is not to say that an individual is not entitled to defend themselves if they face imminent death and bodily harm, but vigilantes of social justice often instigate violence against others in the name of rectifying and resisting large systemic inequalities and oppressions. These systems are not always working on the level of subjective violence, nor are they actually presenting cases of literal concern for survival and self-preservation. The myth of the vigilante hero in the context of social justice can also be used to justify violent vigilante action to defend the cultural status quo and ISAs that is perceived as being threatened. This has been demonstrated by the actions the FBI have engaged in, as well as by the vigilantes hunting

Natives throughout California. Mapping violent tactics on behalf of social justice onto the myth of the vigilante hero creates a vicious and dangerous cycle of violence.

The recent events in Charlottesville offer another take on vigilantism of social justice. A removal of a statue of Robert E. Lee led to a protest and rally from “Unite the Right” and various white supremacist and neo-Nazi groups. For this group the statue was a symbol to their history, a part of the story that formed their worldview. This can connect to notions of Southern pride and their honour culture in glorifying the violence and sacrifice of the Confederate army and soldiers during the Civil War. Of course, the claims of Southern pride and history are also being used as a smokescreen to cover the racist and white supremacist ideas that the statue and Confederate army stood for in the Civil War. A group of counter protestors arrived to support the removal of the statue as it operates as a symbol of racism and systemic oppression in the history of the South. Not surprisingly violence broke out between the two groups. Some of the counter protestors began clubbing the protestors, and then one of the protestors drove a truck into the counter protestors and killed one of them. It was a situation of escalating violence that led to a state of emergency being declared. Skirmishes began early in the morning before the rally was set to occur and there was escalating violence between both sides that reached its highest level with the murder and assault on counter protestors with a vehicle (Kenally).

Donald Trump received harsh criticism for saying that he regretted and blamed the violence on both sides of the conflict. The violence that was enacted by both sides was a different scale of subjective violence, but both sides did engage in subjective violence that could have been avoided. It pains me to have to hold slight agreement with President Trump, and the higher moral ground in the confrontation rests with the protesters speaking against “Unite the Right.” However, that does not mean that I condone the use of violence. Trump noted that there

was violence on both sides, but that was not a useful point to try and equate the two ideological positions that erupted into subjective violence. It does however make a step in seeing there is a common element of a turn to violence, and that turn occurs because of the myth of the vigilante hero.

When any individual feels their cause is just and find the cause and themselves in jeopardy, the heroic move to engage in violence for defense of the movement and the ideals has become a truism in American culture because of the myth of the vigilante hero applied to the context of social justice. This ideology can be traced in the vigilante myth all the way back to the Revolutionary War. In the case of Charlottesville both sides can be blamed for turning to violence. That does not mean both viewpoints are equally moral, and it does not mean that both positions engaged in the same level of subjective violence. There is a difference in the level of harm a human fist or club can do versus the damage a truck can do when used as a weapon against human bodies. What it does demonstrate is that both sides are guilty of engaging in violence under the influence of the myth of the vigilante hero. I am an advocate of non-violence, but that does not mean that violence can never be resorted to. As stated earlier, in the case of self-defense with life and physical well-being on the line violence may be turned to when all other options have been exhausted. The argument is that violence should always be a last resort and should never be glorified as a tool to accomplish tasks.

The stories told about violent tactics on behalf of social change must be careful to not map the violence onto the myth of the vigilante hero. There is a continuum between representations of violence and actual violence, even if some individuals do not confuse the representation of violence in popular culture with real violence in the culture, there are individuals that do. This idea will be returned to in the conclusion of this work. The stories of

violence used on behalf of social justice ends should be examined to reveal the underlying oppressions that inspired individuals and communities to act violently. The narratives must be deconstructed to explore the various forms of violence that must be resisted, instead of being perpetuated by glorifying new acts of violence against the older one. The oppression suffered by the community on Pine Ridge is a story that needs to be told. The vigilante actions of the government and white Americans that have been exposed by historians such as Matthiessen are important, but they need to not be constructed to elevate violent AIM activists into hero figures the way Apted did with his films.

The pattern of mapping violent tactics onto the myth of the vigilante hero raises the question of why it is that the myth of the vigilante hero seems more powerful than other mythic narratives of non-violence. Examples of mythic non-violent figures in American culture would be Christ, Thoreau, and Martin Luther King, Jr. It is an important question to ask but will take more space to answer than can be offered in this chapter. Instead the answer to that question will be examined in the final chapter when looking at the intersections of Christianity and the myth of the vigilante hero. One point that can be offered on this now is that myths circulate through repetition. Violence means there is action and action will always make for a more exciting story. The narratives of violence will be shown and told more frequently than narratives of non-violent civil disobedience because they will be perceived as less exciting to the audience. One need only look at news coverage of protests focusing on images and moments of chaos and conflict over hours of peaceful demonstrations.

If vigilante violence can be a community building exercise as scholars such as Girard, Shapira and Wilson argue, then it must be recognized that while it builds one community it excludes and persecutes another through the use of vigilante violence. In the process of engaging

in vigilante action, as the white Americans did against Natives, it then encourages similar tactics to be used by the Natives. This shapes a cycle of violence in the name of social justice and gives a darker understanding to the term social justice warrior. In the context of the Pine Ridge vigilantes it is safe to assume that not all of Wilson's GOONs were evil, and it would be equally mistaken to believe that all members and supporters of AIM were good. However, the structure of the myth of the vigilante hero will shape the narrative into these clear distinctions. It will distort the history and remove the complexities of the context. Vigilantes of social justice will always formulate the us vs. them mentality amongst its participants as has been noted in earlier chapters for other types of vigilante motivations. Such a worldview can never be truly community building, and ultimately can only lead to destruction and exclusion. This is a complexity that is attempted to be drawn out in *Scalped*, but still finds itself trapped in the cycle of vigilante violence. This holds great importance when vigilante action is used in relation to social justice. This new critical awareness and analysis must be used on the vigilante narratives in American culture to help deescalate the violence in the growing partisan American culture.

Another side effect of vigilantes being viewed as heroic when fighting on the side of good is that it opens the door to law enforcement overstepping their bounds into vigilantism. Examples of this have been offered throughout the work thus far. Law enforcement officials will always view themselves as the force of good if they view their worldview as positive and representative of what society should be. This will become their view of the law and their duty is to uphold it. This dynamic was presented in the views of the FBI that filtered down the agency from J. Edgar Hoover's personal worldview. As a result, they will always position themselves on the side of good and feel justified to engage in vigilante violence in the name of doing so and will be perfectly comfortable in feeling heroic as a result of their actions.

While there are many narratives that could be explored in relation to vigilantism of social justice in America, the case study of Native vigilantes on Pine Ridge seems especially relevant. Part of this is because of the multiple vigilante narratives that are at play within this community; the other part is the emphasis on narrative to frame vigilantes of social justice and the importance of story and storytelling within Native communities. This component of Indigenous thought heightens the awareness of how the mythic figure of the vigilante is formed in American culture and adds a heightened awareness to the power of story/narrative in this process. It also offers a technique to escape from the romantic construction of the vigilante of social justice through telling the story differently to critique these figures. Native authors have written the history of American relations to Natives differently than America has constructed its historical narratives of those same relations. Some of these authors and their works have been discussed in this chapter. They have challenged dominant perceptions, and the American historical imagination as well as challenging stereotypes of Natives through the stories they tell about themselves and their communities. More of this work could be continued by all storytellers and narrative creators in America with an aim to deconstruct and resist the myth of the vigilante hero.

Chapter 6: Vigilantism and Gender – Not Just a Man’s World

This chapter has been placed after the analysis of vigilantes of economic and social justice as there are intersections between those contexts of the vigilante hero that become impacted by the intersection of gender. The portrayal of gender in relation to vigilantism also has more specific points of interest that are linked to the particular contexts of the narrative in relation to the space in which it is being constructed within, and the historical context that is shaping the worldview of the narrative. The last chapter had a heavy focus on narratives related to Natives and vigilantes of social justice, and this chapter can open looking at the vigilante narrative the deals with the Native community. The narrative is the film *Wind River* released in 2017. The film deals with Native community and identity but allows for a transition of focus towards the context of gender. This is another vigilante narrative tied to the space of a Native reservation, but it is gender dynamics and violence against Native women the form the core of the plot.

The narrative of this film focuses on the discovery of a dead woman’s body found in the snow and there is evidence of her being raped before dying. A lone FBI agent, Jane Banner, is sent to investigate the crime because FBI are still the ones who have jurisdiction over a number of more serious crimes that occur on reservations. Banner teams up with a hunter and tracker who works on the reservation but lives off of it. He exists in a liminal space as he is only part Native in his ancestry, and therefore not fully accepted by all the members of the reservation. Originally it is suspected that a Native on the reservation had killed the woman, but as the film progresses it is found that the crime is committed by non-Native security guards on a drilling site near the reservation. It is uncovered that the dead Native girl, Natalie, was seeing one of the

security officers and when she is visiting him at the drill site the other men arrive, and they rape her and kill her boyfriend. When Natalie's boyfriend begins fighting the other men it allows her a chance to escape. Her escape into the snow and cold is what gives her a hemorrhage and ultimately why she died. When the FBI agent and tribal police arrive to arrest the men, they engage in a shootout with them. All the officers are killed, and the FBI agent is wounded. The hunter then starts to hunt the killers and the rapists, most of whom are white. He shoots and kills four of the murderers and then offers the rapist the same chance to live that Natalie had. He leaves him to try and escape barefoot in the cold and he suffers the same hemorrhage and fate that Natalie did.

The hunter becomes the vigilante hero, and his vigilante actions are endorsed by the FBI agent that he has partnered with. He is presented as a hero, and a hero that offers a small piece of justice to a larger problem. The film ends with a title screen calling attention to the large number of Native women who have been killed and gone missing. This draws attention to a gender specific issue that is attached to Native communities and reservation spaces. These crimes often go unsolved, and have limited resources put towards them, and this is part of the issue that the narrative of the film draws attention to. It is a female FBI agent that is brought in to investigate the crime. The hunter early makes a remark to her that "wolves don't hunt the unlucky deer -they hunt the weak one." He is implying that the female agent may be too weak for the assignment on the reservation because of her gender, and because of her being an outsider to Native communities. By the end of the film he is at her side in the hospital praising her and admiring her strength. However, ultimately in this narrative it is a male vigilante figure who is defending and standing up against violence used against women. The narrative focus on the hunter as strength offers a particular gendered approach to the portrayal of the vigilante. This is not the only

vigilante narratives that have been constructed where a male vigilante is working to provide justice for gendered violence against women.

Wind River's narrative is shaped by the space of the Native reservation as a frontier space. This helps open the narrative further to map onto the formula of the vigilante hero. There are other frontiers that exist for male vigilantes to enter the space to provide justice for women. One such space is in the Southern States and the use of vigilante violence against black males within them. The cultural divisions between race in the South after the Civil War created a new social frontier for the vigilante hero to go to work in. The lynching of black males throughout the south as well as the romantic view of the Klu Klux Klan as protecting white womanhood have been touched on in preceding chapters. White males in the South saw the use of vigilante violence against black men as a noble act, and a component of Southern honor culture. They framed themselves as heroes within their community. Even when perpetrators were known to be guilty, such as J.W. Milam and Roy Bryant who lynched Emmett Till, they would be found innocent of a crime by a jury of their white peers in court. The space of the South and its honor culture makes an alteration to the mythic narrative of the vigilante hero, and the racial tensions of the South opens a new frontier of social and cultural norms that can be policed through vigilante action.

The discussion of Southern lynching as vigilante action should be brought back to the distinction that Judge Henry was making in *The Virginian*. He claimed there was a difference between the orderly hanging of cattle thieves in private and the public spectacle of hanging black males in the South. However, the main difference between these two acts of vigilantism is one is constructing a narrative context of a vigilante of economic justice, and the other is constructing a narrative context of vigilante of social justice. However, this specific narrative context of the

vigilante narrative about white males lynching black males is steeped in racial, sexual, and gendered politics. This form of vigilante violence often sees White women acting complicity by not challenging this narrative of vigilante violence. Instead, they view the males of their community as doing what is right, just and proper. They view them as heroic and endorse the myth of the vigilante hero even if these women are not engaging in the vigilante violence directly. While this particular form of vigilantism has been well researched and discussed by scholars such as Wilson and Waldrep, it has been less examined as a variation of the larger myth of the vigilante hero.

A couple exceptions to this are the work of Historian Jacquelyn Dowd examining the role of Jessie Daniel Ames and women's movements against lynching and scholar Lisa Arellano's argument that Ida B. Wells worked to rewrite the role of Southern lynching in the South (Arellano 112). Arellano examines Wells' writing to demonstrate how she challenged and critiques the myth of the vigilante hero in the Southern context of lynching. She exposed the lies of the supposed crimes that Black individuals had committed – particularly focusing on lie of Black men raping White women. Arellano argues that the Wells' work rewrote the myth of the vigilante hero, however, it seems more likely that it was the method of lynching specifically being tied to heroic vigilantism that was altered, but the vigilante hero remained intact as a mythic figure when using other methods of violence in the figures representation in narratives located in the South. It is also worth noting that Arellano focused exclusively on historical narratives of vigilantism and did not look at a wider range of vigilante narratives. Therefore, Wells' writing altered the perspective of lynching as a method of heroic vigilante violence in the South from a historical context, but other narrative forms, such as literary and fictional narratives, would continue to present vigilante violence and lynching in heroic light.

It also matters the perspective offered in the narrative whether or not the vigilante violence is justified. While Wells challenged the idea of White vigilante violence against Black bodies being heroic to defend White women's bodies, there are other narratives that invert these components of the Southern lynching narrative formula and reposition the vigilante in a heroic light. These narratives add new layers of complexity to the discussion of Southern lynching, but ultimately reinforce the myth of the vigilante hero.

One such complication can be found in Gwendolyn Brooks' poem "The Ballad of Pearl May Lee" (1945). The eponymous speaker of the poem discusses the lynching of her husband for sleeping with a white woman. What makes the narrative particularly interesting is that she sides with the community in the lynching of her husband. She feels betrayed by what he did to her and how he treated her in marriage.

"You grew up with bright skins on the brain,/And me in your black folks bed./Often and often you cut me cold,/And often wished you dead" (Brooks 61).

Pearl May Lee is filled with contempt for her husband and sees his actions as an unjust crossing of the racial frontier as much as the white community does. Her perspective justifies the lynching mode of vigilante justice as she associates herself with the lynching community.

"And they stole you out of the jail./They wrapped you around a cottonwood tree./ And laughed when they heard you wail,/Laughed,/ Laughed./ They laughed when they heard you wail./ And I was laughing, down at my house. Laughing fit to kill. You got what you wanted for dinner,/ But brother you paid the bill" (63).

The narrative of the poem leaves little room for critique of the lynching as the speakers' final words are: "You had it coming surely" (63). Of course, this is not to equate the speaker of the poem's views as those of Brooks as the author.

Here is a narrative given from a perspective where one might assume an anti-lynching position to be taken. However, because of personal feeling of injustice that at some points differ and at others match those of the white community engaged physically in the lynching, Pearl May Lee justifies the lynching and in turn the myth of the vigilante hero. She does not justify the lynching because Sammy raped a white woman, but because he cheated on her. She justifies it not because she feels it is a smear on White honor to have interracial sexual intercourse occur, but it is damaging to her own honor and pride that she is not enough for Sammy on account of her black skin. His death while causing her grief also offers an opportunity to repair her pride as a spurned black woman. Brooks' work has complicated intersections between race and violence, and she has written other poems supporting violent action as a means to escape oppression. An example of the complex interconnections of violence and race in Brooks' work can be found in Annette Debo's article "Violence in the Warpland: Gwendolyn Brooks's *'Riot.'*" The reading of the poems in this article demonstrates the speaker of the poem celebrates the use of violence and riots to resist oppression and give voice to the unheard. It is another example of a call to engage in violence and become a vigilante hero for social justice. This is similar to the way that in this poem Pearl May Lee is using Sammy's lynching as a way to challenge her oppression in her relationship with him. This is the reason that from her perspective he "surely had it coming."

Another narrative that flips the perspective of the gendered violence of the vigilante hero related to Southern honor culture is John Grisham's *A Time to Kill* (1989). This narrative is constructed around the shooting of two White males by Carl Lee Hailey, a black father whose

daughter they beat and raped. These white men are known racists and described as “hillbillies” in the text. When they are being brought into the court room for trial Carl Lee shoots them repeatedly with an assault rifle in the lobby of the courthouse, and in the process also wounds a deputy. Both of the rapists die before their trial begins, and Carl Lee is arrested. This act of vigilantism that is ultimately supported by the community as Carl Lee is acquitted of the charges. The acquittal is later explained by a jury member who got the jury to imagine if the raped girl had been white, and this decides the jury in Carl’s favor. In this narrative we have a black man lynching two white men for being racists and rapists in the lobby of the court of law. The text offers an inversion of the usual Southern lynching narrative, but the results are proven the same: it justifies vigilante action and frames Carl Lee as a vigilante hero.

In the author’s note to the text Grisham explains that part of the inspiration for the story came from watching a real trial of a girl who had been raped. He states, “[a]s I watched her suffer before the jury, I wanted personally to shoot the rapist” (ix-x). Here the author has admitted to impulse for vigilante action. While he does not act on this impulse, he is inspired to write a novel that shapes vigilante violence as heroic by replicating and inverting the norms of the myth of the vigilante hero in the context of gendered violence in the American South. This narrative creation is troubling since John Grisham was a lawyer before he became a writer. While this does not mean he would support these actions in the real world, the way that he crafts the narrative to support Carl Lee and ultimately get him acquitted adds to the pattern of justifying vigilante violence from the opposite perspective used to justify a great many real lynching of black males. This support of the vigilante tactics is continually made throughout the text by many of characters. One of the most striking examples of this is that Carl Lee’s lawyer Jake is

aware he plans to conduct the vigilante murders before he does it. He offers his support for the act, and only says Carl Lee shouldn't because of the racist nature of their community:

“Don't do it Carl Lee. It's not worth it. What if you get convicted and get the gas chamber. What about the kids? Who will raise them? Those punks aren't worth it.”

‘You just told me you'd do it.’

Jake walked to the door next to Carl Lee. ‘It's different with me. I would probably get off.’

‘How?’

‘I'm white, and this is a white county. With a little luck I could get an all-white jury, which will naturally be sympathetic. This is not New York or California. A man is supposed to protect his family. A jury would eat it up.’...

‘I have no choice, Jake. I'll never sleep till those bastards are dead. I owe it to my little girl, I owe it to myself, and I owe it to my people. It'll be done.’... ‘One more thing Jake. Will you meet me at the jail when they arrest me?’

Jake nodded before he thought” (47-48).

In this exchange there is never any question about the positive nature of vigilante action: it is simply a positive act. The only drawback is what it may cost if there is not an acquittal because of racist views of the community. The question is whether the racist tendencies of the jury will be stronger than the belief that the murder was justified because of the belief in the morally superior position of the vigilante. The question becomes would the jury insert Carl Lee into the myth of the vigilante hero. Carl Lee feels the need to become a vigilante for the whole of

his community, and this could be a reference to the inversion of the long standing Southern lynching narrative against a black victim. The great irony is that if the inversion is justified than the original narrative of lynching black males can also be justified. There is little doubt presented in the case that the two rapists will not end up being punished by the law. The community is outraged by their actions, so it is impossible to conceive of the vigilante killing as anything but criminal and excessive.

In spite of its excessiveness the narrative has many characters justify the lynching by Carl Lee, the most recent occurrence of the long-standing vigilante tradition of the South within the world of the text. In the text Carl Lee's vigilante action is supported by his family, his community, his church, his reverend, the NAACP, Jake and his wife, the jury (male and female members of varying races and ages), the judge, and the Sheriff. Even the deputy who is wounded by Carl Lee offers support of the vigilante action despite being wounded unintentionally. This can seem as excessive fantasy to bring the reader to support Carl Lee's position and actions, but it demonstrates how far the narrative is going to make the vigilante figure into a hero to all. It also mirrors the widespread community support that was often found for the lynching of black males. Carl Lee takes pride in the term vigilante being applied to him as well, and the entire text is constructed to have the reader rejoice at the legal acquittal, which justifies vigilantism.

It is another terrible irony in this text that the NAACP offers funds to support Carl Lee's trial to gain an acquittal as a mode of progress. A great deal of anti-lynching, and in turn anti-vigilante, campaigns and work came out of this same organization historically. This text presents it as an organization of contradictory ideals, as it cannot support the vigilantism of Carl Lee and condemn the lynching of accused black males by the white community at the same time. It suffers from the same problematic view that Judge Henry was presenting in there being a

difference between forms of lynching in the West and the South, but this is simply untrue. Both of the lynching forms are specific contexts of the larger myth of the vigilante hero, and all these various narratives work to reinforce that myth and condone vigilante violence.

The two contexts of the vigilante hero narratives discussed so far in this chapter have clear intersections of gender in them in relation to the sense of injustice that incites the use of vigilante tactics to protect women from sexual violence. However, there has not been examples of female vigilantes being discussed yet in this chapter. Part of this may be that there are limited cases of vigilantism being engaged in directly by females. Some fictional narratives of female vigilantes have been made – an example would be *Thelma and Louise* (1991). The film offers the women using violence as a way to resist their oppression, but ultimately these challenges get them trapped into a position where suicide becomes their only escape. Later this chapter will explore vigilante texts that offer the acceptance of female vigilantes working for social justice in relation to gender.

While there are limited narratives of fictional female vigilantes there are more limited historical narratives of vigilantism that this work has analyzed. This is reflective of the gender norms of America itself. The Western frontier did not permit women to join the vigilance committees, but we do get endorsement by women of their actions and views as was presented by Roosevelt in his autobiography. However, there are some fictional narratives set on the Western frontier that open space for women to engage in vigilante action, or engage in vigilante action by proxy through the economic transaction of bounty hunting.

It is in narratives of bounty hunting that the subversion of gender conventions seeped into the mythic narrative of the vigilante hero. Not surprisingly, it is after the practice of bounty

hunting in the frontier had vanished and the frontier became developed and urbanized that fictional narratives of the undeveloped Western frontier returned these ideals and practices into cultural consciousness. A specific bounty hunting text to begin exploring how bounty hunting opened the way for female vigilantism is *True Grit* (1968). The novel by Charles Portis, and its varied film adaptations will be analyzed.

True Grit's opening lines both expose the gender norms associated to the violent pursuit of justice held in the American cultural imagination of the Western frontier and expose that this story will challenge them outright. "People do not give it credence that a fourteen-year-old could leave home and go off in the wintertime to avenge her father's blood" (Portis 9). People would not give this credence because of the separate spheres ideology, a component of European culture prescribing an enforcing women's role within the private space of the home and placing the role of their male counterparts in the political and economic realm of the public sphere. This ideology was exported from European culture and transferred into the social and legal culture of the American colonies.

It is worth noting that there is economics underlying the crime of Tom Chaney murdering Mattie's father in the narrative. Chaney killed him to take his \$150, two gold pieces, and his horse named Judy. When Chaney made his escape there was no active pursuit, and while the law was calling for his capture there was only a \$2.00 reward and 50 cents for each mile covered in his pursuit by the US Marshalls. It is worth noting how the enforcement of law and pursuit of justice is framed through economic transaction. Mattie recognizes this is little incentive, so she offers Marshall Rooster Cogburn an additional \$50 for Chaney's capture.

A deal is struck between Rooster and Mattie, but this money does more than get active pursuit of Chaney; it opens the ability for Mattie to join actively in the hunt for him. At first Rooster, and the Texas Ranger LaBoeuf (he joins the team by revealing another bounty on Chaney's head for shooting a senator in Texas worth \$1500 whether he is delivered dead or alive), are opposed to having Mattie come along; however, after she demonstrates her capability she quickly gains Rooster's support in her joining them in the pursuit. She shows her skills at riding and crossing a river on horse that is usually crossed by a ferry. She proves her determination, her grit, and is accepted by Cogburn. This is the beginning of the subversion of gender norms. While the notion of putting a bounty on a criminal who has wronged you fits with the norms, it was not common that those who put up the bounty engaged in the hunt. In this case the subversion is even more striking because the individual putting up the financial incentive, and therefore holding the power, is a teenage girl.

In this way the money pays for Mattie to become a vigilante, and she truly does become a vigilante as the narrative progresses. Ultimately, she is the one who catches and kills Chaney. It is this moment in the book that transforms Mattie from being the employer of bounty hunters in pursuit of her view of justice to becoming the agent of accomplishing it. It can be referred to as Mattie's view of justice as there has been no trial to prove the guilt of Chaney. All that the reader has is the narrative they read, and that narrative is constructed from Mattie's personal perspective entirely. The narrative has also been constructed with hindsight as she is narrating from the future about her past. This means that even any confession offered by Chaney is not guaranteed. The following quotation is what turns Mattie into a vigilante: "I hurriedly cocked the hammer and pulled the trigger. The charge exploded and sent a lead ball of justice, too long delayed, into the criminal head of Tom Chaney" (Portis 195). The lead ball is considered an actor of justice.

This is what makes Mattie a vigilante. She kills Chaney and feels justice has been achieved with his death. She did not need him to stand trial or be hanged by the law but wanted the satisfaction of killing him herself. This moment is displayed in an equally vivid fashion in the 2012 Coen Brothers film adaptation of the story by having Mattie order Chaney to stand before she shoots him, and a smile spreads across her face as she pulls the trigger.

There is a stark difference between the novel and 2012 remake of the film, and the original Hathaway film released in 1969. In the 1969 film version Mattie does shoot Chaney but she does not kill him. In the end, he overpowers her and throws her in a pit filled with rattlesnakes. In the novel and the 2012 remake the backfire from the gun shot that kills Chaney knocks Mattie into the pit. As a result of her being thrown in the pit she takes on the position of damsel in distress while the sneering villain watches her immanent death. In this version Rooster, played by John Wayne, must come and save her and in doing so also kills Chaney. This version of the narrative removes Mattie from being a vigilante and places the power of killing a criminal back in the hands of the appointed officer of the law, as well as in male hands. The decision to make this change in the film has never been addressed, but there are several reasons open to speculation. One might be the audience expectation of John Wayne as the great American action star to kill the primary villain of the story. There may also be the political factors of 1969 America where those involved in the creative decisions of the film are making statements and jabs against the second Wave Feminism and women's liberation movement in America. John Wayne himself was noted to be very reactionary. Whatever the motivations may have been, the 1969 film version removed the most radical element of the intersection of vigilantism and gender found in the novel.

The most important point of interest in *True Grit*'s narrative of vigilantism is that it was the money that Mattie paid to Cogburn that allowed her to tag along in hunting the criminal. Without the economic exchange there would have been no way that she, a fourteen-year-old girl, would be able to find herself in a position to have a gun on Chaney. Even if she had pursued the two men going to hunt Chaney crossing the river alone would have not been enough. It was not enough for LaBoeuf who wishes to spank her for ignoring their instructions and crossing the river, but Rooster intervenes on her behalf, and the reason he does is because Mattie already paid him part of the one hundred she ends up promising him for catching Chaney. In contrast she paid nothing to LaBoeuf, and hence his stronger resistance to her coming with them. It is the economic exchange that gives Mattie the access to the otherwise adult, masculine world of criminal pursuit and punishment. Her payment is what allows her to transcend the usual age and gender boundaries of the cultural norms of Western frontier culture. This is even more interesting when we consider that in separate spheres ideology it would typically be a male figure making all economic exchanges, but since Mattie's father is dead it opens space for her to enter the public sphere of commercial exchange. This is not the only bounty hunting narrative worth discussing for its impact in opening space for female vigilantes.

Another text which opens the space for women as vigilantes is *Unforgiven* (1992). In *Unforgiven*, a ranch hand assaults and cuts the face of a prostitute in a brothel of a frontier town. After the assault the brothel owner calls the sheriff, Little Bill, who determines that the ranch hand is just a hard-working boy who went too far blowing off steam. The male is infantilized as a way of dismissing his violence as an overstep that a child might make, and it is a transgression that may almost be viewed as cute. As punishment he would receive a whipping and pay money to the brothel owner for lost profits from the damage to the beauty of the prostitute's face. The

brothel owner finds this arrangement acceptable, but the other prostitutes find this settlement unjust.

The core of the injustice from the perspective of the prostitutes is seeing a financial settlement to the male owner of the brothel for the permanent damage done by a male customer to a female body. The economic compensation is not even being paid to the woman who has been harmed. Instead, she is viewed as an object and is the property of the male brothel owner. The prostitutes are women who are denied a public voice, full legal consideration, compensation, and even recognition as human beings. The irony of this is that it is these women being treated as objects equaled to trade goods that allows them the opportunity to seek justice and gain power over their oppressors. It is the money they manage to collect while being prostitutes, after the brothel owner takes his cut, that allows the women to challenge the legal system that failed them in the form of sheriff Little Bill by hiring bounty hunters. The women become vigilantes by proxy through the use of bounty hunters.

After Little Bill declares the sentence and it is accepted by the brothel owner, the women put their own plans in order. The women pool their money together that they have saved away to offer a bounty for the death of the three ranch hands who were present and involved in the mutilation of one of their fellow co-workers. The women do not feel they have the skills or abilities needed to track down and kill the men responsible for the crime, but they hope that the word of the reward they are offering will draw bounty hunters to them and it does. In this case the women want to act as vigilantes but have no practical skills they feel would make them useful for this role. They also have no legal recognition in the law to advocate for their desires, or even to be reimbursed for damage to their bodies because of the legal standing of women, as

well as their low social standing as prostitutes does not account them the usual consideration or protection a woman may expect to be entitled to through ideals of chivalry.

The promise of money brings out several interested parties. One a lone bounty hunter named English Bob arrives in town as does William Munny and his two partners - Ned and The Schofield Kid. Not only do the women promise money for the death of their offenders, but they offer their bodies and sexual favors as payment towards the deed. The vigilante actions that the women pay to have occur are carried out by Munny. Then Munny becomes a vigilante on behalf of his partner Ned. Little Bill declares all bounty hunters present in his town as illegal. English Bob is assaulted and then run out of town, but Ned is whipped and then killed. The difference between the two is that Ned is black. There is a very interesting scene where the camera shifts between Ned's black body being whipped in the sheriff's office with the prostitutes reacting and crying while hearing his cries of pain. The black whipped body recalls imagery of slavery and the black body being reduced to a commodity much as the white women's bodies are reduced to commodities as prostitutes. It also recalls images of lynching after the Civil War and the distinction between forms of vigilantism that Judge Henry points out to Molly.

After Ned is killed Munny responds by killing Little Bill and all the men he has deputized to deal with bounty hunters. This group was likely planning to deal with Munny when he returns to collect his payment. He becomes a vigilante hero who provides justice against the oppression of minorities and women in the West. This creates a flip from past perspectives of Western vigilantism used to kill minority figures and retain power and position, but also justifies vigilante violence as the effective tool to accomplish this goal. There is a moment where the woman who was cut attempts to sexually service Munny and he resists because he still carries a torch for his dead wife. Ultimately the narrative ends with his return to his farm and his children. He has

dispensed justice and returns to family life, and this ending again reinforces the vigilante hero and legitimates the violence. Munny suffers no repercussions for his actions and instead returns to his family to presumably live out the rest of his life peacefully. He transcends the issue of bridging frontier space and civilization and can effectively navigate both. The film portrays him as morally superior through his own personal code that the audience is brought into alignment with through the film (Woolley 199).

The impacts of gender on the myth of the vigilante hero have all been entwined by the idea of frontiers. The frontier has a mythic dimension of its own and can be understood in terms of physical frontiers in relation to space as well as cultural frontiers of racial and gender identity. However, the interaction of different cultural and social norms become intertwined in the collapsed space of the urban city. In this way the city itself becomes a shifting context of the mythic frontier space in America and this will be a context that impacts the myth of the vigilante hero. It is also a space where the intersectionality of space, race, and gender all collide; this has an important impact on shifting elements of the vigilante narratives constructed in this space. If vigilantism is associated as a frontier phenomenon it is worth examining the diversity of urban environments as a frontier. A comparative look at vigilante narratives set in urban spaces will allow for examination of changes to the myth of the vigilante hero in different contexts of space, and how the change of time and space has altered the impact of gender in the narratives as well.

A foundational urban vigilante film is *Death Wish* (1974) starring Charles Bronson. This film illustrates the influence and popularity of vigilante narratives in American popular culture as it went on to get four sequels, and a remake of the original film released in 2018. Bronson plays Paul Kersey, a liberal New York City architect, whose family is attacked by hoodlums, leading to his wife's death and his daughter's rape and subsequent catatonia. In the remake Kersey is

played by Bruce Willis, and instead of being an architect he is a doctor. This is worth noting as a medical professional takes an oath to do no harm, and Kersey fails to uphold this consistently. Like the original film his wife is murdered, and his daughter is put in a comma, but no rape occurs in the remake.

In the original film Kersey is sent by his employer to the South-West United States after this tragedy strikes his family to work on a development project, but while there is introduced by a friend to the gun culture and the mythic codes of the 'Old West.' In the remake Kersey travels on his own to see his father-in-law who he witnesses engage in vigilante violence out in the country of an unannounced state to protect his stock and property. In both versions after this trip Kersey returns to New York in the original and Chicago in the remake and begins a spree of vigilante murders of criminals having been inspired by the myth of the vigilante hero. He purposely puts himself in harm's way to encounter criminals and then kill them. In this film the vigilante character embraces the mythic historical narrative of the frontier West, by belatedly defending his homestead—his family and his City—that he previously failed to defend. He failed to defend the homestead originally because he was too liberal politically, or this is what the narrative of the original film implies. In the remake it is because he is too busy saving other lives that he was not there to save his own family. At the end of the original film, Kersey is discovered to be a vigilante, but rather than arresting him, a police detective allows him to escape to another city where Kersey can continue his vigilante activity in the four other films that constitute the *Death Wish* franchise. In the remake the detective investigating a series of murders implies his knowledge that Kersey is the vigilante he has been hunting, but since all of the criminals involved in the attack of his daughter have been killed, it is implied Kersey will now cease his activities. This is complicated in the remake with the final shot of the film where Kersey sees a

crime and with his hand making a gun and shooting at the criminals. This can be viewed as an implication that he will continue his vigilante activities. There is also the difference in the remake that Kersey's daughter wakes up and returns home to resume a normal life with him. He has a point of connection keeping him from turning his whole life into vigilantism as the original series did. Ultimately the vigilante is presented as a hero, his actions apparently help to reduce crime, and while law enforcement cannot publicly condone his actions, they will not arrest him for them within the narrative of the film.

Ten years after the release of the original *Death Wish*, New York City would experience the trial of Bernhard Goetz, A trial that focuses on a vigilante action practically pulled from the film. In *Death Wish*, Kersey rides a subway train waiting for some men to try to rob him and then he shoots and kills them. In 1984 Goetz entered a subway car and was approached and surrounded by four black males looking for money, and he shot all of them in self-defense. None of them died, but one of them did receive permanent brain damage. There was a lengthy court case that much of America watched to see what the verdict would be. In the end Goetz was cleared of all charges except for a weapon possession charge. One of the jurors, Mark Lesly, went on to publish *Subway Gunman*, his account of the trial. In the book he argues that "Bernhard Goetz did what the law allows. I agree with that statement, and I think the law is flawed" (Lesly 316). The law validated Goetz's act of vigilante violence, and to some of the population of New York City Goetz was a folk hero. This is not to say that there were not critics of Goetz and the jury, but there was as much admiration as condemnation. The narrative told about Goetz could present him as a hero or a criminal depending on who was telling the narrative, but it is safe to say that *Death Wish* had set a precedent for the way people could

construct a narrative to turn Geotz into a folk hero. He even went on to open an electronics shop called Vigilante Electronics signaling his taking pride in being seen as a vigilante.

In many ways the urban space of the American city is filled with unseen borders and frontiers. The city becomes a new wild West and the myth of the Western frontier gets retooled to the new space. There are spaces that exist along racial divides, economic divides, lifestyle divides, and religious divides, not to mention all the interactions between these various spaces. The city is a large and diverse space with different languages and cultures crammed together and varying social norms from region to region. Each region within the city space has its written and unwritten rules, and in any space, there can be punishments for transgressing them. These rules and punishments can be applied differently depending on one's gender. It is not surprising that the two main characters of the vigilante films, William Foster from *Falling Down* (1993), and Erica Bain from *The Brave One* (2007), transgress these boundaries repeatedly as they walk the city. These films are also important for the way the new urban frontiers shape the worldview of injustice for the characters that lead them to vigilantism, and the way their gender impacts their vigilante narrative. One of the interesting differences between the two narratives is that Bain starts wandering the city searching for vigilante actions she can actively engage; whereas Foster largely has situations for vigilante action forced upon him that he was not actively seeking.

As they move through the city spaces, Foster on the West Coast in Los Angeles, and Bain on the East Coast in New York, they cross over boundaries and push to make a new frontier that they feel they must defend using the universal language of the city: violence. Violence is the one tactic that is used in every space of the city, and it is a language that everyone can understand. It is also what leads to the creation of the vigilante figures in both of these films, as it also turns Kersey into a vigilante in both versions of *Death Wish*.

The formation of the vigilante in these films can be understood by examining the ways that they relate to the city when they decide to turn rogue within its space. The way the figures relate to the space of the city is directly related to their gender. In Foster's case the film begins with him stuck in traffic in the stifling heat. He sees crowded cars and angry people. There is a shot of a school bus filled with ethnically diverse children that has a large American flag on the side. Foster's air conditioner is broken, as is the crank to open his window. His situation in the car can be read as symptomatic of the position of the average white, middle-aged, American male in the contemporary city. He feels his space is confined, and the city is flawed and broken like the air conditioner and window crank in his car. It is a space where he has become confined and he needs to break out of it. He leaves his car in the road, and as angry drivers ask what he is doing he responds, "I'm going home." For Foster, home is an idealized space in a city and time when he knew where he belonged and felt he had purpose and power. This is similar to the mentality that is found among the volunteers of the militia movements discussed in chapter 3. It is also interesting that this figure is set in Los Angeles. This work has earlier established the racial tensions and border policing that has and continues to occur in California.

In *The Brave One* Bain works for a radio station, and has a show where she walks New York City and collects the sounds from its streets, and then builds narratives from the sounds and plays them on the air. She starts all of her shows saying, "I'm Erica Bain, and as you know I walk the streets." For her the streets are a place of comfort and freedom, and she refers to New York as "our safest big city in America." This counters the typical narrative structure that a female body walking alone in the city needs to be ever vigilant to the threats against her. She is instead actively creating and narrating, constructing the city, to present her experience of it. Her attitude changes, however, when she and her fiancé are attacked at night in a park by a gang of

young men from Spanish Harlem. They are both severely beaten. Her fiancé dies and she is comatose for three weeks before she awakens and finds herself touched by fear, afraid of the city space in which she once found comfort and freedom. She decides to walk the city again, but only feels comfortable doing so if she has a gun, as if she were a female Bernhard Goetz.

Foster in *Falling Down* goes to a corner store run by a Korean shop manager after leaving his car. Foster wants change, but the owner refuses to give him any unless he purchases something. A fight ensues and Foster grabs a baseball bat from the store manager and starts to demolish his store as punishment for his unfair prices. As Foster does this he states, "I'm just standing up for my rights as a consumer." He then pays 50 cents for a can of Coke and leaves with the bat. This is the moment where Foster becomes a vigilante

In *The Brave One* when Bain goes to purchase a gun legally she discovers she will have to wait thirty days. This is unacceptable to her, and a man in the gun shop hears her say so. He offers her a gun then and there, instructions on how to use it, and bullets, all for \$1,000. She accepts his proposal and gets her gun. Later that night Bain is at a corner store when the store owner's ex-husband comes in and guns the owner down. He becomes aware of Bain's presence through her ringing cell phone, but she shoots and kills him, and then leaves the scene after taking the store's security tape. In this case it is the urban space itself that offers Bain the tools she needs to engage in vigilante activity. The same is true for Foster in *Falling Down*. As he continues to wander through the city he ends up collecting various new weapons from the different criminals he encounters. The accumulation of tools to engage in vigilante activity is a way of demonstrating the American urban space as a new frontier needing to be tamed by the vigilante, and justifies the use of violence to create or protect an individual's space and place within America and that space and place is inherently impacted by one's gender. The urban

frontier is presented as a space where violence and the tools of violence are universally and readily available in both narratives.

As the urban space creates the opportunity for the vigilantes to engage in violent activity the space is also framed as one where the primary language that is used between ethnically and economically diverse groups is violence. As Foster moves through the city he has a Korean shop keeper try to hit him with a bat, Latino gang members threaten him with a knife, and then later attempt to shoot him. He even has a white senior citizen launch a golf ball at his head as he is crossing a golf course. At one point in the film Foster holds up a fast food burger conglomerate in an apparent act of protest against the corporate abuse and manipulation of the consumer. After this event he encounters a white supremacist who mistakes Foster for a racist vigilante and a bigot, but Foster replies “I’m an American, but you are a sick asshole.” After Foster dismisses this white racist, the bigot attacks Foster but Foster kills him with excessive violence by stabbing him and shooting him repeatedly. Some of this is likely because Foster does not want to be seen as a white supremacist. Foster sees himself as a patriot defending traditional conservative American family values that is his responsibility to uphold as a man. However, it is revealed that even in his own life these values are a fiction that never really existed. Everywhere he goes he encounters the ways in which violence intersects with gender, race and capitalism in urban space, and he feels the only language he can respond with and be understood as a man in America is also through is violence.

Bain’s position in *The Brave One* is different on account of her gender. She also finds herself encountering violence and threats of violence from various races and economic classes, but she purposely places herself in situations to have these encounters and to punish those who would do violence against her. She also seeks out and takes vigilante action against males who

are engaging in violence against other women. Bain is here appropriating the sexist systemic violence found in American culture to decolonize the space. Bain seeks these male criminals out in order to use violence as a therapeutic tool for her own recovery from trauma. These vigilante actions also become a method of empowerment for her. This has an interesting parallel to the *Death Wish* remake. The remake shows Kersey going to therapy after losing his wife and having his daughter in a coma. The therapist comments that he seems to be doing better than he has been and he should continue doing whatever he is doing that has put him in a perceived better mental state. What the therapist doesn't know is he has been engaging in vigilante actions and these seem to be helping him heal. In these narratives, vigilante violence is not only legitimated as part of a healing process, but this troubling connection is used to create a joke in *Death Wish*.

In *The Brave One* Bain's actions are legitimated when police detective Sean Mercer, who is a figure of authority and good, helps her to commit a murder and escape without legal penalty for the past killings she has committed. Bain's violence can be seen as an extension of her acting as the voice of the city, as she does in her radio show. The common point of both these films is that the vigilante is white and is able to more freely walk the city and commit violent acts – though it is at greater risk for Bain than Foster because of her gender. However, Bain is also able to use her gender against her male targets to take advantage of their gendered assumptions that she is not as dangerous or violent as them because she is a woman. The difference in the way Foster and Bain's actions are received, and their ultimate fate in the end of the narratives, seems to lie in the impact of their gender.

Foster is constructed as a sympathetic character who is somewhat idealized in the film until his violent actions move from vigilantism to the terrorizing of his own wife and child. At this point a detective who has been tracking him throughout the film has him at gun point to take

him under arrest. Foster has a moment of realization and asks the detective, “I’m the bad guy?” In this moment of the film the narrative perspective that Foster has been making for himself as a vigilante hero begins to collapse for him, but it is ultimately restored for the film viewer by the end of the narrative. After his moment of realization Foster threatens to shoot the detective if he doesn’t shoot him first. Foster states: “You have two options. I can shoot and kill you, or you can shoot and kill me and my little girl can get the insurance money.” Foster pulls his gun and the detective shoots him, but Foster turns out only to have a blue plastic water pistol. Ultimately, he is seen as self-sacrificing and idealized. His masculine act of violence is offered as redemption because it will lead to ensuring financial security for his family.

In contrast to Foster, Bain is portrayed as conflicted about her actions, but also as heroic. She engages in violent acts outside the law to restore order and decency, as well as to protect women who are suffering abuse without consequences for their abusers. She pushes past the expectations of behaving civilized to help open the path to a better and more just civilization as a vigilante of gendered justice. This is mirrored by the way that the film’s violence allows a personal healing for Bain. She is further legitimated and brought back into society by the endorsement and help of Detective Mercer. He may be more inclined to assist Bain as he has seen the ineffectual and corrupt aspects of the legal system as a black officer of the law. But again, the reception of Bain’s actions may have been different if a black actor, or any other woman of colour, portrayed this character. Ultimately, it is the urban space that creates the vigilantes in these films, and it is the character’s gender in relation to the space that shifts the contexts of the myth of the vigilante hero.

Falling Down was released in 1994 while Bill Clinton was president and *The Brave One* was released in 2005 while George W. Bush was president. This is an important detail because

The Brave One was made in post 9/11 America, and that could be another reason for the positive portrayal of violence from a vigilante against perceived threats, and why the narrative treats violence as a therapeutic device. After 9/11 violence was seen as a necessary tool to respond to terrorist attacks in American culture, and the nation cheered in the midst of its mourning when bombs were dropped in response to the attack. Part of the reason 9/11 seemed to demand a violent response is the historical lessons of justified violence taken from the mainstream narrative of American history dating back to the American Revolution and the nation's founding. The myth of the vigilante hero is a part of that tradition in the cultural memory of America. It is no surprise that Foster in *Falling Down* is trying to protect a conservative right-wing America that felt it was losing ground and was under attack during Clinton's two terms as president. There is a certainty irony in the portrayal of the middle-aged white man being oppressed in the urban space of America as this identity position was responsible for the oppression, exploitation and violence against many minorities throughout American history. In this film there is also a call back to the frontier ideology of defending the homestead. This ideology has had a resurgence during Donald Trump's presidential campaign after Obama's two terms that fostered a very liberal political culture in America. It is telling that Trump's heavy criticism of the Obama administration and slogan of "make America great again" speaks to a return to older ideas and approaches to governing the country.

There has been a proliferation of more contemporary vigilante texts in recent years that have featured a female vigilante. The changing contexts of gender dynamics in contemporary American culture have begun to allow for more narratives of women engaging in vigilante violence to gain their perception of justice. Some of this may also be a result of misconceptions of empowerment, agency and equity in culture being associated to holding positions of power in

cultural myths traditionally only held by males, but in this case it may be better to question if this myth is worthwhile to expand representation within it. Such newer texts include the *Kick Ass* graphic novels published between 2011 - 2014 and the film released in 2010 that feature a young female vigilante Hit-Girl. She is trained by her father to act as a vigilante. In the films it is because he is a cop who saw a corrupt system and turned to vigilantism to dispense the justice that the system couldn't. In the graphic novels he is just a comic book nerd who finances his and his daughter's training and vigilante activities by selling high value comics from his collection. That iteration of the character speaks to the power of the myth of the vigilante hero and its link to the medium of comics. The daughter vigilante is a gendered portrayal of the mythic figure of the vigilante hero. What makes Hit-Girl even more interesting as a gendered vigilante is that she is the most lethal and powerful vigilante in the narratives. Instead of being relegated to the position of a side kick to the vigilante, as other female figures are – such as Batgirl, or Isabel in Allende's *Zorro* – she becomes the most important member of the vigilante team. However it is only made possible by her operating in masculine forms of force and violence more effectively than any of the male vigilantes in the narrative.

It is also worth noting that she is a child and has been indoctrinated into the myth of the vigilante hero from the inspiration of the past vigilante heroes – most of whom were male. In this narrative there is only a male parental figure who is constructing the world for his daughter from his perspective and experience. It is positioning a female body into the traditional male role, but the gender norms of action and violence are endorsed more as a result of a female body being trained to perform in male gender roles. It raises the question of whether true equity in representation of vigilante violence across gender is a development that should be occurring in

American culture. It seems that this opening of women as vigilantes will only further repeat the myth of the vigilante hero and continue the cycle of violence the myth creates.

The aims at more consciously constructing vigilante narratives shaped by the context of gender can be seen by some more recent female vigilante narratives that have been produced. One aspect of the portrayal of a female vigilante of the gendered contexts in the construction of the narrative is the tension of a female vigilante trying to balance being a wife/girlfriend and/or a mother with being a vigilante. This narrative more actively looks at how a woman can tackle public and private spheres, but examines this tension through a desire to engage in vigilantism as a part of public life. These tensions are explored in the film *Miss Meadows* (2014). In this film Miss Meadows is a teacher who also acts as a vigilante and moves where she lives after she has killed too many criminals to remain safely in her location without being arrested. However, in the film she ends up in a relationship for first time, and it just happens to be with the local sheriff who is also investigating the vigilante crimes she has committed. He discovers what she has done and is willing to cover up her crimes and marry her if she is willing to stop her vigilante violence. However, a series of events leads her to commit vigilante violence on her wedding day. At the end of the film she now has a baby and is married, but we see her leave the house on an errand with her purse where she always keeps her gun. This is the same gun that she commits all her acts of vigilante violence with. She is ultimately portrayed as a heroic figure bringing decency and civility to society ironically through vigilante violence. By the end of the film she has also found balance to the tensions of her domestic roles and the public sphere role as a vigilante. She now has the full support from her partner too in her vigilante activities as he watches their child while she goes out to engage in her vigilante work.

There is a final variation on the myth of the vigilante that is impacted by gender that this chapter should examine. This is looking at female vigilantes who are acting specifically as vigilantes of justice for women. There are three texts that will be looked at: the film *Hard Candy* (2005); the comic collection of *Hothead Paisan* (1999); and the novel *Vigilante* (2017). *Hard Candy* focuses on a girl of fourteen, Haley, who has been chatting with a guy online and meets up with him for the first time in person. It is implied that he is a pedophile by his interest in photographing young girls and is planning to take advantage of the girl, but she turns the tables on him before he can. Haley has set him up and drugs him before he can drug her, and then she proceeds to torture him to get a confession of the crimes he has committed against other young girls. Haley lynches the pedophile, and the audience is meant to view her actions as a positive. Many would view pedophiles as criminals who deserve a death without due process, so the film works as a revenge fantasy, but also endorses the myth of the vigilante hero. It has just shifted the context from it being a male vigilante protecting women and girls to it being a girl taking action on behalf of other girls. The film ends with Haley getting her victim to give her the names of others involved in a pedophile porn ring that her would be molester has now admitted guilt in being involved with. Haley admits to already having killed some of them, and it is clear she plans to continue her vigilante actions against the others. It is worth mentioning that Haley accomplishes her vigilante actions not through strength and force, but through being smarter than the criminals she pursues. It is intelligence that makes her so lethal, not her size and strength. This offers another shift of context from the common pattern of strength and force being utilized by a vigilante for success when they are male.

Hothead Paisan is a comic series created by Diane DiMassa throughout the 1990s. It focuses on Hothead, a lesbian who finds it hard to see a space or place she belongs in within

North American culture because of the sexist, heteronormative values instilled in the culture. As a result, she begins a vigilante mission that leads her to such vigilante actions as killing men who believe they are superior to women, and mutilating the genitals of men who are sexually crude to her or other women. She also pushes a massive sexist billboard off a roof to crush the male ad executives that created it. This text has Hothead engaging in violent vigilante action to expose and fight back against the oppressive toxic masculinity and homophobia of mainstream American culture. It should be noted that the text primarily acts to fight for the female gender, and offers little space for an acceptable male figure, or even a queer male figure. It is largely played for humor by exaggerating and universalizing toxic masculinity as being attributed to all males. It is designed to point out systemic cultural violence against women and the LGBTQ community. While this is useful work that the text is doing it still encourages a hero worship of the vigilante figure if one is amused and laughing at Hothead's actions. The comic is designed to speak primarily to an audience of lesbian women, and in turn have this community endorse the myth of the vigilante hero. While this text addresses larger issues of toxic masculinity and systemic oppression against women to a limited female audience, the novel *Vigilante* speaks to a much wider audience. This novel further legitimates vigilante violence as an avenue to offer justice to women against the larger systemic violence of the sexist and patriarchal culture.

The novel *Vigilante* is the most recent of these texts and corresponds with the cultural wave of the #metoo movement. More attention was being paid to sexual abuse against women, and this Harlequin Teen book ties into it directly, and offers a narrative of a teenage girl who turns vigilante to punish males who seek to sexually abuse and harass women. It should also be noted that since it is a Harlequin book the teenage vigilante also finds herself in a loving relationship with a young man who is frightened for her safety, but also helps and assists her

vigilante actions. This leaves me hesitant to call it a healthy relationship. The novel presents Hadley as an exceptional girl, but this is largely due to her transformation into a vigilante. It is also these actions that lead her to ending up in her relationship fulfilling a romantic fantasy as well. While the text draws attention to a timely and important issue that is slowly being exposed and publicly confronted, it also constructs a narrative that endorses the use of vigilante violence towards accomplishing these goals. The plot focuses on Hadley, whose best friend committed suicide after she was raped by three popular boys in their high school. A video of the rape was posted publicly. It could not be proved that it was not consensual sex, and the boys are from wealthy and important families in their community, so they are not able to be punished.

Hadley had taken various martial arts classes in the past, and the female detective who was unsuccessful in putting together the rape charges against the boys asks her to assist in starting a new self-defense class for teen girls. Hadley is filled with rage at the lack of justice, grief over the loss of her best friend, and guilt over her realization that she too engaged in victim blaming of her friend. This leads her to find an outlet for her emotions as a vigilante who wears a pink ski mask and begins to intervene and fight males she sees trying to harass and abuse women, as well as targeting the teen boys who raped her friend.

As the narrative progresses, her vigilante actions intensify as she moves from kicking and punching people, to using a knife to carve a “v” on one rapist’s forehead. The v is meant to be her calling card as a vigilante. This action is reminiscent the z that Zorro would cut on to some of his enemies. It is drawing on iconography of a past vigilante narrative of a vigilante famous for fighting oppression and apply it to a new vigilante figure and different context of fighting sexism as a form of oppression. This speaks to the repetitions of elements of the myth of the vigilante hero as it changes and adapts to different contexts over time in American culture. By the end of

the novel Hadley even shoots and kills one of the rapists, but the narrative makes this killing an act of self-defense. However, she states at the close of the narrative, “I would have to live with the fact that I ended his life. Could I live with that? Yeah. I could live with that” (280). While Hadley’s actions were self-defense when she killed the rapist Drew, she also was seeking chances to engage in vigilante action against him. A pattern repeated from the character of Erica Bain.

While Hadley engages in vigilante action it also helps her to deal with her emotions and heal from her trauma. This echoes the positive effects vigilantism held for Erica Bain as well. Hadley makes new friends through the self-defense class and finds a new purpose in life through her vigilante actions. The friends she makes also start to idolize the pink vigilante, as Hadley is called when wearing her pink ski mask costume. The costume vigilante is another similarity traced back to Zorro. The self-defense class members who have become Hadley’s new friends start wearing shirts with a pink v in honor of the vigilante, and this is led by her new best friend Zoe. The public at large also starts viewing the vigilante as a positive force. The girls from the class begin to tail the vigilante and assist Hadley in her actions, and she describes them as her “bad ass girl gang” and that they are “brutal and beautiful” (170). Vigilantism begins to be turned into a form of girl power, but this is a troubling idea of empowerment. Zoe talks to Hadley as the novel progresses and declares to her, “you’re a symbol for the rest of us... You’re a hero, Had” (238). By the end of the narrative Hadley has told her mom about her vigilante actions, and her mom offers support to her as well. Hadley even confesses to Detective Davies who proclaims that she will not press charges and covers up Hadley’s involvement. The entire text is structured to have the reader agree with Zoe and view Hadley as a hero and inspiration.

As with the figure of Zorro, or other vigilantes of social justice, this text does draw attention to important issues, and the motivations behind the vigilante actions can be viewed a positive ideology to push for. However, the vigilante violence that is used to achieve these ends should not be endorsed. The text pays careful attention to examine that Hadley is often smaller and at times weaker than the males she is fighting. However, this is presented to create further admiration of Hadley by having the reader see her as brave for engaging in the dangerous vigilante action. This idealizing of the vigilante violence as heroic for seeking justice on behalf of women who are victims of sexual harassment and abuse is troubling. It is important to consider this book was published as part of the Harlequin Teen line and meant to speak to this age group often grappling with issues of identity and their place in the world.

Teens are often rebellious and looking to find and discover where they fit in society. They seek to make sense of what they do and justify the actions and choice they make to themselves and the communities they are a part of. Individuals often seek to discover their place in relation to the stories and myths that shape the understanding of their culture and their world – the cultural memory of America. This makes the narrative and structure of the novel very worrisome. It is recycling the myth of the vigilante hero to a new context for the next generation, but ultimately endorsing the violence as a legitimate tool. It is also shaping the perceptions of a supportive and caring partner in a relationship is one who will support violent actions. This is not just done in relation to a romantic partnership, but amongst friends, family, and community authority figures. It is presenting the idea directly that you can find, or make, your place in the world through the use of vigilante violence to shape it into the world you want it to be and your allies should support these actions.

By this point it is clear that even though the contexts continue to shift, and the forms of justice the vigilantes act for can change, there is a clear narrative pattern of constructing vigilantes as a hero through the mythic formula. This mythic figure has been used to create narratives to justify violence throughout American history, and in all different American cultural contexts. Sometimes the ideologies that are inspiring the call to vigilante action may be viewed as illegitimate or immoral, but those that frame the vigilante's narrative do not view them as such. Ideologies contained in the vigilante narratives that one finds sympathy with makes them fall into the trap of seeing the vigilante in a positive and heroic light. This will also lead to endorsing the violence of the vigilante. How does one break out of this cycle of violence that the myth of the vigilante hero creates? The narratives must be retold a different way, and the vigilante must be structured as a violent criminal instead of a hero by deconstructing the mythic formula and examining all the contextual complications of vigilante narratives. Positive ideologies can be championed through non-violent tactics. However, this is not easy work to engage in.

One of the most noted figures in America that is an advocate of non-violence would be Martin Luther King Jr. His push for non-violence is modeled after Gandhi's example and the teachings of Christianity as he was a minister. The core ideal of Christian teaching is to love the other, and this included the instruction to love your enemy. Such messages are actively encouraging positions of non-violence. However, the power of the myth of the vigilante hero has even managed to link itself to Christianity, and in more contemporary narratives has meshed the vigilante figure and the Christ figure. This will be the focus of the final chapter.

Chapter 7: Vigilante Myth meets Christian Theology: *The Dark Knight* an American Vigilante Christ

What is it that has made violence an important aspect of American culture, as Richard Slotkin has argued, but at the same time kept the Christian ideology from counteracting the mythic role of violence with its message of non-violence? This question seems even more pertinent since Christian ideology was present from the foundations of the nation stretching back before the Revolutionary War and the founding of the myth of the vigilante hero in America. This already linked the idea of righteous violence to the origin of the country into its myth-making and cultural memory; however, this is in contradiction to the dictates of non-violence and love found in the messages of the gospels. This chapter will offer an argument as to why the vigilante as a mythic figure holds more power than the non-violent figure of Christ in the culture of America. It is also worth noting that the message of Christianity was one of love and non-violence, but the religious institution and churches of Christianity have often failed to follow these ideals in America and throughout the history of the world. In the American context the vigilante figure holds such power as it has subsumed the Christ-figure. The process of how this transformation occurs will be demonstrated by examining how Batman in Christopher Nolan's *Dark Knight* (2008) is turned into Jesus Christ.

James L. Papandrea has made the argument for Batman and other superhero figures as Christ in his work *From Star Wars to Superman Christ Figures in Science Fiction and Superhero Films* (2017). While Papandrea focuses on more contemporary figures, one can see the Christian ideals being attached to the Klu Klux Klan in spite of the inherent contradiction of their actions and the beliefs they hold to. Zorro, who was an inspiration for Batman, was also

associated with the Catholic church through the Spanish missions in the various adaptations that the character has been presented through. While such figures are not always equated with Christ they get framed as warriors for Christ, and this is an idea that stretches back to the colonial period of America framing the settlers as civilizing and Christianizing the land in the New World.

While Papandrea presents a good argument about the way Batman has been presented as a savior and Christ figure, he fails to fully address the issue of the vigilante as a mythic figure in relation to this. He presents Batman as the most human of the superheroes because he lacks any superhuman powers, and as flawed human at that. Papandrea states, “[h]e knows he’s a vigilante, and he does things that regular society cannot condone” (288). The problem with this claim is that historically American culture has shown its support for the vigilante as a hero repeatedly, and within popular culture Batman is an iconic hero that people celebrate. It is the sacrifice that Batman makes, living the life of a vigilante who is hunted by those who do not understand his missions, that makes him seem all the more heroic in the culture. From 1939, in the very first comic that Batman appeared, he is always viewed with a certain distrust from the larger systems of government and law enforcement, but in some instances, this may be because he will expose and punish their corruption. Part of this heroic view of Batman’s self-sacrifice stems from the beliefs in Batman’s ideals being righteous and this links to American culture equating righteousness with patriotism. Batman is not blatantly patriotic in the form that Captain America or Superman are, but he also challenges the larger corrupt power structures of society that can demand obedience from the citizens. He can be framed as a threat to the status quo, and this can be presented by his enemies as dangerous and unpatriotic. This holds similarities to the way the Christian scriptures present the Pharisees arguing Christ was a blasphemer and threat to the

stability of the tradition and society in Jerusalem by claiming to be the son of God. The people viewed him as a king and this threatened to bring down retribution from King Herod, and the Roman occupiers.

The United States is a multicultural, immigrant country, but it is also a distinctly Christian nation, and is happy to proclaim that identity. Scholars such as Perry Miller have detailed the ways in which puritan religious ideals set the foundation of American culture, and Geroge McKenna has established that these puritan ideals of righteousness and the moral good become what it represents to be an American in response to the religious pluralism that had developed within the country. The references to God and Christ are heard through the rhetoric of its public figures and celebrities, and it is found in its literary themes and cultural ideas back to its founding. Even President Trump has discussed his border funding as a moral crisis in his address from the oval office, and ends his speeches calling on God to bless his citizens. The role of Christian ideas and story arcs is another aspect of American cultural myth-making that Richard Slotkin points out in his work. Whether it was used to justify violence against devils, witches, or the Native tribes who were viewed as savage heathens, Christian beliefs has been rooted to the use of violence in American culture from its founding forward. However, it is in more contemporary times that Christian ideology has been mapped specifically on the vigilante mythic figure. Particularly, in post 9/11 America the vigilante figure has been meshed closer with Christ since George W. Bush announced that America would engage in a crusade against the forces of Axis of Evil.

It must first be demonstrated that the *Dark Knight* seeks to place Batman into the role of Christ, or at the very least that Batman can be interpreted as a Christ figure as James L. Papandrea and Shebuel Varghese argue; only then can the complications of mapping the figure

of Christ onto the vigilante mythic figure be explored in more detail. *The Dark Knight* is the middle film in Nolan's Batman trilogy. Nolan is a British filmmaker but is creating films for Hollywood and a global market. Since Batman has taken on a mythic/folk hero status within American culture it is hard to separate an American context from the character. This story focuses on the criminal retaliation against the successful campaigns of Batman's/Bruce Wayne's war on organized crime in the form of The Joker. Batman has aligned himself with the police of Gotham and the city's District Attorney, Harvey Dent. Their pressure forces the criminals of Gotham to turn to The Joker with his promise to kill Batman. As the story progresses The Joker continually escalates the level of violence and terrorism that he enacts on Gotham City, and switches his motivations from killing Batman to demonstrating to him that his mission to save the city is a failure and that the population of the city is beyond saving as they are all corrupted and twisted already. (This could be viewed as an anti-American perspective from a British director but fits better if The Joker is viewed as Satan and his aim is to corrupt humanity.) However, Batman thwarts The Joker's plans by sacrificing himself to save the city from the corruption that The Joker succeeds in creating.

From the basic outline of the film it is not hard to see the parallels to the core of Christian theology in the form of the atonement. In his book *Batman and Theology* (2016) Shebuel Varghese focuses on the form of atonement that is portrayed in each of the films in Nolan's trilogy. In *The Dark Knight* the two main models of the atonement that are presented are the Christus Victor and the penal substitution theory. The Christus Victor model is understood as Christ vanquishing the devil through his self-sacrifice, and the penal substitution model presents Christ as substituting himself for the sins of men to forgive them. These understandings of Christ's actions have been built into other epics and figures but have not been meshed with the

mythic vigilante hero before. In the film, Batman makes a self-sacrifice by taking the blame for murders that Harvey Dent commits, so that Dent can remain a positive role model for the city to inspire them to be good. By sacrificing himself to cover Dent's crimes Batman embodies the substitution model (Varghese 58), but at the same time Batman defeats The Joker's plan, so he also embodies the Christus Victor in his sacrifice (63). To fully understand how the atonement is used in the film more examination of the relationship between Batman and The Joker in the film must be done.

Varghese is not the only author who reads The Joker as the devil. Nicholas Bott does as well in his article "Can Satan Cast Out Satan?" (2013) Bott makes clear that The Joker is often understood and read as Satan in the same way that Batman is understood as Christ, though he argues viewing Batman as Christ is a misunderstanding of Christian theology (Bott 246-247). While Bott presents the common cultural reading of the two figures as Satan and Christ as problematic, it is important to establish that this is the largely understood reading of Batman and The Joker in American culture. It is also worth noting that Bott is taking a position for having the correct interpretation of Christian ideas and theology, but many individuals and groups dispute what *the* correct perspective is – if there even is just one. His argument against Batman as a Christ figure rests on the idea that Batman is lying about Dent's true actions, so his sacrifice is one based on a lie instead of the self-sacrifice of a Christ-like innocent. Dent kills several people and Batman takes the blame for these murders. Batman lies to protect the reputation of Dent as the innocent who is sacrificed, but for the audience of the film it is Batman who sacrifices his reputation taking the blame for murders he is fully innocent of. This allows him to be substituted as a Christ figure. While Bott's critique is worth noting, it is more useful to consider his point that the film is often read with Batman as Christ, which is in line with Varghese text as well.

The Joker is presented as a force of evil. While he claims he is an “agent of chaos,” and that he does not create plans and schemes it is demonstrated throughout the film how carefully he plans and organizes his actions. The Joker devises a number of elaborate plots throughout the film that make it clear he is an intensive planner and that he leaves very little to random chance. He is constantly organizing various plots from faking his own death, to getting arrested on purpose, to attacking the hospital to get a chance to talk to Dent. He even switches the positions of hostages’ and criminals’ appearance for a police raid on his location. The Joker also sets up an elaborate scheme to have Batman choose between saving Harvey Dent or Rachel Dawes, Bruce and Harvey’s love interest, from being blown up. Rachel Dawes is also an assistant district attorney who lacks fear in pursuing justice in the city through legal means in this film and its predecessor *Batman Begins*. The Joker makes it clear that there will only be time to save one of them from their locations, and he gives Batman the address for them both. However, he has lied and switched the locations, so when Batman goes to save Rachel, he instead finds Harvey. Harvey gets half his face burned in the process of being rescued and Rachel dies. This is only one step in a larger plan. The Joker knew Batman would go for Rachel and in turn save Dent and not save her. He also knew this would crush Dent. The Joker uses a bomb threat in a hospital in Gotham to get access to Dent who is recovering in the hospital. It is in this conversation that The Joker tells Dent he is not a planner or schemer like all the others. He tells Dent to become an agent of chaos like he claims to be and gives Dent the chance to kill him on the toss of a coin. All of these events are stages in an elaborate plan to corrupt Harvey Dent and destroy the symbol of good and hope for the city if The Joker cannot corrupt all the citizens of the city through his other plans. All of these acts of organized deceit from The Joker and help to establish his role as Satan: the father of lies (John 8:44).

The Joker has other visual factors in the film that allow him to be representative of Satan. One of these is the playing cards that he leaves at the scene of his crimes. Often in the film when a close-up of The Joker's cards are shown pinned to bodies, or drifting through the air after explosions, the picture on the card is a devil instead of a clown. The use of this imagery is designed to allow The Joker and Satan to be interchangeable in the reading of the film. There is also the importance of the ending visual of The Joker in the film; he is captured by a grappling hook hanging upside down with his arms out, and his body matches the shape of an upside-down crucifix. This contrasts with the earlier image in the film when Batman stands on top of a high building in Hong Kong and spreads out his arms before leaping to put his body in the shape of a crucifix.

One of the strongest aspects of the film that associate The Joker with Satan is his role in corrupting humanity and manipulating them. Throughout the film the Joker corrupts criminals to turn on each other, corrupts the citizens of Gotham to attempt to kill each other, and corrupts Harvey Dent to go on a murder spree. All of these actions present his role as a tempter, and a force to have humanity indulge in sin and evil (Matthew 4:3). Not all of The Joker's manipulations are successful. He attempts to have two ferries full of people decide to blow the other ferry up before he will blow them both up. Ultimately, the people decide to resist The Joker's manipulations even though it may result in all of them dying. When Batman catches The Joker he points out to him that the people proved to The Joker that he is alone and humanity are not all as corrupt as The Joker once claimed when he said, "I'll show you. When the chips are down these civilized people will eat each other." However, The Joker does succeed in corrupting Dent, and that is his true plan to reveal the corruptibility of humanity. There will be more said about Dent, and The Joker's final scheme later in this paper.

The final and most important aspect that relates The Joker to Satan is his ambition to kill Batman. The Joker states the destruction of Batman as his goal, but he also later states he does not wish to kill Batman, and that Batman completes him. This seems an inversion of the need for a hero to rise up to defeat an antagonist, but from The Joker's perspective he is a vigilante policing another vigilante. He seeks to corrupt or destroy Batman as no one else can punish him for crossing the lines of legality. This offers a critique of vigilantism by rising in a more twisted and morally inferior vigilantism aiming only to eliminate the first vigilante. It becomes an embodiment of the unending cycle of violence that myth of the vigilante hero can lead to, but this framing of The Joker as a vigilante hero is only in his mind and not shared by the film's audience. For them The Joker is the villain that requires vigilante action to defeat. The Joker wishes to corrupt Batman and make him break his one rule of not killing, and ultimately in the film The Joker succeeds as Batman kills Harvey Dent. However, that scheme is also meant to kill Batman because The Joker recognizes that Batman is more than a man to be killed. Batman is a symbol and an icon. Being more than just a human was the motivation Bruce expressed in *Batman Begins* (2005) when he first conceives of taking on the mantle of Batman. To kill Batman, the symbol of Batman must be corrupted, and ultimately The Joker succeeds in this ambition within the world of the film.

The Joker's plot to make Batman choose whom he will save is the first important step he takes in destroying the symbol of Batman. This moment in the film does not allow for Batman to save both victims and as a result exposes his humanity. This moment is a parallel to The Riddler's plot in *Batman Forever* (1995). In that film The Riddler captures both Bruce Wayne's love interest and Batman's partner Robin and sets a trap where they will both die at the same time and Batman can only save one. The choice between saving two individuals is mirrored by

The Joker choosing Bruce's love interest Rachel and Batman's partner against criminals, District Attorney Harvey Dent. In *Batman Forever* Batman manages to save both Robin and his love interest and explains that he had to because he is both Bruce Wayne and Batman. He performs an act conceived as impossible for any human, but this film reinforces the idea that Batman is more than human as well. In *The Dark Knight* Batman is only able to save one individual, and as a result his humanity is exposed in his failure to save both. In this moment, Batman falls from being the icon to becoming human, and Batman's becoming human parallels the idea of God becoming human to save humanity through sacrifice. More will be said on Batman's role as a Christ figure, but first Harvey Dent's role as a representative of humanity should be explored.

Harvey Dent is nicknamed Gotham's White Knight because he is willing to stand up to the criminals in a legal form of resistance as the District Attorney. It does not seem an accident that Dent represents the law and believes firmly in upholding the rules in a rigid and unbending way that speaks to the puritan origins of Dent's patriotic approach to civil service. Bruce sees the potential that Harvey can offer to save the city in a way the Batman never could. He believes he could place Batman aside and let Harvey be a proper, legal hero to the city. Harvey can be seen as an exceptional individual that can act as a savior that meshes with Calvinist and Puritan perspectives – he is chosen. This is demonstrated by his success at striking against crime through legal avenues, and the way the flip of his coin always lands in his favor – more will be said on this later. However, after the Revolutionary war and a push to recognize the value of all citizens this alters the Puritan ideals on American soil to open the idea that all of them are worth being saved and can be if they accept the teachings of Christ. This is what leads to the born-again Christian revivals in America. In this way Bruce/Batman as the Christ figure sees the inherent good in humanity and its worthiness in being saved, as Batman resists abandoning the city of

Gotham in each film in the trilogy in spite of the villain always claiming the city is beyond saving. In the same way, The Joker as Satan sees the potential for evil and sin in every human in the population, and most importantly in Harvey Dent. Dent's purity is why The Joker takes the individual that is considered "the best of us," as Commissioner Gordon says to Batman, and turns him into a corrupted murderer.

Another significant aspect of the film that presents Dent as a stand-in for humanity is his relationship to the concept of luck, and later chance, as an examination of the role of fate to govern human life. Calvinists believe in predetermination of a set number of individuals who will be saved and have been selected by God. Harvey puts great stock in his control of situations, and his ability to choose the outcomes. He frequently leaves important decisions in the film to the toss of a coin and claims he makes his own luck. On the surface this presents support of a position of being chosen and directed by fate. Harvey always puts his desired outcome on heads, and always gets his way as it is a two-headed coin. However, Harvey loses control when he is kidnapped, maimed by fire, and his fiancée Rachel is murdered. During the fire his coin is also burned, and one side becomes black, and this creates a truly two-sided coin. Dent is manipulated by The Joker to take revenge, and Dent decides whether individuals should live or die by the toss of his coin. Dent removes his belief in free will, and instead fate governs his decision to engage in evil acts. The mistake that Dent makes is that when he feels a loss of control he allows his manipulation by The Joker to be understood as the cruelty of fate instead of understanding that his acts are based on The Joker's manipulation and the temptation to take revenge. The Joker himself puts a gun in Dent's hand and gives him the coin to toss as to whether he should shoot him or not. The Joker does not care in that moment if he is killed by Dent because the murder will corrupt Dent and bring about the success of his plan. Dent does not kill The Joker but

instead kills several others and is himself killed by Batman while attempting to kill Commissioner Gordon's son.

It is these crimes that Batman decides he will take the blame for. He decides to claim the guilt of the murders as a way to clear Harvey's name so he can continue to be a positive role model for the rest of Gotham. Batman's taking the burden of Dent's murders mirrors Christ substituting himself in place of the sins of humanity to have them forgiven. By engaging in this self-sacrifice, he also believes he is stopping The Joker's plot, but he also fails to realize the issue of salvation is being based on a lie. Batman will be made to realize this mistake in *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), and he will again engage in an act of self-sacrifice premised on a love for the city and its citizens to save them all again. At the end of *The Dark Knight* Batman goes on the run and Commissioner Gordon's son asks his father why that is, since Batman "did nothing wrong." The Commissioner's response makes very clear the intent to map Christian theology onto the narrative and Batman when he says, "because sometimes people deserve to have their faith rewarded."

Another flaw to Batman's belief that he has stopped The Joker's plot is that he has saved Dent's reputation, and in turn shown that the good of humanity could not be corrupted by The Joker's evil because of the example that Dent will inspire in Gotham from a Puritan perspective. This perspective will be linked to a Puritan perspective because for Puritans salvation is already determined. However, by taking the blame for Dent's crimes he has corrupted the symbol of Batman, and as a result has killed Batman. Indeed, when *The Dark Knight Rises* begins Batman has been missing for the last eight years. The Joker had set up a scheme that for Batman to live the city/humanity must fall, or for them to be saved Batman must die. However, the effect of The Joker's scheme is only within the world of the film, viewing audience they will quickly interpret

Batman's actions as an emulation of Christ by his self-sacrifice and view his move as a heroic defeat of The Joker. There are some other issues that present themselves in this eager Christian reading of the film by the public and other academics that have been mentioned and should be elaborated on.

One aspect that complicates the equating of Bruce Wayne/Batman to Christ is the extreme wealth that Bruce possesses. Christ was famous for advocating that his followers abandon material possessions with the gospels, but Wayne is the richest man in the whole of Gotham. His parents were interested in donating large sums of money to positive city initiatives to help the public and leaving the running of their company to "men more interested in it" in *Batman Begins*. However, in *The Dark Knight* there is no sign of Wayne Enterprises being involved in investing money in charity and initiatives to improve the city. Instead Bruce invests his money in being Batman and creating tools, equipment, and running investigative and scientific tests to aid his vigilante activities. In fact, in the beginning of the film Gotham citizens dress up like Batman and use guns to try and punish criminals, and Batman intervenes against them and the criminals. One of the would-be Batmen asks him: "What's the difference between me and you?" To which Batman pithily responds, "I'm not wearing hockey pads." Part of what makes Batman more than a man is not just his training, but his resources. It is entirely Bruce's wealth that gives him the ability to be a vigilante, and his being a vigilante is commonly viewed as an act of self-sacrifice that allows the audience to read Batman as a Christ figure.

It is the view of Batman as a vigilante Christ figure that is the most important aspect of this argument. Christ was an advocate of non-violence, and even introduced the radical idea of loving your enemy. Batman has no love for his enemies. He has no problem beating them, breaking their bones, leaving them for dead, and even killing them by the end of *The Dark*

Knight. It is also worth noting that this returns to the first Batman comic where he smiles as he watches a criminal die. It was in the 60s and 70s when Batman was established to not kill, but that has been altered from the late 80s onward in his portrayals. The violent vigilante actions are not the actions Christ would condone, and it is compounded by the dilemma of Batman lying to protect Dent's honor. The faith that is being rewarded to the citizens of Gotham is premised on a lie about Dent, and even worse, Batman taking the blame for the murders does not mean he is truly innocent. He too committed a murder of Harvey Dent in an act of vigilante violence.

A key point to the atonement is that Christ was innocent. He had committed no crime and was not deserving of the torture and death that was put upon him. It is his innocence that allows his sufferings to give forgiveness to humankind and become the savior. Batman is not an innocent. He consistently breaks the law and engages in violence to further his goals. He also has immense wealth that he does not use to do good by providing to the poor and needy as Christ advocated, but instead hoards his wealth to allow his vigilante actions. Although audiences often view Batman's fighting crime and risking his life for the city as altruistic, he is in fact motivated by his own personal loss, and ultimately spurred by revenge that he transforms into a war on crime. Bruce's wealth and privilege provide him with power, and he abuses this power through being Batman. The film does not present this as an abuse of power from the structure of the narrative, but instead presents it as a heroic action. As a result of the structure of the film's narrative, the dangerous vigilante Batman is not just made into a hero for the audience, but also equated to Christ.

There are a number of other elements of the film, and its post-9/11 context in American culture that are important to highlight to examine the dangers of combining the vigilante mythic figure with Christian theology. Terence McSweeney points out several aspects of *The Dark*

Knight that offer imagery reminiscent of the 9/11 terrorist attacks to the audience in his book *The 'War on Terror' and American Film* (2014). When Batman was first presented in *Detective Comics* his creator Bob Kane had always envisioned Gotham as a stand in for New York and its sprawling underworld of crime in the late 1920s and early 1930s. It is not surprising that Nolan would choose to offer visuals that act as more contemporary reminders of New York City in his version of Gotham. The images in the film after The Joker's explosives that kill Rachel and blow up the Gotham police station offer visuals similar to the news footage of the Ground Zero wreckage site (McSweeney 121). The film also makes clear reference to The Joker as a terrorist, and how he is costing law enforcement lives. When The Joker demands Batman turn himself in, Dent tries to explain to the citizens that Batman should not give in to the demands of a terrorist. A watching police officer shouts back, "no more dead cops!" This moment in the film notes the lives lost by first responders and law enforcement in the aftermath of the 9/11 attack.

The film also mirrors the rhetoric from George W. Bush when he described the forces of terrorism as the axis of evil. Bush talked about America engaging in a crusade against terrorists and evil. This rhetoric draws attention to the historical religious conflicts of the Christian church trying to recapture the Holy Land in the Middle East. This conflict lasted over a century with many crusades to try and recapture the land from Muslims, and links that Christianity is at war with Islam are fully intentional by Bush in the contemporary context of his speech. In this case the government and American military attach righteousness to their violent acts. One of the shifts that this film's narrative makes is that instead of Batman acting as a warrior for Christ he becomes a Christ figure. The religious implications of the rhetoric around terrorism in post-911 America is intended in the film by having The Joker labeled as a terrorist, and also made a stand

in for Satan. Batman is viewed as the primary force needed to defeat The Joker, and therefore a stand-in for the US government and military, as well as being equated with Christ.

While it may seem odd that Batman would be made to represent the officials sanctioned with security and defense, there is a deeper reason to have this association exist for the audience. In the post-9/11 America there were a number of extreme, questionable and immoral actions that the US government employed and justified. Some of these actions include the passing of The Patriot Act, and the use of waterboarding and torture. These political policies and actions become another example of officials and agencies charged with upholding the law breaking it instead in an aim to provide their view of justice, or righteous action. The use of the name “Patriot Act” is a link between righteousness and Patriotism itself. As George McKenna states about Bush in post 9/11 culture, “[h]e did not brainwash or manipulate people but put into words what most Americans were already expressing in their own words and actions” (361). The government officials are making the same sacrifice for good in their extreme and violent tactics as the vigilante Batman is making. This means that the mythic figure of the vigilante is justified as a righteous Christian hero as much as the government officials of America, and their representatives, are made Christian heroes through their association to Christ and Batman.

There are other specific elements of the film’s narrative that make comparison between the US government and Batman stronger. The first is the use of torture. There are several scenes in the film that make an important focus on the use of torture. One of these scenes is when Harvey Dent takes a captured criminal who has threatened Rachel’s life. He holds the hostage at gun point and says he will shoot the criminal if he doesn’t talk based on the toss of his coin. Harvey says he will shoot the criminal if he tosses the coin and it is tails. While it has not yet been revealed in the film, we later discover that Harvey’s coin has two heads. Having a two-

headed coin means that Harvey has complete control and is only bluffing. He will never really shoot the criminal. Harvey's control reveals his intent to engage in any violent action a bluff and makes the torture seem acceptable, as it has imposed limits that will avoid lethal harm to the hostage. Batman intervenes while Harvey is interrogating the criminal and warns him that if the public ever found out what he was doing his positive reputation and role as The White Knight of Gotham would be ruined. It is his role as a public servant and legal official that presents him as a positive role model for Gotham, and links him to the puritan origins of righteousness. It is only by maintaining these roles that Dent can be viewed as a true hero and force of good. Harvey must not engage in questionable actions, torture or any activity outside the law.

This criticism of Dent's actions seems hypocritical coming from Batman, as there are two important scenes in the film where Batman engages in torture. In the first scene Batman captures a mob boss and dangles him over an alleyway a few stories up. The mob boss laughs at Batman's threat to drop him as the fall won't kill him. Batman responds by stating, "I'm counting on it," and drops him so both his ankles snap from the fall. He then leaps down and continues to question the gangster about where The Joker is. The mob boss explains to Batman that no one will ever betray The Joker for Batman because Batman operates within a set of rules, and The Joker does not. This pointing out of Batman's rules also occurs during the second important torture scene when Batman tortures The Joker.

That scene begins with Commissioner Gordon questioning The Joker. When he doesn't cooperate, the Commissioner leaves the room and Batman is revealed to have been hiding inside it in the dark. Batman then proceeds to beat The Joker. In this case the police are aware of and allow Batman to beat their prisoner, though Batman does put a chair under the door to keep the police out when he starts to beat The Joker more intensively. However, the beating does not have

the result that Batman seeks. The Joker tells him Dent and Rachel's location because it is part of his plan and not because he is intimidated or afraid of Batman. Instead, when Batman tells The Joker he only has one rule, the Joker states, "then that's the rule you're going to have to break." Indeed, Batman does end up breaking this rule by the end of the film's narrative when he kills Harvey Dent, and is perceived to break his rule and go too far in the eyes of the public and law enforcement when he takes the blame for Harvey's murders.

It should be noted that from the start of *The Dark Knight* Gordon is working with Batman, and as a representative of law enforcement he is endorsing his violent and vigilante actions. This film's narrative is also building on the narrative established in the first film of the trilogy. In *Batman Begins* Batman also uses torture and violence to subdue the criminals, and ultimately the Gotham police support his actions. The films also encourage the viewers to see Batman as a hero figure and this makes the audience endorse violent vigilante tactics, and in this case torture. On one level, the vigilante hero myth contextualizes the way in which the public of Gotham within the film accepts Batman's acts of torture as heroic, thus encouraging the viewing audience to do the same. Further, however, the way in which Christian theology is mapped onto the film lends these actions an aura of righteous justification. Even if such actions are in contradiction to the actual messages and teachings of Christ in the gospels.

Torture is not the only questionable actions that are justified by the structure of the film's narrative, as well as justifying the questionable actions of the US government in post-9/11 America through the Patriot Act. Earlier in the film, it is revealed that Wayne Enterprises is sinking a lot of money into a telecommunications project. Lucius Fox, the CEO of the company and an inventor who supplies Batman with technological innovations knowing Bruce is Batman, asks Bruce about the project. Bruce replies that he is playing this project "close to the chest."

During The Joker's reign of terror Batman reveals to Lucius that he has adapted a technology he developed earlier to turn a cellphone into a sonar mapping device. He asks for Lucius's help to track and locate The Joker using this device which has been linked in secret with every cell phone in Gotham thus destroying the element of privacy. Lucius is disturbed by the machine and it is because of this that Batman says he will only trust Lucius with the device. Batman instructs him that after they catch The Joker to put in a code and press a button. Lucius says he will help, but after he will resign so long as the device exists in Wayne Enterprises. It is only through using this illegal device and technology that The Joker can be found, and that Batman can prevent police from killing hostages by accident assuming them to be criminals. After the successful capture of The Joker, Lucius types in the code and the machine self-destructs. This occurs at the moment while Commissioner Gordon's voice over is stating that people need to have their faith rewarded. It acts as a way to justify the extreme actions as necessary in the immediate moment but can be removed later. Of course, in the context outside of the film the threat is never gone and eliminated, and the actions will continue and be justified on righteous grounds.

The use of this technology and its flagrant disregard for personal privacy can be read as a reference to the US Patriot Act, as McSweeney points out (McSweeney 122). The film's narrative makes it clear that this technology is the only way to stop the threat of The Joker. It acts to justify the self-defense and subversive methods that share in the vigilante ethos of breaking the rules to uphold and protect them as Richard Maxwell Brown outlined in *The Strain of Violence*. As Brown states, "the vigilantes, knowing full well that their actions were illegal, felt obliged to legitimize their violence by expounding a philosophy of vigilantism. The philosophy of vigilantism had three major components: self-preservation, the right of revolution, and popular sovereignty. Reinforcing the threefold philosophy of vigilantism was an economic rationale –

this composed the ideology of vigilantism” (Brown 115). The government invasion of privacy and use of questionable technology is linked to being a righteous action by making this methodology a part of Batman’s crusade against the forces of terror and evil. The scene described above from the film also offers a tidy narrative that posits such questionable technology can be trusted to the right people who will leave it behind when the threat is eliminated. The film presents surveillance and the growing use of digital technology creating a new space or frontier that is being tied to the vigilante actions of Batman. In the film, the terrorist plot ends with the apprehension of The Joker and death of Harvey Dent, but in the world outside of the film the threat of violence and terrorism is always looming. There is thus no end or limit in sight to the use of such technology by the officials and organizations charged with protecting and defending America, even if they must ignore the principles of the country to uphold it. The narrative of the film frames not only the government as being trusted with this potentially limitless power and surveillance but also Batman can be. This means Batman can be trusted in being omniscient when it will assist his aims. Batman is Christ-like, and therefore can be trusted with absolute power over life and death, and this absolute power is exactly what every vigilante wields, but this power is now being justified through mapping Christian theology onto it. It is also worth noting that earlier in the film Dent argues that he sees the value of giving someone unlimited powers to do good temporarily as Romans did with Caesar. Rachel points out that Caesar grew corrupted with the power and refused to return it, but the film narrative presents Batman as relinquishing his limitless power after the crisis comes to an end, another noble sacrifice on Gotham’s behalf.

Christopher Nolan stated in an interview with Scott Foundas that he enjoyed creating the Batman trilogy so that it can be interpreted in different ways. For Nolan, the trilogy is not

politically specific (Foundas 9). However, Nolan does state, “The Joker is an anti-religious figure,” but he does not discuss how heavily Christian theology is found within *The Dark Knight* and the whole Batman trilogy. In the final film of the trilogy Batman returns for a final showdown to save the city and sacrifices himself to take a nuclear bomb out of the city. It is another act of self-sacrificial atonement for the city. These strong elements of the Christian theology are not found in the comics and graphic novels that held inspiration for Nolan, such as the *Knightfall* arc in the batman comics. It seems these elements were an aspect to the Batman mythology that Nolan sought to add to the film. He contemplated what would make it more real and plausible for a man to choose to become Batman, and Bruce’s decision to do so hinged on him seeing the importance of becoming a symbol and an icon to inspire others.

Will Brooker, the Batman specialist in academic circles, has argued that Batman has a mythic status in American culture in *Batman Unmasked*. Nolan wanted to capture this iconic idea of Batman, and what better way to do it than to link him to one of the most powerful iconic figures in American culture: Christ. However, by making these connections Nolan has created a new and powerful link to the vigilante mythic figure and presented him as a Christ-figure. The reading of the film that this chapter has offered makes it difficult not to see the associations to Christian theology in the film. Conversely, it makes it easier to see the dangers of allowing a violent - vigilante killer - who is also abusing his position of wealth and influence - to be associated with Christ. Nolan has created a potent and powerful film trilogy by combining the vigilante myth and Christian theology. Before he did so it may have been useful to reflect on a line from another iconic American superhero comic, *Spider-man*: “with great power –there must also come great responsibility” (Lee 32).

The power being referenced above is not the power of the vigilante figure, be it Batman or any other, but the power of those who construct narratives of vigilante figures – the myth producers. This work has established the tendency to create narratives that form the vigilante into a hero. It is the power of a storyteller to resist this pattern and tell the story differently. It should become the responsibility of all storytellers to resist framing the vigilante as a hero and in turn legitimate their violent tactics. This tradition in American culture has done much to idealize violence as a viable and righteous tool, and it is a myth that needs to be told differently, and told differently repeatedly to undo the damage it continues to create. The mythic figure of the vigilante has helped to shape a more violent culture in America, but the good news is that like any myth it can be rewritten and interpreted differently. It is a myth and not a fact, and the story can be told another way.

Conclusion: The Joke on Justice Doers

This work began drawing on the image of Batman engaging in vigilante violence, so it seems worthwhile to close the work examining his nemesis: Joker. In Todd Phillips film *Joker* (2019) the audience is given an origin story of how a lonely and troubled man, Arthur Fleck, becomes Batman's greatest nemesis. The narrative walks a careful line seeking to offer and explanation for how Joker could come to exist while not making the character into a sympathetic or heroic figure outside of the world of the film. Inside the world of the film Joker does become a hero to some and inspires them to vigilante violence.

Joker commits the murder of three financial workers for Thomas Wayne's, Batman's father, company. The film narrative at first presents them as bullies harassing a woman and Arthur, but as the narrative of the film progresses it becomes clear that Arthur is delusional, and nothing shown in the film can be seen as accurate or certain. As a result, one will never know what these men truly did, but only what Arthur perceived them to do. He viciously guns them down, purposely pursuing them and shooting them at point blank range while they try to escape. It is a brutal act, but the narrative sets up that Arthur felt justified.

Arthur is also presented as an aspiring comedian who is anything, but funny. As a result, he gains notoriety for being terrible, and is asked to come on a late-night Gotham talk show as a joke in the culture of the city. Arthur accepts, and when he arrives on the show he is dressed as a clown and asks to be introduced as Joker. While he is on the show he admits to murdering the three men, and that he is the killer clown that the city is looking for. He states that he did not do it for any political reason, and he did it because they were bad. He also goes on to explain that the city is bad, and the host of the show he is on is bad. Joker explains that his few sources of stability and support were removed from him. He was ignored and forgotten by the system, and

as a result he feels he has been treated unjustly. They city and systems of power that run it are bad. For that reason, he shoots the host and explains that the violence he has committed is a result of all that is bad from his perspective “getting what it fucking deserves!”

The above line demonstrates the idea that Arthur/Joker felt justified in his acts of violence and murder. In his mind it was justice. However, his mind is not stable. He demonstrates the idea of knowing and understanding concepts of right and wrong, but his notion that what and who is wrong can be killed and acted against with violence is a form of madness. The idea of vigilante violence as being justified as righteous action is being presented as the product of delusional and unstable reasoning. However, the film’s narrative pushes this critique of vigilantism further than this.

It is important that Joker says he did not kill the men on the subway for any political reasons. This is because the city starts to engage in mass protests wearing clown outfits and using the killer clown as a symbol and inspiration for a social movement. This social movement becomes class based of the poor who are being ignored and oppressed by the wealthy of Gotham who they see as corrupt. One of the key figures they see as being corrupt is Thomas Wayne who is running to be the mayor of Gotham in the film, and states within the film that he is doing it to try to help all the poor and struggling people of Gotham.

This movement has latched onto Joker as their literal call to arms. The members of the movement engage in rioting. They kill law enforcement officers, and even temporarily free Joker from police custody. One of the movement members also follows Thomas Wayne and his family into an alley and shoots both Thomas Wayne and his wife. Their son, Bruce, is left standing by

their bodies after witnessing their violent deaths. This traumatic moment, much seen in other films and comics, is the event that will inspire Bruce to become Batman.

Not only does the film present the way that culture can take up and map the vigilante myth onto violent actors. It shows that this can be done regardless of if the actors had any intention to be viewed as vigilantes. Joker viewed himself as justified to kill, but he never claims to be a vigilante of social or economic justice. He outright denies it. That does not stop many individuals of the culture banning together and acting because they fit and shape his actions into a vigilante myth.

At the end of the film we see Joker in custody at an institution, and he is talking with a psychiatrist and laughing. The psychiatrist asks him what is funny. He says it is a joke, but she will not get it. As he says this he laughs and we see the image of Bruce standing over his dead parents. We see the origin of Batman. This is the start of another vigilante, and the beginning of a vigilante myth that only comes to exist because of the misguided violent actions of a Gotham citizen who was inspired to his own violent act from the vigilante myth constructed about Joker. The narrative of the film is presenting the unending cycle of violence that the myth of the vigilante creates in American culture, and that it is the great joke. This is a joke that only Joker can find funny.

This reading of the film gains some further irony because of the cultural panic in America that when it was released it could lead to violent and criminal actions. The film was criticized about its role in glorifying or promoting violence (Scribner). The film does just the opposite of this. It is presenting that the culture will be the one that produces violence by mapping a vigilante myth onto the character of Joker. It is the myth of the vigilante that will create the inspiration to

violent action, and in the case of this film it is seeking to demonstrate and critique this tendency of the culture. It is also worth noting that the violence enacted in the film by all the vigilante figures inspired by Joker are male. This would seem to speak to a primarily male resentment in culture, but there is another aspect to this gender portrayal. When it is read as a critique of the myth of the vigilante hero it is clear that the foundation and repetition of the hero figure was all focused on male vigilante figures. It is not until the 20th century that the mythic formula shifts and adapts to open room for female vigilantes.

The narrative construction of this film is a very productive one for seeking to expose and dismantle the myth of the vigilante hero. It is one of the few films that deals with comic book vigilantes that manages to call the myth into question and does not at the same time reinforce it. Very few vigilante narratives that seek to dismantle the myth manage to fully accomplish that, and most seek only to retell and perpetuate the myth. By perpetuating the myth American culture will continue to perpetuate a cycle of violence that can be justified as being a good or righteous act. Violence can be mapped onto this myth to justify its use from any given political perspective or position. It will be a cycle of violence that can never be escaped. It is a promise of instability, fracture, and perpetual violence in culture. It is a joke that the culture needs to stop telling and open more positive avenues towards justice and change that individuals and communities with the United States seek to achieve.

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