Undressing An American Icon: Addressing the Representation of Calamity Jane Through a Critical Study of Her Costume

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Catherine Mary McComb, candidate for the degree of Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies, has presented a thesis titled, *Undressing an American icon: Addressing the representation of Calamity Jane through a critical study of her costume*, in an oral examination held on November 15, 2016. The following committee members have found the thesis acceptable in form and content, and that the candidate demonstrated satisfactory knowledge of the subject material.

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Abstract

This investigation studies Martha Jane Canary, known as Calamity Jane, with focus on her apparel, the buckskin outfit of a scout. This thesis looks at Calamity Jane’s costume because it was so seminal to her emergence as an American frontier icon. Unlike one-off costumes such as Dorothy’s ruby slippers or Marilyn Monroe’s JFK birthday dress, Calamity Jane’s costume re-occurred and was the determining factor in her rise to fame. What is innovative in this research is the use of critical costume theory as a methodology to revisit the history of Calamity Jane.

This thesis considers Calamity Jane’s garments as a biographical construct, containing conceptual elements and acting essentially as a floating semiotic signifier representing: 1) a woman’s ability to survive in the frontier west; 2) its construction of relative freedom for women from normative social structures and; 3) cultural assumptions around what gender is and does. It is her costume that therefore elevated the figure of Calamity Jane to iconic proportions in western frontier mythology.
INTRODUCTION: The Object of Investigation

CHAPTER ONE: Methodology: A Case Study using Critical Costume Discourse

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Introduction: The Object of Investigation

This thesis develops a case study of Martha Jane Canary, American frontierswoman and professional scout, considering specifically how her adoption of masculine dress cast her as Calamity Jane, an icon figure of popular culture. Viewed through the lens of critical costume theory, this thesis uses a methodological approach that intertwines the study of an apparel and its social and cultural context, with a reading of historical evidence and legend. This thesis argues that without the costume, the woman and infamous wild west figure would not have achieved the level of notoriety that followed her in life and proliferated after her death. The central claim of this research is that Calamity Jane was and is, in effect, a costume; a collection of masculine identifiers: buckskin jacket, leather trousers, flannel shirt, Stetson hat and cowboy boots; a costume that both hid and revealed the female body of Martha Jane Canary. It was, moreover, a costume that altered over time in response to changing social pressures, mores and readings of her ambiguously gendered identity. There are other examples of the revisioning and representation of feminine apparel in response to changing attitudes in regards to the identity of women. However, the case of Canary is compelling because of: 1) its historical setting against the backdrop of the wild west; 2) the questions that it raises about gender representation at that time; and 3) its thorough charting through photographs, literary, film, and television depictions since her death. What this investigation adds to the existing canon of research into the figure of Calamity Jane is a

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1 One might name any number of iconic women whose legend persists over time: Cleopatra, Joan of Arc, Marie Antoinette, Catherine the Great, Pocahontas. All were variously (and sometimes simultaneously) celebrated and reviled, their identity and, notably, their sexuality examined and represented in a multitude of retellings.
careful reading of her iconic scout costume as a crucial material signifier, mask, disguise, and mirror of female sexuality and gender identity as read through and against its ongoing commodification to an avid public. What the actuality of life for one particular woman in the American frontier was, and how she has been revised in various forms of media over time, is at the core of this discourse. Compared to the volume of material written about men, there is a lesser body of work regarding women’s contribution to nation-building in the wild west, despite their equal participation in this undertaking. Indeed, the known facts of Canary’s life are few and far between, and her notoriety may be based on pure fiction. Richard W. Etulain, in *The Life and Legends of Calamity Jane*, discusses many fictional accounts of Jane’s life that escalated as she gained a reputation for sometimes scandalous activity.²

Investigating her as a case study from the perspective of critical costume theory assists in uncloaking the life of an American frontier woman whose faces were captured now and then by a camera lens but whose identity was chiefly marked by the masculine costume that she donned from time to time. The absence of the subject, marked by the presence of the costume, is what drives the investigation. Without these frames, the story of Martha Jane Canary, like that of so many women of the period, would have dissolved into the past. Instead, her alter ego Calamity Jane is still identifiable by the fringed buckskin scout outfit. Reading this uniform is critical to understanding the legend of Calamity Jane. Charting the costume’s multiple representations and iterations over time

² Richard W. Etulain, *The Life and Legends of Calamity Jane* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2014), 200-215. Etulian cites examples of how her reputation as an adventu resome, gun-toting hellion grew. She is thought to have been a hostess and dancer in Deadwood’s saloons and theaters. She is known to have frequently taken strong drink, and she may have worked as a prostitute.
through popular literature, film and television illustrates the importance this costume has
in illuminating the complexity of Calamity Jane as a character. Succinctly put, critical
costume theory is a framework that enables the investigation of clothing as a semiotic
signifier of culture. Dorita Hannah writes that it is high time we consider “how design
elements not only extend the performing body, but also perform without and in spite of
the human body.” What Hannah is saying is that we can investigate costume as a
material object that functions both as an extension of an individual identity and apart
from that body. In the case of Calamity Jane, this double action is apparent in regards to
the scout outfit, at times both practical and performative, and then beyond the body of
Canary, when her dress becomes a performance costume taken up by other people. After
Canary’s death, the costume takes on other meanings when cited by other bodies in
popular culture in literature, on stage, screen and in social media. Over time, the scout
outfit operates semiotically without reference to the woman, the originator. This thesis
makes this case by providing a chronology that at first includes and then excludes Martha
Jane Canary from the equation, leaving the name Calamity Jane and her costume to
signify in multiple ways, gaining resonances though historical and gender readings. The
result is a case study of an individual, and a legend. Calamity Jane’s costume at various
points in history and within the field of entertainment and popular culture emerges as a
biography of her costume the cultural critic can trace.

Assumptions are readily made that a person’s identity and gender are reflected in
their clothing. Yet Aoife Monks suggests that costume is “…Something that can be

3 D. Hannah and S. Mehzoud, Expanding Scenography (Prague: The Arts and Theatre
Institute, 2011), 103.
removed. Costume is a body that can be taken off. Monks’ claim is important in understanding the findings of this paper. Devoid of its initiating body, Calamity Jane’s costume, used and re-used without consideration of its originator, is symbolically emptied out, thus opened to revision and commodification and able to be read through historical, cultural and gender lenses. In this case study of Martha Jane Canary, a space is opened for the consideration of apparel as primary material that uncloaks the identity of an American frontier woman and signals to future iterations, identities and meanings. In examining the circumstances of one individual, this paper addresses how humans embody and are embodied by clothing and how, through dress, gender is simultaneously hidden and revealed, claimed and thrown into question.

In the settlement stage of the American frontier, beyond mythology and photo images, men have their reputations, and recorded actions to tell their stories in the history books. Kit Carson, Buffalo Bill Cody and Daniel Boone, for example, were celebrated frontiersmen. Women had, and in many cases still have, little apart from their manner of dress as an example of residue most of which is fragile and fragmentary. The case of Canary is unique in that it is the costume that persists. At the same time, she stands in for many other women of the frontier such as One Eyed Kate who rode with Doc Holliday, and Sadie Earp the lover and wife of Wyatt Earp, whose specificities have been largely lost, neglected or ignored. This scholarship attempts to trace the ways in which such histories have been remembered, forgotten or rewritten over time by looking at one subject. It makes the claim that Calamity Jane’s mode of dress provides a starting point from which to unravel her story and redress the accounting of her life. The examination

of clothing fragments to piece together a social history of women coincides with the expanding archive of data found in novels, films, television shows, and social media citations available in the 20th and 21st century. The attention paid to Calamity Jane was and is a result of a growing ability to both harness this data and access larger markets than ever before possible. Though her depiction was continuously modified through retellings in literature, dime store novels, live wild west events, films, television shows, and the Internet, it is germane to note that her identity is chiefly perpetuated through the signifying aspects of her costume.

The thesis will make an argument in five chapters. Chapter One, “Methodology: A Case Study Using Critical Costume Discourse”, discusses research questions, methodology used, and sources (biographical material, gender theory, and popular culture iterations of her story) employed to frame the argument. This argument supports an investigation that follows the shift from the performance of Calamity Jane by Canary herself to the performative gesture implied by the wearing of the costume by others who were variously defined and empowered by it. Chapter Two, “Calamity Jane Arrives: The Making of the Myth,” considers how Calamity Jane was constructed in the public imagination. It looks first at her iconic ride into Deadwood and her relationship with Wild Bill Hickok, a folk hero known for his gun fighting and his gambling habit, who was a major adjunct to Canary’s narrative. It then references the initial portrayal of Calamity Jane in dime store novels and newspapers. It follows with a look at the wild west shows that glorified a spent era. In particular, this chapter sets up her iconic scout costume and discusses its importance in creating the legend. Chapter Three, “The Myth of the American Frontier in Film and Television,” uses the work of cultural theorists and
philosophers Richard Slotkin, Karen R. Jones and John Wills among others, to consider how Hollywood manufactured the American frontier myth of nation building through its version of the wild west. It looks at the traditional theory of settlement alongside the Hollywood construct paying particular attention to David Butler’s film *Calamity Jane* and David Milch’s television series *Deadwood*. Chapter Four, “Gender Performativity, Branding and the Appropriation of Calamity Jane in Popular Culture,” considers Calamity Jane, with support from theorists Peter Boag, Judith Butler, Jean Baudrillard, Ina Rae Harks and Eric Savoy, as a signifier of queer identity, hollowed out of original meaning, and how this reads against the evidence, albeit scant, we have of the historical figure. Chapter Five, “A Critical Study of Calamity Jane’s Dress in Images,” looks closely at selected photographic, graphic and film images of Canary and Calamity Jane. While the original clothing is no longer in existence, much information about her garments can be taken from reading these forms of visual documentation. Looking at images and media representations provides information that fills in some gaps in reading her history and provides insight into how the lives of women are read over time. Many images are used to support the argument and the Fair Dealings Clause (both in Canada and in the USA) allows for the use of copyrighted images to be used without copyright permission for academic research with citation of sources. Where possible the source of the image has been cited. Finally, in the conclusion, I argue how this case study validates the examination of women’s dress as a tool for studying women’s histories.

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Chapter One

Methodology: A Case Study Using Critical Costume Discourse

This thesis develops a case study of Martha Jane Canary, also known as Calamity Jane that is grounded in a critical costume methodology, an emergent research approach that asks the question: What does it mean to study costume in the 21st century? Early theoretical discourse on costume, such as is found in Hollander’s book Seeing Through Clothes and Elizabeth Wilson’s book Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity, are discussed in Jane Gaines and Charlotte Hertzog’s book Fabrications: Costume and The Female Body where they are described as underlining the active interrelation of costume, body, and character. Gaines and Hertzog argue that these theorists suggest, “…. costume assimilates bodily signifiers into character, but the body as a whole engulfs the dress.”7 Costume, historically considered to exist in proximity to the stage, is in this thesis expanded to embrace the production and function of costume in all areas of the performing arts and references how the costumed body and bodily practices are read through “a multitude of different media: from film and theatre to virtual environments and mediated platforms.”8 In writing this case study, the writer has included the notion of costume in everyday life in recognition of how the border between life and stage is ever more permeable.9

The aim of this thesis is not solely to develop a biography of the frontier woman, Martha Jane Canary, but to undertake a study of the clothes she adopted: those of a scout,

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8 Ibid., 193.
a rugged individual “who from mere love of adventure, wandered alone or in small companies across the wilderness, ever in advance of the settlements and the troops.”\footnote{Randal Parrish, “Old West Legends: Frontier Scouts and Guides.”} In this guise, she took on the persona of Calamity Jane, an alter ego defined by a costume that was iconic in concurrent popular culture representations and remains so in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century. The investigation addresses: 1) historic evidence and putative descriptions of her dress; 2) depictions of her apparel in print, film and photographs and; 3) how her iconic scout costume reverberates and is read through ensuing iterations portrayed in popular culture. The questions that are posed in this research take several points of departure and use a variety of theoreticians to aid in answering them. The questions are: 1) considering that remnants of apparel are one of the archival materials we have to trace the history and identity of frontier women, can a case study of a legendary female figure, and her signifying costume, assist in understanding the scope of female identity of that time?; 2) what happens when the apparel subsumes the subject or, in other words, can a costume take on an identity that, through the performing of it, overshadows the identity of the original wearer?; 3) how does the signifying apparel, read across approximately 150 years and in a variety of media, speak to changes in how women are represented?

This thesis begins with a biographical look at the individual to give context to her act of cross-dressing as a male (while retaining a female stage moniker). In the role of Calamity Jane, she assumed a character bearing little outward resemblance to the woman, Martha Jane Canary. In \textit{Calamity Jane: The Woman and the Legend}\footnote{James D. McLaird, \textit{Calamity Jane: The Woman And the Legend} (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2005).}, her primary
biographer James D. McLaird combines historical data and legend based on reminiscences from Jane’s contemporaries. Linda Jucovy, another of Calamity Jane’s principal biographers, follows a similar course in Searching For Calamity: The Life and Times of Calamity Jane. While these authors present historical fact as accurately as possible, the frontier west was rife with conjecture and tall tales, making this a singularly daunting task. Given the challenging circumstances on the western frontier in the mid-nineteenth century, even the birth and death records of Canary may not be accurate. So too, her notorious ride into Deadwood, Dakota Territory, while extensively written about, in reality probably lacked the grandeur affixed to the legend. This separation between fact and fiction is addressed by Keith Jenkins in Refiguring History: New Thoughts on an Old Discipline, in which he underscores the difficulty of recording history. Regarding the relative impossibility of claiming an accurate account, he writes:

> It is liberating for the creative imagination that there is no such thing as a correct historical method and that history can never fulfill its aspiration to obtain reliable and objective knowledge. For it is this failure, which allows radical otherness to come, new imaginations to emerge…. For if subjects are never complete but are always subjects (or better still subjectivities) in constant formation, then this instability allows for all kinds of actual personal and social antagonisms and ambivalences.

In response, this thesis considers the question: if we consider historical fact as merely subjective truth, how does a historian revisit the past? Indeed, this query has led to the untethering of this investigation from the historical figure, at a certain point, in order to read iterations of her well-recognized scout costume. In so doing, it views the subject through multiple lenses and turns its attention from the subject to her clothing, following

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13 Keith Jenkins, Refiguring History: New Thoughts on an Old Discipline (London: Routledge, 2003), 4-5.
the transcendence to icon of an ordinary woman. Finally, it is an investigation of how the apparel subsumes the wearer as a potent if unstable signifier performing a range of meanings contingent on each new wearer and the setting of the times.

Ample use of Canary’s biographers is made to provide dates and mark occurrences; however, these putative facts only frame the thesis. It has been more productive to look at the frontier west through depictions found in popular media of the time, which were instrumental in making the woman into a legend. By focusing on the sartorial aspect of her life, the thesis develops a thread that follows her from early life to her death and beyond, through popular representations of her and, specifically, her costume. Indeed, dressing in masculine attire was the primary signifier of the person.

![Fig.1. Calamity Jane (1876)](image)

In contextualizing the woman, the work of such theorists as Christine Bold, Mark Cronlund Anderson, Richard Slotkin, Karen R. Jones and John Wills is used to make

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14 Fig.1. Calamity Jane, (1876), The Montana Historical Society, (MHS 941-419) in; McLaird, Calamity Jane, 70.
sense of the social milieu in the American west at the time which contributed to the rise of Calamity Jane’s fame. Through their work, an understanding has been gained of how the American west was sensationalized and mythologized through the press, dime store novels, travelling wild west shows and finally, in the 20th and 21st century, in theatre, film, television, and popular media representations. Throughout, Calamity Jane’s iconic scout costume constantly resonates. In fact no performative iteration of the character is complete without buckskins and a rifle. Although some photographs taken as her fame was on the rise show Canary in female dress, her public performance and persona were formed and cemented through the taking on of male apparel.

Although not entirely the focus of this thesis, the representation of gender and how gender is performed through clothing has percolated throughout the research. While Canary was a woman who dressed as a man, this thesis does not speculate on her sexual orientation. Rather, it examines the contradiction drawn between the performativity associated with the male trappings (or drag) and the performance of self. Gender Trouble, Judith Butler’s seminal analysis of how culture reads gender, has been helpful. Her theory conceptualizes how gender is normalized and performed against a largely heterosexual society. As Butler suggests, clothing constructs and represents gender through an unending series of repetitions. However, the clothes that we choose also subvert and bring into question normative assumptions: clothing suggests or performs identity dependent on context.15

Following the work of Mary Harlow, this thesis then argues that clothing both hides and reveals. In her text Dress and Identity, Harlow writes, “…. dress can be

15 Judith Butler, Gender Trouble (New York: Routledge, 1990), 103-106.
manipulated by the wearer to establish a number of associations, which will send a message to the viewer about how an individual wishes to be regarded. These messages are frequently both complex and ambiguous.”16 The suggestion that dress represents and misrepresents beyond the wearer in complex ways, that it is a potent and dense signifier that can be manipulated, is the basis of this discourse and is exemplified by the costume first worn by Canary as Calamity Jane and later by those that adopted and adapted her dress for performance. This thesis argues that her quintessential attire is depersonalized through these iterations and emptied of its original meaning, thus becoming an emblem, or a brand that no longer signals the originator but points to a number of other meanings in popular culture. Illustrating these variations, the author draws on representations in print, theatre, television, film and popular media.

The decoupling of signifier and signified demonstrated in these sartorial representations is supported by Llywellyn Negrin in her book *Appearance and Identity: Fashioning the Body in Postmodernity*, where she writes:

Paradoxically, at the same time as there has been an increasingly individualistic focus in postmodern body projects, our outward appearance reveals less and less of who we are. For, while items of body adornment have become more personalized, they have also become more ambiguous in their meaning…. [T]he recognition of the essentially arbitrary relation between signifier and signified in clothing opened up the possibility of unfixing the meanings of dress.17

Indeed, the notion of unfixing meaning is critical to this work. In observing and deconstructing representations of her iconic apparel over time, there is a fascinating transformation or slippage in the costume itself, and in how Calamity Jane is embodied, enacted and performed.

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As a concrete point of reference, this thesis appends photographic images of Martha Jane Canary, Calamity Jane, and various fictionalized and spectacularized iterations of Calamity Jane’s story. It is intended that these visual representations, which clearly highlight her apparel, will support the argument that while Calamity Jane and her costume are interchangeable, what the costume means, signifies and represents is fluid, multiple and contingent, and it performs differently at different times. The question of who Canary really was, arguably, is then no longer of any great matter because the costume has subsumed the individual. It is a case study of a woman, and more importantly, a costume worn and read over time.
Chapter Two
Calamity Jane Arrives: The Making of the Myth

The version of Calamity Jane that is identified in popular culture was invoked by the catalytic moment of her highly publicized appearance in men’s clothing in Deadwood, Dakota Territory when she rode into town in 1876 with the wagon train of the notorious gunfighter and gambler Wild Bill Hickok. Although she certainly wore male dress before this, McLaird speculates that this moment launched her rise to almost mythic notoriety. He writes, “she had accompanied the General George Crook expedition against the Sioux and ridden into Deadwood with Wild Bill Hickok. Moreover, her flamboyant behavior made it impossible for newspapers to ignore her. The next year sensationalist writers extended her notoriety a national audience.”\(^{18}\)

There were no photographs taken to corroborate this event and historical accounts can only tell us that the ride into Deadwood happened. So why did this moment, however putative, catch the public’s attention? As she had done it before for practical reasons, cross-dressing alone was not the sole reason for her emergence as an icon of mythological proportions. Probably, it is attributable to the timing and the staging of the event and the cast of supporting characters. Certainly, it is likely that she would not have been so noted had she not been in the company of the already legendary Wild Bill Hickok. It is also possible that she would have gone unnoticed had she been dressed in women’s clothing or perhaps only fleetingly admired as one among Hickok’s retinue of females. McLaird notes that White-Eye Anderson witnessed that there were “as many as fourteen ladies of ‘easy virtue’ with Hickok’s party,” yet on July 15, 1876 a headline in

the *Black Hills Pioneer* singled out Calamity Jane reporting, “‘Calamity Jane’ has arrived.” It would seem plausible that the notoriety of the event was paramount in her rise to fame, and was at least partially rooted in her mode of dress. This idea is supported by the burgeoning of media representations following that public and much celebrated entry into town with Jane dressed in the outfit of a scout.

What is known of Canary’s relationship with Hickok? It is generally accepted that she met up with Hickok’s wagon train at Fort Laramie where she was reportedly on a drunken rampage. Legend has it that the soldiers asked Wild Bill to take Jane with him and he agreed. It is reported that the Utters and the Andersons who rode with Bill’s wagon train gave the carousing half-dressed party girl Jane, men’s buckskins, boots and a hat for the journey. McLaird claims that after arriving in Deadwood together that Martha Jane Canary had little actual contact with Wild Bill Hickok except as an acquaintance. This is contrary to the legend that they were lovers and is antithetical to the fact that she was buried near him in the Deadwood cemetery. Either way, stories connecting Martha Canary and Wild Bill Hickok began appearing during her lifetime and the two have been forever coupled in the mythos surrounding them. Linda Jucovy notes in her book *Searching For Calamity: The Life And Times Of Calamity Jane* that to this day tourists flock to visit the graves of Martha Canary and James Butler (Wild Bill) Hickok, who lie buried next to each other each other in Deadwood’s Mount Moriah Cemetery and it is commonly supposed that the two had a long-standing relationship that

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21 Ibid., 55.
ended in tragedy with the murder of Hickok on August 2, 1876.\textsuperscript{22} That said, McLaird claims that Hickok’s biographers discount any serious relationship between the two, and McLaird himself finds no evidence of a love affair in his primary research into Canary’s colourful life.\textsuperscript{23} Therefore, it seems fair to claim that their relationship was manufactured to sell dime novels and newspapers to a public eager to read about a romantic liaison between a legendary gunslinger and a notorious crossing dressing female.

The first significant examples of this literature is made evident when Calamity Jane appears in Edward L. Wheeler’s \textit{Deadwood Dick} dime store novel series, which McLaird claims “…. elevated ‘Calamity Jane’ from local notoriety to national prominence.”\textsuperscript{24} Arguably, it catapulted Canary as Calamity Jane to international fame. While her ride into Deadwood may have cemented her place in the history books, it was when she was featured in Wheeler’s \textit{Deadwood Dick and the Adventures of Calamity Jane} in 1877 that Canary first gained widespread popularity as a Wild West icon.

Louis S. Warren, William Cody’s biographer writes that:

\begin{quote}
The appearance of Buffalo Bill and other legendary figures such as Calamity Jane, and Wild Bill Hickok in the popular form of dime novels suggests that the West was a necessary arena for the developing ideas of entertainment in America. Perhaps there was some way in which the West provided these “heroes” with the requisite context for mixing life, myth, and performance. Lives were reconciled to story and \textit{vice versa} devising a seminal realization that life could be a story, lived for the amusement of the public.\textsuperscript{25}
\end{quote}

McLaird writes “although Martha occasionally denounced the dime store novels about her as lies, she spun similar yarns herself, expanding her role in events she knew only

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\begin{itemize}
\item Jucovy, \textit{Searching For Calamity}, 55.
\item McLaird, \textit{Calamity Jane}, 57 - 58.
\item Ibid., 155 - 68,73.
\end{itemize}
indirectly.” While many of the tales may have been incongruous with the reality of life in the western frontier, they made for good reading and were profitable for both the publishers and the subjects. True or not, they have persisted and become imbedded in our understanding of that period of time.

Indeed, Wheeler’s fanciful depictions of Calamity Jane, written in the last decades of the old west, were some of the most potent and lasting. He conjured his characters while employed by Beadle and Company, one of the most established and widely read publishers of the time and it was there that he founded, in 1877, the Half Dime Library sustained by the Deadwood Dick stories. In these, Wheeler delineates Calamity Jane as a woman gone wrong or, as Bold writes, “There is Calamity Jane, a woman who has been seduced in the past and now leads a man’s life, often helping Deadwood Dick out of danger… It is not unusual to find Calamity Jane (the name itself a disguise) dressed up as Deadwood Dick dressed up as an old man…” Calamity Jane was an odd character in men’s clothing even within a society of misfits. In this way, Wheeler’s depiction of Calamity Jane famously portrayed her as an odd character in men’s clothing even within a society of misfits. In this way, Calamity Jane became an identifiable character for the audience to welcome in each installment of the novels.

In Selling The Wild West: Popular Western Fiction, 1860-1960, Christine Bold describes the publication of dime store novels as a fiction factory that for over 100 years operated on the foundation of “selling the fictional product to as many people as possible

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26 McLaird, Calamity Jane, 5.
27 Ibid., 92.
29 Ibid., 13.
as profitably as possible." The western genre was one of the most popular and profitable subjects of dime novels. Authors were required by publishers to write formulaic tales of the wild west that featured good triumphing over evil with stock characters embroiled in adventures and carrying out heroic deeds while carrying on with nation building.

Bold notes that Fredrick Jackson Turner fostered this idealized scenario in 1893 in his seminal discourse on the western frontier, however, in that essay “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” he acknowledged that while the American character was forged from life on the frontier, that period had ended. While Turner’s romanticized version of settling the west has long been contested, his writing on the subject was accepted as true in his time and his rendering of fact certainly provided fodder for the dime-store novels. Western frontier idealization laid the groundwork for the creation of western frontier mythology and allowed characters like Calamity Jane to appear and remain larger than life in the public psyche for years to come.

According to Linda Jucovy, another noteworthy version of Calamity Jane appeared in the novel Calamity Jane: A Story of the Black Hills written by W. Loring Spencer in 1877. In Searching For Calamity Jane: The Life and Times of Calamity Jane, Jucovy describes Spencer’s novel as one of the countless examples of fan fiction that was undoubtedly inspired by dime store novels. Spencer, accompanied by her husband, began researching the novel with visits to Deadwood, Dakota Territory in 1877. Ten years later, it was published as an entirely fictionalized version of Calamity Jane.

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30 Ibid., 35-36.
31 Ibid., 38 – 40.
32 Ibid., 37.
33 Jucovy, Searching For Calamity, 102.
based on details taken from tourist literature and second-hand stories. 34 Jucovy suggests that Calamity Jane made an intriguing subject for writers and their readers mainly because of her appearance in male costume. When Spencer’s book was released, the ubiquitous visual construct of Calamity Jane was already firmly entrenched in popular frontier mythology. Jucovy writes, “Calamity’s gender fluidity was always a large part of her appeal to writers and their reading audiences…. In the ten years before Spencer completed her book, Calamity’s name, and the depiction of her as a woman-man, had come into wide circulation around the country.” 35 By the last decade of the 19th century, the populace had a picture of Calamity Jane in its mind’s eye. Jucovy summarizes this phenomenon, “She is the first real woman to make her way into dime novels, and the most popular. While her outward appearance and inward character may vary from story to story, an overall picture emerges.” 36 This picture of a magnificent, jaunty creature dressed in buckskin was by then already the embodiment of a great frontier legend.

Following on the success of the Calamity Jane character in the dime store novels of Edward Wheeler and others, Canary herself was contracted for public appearances in Buffalo Bill Cody’s Wild West and various travelling dime shows where she demonstrated her riding and shooting skills, and sold publicity pictures of herself dressed in the scout costume (Figure 1). 37 William Cody’s highly successful Wild West show was certainly instrumental in elaborating Calamity Jane’s public persona. Following Turner’s concept of the west, Jucovy claims that the real west had already begun to disappear by the time Cody’s show and its subsequent variations began touring the world.

34 Ibid., 102.
35 Ibid., 103-104.
36 Ibid., 105.
37 McLaird, Calamity Jane, 85-100.
However there remained a powerful sense of nostalgia surrounding a place and time that was already slipping away. She writes, “the West had become a show about the West, and Buffalo Bill Cody’s Wild West was the biggest performance of them all.”

McLaird writes that there were a number of other wild west shows in the eastern United States touring simultaneously. Having no control over the representation of her character in them, Canary informed a reporter that the public was being defrauded by the inauthentic stories of her life in circulation and by imposters claiming to be the authentic Calamity Jane. To set the record straight, Canary told her own version of her life in a ghost written pamphlet that she sold wherever she made public appearances. According to her biographers, the pamphlet was full of tales as tall as any adventures told in dime store novels or in dramatizations of her life. In reality, the effects of alcoholism marred her appearances at these events and, while the commodification of Calamity Jane flourished in other more polished performances, her ability to sell herself as the authentic individual became more difficult as her condition worsened. It appears that the public preferred to see an actor playing Calamity Jane rather than to see “the wretched creature” herself. The costume, once a glorious personification of the wild west, was now transferable; it had become a material representation that anyone could don, perhaps to better effect. When Canary died in 1903, the new century was already bringing technological innovations such that made obsolete the western frontier she knew.

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39 McLaird, *Calamity Jane*, 146.
40 Ibid., 160-168.
Chapter Three

The Myth of the American Frontier in Film and on Television

In *Cowboy Imperialism and Hollywood Film*, Mark Cronlund Anderson argues that Hollywood has proven to be a seminal teacher of history for the general populace. He uses the American frontier as an example of how our conception of historical events has been formulated, not necessarily with accuracy, by Hollywood. He argues that although most of the population in the twentieth century have never witnessed cowboys and Indians at war, the circling of wagon trains or cavalry charges, there is a perception of what these events look like because of their portrayal in the movies. Anderson writes: “in truth, if your mental image of the old west has not been fashioned by film, you probably were not alive in the twentieth century. Movies serve as our broadest and most pervasive, though by no means our best or only, history teacher.”

His argument is helpful in understanding the influence of Hollywood on the common perception of the wild west in the 20th century and how we have come to know its legends, Calamity Jane being perhaps one of the foremost. However, it is also critical to recognize that the forerunners of film, in the 19th century, were dime store novels and wild west shows, which were at least as seminal in the development of the myth of the American frontier west.

In his book *Gunfighter Nation*, Richard Slotkin writes that western genre films represent a cultural history with an emphasis on America’s “…. mythic expressions of

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ideology." The genre is so successful, he suggests, because it offers to the viewer romanticized images of historical events, “for an American, allusions to “the Frontier” … evoke an implicit understanding of the entire historical scenario that belongs to the event and of the complex interpretive tradition that has developed around it.”

Considering Slotkin’s theory and Anderson’s claim that one learns history primarily from watching film, it follows that one accepts the narrative of the American wild west presented in the films and television shows that have reproduced historic moments on screens for almost a century. The difficulty with these well-established narratives is that they are romanticized versions of historical events. As in the case of Calamity Jane, the narratives exclude important parts of society, namely details of women marginalized by the stereotypical and hackneyed ideas imposed by these media industries. Of course, other groups were excluded or severely misrepresented, as well. Slotkin asserts that at the base of American culture there is a patriarchal world in which the conquest and settlement of the American west was achieved by regeneration through violence. He writes:

The Myth Of the Frontier is our oldest and most characteristic myth, expressed in a body of literature, folklore, ritual, historiography, and polemics produced over a period of three centuries. According to this myth-historiography, the conquest of the wilderness and the subjugation or displacement of the Native Americans who originally inhabited it have been the means to our achievement of a national identity, a democratic polity, an ever-expanding economy, and a phenomenally dynamic and “progressive” civilization.

In Slotkin’s assessment, Indigenous peoples are excluded from the actual narrative of nation building. On the whole, so too were women. For example, film versions of the

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43 Ibid., 6.
44 Ibid., 10.
American frontier have frequently overlooked fully formed female characters, focusing instead on two-dimensional stereotypes; a familiar stream of saloon girls and prostitutes that do little to represent the rich reality of frontier women. This leveling out is distinctly true in regard to Canary and Calamity Jane, and this thesis provides, in the following chapters, several examples of film and television shows in which the treatment of her was deficient, focusing in some detail on two examples in particular that offer distinctive variations on the figure of Calamity Jane. These are the David Butler directed film *Calamity Jane*\(^{45}\) starring Doris Day in the title role, and David Milch’s television series *Deadwood* starring Robin Weigart as Calamity.\(^{46}\) Both are prime examples of this emptying out or flattening of the role of women. The first exemplifies a patriarchal version of American history in which women like Calamity Jane are tolerated but mocked and dismissed as either mere entertainment or aberration until they discover fulfillment through matrimony. The highly popular television series *Deadwood* does the same thing offering only slightly more robust characterizations of women capable of complex relationships, and scarcely acknowledging other ethnic groups (Afro-Americans and Chinese) who were generally excluded in earlier western films and television. However, in *Deadwood*, while Calamity Jane is, in some ways, a more nuanced human being, she is still portrayed as an alcoholic, an abject failure even in a society rife with unusual characters.

*Calamity Jane* is a romantic musical comedy set against the backdrop of Deadwood. In *The American West: Competing Visions*, Karen R. Jones and John Wills

\(^{45}\) David Butler, *Calamity Jane*, directed by David Butler (1953, Warner Brothers: Burbank CA).

describe the film as a “distinctly 1950’s gloss over of Western history.” 47 Far from the violent west described by Turner, this film shows a fictionalized frontier town in which everything is neat and tidy. This applies to everyone except “Calam,” the uncivilized outsider, who arrives by stagecoach in the opening scene. She wears a variation of the iconic garb, looking dusty and disheveled. Jones and Wills claim that the film appealed to the 1950s audience’s conservative values and, even with a smudged face, Calamity Jane is, certainly, a cleaned up version of her legend.

Rather than guzzling whiskey, this Jane drinks sarsaparilla soda and, while she does shoot her gun and tell tall tales, there is no cursing or lewd behaviour. Jones and Wills write that Day described her character as “a rambunctious, ‘pistol-packing prairie girl’ rather than a brusque, alcoholic drifter.” 49 The film was made in a time when the world was caught up in the politics of the Cold War. Hollywood believed the public needed popular entertainment that reminded audiences of a time when good men won and

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48 Fig. 2. Butler, Calamity Jane, 1953. Available from Allposters.com (accessed June 11, 2016).
49 Jones and Wills, Ibid. , 164.
the threat of nuclear destruction was non-existent. Day’s version of Calamity Jane branded the character indelibly in the public imagination as Jones and Wills suggest by writing:

In the end, the whimsical nature of *Calamity Jane* the musical ensured that the public took Doris Day’s character to heart. “Calam” may have borne scarce resemblance to her historical namesake, but the punters appreciated the hearty depiction of a whip-cracking heroine. This easygoing depiction offered escapism for the atomic generation and a wholesome story that conformed to extant codes of female decorum.

Despite the liberties taken with the historical details of Canary’s life, Calamity Jane’s scout costume, at least in broad strokes, survived this fictionalized retelling. Although tailored and belted to show the actress’ curves, for much of the film Day retains the familiar buckskin trousers and fringed jacket, a denim men’s shirt, a neckerchief, cowboy boots, a gun belt and a Cavalry cap.

![Fig. 3 Doris Day in David Butler’s *Calamity Jane*](image)

Fig. 3 Doris Day in David Butler’s *Calamity Jane*[^3]


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[^50]: Ibid., 165.
[^51]: Ibid., 165.
[^52]: Fig. 3. David Butler, *Calamity Jane*, 1953. Googleimages, (accessed June 11, 2016).
It is only as she gradually accepts her role as a woman that she begins to dress the part although the transition is only partial.

With some help from her friend Katie, she cleans up nicely to attend a ball in which she unwittingly catches Hickok’s attention. Finally, after a few rocky plot twists, she falls in love, and has a change of heart that necessitates a rethinking of her wardrobe. Although she still rides into Deadwood wearing a pristine and suitably fitted version of the buckskin outfit, she ends the film in a wedding dress straight out of the 1950s’.

Despite this obvious nod to the pressures on American women at this time to fit within a hetero-normative model of love and marriage, the film suggests it is questionable whether

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53 Fig.4, Ibid., (accessed June 11, 2016).
54 Figure 5, Ibid., googleimages.com, (accessed June 11, 2016).
Calam will ever completely lose the outfit of the scout, which here still manages to invoke the wild west however skewed it is by the fashion aesthetics of the 1950s. Calamity Jane is inseparable from her costume, the authenticity of which is inconsequential as long as the hourglass silhouette of the idealized 1950s female is obvious.

In the popular HBO television series *Deadwood*, we see a somewhat different portrayal of Calamity Jane. Here, the character is, arguably, a more historically accurate version (Fig. 6) than that portrayed by Doris Day. Weigert’s Jane is a hard-drinking, cussing, stumbling drunk trying to survive in the mire and shambles of the mining camp in Deadwood. In this depiction of the lawless gold rush town, Milch creates a hotbed of corruption and inhumanity peopled by an assortment of mavericks and nonconformists.

According to Jones and Wills, Milch shows:

*Deadwood*’s renowned sot [Calamity Jane] as a bumbling narrator in a late nineteenth century West marked by chaos, materialism and violence, a ‘Shakespearian fool, speaking truth to power, bearing witness to injustice, exposing what is normally kept well hidden in a mythologizing western’. Milch’s presentation of Calamity as a troubled ‘ministering angel’ bore some similarities with dime novel portrayals and early biographies. At the same time, Weigert’s Calamity roamed an asinine, grubby, grasping world far removed from the heroic landscapes of traditional fiction and Hollywood cinema.55

Within Milch’s framing, the iconic scout outfit remains faithfully depicted. Weigert’s Calamity wears ragged buckskin trousers and jacket, cowboy boots, a man’s flannel shirt, a battered Stetson decorated with feathers and a gun belt and six-shooter. However close the costume is to the photograph of Canary wearing the original, despite the director’s

intention to show a more realistic portrait of the west, Calamity Jane remains a cipher, memorable in this version for her costume, drunkenness and ambiguous sexuality.

In *The Life and Legends of Calamity Jane*, Richard W. Etulain suggests that the actual figure was nothing of the sort. She was a tough frontier citizen who fought to define herself and her world. By most biographical accounts, while Canary dressed in woman’s clothing much of the time, it was only when she adopted the role of Calamity Jane that she donned a costume; the well known collection of masculine signifiers; buckskins, a Stetson hat, and firearms, the material objects that defined the frontier hero. In not allowing Jane out of the scout outfit, Milch’s treatment, like many of his forerunners, gives the character surprisingly little breadth or scope considering the feminist movement had begun to address some cultural inequities in the years since the Doris Day film. This thesis furthers the discussion of *Calamity Jane* and *Deadwood* in Chapter Five.

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Fig. 6 Robin Weigert as Calamity Jane in Deadwood.\textsuperscript{57}

Chapter Four

Gender Performativity, Branding and the Appropriation of Calamity Jane

This chapter asks: given the construction of Martha Jane Canary’s identity as a notorious character known for cross-dressing, a woman who took on the outward trappings of a man, how does one distinguish among functionality, theatrical performance and gender identity in her apparel? There is no historical evidence that Canary identified as anything other than heterosexual despite various attempts to read her as queer. Despite this, cultural theorists have revisited her tendency to cross-dress through the lens of gender identity. For example, the character of Calamity Jane, portrayed by Doris Day, has received, in the hands of Eric Savoy, Mair Rigby and others, non-normative readings that as Rigby says, range across the spectrum of “butch, genderqueer, and transmasculine.”

In his essay “That Ain’t all She Ain’t,” Savoy uses Doris Day’s portrayal to consider queer identity and its representation in popular media in 1950s America and as a resurgent trope in the 1990s. The queering of the character is, arguably, an appropriation of the subject to support a particular analysis and it illustrates vividly how the costume can be adapted to multiple readings.

While evidence suggests that Canary donned the iconic outfit for reasons of necessity and financial gain, Savoy and others suggest that the costume has marked Calamity Jane and not Martha Canary as a gender bending paradox. In her blog post

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58 Mair Rigby, “Gender Calamity And Gender Possibility: Calamity Jane (1953),” Selected Tales (Blog).
59 Eric Savoy, “That Ain’t All She Ain’t; Doris Day and Queer Performativity” in Out Takes: Essays On Queer Theory And Film, Ellis Hanson Ed. (Berkley: Duke University Press, 1999), 151-152.
*Selected Tales,* Rigby discusses the role of Calamity Jane in which Day’s character troubles the heteronormative narrative, offering a “high camp celebration of queer rebellion and non-normative desire which conveys an alternative story.”*60* She writes:

From the outset, *Calamity Jane* presents gender roles as socially constructed, rather than natural, as roles that have to be taught and learned. Living out on the frontier, Calam, we are told, simply has not learned how to be a woman, but of course the implication that one has to *learn* how to be a woman undermines the very idea of fixed gender roles and identities.…. Whether we now interpret the historical Calamity Jane as butch lesbian, genderqueer, or transgender, it seems that the frontier allowed her a more fluid gender and sexual identity than was possible for many women who lived in more “civilized” places.*61*

The disruptive gender possibilities represented by Day’s character and costume reflect a playful element of American post war society existing just beneath the surface that may or may not have been present in the social landscape of the real Calamity Jane, a reality that was nothing like the Deadwood of the 1953 film. In *Re-Dressing America’s Frontier Past,* Peter Boag claims that homosexuality was certainly evident on the western frontier. However, he claims that for women in the old west, the disguise of cross-dressing was at times a safety mechanism and, at other times, a lucrative solution. The result was an escalating number of female cross-dressers who claimed a hetero-normative position but were not necessarily so. At the time, the idea of homosexuality was based on a survival model of posing as a man.*62* He writes:

Late nineteenth and early twentieth century stories about cross-dressers, whether real people or fictional fabrications, hold great significance. They were created as part of a large and forceful national program that heteronormalized America’s frontier past and thus its national origins. This all happened in a response to period anxieties over ever-increasing rates of homosexuality, transgenderism and

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*60 Mair Rigby, “Gender Calamity,” 54.
61 Ibid., 54.
transsexuality, collectively collapsed into the period’s term “sexual inversion” and symbolized by the cross-dresser. Boag argues that cross-dressing was very much a part of daily life in the American frontier and that to regard this as evidence of sexual inversion also wrongly suggests that the frontier past was depraved and degenerate. Rather than converting to the norm expected by eastern America, in the west cross-dressing was logical and practical for those women who worked in or were frequently exposed to the elements. Cross-dressing is also a theme that often appeared in stories and female-warrior ballads that were included in dime store novels and periodicals of the time. Boag also suggests that constructed representations of women who undertook sartorial switches did not necessarily align with reality. He writes that popular literature of the mid-19th century:

… normalized the western female to male cross-dresser and made her a heterosexual woman well before the very end of the nineteenth century, just when notions of hetero and homosexuality crystallized in broader society. Whereas in real life during this era cross-dressing became increasingly associated with sexual inversion, in western frontier fiction, and thus popular myth, a woman who turned to men’s dress remained above sexual suspicion: cross-dressing had become coded in the region as an act related to heterosexual love and sex.

How does cross-dressing relate to the specificity of Canary’s wearing of men’s clothing in the harsh circumstances of a frontier-mining town? Necessity must have, in some way, determined her wardrobe choice: arguably she began wearing men’s clothing to survive but, as per Boag, this was not a unique move. It was not until Calamity Jane rode into Deadwood in 1876 with Wild Bill Hickok that her masculine attire was recognized as highly performative, something extraordinary to daily life.

63 Ibid., 128.
64 Ibid., 128.
65 Ibid., 109.
In determining where necessity and performance butt up against each other, it is relevant to provide the alleged facts of Canary’s early life. She was orphaned at the age of twelve, and left to survive in the rough and unforgiving western territories of Montana and Wyoming. She lived as a camp follower in the mining and railway camps of the mid-19th century frontier of America, growing up among thousands of men and with little female interaction other than prostitutes.\textsuperscript{66} Indeed, choosing to adopt male signifiers such as riding, shooting, dressing in buckskins, and hard drinking, may have saved Canary from a lifetime of prostitution. It certainly opened a door for her to work as a wagon driver and an army scout. As a buckskin clad, pistol-packing personification of frontier masculinity, she was accepted by the men (perhaps as an anomaly) and allowed into male drinking establishments where she shared tall tales of her exploits with her male comrades.\textsuperscript{67} Certainly, cross-dressing began as a performed survival technique providing her a protective persona that gave her options not generally available to women so that she might gain paid work. However, cross-dressing served Canary only for a limited period. McLaird writes that, exploited by the press and commoditized by the entertainment industry on which she grew reliant for her livelihood, Canary took to excessive drinking. In the 1880s and 1890s, the romanticized legend had little correlation to Canary’s real life. Encounters with the broken alcoholic, McLaird writes, shocked and disappointed her fans that expected to meet the heroic figure of the Deadwood Dick novels. Instead, they were faced with a downtrodden drunkard dressed in women’s clothes.\textsuperscript{68} Ironically, rather than Canary herself, those who profited from her ambiguous

\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., 28 - 55.
\textsuperscript{68} Ibid., 202 - 225.
identity, colourful costume and the narratives that abounded were the real authors of her iconic status in western folklore.

In order to understand Canary’s cross-dressing in theoretical terms, read against our current understanding of gender identity, Judith Butler’s deconstruction of drag is helpful. Her work is crucial in considering Canary, a woman who, for whatever reason, subverted gender codes by wearing the superficial trappings of a man in a frontier landscape characterized by the relative absence of women. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler theorizes that if gender is a fabrication and a fantasy rather than an indisputable fact, then the concept of gender is merely “inscribed on the surface of bodies.”  


Furthermore, Butler suggests the performance of gender is constructed through reiterated acting, which produces the effect of collectively agreed upon static or normal gender differentiations while obscuring the contradiction and instability of any single person's gender act. The choice of non-normative apparel, in other words “wearing drag,” is a choice meant to subvert common perceptions of identity. Butler writes, “….drag fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer physic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity.”  

71 Ibid., 186.

Hence drag should not be considered the honest expression of personal intent; it is a costume worn to elicit a response from those who observe the enactment.

69 Ibid., 186.

70 Ibid., 186.

71 Ibid., 186.
According to Butler, the wearing of drag is a double inversion where the wearer appears to be constructing an illusion. An individual dressed in drag might present as feminine outwardly, while their inner self is in opposition. At the same time, an opposing semiotic inversion might be in effect; with the subject presenting a masculine gender outwardly with an inner gender or essence that is feminine.\textsuperscript{72}

However one deconstructs the representation of Canary’s gender, the iconic scout outfit was a potent and ambiguous signifier of masculinity and the wild west that functioned as a kind of brand that she herself exploited through theatrical means. It was certainly the strongest indicator of Calamity Jane’s identity; it made her distinctive and helped position her in the mythology of the frontier. Rather than being an inversion of normative gender identification, it was regarded as extraordinary. Seen to be entertaining, exciting, shocking, outré, even fashionable, it was the quintessence of the character. It marked her as an outsider and, as such, she was, and remains, a highly compelling figure.

Discussing the ambivalence in western society toward woman’s adoption of men’s attire, Fred Davis, in \textit{Fashion, Culture, and Identity}, argues that the acceptance of male drag was fueled by the appearance of some menswear as woman’s fashion at various historical times.\textsuperscript{73} While this may well apply in the case of Calamity Jane, it was perhaps the broad dissemination of her image, through the media platforms available in her lifetime, and the forms that developed after her death, which created a kind of fashion

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 186.

\textsuperscript{73} Fred Davis, \textit{Fashion, Culture, and Identity} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 54.
statement or brand around the scout outfit and marked the wearer as immediately identifiable.

In *Media Analysis Techniques*, Arthur Asa Berger introduces the postmodern notion of contingency, claiming that branding is a force that creates a semiotic language of identification, and arguing that although identity is always temporary, it is never stable. He writes:

…. brands are signifiers that we use to help define ourselves to others and, to a certain degree, without being too reductionist, we can say that we are the brands we assemble to forge a public identity. Brands are icons that function as status symbols, among other things. The fact that our valuations of brands change and our sense of style is open to fashion currents suggests that identities based on brands are open to constant revision and change, which brings the question of postmodernism into the discussion. The notion that our identities or selves are, in some way, temporary constructions, is the central notion in postmodern theory.74

This is useful: considering Calamity Jane as a brand provides a context for understanding the repeated appropriation of her image in the public sphere and the slippage of meaning associated with the familiar costume. The semiotic signifiers (buckskin trousers and jacket, a man’s rough shirt, a Stetson hat, cowboy boots, a neckerchief, and a gun belt and/or Sam brown belt and a rifle) are endlessly modified but always there. As long as these material signifiers are present, one sees how the notion of Calamity Jane is appropriated in ways as diverse as the dime store novel heroine, the Doris Day tomboy or the lesbian misfit in *Deadwood*. Despite temporal differences, all that is needed to conjure her up are these signifiers drained of any real meaning other than for the financial or entertainment value for which they have been appropriated.

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In *Screened Out*, Jean Baudrillard claims that the branding of history has resulted in a pastiche of historical knowledge left flattened and jumbled; using the term Disneyfication to describe the emptying out of meaning and the ambiguity of current media images. He writes about his claim as follows:

Disney achieves *de facto* realization of this timeless utopia by producing all events, past or future, on simultaneous screens, remorselessly mixing all sequences as they would - or will- appear to a civilization other than our own. But this is already our civilization. It is already increasingly difficult for us to imagine the real, to imagine History, the depth of time, three-dimensional space.

The Disneyfication of Calamity Jane, and possibly the entire wild west, is an example of Baudrillard’s notion of the shaping or recycling of everything to belong in a polymorphous world of the virtual. A case in point is the transformation of the town of Deadwood into a tourist destination that makes artificial the story of the wild west. With its designation as a National Historic Landmark in 1961, many storefronts were restored as to simulate how they might have appeared at the height of the gold rush from 1878 to 1884. Restoration also took place to make Mount Moriah Cemetery, where Canary and Hickok were buried, a historic site. This resurgence followed a period of disinterest and economic downturn during which, as McLaird writes, even Jane’s fame dwindled. He claims, “for nearly two decades after Martha Canary’s death in 1903, it seemed that she might be forgotten. Only sporadic stories were published about her and memorials

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76 Ibid., 167.
77 Ibid., 164 -165.
commemorating Calamity Jane were uncommon. Except for her gravesite in Deadwood, there were few reminders of her activities in the West.”\textsuperscript{79}

The Disneyfication of Calamity Jane, a brand that itself underwent a Baudrillardian emptying out of the original figure, has urged this investigation of primary and secondary images to catch glimpses of Canary and Calamity Jane and to see how subsequent generations have reimagined her. This thesis examines some of these revisions in the next chapter and returns finally to the examples of \textit{Calamity Jane} and \textit{Deadwood} for concluding thoughts.

\textsuperscript{79} McLaird, \textit{Calamity Jane}, 221.
Chapter Five

A Critical Study of the Dress Of Calamity Jane in Images

The function of this chapter is to illustrate the clothing attributed to Martha Jane Canary and her alter ego Calamity Jane by referencing photographs, artist illustrations, posters and film stills. This chapter examines these various representations of her attire, including the costume she wore in wild west spectacles and the costumes used by other performers who portrayed her in the decades after her death. These images can be viewed in the body of the text of this thesis and are referred to numerically within the thesis. These photographs and images are from prints found in archives, historical societies, and libraries in Montana, South Dakota, and Colorado. In the case of movie posters, they are taken from googleimages.com and imdb.com.

This thesis does not examine the specificities of her attire from an archeological perspective. It does not, for example, investigate the fibre, weave and dyes used to determine provenance, nor the inevitable signs of wear and tear that reflect types of employment and social status. Neither does it look at the images in order to recreate their cut and fabrication as a costume designer might. Rather, it uses the lens of critical costume as a means of interrogating the body in and as performance that maps a complex performance of identity as seen through normative gender representations. The material used to do so is largely photographic imagery. The represented images were chosen because of the diverse portraits of Calamity Jane they produce while offering a narrative that supports the principal argument of this thesis. They are widely circulated and what is critical to this thesis is that they continue to be circulated in the public domain.
In the introduction to *On Photography*, Susan Sontag writes that from its inception in 1839, the photographic image has taught us a “new visual code,” altering our view of the world, necessitating a new vocabulary and transforming the “ethics of seeing.” Resting on an unstable representation of reality, really only an image of an image, at first glance, “… photographs furnish evidence. Something we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we’re shown a photograph of it.” She writes: “photographed images do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it, miniatures of reality…. Yet, however much they seem to present an irrefutable reality, photographic images are interpretations as much as a result of the art of arrangement and aesthetic as other art forms such as artist illustrations, which we readily recognize as manipulated and aestheticized.

How should one read the images presented in this thesis? While informed by multiple sources, the proposed reading is subjective and a product of the popular culture that produced such distinctive versions of Calamity Jane. The intention is to look closely, and as objectively as possible, at the clothing captured in the photographs and illustrated in the graphics. The aim is to reveal something of the character of Calamity Jane and to provide insight into her rise to fame as a highly sexualized and gender bending camp symbol within popular culture, showing how images may provide a detailed representation of what women wore but only a partial answer to why they wore what they wore. These images reference only obliquely the individual underneath the garb.

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81 Ibid., 3.
82 Ibid., 5.
Clothing, as it turns out, is as duplicitous as the various means used by artists to capture the image.

The volume of portraits produced by the photographers of the late 19th and 20th century are an important element in the telling of the story of the frontier west. People of all classes had photographic portraits made that stood as treasured records of their likenesses. These exist in museums, archives and family collections, and are widely available in the public domain. From a historical perspective, it is important to ask what the value of these images and illustrations is in determining the actual dress adopted by subjects. The photographic portraits are generally posed and feature the individual in a fashionable dress, or in an outfit owned or often supplied by the photographer. As Sontag states, they are images of images. Nonetheless, they contain a wealth of information. It is noteworthy that there are more portraits of Canary in women’s dress than in men’s, and the later images of her dressed heroically in trousers and buckskin are publicity photographs rather than informal shots.

In the 1870s, Canary began working as a scout and took on its uniform for practical reasons, passing as a man in order to find work and adventure. The earliest known photograph of Canary was taken in 1875. Retained in a private collection, it is not available for viewing. However, there is a record of it in Jucovy’s description:

In it, she is half sitting, half reclining on a rock near a creek in the Black Hills, Dakota Territory. Dressed in boots, pants, a shirt, and a wide-brimmed hat, she could be mistaken for a male soldier - which is exactly what she had in mind….Martha Canary, the girl wandering through Wyoming towns in the late 1860s, had, by the time of her appearance in 1875, somehow reinvented herself as Calamity Jane…. From that time on, no one ever referred to her as Martha.

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83 Sontag, Ibid., 5.
84 Jucovy, Searching, 47.
As Canary herself stated, up until this point, she dressed in the clothing of her sex, finding it uncomfortable to dress as a man until she grew accustomed to it.\(^{85}\) Despite her eventual ease with men’s clothes, Jucovy argues that Canary was not in the least concerned with concealing her gender.\(^{86}\) She writes:

“No other woman could be a man like Calamity. She wasn’t disguising herself as a man. She wasn’t pretending to be a man…. Calamity did not need to practice walking or sounding like a man when she talked. That was not a challenge for her. She was large and strong. She rode astride her horse and cursed as expertly as any man around. And she could do the physical work associated with men; as well as any man was able to.\(^{87}\)

There is no doubt that Calamity could pass as a man. A studio photograph of Calamity Jane (Fig. 7) dressed as a fully outfitted neatly uniformed soldier was shown around to the soldiers at a camp near a place known as French Creek where she was working. Upon seeing the photograph and thinking he might have seen a woman in a man’s uniform, an officer ordered her to leave camp. Refusing to do so, she hid instead among the wagon drivers.\(^{88}\) The photograph is telling; with her right arm cocked, her hand resting on her side arm, Jane appears comfortable in her skin. Her hat sits just so on her head and her gaze is firm. There is no sense of mockery, irony or self-deprecation in the image. In this photo she is not trying to pass as a man. Instead, she appears to enjoy the ruse.

\(^{85}\) Ibid., 47.
\(^{86}\) Ibid., 53.
\(^{87}\) Ibid., 52.
\(^{88}\) Ibid., 53-54.
Indeed, the image suggests that the Calamity Jane persona was already coalescing. When she later made the legendary ride into Deadwood in 1875 with Wild Bill Hickok, she was already comfortable riding with the men neither as a man nor as a woman disguised as a man but simply as Calamity Jane. From then on, she allowed herself to be professionally photographed both in menswear and in women’s clothing. Apparently, she was equally at home in either role. Formal portraits typically show an attractive, neatly coiffed, modestly attired woman of some means in (Fig. 8 and Fig.9).

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89 Fig. 7. Canary in Calvary Uniform, J. Leonard Jennewein Collection, McGovern Library, Dakota Wesleyan University, in Etulain, Life and Legends, 127.
Arguably, Canary saw the potential for fame and fortune, or at least remuneration, in the photographs of her dressing in men’s clothing, and it is well known that she sold the hand-tinted photograph of the rifle-toting Calamity Jane in buckskins at wild west shows and at public appearances. Presumably, it was a favourite both of her and of her many fans. Reproduced so frequently, it has become indelibly imprinted in the minds of the public as the iconic image of Calamity Jane. In it, she is boyish but obviously a woman. The colouration is soft and her long hair is pinned back in a chignon, a hat framing her head. The buckskin jacket, a trifle large, falls rakishly off her right shoulder revealing a plaid shirt and a white ribbon tied at her neck. It is an appealing image. Her stance is defiant but relaxed and her gaze is directly at the camera.

90 Fig. 8. Martha Jane Canary, The Montana Historical Society, (MHS 981-573) in McLaird, Calamity Jane, 80.  
91 Fig. 9. Martha Jane Canary (date unknown), Denver Public Library Western History Collection (F-38793), in McLaird, Calamity, 175.
Also in circulation were drawings made of Calamity Jane for covers of dime store novels. Widely popular, these publications disseminated her image nationally and internationally. Figure 10 shows the hard-riding heroine of Fort Whoop-Up infamy, a whiskey trading post, originally Fort Hamilton, which she may have frequented. In it, her hair is loose, her neckline revealing, but she is tightly corseted and there is no hint of the scout apparel seen in photographs other than the hat and rifle that identify her occupation.

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92 Fig. 1. Calamity Jane, (1876), The Montana Historical Society, (MHS 941-419) in McLaird, *Calamity Jane*, 70.
Although not accompanied by an illustration, a vivid description taken from the pages of a pamphlet written by Horatio N. Maguire states, “there was nothing in her attire to distinguish her sex … save her small neat-fitting gaiters, and sweeping raven locks. She wore coat and pantaloons of buckskins, gaily beaded and fringed, and a broad brimmed Spanish hat completed her costume.”

One wonders, if Canary dressed to mirror such depictions, or if she did ever attain such sartorial magnificence.

There are many other candid photographs of Canary taken later in her life in which she is dressed in women’s clothing. We can only speculate on the reasons for this shift away from the Calamity Jane apparel. If we take the iconic image of Calamity Jane (Fig. 1.) as the pinnacle of her career, any divergence from this ideal that observers might have noted as Canary aged, gained weight, abused alcohol and generally fell prey to the indignities of middle age, could only have negatively impacted the public image of the

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93 Fig. 10. Calamity Jane on the cover of Beadle’s Pocket Library, McLaird, Calamity Jane, 76.
94 McLaird, Calamity Jane, 88.
real person. Certainly, she would have been less inclined to take up the scout costume only to be mocked or belittled for no longer living up to the expectations of others. It would appear that the Calamity Jane role and costume, which Canary readily assumed in her younger years for practical and lucrative reasons, came to be regarded as something outside her, a performance costume that no longer reflected or fit the reality. These amateur photographs, taken later in her life, show a rough and ready frontier woman. They also, sadly, chart her gradual decline into alcoholism and poverty. From these later images, one taken only eight months prior in 1885 (Fig. 11), it is evident that simple, well-worn dresses, blouses and skirts appear to be the practical choice for hard-working, hard-living women rather than the fine attire evident in the professional portraits of the period. Not surprisingly, women sat for studio photographs in finery that they did not adopt on a daily basis.

Fig. 11. Calamity Jane in a photograph taken in 1885.95

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95 Fig.11. Ibid., 170.
In 1881, she settled in Miles City, Montana where she struggled with alcoholism and attempted to run an inn. Two images of Canary from 1885 (Fig.12) are significant because they may be the closest that we get to an accurate representation of her life as a frontier woman. They capture her without any of the familiar theatrical trappings of Calamity Jane; buckskins, Stetson, neckerchief, and cowboy boots. In one, Canary is seen standing by her saddled mount. In the other, she is shown in a meager shack caught in the midst of cooking breakfast and pausing to smoke a cigar. In both, she is plainly and practically dressed in women’s clothing fit for a life that was dirty, dangerous and
markedly different from the illusion of the American west supported by the studio photographs so significant in creating the myth of the wild west.

In 1893, she began to appear in costume in Buffalo Bill Cody’s Wild West performing as a storyteller. In 1896, she joined the traveling Kohl & Middleton Dime Museum as a performer, appearing on stage in buckskins and reciting her adventures. However, at that time, she suffered from both depression and alcoholism.

Fig. 13. Calamity Jane (1895)\textsuperscript{97}

Fig. 14. Calamity Jane (1895)\textsuperscript{98}

\textsuperscript{97} Fig. 13. McLaird, \textit{Calamity Jane}, 183.
\textsuperscript{98} Fig.14.Ibid., 190.
In two images taken from the same period, Canary assumes the costume of a scout. In one image, she is still riding tall in the saddle but looks slightly more trail worn. In the other, she appears stiffly arranged, somewhat portly and ill at ease with what had perhaps become a counterfeit persona. About six months after these photos were taken, her drinking and profanity ended, for the time being, her career as a stage performer. In 1901 she participated for the last time in Cody’s Pan-American Exposition. Widely disseminated publicity generated by Cody’s show, posters, and later film, stills fostered a romanticized version of a place and time in American nation building that ignored the hardscrabble reality of life on the land and the women and men who peopled it. The image of Jane posed at the grave of Wild Bill Hickok (Fig.15) was taken later in her life and in it there is no hint of the drinking that had begun to mar her performances. Here she looks very much as one would expect a middle aged woman to look, seemly attired, her straw hat cocked at the required angle to show her face to the camera, posing beside a tourist attraction.

99 Ibid., 157.
100 Ibid.,190-194.
In the spring of 1903, Canary returned to the Black Hills to help cook and do laundry for a brothel in Belle Fourche, South Dakota. Here, she again showed signs of depression and the psychological conditions now identified with the effects of alcohol abuse. Was the bifurcation of Canary’s personality into two distinct characters evidence merely of a pragmatic will to survive, a desire for adventure, and a disregard for normative social forms? The answer is an enigma; she died in 1903, at the age of 51, leaving a legend that blurred the line between the reality and fiction of her life.

What happened to the public interpretation of Calamity Jane in the decades following her death? The following provides a brief overview of attempts by the Hollywood movie industry to mine the rich vein of her legend, and it includes examples of the adaptation of the iconic scout costume to jibe with norms, social mores and fashions of the times in which the films were made.

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101 Ibid., 189.
102 Ibid., 209.
103 McLaird, Courtesy of The Montana Historical Society (MHS 941-418), 181.
The films chosen for this thesis were produced between the early 20th century and the mid 20th century, the heyday of the genre of the Western film. The list also includes David Milch’s 21st century television series Deadwood because Calamity Jane is a primary character in the series and the portrayal of her character is in stark contrast with the earlier films cited here. In these early films, Calamity Jane is a secondary character and, because of this, minimal time is spent discussing them. Instead, this chapter concludes by addressing more fully Butler’s Calamity Jane, in which the character of Jane is central, and Milch’s Deadwood, in which the role is also fundamental, pointing to how, many decades after her death, her narrative still captures the popular imagination.

Clifford S. Smith’s Wild Bill Hickok,104 the first nationally distributed film to feature Calamity Jane, starred Ethel Grey Terry.105 Although the film is lost, the surviving script indicates that it perpetuated the myth of her love affair with Hickok and shows Calamity turning to masculine attire, the scout outfit, only when Hickok abandons her.106

Cecile B. DeMille’s The Plainsman, a film starring Jean Arthur as Calamity Jane and Gary Cooper as Wild Bill Hickok, was made in 1936.107 A publicity shot and the poster presents her as a beautifully made-up and fashionable young woman, not wearing buckskins but dressed in a fur trimmed, cinch waist jacket adoringly clutching Hickok as he heads off to fight the enemy.

104 Clifford S. Smith, Wild Bill Hickok (1923, Paramount Pictures).
105 McLaird, Calamity Jane, 224.
106 Etulain, Life and Legends, 220.
107 Cecile B. DeMille, The Plainsman (1936, Paramount Pictures).
In Joseph Kane’s *Young Bill Hickok*, Jane, portrayed by Sally Payne, is a horse trader who befriends a clean cut Bill Hickok (Roy Rogers) after an attack by raiders. But, Hickok’s attention never veers from his love interest Louise, despite Jane’s attempts to catch his eye. In one film still, she is seen dancing flirtatiously on a barroom table. She is wearing the iconic outfit of the scout but looks more like a ragged and comical creature rather than a femme fatale.

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108 Fig. 17. *The Plainsman* (1936), googleimages.com, (June 11, 2016).
109 Fig. 18. Ibid., googleimages.com, accessed (June 11, 2016)
In Alfred Green’s *The Badlands of Dakota*, Calamity Jane is a secondary role played by Frances Farmer. Meticulously coiffed and wearing a formfitting buckskin scout’s outfit with an ammunition belt slung across her hip, she vies fetchingly but unsuccessfully for the attention of Wild Bill Hickok.

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111 Fig. 19. Ibid., googleimages.com (accessed June 12, 2016).
Jane Russell played Calamity Jane opposite Bob Hope in Norman Z. McLeod’s comedy *The Paleface*.\(^{114}\) In this iteration, the character of Jane was played for laughs. Russell infused the role with tremendous sexual innuendo and was frequently dressed in a chemise tightly corseted to highlight her voluptuous figure. Either dressed as a scout or as a woman, Russell’s portrayal exudes sexuality.

Starring Yvonne De Carlo in George Sherman’s *Calamity Jane and Sam Bass* (1949), Calamity is tightly buckskinned to reveal her figure and is wearing the fashionably wide shoulders of the time. Calamity is the wild frontier horse racer who leads a handsome drifter to moral downfall.\(^{117}\)


\(^{115}\) Fig. 21, Ibid., (accessed June 11, 2016).

\(^{116}\) Fig. 22. Ibid., googleimages.com. (accessed June 11, 2016)

In all these examples, Calamity Jane is portrayed as the outsider, always beautiful but never the kind of woman that men marry. While these examples chart fascinating recreations of the character, it is David Butler’s *Calamity Jane*, the 1953 musical-western film starring Doris Day, that is particularly noteworthy in its reflection of American mores of the period in which it was made. Remaining popular over the intervening years, it is exemplary in revealing how the Calamity Jane narrative has since been taken up in current popular culture. Publicity stills and posters of *Calamity Jane* show a character in sharp contrast to the iconic photograph of Canary in the scout costume purveyed during her lifetime. Rather than paying homage to the original, the all-American tomboy costume worn by Day reflects the fashion profile of the 1950s.

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118 Fig. 23. Ibid., Googleimages.com (accessed June 12, 2016).
In “That Ain’t All She Ain’t,” Eric Savoy suggests that read in one way, Day’s character is regarded with nostalgic affection as the Girl Next Door who exemplifies a reassuring and uncomplicated sexuality.\textsuperscript{119} Her boyish garments are tailored to fit her curves, and the buckskin pantaloons and jacket are only nominally masculine. They are certainly no gender disguise. Indeed, the open neckline of the shirt and the tight high cut of the pants are sexualized in a kittenish way – a completely declawed version of the wild west legend. This is a sign of the time in which the film was produced: American soldiers had in the decade after World War II shown an eagerness to reclaim their old jobs, although in doing so they relegated women, who had kept industry producing during the war, to the domestic sphere to raise children. With the Cold war looming, movies produced in the period manufactured images that assured male audiences that all was right both at home and in the world.

Savoy suggests that another reading of Doris Day playing the Calamity Jane role is also possible, one set against the backdrop of America (and American cinema) in a time of emerging recognition of the instability of gender and sexuality, of incipient homosexuality and desire.\textsuperscript{120} In the film, this is exemplified by the ambiguous relationship between Jane and hyper-feminine girl friend, Katie, which underscores a lesbian specificity “that pulls against … a heterosexual narrative trajectory.” He writes, “a compelling irony of the 1950s is that the most acutely homophobic phase of the American 20\textsuperscript{th} century generated such a wealth of representation around lesbian and gay potentiality. Day’s work ‘confounds’ both the narrative intent to restrict and regulate the cultural expectations of feminine subordination to the coherent ‘type’ both ‘heterosexual’

\textsuperscript{119} Savoy, “That Ain’t All She Ain’t” 156.
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 155.
and ‘lesbian.’ Day enacts and embodies lesbian performativity through her exuberant physicality and through her apparel, which, as evident in the publicity photos and posters from the film, achieves a level of sexuality that is neither fully heterosexual nor fully homosexual. It is hard not to recognize this ambiguity as distinctly gender bending.

In strong contrast to Doris Day’s representation is that of Robin Weigert in Deadwood. This version, made for a television audience in the early 21st century, focuses on Calamity Jane’s gender identity. Even so, Calamity Jane harkens back, in many details, to the iconic photograph (Fig. 1) where the scout jacket falls off her shoulder and her gaze meets the camera directly. However, as Ina Rae Harks argues, in Deadwood, Jane, in the scout outfit, is played as gender transgressive and thoroughly marginalized. Her “assumed masculinity is the worst kind on display, a parody of the typical hoople [a useless self-serving entity] behavior. She is perpetually drunk, foulmouthed,

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121 Ibid., 157.
pugnacious.”123 Unlike the Hollywood versions previously cited, this Jane is uncouth, awkward, and absolutely uncomfortable in her skin. Her scout costume is ill fitting and filthy. Of all the wretched characterizations of women in Deadwood (whores, prostitutes and drug addicts), Jane is arguably one of the most abject. There is no hypersexuality apparent in this version, although, as Hark argues, “Jane’s true nature emerges as much more stereotypically female than her outward behavior would indicate.”124 Ever the outsider, always the spurned would-be lover, she adores Wild Bill Hickok, who, while not in the least attracted, nonetheless accepts her as she is. There is nothing but unrequited pain in this relationship, which is not resolved until Joanie Stubbs, one of the prostitutes, expresses lesbian desire for Jane and this attention is finally reciprocated. Here then we see a yet another fictitious portrayal of Calamity Jane that speculates about her sexuality. One could argue that her costume made her appear quite butch throughout the series foreshadowing her liaisons with Joanie Stubbs who is an openly lesbian character.

123 Ina Rae Harks, Deadwood (Wayne State University Press, 2012), 5-15.
124 Ibid., 5-15.
Both the Doris Day and Robin Weigert versions of the Calamity Jane character trouble the gender narrative surrounding Canary suggested, if not totally supported by, her legendary cross-dressing. In the 1953 film, the surface narrative, which ends with Calamity riding into the sunset wearing a wedding dress with Hickok beside her, is “in constant tension and conflict with the film’s high camp celebration of queer rebellion and non-normative desire, which conveys an alternative story.” The underlying narrative in the film is full of lesbian potential. In Deadwood, the character of Jane, ill-fitting scout outfit included, is only fully realized when she unambiguously claims her homosexual desires, something hinted at in but not fully articulated in the Doris Day film.

In these contrasting versions of Calamity Jane, one sees that, although the character has changed in fifty years reflecting the relative acceptance of non-normative portrayals of gender within popular culture, what remains is the essence of the Calamity

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125 Figure 15, Deadwood (2004 – 2006), Googleimages.com, June 12, 2016.
126 Savoy, “That Ain’t All She Ain’t,” 151.
Jane costume. It is the buckskins, while stylized and differentiated in each version, that act as a device to connect Calamity Jane and Martha Canary disguised in the form of an identity that those garments symbolize.
Conclusion

In conclusion, this thesis returns to Sontag’s notion of the power of the image to reveal and, simultaneously, conceal. She writes:

… the force of photographic images comes from their being material realities in their own right, richly informative deposits left in the wake of whatever emitted them, potent means for the turning of the tables on reality - for turning it into a shadow. Images are more real than anyone could have supposed. And just because they are an unlimited resource, one that cannot be exhausted by consumerist waste, there is all the more reason to apply the conservationist remedy. If there can be a better way for the real world to include the one of images, it will require an ecology not only of real things but of images as well.127

Sontag’s words note the value of photography (and other imagery) in understanding dress and the women who dress. A study of how Martha Jane Canary becomes Calamity Jane is an example of how dress uncloaks fascinating details regarding a particular character in a specific time and place.

To reiterate, the questions that drove this investigation were: 1) considering that remnants of apparel are one of the primary archival materials we have to trace the history and identity of frontier women, can a case study of a discrete, if legendary, female figure and her signifying costume assist in understanding the scope of female identity of the time;128 2) what happens when apparel subsumes the subject or, in other words, can costume take on an identity, through the performing of it, that overshadows the identity of the original wearer?; 3) how does the signifying apparel, read through time and in a

128 This question is also poignantly addressed in Laurie Bertram’s exhibit at University of Toronto on the history of sex work legislation in Canada, and “Pioneer Ladies (of the evening),” a travelling exhibit that explores the lives and legacies of criminalized women in Western Canada through textiles and fashion. https://lauriekbertram.com, (accessed on September 20, 2016).
variety of media, speak to the changes in how women represent and are represented outwardly?

Certainly, this investigation articulates how dress is a critical component in the study of women’s history in the frontier west. Clues to the domestic conditions that women endured in the period can be read from the garments that remain, snippets of written descriptions, and the goldmine of photographs and images that were generated during the period. In this case, biographical descriptions of Calamity Jane’s costume supported by photographs and media image of the subjects, assist in tracing the legend she became.

Not content with limiting the cultural representations of her only up until the time of her death, this thesis also looks beyond to map the representation of Martha Jane Canary and Calamity Jane for the better part of the century that followed. To this day, Calamity Jane is comprehended by means of viewing the publicity shot, the iconic photograph of her in the buckskin scout outfit that she allegedly wore on her ride into Deadwood with Wild Bill Hickok’s wagon train. However, while Calamity Jane was defined by that singular costume, Martha Jane Canary’s identity remained largely hidden from view. She played the role of the scout when it suited her needs and otherwise identified as Martha Jane Canary, a frontier woman, who did what was required to survive in a place where women were relegated to second-class status.

The tragedy of Martha Canary’s life was that she played a role in creating a costume that eventually subsumed her identity as a flesh and blood individual. Too. It may have ultimately led her to a relatively early death hurried on by alcohol abuse and the circumstances of frontier poverty. The burgeoning legend, much of it self-generated,
began with the descriptions published about Calamity Jane in Deadwood as early as 1875, followed by a widespread dissemination of her story through dime store novels and popular travelling wild west shows. As her fame grew, the character of Calamity Jane subsumed Martha Jane Canary. In the eyes of the public, she was Calamity Jane, a gun-toting, cussing, rough riding celebrity; in actuality, it was a performance enacted only when she wore the buckskins.

After her death in 1903, her costume, the well-rehearsed collection of masculine signifiers, was cemented in folk mythology and manifested again and again in novels, films, television shows, and other media depicting the wild west. This suggests that it is possible to represent Calamity Jane in a myriad of genres and time periods as long as her costume bears some resemblance to the original subject and the iconic image of her dressed in buckskins. For example, Doris Day in tight trousers and formfitting buckskins in 1953, and Robin Weigert as a butch bi-sexual in buckskins in 2004, are instantly recognizable as long as the costume references the Calamity Jane sartorial story.

Finally, this is a case study of one woman told through her dress. It finds that dress both covers and uncovers the subject in question. Either way, it is a productive tool for reviewing women’s place in history and for exploring the myriad of depictions that express how and what we think about women, how women are represented in popular culture and, more generally, how gender is enacted inwardly, outwardly and over time.
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