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Hilary Radner and Moya Luckett, Editors

Swinging Single Representing Sexuality in the 1960s



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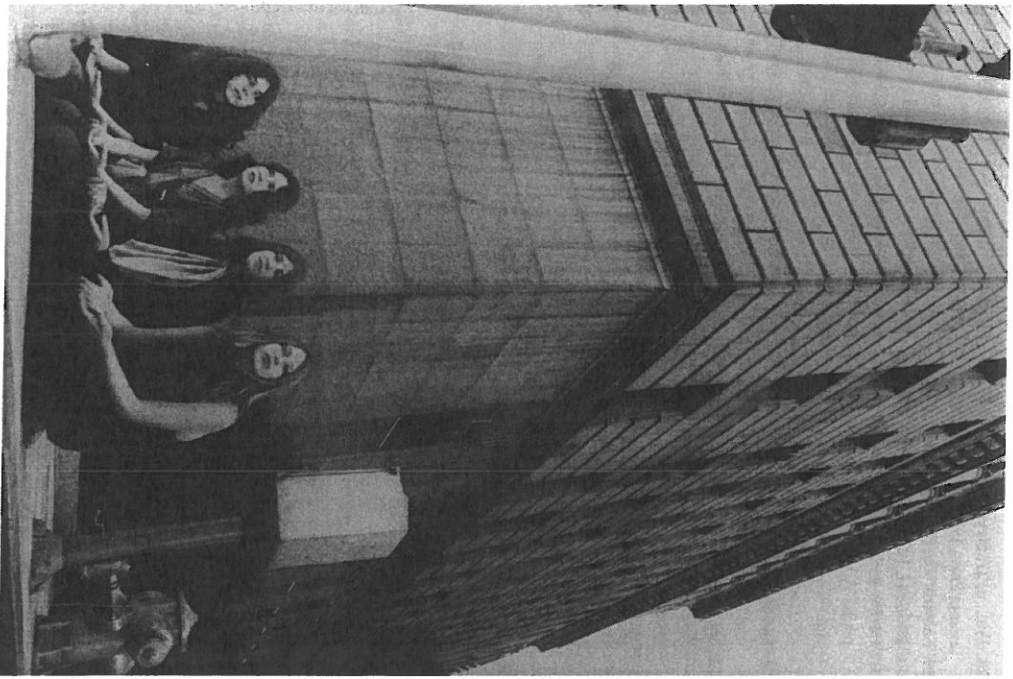
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Love and Kisses from Charlie
Jeffrey Sconce



Members of the Manson "family" maintain a vigil outside the Los Angeles courthouse during the murder trial. Courtesy of Los Angeles Public Library.

Few popular demons in American culture have undergone as thorough, enduring, and lucrative an exorcism as Charles Manson. Two and a half decades after his conviction and incarceration for the Tate/Labianca murders he is said to have masterminded, Manson remains a surprisingly public figure. Having already inspired a seemingly endless cycle of paperbacks detailing the sordid life of "the family," and having single-handedly created the now ubiquitous pulp menace of the "hippie terror-cult," Manson in the 1990s has continued to generate considerable press—this despite the fact that he has never escaped, can expect absolutely no possibility of parole, and would seemingly have been upstaged by now by the more prolific trio of Bundy, Gacy, and Dahmer. And yet it is Manson who survives, both in a series of correctional facilities in California and in the nation's feverish and apparently insatiable criminal imagination. He remains the psychopath of choice for each new generation of cub reporters and video journalists looking to cut their teeth on an "intense" interview situation. In their time, Gerardo Rivera, Tom Snyder, and even Ronald Reagan Jr. have all gone *mano a mano* with Charlie in lockdown, bringing his disassociative ramblings to a still growing and apparently eternally fascinated audience. With each passing year there appears at least one tabloid story touting Manson's imminent (yet obviously impossible) parole, decrying the supposedly vast recording royalties he receives in jail, or warning of followers still lurking in the California desert, plotting to free him and embark on the killing spree of the century.

For many, the Manson story served as a grisly coda to the failed and now increasingly distant idealism of boomer counterculture in the sixties. In this respect, a generation that watched Jerry Rubin go to Wall Street, Mark Chapman

kill John Lennon, Abbie Hoffman take his own life, and Jane Fonda marry Ted Turner must now contend with the equally unnerving bumper that Charles Manson, born November 1934, is over sixty years old. Although Manson himself is not a boomer, of course, he is nevertheless a dominant symbol of that generation's "loss of innocence" for the now burgeoning boomer analysis industry. "Many people I know in Los Angeles believe that the Sixties ended abruptly on August 9, 1969, ended at the exact moment when word of the murders on Cleo Drive traveled like a brushfire through the community," writes Joan Didion in her 1978 memoir of the decade.¹ Debuting the ABC news series *Turning Point* some fifteen years later with an entire episode devoted to "the Manson women," correspondent Diane Sawyer parroted this maxim as the party line on the counterculture's ignominious ending. "There was a sense of possibility then that would survive the Vietnam protests, and the assassinations," said Sawyer, "but it would not survive the day in 1969 when we picked up the newspaper and read about Charles Manson and his followers who brought death."²

But there would seem to be something more compelling in Manson's media legacy, something that transcends the tired recirculation of long-standing bromides within mainstream historical and cultural commentary. Born of the sixties, perhaps, Manson has somehow remained meaningful to subsequent generations, and like all true media superstars, he enjoys a celebrity that seems to resonate with a vast cross section of the American public. The Manson persona continues to be important, not only to aging boomers contemplating their harsh fall from Eden, but also to the older God-and-country set who believed Manson to be the inevitable consequence of shaggy hair and electric guitars, as well as a whole new subculture of disaffected youth sporting Manson T-shirts and performing Manson music, all to the horror of elders who do not recognize the knowing irony and rather explicit generational contempt expressed through such gestures.³ The media may lecture itself every so often about the morality of extending Manson's fame, and as a nation we may occasionally be temporarily distracted by other criminal celebrities, but in the end Manson remains the figure to whom we return collectively again and again as the culture's consummate symbol of evil incarnate. Or as Quentin Tarantino's ambitious mass murderers observe of Manson through the prism of Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers*, "It's hard to beat the king."

How has this come to be? Why Manson and not Gacy, or Dahmer, or even

Charlie's military soul mate, Lt. William Calley? How many Americans have even heard of Dean Allen Corll, a murderer who by the most conservative estimates killed four times as many people as Manson, Tex Watson, and Susan Atkins combined? Clearly Manson's notoriety is not based on a simple arithmetic of atrocity, his evil residing somewhere other than in a mere body count.⁴ I would argue that the public longevity of the Manson mythos, like so many other psychodramas haunting the American mediascape, is fueled by complex and volatile issues of sex, gender and power—cultural conflicts provoked by the "sexual revolution" of the sixties that remain unresolved even today. From the earliest reports of Manson's involvement in the Tate/Labianca murders, media attention to "the family" dwelled leeringly on the sexual dimensions of the group's social organization, leading *Life* magazine, that bastion of American normality, to dub the entire affair "the strange story of Charles Manson and his brood of nubile flower children."⁵ Exploiting this line of interest, most major paperback editions covering the case in the years that followed have promised on their covers that lurid details would be revealed within, ranging from the secret "sex orgies" of Ed Sanders's *The Family* to the "perversion and passion" in William Zamora's *Blood Family*. Within this scenario, Manson is not only infamous as a murderer, of course, but also as a psycho-Svengali who was somehow able to compel middle-class teenage girls to commit unspeakable crimes, be it the murder of anonymous victims or having sex with a thirty-three-year-old ex-con. Complementing Manson in this mythos are the Manson women, abused teen runaways who alternately figure in popular culture as freethinking hippie sluts or brain-dead hippie slaves.

In this essay I examine how highly sexualized discourses—both prurient and prudish—surrounding Manson and his "girls" have allowed the events of 1969 to take on the character of a disturbing yet obviously compelling and thus enduring morality play. Emerging in an era when *Cosmopolitan* and *Playboy* worked to articulate a new sexual economy beyond the strictly procreative functions of the American family, Manson's "family" emblemized both the dread and the desire bound to this cultural transition, making their strange commune symptomatic of larger sexual contradictions within American society as a whole. I hope to demonstrate how Manson, in his rather exaggerated roles as hippie "playboy" and psycho-patriarch, remains a site of cultural fascination by foregrounding the often repressed ideological connections between male

promiscuity and male domestic control. In this respect, Manson himself is of less interest than Manson as a vehicle of male power, a persona so completely successful at realizing the underlying fantasies and sexual imperatives that structure male American life that he threatens to reveal and thus betray the patriarchal terms of property and power, conquest and control, that provide the foundation of America's sexual, familial, and social order.

Within the Manson mythos, images of Manson's seemingly unfettered and insatiable sexuality are often paired with accounts of brutal social control within the "family" itself. As has been widely reported of the Manson clan, the men of the family ruled over the women, and Manson, in turn, ruled over everyone absolutely. Within this strikingly hierarchical and discriminatory "commune," women were expected to do all the sewing and food preparation while remaining sexually available at all times for the men in the family (and for visitors to the family compound). Despite its seeming sexual liberation, in other words, the Manson family was in fact a model of reactionary gender roles. In this respect, the story of the Manson family, like most accounts of families in America, is ultimately a story of patriarchy. And while Manson remains an unsettling icon of pathological male power "out of control" (precisely by being so "in control"), the Manson women in their dual roles as sluts and slaves express the paradoxes facing women within the confines of American family life, Mansonesque or otherwise. Living in the deviant Manson family, these women were seen as perverse and promiscuous for standing outside the monogamous order of the "normal" family, and yet at the same time they were subject to the most profound humiliation and subordination imaginable as psychologically devoted "daughters" and "wives." If Manson and his family remain notorious, then, it may have less to do with their aberrance in the annals of crime than with our continuing fascination with the roles of domination, devotion, and degradation, which remain extremely relevant in the popular examination of the culture's sexual and social order, structures radically disrupted and yet strangely reaffirmed by the family and its beliefs.

"Love among the Rattlesnakes"

The horse wrangler, tall and ruggedly handsome, placed his hands on the hips of a pretty girl wearing white bell-bottomed trousers and casually lifted her onto a hitching post near the stable; then, voluntarily, almost automatically, she spread her legs and he stood

between her, moving slowly from side to side and up and down, stroking her long blonde hair while her arms and fingers caressed his back, not quickly or eagerly but quite passively, indolently, a mood harmonious with his own.⁶

Although the above may seem a rather mundane passage from a nameless romantic novel, it is in fact Gay Talese's lead paragraph in a story about the author's visit to the Spahn ranch, the abandoned movie set where Manson and his followers lived in the months before the murders. Talese knew his audience well. Appearing in *Esquire*, a magazine rivaled only by *Playboy* in its dreamy articulation of male heterosexual fantasy, Talese's opening helped transform a rather dull interview with George Spahn, the eighty-year-old owner of the ranch, into a potentially revealing visit to the legendary sexual wonderland of the Manson compound. Such a strategy was typical of much coverage of the Manson story, which routinely foregrounded the sexual practices of the family (and the victims), sometimes even over the murders themselves.

The *New York Times Magazine*, for example, began its in-depth treatment of the Manson family with the following epigraphs:

Neither repented they of their murders, nor of their sorceries, nor of their fornication, nor of their thefts.

Revelation 9:21

Why don't we do it in the road?

The Beatles⁷

Time was particularly salacious in its initial coverage of the story. "His women lolled harem-like around the commune nude or bare-breasted, catering to his every whim," wrote one reporter, who, in case readers lacked the imagination to illustrate this scene in their own mind's eyes, further noted that "one chagrined ranch hand relat[ed] discussing business with Manson while one of Manson's girls performed a sex act upon the 'gurni.'"⁸ During the trial, a reporter for *Newsweek* honed in on Manson's famous sexual vibe by describing a courtroom full of "meticulously lacquered housewives shivering deliciously when Manson fixes them with his compelling stare." The same reporter also felt it significant to note that "a pretty female artist" painting Manson's portrait during the trial was "ejected once from the court room for appearing in a get-up with an exposed tummy."⁹

Such prurience was not limited to the mainstream press. In the months immediately following the arrests, many underground papers championed Manson as a revolutionary hero for having struck terror in the heart of the "Establishment." This did not stop those papers, however, from engaging in Establishment-like feature writing. Amid its own editorial coverage of the murders and trial, for example, the *Los Angeles Free Press* inserted a front-page story headlined "M.D. on Manson's Sex-Life," a report from a psychologist who had lived briefly at the Spahn ranch. In perhaps the most sordid and transparent exploitation of the sexual scandals associated with the family, opportunistic pornographers in 1970 quickly released a low-budget film called *Love in the Commune*, a movie that distinguished itself with the distinctly bucolic perversion of a Manson type "balling a headless chicken."¹⁰

Even before any arrests were made in connection with the crimes, the events at 10050 Cielo Drive circulated in rumor and reporting as a sexualized scenario. In a classic "blame the victim" response, the American public first seized on the imagined sexual transgressions of the murdered jet-setters. Within days of the Tate murder, and continuing for much of the trial, public gossip traded in bizarre explanations for the murders, each story assuming, as prosecutor Vincent Bugliosi notes, "that somehow the victims had brought the murder on themselves." Bugliosi continues:

Given Roman Polanski's affinity for the macabre; rumors of Sebring's sexual peculiarities; the presence of both Miss Tate and her former lover at the death scene while her husband was away; the "anything goes" image of the Hollywood jet set; drugs; and the sudden clamp of police leaks, almost any kind of plot could be fashioned, and was. Sharon Tate was called everything from "the queen of the Hollywood orgy" scene to "a dabbler in satanic arts." Polanski himself was not spared. In the same newspaper a reader could find one columnist saying the director was so grief-stricken he could not speak, while a second had him nightclubbing with a bevy of airline stewardesses.¹¹

"Live freaky, die freaky" was the popular judgment frequently heard in the wake of the murders, a maxim wholly sexual in its connotations. Fueled by Sanders's book, contemporary interest in the case continues to center on rumors of Satanism, pornography, and even "snuff" films featuring major Hollywood celebrities that supposedly involved the Tate household.

Once arrests were made, however, the stories of Manson's absolute control over his women, sexual and otherwise, quickly emerged as the central fascination in the case. To this day, almost every published account of the family contains some story of Manson's sexual domination, whether it be in seducing new converts, compelling his women to have sex with visitors to the ranch, or in orchestrating elaborate orgies. And as is true in most sensationalistic accounts of sexual excess, the Manson mythos has exploited elements of both revulsion and desire. What provokes outrage in public discourse, after all, can often serve as fuel for fantasy in private thought, and although few would admit it (maybe even to themselves), many men have no doubt been secretly intrigued by Manson's power over women, even as they were outwardly repulsed by it. Such intrigue has certainly fueled the magazine and book industry that seeks to uncover and publish as many anecdotes of Manson's sexual exploits as possible. As Talese's tour of the Spahn ranch demonstrates, this coverage fit particularly well with what was already a primary theme in the articles and advertising of most men's magazines in the early seventies, which promoted fantasies of such sexual control and even promised to reveal the secrets of acquiring such power. Whether Manson himself had ever read *1001 Best Pick-Up Lines for Women*, *Where to Meet Girls*, or any of the other masculine self-help manuals available by mail order, he had clearly mastered their message. Particularly galling (and yet obviously compelling) for critics, not only was Manson able to seduce many different women, he also cultivated and commanded a perpetually renewable harem to service his every desire. "Manson had the greatest scam of all," writes Sanders, almost as if in grudging respect. "He'd tell the girls that if they really loved him they'd go out and bring him back a girl prettier and younger than they were—and he got away with it."¹²

Of course, although many commentators were quick to link the murders to a larger ethos of sexual perversion, few were willing to go so far as to admit that Manson had only mastered an art that many males had been aspiring to understand throughout the sexual revolution of the sixties. As Manson himself said in one of his more lucid moments, "They've been following me around for three years, trying to find something, and wherever I go there's like thirty women. And that really makes them mad. They can't understand what all these women are doing with one guy."¹³ Perhaps because Manson was so spectacularly successful as a womanizer, discussions of Manson's "powers" frequently took the form

of disavowal. Confronted with a Casanova figure who also happened to be a psychotic cult leader, commentators disguised Manson's obvious success at realizing the *Playboy* fantasies of many of the era's male population by recasting Manson's sexual prowess as psychosis, his magnetism as mania. This disavowal explains why accounts of Manson's sex life concentrate not only on the "immorality" of his sexual excesses, but on attacking Manson's masculinity and heterosexuality. So unsettling, apparently, were the similarities between Manson's seduction of young runaways and the era's more urbane image of the airline pilot seducing young stewardesses that the masculinity of the former had to be discredited in order to preserve the masculinity of the latter.

"One of the mysteries about Charlie is the fact that young women were attracted to this singularly unattractive individual," writes one of the many true-crime authors who has struggled to interpret Manson's legacy in the intervening decades. The implication is that some form of charade beyond the "normal" mechanisms of male heterosexuality must be involved. This same author then focuses her attack by observing, "Other than his brief marriage(s) and his almost as brief activity as a pimp, his primary sexual experience in prison had been homosexual."¹⁴ As this comment suggests, bafflement over Manson's heterosexual charisma has frequently led to attempts to recast him as an impostor of some sort, in this case a homosexual who had somehow learned to "use" heterosexuality as a tool of control over young women. This strategy of heterosexist emasculation has taken a variety of forms. The major newspapers, for example, rarely missed an opportunity to comment on Manson's slight physical stature, dubbing him the "diminutive guru," the "pint-sized guru," and the "slight (5 foot 4) defendant."¹⁵ Such attacks no doubt helped ease anxieties that Manson might actually be a "real" man and recast him as a sexual charlatan of some kind.¹⁶ As a stunningly successful example of predatory male heterosexuality, Manson had to be attacked on the terrain of masculinity itself in order to distinguish his "unnatural" and/or "artificial" sexual prowess from that of a normal man.

Perhaps most inventive in this strategy has been Sanders, who, speculating on Manson's fabled sexual stamina (family members claimed Charlie liked to have sex seven times a day), suggests that this "strength" might in fact be a simple case of priapism, a prostate condition that makes it difficult for men to lose an erection.¹⁷ In this way, a common index of masculine pride is rewritten as clinical pathology. Meanwhile, in an essay for *Harper's Magazine* written near the time of

Manson's final sentencing, Frank Conroy wonders whether or not the "trococo architecture of polymorphous perversity" orchestrated by Manson and practiced by the family could possibly compare to the "technicolor prison-cell productions" of Manson's chief sexual outlet: jailhouse masturbation. "The sex games must have become, inevitably, a subdivision of the power games," writes Conroy. "It must have been telling people what to do and having them do it that was the kick, not so much what they actually did." Conroy follows this cogent comment on sex and power with a statement that immediately reaffirms the codes of "true" masculine sexuality underpinning his discussion of Manson. In the ultimate insult one heterosexual male can offer another (beyond allegations of homosexuality), Conroy writes of Manson returning to prison, "I imagine him dying of old age, with his prick in his hand."¹⁸

Charlie's Angels

Although few critics made explicit connections between the bachelor philosophy promulgated by Hugh Hefner and Manson's oft-quoted creed, "I am the god of fuck,"¹⁹ many commentators did portray Susan Atkins, Leslie Van Houten, Patricia Krenwinkel, and the other "Manson women" as witless vixens whose vacuous personas harbored an explosive potential for violence concealed within a typically *Playboy*-esque mixture of smoldering sexuality and nubile naïveté. And just as popular discourses labored to delegitimize Manson's masculinity, they worked equally hard to construct a certain hyperfemininity around the Manson girls. In a common conceit running from Victorian heroines to Playmates of the month, these women came to signify a volatile passion storming behind an eroticized veil of innocence.

As perverse as it may seem, there is little doubt that the Manson girls provided a site of sexual fantasy, or at least fixation, for the culture at large. As is the fate of many young women in American society, these women's identities were defined almost wholly in terms of their physical appearance, sexual history, and marital status, casting them as objects of both fear and desire. Introducing the world to Susan Atkins, for example, a reporter for *Newsweek* described her first and foremost as "a former acid-dropper and topless dancer," and in his best-selling account of the trial, prosecutor Vincent Bugliosi helped round out his own portrait of Atkins by noting that while in prison, "she did her exercises sans underpants."²⁰ In perhaps the most strained attempt to exploit an association with the

Manson case, a park ranger for Death Valley National Monument wrote a book based on his intimate knowledge of the desert topography inhabited by Manson and his followers in the days before their arrest. Ranger Murphy recounts this sexual anecdote from the day of the arrest:

Susan Atkins approached the officers and, pointing to Clem, asked the officers to "unhook him." When George asked the reason he was told, "I want to take him behind the buildings and make love to him one more time." She explained, "He's about the best piece I've ever had, and I may never see him again." The officers knew these were, indeed, unusual women, but her reply flabbergasted them.²¹

During the trial, *Newsweek* reported seemingly extraneous testimony concerning Linda Kasabian's sexual history, noting facetiously that "she had had sexual intercourse with six different 'family' men on eleven different occasions (four times with Manson)."²² A hand-drawn illustration for George Bishop's *Witness to Evil*, meanwhile, depicts family member Barbara Hoyt testifying how she "performed 'that oral watchamacallit'" on a visitor to the ranch.²³ Finally, in a more self-conscious examination of this sexualization, the author of a contemporary novella titled *Susan Atkins* wonders in graphic terms "what it would be like to be married to Susan Atkins" and elaborates explicit sexual scenarios around other Manson women such as Kasabian, Van Houten, and Ruth Moorehouse.²⁴

Equating this fascination with the sexuality of the Manson women, however, were infantilizing discourses that portrayed the women as little girls. Thus was Kasabian described at the trial by *Newsweek* as "blue-eyed, dimpled chinmed" and as a "pig-tailed woman child."²⁵ *Time* described her as "girlish, her blonde hair in pig-tails, a small soft figure on the stand."²⁶ Describing the arrival of Atkins, Krenwinkel and Van Houten at a preliminary hearing, *Rolling Stone* observed, "Three young girls dance down the hallway of the Superior Court Building in Los Angeles, holding hands and singing one of Charlie's songs. They might be on their way to a birthday party in their short, crisp cotton dresses."²⁷ Reporting from the courtroom, finally, *Newsweek* described the three female defendants as "harpies" who sat "with bird-like heads together, giggling guiltlessly, chattering in strangely childlike voices, smiling innocently and engagingly at the mute, stony jury."²⁸

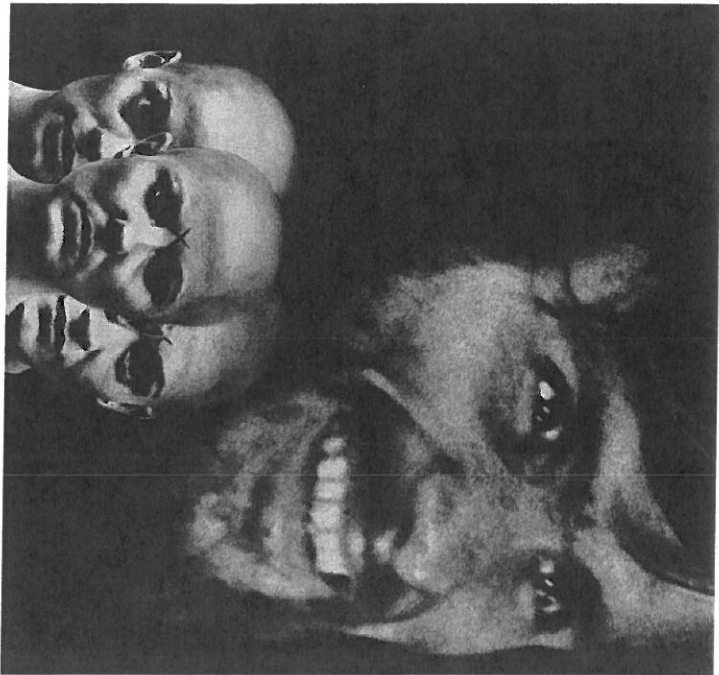
The sexualized woman-child has long been a fixture in patriarchal fantasy, embodying the desired yet contradictory identities of virginal innocence and

adult sexuality. The Manson girls were particularly diabolical in this regard, taking shape as the press juxtaposed images of wanton sexual abandon with accounts of girlish middle-class lives abandoned for Charlie. Leslie Van Houten was a prom queen, noted many reporters, while Krenwinkel had sung in the church choir. Such ironic contrasts between debutantes and debauchery helped sensationalize the family and its crimes even more, of course, but they also contributed to the staging of both moral panic and private fantasy in the nation's sexual imagination. It is in this sense of dichotomy and duplicity that the women, Manson, and the family as a whole emblemized the uncertainty surrounding the decade's shifting sexual codes.

Triple XXX

The simultaneous intensity and ambiguity of the Manson family's sexualized kinship structure found dramatic expression during the opening week of the trial. On the first day of testimony, Manson appeared in court with the letter X carved in his forehead. The family, including codefendants Atkins, Van Houten, and Krenwinkel, soon followed suit. Explaining this automutilation, Manson released a statement to the press in which he announced, "I have X-ed myself from your world. . . . I am not of you, from you, nor do I condone your unjust attitude towards things, animals, and people that you do not try to understand."²⁹ The four defendants bore these marks through the remainder of the trial. Ever the crude semiotician, Manson later converted his X into a swastika.

On a most superficial level, this X can be read in terms of Manson's presumed intentionality. What this gesture lacks in subtlety it more than makes up for as a compelling act of deviance and a calculated image of "Otherness." An X cut into the forehead of any human would command attention, of course, but when Xs were carved into the foreheads of American teenage girls, their impact was immeasurably amplified. Although this objective was most likely not on the family's collective mind, this scarification provided an effective way of disrupting, at least partially, the mass sexual fetishization of these women in the popular press. As opposed to the piercing of ears, here was an act of self-mutilation that was decidedly "antifeminine" in that it did not contribute to the voyeuristic objectification of these women by the media. Those who had bought into such X-rated fantasies surrounding the women were rather rudely confronted by an unambiguous marker of cosmetic disaffection and potential psychosis. Later,



A CBS publicity photo for *Hater Skelter* (1976), the made-for-TV movie about the Manson case, employs collage to create an image of Manson's domination over his "girls." Steve Railsback as Charles Manson, Cathy Paine, Christina Hart, and Nancy Wolfe as the "girls."

when guilty verdicts were finally returned in the case, the female defendants removed themselves even further from the realm of conventional sexual iconography and "sanity" by shaving their heads.

There is a more sinister implication of the X of course, tied to the central issue of gendered power in the family that provides the lingering popular fascination with this case. Quite literally, the Manson X was a mark of the "father," a material sign of Manson's absolute domination over his female followers through a brand signifying power and ownership. In this respect, the X was

wholly available for reappropriation within the larger fantasies of masculine power evoked by the case, especially when balanced against the other side of this power equation—the women's apparently spontaneous decision to wear the X as an act of devotion, a pledge of love and commitment to Charlie. Such seemingly blind obedience was already a focus of much public interest in the case, and the wearing of the X only reemphasized the paramount enigma of the Manson saga, a question much more important in the nation's mind than the actual guilt or innocence of the defendants in the murders. Just what was the "real" relationship—sexual, familial, volitional—between Manson and these women?

As objects of terror and titillation, the Manson women shattered the traditional mooring points of gendered society by conflating and confusing such usually distinct social relations as brother and sister, father and daughter, husband and wife. This was perhaps the family's most transgressive act, especially given that Manson seemingly served as the exclusive male partner in each of these relationships. If Manson remains the consummate icon of evil incarnate even today, then, it is in large part because his "family" forced a most public and uncomfortable consideration of the American family's usually occluded drama of oedipalization. As a parable of gender and power, the story of the Manson family presented an example of the intertwined social and sexual mechanisms of oedipalization run alternately amok and astray. Considered in this respect, the recurring obsessions surrounding the case make much more sense. Were the Manson women presexual little girls or adult seductresses? Devoted daughters or eroticized femmes fatales? Was Manson a heterosexual man or some form of asexual or homosexual impostor? Was the "family" actually a family or an ongoing orgy of unrestrained and unchanneled libidinal energy? On the surface, the family's sexual experimentation and apparently communal structure may have evoked both the problems and possibilities of a social organization operating outside the boundaries of the oedipal scenario. But this was more than countered by the absolute power of Manson, whose disturbing public persona reaffirmed the discomforting suspicion that a destructive masculine authority ultimately supported, sanctioned, and censured the era's emerging sexual economy. Sexual liberation, in this case, was the freedom of Manson (and other male family members) to sleep with whomever they chose. Such freedom, of course, was not allotted to the women in the family, replicating the prevailing sexual logic that an airline pilot who sleeps with twenty stewardesses is a playboy, whereas a

stewardess who sleeps with twenty pilots is a whore. It was within this authority and omnipotence that Manson ultimately reaffirmed that his family was indeed a family, a social unit that, although it appeared superficially to challenge the sexual order of patriarchy, actually underscored its controlling social order with chilling emphasis, a point perhaps best made by one of the Manson women themselves who, when asked why she and her friends sat on the steps of the L.A. courthouse sewing a sweater for their incarcerated brother, lover, and patriarch, replied, "We're waiting for our father."

Sexy Sadie

What exactly is the historical legacy of the Manson family twenty-five years later? No longer subject to the immense media scrutiny of the early seventies, Manson and "his" women today nevertheless remain volatile and unstable signifiers, especially as recent attempts to gain parole for the women have intensified. At stake is a historical redefinition of Manson, the women, and the family, often fought around the contentious issue of gendered agency. Were the Manson women helpless victims of Charlie's all-powerful mind games, or were they free-thinking, autonomous criminals completely cognizant of their actions? The latter option would seem to be the opinion of psychologist Clara Livsey, who argues in several places in her book *The Manson Women: A Family Portrait* that female criminals are never taken seriously enough and that their numbers are vastly underestimated.³⁰ Livsey dismisses accounts of the Manson women as passive victims and argues that they alone should be held accountable for their actions. Even within such a project of recuperation, however, it is doubtful that the Manson women will ever reach the same political status as Valerie Solanas, because as far as crime goes, brutally stabbing jet-setters to death has nowhere near the cultural cachet of artfully plugging Andy Warhol. But this somewhat perverse attempt to reempower these women in the face of Charlie's seeming domination testifies to the continuing importance of these women as symbols and signifiers.

Today, the same boomer analysis industry that sees the Manson case as a signpost for the end of the sixties frequently interprets the story as a warning about the excesses of personal freedom emblematic of the era as a whole. Paradoxically, a story that should serve as a cogent lesson about the excesses of male power implicit in the social structure as a whole becomes instead a parable legitimating a generation's retreat back into the unexamined patriarchal dynamics of

"traditional values." Entering this debate over Manson, the women, and their legacy, ABC's documentary series *Turning Point* approached its take on the Manson story through perhaps the most hackneyed, and in this particular case, offensive trope of gender imaginable—the tragic "lost" romance. After probing the consciousness of Krenwinkel and Van Houten with such insightful questions as, "Leslie, were you a *bad* girl?" host Diane Sawyer devotes most of her interview to the women's memories of life with Charlie. Although the women strongly express their repudiation of Manson and their sincere guilt for their parts in the crimes, the overall structure of the documentary cultivates a sense of almost glowing, romantic nostalgia. Incredibly, touted on bumpers throughout the show, the last segment features Sawyer showing the taped interviews of the women to Manson himself in a perverse travesty of *The Love Connection*. "When we come back," promises the announcer, "Charles Manson sees the women who killed for him for the first time in twenty-five years." Back from the commercial, Sawyer introduces her segment with Manson by saying, "It's been twenty-five years since he's seen the women who gave up everything for him." The entire segment then consists of Sawyer setting Charlie up for his video mystery date, working to heighten the audience's anticipation of their strange reunion. Finally, after watching these once teenage murderers now forty-something inmates discussing their former lives in the family, a wistful Manson in full close-up laments of Krenwinkel, "She got old on me." Expressing the general anxiety of boomers everywhere moving into middle-age, perhaps, the showcasing of this comment suggests that, for a nation long fixated on the sexual dimensions of this case, the ultimate crime committed by these women was not murder, but the apparently more horrific betrayal of growing old.

By 1998, however, Manson (and the media) had moved on to fresh meat. British tabloids reported that Manson had become obsessed with the Spice Girls, an all-female pop quintet that Manson reportedly believed to be the Beatles of the new millennium.³¹ American video tabloids such as *Hard Copy* immediately picked up the story, reporting that Manson had requested a one-hour audience with the Spice Girls during their upcoming U.S. tour (so that he might "advise" them on their important role in the next century). If authorities would allow the girls to visit Charlie in jail, Manson promised to execute himself afterward with a self-administered lethal injection (his work on earth, apparently, having come to an end). Whether or not this story is true, of course, is of little importance. The tale's frantic circulation on both sides of the Atlantic, however, proves

that Manson's peculiar vibe continues to sound in the world's sexual consciousness. The story once again activates the full symbolic range of the Manson persona. In this latest panic, Charlie could not settle for a mere solo artist. He must have nothing less than the full pop harem of the Spice Girls. But in this respect, perversely, Manson only makes explicit the desires of male Spice Girl fans the world over. Charlie claims he wants to discuss philosophy and the future with the girls, but a knowing public is wise to his "real" goal. Why else would any man want to spend an hour alone with the Spice Girls (and be willing to die afterward)? Bringing this projection of public fantasy onto the figure of Manson's psyche full circle, management for the Spice Girls announced that in response to the story, the girls would be "beefing up" security on their upcoming U.S. tour. But the question remains: Security from what? A sixty-four-year-old man locked up in California's toughest prison? Or the apparently now timeless sexual specter of the Manson mythology?

Notes

1. Joan Didion, *The White Album* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979), 47.
2. "The Manson Women: Inside the Murders," *Turning Point*, ABC, March 9, 1994.
3. Most explicit in this regard has been the career of "Marilyn Manson," an Alice Cooper retread who broke into MTV success during the 1990s. Trading on Charles Manson's notoriety, Marilyn Manson's T-shirts featured one of Charlie Manson's most famous quotations: "I am the God of fuck."
4. In large part, Manson's fame hinges on the social position of his more prominent victims—Hollywood starlet Sharon Tate, coffee heiress Abigail Folger, and international hairstylist Jay Sebring.
5. "On the Trail of Charles Manson," *Life*, December 19, 1969, 2A.
6. Gay Talese, "Charlie Manson's Home on the Range," *Esquire*, March 1970, 101.
7. S. V. Roberts, "Charles Manson: One Man's Family," *New York Times Magazine*, January 4, 1970, 11.
8. "The Demon of Death Valley," *Time*, December 12, 1969, 22.
9. "The Manson Scene," *Newsweek*, January 4, 1971, 20.
10. David Felton and David Dalton, "Year of the Fork, Night of the Hunter," *Rolling Stone*, June 25, 1970, 26.
11. Vincent Bugliosi, *Helter Skelter: The True Story of the Manson Murders* (New York: Bantam, 1974), 78–79.
12. Ed Sanders, *The Family: The Story of Charles Manson's Dune Buggy Attack Battalion* (New York: Dutton, 1971), 71.
13. Quoted in David Felton and David Dalton, "The Most Dangerous Man in the World," *Rolling Stone*, June 25, 1970, 35.
14. Jean F. Blashfield, *Why They Killed* (New York: Poplar Library, 1990), 142.
15. "The Family Hour," *Newsweek*, June 29, 1970, 22; "Linda's Punishment," *Newsweek*, August 31, 1970, 29; "Helter Skelter," *Newsweek*, August 10, 1970, 22.
16. Particularly irritated by stories of Manson's diminutive height, supporters of Manson provide the following account of his "true" size on the Web page Access Manson (<http://www.atwa.com/index.htm>): "This petty and pointless lie has been told by D.A. Bugliosi from the time of the publication of *Helter Skelter* to as recently as his December 8, 1995 appearance on the Discovery Channel's program *Rivals*. Bugliosi spent over nine months in a courtroom in close proximity to Manson, so he must know that this claim is not true. The only reason there can be for him repeatedly saying it is that the height 5' 2" is so abnormally short for a white American male that it adds yet another freakishly unique aspect to the Manson caricature. In fact, Manson is at least 5' 6". This is born [sic] out by the height indicated on the California Department of Corrections record card reprinted on page 118 of *The Manson File*. It is also born [sic] out by the personal experience of the Webmaster St. Geo, who has observed Manson during over 100 visits at California State Prison-Corcoran. The photo in *Helter Skelter* which purports to show Manson as being 5' 2" is clearly incorrect and probably faked. This can be shown by continuing the height scale to Manson's left down to 0'. If Manson was 5' 2" tall, as the scale indicates, the scale should reach 0' where his feet meet the floor. It doesn't. It goes below his feet, out of the photograph, and off the page".
17. Sanders, *The Family*, 65.
18. Frank Conroy, "Manson Wins," *Harper's Magazine*, November 1970, 58, 59.
19. Sanders, *The Family*, 36.
20. "The Demon of Death Valley," 22; Bugliosi, *Helter Skelter*, 106.
21. Bob Murphy, *Desert Shadows* (Billings, Mont.: Falcon, 1986), 83.
22. "Linda's Punishment," 29.
23. George Bishop, *Witness to Evil* (New York: Dell, 1971), n.p.
24. Kurt Nimmo, *Susan Atkins* (Canton, Mich.: PNG, 1991).
25. "Linda's Punishment," 29.
26. "Of Murders and Messiahs," *Time*, August 10, 1970, 12.
27. Felton and Dalton, "Year of the Fork," 24.
28. "The Manson Scene," 20.
29. Quoted in Bugliosi, *Helter Skelter*, 421.
30. Clara Livsey, *The Manson Women: A Family Portrait* (New York: Richard Marek, 1980).
31. In the mid-1970s, Manson had been linked to the American rock group Heart, a band fronted by sisters Ann and Nancy Wilson. Rumors circulated that their hit song "Magic Man" was actually about Manson, and that profits from the record were being turned over to Manson in jail.