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CRAFTING POST-FEMINIST WOMEN IN CONTEMPORARY WESTERN/HORROR

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ABSTRACT

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The scarcity of creative work that engages the problematic issue of female marginalization in the western/horror hybrid space demonstrates the need to expand her limited framework and develop a new screenwriting approach that privileges the female perspective. Prevailing contemporary western and horror hybrid texts, such as and *Bone Tomahawk* (2015) adhere to traditional male-centred American myths that re-inform genre codes and conventions supporting patriarchal power. Female-centered western/horror hybrid narratives, such as *The Witch* (2015), *Brimstone* (2016), *Mohawk* (2017), and *Prey* (2022) move issues of female representation into lesser-explored territory, but, when read through a post-feminist lens, do not fully realize the fruitful craft potential that, as I will argue, genre hybridity and post-feminist screenwriting generates. That said, using *Mohawk*, as a detailed case study, I will analyze how post-feminism successfully informs the narrative and character construction, to advance female representation in mixed-genre form. In addition, this article proposes and explores a new approach to 'writing' strong female characters: one that expands the limits of power beyond the boundaries of the existing western/horror storytelling.

Keywords: Post-feminism; gender; genre; screenwriting

1. INTRODUCTION

As separate and connected fields of study, the horror genre and the American western have a long history of academic research devoted to the cultural, thematic and structural elements that both bridge and distinguish the two generic forms. Gregory A. Waller (1987) proposed that "in its adaptability and capacity for accommodating a range of cultural values and cinematic styles, modern horror is probably equalled among American film genres only by the western" (p. 1). In creative practice, though—specifically the screenplay—a limited amount of work currently exists devoted to western/horror genre writing which, through the practical application of craft, extends existing critical and theoretical research. The prevailing western and horror hybrid texts most often adhere to traditional male-centred American myths that re-inform genre codes and conventions supporting outmoded concepts of power. Wherein lies the heart of the problem. The female characters within existing western/horror hybrid texts are often marginalized and, though their actions may contribute to some form of narrative progression, a deeper reading demonstrates the limitations of their narrative positioning. As such, a new craft-driven approach to advance the female characters would serve to further the creative potential of both genres.

In the field of screenwriting, contemporary female scholars, such as Helen Jacey (2010) and Roberta Garrett (2012), have explored innovative practices to best engage the culturally diverse perspectives, and methods, which inform modern global storytelling. Their work interrogates the historically patriarchal approach of male-written screenwriting guidebooks, and, in doing so, contributes to an emerging body of literature around the creation of female-centered stories. While discussing Linda Seger's book *When Women Call the Shots* (1996), Jacey addresses a writer's need to re-evaluate "the differences between men's and women's lives and to what happens to the rules and conventions if a heroine leads the action" (p. 15). Roberta Garrett examines the effect and influence that gender plays on the rules and conventions of genre screenwriting. Garrett (2012) states that

> female-oriented genres, such as the classical melodrama or contemporary chick flick, place a greater emphasis on the heroine's need to be successful in the sphere of personal relationships and on the demonstration of traditional feminine qualities. (p. 179)

Both Garrett and Jacey's work suggest that gender differences impact the requirements of female success within genre space. This idea informs the thinking around and writing of centralized female characters, including the relationship to the oppressive forces of the system that directly confront her – the patriarchy. In short, an active heroine "has major problem with the worse sides of sexism and the patriarchy, [and she must] despite victimization and oppression, find it within [herself] to get up and fight despite the odds" (Jacey 2010, p. 11). Under such conditions, female heroism in western/horror stories must, not only expand her narrative positioning into lesser-explored territory, but also allow for the re-writing of the codes and conventions associated with the literal and symbolic landscape of the western/horror genre. To achieve these aims, it is necessary to define and explore how post-feminist female 'power' generates and tests craft methods that promise new representations of progressive female heroes in hybrid storytelling.

2. DEFINING A POST-FEMINIST CRAFT PERSPECTIVE

In a discussion of cinematic images of female power, Sutherland and Feltey (2017) ask what it means to say that a female character is powerful in a film, with their primary interest being "the ways women use power in the narrative context of the film" (p. 618). They breaks down cinematic power into three distinct categories: power-over, power-to and power-with. Sutherland and Feltey's (2010) highest "power-with" demonstrates "the kind of power whereby women come together as a group to challenge systems of oppression and bring about social change" (p. 117). Although, post-feminism is often used as a term that emphasizes female "individualism, choice and empowerment" (Gill, 2007), Sutherland and Feltey's (2010) "power-with" tier extends its function into collective action. In fact, Rosalind Gill expanded her post-feminist guidelines, arguing for the integration of female solidarity into the construction of a post-feminist lens. Ultimately, Gill (2016) proposed that in academic writing and in media construction, "it is important that we build feminist solidarities across and between generations" (p. 625). For screenwriters, this requires craft choices that demonstrate female solidarity and empowerment through working together as the most effective method for characters to not only survive, but to succeed on their own terms. Furthermore, as Allen (1999) argued, we must understand female solidarity as

> a kind of power that arises when we make commitments to one another and act in concert. Thus solidarity is achieved, not assumed in advance. Such an account helps us to understand what binds feminists together and fosters collective action while, far from repressing and excluding difference, embraces and protects it. (p. 114)

Post-feminism appeals to the shared experience of repression felt and voiced by all women, regardless of their race, ethnicity, sexuality, class and age. Felski (1989) describes post-feminism as "an appeal to a shared experience of oppression (that) provides the starting point from which women as a group can open up the problematic of gender" (pp. 168–169). This opening-up of viewpoints and expressions allowed for new readings of patriarchy and a higher degree of fluid engagement, especially around "gender identity [and] femininity at least [that] challenged notions of gender identity as fixed and unitary" (Kuhn, 1994, p. 216). As such, the following craft strategies will contribute to the rethinking of feminism and the re-making of the screenplay in the context of the western/horror hybrid film:

1. Post-feminist action movies "depict their heroines like other representations of women in popular culture: capable of success within traditionally male working environments" (*Unbelievable;* see Tasker and Negra, 2007).

2. The heroine succeeds through intelligence, determination, and the use of strategy to overcome obstacles as aided by her own physical strength.

3. She is an active agent of the narrative that drives the story forward, physically capable instead of inhibited.

4. The narrative should extend Rosalind Gill's (2007) definition of post-feminist sensibilities of "individualism, choice and empowerment" (p. 153) through Sutherland and Feltey's (2010) "power-with" (p. 117) model to emphasize collective action.

By targeting the female narrative position within western-genre writing space, the following discussion of craft proposes strategies that a writer could employ in order to extend the power and significance of female characters in western/horror screenwriting.

3. CENTRALIZING FEMALE POWER OUT WEST

Simply placing a female heroine in a centralized narrative position and giving her strength of character may seem like a straightforward strategy to create a feminist narrative. If only it were that simple. The frequency with which the term "strong female character" is utilized to endorse a female-led storyline—or even to rewrite traditionally genre-stereotyped roles such as schoolteachers in the western or the female victims of slasher-horror films—renders the term almost meaningless. The *New York Times* published an online article discussing the effect of this straightforward approach to rewriting historically male-centered stories with an updated version retooled around women. According to article writer Amanda Hess (2018), doing so requires the female characters "to relive men's stories instead of fashioning their own. And they're subtly expected to fix these old films, to neutralize their sexism and infuse them with feminism, to rebuild them into good movies with good politics, too." (para. 5) But without a deeper understanding of power, or how images of power in films and stories are rendered, it is difficult to create progressive female characters that can act as agents of change and can potentially be read as unique case studies that deliver empowering cinematic images of strong female characters.

Centralising a female protagonist in a western genre requires an understanding of the metaphorical function the exterior space plays in aligning power to individuals. Jane Tompkins (1992) wrote that "more than anything, nature gives the hero a sense of himself" (p. 81). In line with this understanding, I will argue that the female characters must come to know themselves *within* nature. By presenting the landscape of the west as inherently violent, my argument stresses that true narrative agency in a western requires a female heroine to succeed within an exterior space through acts of violence. In female-led westerns, the hero must demonstrate her capacity to endure the hardness of the landscape, including the pain and suffering through which she will "be brave, strong enough to endure [and] become like this, hard, austere, sublime" (Tompkins, 1992, p. 71). In doing so, she forces the narrative to grant her the same assumed sense of agency that is inherently provided to the male characters throughout the genre's history.

4. POWER THROUGH VIOLENCE IN THE WESTERN LANDSCAPE

In the words of Jane Tompkins (1992), "death is everywhere in the western genre. Not just in the shoot-outs, or in the scores of bodies that pile up towards the narrative's close, but even more compellingly within the landscape with which the bodies of the gunned-down eventually merge" (p. 24). In this inherently violent western-genre landscape, female narrative agency requires active engagement and mastery over exterior space through acts of justified violence. Through her readiness to confront and engage violence as a necessary means, coupled with self-determination and her ability to assert control over her own destiny from the opening moments of the story, a centralized female character becomes the hero. This is coded power. Historically, it is a coded masculine power that works to propel male agency within the patriarchal confines of a western through necessary acts of violence, a mastery of both an exterior landscape and oneself within it.

In director Kelly Reichardt's *Meek's Cutoff* (2010), all characters suffer under the oppressive power of the vast landscape. The seemingly endless plains and suffocating heat punish everyone who ventures deep within. Reichardt focuses the narrative on female suffering at the hands of men too proud to admit defeat. It's the male ego, and a false mastery of the western landscape, that must be overcome.

Meek's Cutoff depicts a male-driven wagon train hopelessly misguided by the eponymous character of Stephen Meek (Bruce Greenwood), whose ego and misrepresentation of his navigational skills send three emigrant families wandering in circles in the Cascade Mountains. With the men refusing to intervene, the women, led by Emily Tetherow (Michelle Williams), take control and attempt to rectify a seemingly hopeless situation. To attain narrative control, the female characters in Reinhardt's film must fight against the

preconceived understanding that it is men who lead and women who follow, even when there is the likelihood that the men have steered all parties, male and female, astray. She must embrace violence as means to acquire control over her own situation and begin to drive herself toward her own future. The moment she takes control of the narrative, our sympathies fully align with her struggle to save herself and the others in her party.

5. NARRATIVE POWER THROUGH UNFAIR INJURY

One of a writer's tools to align narrative power, and audience sympathy, for a centralized character is through an informed use of "unfair injury", a term coined by Eric Edson (2011). Edson describes unfair injury as "blatant injustice inflicted upon (your character) that puts the hero in a position where he's [or she's] compelled to do something, take action in order to right a wrong" (pp. 16–17). Historically, the use of unfair injury against female characters in westerns has taken many forms. As we have seen, in female-led westerns, such as the aforementioned *Meek's Cutoff*, oppressed female characters suffer a form of unfair injury in their limited social and personal freedoms. The following section will highlight a number of ways in which unfair injury frames the female character's narrative arc and, in some cases, works against her feminist potential. Through this discussion, a writer can better incorporate the trope of unfair injury as a progressive tool of characterization, and realign power to our centralized women as they actively fight to rectify the unjust, oppressive factors that hold them back.

6. *UNFAIR INJURY* AND *EXTREME TRAUMA*

For centralized western women, attaining the same type of power that is typically granted a male hero from the outset most often requires, first, a near death or tragic abuse against them in their past. This abuse, most often physical, positions her as victim of male violence or occurs as something tragically inflicted upon a member of her family, usually her child. Her ability to "withstand a tremendous amount of psychological suffering [is] the heroine's claim on our admiration" (Tompkins, 1992, p. 126), and precisely what the writing trope of unfair injury aims to evoke—the reader's admiration and sympathy.

These limitations oppress our central female hero long before the narrative journey begins. Often, the oppressive social conditions force centralized heroines to take drastic measures. As films such as *The Ballad of Little Jo* (Greenwald, 1993) suggest, a woman may seek to find her own identity, but ultimately patriarchal social limitations require a life of extremes. For 'Little Jo', a beautifully realized female character, her social abuses include the forced abandonment of a child out of wedlock, her required escape to the frontier to recreate an identity free of the past, and the necessity that she becomes a man—self-inflicted facial scarring and all—in order to attain any chance of independent social mobility. This is how the unfair injury trope can be, problematically, anti-feminist.

In female-led revenge western tales that showcase concepts of violent female agency in a western landscape in films such as *Hannie Caulder* (Kennedy, 1971), *Bad Girls* (Kaplan, 1994) and *The Quick and the Dead* (Raimi, 1995), the "intensity of her quest makes her heroic role border on villainy" (Lusted, 2003, p. 255). This type of avenging female power must be earned and, again, often stems from past trauma. The narrative requires her character to perform acts of questionable moral centering. Her ability to complete her aims, however violent, additionally requires a mastery of narrative and genre elements. These symbolic codes of power grant the hero or heroine the right to act. Historical genre identifiers are the ease and mastery of one's terrain, the ability to manoeuvre on horseback within the vast landscape, a comfort and expertise with a gun, and the ability to successfully interpret others' moral character and judge a man's (an individual's) moral fibre. It is just that, historically, the western female character's rights are never granted without her having to fight for them. This is evident in the backstory trauma that the narrative requires of her, as well as the hardships she must endure in the present timeline to prove her self-worth.

7. *UNFAIR INJURY* AND *RACE*

Historically, perhaps no group of people has been more unfairly injured in the western than the Native American. In discussing the Native American role in the mythology of the American West, Armando Jose Prats (2002) wrote that the western keeps

> the Indian all but invisible, yet it must still present him somehow—and with a purpose. It makes him present so that it may render him absent. Moreover, the conqueror must present an Other whose destruction is not only assured, but justified. The Indian's absence is inevitable, foregone. (p. 2)

Prats goes on to state that the female Native American "is no less a victim than her male counterpart" (p. xvii). Thus, more often than not in a western, our emotional affinities remain more closely linked with a white male. For screenwriters with a post-feminist intent, this warrants investigation. In a focused research study surveying Native American audience identification with the male characters in John Ford's *The Searchers*, author JoEllen Shively (1992) observes:

> The Indians, like the Anglos, identified with the characters that the narrative structure tells them to identify with—the good guys. In the focus-group interviews, both Indians and Anglos reiterated their fondness for John Wayne. For both audiences, the Indians in the film were either neutral or negative. What stood out was not that there were Indians on the screen, but that the Indians were the 'bad guys.' For example, in the focus groups respondents were asked, 'Do you ever root for the Indians?' Both Indians and Anglos consistently responded, 'Sometimes, when they're the good guys.' Their responses suggest that there is no strong ethnic bias governing whom the respondents root for and identify with. Instead, antagonism is directed against the bad guys. The structure of opposition that defines the heroes in a film seems to guide [audience] identification with the characters in the film and overrides any ethnic empathy. (pp. 727–728)

Although an in-depth discussion of race and audience identification falls outside the scope of this article, it is worth discussing the historical link between unfair injury as a screenwriting concept and cinematic violence against women—specifically, this writing trope's harmful application against the female Native American characters in westerns.

The origins of allowing the female Native American to experience a voice in Hollywood cinema are most often attributed to Delmer Daves' *Broken Arrow* (1950). The film attempted to authenticate the Native American experience in dealing with white settlers, but in the end the cost of peace for the Native American people is the death of Cochise's daughter. Her death acts as symbolic punishment for falling in love with the white male hero, played by James Stewart, a Great White Hope negotiating peace between the two sparring cultures. As Maryann Oshana (1981) writes, "throughout all these sympathetic films of the fifties and sixties, there was no major breakthrough in the portrayal of the roles of Indian women" (p. 48). She adds that "the roles for women are clearly defined. If they are not being raped or murdered they are usually shown as slaves, household drudges, or bodies en masse in camps and caravans. Women are most often portrayed as victims, convenient objects for men to rape, murder, avenge or ridicule" (p. 48). It is unfortunate, as Prats (2002) states, that despite "the instrumental, even essential, presence of the Indian woman in the chronicles of Contact and Conquest, she features far less prominently in the Western" (p. 16). Prats suggests that the victimised female Native American characters are

> hardly central to the action: she dies or else she disappears—all in docile compliance to the mythology that so harshly abuses her. For she must often prove nothing so vital as that the white hero is a better man than her own Indian mate. The myth would have its free and easy way with its representations of Indian womanhood because it needs first to destroy the savage warrior [in order to] assert the heroic identity of its white protagonist and the exalted destiny of the exceptional nation. (p. xvii)

Though credit is due for attempting to ameliorate cinematic cultural misrepresentation, such films "from *Broken Arrow* (Daves, 1950) to *Dances with Wolves* (Costner, 1990) amounted to little more than the insistence that a white hero could readily become Indian—that he could become, indeed, the very best of them" (Prats, 2002, p.14) and, in the process, rescue the Indian woman from her own culture. In so many male-centred westerns, female suffering, in general, is required to justify violent male action. Driven by his inner anguish and her unfair injury, a male protagonist pursues vengeance as the means to rebalance his world. In the end, it is the female characters who suffer the most. These images further female cinematic misrepresentation by requiring a woman's death as a necessity to reassert temporary moral balance and narrative stability. That is unfair injury of the highest degree.

8. UNFAIR INJURY IN WESTERN/HORROR

Even at their best, the more recent examples of hybrid western/horror narratives depict female characters incapable of handling the requirements of their central heroic status. For example, *Bone Tomahawk* (Zahler, 2015) reflects American concerns of racial identity and racism against cultures and cultural practices

through the eyes of male saviours. The abduction of the injured hero's wife sets the narrative in motion, and it is the quest for her safe return that drives the all-male cast of characters deep into dangerous lands: The Native Americans in question are monstrous cannibals more beast than human in their way of life. In the end, though, her salvation is determined by the men who set out to save her.

Brimstone (Koolhoven, 2016), a recent female-led western/horror, can be read as a film that demonstrates the failures of patriarchal authority and male cruelty, but the film presents a relentless trade in misogyny and female death as the sole solution to escape oppressive social conditions. In the film's draconian society, the centralized female characters, led by frontier woman Emilia Jones (Dakota Fanning), suffer severe forms of unfair injury, even to the point of self-inflicted mutilation. In Emilia's quest to attain her freedom, she chooses to gouge out her eyes in order to protect her identity and start a new life. Due to the excessive misogynistic cruelty inflicted upon almost every female character who inhabits the narrative world, *Brimstone* fails to become a significant post-feminist expression of empowerment and female narrative agency.

In female-led western/horror, the replacement of the loss of a husband—in place of the stereotypical loss of a wife as means to create unfair injury that motivates action and builds audience emotional sympathy—would not and could not function narratively to serve a female-empowerment message. To refer again to Amanda Hess' (2018) *New York Times* article, gender swapping as the means to address female representation in cinema, may appear on the surface to "free women from old Hollywood expectations, [but simply] box(es) them into a new one" (para. 13). This practice arguably creates new problems, such as forcing women to behave more admirably in situations originally depicted from a male perspective and, additionally, "when women are moved to the center of the frame they're expected to act more womanly—even when they're playing roles originally occupied by men" (para. 16). When the centralized character is female, a reassessment of the genre tropes associated with the backstory to her current actions must be carefully considered. Gender swapping is not a viable option and would not lead to a progressive interpretation of the female experience within genre confines. Butler (1988) emphasized this point, stating:

> Certainly, it remains politically important to represent women, but to do that in a way that does not distort and reify the very collectivity the theory is supposed to emancipate. Feminist theory which presupposes sexual difference as the necessary and invariant theoretical point of departure clearly improves upon those humanist discourses which conflate the universal with the masculine and appropriate all of culture as masculine property. (p. 530)

Instead of replacing male characters with female versions, the goal should rather be to "suggest a new framework for developing female characters within what exists" (Taylor, 2017, p. 6). This new framework suggests a forward-looking approach to gender representation in scriptwriting that could rewrite existing narrative structural signposts in order to alter viewer expectations.

9. THE INFUSION OF SUPERNATURAL POWER INTO THE WESTERN

Re-examining genre tropes and creatively applying them to the screenwriting craft aids in better understanding and approaching modern female cinematic representation. This can be achieved by "re-order[ing] the signs within the conventions, giving us unfamiliar images of women; [through which] we make unfamiliar identifications, sympathies and alliances and are given new perceptions" (Kaplan, 1976, p. 52). Genre hybridity allows for such a reordering of signs. This includes a potential shift in the symbolic meaning attached to images, and to the space where character development occurs. It is important to understand that it is not simply the act of shifting the power dynamics of the male/female characters within the same space, but the act of changing the nature of the space, that is crucial. In the western/horror genre, the infusion of supernatural tropes allows for a new western landscape that changes the inherent symbolic use of space.

10. A HEIGHTENED SYMBOLIC LANDSCAPE

Power in a western exists outdoors. Typically, it is a power felt and understood by the men who ride among it; who, through skill and the ability to endure hardship, prevail. Jane Tompkins (1992) sums it up:

> The qualities needed to survive on the land are the qualities the land itself possesses—bleakness, merciless. And they are regarded not only as necessary for survival but as the acme of human moral perfection. To be a man in the Western is to seem to grow out of the environment, which means to be hard, to be tough, to be unforgiving. And because the people who exhibit these traits in Westerns are

> invariably white, male and Anglo-Saxon, [there is] no need to say that men are superior to women, Anglos to Mexicans, white men to black; the scene has already said it. (p. 73)

Therefore, in female-led westerns, the necessity to demonstrate the female capacity to endure the hardness of the landscape, including the pain and suffering through which she will, like the men, Thompkins continues "conquer it by traversing it, know it by standing in it, [and] go in any direction, as far as he can go" (p. 75). It is through the female hero's ability to not only endure, but to overcome, the violent terrain of the western landscape that female narrative agency moves the genre into less-explored territory. This is especially true of western/horror films, of which there are so few textual examples that allow the female characters the capacity to demonstrate autonomous narrative agency and redefine the terrain in which the characters mature.

The fusion of horror tropes into a western landscape, and the elevated threat of a new, supernatural west, challenges the female-heroine to redefine her relationship to the west as the principal means to advance her narrative position. In discussing the spatial realities of supernatural horror as prescribed by mainstream cinema, Eugene Thacker (2011) writes:

> Standard or 'mainstream' horror tends to adhere to a separation of spatial realities; either monsters intrude into the realm of human space or humans enter into or find themselves transported to the spatial realm of monsters. In either case, the two domains remain ontologically distinct and separate. (p. 77)

My supernatural interests incorporate Thacker's thesis and lean toward Ethan Stoneman and Joseph Packer's (2017) explanation of supernatural horror, which they label "weird fiction" (p. 25). They describe supernatural horror as a storytelling space that

> by contrast, works to create a blurring effect with respect to spatial delineations and in such a way that, on Thacker's view, natural and supernatural blend into a kind of ambient, atmospheric no-place. (p. 35)

It is precisely within this supernatural blurring effect of space that "the weird tale of supernatural horror circumvents the habitual, intellectual, and social barriers that otherwise preserve one's sense of reality" (Stoneman & Packer, 2017, p. 31). This lends to a writer's potential symbolic use of space that may contribute to new ways of thinking surrounding the use of the hybrid horror setting as a writing tool to redefine the centralized female heroine.

The fusion of horror tropes into a western landscape and the increased threats of a supernatural west challenge the female protagonist on heightened physical and spiritual levels. Her heightened challenges and new conceptual awareness "call into question [her] adequacy of rational thought to organize and structure the sensible world of appearance" (Stoneman & Packer, 2017, p. 33). In this new enlightened state, she may, more completely, engage the challenges necessary to overturn the systemic oppressiveness of her environment. That is not to suggest that female characters will fall victim to a form of supernatural "gaslighting". The male characters are equally affected by the infused horror but, removed from the central narrative position, the male characters are not granted the required agency to overcome its power, unlike the empowered, centralized female characters.

Much has been written about the symbolic use of setting and landscape in horror as a metaphorical or allegorical backdrop to plot and characterization. For example, Karl Schoonover (2018) wrote that "horror settings operate as challenges to existing symbolic systems" (p. 347). In doing so, as Jonathan Lemkin (1984) corroborates, a supernatural landscape contributes to a potential "implosion of the archetype" (p. 324). Within this form of hybrid western/horror landscape the roots of patriarchy can be un-anchored, and new forms of progressive female characters developed.

Certainly, screenwriters can learn how to better develop their post-feminist craft-aims by interrogating existing work that harbours similar progressive intent, such as *The Witch* (Eggers, 2015), *Mohawk* (Geoghegan, 2017), and *Prey* (Trachtenberg, 2022). Through an expanded textual analysis of *Mohawk* (Geoghegan, 2017), I will interrogate the operations of the narrative and discuss the craft choices that contribute to its progressive post-feminist intent. This discussion of *Mohawk*'s narrative strategies, specifically those challenging traditional readings of power associated with the western, benefit a screenwriter with similar progressive aims.

11. *MOHAWK*: HOW HORROR SUCCESSFULLY TRANSFORMS THE WESTERN LANDSCAPE — A POST-FEMINIST TEXTUAL ANALYSIS TO ENGAGE CRAFT APPROACH

Utilizing a horror/western hybrid narrative approach, *Mohawk* presents the best textual evidence of the potential for female-led western/horror to advance the limited scope of creative work done within this screenwriting domain. Through the ability to demonstrate narrative agency over this oppressively supernatural realm, female heroism achieves a narrative power rarely attained within western/horror hybrid confines.

Journalist-turned-film-critic Philip French (1973) wrote that "a western is defined by certain kinds of action within a historical setting [and] is no less obviously a western if the central character is an outlaw or an Indian" (p. 52) or, as in the case of Mohawk, a Native American woman. *Mohawk* centralizes the Native American, female-warrior perspective and gives voice (in her mother Mohawk tongue) to this historically misrepresented and under-represented point of view. In doing so, the film interrogates the female Native American understanding of the west and considers the "social influences that shape women or their gendered subjectivities" (Taylor, 2017, p. 7). As a Mohawk woman, Oak finds herself constantly under threat of patriarchal control from the Mohawk men within her own cultural sphere as well as from the white European male aggressors who encroach from outside. The film specifically incorporates western narrative codes and conventions with supernatural horror tropes. Through this combination, the film expands the western genre framework and re-examines American history through the often-discounted eyes of the Native American warrior woman.

In the aftermath of the war of 1812, the United States once again declared war on Great Britain, which, according to the prelude that introduces *Mohawk,* forced the Native American people "to choose sides". Immediately, the film constructs a world where the choices and actions of white, male-driven society force all other individuals co-existing within the shared landscape to reconstruct a new identity in order to survive. Though we are told that the Mohawk tribe has chosen to remain impartial in this fight, the opening moments of the film immediately set up events that will prove the impossibility of such a non-biased state of existence. Seen through the watchful eyes of Oak, a young Mohawk woman, our affinities immediately connect to hers, as she witnesses Mohawk-friendly British soldier Joshua offer up two sturdy battle axes to the tribe's matriarchal leader, Wentahawi, with the promise that he can "give [them] one hundred of these." Oak watches Wentahawi, her mother, inspect the weapons, but disapproves of her mother's tentative leadership as she preaches that "they have a treaty with the Americans." Both Oak and her brother, Calvin, know their mother's advice is wrong. Frustrated, the group separates.

Joshua and Oak's relationship, as lovers, quickly becomes evident. They drink whisky, kiss and have sex. The sex scene, though not explicitly visualized, clearly occurs, but only after Joshua laments his planned departure from Mohawk territory back to England. His words reinforce Oak's narrative status as the hero who will be called upon narratively to "finish what we've started." He adds that he "has faith in her" which suggests that we, the audience, should too. As she sleeps after sex, her warrior spirit visits her in a dream. Out of the darkness, wearing a hollowed-out animal skull over its face, the entity approaches, and we are shown in close-up an image of blood seeping out from the spirit's upper torso. This startling image, coupled with the sound of echoing thunder, awakens Oak, who stares in wide-awake, in introspective contemplation.

This moment sets up Oak as a developing post-feminist hero. The brief dream-warrior imagery, coupled with Joshua's verbal call to adventure in declaring his faith in her to lead her people forward, work together to reinforce her character potential. Her inner spirit alerts her to the necessity to act and, in an empowered state, her actions will dictate the future of her people as a collective unit. Immediately, the plot and inner necessities of the character sculpt a feminist reassessment of female narrative power that will require a woman to fight for the future of a community and not just for herself. Although it is Joshua who first presented the weapons of war to the Mohawk community, it is ultimately the decision of the female tribal matriarch that allows Oak the right to wield them. By fighting to alter the future of her people, Oak accepts violence as the means to evoke social change. In addition, her heightened sense of awareness of her natural environment (the thunder), and her ability to read the signs communicated to her from within (her inner animal-spirit), set her apart from most female characters in western-horror hybrid films. Oak demonstrates an immediate sense of self-empowerment. With the support of others around her, including the men and women she will fight for and alongside, her future actions align her with Sutherland and Feltey's (2010) highest female "power-with" tier (p. 117).

The inclusion of a sex scene with Joshua, her white male British companion, serves to paint Oak as a fully realized sexual human being. She is confident in her interactions with men, with whom she has consensual sex on her own terms. It is worth keeping in mind, in considering post-feminism as the lens through which Oak's actions and the narrative itself are interpreted, that "feminists don't want to turn the tables, and oppress

men, rather they count on men to rise to their feet, along with women and support them in their call for social change" (Sutherland & Feltey, 2010, p. 125). *Mohawk* layers the central character of Oak with a warrior's spirit capable of active narrative agency, but also depicts her as a sensual human being capable of desire and being desired.

The horror elements of *Mohawk* are planted through the narration, starting with ghostly visions in Mohawk dreams, as ethereal voices heard in the woods, and ultimately in Oak's own transformation into a full-blown warrior animal-spirit at the film's climax. However, for the most part, the story focuses on real-world horror as evil in human form depicted through the unconscionable actions of the American soldiers who relentlessly hunt Oak and her people. Their first true demonstration of horrific behaviour occurs near the end of the first act when they surround Oak, Calvin, Joshua and tribal matriarch Wentahawi (Oak's mother). With pointed guns, they belittle the Mohawk people, stating that "these people are obstructing the United States government [and] this is not the way good children behave." The soldiers view the Mohawk culture as infantile in comparison to civilised Americans and the power of government. This thought process aligns with an early doctrine of Indian assimilation practiced by "salvage ethnographers (who) were mobilised by the belief that Native American peoples would naturally be assimilated by the 'superior' Anglo-American culture—an assumption contradicted by the aggressive tactics used to help the process along" (Lamont, 2016, p. 90). Their aggressive tactics result in violent confrontation, with its graphic outcome presented in gory detail, similar to what one would expect in a slasher film. A soldier attacks suddenly, only to have a Mohawk warrior's knife pierce through his temple leaving flesh and gore exposed; arrows fly and slice through soldier's necks in extreme close-up; bullets pierce flesh with misty backlit blood-spray; wounds bleed like open faucets; complemented by the gruesome display of severed heads on stakes, not to mention the exploding thumb on display in the scene prior. For Oak, it's the murder of her mother and the capture and torture of Calvin that trigger her true call to action. These events allow her animal-spirit the emotional focus necessary to endure the horrors that will befall her.

After a fierce battle resulting in the death of her brother, Oak and Joshua hide in a hollowed-out underground tunnel system below the forest. Joshua, on the verge of giving up, tells Oak that "there is no future." Within this dark womb of the earth, Oak reveals that she is pregnant with his child, a secret she has kept for months. She states that "there is a future" both literally via the half-British, half-Mohawk child within her body and in her spiritual resolve to bring her people together to fight for their lands. Her mixed-race child represents the "postmodern and poststructuralist (feminist) rejection of one uniform type and perception of motherhood (Nayer & Bernardi, 2011, p. 167). Oak's motherhood touches on the grammar of racialized representation, as the fact of her mixed-race pregnancy opens up a subtext of miscegenation that the film does not fully explore. Oak interprets her pregnancy as a positive, strengthening component to her life that gives her further reason to fight. In the words of Daphne de Marneffe (2004), this type of post-feminist understanding of motherhood

> opens up the possibility for agency, for a great diversity of (self-defined) motherhoods, and for a positive identification with maternity. The emotional, intellectual, and often spiritual rewards of motherhood are stressed, which women try to re-legitimise in their life rather than deny it. (p. 167)

Oak's mixed-race child represents the possibility of future cultural inclusion, blending the best of foreign blood and open-mindedness with her own deeply rooted, traditional ways of life as connected to the earth and to her people. Revealing Oak being with child transforms her into a mother, which layers her character beyond female warrior and elevates her fight to now include her child. In a post-feminist sense, Oak does not "rebuff motherhood in order to overcome power structure, but [seeks] for a means to overcome power structures in order to allow motherhood" (Nayer & Bernardi, 2011, p. 167). Oak's "power-with" (Sutherland & Feltey, 2010, p. 117) narrative status now includes her mixed offspring and the potential cultural ties the future child will utilise to connect the Mohawk people and the inevitable American presence that will one day fully inhabit their lands.

"When there's too much death, the blood seeps into the ground, soaks into the roots. The trees can't sleep and the forest goes mad," Oak proclaims, fully aware that the long-term effect of violent bloodshed has poisonous results that live on in the memory of the people involved and in the land itself. It is through the infusion of horror into the soil that the land itself transforms, and its transformative power to elevate individuals who ride among it increases. We feel this in *Mohawk's* thematic underpinnings, which remind us that violence occurred in the formation of America and the events unfolding are events of the past. The horrors depicted are tragedies of American history and the blood that has seeped into the roots of American soil has sunk in deeper over the years. By creating a "new-western landscape," one that manifests an evil within the very fabric of the land, horror-genre tropes build on a pre-existing, oppressive, male-dominated western-genre space by elevating the level of opposition into the symbolic realm of the supernatural, where it is transformed

in feminist ways. In this new western landscape, potential new forms of progressive female heroism may emerge. It is precisely Oak's spiritual connection to the origins of North American soil, along with her perspective as both female warrior and mother, that infuses her monstrous transformation at the narrative's conclusion with an inherited right to expel the invading demons that poison the land's veins through violent aggression.

Mohawk incorporates the horror genre's own death-and-rebirth-cycle trope into the western narrative landscape and, in doing so, expands the generic use of that narrative convention. It does so through the character of Oak, who creates from her fallen body a new spiritual avenging force, more powerful than her human form would allow. *Mohawk* flips the historically common convention that Native American "women are most often portrayed as victims, convenient objects for men to rape, murder, avenge or ridicule" (Oshana, 1981, p. 48), by allowing her death and the sacrifice of her human body to elevate her narrative power. This is similar to, but ultimately different from, the death and resurrection scenes in numerous slasher films, where the fallen evil entity momentarily appears dead at the feet of the *final girl* who, having just stabbed, maimed or occasionally shot him, foolishly relaxes and lets her guard down. Defined by Carol Clover (1992), the final girl attains an authentic narrative power that allows her to "become her own savior [and] become a hero" (p. 60). It is during the final girl's climatic struggle, according to Clover, that she

> endures the deepest throes of 'femininity' and even during that final struggle she is now weak and now strong, now flees the killer and now charges him, now stabs and is stabbed, now cries out in fear and now shouts in anger. She is a physical female and a characterological androgyne: not masculine but either/or, both, ambiguous. (p. 86)

Historically, these moments can be read as the final girl's temporary loss of narrative control. Wherein, the final girl momentarily relapses back to a state of unawareness and passivity, allowing the monster another opportunity to defeat his female victim. *Mohawk* reverses this death-and-rebirth trope by depicting Oak's supernatural transformation as more powerful than the monstrous soldiers, who consistently act with evil intent. In doing so, her transformation reverses the negative sexist connotations connected to the monstrous feminine, described by Barbara Creed (2002), as "an abjection [where] the monstrous is produced at the border which separates those who take up their proper gender roles from those who do not" (p. 71). Oak's maternal authority overturns the patriarchal order of things and, through it, assumes complete narrative control with a positive force to set things right. At the film's conclusion, the sadistic corporal, upon seeing Oak's spirit monster, proclaims, "Ghosts? They sure as Hell are not gonna stop me." At the moment of her monstrous appearance, he finds himself engulfed by flames, the American outpost-fort burning hellfire around him. Like a demon from the smoky haze, Oak emerges, her face hidden behind the same animal skull the spirit wore in her visions. The scene functions as the climatic showdown expected of the western genre form but, counter to the convention, her presence reads as an avenging female spirit facing off against the western man, who flips his own moral compass to now appear justified. He chastizes her now for "kill(ing) twenty-two American patriots in their sleep" and attempts to humanize the victims of Mohawk rage as innocent. Through association and his American birthright, he too claims the moral high ground. But looming slightly above him in silence, Oak no longer speaks. Her words no longer matter, as we see the fallacy and lies that his words bring. Her power has shifted completely to the physical realm and she exists now to rid Mohawk lands of toxic violence and oppressive male aggression.

With a supernatural power granted her from the spirit realm, she throws him around effortlessly, flinging his body with unearthly ease. Taking an axe in her chest, she pulls it out without vocalizing the slightest utterance of pain, and hurls it back at him. Oak has become the image and embodiment of a slasher killer: unstoppable, possessing inhuman strength, and having a single-minded focus to kill what she views as morally unfit to inhabit the landscape. Based upon prior actions of the narrative, we side with her and the future of her people, which now include the baby in her womb. But unlike stalker killers such as Michael Myers (*Halloween*, Carpenter, 1978), Jason Voorhees (*Friday the 13th*, Cunningham, 1980), Freddy Krueger (*A Nightmare on Elm Street*, Craven, 1984), Ghostface (*Scream*, Craven, 1996), Victor Crowley (*Hatchet,* Green, 2006) or any other forms of evil that prey upon their chosen victims, her violence is justified and acts as a post-feminist metaphor against all forms of oppressive domination.

An opposing reading of *Mohawk*'s empowerment ending potentially links Oak to a history of climactic cinematic battles between white settlers and indigenous natives. According to Jose Armando Prats (2002), in such a view, the Indian threat

> tends to appear before us as a loose collection of fragments, at once hinting at and concealing a complete human identity. When at last he appears before us, he is most often the misrepresented agent of an

> indigenous culture so muddled, fudged, and falsified that it seldom admits of reference except through those contrivances that configure Hollywood's idea of frontier savagery. (pp. 23–24)

Oppositely, Oak's monstrous violent form, seen in glimpses, produces a type of visual fragmentation that has an empowering effect. The film has so deeply embedded us, the viewer, within Oak's perspective, and allowed us such deep narrative insight into the inner life of her character from the opening scenes, that it is the white antagonist whose humanity is, ultimately, rendered non-existent. *Mohawk,* fully aware of cinema's historical misrepresentation of history and gender, reverses the trope by aligning the viewer alongside Oak, and her tribal family. Her transformation into an avenging force of supernatural extremes speaks more to the western genre's long-established cultural misappropriation of the Native American experience than it does to the maternal figure as a monstrous abjection. The horror genre's long history of monstrous-feminine construction, detailed by Barbara Creed (2002), explores "human societies conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, [and therefore] abject" (p. 67). Oak's monstrous transformation allows her to embody the genre's historical savagery of her own indigenous peoples and, in doing so, reverse the evils against her oppressors. She fights for the future of her family, her tribe and their culture, which is very much under attack.

When the violence concludes, Oak removes her animal mask and becomes human again. Her temporary monstrous state served to counter reductive and recurrent images of Native American women as male victims and, worst of all, as a non-participant in the outcome of the narrative of her life and her people. We know this as the monstrous climax unfolds through her eyes, and we see the apparition of the Mohawk people standing before her in the form of men, women and children. She is aware at that moment that she fights for her people, past, present and future. These final images, read through Sutherland and Feltey's (2010) post-feminist lens, elevate Oak into the highest "power-with" tier (p. 117). She is an empowered female hero who, in fighting for her people, potentially empowers future generations to tell of "their origins, their history, their vision of the future" (Prats, 2002, p. 133).

Read through a post-feminist lens, *Mohawk* exists as a rare, successful textual representation of western/horror genre hybridity that advances female representation within this mixed-genre form.

12. CONCLUSION

Throughout this article, I have argued that the western/horror hybrid screenplay operates as a creative space that, activated by reconsiderations of craft, can benefit the female position and, in turn, contribute to a post-feminist conversation. As such, crafting female characters who are empowered and empowering within a heightened supernatural western/horror environment requires engagement with a post-feminist methodology that encompasses a multifaceted approach. I have also attempted to target key areas of concern, and have addressed creative tensions and ideological issues through an interrogation of genre and textual analysis. In addition, I have sought to measure the effects a post-feminist perspective could have on a hybrid screenwriting craft approach. This article presents structural and narrative guidelines that provide a contemporary writer with a more informed position upon which to continue the sociological, cultural and gender-based conversation that post-feminist creative work engages. This may well lead a writer to better engage the problematic issue of female representation in the western/horror genre, and present new and progressive ways of writing their roles.

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