They Sound Human: Crafting Post-Feminist Women in Contemporary Western/Horror

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PUBLICATION DATE

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They Sound Human: Crafting Post-Feminist Women in Contemporary Western/Horror

by

Bryan Ott

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Deakin University, Melbourne
School of Communication & Creative Arts
September 2020

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Abstract

The scarcity of creative work that engages the problematic issue of female marginalisation in the western/horror hybrid space demonstrates the need to expand her limited framework and develop a new craft approach that privileges the female perspective. 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, 1) proposes that "in its adaptability and capacity for accommodating a range of cultural values and cinematic styles, modern horror is probably equaled among American film genres only by the western." 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 patriarchal power. Wherein lies the heart of the problem. The female characters within existing western/horror hybrid texts are often marginalised and, though their actions may contribute to some form of narrative progression, a deeper reading demonstrates the limitations of their narrative positioning.

This thesis employs a practice-led research (PLR) methodology to develop an inquiry at the intersection of post-feminism and genre studies. It aims to generate, work with and test craft methods that promise new representations of progressive female heroes in hybrid western/horror storytelling.

As a male screenwriter, I have been influenced by patriarchal models of scriptwriting and this project is an opportunity to test how far a screenwriter can work with and against those conventions within a genre format. Based on my discoveries during this writing process, I propose a developing methodology to work through issues as a male screenwriter for future screenwriters with like-minded post-feminist craft goals. My feature screenplay, *They Sound Human*, centres active female characters, including a lead who is empowered and empowering, and draws from Jean-Anne Sutherland's "female-power-model"

(2017, 3). Developed from Amy Allen's work (1998), Sutherland elaborated on the concept of three distinct categories of female cinematic power: power-over, power-to and power-with. I have chosen to adopt Sutherland's highest "power-with" tier to test my craft aims, which she describes as demonstrating "the kind of power whereby women come together as a group to challenge systems of oppression and bring about social change" (2010, 117). This post-feminist lens tracks the success and circumstances of my screenplay *They Sound Human*. Additionally, it frames my genre analysis in support of my post-feminist screenwriting intent.

Ultimately, my aims are to open up a new craft-based and theorised methodology that allows centralised female characters to expand the limits of power beyond the patriarchal boundaries of the existing western/horror storytelling. My discoveries will be developed and tested through my craft approach and political framings of the project. In using a PLR methodology, I am working with and seeking to extend existing critical and theoretical research in western/horror screenwriting, and I am testing what happens to this limited, minor-genre script form when approached from a post-feminist point of view.

Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS I

CRAFTING POST-FEMINIST WOMEN IN CONTEMPORARY WESTERN/HORROR

INTRODUCTION 1

APPROACH, METHODOLOGY AND METHODS 5
Approach: A Male Screenwriter's Concerns in Writing Female Heroines 6
Methodology: Defining My Post-Feminist Craft Perspective 9
Methods: Craft Strategies 11
CHAPTER AIMS 12

CHAPTER ONE – LITERATURE REVIEW RETHINKING THE FEMALE WESTERN MYTHOS 18

THE MYTHIC POTENTIAL OF WRITING GENRE STORIES 18
The Classic Western: Planting the Seeds of Gendered Space 19
The Symbolic Use of Gendered Space 22
ENGAGING THE TENSION BETWEEN FEMINIST AND NON-FEMINIST MODES OF POWER IN THE AMERICAN WESTERN 23
Female Power Out West 24
The Narrative Power of Western Women as Secondary Support 26
CENTRALISED FEMALE POWER IN THE WESTERN: PROBLEMS AND CONSIDERATIONS 28
Power Through Violence in the Western Landscape 29
Narrative Power Through Unfair Injury 30
Unfair Injury and Extreme Trauma 31
Unfair Injury and Race 32
Unfair Injury in Western/Horror 34
Potential Solutions: Female Power Through Solidarity 35
The Good Time Girls: a Post-Feminist "Power-With" Analysis 36
The Post-Feminist Influence of Woman Walks Ahead (Susanne White 2018) 39

CHAPTER TWO – WRITING HORROR TO ELEVATE FEMALE HEROISM IN THE AMERICAN WESTERN 48

HORROR AND THE "FINAL GIRL" 48
ELEVATING THE FINAL GIRL THROUGH FEMALE SOLIDARITY 51
THE INFUSION OF SUPERNATURAL POWER INTO THE WESTERN 53
A Heightened Symbolic Landscape 53
A Heightened Conceptual and Social Awareness 55
POST-FEMINIST ANALYSIS: *DEAD BIRDS* AND *MOHAWK* 56
The Post-Feminist Hybrid Failings of Dead Birds 56
Mohawk: How Horror Successfully Transforms the Western Landscape – a Post-Feminist Textual Analysis to Engage Craft Approach 60

CHAPTER THREE – *THEY SOUND HUMAN*: FINDINGS 69
MAKING-AN-ENTRANCE: PLANTING EMOTIONAL CHARACTER SEEDS 70
Defining Patriarchal Power: Father *73*
The Patriarchal Power of Speech *75*
METHODS OF OVERTHROWING PATRIARCHAL POWER IN THE WESTERN/HORROR GENRE 77
Challenging the Male Voice *77*
Incorporating Post-Feminist Final Girl Tropes *78*
Crafting a Post-Feminist Final Girl Through Solidarity *79*
A SUPERNATURAL POST-FEMINIST WESTERN/HORROR LANDSCAPE 82
Ellen Ventures West: Elevating Female Power in Supernatural Space *83*
Mastering a Supernatural Land *84*
THE POST-FEMINIST NECESSITY OF SECONDARY FEMALE CHARACTERS 86
FEMALE SOLIDARITY IS A STRUCTURED PROCESS 88
FUTURE RESEARCH AND CRAFT REVISIONS 91
BIBLIOGRAPHY 94
FILMOGRAPHY 99
SCREENPLAY – THEY SOUND HUMAN 101

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to express my sincerest thanks to my executive supervisor Associate Professor Patrick West and co-supervisor Professor Sean Redmond. Their hard work and dedication to this project, and to my own process of creative and academic discovery, is infused within every word of this thesis. It is my good fortune to have had the privilege of their stringent advice and critical feedback. In addition, I would like to thank thesis editor, Jackey Coyle, for her contributions to the finished paper. For their kind words, and supportive feedback, I would also thank my research advisor Dr Simon Wilmot, associate supervisor Dr Donna Mcrae and Nadia Tass.

I would also like to thank Deakin University for its kind support, professionalism and academic rigour. I am honoured to be forever associated with your fine institution.

Finally, I thank my parents, my sister, and my wife and children for their patience, support and willingness to share in my vision during this process. We move forward together.

CRAFTING POST-FEMINIST WOMEN IN CONTEMPORARY WESTERN/HORROR

Introduction

Female characters within western/horror hybrid texts are largely marginalised. Although their actions may contribute to some form of narrative progression, a deeper reading of the texts in which they appear, and the limitations of their narrative positioning, demonstrate the need for more progressive representation. Modern western/horror films such as *Dead Birds* (Alex Turner 2004), *The Burrowers* (J. T. Petty 2008), *Bone Tomahawk* (S. Craig Zahler 2015), *VVitch* (Robert Eggers 2015), *Brimstone* (Martin Koolhoven 2016) and *Mohawk* (Ted Geoghegan 2017) incorporate hybrid-genre storytelling as a means to interrogate the social ills that permeate our current lives. Through the exploration of social and cultural fears, these hybrid horror narratives evoke the short-lived social reverberations of the slasher films of the 1980s that, according to Vera Dika, "reached their peak of activity during three short years: 1978 to 1981" (1990, 11). The problem is, with the exclusion of *Brimstone*, *VVitch* and *Mohawk*, almost all western/horror hybrid films adhere to a traditional male-centred narrative to depict the action as it unfolds. As such, the audience is asked to identify with this male perspective as the principal means of social and cultural interrogation. Problematically, most current western/horror hybrid narratives that utilise the historic western setting and recurring genre elements adhere to traditional male-centred American myths. These myths continue to re-inform patriarchal genre codes and conventions, and do little to advance the fruitful craft potential that, as I will argue, genre hybridity allows.

Genre hybridity, as an approach to screenplay writing, is nothing new as the very act of genre mixing "has long been a standard Hollywood practice [and] is necessary to the very practice whereby genres are created" (Altman 1999, 141–3). In general, the flexibility of the genre-writing space allows for the critical overlap of codes and conventions of numerous genres and any attempt to separate genres with rigid delineation is impossible. As genre writers working in the 21st

century must acknowledge, "boundary lines are increasingly porous in modern times [and] attempts to define genres usually involve a futile erection of fences, attempts to designate the ins and outs" (Kitses 1998, 19). Another key point to highlight is that "genre films must not only be similar in order to succeed, they must also be different" (Altman 21) and, given their historical tendency toward variation, "genre mixing (hybridity) is necessary to the very process by which genres are created" (143).

In fact, surprisingly, hybrid western/horror film history takes us back to the early days of silent cinema. *Haunted Range* (Paul Hurst 1926) "tells the story of a cowboy trying to solve the murder of his father at the hands of a ghostly figure known as The Black Rider. Although the haunting turns out to have human and not supernatural origins" (Harris 2020). The 1930s saw a few examples, including one starring John Wayne himself entitled *Haunted Gold* (Mack V. Wright 1932). In this film, Wayne's character, appropriately named the Duke, inherits a goldmine rumoured to be haunted. Universal Studios released a B-grade Spanish-vampire western called *Curse of the Undead* (Edward Dain 1959) in which the town preacher must save the community and, in the 1960s, *Billy the Kid Versus Dracula* (William Beaudine 1966), *Jesse James Meets Frankenstein's Daughter* (William Beaudine 1966) and, most famously, *The Valley of Gwangi* (James O'Connolly 1969) saw theatrical release. Utilising state-of-the-art stop-motion effects by the legendary Ray Harryhausen, *The Valley of Gwangi* tells the story of a cowboy, played by James Franciscus, who seeks fame and fortune by attempting to capture a Tyrannosaurus Rex and sell it to a Mexican circus. Of the most well-known western/horror hybrids of the 1970s to the 1990s, including *Westworld* (Michael Crichton 1973), *Ghost Town* (Richard McCarthy 1988) and *Grim Prairie Tales* (Wayne Coe 1990), only *Ravenous* (Antonia Bird 1999) stands out as a remarkable example of the creative potential of western-horror narrative screenwriting. Antonia Bird directed and rewrote the script to give it a more female perspective, and states in her interview with the *Guardian* UK on 5 August (1999) that she "thought it was a beautiful piece of writing [but] didn't want to do another boy's movie and I saw it very much as a very, very male movie and I was not interested in that."

Despite this long history, the western/horror hybrid genre remains, for the most part, locked within patriarchal discourses. That said, specific mention must be given to Kathyrn Bigelow's neo-western horror film *Near Dark* (1987). Set in a contemporary, small Midwestern town, the film follows a young man who falls in love with a beautiful vampire who travels with a nomadic clan of debaucherous male vampires. Although *Near Dark* moves the hybrid-genre form into less-explored spaces, the story remains fixed to the male point of view. In her study of *Blue Steel* (Bigelow 1990) and *Near Dark*, Anna Powell writes that in a Kathryn Bigelow film

> Intertextuality is frequent – particularly in *Near Dark*, with its evocation of the Western, the countercultural road movie and the gothic horror. Her more sympathetic characters are sexually attractive young rebels, chiefly male, and often members of subcultural groups. (1998, 136)

My feature-length script entitled *They Sound Human* incorporates the respective narrative iconographies and character tropes of both the western and the horror genres to expand upon the limited female representation that currently exists within this hybrid space. At the core of this exegesis is an investigation of the writing process utilised to develop these aims: one that interrogates the codes and conventions of both the western and horror genre forms in order to craft a progressive, female-led, hybrid screenplay. As such, a new craft-driven approach to advance the female characters in western/horror screenwriting would serve to further the creative potential of both genres.

In the field of screenwriting as creative practice, contemporary scholars explore innovative practices to best engage the culturally diverse perspectives, and methods, which inform modern global storytelling. For example, the article *Script Development: Defining the Field* argues that practice-led PhDs in screenwriting practice, "under the supervision of academics, can arguably always be viewed through the lens of script development" (Batty, Taylor, Sawtell 2017, 242), and have an impact on how we conceive and approach narrative construction. In addition, innovative screenwriting guidebooks, or 'how-to' books, such as Jule Selbo's *Screenplay: Building Story Through Character*, re-work the standard craft approach to plot and character development. Selbo details an inventive eleven-step story structure that "employ[s] all the great classic

storytelling points by focusing on the events – and emotions – of the main character's journey" (2015, IX). Selbo's aims to "create a new rhythm of storytelling" (2015, ix) that results from re-thinking the narrative construction process. Additional contemporary female scholars, such as Helen Jacey and Roberta Garrett, have contributed to an emerging body of literature around the creation of female-centred stories. Jacey's work interrogates the historically patriarchal approach of male-written screenwriting guidebooks. In discussing Linda Seger's *When Women Call the Shots* (1996), Jacey addresses a writers' 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" (2010, xv). Roberta Garrett examines the effect and influence that gender plays on the rules and conventions of genre screenwriting. Garrett 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. (2012, 179)

Both Garrett and Jacey's work suggests 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 11).

Building on the scholarly work of film feminism, I have chosen to interrogate my own feminist perspective in order to examine applied craft decisions more specifically. *They Sound Human* crafts a post-feminist heroine that can be interrogated through Jean-Anne Sutherland's "female-power-model". In a discussion of cinematic images of female power, Sutherland asks what it means to say that a female character is powerful in a film, with her primary interest being "the ways women use power in the narrative context of the film" (2017, 618). Sutherland breaks down cinematic power into three distinct categories: power-over, power-to and power-with. I have chosen to adopt Sutherland's highest "power-with" tier to test my craft aims, which she describes as demonstrating "the

kind of power whereby women come together as a group to challenge systems of oppression and bring about social change" (117). Although post-feminism is often used as a term that emphasizes female "individualism, choice and empowerment" (Gill 2016, 153), Sutherland's "power-with" tier extends its function into collective action. This post-feminist lens tracks the success and circumstances of my screenplay *They Sound Human.* It requires craft choices that demonstrate female solidarity and empowerment through working together as the most effective method to not only survive within patriarchal confines, but to succeed within them on one's own terms. As Amy Allen argues, 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. (1999, 114)

I will argue that this type of feminist power is connected to the way that symbolic and physical space are able to be re-coded through combining and transforming the haunted environs of horror with the wilderness mise-en-scène of the western. In the new-western landscape, evil manifests within the very fabric of the land, and comes to both embody and resist patriarchal authority. In this uncanny setting, the female characters must confront and overcome their fears – fears rooted in both the supernatural and the tangible. This challenge of confronting the supernatural potentially unearths "otherwise hidden knowledge that can now finally be revealed and perhaps then understood and controlled" (Braudy 2016, 3), and ultimately works to redefine the terms of the female hero's existence. I will suggest that in this new-western landscape, forms of progressive female heroism may emerge.

Approach, Methodology and Methods

This exegesis begins by addressing my screenwriting concerns surrounding the possibility of writing with a feminist intent. I will also present my working definition of post-feminism and explain the post-feminist lens through which to test my creative decision-making process.

As a contemporary screenwriter, the emergent approach of practice-led research (PLR) provides the means to creatively engage my theoretical and craft-based research interests. Estelle Barrett discusses the value of the PLR approach for creative practitioners in the production of knowledge in a broader cultural context. She writes that

> the innovative and critical potential of practice-based research lies in its capacity to generate personally situated knowledge and new ways of modelling and externalising such knowledge while at the same time revealing philosophical, social and cultural contexts for critical intervention and application of knowledge outcomes. (2010, 2)

Through a PLR methodology, my craft-work and accompanying exegesis aim to support future hybrid western/horror studies that extend issues of gender representation in genre cinema and the craft-development process in writing female-centred horror/western-hybrid genre screenplays.

Approach: A Male Screenwriter's Concerns in Writing Female Heroines

As a male screenwriter, I have been influenced by patriarchal models of scriptwriting. This PhD allows me a creative and academic space in which to address my developing concerns around writing with a feminist intent, as filtered through my research and my own life experiences as a male writer.

Firstly, the idea of seeing things through a feminist lens suggests more of a perspective through which to interpret female representation and less of a methodology per se. As feminist author Ann Kaplan argues, "Feminism offers not so much a methodology as a perspective – a pair of spectacles, as it were, through which we can look at films" (*Aspects* 1976; *New German* Critique 1978). Equally applicable are Adrienne Rich's words, describing "the act of looking back and seeing with fresh eyes old texts from a new critical direction" (1979, 35). This approach is vital to the re-evaluation of our national myths, especially the female position within. Film, like text, deals with questions of identity – individual and collective – particularly in relation to gender and sexuality. The power of the film image to contribute to the sense of self, and the way one interprets the world, often needs re-evaluation since it is steeped in mythology. As Pam Cook

discusses, in order to re-evaluate these myths, the authorial intent of the text's creator, to the extent the text manifests this, must also be considered and submitted to "post-structuralist revision and to a thorough-going feminist critique" (1978, 70).

As a male screenwriter creating female characters, I am in danger of completely neglecting considerations of gender, not in terms of binary sexual differences, but in how gendered experience informs the way we interpret the social world. Our individual interpretation and ideological viewpoint contribute to how we decide to recreate various experiences within our characters in written form. According to Lisa French, "sex in itself does not ensure or suggest any difference of view" (2007, 11). In fact, Helen Jacey writes that a screenwriter, male or female, "might project their own experiences of women as well as their feelings about what women should be like onto the female characters" (2010, 182). But this is certainly not a "get-out-of-jail-free card", as one cannot efface the power structures that one's gender allows or delimits.

Nonetheless, one of the dangers inherent in adopting a progressive response to gender representation comes in the form of universal subjectivity, in which by simply replacing the male characters with female ones, the hope is that this gender-swapping positively addresses the lack of female representation and the marginalisation of female characters. This is clearly not the case. Doing so, as Staci Taylor suggests, "denies gendered subjectivities [and] retrospectively attribute[s] femaleness to a character conceived as a man that falls well short of presenting the perspective of someone living in the world as a woman" (2017, 6).

Taylor questions how, in the very process of screenplay construction, screenwriting practice might be "gendered or gender identified and, more specifically, how screenwriting practice is informed by, and performs notions of gender" (4). 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" (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. It is likely that the inherent structure of the screenplay form, and audience familiarity with that structure, creates expectation for character behaviour regardless of gender. But, as

a writer, I am not convinced that any new structural form at this stage, in itself, will contribute much to a methodology to elevate feminist characters above stereotypical and marginal subject positions. To begin with, it is simply not possible to reboot patriarchal screen history with no residue of the past. What we do need are more examples of progressive female characters within less-explored narrative structures, since this will help build a clearer framework for structural innovation *with* feminist intent. This statement aligns with the words of feminist author Victoria Lamont: "I believe that we have as much to learn from thus probing the margins of a genre as we do from focusing on its classic or representative texts" (2016, 76). Only by interrogating the limited existing framework of writing strong females can a new approach be developed, which addresses the need to structurally centralise female heroines in screenwriting practice. I suggest that it is through the hybridisation of the horror-western film that progressive feminist screenplays will emerge. With this knowledge, we can begin to creatively explore progressive female representation with a post-feminist intent.

Annette Kuhn suggests the various approaches a writer may take to best support a feminist stance. She sums up her thoughts on the process by connecting to elements such as audience reception, which may be out of our control. She concludes that

> if it is accepted that meaning does not reside purely in the text itself, that it is not something locked within the text waiting for the reader in order to be liberated, but is itself to some degree an independent product or outcome of reading, then it becomes impossible to consider feminism in terms of fixed textual attributes, whether they be of 'form' or 'content', let alone in terms of whether or not producers intend to put them there. (1994, 16)

Kuhn's work sets out to discover the relationship between the text and the context in both the creation and reading of feminist narratives. She defines feminism, not as a monolith, but as a "political practice, or set of practices, with its own history and forms of organization, with its own bodies of theory constructed in and through that history and organization" (3). In connecting feminism and cinema, her work suggested that associations could be made on an analytical or theoretical level between the two sets of practices and "that taken together feminism and

cinema might provide a basis for certain types of intervention in culture" (5). She looked forward to the new types of feminist narrative and art forms that may be possible when a feminist response extends beyond a critique of mainstream or dominant representations.

Falling under the safety net of positive intentions, anyone can adopt intent in support of their creative aims but surely it is really how a writer, male or female, works to upset established conventions of screenwriting and filmmaking that becomes the key issue. From this viewpoint, I have set out to explore the female characters found in the margins of genre, specifically women in hybrid western/horror storytelling. That said, and at the risk of creating tensions in my approach, I also chose not to completely neglect the differently empowered female characters found in more mainstream, commercial films, such as *Woman Walks Ahead* (Susanna White 2017), as my Literature Review sections will later demonstrate.

Methodology: Defining My Post-Feminist Craft Perspective

Jean-Anne Sutherland asks, "What does it mean to say that a woman is powerful in a film?" (2010, 114). Sutherland separates cinematic power into three distinct categories: power-over, power-to and power-with. The following section will highlight Sutherland's work, but will focus primarily on her ideas of the tiered power model as related to gender and sexuality.

Power-Over – Power-over others, when placed within narrative terms, highlights a character's ability to dominate and exert free will over oppressive forces, which provides them with both an interior and exterior growth. This type of power is not limited to male characters exclusively. Typically, this kind of power is "seen in terms of force, inequality, and the ability to impose not only physical strength over others, but meaning and ideas as well" (2010, 115). This type of power is not aligned with the goals of feminism in general, as feminism does not seek to "transfer domination and oppression (and masculinity) into the hands of women. Rather feminists have exposed this type of power in order to dismantle it" (116). Power seen in these terms mimics patriarchy and requires that women oppress other women in order to achieve personal growth and elevated social stature. This type of power does not represent a threat to patriarchy. When an elevated female

figure in power exerts the power-over-model over other female figures within the narrative, she has simply gender-swapped her position with the male role figure that typically fulfils this narrative function. These powerful female characters might, in fact, be regressive in nature and should not be celebrated so readily for the type of oppressive power they assert.

Power-To – Sutherland's "power-to" model concerns the idea that any form of mastery over one's circumstances requires action. In social psychological terms, we associate power-to with what Albert Bandura calls personal control or self-efficacy, defining it "as the extent to which we believe we have the ability to achieve results from our actions" (116). This type of power requires a character to master her domain and demonstrate her command in order to achieve her narrative aims. A sense of agency is necessary to fulfil her destiny, which provides direction and meaning to her life and to the narrative. This type of power gives value and narrative necessity to her role and the function that she plays in the development and progression of the story. She has the ability "as a woman to recognize the control she has over her life, see the results of her actions, and recognize the power of the self" (117). Though it is a step forward over the power-over model, this type of power can also be read as incomplete. She may have a sense of personal power in the end, but there is no real threat to patriarchal order. She does not rise up to the third tier of power Sutherland labels as "power-with."

Power-With – Often dubbed female solidarity, this type of power demonstrates that true progressive, social change builds upon the actions of the individual and requires a collective, unified identity and teamwork to achieve significant social change. Sutherland writes that "beyond the masculine variety of power-over, and the social psychological power-to, power-with is the kind of power whereby women come together as a group to challenge systems of oppression and bring about social change" (117). I suggest that this is true female-progressive power of the highest tier. To add support to Sutherland's "power-with" model, I will briefly mention fellow "empowerment theorist" author Amy Allen, who writes that *"*true progressive power requires women to not only transform themselves and others, but also the world" (1998, 13). That sense of personal power stimulates the

strength and inner desire to become an active agent of social change. In this third level of power-with, Allen argues, women "must be able to think about the kind of power that diverse women can exercise collectively when we work together to define, and to strive to achieve, feminist aims" (32).

To reiterate, Sutherland's *power-with* tier encourages and supports my developing post-feminist lens. It is through this highest tier that I will test my craft aims. In conjunction with Sutherland, I have chosen to employ additional post-feminist craft strategies.

Methods: Craft Strategies

Post-feminism appeals to the shared experience of repression felt and voiced by all women, regardless of their race, ethnicity, sexuality, class and age. Rita Felski describes post-feminism as "an appeal to a shared experience of oppression provides the starting point from which women as a group can open up the problematic of gender" (1989, 168–9). 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, 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 definition of post-feminist sensibilities of "individualism, choice and empowerment" (2016, 153) through Sutherland's "Power-with" model to emphasize collective action.

By targeting the female narrative position within western-genre writing space, my discussion of craft proposes strategies that writer could employ in order

to extend the power and significance of female characters in western/horror screenwriting. My craft strategies are guided by my post-feminist framework, which provides a lens through which to interrogate my screenwriting approach, and measure my results.

Chapter Aims

Chapter One begins with a discussion of the western as a myth-making genre. This analysis lays the foundation to engage the female narrative position within western genre writing, specifically in terms of the historical use of patriarchal symbolism and gendered space. Throughout this chapter, I will emphasise how power is connected to space and used as a narrative device to define character relations.

My historical engagement with female characters in the western genre will focus on the need to critically re-evaluate their secondary narrative position as essential to the advancement of story. This line of discussion borrows from Blake Lucas's discoveries in *Saloon Girls and Rancher's Daughters: The Women in the Western*. Through a discussion of his findings, I will argue that these secondary support characters provide scope for a contemporary writer to extend their narrative significance and active power. This unpacking will allow me to build a platform to later discuss contemporary westerns that centralise women on the primary narrative level and evaluate the writing choices that enable them to have active control over the direction of the narrative.

To make the transition from secondary to centralised narrative position, I will argue that the female characters in a western must directly engage with feminist and non-feminist power plays. This argument connects directly to a writer's use and misuse of the screenwriting trope "unfair injury" (Edson 2011, 16), as a means to build immediate character sympathy. Unfair injury will also be discussed in connection to narrative power. Additionally, I will discuss how a contemporary writer can depict female narrative power by re-approaching historical genre-writing tropes through a post-feminist lens. I argue that narrative power is directly connected to the exterior landscape for a western-genre writer, and the female character's ability to master that space correlates directly to her narrative power and active centralised status.

Centralising a female protagonist in western genre requires an understanding of the metaphorical function the exterior space plays in aligning power to individuals. Jane Tompkins writes that "more than anything, nature gives the hero a sense of himself" (1992, 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" (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 patriarchal history.

Through textual readings of the language of film, a screenwriter can continue to develop their craft and incorporate their findings into their written work on the page. I argue, therefore, that textual analysis incorporated into the craft practice of the screenwriter contributes to their understanding of the ideological implications of writing character. Christine Gledhill's writing suggests a similar approach:

> we cannot understand or change sexist images of women for progressive ones without considering how the operations of narrative work to construct such images and their meaning. (1978, 460)

Therefore, part of my craft methodology incorporates a detailed textual analysis of two contemporary female-led westerns, *Woman Walks Ahead* (Susanna White 2017) and *The Good Time Girls* (Courtney Hoffman 2017). Read through a post-feminist lens, these case studies allow for a more comprehensive understanding of the story and character writing choices that ultimately contributed to my own craft decisions in *They Sound Human*. As previously noted, my discussion of both films will be framed by Sutherland's post-feminist, "power-with" model and with the way space is organised and colonised.

Chapter Two discusses how horror can elevate the role of the female narrative agent. As both the western and the horror genre deal largely with

violence and the necessity that the central character perform acts of violence, a brief historical discussion of the slasher-horror "final girl" will benefit my own understanding of her narrative function. Defined by Carol Clover, the final girl attains an authentic narrative power that allows her to "become her own savior [and] become a hero" (1992, 60). I seek to discover an approach to centralise a female heroine in a western/horror hybrid screenplay as partially modelled off the academic and theoretical interpretations of her behaviour as detailed in the writings of Vera Dika (1990) and Carol Clover (1992). My discussion focuses on the methods and structural moments in a story whereby the acquisition of narrative power occurs. Specifically, I will emphasise her active awareness of her surroundings, and her self-generated ability to regain control of her environment, as essential to character growth. These principal concepts lay the character groundwork necessary to begin a discussion around the crafting of progressive, post-feminist female heroines in western/horror hybrid screenwriting.

In this chapter, I will also define and set the framework for the supernatural, as it will be incorporated into my own screenplay, specifically in its effect on space. I will argue that the infusion of supernatural horror tropes into a western landscape elevates the symbolic storytelling potential available to the female characters. In doing so, a writer can redefine the female relationship to the west and craft more progressive female characters.

To further develop my hybrid post-feminist aims, I have chosen to examine two key western/horror films, *Dead Birds* (Alex Turner 2005) and *Mohawk* (Ted Geoghegan 2017). This discussion aims to contribute to future writers' approach to extend female narrative power in hybrid space. I will explore how concepts of power are directly connected to structural screenwriting decisions that inform character growth. These systemic craft decisions, as immediately felt in the introductory scene(s) for centralised female characters, provide the foundational building blocks required to elevate their status within western/horror hybrid genre form. I will also detail how contemporary western/horror films potentially undermine their post-feminist aims through their misuse of genre-writing tropes.

To emphasise this last point, I will detail *Dead Birds'* strategic misuse of codes of power that work against its progressive feminist-narrative aims. My

discussion focuses on the film's failure to construct an exterior environment that establishes and contributes to the development of successful female narrative agency. I will present how Sutherland's "female-power-model" supports my reading of Anna Belle (Nicki Aycox), the centralised female, as a regressive depiction of female heroism, whose actions ultimately reinforce the coded patriarchal system she initially appeared to protest. Through a closer reading of *Dead Birds*, I will target these key problematic points and place them within a larger historical western/horror context to provide a textual counterpoint to my own narrative approach.

Additionally, interweaved through this discussion of hybrid western/horror, I will reinforce issues of power and female narrative agency as achieved through a character's awareness of their surroundings and their ability to recognise and act against narrative threats in exterior space. This discussion serves to legitimise my incorporation of *final girl* tropes into my own screenplay work. Specifically, I seek to advance this writing trope by incorporating the post-feminist necessity of female coalition-building as a necessary component for her to address oppression and social inequality. Rosalind Gill argues for the integration of female solidarity into the construction of a post-feminist lens. Ultimately, Gill proposes that "In academic writing and in media construction, it is important that we build feminist solidarities across and between generations" (2020, 625).

Though highly limited in number, a select few progressively feminist western/horror films exist, such as the previously mentioned *Mohawk* (Ted Geoghegan 2017). *Mohawk* provides textual evidence of a new, marginal film-making thread that infuses supernatural horror into a western landscape. Through an expanded textual analysis of *Mohawk* (Ted Geoghegan 2017), I will interrogate the operations of the narrative and discuss the craft choices that contribute to a progressive female-centred hybrid narrative. 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.

Chapter Three interrogates my craft decisions and post-feminist narrative concerns in *They Sound Human,* my feature screenplay. *They Sound Human*

requires Ellen, the centralised heroine, to look beyond herself and her immediate offspring and fight for the greater social collective, as represented by the numerous orphans she saves from implied child slavery. Through Ellen, *They Sound Human* sets up a layered, post-feminist heroine exemplifying the highest tier of Jean-Anne Sutherland's "female-power-model". As Sutherland's "power-with" tier requires the inclusion of secondary female support as fundamental to a post-feminist reading, I will discuss the necessity to immediately situate supporting female characters alongside my centralised heroine.

Through a discussion of my craft-decision process and post-feminist concerns, I will detail how concepts of power are directly connected to structural choices that inform character growth in my own screenwriting practice. I will emphasise how female narrative agency depends on a writer's understanding and structured use of feminist and non-feminist modes of power. This includes my incorporation of final-girl tropes. Additionally, I will highlight how an informed use of "unfair injury" immediately places centralised characters in metaphorical life-or-death moments of choice that lead to greater audience sympathy and set the groundwork to infuse post-feminist sensibilities into their character arc. Through a detailed analysis of the introductory scene(s) for centralised female characters in *They Sound Human*, I detail my approach to elevate the female narrative status within the western/horror hybrid genre.

From these craft decisions, *They Sound Human* builds post-feminist concerns of "individualism, choice and empowerment" (Gill 2007, 149) into the centralised female characters. I propose these qualities as foundational requirements that female heroines must embody and demonstrate that, through action in an exterior space, they show how patriarchal authority can be defeated. My screenplay explores the necessity for female narrative agency in western/horror hybrid form to be developed primarily through its relationship to symbolically heightened, supernatural exterior space. It is my argument that the fusion of horror tropes with a western landscape, and the increased threats of a supernatural west, challenges 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 and Packer 2017, 33). 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, centralised female characters. In her new enlightened state, the female protagonist may, more completely, engage the challenges necessary to overturn the patriarchal oppressiveness of her environment. Through this approach of developing female characters primarily within exterior space, my craftwork sets out to reassess heroism in the hybrid western setting on female terms and proposes a new methodology to do so.

These techniques will be discussed as contributing factors toward the successful crafting of active, post-feminist female heroines within a western/horror hybrid-genre landscape.

Chapter One – Literature Review
Rethinking the Female Western Mythos

Frontier legends have, since the beginning of cinema, provided the historical fantasy that inspires creative exploration in genre writing. Through the medium of film, the western genre contributes to the shaping of social history and individual identity, sometimes, "with such a power that our perception of contemporary reality and our ability to function in the world are directly, often tragically, affected" (Slotkin 1973, 3). The images and ideas explored in westerns remind us that, at one time, the western myth "provided a national myth and a global icon, a cornerstone of American identity, its roots in history and the frontier providing a unique, rich body of signs and meanings. These meanings can be said to extend far beyond the boundaries of celluloid" (Kitses 1998, 16). It is through the western genre, as John. G. Cawelti writes, that individuals

> explore not only what is gained, but what was lost in the movement of American history. In other words, the western genre is effective as a social ritual because within its basic structure of resolution and reaffirmation, it indirectly confronts those uncertainties and conflicts of values which have always existed in American culture, but have become increasingly strong in the twentieth century. (1984, 100–1)

The Mythic Potential of Writing Genre Stories

In interrogating genre form, Isabel Pinedo writes that "the boundaries of any genre are slippery" (1996, 17), and to successfully create within genre space, a writer should discuss and define genre parameters with a certain sense of flexibility. Though she spoke of the horror genre specifically, her point holds true when discussing any form of genre storytelling. Rigid genre separation is, in itself, a fruitless exercise. In the past, genre authors such as John G. Cawelti (1984), Will Wright (1975), Jack Nachbar (1974) and others created grand monolithic paradigms that spoke directly to an American culture infused with the ideals and grand narratives the films presented. In the decades since their early genre publications, a "great paradigm shift has taken place, marked by a turn away from an ahistorical auteurism, genre studies, and structuralism toward more

historically contextualized and socially engaged research, in which issues of race and gender loom large" (Pearson 1995, 5). In looking back and commenting on his own pioneering genre work, Jim Kitses writes that

> if the western is no longer the grand narrative, central, totalizing, hegemonic, it has already shown its resiliency and value as a set of codes that can speak with authority to a new millennium. The totality of remarkable works corrective of America stretching back to the 1960s has not eroded or diminished or killed off the western, it now is the western. (1998, 21)

Although Kitses, writing in 1998, speaks of the 20th century, the nature of the uncertainties and conflicts of values that the western genre addresses continue to permeate American culture today. These include issues of racial otherness, gender inequality and misogyny, the #metoo movement, toxic masculinity and gun violence – all still at the forefront of the collective conscious.

Contemporary American westerns demonstrate the western genre's viability to interrogate these cultural concerns. In discussing his latest western film, *In A Valley of Violence* (2016) with the *Guardian* online, writer/filmmaker Ti West says "the story and the archetypes in westerns may be simple, but that allows you to use subtext to tie things in to what is happening now." Also speaking with the *Guardian*, writer/director Taylor Sheridan stated that his film *Hell or High Water* (2016) has us "re-examining the self-evident truths of America [by] tackling subjects like poverty's multi-generational stranglehold, the lingering impact of domestic violence; casual racism and even the pros and cons of a state loaded with guns."

The Classic Western: Planting the Seeds of Gendered Space

If westerns are, and have been, a genre capable of exploring issues of gender and gender representation, then in order to write effectively within this narrative form in the 21st century, the genre's codes and conventions should be contextualised and refigured within this new millennium.

Firstly, I should set some of the early foundations of the western genre form and some of the misconceptions in order to ground and specify concepts I will later discuss in detail.

The western genre formula and its contribution to American frontier mythology may have originated at the turn of the century. During this period, as Victoria Lamont writes, "ideas about the American frontier shifted profoundly in response to so-called frontier closure, leading to an explosion of public interest in fiction, photography, and art about the disappearing west" (2016, 4–5). The early western adventures mythologised the actions of gun-slinging cowboys in the cheap dime novels, local newspapers and tobacco cards that misled their audiences and distorted images of the occupation and locales where these people lived and worked. The "popular western was supposed to have been reinveneted by Owen Wister, who published his novel *The Virginian* in 1902" (1). Wister tackeled the topic of the cowboy character, and dealt earnestly with the motifs and iconography that would forever detail the western film. In fact, a woman suffragist, Emma Ghent Curtis, took up these very same narrative concerns thirteen years before Wister's publication. Her novel *The Administratrix,* published in 1889, featured "characters and motifs now familiar in the classic westerns, including a chivalric cowboy, a tenderfoot schoolteacher, outlaws, vigilantism and gun violence" (5). Another female author, Francis McElrath, wrote her version of frontier cowboy life in *The Rustler,* a novel based on the famous Johnson County Wars of 1892, ironically the same topic Wister based the events of *The Virginian* upon. *The Rustler* was published in the same year as *The Virginian.* Unfortunately, neither Curtis nor McElrath were part of the "frontier club" (75), a highly successful, politically and culturally powerful all-male group composed of Owen Wister, President Harry Truman and artist Frederick Remington. Consequently, both female authors' creative work, which explored and mapped out the early conventions of the western genre, fell into obscurity.

Regardless, the early cowboy characters that dime-novel readers and, a shortly after, filmgoers would experience depicted idiosyncratic heroes, some good, some bad, some flawed, but mostly idealised in the form of a perfect gunslinger — a man of few words with a strong moral compass. That cowboy moral code would centralize the western films of the early decades of the 20th century.

This moral code, described by John G. Cawelti, relates to the cowboy's use of violence and his reluctant approach to killing. He summarises the classic western hero under the following conditions:

> Perhaps one source of the cowboy's appeal is the way in which he resolves this ambiguity by giving a sense of moral significance and order to violence. His reluctance and detachment, the way in which he kills only when he is forced to do so, the aesthetic order he imposes upon his acts of violence through the abstract ritual of the showdown, and finally his mode of killing cleanly and purely at a distance through the magic of his six-gun cover the nakedness of violence and aggression beneath a skin of aesthetic and moral propriety. (1984, 88)

In its most classic form, the cowboy hero acts as an embodiment of this moral clarity, which, according to Jack Nachbar, "corresponds to the clarity of his physical image against his bare landscape" (1974, 47). As one of the genre's earliest writers, Nachbar presents the key characteristics of the cowboy hero – and his dedication to decisions based on the clarity of his own self-imposed moral code – as being interconnected with the cinematic elements of the narrative form itself: the wide expanses of land, the free movement of people and animals. Nachbar writes that

> guns constitute the visible moral centre of the Western movie, suggesting continually the possibility of violence, so land and horses represent the movie's material basis, its sphere of action. But the land and the horses have also a moral significance; the physical freedom they represent belongs to the moral 'openness' of the West – corresponding to the fact that guns are carried where they can be seen. (47)

In the classic western genre, the hero, most often a cowboy (and almost always white and male), was called in to perform violent acts with the purpose of reinstating a moral balance to a corrupt town that required his deft touch. In the end, "the use of his strength demonstrates to the people of society that they do need his ability and he is therefore accepted by them" (Wright 1975, 149). Ultimately, his violent acts are justified. This narrative pattern put the cowboy's moral code to the test within a seemingly endless supply of Hollywood westerns.

The Symbolic Use of Gendered Space

Iconic male western directors such as John Ford, Howard Hawks, Anthony Mann and Budd Boetticher represent the classic phase of "balanced awareness of the westerns as a genre and commitment of the genre as a meaningful representation of life" (Cawelti 1984, 14). After WWII, the thematic preoccupations of the classic westerns seemed constructed out of problematic antinomies, and this new era brought with it new perspectives that forced the "ironies inherent in the genre to the surface" (Park 1974, 2). The aforementioned classic male directors met these requirements of change head-on by reworking the narrative tropes to highlight their own auteurist preoccupations within a drastically changing social context.

One such area of focus was the symbolic use of space and issues of power associated with it. In the classic period westerns of John Ford, "civilization is embodied primarily in the family and the community, and characteristically located in homes, cavalry forts, stagecoaches, covered wagons, or other shelters" (Budd 1976, 133). As a filmmaking pioneer shaping the western through multiple eras, Ford himself used the juxtaposition of imagery – the open, untamed landscape contrasted with the civilised township – to present his personal viewpoint. The compositional precision of Ford's frame and camerawork sets up the moral clarity of the western universe and the fragility of such an idealised space. For example, in *Stagecoach* (1939), Ford used interior spaces, including shots of fences and posts, to signify shelter, safety and protection. Once the wagon journey began, the departure into the wilderness meant an invitation to danger. The wagon's interior represented a variation of the home and wilderness motif, as felt in the cramped space inside, with the agents of civilisation all nestled in tight against the open, vast spaces outside. The travellers "first make the interior into a microcosm of the towns they travel between, the respectable people shunning the social outcasts who sit next to them. They try and separate their tiny space from the frontier environment around them" (135). Ford frames the wilderness, as well as the images of attacking Native Americans, through the windows of the wagon to delineate interior and exterior spaces. Issues of racial division aside, the wagon acts as a metaphor for civilisation. Similarly, the towns

in westerns provide the same function. But in all towns, there is a periphery, a fragile border that separates civilisation and wilderness. All one has to do is stand on that edge to recognise the illusion of safety the town provides.

The irony of gender space was another such concern, which John Ford continued to explore in *The Searchers* (1956). The film begins with Martha, in silhouette, opening the large front door of the Edwards' home to Ethan and the wilderness. The film culminates with the same image, but acts as a symmetrical reversal of this opening shot, in both visual and narrative function. Ethan walks away from the home a changed man, fully aware of his place in the wilderness. Unlike his half–Native American nephew Martin and his rescued niece Debbie, Ethan will never find shelter and comfort within the enclosed walls of his ancestral home. *The Searchers* "is both a culmination and an innovation in the imagery of home and wilderness. The film not only recapitulates a large part of the complex of images described above – ways in which two kinds of space are juxtaposed – but it also expands and elaborates on that tradition" (Budd 1976, 142). In Peter Bogdanovich's documentary *Directed by John Ford* (1971), John Ford continually refuses to engage in a conversation asking him to explain the deeper meaning of his works and his auteurist preoccupations. Even though the directors themselves may deny it, classic western filmmakers such as John Ford were constantly looking for ways to express their personal thematic preoccupations through the genre's tropes.

Engaging the Tension Between Feminist and Non-Feminist Modes of Power in the American Western

The western's coded depiction of power through the use of familiar images – such as gun-toting cowboys on horses, shootouts in a newly formed town, or an exasperated hero riding off into the landscape – has never been a simple reproduction of conventions. Rather, by invention through the expansion and reapplication of visual imagery, this seemingly repetitious genre develops and updates its mythic functions. As the world changed around classic western filmmakers, they reapproached the genre to alter its sociocultural narrative possibility. Following the Second Indochina War, numerous revisionist westerns, such as *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (Robert Altman 1971), *Ulzana's Raid* (Robert

Aldrich 1972) and *The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid* (Philip Kaufman 1972), encapsulated more clearly the sociopolitical unrest of the times. It was during this period that the western began to counter years of inauthenticity, especially in its depiction of race, gender and the realities of violence.

This ideological shift continued on into the 1990s, as evident in a handful of westerns that dealt, even more intrinsically, with issues of race, gender representation and the deconstruction of the male-centred western myth. Films such as *Dances with Wolves* (Kevin Costner 1990), *The Last of the Mohicans* (Michael Mann 1992) and *Dead Man* (Jim Jarmusch 1995), and feminist westerns such as *The Ballad of Little Jo* (Maggie Greenwald 1993), *Bad Girls* (Jonathan Kaplan 1994), *The Quick and the Dead* (Sam Raimi 1995) and *Painted Angels* (Jon Sanders 1998), depicted a new kind of west. These postmodern westerns fed into

> and out of an equally expanding and equally plural 'New Western' culture, a culture that includes novels, paintings, vacations, lifestyles, as well as a new wave of revisionist academic histories, [so that] westerns were able, in what was now a new post-Cold War world, to reassess as well as reassert a central element in America's national mythology. (Neale 2002, 32)

These films focused on the gendered world of the western and stimulated a branch of feminist film criticism that, as David Lusted describes,

> developed from a desire to place the legacy of male-centred genres and genre criticism in wider contexts of film history and film criticism, in order to explore female genres and the place of women in cinema. (2003, 28)

Female Power Out West

Lusted frames his discussion of feminist westerns of the 1990s by stating that even the earliest westerns of the late 1910s and 1920s, such as "*The Trail of Lonesome Pine* (1916 and 1936), suggest that the West is a place where women can break away from family constrictions to find their identity independently" (260). This search for a sense of place away from the Victorian confines of the east, both in fiction and in real life, led many adventurous women out west, with tales of their adventures well documented in both literature and film.

Academically, it was Jacqueline Levitin who first attempted to understand the female place in the traditional dichotomy of the wilderness/civilisation motif so prevalent in classic westerns. Levitin indicated that we need to begin by looking for clues in the real-life stories about women who ventured west. Levitin writes that

> contrary to the accepted notion that the frontier offered nothing but toil and disillusionment for the pioneer women, Heather Robertson in her study of Canadian pioneer women and William Forrest Sprague in his study of her American counterparts propose that the west was also a place of freedom and satisfaction for women. (1982, 103)

In addition to their studies, author Lesley Poling-Kempes documented her search, around the turn of the century, for a missing woman, Carol Bishop Stanley. Her work led her to uncover "a narrative that connected Carol to an informal alliance of remarkable women. Women who, like Carol, had left the security and comfort of conventional society in the first decades of the twentieth century and journeyed into Indian country in search of a wider, deeper view of themselves and the world" (2015, 4).

The west was a place that offered women far more hope and opportunity and even held the promise of the power that a life dictated on one's own terms allows. Levitin has highlighted the reasons women ventured west, stating that

> despite the hardships, living away from parental constraints and social demands offered a powerful and exhilarating experience for the woman who went West [because] remaining in the East, she would have become the factory worker or the genteel spinster of limited means. (1982, 103)

But in light of these real-life discoveries, feminist authors, such as Levitin, felt that the western film genre did not allow the female characters the same type of spectrum mobility as their male counterparts. The crux of Levitin's article is that "unlike the [male] hero whose place in the wilderness/civilization spectrum has varied considerably over the decades, women characters had a fixed range of emotions, attitudes and actions. Their characters tended to be predictable because, generally, women played a passive role in the western" (96). She claims that the western genre limits female mobility and creates fictional versions of women far removed from their real-life counterparts. Levitin initiated an academic call to

adventure when she wrote, "how could women fit into an analysis of the western on psychological, social or mythic terms?" (96). In doing so, she set out an agenda that was explored by authors such as Pam Cook (1988) and Blake Lucas (1998).

The Narrative Power of Western Women as Secondary Support

Academic research in the 1990s re-evaluated the long-held assumption that the western is coded by rigidly patriarchal ideologies that "act as masculine backlash against female-dominated sentimental culture and [Norris] Yates's characterizations of women's westerns as domestic texts" (Lamont 2016, 4). In particular, Blake Lucas (1998) approaches the female position in the western in a new light by re-reading her narrative position as not stuck powerlessly within a narrow patriarchal framework. In fact, Lucas reads her secondary narrative position as one that generates both character and narrative growth for herself and the centralised hero. From this perspective, a contemporary screenwriter can extend their narrative significance and active power in order to build layered, secondary female characters that work to support a centralised female heroine.

Historically, in male-led westerns, the narrative value and progressive possibilities of women as secondary, supporting characters cannot be overlooked. For it is here, in this undervalued secondary position, that we discover fully-realised progressive female characters thriving in and not limited by their secondary narrative status. In Blake Lucas's historical reassessment of the female position in the western, he states that "of all the misconceptions which have come to attach themselves to the Western, none is more saddening or wrong-headed than the notion that women are unimportant to it" (1998, 301). He argues that "it is the rule rather than the exception that the strongest Westerns tend to be those in which women are most well realized and vital to the whole" (312). Lucas emphasises the all-too-common misconception that the value of a western lies only in its action when, in fact, the "reflective and gentle side of the Western, is as valuable and important as the most violent and cathartic action" (307). His article evaluates the narrative importance of the female in classic westerns such as John Ford's masculine cavalry trilogy, *Fort Apache* (1948), *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949) and *Rio Grande* (1950). Lucas also readdresses the female narrative

importance within genre oddities such as *Pursued* (Raoul Walsh 1947), *Westward the Women* (William Wellman 1951), and Anthony Mann's *The Naked Spur* (1953) and *The Far Country* (1955).

In looking at a variety of westerns pulled from a western era often read as extremely imbalanced in its use and appreciation of the female characters, Lucas sets out to disprove that misconception and demonstrate the need to "see the Western in a different light – not as a masculine genre but as one supremely balanced in its male/female aspect and one of the finest places for women characters in all of cinema" (301). For example, in Budd Boetticher's *Buchanan Rides Alone* (1959), Karen Steele plays the secondary female support to Randolph Scott's avenging bounty hunter. Throughout the film, Steele's character competently rides a horse alongside the men, shoots a gun with equal accuracy, and even provides the fatal shot, which saves the group from an attacking Native American. In the end, she belongs to no one but herself. The hero goes his separate way and she, controller of her own destiny, chooses her own path. The final image of the film re-emphasises the plot victory of our hero by showing the hanging tree set ablaze, burning vigorously as Scott watches from a few feet behind the flames. This image can be read a few ways. On the simplest level, it acts as closure to Scott's storyline. It can also be read as a symbolic inner victory signifying the closure of the past, and the possibility of individuals, both male and female, clearing the mental and emotional slate and starting anew. A wronged woman's fate is honoured by the man who loved her without her memory having to be replaced by the younger, prettier female in the current narrative plot line. In this film, as in other Boetticher westerns, the female characters retain their self-worth and identity, and demonstrate narrative control over their own future destiny.

It is vital then to recognise the female secondary position as valuable to the narrative outcome in films where the female characters support a male-driven narrative. For it is here, in this secondary narrative position, that complex, layered female characters have helped create strong, highly progressive westerns. It is through female intervention that a male hero understands how, but most importantly the reasons why, he needs to move forward. In addition to stimulating the centralised male character's narrative arc, the female character herself also

develops an inner storyline. Although she exists on a secondary subplot level, her inner growth demonstrates the progressive potential of her narrative positioning. At the same time, in demonstrating a type of narrative power that affects the outcome of both character and story, her influence and actions produce measurable results, in line with Jean-Anne Sutherland's post-feminist assessment model. These layered, secondary female characters contribute to stories that depict "women's lives where power [is] manifest through action, decisions, hopes and dreams, and relationships" (2017, 622). This understanding of women as secondary narrative supports works to secure their historic position within the genre as crucial to plot and character development. Most importantly, this perspective contributes to a contemporary screenwriter's approach by emphasising the secondary female characters as an essential, pre-existing component in crafting a post-feminist narrative.

Centralised Female Power in the Western: Problems and Considerations

Simply placing a female heroine in a centralised 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 utilised 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. In 2018, the *New York Times* published an online article discussing the effect of this straightforward approach to rewriting historically male-centred stories with an updated version retooled around women. According to writer Amanda Hess, 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" (Hess 2018). But without a deeper understanding of power, or how images of power in film 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.

Power Through Violence in the Western Landscape

In the words of Jane Tompkins, "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" (1992, 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 centralised 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. It is a landscape toward which our heroine will eventually ride, deploying a different way of moving through space from that of males.

> Tompkins defines the landscape as
>
> an environment inimical to human beings, where a person is exposed, the sun beats down, and there is no place to hide. But the negations of the physical setting — no shelter, no water, no rest, no comfort — are also its siren song. Be brave, be strong enough to endure this, it says, and you will become like this – hard, austere, sublime. This code of asceticism founds our experience of western stories. The landscape challenges the body [and mind] to endure hardship — that is its fundamental message at the physical level. Its spiritual message is the same: come and suffer. (71)

In director Kelly Reichardt's *Meeks 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, whose ego and misrepresentation of

his navigational skills send three emigrant families wandering in circles in the Cascade Mountains. The men are hesitant to take control away from Meeks, whose continuous, yet dishonest, proclamation that "he's never been lost in his life" evokes male trust. With the men refusing to intervene, the women, led by 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 a patriarchal 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. In order to do so, 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.

Narrative Power Through Unfair Injury

One of a writer's tools to align narrative power, and audience sympathy, for a centralised character is through an informed use of "unfair injury", a term coined by Eric Edson (2011). In the craft of screenwriting, the concept of unfair injury acts as a mythological tool to build and develop immediate character sympathy. Eric Edson proposes nine key requirements that allow for an effective method to emotionally connect a viewing audience to fictional characters. Unfair injury, described as "blatant injustice inflicted upon (your character) that puts the hero in a position where he's compelled to do something, take action in order to right a wrong" (16–17) is one of the nine key requirements. Edson describes this particular requirement as one of "the quickest way[s] to bond an audience to your hero" (16).

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. Historically, the use of unfair injury against female characters in westerns has taken many forms. 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 characterisation, and realign power to our centralised women as they actively fight to rectify the unjust, oppressive factors that hold them back.

Unfair Injury and Extreme Trauma

For centralised 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, 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 centralised heroines to take drastic measures. As films such as *The Ballad of Little Jo* (Maggie 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 realised 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 become 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* (Burt Kennedy 1971), *Bad Girls* (Jonathan Kaplan 1994) and *The Quick and the Dead* (Sam Raimi 1995), the "intensity of her quest makes her heroic role border on villainy" (Lusted 2003, 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 centring. 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.

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 writes 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. (2002, 2)

Likewise, the female Native American "is no less a victim than her male counterpart" (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 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. (1992, 727–8)

Although an in-depth discussion of race and audience identification falls outside the scope of my exegesis, 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. Additionally, as my screenplay *They Sound Human* involves the female Native American experience, some unpacking of the historical use of violence as a means to evoke sympathy for, ironically, the men who fight to save the female characters, is needed.

The origins of allowing the female Native American to experience a voice in Hollywood cinema are most often attributed to Delmer Daves's *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 writes, "throughout these trends in the films of the 50s and 60s, which were sympathetic to Indians, there was no significant breakthrough in the roles of women" (1982, 127). 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" (127). It is unfortunate, as Prats writes, 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" (xvi). 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. (xvii)

Though credit is due for attempting to ameliorate cinematic cultural misrepresentation, such films "from *Broken Arrow* to *Dances With Wolves* 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" (xiv) 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.

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* (S. Craig 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 "savage" 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 (Martin 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 centralised female characters, led by frontier woman Emilia Jones (Dakota Fanning), are severely "unfairly injured" throughout the narrative, even to the point of self-inflicted harm. 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. According to Amanda Hess of the *New York Times*, 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" (2018). 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" (2018). When the centralised 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. Judith Butler emphasises 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. (1988, 530)

It's not a matter of changing the actors in the same old patriarchal game, but of changing the game systemically.

Potential Solutions: Female Power Through Solidarity

As recent female-led westerns – such as *The Ballad of Little Jo* (Maggie Greenwald 1995), *Meek's Cutoff* (Kelly Reichardt 2010), *Woman Walks Ahead* (Susanna White 2018) and the Courtney Hoffman–directed AFI short film *The Good Time Girls* (2017) – continue to demonstrate, female desire to reclaim power from patriarchal oppressors and reclaim western narrative remains a

relevant thematic concern within the genre form. Most often, it is through the collective solidarity of the female characters that a more complete power shift occurs. In such cases, the female perspective drives a storyline wherein personal power works to reorder the imbalance of social power for the greater, collective good. According to "empowerment theorists", as Amy Allen labels them, a sense of personal power stimulates the strength and inner desire to become an active agent of social change. In this third level of *power-with*, both Sutherland and Allen argue, women "must be able to think about the kind of power that diverse women can exercise collectively when [they] work together to define, and to strive to achieve, feminist aims" (2010, 32). Through a textual analysis of *The Good Time Girls*, I will reverse-engineer the text to highlight the story and structure craft decisions that grounded my post-feminist reading of the film. Doing so will allow my own craftwork a richer post-feminist foundation to support the fusion of horror into my hybrid approach.

The Good Time Girls: a Post-Feminist "Power-With" Analysis

The female-driven western short film *The Good Time Girls* depicts Laura Dern as a frontier prostitute working at Ada's Brazen Beauties outpost parlour. Within the dimly lit interior, women completely control what we see and how we see it. Presented by the AFI Conservatory Directing Workshop for Women, this tale opens with the sound of male grunting, the nature of which is unclear, as it reverberates over a black screen. Are these sounds of pleasure or pain? A slow fade-in reveals a meandering camera that traverses just slightly above the wild grass covering a hill in front of an open vista of endless, rolling hills on the horizon. The male grunts continue over the image of a pair of brown pants and spurred cowboy boots, but it soon becomes evident that the moans stem from desperate pain. With that first bit of auditory misdirection clarified, the camera tilts up to reveal our heroine, Laura Dern, as the woman wearing the pants and spurred boots. Her backlit blonde hair highlights the rifle intently aimed toward some off-screen victim. The immediate sound of gunfire jolts the viewer as Dern squeezes the trigger, and finishes off her moaning male victim.

This opening recalls the clichéd establishing shots of numerous westerns depicting the central hero, almost always a man, riding in from the wilderness

toward a domestic space, township, or symbolic agency of civilisation. His entrance aligns him with the open space, his freedom and sense of agency a given from the first frame. He is a master of the terrain, along with the skills required to survive within it. In the case of *The Good Time Girls*, the body revealed is of a woman who then, through the power of familiarity of this western opening trope, is immediately granted the power and agency that the shot implies. But as her voice-over informs us, her agency didn't come without a cost. She tells us that she was "born in a whorehouse. Beds knocking walls was my lullaby. Nothing comforts me more than the sound of a man grunting and panting." The opening audio misdirection, coupled with the image, suggests the duality of her character as well. She is a woman scorned, we later learn, who assumes the false identity of a frontier pleasure-giver intent on murdering her assailant. In fact, the entire parlour depicts women standing united by the same shared purpose of revenge against male abusers from their past. The promise of good times is a charade that, when finally brought to light, allows the women the proximity required to finish off their abusers.

Laura Dern leads the assault against her abuser. Rifle in hand, she strolls off the porch of Ada's Brazen Beauties out into the open field, proclaiming, "You murdered my daughter. You burned down our whorehouse and now this bitch is going to kill you." This moment – interpreted through Jean-Anne Sutherland's "power-to" model, which demands that mastery over one's circumstance requires action – demonstrates female control over the narrative. Sutherland states that "in social psychological terms, we associate power-to with what Bandura (Yoder & Kahn 1992) calls 'personal control or self-efficacy' as the extent to which we believe we have the ability to achieve results from our actions" (116). Therefore, when a female character realises that she has control over her life and can take action to safeguard it, and once she begins to see the results of her actions, she has grown on a personal level. Though, arguably, damaged from the effect of such actions, Dern's character is provided the potential for meaningful character growth. After years of revenge-seeking, her character arc culminates in the reveal of her derived pleasure in murdering the man who killed her daughter. "You gave me a reason to live," she informs him, which highlights the sense of purpose that a goal provides a lost spirit, which holds true to the western mythology that

through purpose a man acquires meaning in life. The nature of that purpose, according to the western, fluctuates, but violence almost always rests at the heart of the western. Violent circumstance generally requires violent action on the part of the hero to reinstate balance and order to the world around him, or her.

The Good Time Girls portrays women employed under the guise of prostitution, which appears initially, on a social level, opposed to a feminist ideal, but it is quickly understood to be a ruse. By appealing to the base subconscious desires of their male oppressors, specifically realised in the form of corrupt outlaws who have sexually and emotionally wronged them in the past, their combined efforts as a united female front ultimately leads to their success. Each of Hoffman's characters acts as true a representation of post-feminist female heroism, in that the type of female power on display requires female solidarity and pre-planned group effort to accomplish their desired end. Through the collective courage of all the abused women, and the utilisation of their individual skill sets, each woman is crucial to the narrative outcome. Each female character plays a highly specific role in the plan, making her participation essential. For example, we learn that freckled Ruth, a supporting character, is the widow of the butcher killed by the outlaw leader's brother back in Ridgeway. With fitting poetic justice, she castrates the brother of her oppressor; removing his manhood is the penultimate act of symbolically making the world safer for future women. The collective actions undertaken by this small group of oppressed and abused female characters requires blunt force and ruthless aggression to find the slightest hope of a future where they can move beyond the horrible truths of their past. To evoke Amy Allen, true progressive power requires women to not only transform themselves and others, but also the world. That sense of personal power stimulates the strength and inner desire to become an active agent of social change. In the western, as has been understood from the origins of the genre itself, violence inflicted in accordance with a personal moral code justifies the means to the end. In this case, in acting as agents of social change, the combined individual efforts of the scorned justify the horrific nature of their means. They deserve their collective day in the sun.

The Post-Feminist Influence of *Woman Walks Ahead* (Susanne White 2018)

The following discussion of *Woman Walks Ahead* (Susanne White 2018) aims to illustrate how recent female-led westerns utilise and progress familiar western genre tropes to privilege the female perspective. Using Jean-Anne Sutherland's "female-power-model", together with a working definition of post-feminist heroism, I will argue that the film is a post-feminist, contemporary western. Through this lens, I will detail how Catherine Weldon, the centralised hero, proves her ability to control the action of the film and, as a result, affect the lives of both individuals and a larger collective community. Though an adverse reading of the film as a white-saviour myth – as expressed in Caroline Cao's web article "Op-Ed: Evaluating the Feminism of *Woman Walks Ahead*" (June 2018) – potentially muddies the post-feminist lens through which I discuss the film, my argument emphasises that the narrative's positives far outweigh its potential subversion by a regressive white-saviour trope. *Woman Walks Ahead* demonstrates that true progressive social change builds upon the actions of the individual and requires a collective, unified identity and comradeship.

Woman Walks Ahead flips the western genre trope that the men lead and the women follow through a story driven by eastern painter Catherine Weldon, who sets out west to paint a portrait of honoured Lakota warrior Sitting Bull. In a telling moment that initiates the second act of her film and the beginning of the transformative relationship between Sitting Bull, played by Plains Cree Native Canadian Michael Greyeyes, and Catherine Weldon (Jessica Chastain), White foregrounds her post-feminist narrative concerns. As the two characters walk toward the scenic locale chosen for his portraiture, Sitting Bull struggles to keep up with her swift pace, asking her, "Do you always walk this fast?". Surprised by his question, she asks "Why?", to which he replies, "I'm trying to get ahead of you before someone sees us. You don't walk ahead of a chief." She pauses, responding, "Should I walk behind?". Sitting Bull stops next to her, stating "Side by side is fine". The Lakota people respect "a woman who works hard" and through her hard work she equals a man in her capacity to provide for the

community on equal terms, thus enabling her to walk side by side with the most respected of patriarchal symbols: the chief.

The concept of walking is brought up on numerous occasions in the film, so much so that Catherine Weldon informs Sitting Bull she wasn't aware that walking was such a complicated issue. Shortly after, Sitting Bull tells her from atop his horse, "You'll never be free on the prairie if you don't ride", to which she immediately replies, "Freedom's in the head". As we watch Sitting Bull ride, while wearing a western suit that he earlier boasted of having worn when he met the president, we are reminded that Sitting Bull himself has turned his back on the freedom he once fought to maintain for his people. Though regal on his horse, it is a false picture of power, one that Catherine refuses to paint, preferring to capture him in his indigenous attire, feathers and all. But at this moment, as she limps behind him, her feet blistered from the high-heeled shoes adorning them, he reminds her wittily that freedom is "also in the feet". In scenes such as this, and numerous others, the film aligns walking, not only with social and gender status, but also with character growth. When Sitting Bull passes down his old buckskin moccasins, she immediately puts them on. It is a brief symbolic moment of cultural exchange, where she removes an article of clothing inappropriate in her new surroundings, ever so slightly growing, both externally and internally, more comfortable in her new life. It is a symbolic change that Sitting Bull himself will soon undergo.

Armando Jose Prats writes that the "Hollywood Western never produced an Indian more memorable, or more familiar, than the one whom we never quite see" (2002, 23). *Woman Walks Ahead* tackles this trope head-on in Catherine Weldon's desire to observe and paint Sitting Bull on the land where he was born. For his portrait, Catherine continually insists that he remove his western-style suit and wear his indigenous warrior regalia. At the risk of creating tensions in my support of the film, it is necessary to discuss potentially problematic readings that arise from her insistence to paint him on her terms, as a white outsider unfamiliar with his culture, history and tribal customs. Her desire to use art as the means to familiarise Native American culture to white easterners, whose culturally Victorian values she simultaneously insists she has abandoned, connects Catherine to similar male western characters within the genre's history. In

Northwest Passage (King Vidor 1940), the male hero Langdon Towne (Robert Young) also insists that he will paint the Indians he encounters on his way out west, stating that he can "paint them as they really are. Nobody's ever done it before." Immediately this reinforces the problematic genre trope that "the Western tends to represent the Indian through the white hero, consistently resorting to him, often as a fully authorized Indian, to teach us all we need to know about the Indian" (13). The assumption granted the centralised hero is that he can assimilate into Indian culture with such ease and arrogance that, through his perspective, a true portrait will emerge that speaks, even visually, on their behalf. Catherine Weldon runs the risk of a similar form of cultural appropriation, as her understanding and depiction of Indigenous culture through her art simultaneously endorses her heroic status. Armando Prats claims that Indian westerns, even those with the best intentions, deal with the guilt of American westward expansion and the disappearance of Native American culture. In doing so, these films depict stories where "a white hero remains to tell their [the indigenous] story – and to claim, if implicitly, sole exception from complicity in their disappearance" (xv). Undoubtedly, issues of race and history should not be ignored in my study of *Woman Walks Ahead.*

The excellent work done by Armando Jose Prats and others, such as Richard Slotkin in his trilogy on the myth of the frontier, focuses on the complex relationship between history, race and culture, but my interests and research lie firmly in gender. Even from this focused gender perspective, my discussion of Catherine Weldon does not seek to completely disassociate her from her historical white male counterparts, who similarly sought to experience and recount their time living within a Native American culture. This includes the aforementioned character of Langton Towne, who through the course of *Northwest Passage*

> comes to 'see' Indians as worthless artistic subjects, savage and degraded brutes. The artist who would have painted Indians has rendered, instead, the white hero; the story that would have shown the artist painting the Indian shows us, instead, his sketch of the hero while denying us a look at the Indian; the genre that would show the Indian as he 'really' was, accounts it a sufficiently accurate representation of the Indian to show him by that which fails to show him fully. (Prats 2002, 19–20)

To claim outright that Catherine Weldon is not, even partially, guilty of these same sins would conflate issues of race and gender in order to conveniently bypass the western genre's historic male white-saviour myth. By suggesting that an idealised female hero can symbolically replace a white male version and, in doing so, eradicate the cultural guilt that the film's narrative addresses, fails to account for the powerful ideological, generic and narrative history of the Hollywood western's handling of the Native American experience. Whether in photographs, sculpture, art or film, "nowhere among these constructions do we find Indians in the plenitude of their cultural integrity [instead] we see images of a proud race vanquished by the white man" (Prats 2002, 127). Often these artistic renditions express lament and remorse for America's violent history of conquest against the Native American people, through which a pro-Indian ethos may emerge from the carnage. In identifying *Woman Walks Ahead* as a story constructed from a similar ideological framework, a critical reader can and should recognise the film's use of recurring Indian western genre tropes, such as the story unfolding through a loner or rebellious white hero, and the action depicted as typically occurring during the last days of the Indian. Additionally, the film also incorporates the use of a "special Indian, whose humanity transforms our preconceived ideas, even to astonishing and humbling us with his virtues" (127). The gender of the hero performing the duties of the story should be critiqued on equal terms, and certainly *Women Walks Ahead* can, and has been, faulted for adhering to the same tropes that the film seeks to distance itself from, regardless of gender.

Having said that, the film allows both characters to tell their own story. Though the film is anchored by the central female protagonist of Catherine Weldon, Sitting Bull's own story unfolds with equal relish and layered detail through his own lips, not hers. Through this narrative approach, *Woman Walks Ahead* directly acknowledges the reality that

> the Indian's cultural inheritance is well-nigh irrecoverable, save for this white man poised to tell his story of life with the Indians as though it were not a jot different from the story that the bereft [Indians] themselves would tell of their origins, their history, their vision of the future. (133)

From this point forward, the individual stories of Catherine Weldon and Sitting Bull unfold through the telling of personal histories and shared experiences. The first of these relates to Catherine's refusal to ride a horse. Her insistence on remaining on foot limits her mobility, both as a character and as a symbol of narrative equality. But her reluctance to ride relates directly to her own inner conflict and her character's fatal flaw. The cause stems directly from a childhood memory, a cruel moment of punishment inflicted on her by her socialite father for her inability to maintain proper, gender-defined social etiquette. The details of this exact moment are revealed to the audience during a later scene but, for now, on a plot level, the refusal to ride serves a visible narrative function. Her later unassisted climb atop her horse Rico, a trained show steed gifted to Sitting Bull by the great Buffalo Bill, acts symbolically to inform the audience she has successfully overcome her internal fears and elevated herself to the fully fledged status of a western hero.

First, she must, as all protagonists do, express and then battle those principal inner flaws. Her admission of her fear of riding occurs as she sits outside alone, leaning against a tepee from which Sitting Bull proudly refuses to emerge, preferring to have his portrait painted within its canvas interior. The scene serves a dual purpose. On one level, it is a battle of wills between two proud individuals insisting on personal preferences. The chief, a patriarchal figure, symbolises a warrior's honoured past. He firmly reminds her to remember who he is, warning her, "don't talk to me like you don't know who I am". The other is a proud eastern woman determined to control her environment, from his attire down to the level of the optimum sunlight required to complete the portrait under her terms. At this character impasse, Sitting Bull breaks the ice, calling out from inside, her horse Rico visible grazing in the field behind her, "So Miss Weldon. How come you're scared of horses?" She confesses to him, and to us, the key horrific memory of her childhood, when her father locked her in a stable with his prize colt on purpose because "he decided she needed to be taught to obey. Broken like a horse." In the western genre, the direct link between the female characters that inhabit its framework and the wild animals, mainly horses and cattle that roam its prairies, is a commonly utilised motif and one that connects principles of ownership with social order and control through punishment. This connection

takes a variety of forms, but is most often seen as a narrative device built into the female character's backstory and her tale of victimisation at the hands of an overbearing father or husband figure, and is also commonly utilised in connection to marriage and courtship when a woman comes of age. Victoria Lamont aligns marriage in the west to a form of a cattle "roundup", stating that

> Just as the ambiguous statues of the maverick [wandering cattle] upsets the symbolic economy through which private property is articulated, so it also raises questions about the status of women, who are treated within the marriage market just like cattle. By refusing marriage, [a woman] disrupts the gender economy that commodifies women in order to constitute the fundamental privilege of citizenship – the right to own property – as masculine. (2016, 48)

Jane Tompkins writes that "westerns teach men that they must take pain and give it, without flinching. The ability to give pain and take it stoically, like a branded steer, is built into the disciplinary model of child rearing that Alice Miller outlines in her study of the roots of violence in western culture" (1992, 121). Miller states that

> a person who becomes a father sees before him a child full of life, how a person is meant to be, how he could have been if obstacles weren't placed in his way. This cannot be allowed to happen and without meaning to and without realizing it, the father treat[s] his child just as cruelly as he treat[s] the child within himself. (94–5)

As Catherine Weldon recalls the painful memory in detail, fluctuating between false smiles of disbelief and complete breakdown, she emphasises the absurdity of the tragedy she endured as punishment for "wiping her mouth with her sleeve" in front of a dinner party of grand, high-society guests in her New York estate. She was eight years old at that time, and fell victim to a father's rage.

In the western genre, there exists a cycle of cruelty inflicted upon women and children as punishment for frivolous, almost non-existent sins. Weldon's own backstory punishment, interpreted as "unfair injury", connects her character to a long line of western women and children punished as a means for the man to rid himself of the child within. Tompkins describes the child-within concept as key, writing:

> a father treats others the way they treat themselves, and that they treat themselves the way that they have been treated. The father who punishes the child for spontaneity is repeating what was once done to him and what he has long since learned to do to himself; the child within. (122)

For the western teaches that the harshness and cruelty required for a man to survive the western landscape requires the expulsion of feminine emotion and the destruction of our inner child. Like countless western heroes before her, Catherine Weldon finds herself exactly at this gender impasse, confessing her feminine, emotional past to Sitting Bull, the ultimate symbol of male virility and warrior-like strength. The physical and emotional abuse inflicted on her during childhood was meant to teach her a lesson. Conversely, instead of teaching her to behave like a civilised, proper woman (or else), her punishments hardened her inside and she decided "not to care what people think of me". For a lone, unmarried woman on a mission that propels her far outside social norms, these life decisions force moments of self-reflection that momentarily crack her protective shield. Catherine knows she has chosen the difficult path and, in doing so, has empowered herself as a woman in control of her own destiny, but not without sacrifice. She concludes, "It's damned hard being brave". For the briefest of moments, she cries for herself, and it's the last time in the film we see her do so. Now she is expunged of her inner pain through her willingness to express her past verbally to Sitting Bull, the two characters reconnect. He sees, for the first time, that her journey out west to paint him required far more than his initial belittling comments that all she had to do was take a train. The events that led to her decision, and the long inner process of defying her family, social norms and cultural expectations, have created a woman who truly walks ahead.

The cumulative effect of Catherine Weldon's actions may be interpreted through Jean-Anne Sutherland's "female-power-model", which states that female power at the highest tier must demonstrate that "beyond the masculine variety of power-over, and the social psychological power-to, power-with is the kind of power whereby women come together as a group to challenge systems of oppression and bring about social change" (2010, 117). When this new, fully empowered Sitting Bull speaks at the treaty hearing, the camera lingers on the faces of the men, women and children in attendance, unified by his words, which

remind them of their rich history and collective deep-rooted connection to the soil at their feet. Sitting Bull pinches a speck of dust between his fingertips and tells them "We will give no more of our land away. Not even this much." Native American chants of agreement swell, along with the film's musical soundtrack, above the image of Catherine Weldon, who sits atop her horse, making eye contact with Sitting Bull. He resumes his seat at the front of the group, staring back proudly at his people and, finally, at Catherine herself. It is a spiritual victory for the Lakota, but one which, as history tells us, ultimately led to one of the most heart-breaking Native American tragedies, the Wounded Knee Massacre. But for the moment, and for the purpose of the film's narrative, social order has been disrupted and the collective spirit of a people ignited.

Catherine Weldon is a post-feminist western hero, but it is not her ability as a woman to service the centralised male character's transformation that defines her as such. Satisfying that narrative function alone links her more directly to the women of the western's past, who existed merely as secondary narrative agents. Contrastingly, at the conclusion of the story, despite the death of Sitting Bull at the hands of a hired army mercenary and the tragedy that followed at Wounded Knee, Catherine leaves behind a legacy. The film tells us that her "portrait of Sitting Bull now hangs at the State Historical Site museum in Bismarck, North Dakota and she remained a champion of Native American rights". Her lifelong efforts impacted upon the lives, socially and culturally, of generations of people after her, who came to know her work and witness both her story and the portrait of Sitting Bull.

In conclusion, I return to Armando Jose Prats, who writes that any critique of any revisionist project, including the Hollywood Indian western,

> ought to question postulates and premises that, however unconsciously held or indifferently deployed, support the ethical design of narrative strategies intended to transform the censured savage into a pitiable native. (2002, 127)

I do not view *Woman Walks Ahead* as a deliberate piece of corrective ethnohistory. That said, the ideas and concepts related to gender, specifically the advancement of female representation explored through Catherine Weldon, are a valuable learning tool for a screenwriter and fully contribute to my post-feminist intentions. In studying the director's craft approach, future writers, specifically

non-Native American writers of stories that explore the indigenous experience, can benefit from both the success and perceived shortcomings of her work.

Up to this point my research has emphasised the female position within the western genre form as narratively essential, and deserving of critical re-evaluation as secondary support in male-led westerns. Furthermore, I have discussed the genre expanding, post-feminist potential of both *The Good Time Girls* and *Woman Walks Ahead* through a close textual analysis of the films' centralised heroine(s) and the narrative agency they fight to acquire. Ultimately, Jean-Anne Sutherland's "female-power-model", together with a working definition of post-feminist heroines, provide my framework for assessing female heroism in western/horror hybrid genre form.

Therefore, through creative application in hybrid-screenplay form, my work contributes to and builds upon the current limited, textual representation of female-driven western/horror hybrid narratives today, and demonstrates a potential new framework to advance the writing of female characters in this highly specific genre format

Chapter Two
Writing Horror to Elevate Female Heroism in the American Western

Female-driven western/horror genre stories offer a potential counter-narrative to the dominant cultural ideology most often reinforced in mainstream genre stories, and challenge how gendered experience informs the way we interpret the world around us. As such, the patriarchal components of western/horror hybrid texts need to be identified, so that progressive female characters and new hybrid narrative strategies emerge. Above all, this discussion of the horror film will highlight my understanding and use of "final girl" characters' tropes and the supernatural in my craft approach.

Horror and the "Final Girl"

The capacity of the horror genre to speak to the tragedies and collective cultural and social fears of any period in history are as relevant now as they have been in the past. As Gregory Waller corroborates, the horror genre's centralised emphasis on violence, like the western, provides the connective tissue linking the diverse preoccupations of horror since 1968, the year he attributes as the birth of modern horror – the year "George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* and Roman Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby* were released" (1987, 2). But in explaining the parallel decline in popularity of the western around this same period, many writers, including John Saunders, attribute the rise and social relevance of horror to be "partially due to the fact that [westerns] could not match the horror film or science fiction in the level of violence" (2001, 77) that the audience had come to desire. As the popularity of the western genre continued to decline throughout the 1970s, the horror genre, and its emphasis on violent storytelling, took over. Waller explains this shift by stating that the horror film remained "commercially viable, unlike the western, and repeatedly proved its affinity for the topical and the novel, and thereby affirmed its place as a type of storytelling particularly apt and relevant to post-1968 America" (1987, 2). He emphasises the words of Bruce Kawin, writing that it is horror films' capability to "represent a unique juncture of

personal, social and mythic structure" (12) that allows the form to dramatise and respond to major cultural shifts and social concerns.

Horror films "have proven to be among the most significant documents in America's public debate over the status of the independent woman in a society still dominated by men" (5). The contentious subgenre of the slasher, in particular, found itself at the centre of feminist disputes during the 1980s and sparked controversy in both academic and popular-culture circles. In order to engage this discussion, Judith Mayne states that "it's only a slight exaggeration to say that most feminist film theory and criticism of the last decade has been a response, implicit or explicit, to the issues raised in Laura Mulvey's article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1985, 83). Using psychoanalysis as her privileged mode of interrogation, Mulvey describes man as the bearer of the look and woman as objectified "to-be-looked-at-ness" (11). Her article pushed feminist film theory forward by deconstructing the male gaze. She writes: "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female" and "the male gaze projects its phantasy onto the female figure [which is] coded for strong visual and erotic impact" (11). According to Patrice Pedro, Mulvey's work stimulated tectonic shifts in feminist film studies by shifting away "from a formal analysis of the film text (the structural organization of the fiction) to a consideration of the metapsychology of film viewing (the place of the spectator in relation to the fiction)" (1994, 74).

The re-evaluation of American national myths, especially the female position within these myths, seemed under attack between the years 1978 to 1981, when the American film market was saturated with slasher-horror films. Inspired by the popularity of this seemingly masochistic narrative form, feminist critics Vera Dika and Carol Clover formally investigated the genre elements using a psychoanalytic method to discuss the female narrative position and the psychosexual titillation of horror as modern-day myths. Dika speaks heavily to narrative structure, claiming that it is "more critically productive to consider the violence in these films as only one of the significant qualities and to, instead, continue a discussion on the particular set of characteristics that distinguishes these films and subsequently has made them so popular to their audiences" (1990, 10). On the other hand, Carol Clover (1992) embraces the psychoanalytic

approach and builds upon the work of Mulvey's seminal essay. Isabel Pinedo also incorporates Mulvey's psychoanalytical approach by positioning the victims in the slasher film "through the male gaze as objects of sexual investigation: surveyed and eroticized before they are killed" (1997, 74). Pinedo recognises horror as "a genre laden with contradictory elements, some conductive to feminism, others hostile to it" (87). At the same time, she grants that the slasher film

> create[s] an opening for feminist discourse by restaging the relationship between women and violence as not only one of danger in which women are the objects of violence but also as a pleasurable one in which women retaliate to become agents of violence and defeat the aggressors. (87)

Clover also avoided reducing the genre to a gender-polarised formula by highlighting the power of the centralised female character, whom she labelled "the final girl". She describes this active narrative agent as

> the only character developed in any psychological detail. We understand immediately from the attention paid it that hers is the main story-line. She is intelligent, watchful, level-headed; the first character to sense something amiss and the only one to deduce from the accumulating evidence the pattern and extent of the threat; the only one, in other words, whose perspective approaches our own understanding of the situation. (1992, 44)

Clover argued for a type of cross-gender identification, wherein at the moment the final girl becomes her own saviour, our binary understanding of gender identification ceases to exist, and we adopt her gaze. In effect, the members of the audience "give up the last pretence of male identification [and] the gaze becomes, at least for a while, female" (60). In fact, the character's own gender identity is partially problematised from the outset of the film, as witnessed in "her masculine interests, her inevitable sexual reluctance, her apartness from other girls, [and] sometimes her name" (48). These tropes provide the platform for her true narrative power, which rests in her ability to save herself from narrative (plot) and psychological (inner) threats: "the moment that the final girl becomes her own savior she becomes a hero; and the moment that she becomes a hero is the moment that the male viewer gives up the last pretense of male identification" (60). Her actions drive the narrative forward, giving her principal narrative

control wherein the passive male gaze, a term coined by Laura Mulvey in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (*Screen* 1975), transfers into an active female one through the combination of her gender and behavioural attributes. Through the eyes of the final girl, we are allowed to take part in "an investigation of the nature of our conventional manner of seeing – an investigation that can lead us to see beneath the surfaces of ourselves and our world and to achieve a new level of awareness" (Telotte 1987, 114).

Elevating the Final Girl Through Female Solidarity

The final girl has anchored the slasher film from the classic period of 1974 through the 1980s, including the postmodern period (1990s), as well as the neo-slasher period (2000 until now). Sally in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper 1974), Alice in *Friday the 13th* (Sean Cunningham 1980) and Nancy in *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Wes Craven 1984) all demonstrate her genre significance, as do more postmodern examples such as Sidney Prescott in *Scream* (Wes Craven 1996), Sarah in *The Descent* (Neil Marshall 2005) and Samantha Hughes in *The House of the Devil* (Ti West 2009). Ultimately, at the narrative end of all these films, the final girl, through the totality of her actions and choices, returns a temporal sense of moral clarity to a locale initially out of balance.

That's not to say that the final girl should be interpreted as a static character. Through the choices she makes, the final girl fights to rid her environment of some perverse incarnation of evil, and that puts her on the side of the just. Given that the perceived horrors in the world in which we live change, the antagonistic forces that a final girl must confront will also change in dialogue with social reality.

This leads me to question how the final girl tropes can be understood and incorporated into my post-feminist position. Ultimately, how can a writer work with and update the archetype to allow for post-feminist, progressive readings of her character?

For horror to be contemporary, the symbolic moral clarity of her fight diminishes, as in a post-9/11 world, a hero or heroine's moral clarity is rarely surface-deep. New fears and anxieties fuel our "collective nightmares" (Wood 1986, 30). To quote Andrew Tudor, we live

> in a society in which we have become more aware of risks; in a society in which we are less convinced by the systems of expertise that surround us and institutions that seek to regulate our lives; a society in which our concept of the self is unreliable; and a society in which anxiety and fear have become ubiquitous. (2002, 116)

Author Sotiris Petridis writes that violence in modern horror is less connected to any sense of moral clarity. Petridis emphasises the fact that the victims in the World Trade Center "had no connection to the reasons that caused the terrorist attack, the 9/11 victims were not aware of what was going to happen and they did not even know the names of their killers (therefore) the fear of pointless death is one of the main concerns" (2014, 83). He concludes that this key point sets the final girls of the new millennium apart from all pre-9/11 slasher film incarnations.

Progressive post-feminist female characters that incorporate final girl character tropes must engage with contemporary cultural and social complexities. The final girl should not act as a symbolic reminder of her collective past, but evolve to demonstrate qualities of an empowered post-feminist beacon. *Halloween* (David Gordon Green 2018) addresses this very concept. In the film, Laurie Strode (Jamie Lee Curtis), the centralised final girl now in her 60s, demonstrates progressive character traits and ideologies to best reflect her age. Her character can be read as exhibiting the post-feminist sensibility to incorporate multiple female voices. She no longer fights alone, and realises that the threats against her affect her entire family and require their support to overcome. Through Laurie, *Halloween* (2018) elevates the slasher horror subgenre by depicting female characters who not only transform themselves and others, but also the world, through collective female solidarity. In this third level of *power-with*, both Sutherland and Allen argue, women "must be able to think about the kind of power that diverse women can exercise collectively when [they] work together to define, and to strive to achieve, feminist aims" (2010, 32). Laurie Strode embodies a clear post-feminist sensibility.

In a conversation transcribed in *Feminist Theory*, Sarah Banet-Weiser, Catherine Rottenberg and Rosalind Gill discuss how she (Gill) continues to advance the notion of a post-feminist sensibility. Gill highlights the ongoing need to re-approach these terms, and discuss what they imply. She states that

> Since the initial formulation [of the term postfeminist sensibility] over ten years ago, I've been thinking a lot more about the notion of developing it in several key ways, often in collaboration with students, friends and colleagues. There's been an extraordinary uptake of the term more generally, and I feel that my work is very much part of an ongoing and collective conversation. One of the most important sets of debates is about postfeminism's relationship to race, class, sexuality, disability and age. (2020, 4)

By depicting an aging Laurie as the centralised hero, *Halloween* (2018) suggests that life experience, in combination with collective female solidarity, elevates the chances of survival in contemporary slasher horror.

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, 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.

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 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. (1992, 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, "conquer it by traversing it, know it by standing in it, [and] go in any direction, as far as he can go" (75). This places her on equal terms with men, as well as with nature itself. 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 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. (2011, 77)

My supernatural interests incorporate Thacker's thesis and lean toward Ethan Stoneman and Joseph Packer's explanation of supernatural horror, which they label "weird fiction" (2017, 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. (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" (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 centralised female heroine.

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

A Heightened Conceptual and Social Awareness

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 and Packer 2017, 33). In this new enlightened state, she may, more completely, engage the challenges necessary to overturn the patriarchal oppressiveness of her environment.

Incorporating final girl tropes into this equation continues the dialogue set forth by Clover and Dika, and suggests that a progressive final girl may act upon social concerns. The roots of this more socially aware final girl can be read in early slashers, such as *Eyes of a Stranger* (Ken Wiederhorn 1981). In the film, a TV news reporter (Lauren Tewes) demonstrates genuine social concern, and her work suggests "a concern about the victimization of women in contemporary society" (Wood 1986, 201). As a news reporter, Tewes struggles to have her voice heard over the men in the film, who are "either unhelpful, uncomprehending, or active impediments" (200). Overall, the film can be read as female-centred, as Tewes and her younger sister (Jennifer Jason Leigh) are "both

presented — in their different ways, and within the limitations of the generic conventions — as strong, resourceful, and intelligent" (200). The knowledge that active, socially conscious final girl characters exist, even as far back as the early 1980s, demonstrates that an elevated understanding of the conditions that create an oppressive environment is as important as the active demonstration of the physical agency required to overcome them.

The incorporation of Sutherland's post-feminist "power-with" model seeks to extend the significance of these findings and contemporise her social concerns and actions through the integration of the three key features of her argument. In order to be classified as a post-feminist film, power and powerful women must engage in acts of "coalition building [as means] to address oppression and inequality" (Sutherland 2017, 619) by depicting women:

> (1) struggling within the constraints of an oppressive system
> (2) coming to realise the extent of their oppression
> (3) working together to confront the system that oppresses them. (2010, 124)

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. 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.

Certainly, screenwriters can learn how to better develop their post-feminist craft-aims by interrogating existing work that harbours similar progressive intent.

Post-Feminist Analysis: *Dead Birds* and *Mohawk*

The Post-Feminist Hybrid Failings of *Dead Birds*

Most contemporary western/horror hybrid narratives fail to incorporate any sense of collective female solidarity and, in the end, betray any post-feminist efforts their writers and directors may have had. Through a misunderstanding of the symbolic power of space, and the failure to develop secondary and centralised female characters with the capacity to engage a post-feminist worldview, a writer

may unintentionally betray their progressive intentions. Hybrid films such as *Brimstone* and *Bone Tomahawk* include the infusion of horror into the landscape and elevate the symbolic terrain accordingly, but refuse to allow the narrative multiple female perspectives. In the end, the narrative requires the lone heroine to survive and fight only for herself. Such is the case in *Dead Birds* (Alex Turner 2004). Read as a post-feminist failure, *Dead Birds* presents an ideal case study to interrogate the western/horror genre's codes and conventions and the possible negative effects of genre crossover by reading the film as a deliberate attempt to privilege the female perspective within the confines of patriarchal narrative. The film's ultimate failure to fully advance any privileged female perspective does not limit *Dead Birds'* potential as a craft-based learning resource that relates directly to my own craft decisions, as the following focused textual analysis aims to demonstrate.

Dead Birds opens by depicting Anna Belle, the centralised female, as a fierce trickster. In a bank robbery gone wrong, she inflicts violent punishment on others to get want she wants. She is a criminal, a killer with a loose moral code, and also one whose actions align her with her male peers. She longs to have her participation within the violent world of men recognised by them on equal terms. In the social dynamic of this opening scene, Anna Belle finds herself as the lone woman within a group of violent men. This is key in understanding Anna Belle's character. Being the only woman, Anna Belle is an outsider. She is set apart on a binary-gender level, and presented as unique within this small microcosm of bandits. As the only woman in the story, she constantly struggles for social equality, but only within the world of violent men. With no other women in her life, she lacks the possibility of forming a female coalition. The narrative does not allow her to develop any sense of collective female identity. For her, there is no "promise and potential of communities forming in solidarity and working towards societal change (Sutherland 2017, 627). Ultimately, she will, like the men around her, be punished on equal terms with them and attain the equality she desires only through her death.

Dead Birds does successfully incorporate numerous horror-genre tropes into the hybrid western landscape and, in turn, elevates the west into the realm of the supernatural. This is felt from the opening sequence onwards, and the horror-

genre tropes function to establish the centralised heroine as a potential final girl. In the words of Carol Clover, we

> understand immediately from the attention paid it that hers is the main story line. She is intelligent, watchful, level-headed; the first character to sense something amiss and the only one to deduce from the accumulating evidence the pattern and extent of the threat; the only one, in other words, whose perspective approaches our own privileged understanding of the situation. (1992, 44)

Anna Belle leads the charge out of the town, post–bank robbery, toward a hideout in the woods. Upon arrival, it is Anna Belle who first witnesses a sign of 'evil' when she spots a decomposing, oddly human-like scarecrow bound to a pole in the middle of the cornfield. The oddity "scared her a bit", she tells the men, but then she reassures them that she is just fine.

When we read this as a horror film, Anna Belle's ability to see and understand signs of danger, including her attempt to protect her friends from the impending horror, positions her as a potential "final girl" in the slasher horror mould. She is also the first to discover an odd hairless, boar-like yet supernatural creature lying dead near their hideout. The men, on the other hand, are unable to clearly decipher what the creature is. They quickly write it off as a "wild boar" and walk away toward the farmhouse. It is clear that, in this moment, that Anna Belle has been privileged with a deeper understanding of her surroundings and a deeper capacity to see, which grants her narrative privilege above the others. The potential culmination of both the opening bank robbery and the ability to see the supernatural dangers that have begun to transform the characters' environment appear as positive craft choices leading toward the depiction of a progressive female heroine within a western/horror genre space.

Unfortunately, numerous, highly problematic narrative choices begin to overpower the feminist potential that the film initially sets up. These structural and character missteps include the erasure of exterior space as crucial to establishing and developing female narrative agency. For example, after *Dead Birds'* initial scarecrow moment in the field outside the farmhouse, the gang, including Anna Belle, retires inside for an extended period of time. While inside, Anna Belle is immediately presented to us as the caretaker of the gang, which situates her alongside a history of western-genre female characters who act as

nursemaids, healers and overall domestic caretakers to the men who surround them. Though in reality, the "post-Civil War era (within which *Dead Birds* is set) saw a massive movement of women out of the home and into public life" (Tompkins 1992, 44), the film follows the generic traditions of the western by "creating an environment where few women are to be found and where conditions are the worst possible for their acquiring any social power" (44). Although Anna Belle shows signs of her ability to control the narrative at the outset, her true narrative function is domestic caretaker.

When the horror elements in *Dead Birds* begin to escalate, the men, as active narrative agents, are the first to investigate the peculiarities unfolding around them. As they actively search, Anna Belle sleeps upstairs. The amount of time that Anna Bell is depicted unconscious, as a vulnerable, passive female body, cannot go unnoticed. As she sleeps soundly, William, our centralised male hero, awakens first and actively investigates the danger. Female inactivity requires male agency and, in her inactive, unaware state of existence, she falls victim to predatory horrors that only the men appear capable of overcoming. In her absence, the men gather below and make the plans that will affect her destiny. She is not privy to their conversation and the action that they control and which she must follow later. This trend of female inactivity and passive acceptance of decisions made by the men on her behalf continues throughout the film; so much so, that the narrative regresses to a typical save-the-girl scenario.

Despite having a deeper knowledge of the origins of the horrors that have poisoned the western exterior, Anna Belle is unable to convince the men to leave. Female words constantly fall on deaf ears. It is at this point in the script that, given her privileged perspective, she should be capable of separating herself from the men and taking control of her own life and destiny. Unfortunately, the film refuses to allow her that sense of narrative agency and she remains in a secondary, weaker narrative position that does not allow her character to realise the post-feminist potential set up for her. She chooses William over herself. Although her character decapitates the evil scarecrow, thereby killing the principal antagonistic force, her actions appear more reactionary than intentional. In the end, she runs into the cornfield alone, a scared victim of circumstance. Calling out for "William!" to save her, Anna Belle requires a male hero to come to her rescue.

Ironically, she ends up shot dead by William, the man she valued above herself. That narrative decision, in combination with numerous failed structure and character craft choices, hinder *Dead Birds'* potential to progress female representation in the western/horror genre.

Mohawk: How Horror Successfully Transforms the Western Landscape – a Post-Feminist Textual Analysis to Engage Craft Approach

Utilising a horror/western hybrid narrative approach, *Mohawk* (Ted Geoghegan 2017) 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. This film directly addresses American racism, and chooses to discuss its cultural effects through a post-feminist lens.

The following discussion will break down the hybrid narrative approach utilised in *Mohawk* as a means to interrogate the film's progressive post-feminist intent. I will discuss how the infusion of horror elevates the symbolic landscape into the realm of the supernatural, thereby creating the requirements necessary for a female heroine to succeed within it. 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. *Mohawk* exists as a rare, successful textual representation of western/horror genre hybridity that advances female representation within this mixed-genre form. It is precisely with this new filmmaking movement, one that infuses supernatural horror into a western landscape through a post-feminist perspective, that I aim to align my own narrative approach.

Journalist-turned-film-critic Philip French writes 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" (1973, 52) or, as in the case of *Mohawk*, a Native American woman. *Mohawk* centralises 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, 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, patriarchal 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 appears to disapprove of her mother's tentative leadership as she preaches that "they have a treaty with the Americans." Both Oak and fellow Mohawk youth Calvin know their elder's advice is wrong, as the "Americans have scalped eighty-seven Mohawk this month and they leave their bodies to be eaten by the animals." Frustrated, the small band retreats into the woods, but the male warrior, Calvin, soon separates himself and leaves Joshua and Oak to wander as a couple. Their relationship as lovers quickly becomes evident as they drink whisky, kiss and eventually have sex. The sex scene, though not explicitly visualised, 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 potential 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 Jean-Anne Sutherland's highest female "power-with" tier.

The inclusion of a sex scene with Joshua, her white male British companion, serves to paint Oak as a fully realised sexual human being. She is confident in her interactions with men, with whom she has consensual sex on her own terms. As previously noted, the sex itself is never shown, except for a brief moment showing Oak on top of Joshua, as her powerful, fully clothed body straddles him. The blocking of the short scene again demonstrates her as a woman in control of her actions and the men whom she chooses to be intimate with. 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

2010, 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 practised 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, 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 and Bernardi 2011, 167). Oak's motherhood touches on the grammar of racialised 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, 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. (2004, 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 and Bernardi 2011, 167). Oak's "power-with" 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 patriarchal 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" (Maryann Oshana 1982, 127), 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. During the final girl's climatic struggle, according to Clover, 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. (1992, 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 patriarchal connotations connected to the monstrous feminine, described by Barbara Creed, 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" (2002, 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 chastises her now for "kill(ing) twenty-two American patriots in their sleep" and attempts to humanise 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 vocalising 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 invading, misogynistic male patriarchy.

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, 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. (Prats 2002, 23–4)

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 nonexistent. *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, explores "human societies conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, [and therefore] abject" (2002, 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's post-feminist lens, elevate Oak into the highest "power-with" tier. 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, 133).

Mohawk infuses female empowerment with supernatural horror in order to overcome white oppression. The film, which directly addresses American racism, chooses to interpret its female heroine through a post-feminist lens and presents the best textual evidence of the potential for female-led western/horror to elevate the limited scope of creative work done within this screenwriting domain.

Chapter Three – *They Sound Human*: Findings

In the limited female-led western/horror hybrid genre space, my practice-led research, headlined by a feature-length screenplay entitled *They Sound Human*, tests the creative application of my post-feminist ideological aims. This thesis employs a practice-led research (PLR) approach at the intersection of post-feminism, genre studies and applied craft to generate, and test the limits of, new representations of progressive female heroes in hybrid western/horror storytelling. Through my writing process, I set out to explore how introductory scene(s) for centralised female characters provide the foundational building blocks required to elevate their status within western/horror hybrid-genre form. Labelled as "making-an-entrance" scenes, I will discuss the importance of these introductory moments for centralised female characters. These moments will highlight techniques to build emotional sympathy for a character as crucial to viewer engagement in the narrative. Additionally, this discussion seeks to incorporate post-feminism as a means to expand final girl tropes in western/horror screenwriting. I will present my findings as to which writing techniques I found most successfully contributed to my own post-feminist concerns.

The craft application of these fundamental screenwriting concepts helps support a more theoretical argument that explores the necessity for female narrative agency in western/horror hybrid form to be defined by and developed primarily through its relationship to exterior space. This requires the fusion of horror tropes into a western landscape, such that the elevated threat of a new supernatural west challenges the female-heroine to redefine her relationship to the west as the key to advance her narrative position. Through her heightened capacity to endure and ultimately overcome both natural and supernatural elements, the female-heroine redefines her relationship to a west that has been systemically restructured. In short, it is my aim to integrate supernatural elements into a western landscape in order to elevate the symbolic function of the land and demonstrate its progressive effects on female character development in western/horror screenwriting.

I will also discuss the necessity to include secondary female supporters as a requirement in my post-feminist approach. Their inclusion and character development make possible my post-feminist narrative goals "whereby women come together as a group to challenge systems of oppression and bring about social change" (Sutherland 2010, 117). I will further this discussion by emphasising the necessity to almost immediately situate my centralised heroine, Ellen, along with supporting female characters, in the exterior space.

Female narrative power through solidarity will then be presented as directly correlated to the moment (or moments) in the script when the true acquisition of female narrative control occurs. I will argue that successful interpretation of a script as progressive, post-feminist heroism depends upon the timing and script placement of the required scenes in which the centralised female character, in the company of other women, through her active will and behaviour, forces a change of narrative control away from patriarchal confinement.

Ultimately, my craft-work and accompanying exegesis provide textual precedent for future hybrid western/horror studies that extend issues of gender representation in genre cinema and the craft-development process in writing female-centred hybrid-genre screenplays.

Making-an-Entrance: Planting Emotional Character Seeds

Christopher Vogler describes the moment an audience first encounters a character as "an opportunity to speak volumes about his [or her] attitude, emotional state, background, strengths and problems. (In addition), the first action should be a model of the hero's characteristic attitude and the future problems or solutions that will result" (1998, 88). This "making an entrance" (88) moment defines the character's true inner problem and, utilised correctly, allows a writer to firmly plant the emotional seeds that will provide the foundation for the character's arc on a plot and inner level. It is a crucial storytelling opportunity that should not be treated lightly.

They Sound Human introduces Ellen as follows:

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ELLEN, mid-20s, Irish, bright-red hair, breathes
heavily. It appears she has been crying.
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Ellen's concise opening-description focuses on her age, her nationality, and physical appearance, which is limited only to her bright-red hair. The reasons for these choices are to intentionally associate Ellen with two key concepts. The first is her nationality. She is presented as a cultural outsider. Born in a foreign country, she now finds herself within the confines of a place that is not her own. On many levels she does not fit in, and will be constantly reminded of her foreignness. Additionally, Ellen does not emotionally connect to the culture of her surroundings, a fact that will also play into the narrative throughout her journey. The second point of her bright-red hair associates Ellen as a character directly with the colour red. The use of red as symbolic narrative device links Ellen throughout the story to the horror elements, which are depicted as demonic, forest beasts with red fur, which later emerge and threaten her family.

Unwillingly placed in charge of her nephew, Ellen emotionally rejects that responsibility and wants only to return the boy to his mother. This act requires an arduous journey through the Sierra Nevada Mountains where her sister was rumoured to have settled. Ellen is written as a direct threat to her loved ones. Similar to Anna Belle in *Dead Birds*, Ellen is a killer from the outset. She is a woman capable of killing children, as a means of euthanasia to rid them of the evils that possess them, thus making them appear deathly ill. In her mind, she is doing the right thing. Over time, her actions have formed a pattern to her life that constantly forces her to "mercy kill" the sick including her own nephew, Thomas. His death at her hands provides the backstory to Ellen's true inner insecurities, and the current narrative places her in a position of having to make similarly difficult choices.

As defined by Eric Edson, "the language of film is the language of constant change" (2011, 25), and through these built-in moments of constant change, a character is defined by their actions. In a making-an-entrance moment, writers often immediately situate the protagonist in a highly conflictual moment of choice. This moment-of-choice-pattern assists the structure of a dramatic narrative, providing key moments that test the individual's inner core and force character growth through difficult choices. The aim is therefore to write characters capable of regaining control over their tumultuous lives through the culmination of the courage to confront and overcome their true inner flaws. This

process requires engagement with a series of difficult choices made on an action plot line. Directly after her opening character description, this technique immediately sets up Ellen's situation and our understanding of her character:

ELLEN looks down at –

THOMAS, 12 years old, deathly ill, hair matted wet and face coated in sweat from the monstrous fever intent on killing him. He lies, eyes closed, shivering under an animal-skin blanket inside the motionless covered wagon.

Behind Ellen, a baby girl, ALICE, no older than 2, sleeps soundly, bundled in animal furs.

The source of Ellen's tears is not feminine weakness, as might be expected within the western genre form. Emotionally overwhelmed, she contemplates killing the boy in order to rid herself of the burden. In her mind, the act would increase her own child's chances of survival. This moment-of-choice provides the backstory at the core of her character and will impact a lifetime of decisions from here on. Described by Helen Jacey as the "metaphorical wound" (2010, 77), this moment is "the deepest pain experienced by your heroine that is metaphorically visible in the wider world of her story" (77). Ellen's inner turmoil is visualised metaphorically on a plot level:

Ellen picks up a POCKET HARMONICA next to the sick boy, turns it over, reads the personalised etched inscription on the back. It says "Your Loving Mother".

Ellen places the instrument in Thomas's hand, his fingers close feebly around it.

He opens his eyes slightly, looks up at Ellen. His body quivers under the strain of even the slightest movement.

THOMAS
(voice faint)
Mom?

ELLEN
(Irish accent)
No. We haven't found her yet.

Her first actions and the use of an active prop (a harmonica) disclose additional emotional information that connects Ellen to her nephew Thomas. Through the prop, we discover that Ellen is not the boy's mother, but his aunt. The harmonica, personalised with a loving inscription on the back, informs the viewer that Thomas is truly loved by his birthmother. Ellen reveals that "They have not found her yet," which demonstrates her inner desire to find the boy's mother, as well as their current failure in completing that goal. There is an aura of hopelessness felt through the boy's near-death state and Ellen's conflicted emotional condition.

The entire opening described to this point acts as an elaborate making-an-entrance for the character of Ellen and functions as a structural tool to create audience identification with her. Through the opening making-an-entrance scene, I have established Ellen as the central narrative agent, though currently she is only given a limited perspective on her surroundings and lacks detailed knowledge of the threat building outside. She will be required, through the horrific events the narrative throws at her, to battle her own inner problems. Through the courage to act and attain control of her surroundings, Ellen will drive the narrative events forward.

The opening sequence sets up Ellen as the clear protagonist, which may allow for feminist readings of the material, but in terms of Sutherland's "female-power-tier", a feminist film of the highest order must "offer us images of women, coming together in solidarity, in numbers to do what one woman cannot do alone" (2010, 126). With this goal in mind, the narrative's opening, including the making-an-entrance sequence, must build toward this possibility by incorporating layered, secondary female support early on. Only then, through the collective power of unified women, can we "move beyond a power-over depiction of women that, in reality, is merely repeating the masculinist patterns of patriarchy. And we step beyond power-to, which depicts individual women coming to terms with their lives" (126). But firstly, the conditions of patriarchy in western/horror hybrid space, as interrogated in *They Sound Human*, need to be discussed.

Defining Patriarchal Power: Father

Shown as an authority figure, Father, the central antagonist in *They Sound Human*, is a commanding force of patriarchal control as witnessed through

dialogue, action and in name. Nearly hung by the roadside, Fig's making-an-entrance moment places him in a victimised position under the direct threat of patriarchal violence. Fig's proclamation of his innocence, his "whimpering and moaning," as well as the indication of the violence discovered, all suggest he is a killer of women. This can be inferred from the line "I didn't do it. I just found her like that." But Fig, like Ellen, may not have seen anything, as he claims to have just discovered the fallen girl in that state. Additionally, the situation plays with the symmetry of violent behaviour and establishes an immediate narrative connection between Ellen and Fig, though in respectively oppositional positions of power. Ellen is the aggressor against Thomas, while Fig is a passive victim of Father's patriarchal authority.

They Sound Human engages an ideology that associates patriarchal power with the ownership of property. This includes the ownership of women and children, which acts as a measurement of power, as the western genre often represents

> a symbolic economy through which private property is articulated, [and] also raises questions about the status of women, who are treated in the marriage market just like cattle. To recognize the status of women as property as the effect of a symbolic economy is one step toward upsetting the apparatus of social relations through which this status is determined. (Lamont 2016, 49)

Father considers women and children to be his property. Seen as commodities, the inherent right to property falls under a democratic process that favours the male voice unless a right to express an opposing thought process has been earned. Thus, punishment doled out as a result of financial loss connected directly to human ownership is immediately visualised with the image of a noose tightening around Fig's teenage neck.

Father, described as an "imposingly large, thick-moustached priest," holds a shotgun in hand and asserts his authority over the western landscape immediately. His hulking body is positioned directly in front of the Shepard Hills Orphanage wagon, the name hand-painted in grease to suggest the makeshift lie that his orphanage represents – no more than a front for Father's side business in the trafficking of children using the guise of religion (his priestly attire) to conceal his true, evil intentions. Our introduction to Father presents his adherence to this

ideology through two methods: the first being his false front as a priest; the second, his spoken word. Presented immediately on the surface as a liar, he fakes religious conviction to gain trust as granted from the men and women he deceives in direct connection to his citizenship and the power of democracy it provides him. As judge and final authority, his words condemn Fig, his actions justified in his words "Killing Snowy affects us all financially speaking. White girls ain't cheap." His words connect the status of women (Snowy being a commodity) to property, and it is up to men to decide the fate of women scorned or, in the case of Snowy, fatally wronged. He makes these patriarchal worldview proclamations while standing in front of a wagon full of children, some Native American, but mostly female and mostly white. To Father, the children, as well as the women, are property to be shielded from the realities of the world, therefore on seeing "a handful of children, dirty and dishevelled, peer out through the cloth opening" of the wagon, he pulls it shut. The closing of the curtain takes away the power from the children, who are no longer able to witness the result of male aggression inflicted upon their property.

The Patriarchal Power of Speech

Patriarchal power is aligned with speech, as witnessed through an individual's knowledge of a situation and their conscious ability to express or withhold information.

Historically, in classic westerns, silence and restraint equal power. We feel this in the male hero's inexpressive nature, which projects dominance. A male antagonist attacks the male protagonist's silence on a physical level, whereas the female characters attack his inner feelings. This act "jeopardizes his status as a potent being, for talk dissipates presence, takes away the mystery of an ineffable self which silence preserves" (Tompkins 1992, 60). Both such attacks on the classic western, male hero are essential to his character growth and the overall success of the film itself. John G. Cawelti writes that

> like his gun, language is a weapon the hero rarely uses, but when he does, it is with precise and powerful effectiveness. In addition, the hero's reluctance with language reflects his social isolation and his reluctance to commit himself to the

> action which he knows will invariably lead to another violent confrontation. (1984, 89)

The classic western hero chooses when to speak or when to withhold knowledge. It is a form of power. It is a power that can also be used against others. Deliberately hindering a character's understanding of their surroundings limits their knowledge and ability to act accordingly. The intentional repression of the voices of others strengthens the patriarchal grip of the men that wield that power.

FATHER, mid-40s, an imposingly large, thick-moustached priest and wagon master of this westward-bound expedition, holds a shotgun on the young man.

The words "Shepard Hills Orphanage" have been hand-painted in grease across the wagon canvas behind him. Panning supplies hang from the side.

Inside the wagon, A HANDFUL OF CHILDREN, dirty and dishevelled, peer out through the cloth opening. Father pulls it shut.

They Sound Human's oppressive western landscape isolates Ellen from the company of men and the women who enforce its rules. Above it all, the monstrous creatures that thrive in the west act as manifestations of the oppressive external space. The creatures represent a perverse form of patriarchal control. They are relentless in their pursuit to smother the voices of individuals who speak out against them, and consume those fragile enough to give in to their despotic authority. The creatures speak through those who are unable to command and repel oppression through voice or through active narrative control, such as the sick and the isolated but, primarily, the children.

To block out the children's view of the beastly carnage, Father pulls the wagon curtain closed. In doing so, he keeps them in the dark, by limiting the information they are able to witness. Thus, he removes their voice from the conversation. Children represent the next generation, who will one day grow up and potentially take away the power that men like Father have strived to maintain. Children, like women, cannot speak of what they do not know. Therefore the power to prevent the taking-in of knowledge limits their ability to express a

calculated opinion. Even simple actions, such as pulling a curtain closed, can function to reinforce the patriarchal, oppressive conditions of the west.

On a larger scale, what methods can an oppressed western/horror female hero utilise in order to reset the balance of power more equally and, in doing so, allow for greater opportunities for personal and social empowerment?

Methods of Overthrowing Patriarchal Power in the Western/Horror Genre

Patriarchal control in the western/horror genre must be overthrown through female intervention. The crafting of the world in *They Sound Human*, as dictated by oppressive men and threatening monsters, creates a platform to build sympathy for the female characters who fall victim to patriarchal oppressive practices. The women, written as victims of various forms of "unfair injury", must retake control of their lives, and demonstrate they are "capable of success within traditionally male working environments" (McClearen 2015, 840; Tasker and Negra 2007). To become an active agent of the narrative that drives the story forward, physically capable instead of inhibited, they must devise a strategic methodology to achieve success on their own terms.

As a screenwriter, I propose several approaches to implement these same post-feminist aims in crafting a female-led western/horror screenplay.

Challenging the Male Voice

The realignment of power associated with speech is a means of breaking apart male patriarchal control through the deliberate method of setting up the reader to distrust the words of men. The intentional byproduct is, then, the realignment of trust to the words spoken by women. This can occur through a viewer witnessing the power of the female voice and seeing its impact on the behaviour of men. This concept, utilised throughout *They Sound Human,* is introduced as a character-defining tool in Jane's first words to Father. He grants her the final deciding vote that solidifies Fig's fate and, upon seeing the remnants of stolen black powder under his fingernails, she commands him to "Rip his clothes off." Not only must men suffer the fate of female authority, but stripped of his clothes, his punishment includes humiliation. Her words create change and that is power. Unfortunately

for Jane, the type of power she wields is not productive. Even though she has the final word, and therefore the final authority over what happens, her actions demonstrate a regressive form of feminine power. This is intentional, as Jane is in the early phase of her character arc. Currently, Jane represents a type of character who has been

> seduced away from feminism and into a world where [she has] become so dazzled by the proliferating varieties of paternity that [she is] unable to see whose interests are really being served. (Modleski 1991, 89)

In terms of her character arc, her current mindset allows her the greatest possible character growth so that, when she ultimately ends up fighting side-by-side with Ellen for the collective social good, she has become an authentic post-feminist hero, in line with Sutherland's "power-with" tier.

Incorporating Post-Feminist Final Girl Tropes

At the narrative's outset, Ellen does not have the ability to completely know her surroundings. This includes her understanding of Thomas's importance to her life and the effect his existence will have on her own narrative. As such, her first task is to acquire narrative control over her own life through her ability to "see" the horrors around her. Similar to a final girl, "her position in the narrative serves to reclaim this space for us [and] ground its visual field into a knowable system" (Dika 1990, 49). This ability derives from the power of observation and the awareness and insight acquired through looking. The horror genre engages the concept of seeing and the power that the ability to see grants the individual afforded it. Connected to ideas of audience identification, our emotional response to material is directly affected by the way that information is given to us, namely from whose perspective a scene unfolds and through whose eyes we experience what is happening. In discussing *Halloween* (John Carpenter 1978), J. P. Telotte writes that

> consistently our perceptions and our understanding of the world around us fall short of their potential, most often because we are conditioned by our experience and culture to see less and less, to dismiss from our image contents those visions for which we might not be able to account, or those that might simply distract from our more important personal concerns. (1987, 122)

Ultimately, *They Sound Human* requires Ellen to look beyond herself and her immediate offspring. She must learn to fight for the greater social collective, as represented by the numerous orphans she saves from implied child slavery. Through Ellen, *They Sound Human* sets up a layered, progressive female heroine crafted through the highest tier of post-feminist interpretation as interrogated through Jean-Anne Sutherland's "female-power-model". Sutherland's guidelines to crafting powerful women on screen call for female solidarity and power that demonstrates that true, progressive social change incorporates and develops the actions of the individual and requires a collective, unified identity and teamwork to achieve significant social change.

The success of my post-feminist aims depends upon the strength of the secondary female characters. This requires that the outcome of the storyline, and the completion of Ellen's character arc, necessitates their active integration. At this juncture, the active support of the secondary narrative character, as fulfilled by Musty Jane, must be explored. Her role will be discussed as a means to advance my use of final girl tropes, and their function in the realignment of patriarchal power to a centralised female narrative.

Crafting a Post-Feminist Final Girl Through Solidarity

Initially, Jane exhibits a regressive form of feminine power. This toxic form of power, as measured in terms of "force, inequality, and the ability to impose not only physical strength over others, but meaning and ideas as well" (Sutherland 2010, 115), does little more than replace male patriarchal control with a female version of it. As discussed previously in relation to Anna Belle from *Dead Birds* (Chapter Two), female power seen in these terms mimics masculinity and requires that women oppress other women in order to achieve personal growth and elevated social stature. When an elevated female in power exerts the power-over-model over other females within the narrative, she has simply gender-swapped her position with the male role that typically fulfils this narrative function. Currently, Jane's character does not represent any real threat to patriarchy but this is intentional, as she will be forced, through the course of the narrative, to realise her regressive attitude and its effect on the lives of the women around her.

Rita Felski writes that a post-feminist narrative must be "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" (1989, 168–9). In other words, a post-feminist narrative should explore the repression felt and voiced, not only by the white middle and upper classes, but also in the voices of various sexualities, classes, ethnicities and races. The crafting of strong secondary female characters positioned to initially challenge, then ultimately support, the post-feminist aims of a centralised female-heroine, strengthens the overall narrative vision by allowing the combined voices and shared experiences of a larger female collective to empower the actions of the centre.

The outcomes of this post-feminist strategy depend upon pushing gender and genre boundaries by moving narrative codes and conventions into less-explored areas. In *They Sound Human*, these requirements fall on the principal supporting character, Musty Jane, a female chemist hired to oversee the detonation of a tunnel system linking the transcontinental railroad through the Sierras. Jane's making-an-entrance moment sets this up:

MUSTY JANE, mid-30s, a woman of noticeable strength; a violet shawl around her neck stands out clearly against her thick, dark fur coat.

She holds a young crying blond baby boy, RICHARD, tightly in her arms, as she inspects a LARGE WOODEN CRATE strapped atop a mule. THE SIGN nailed to the front reads "Black Powder – Dangerous."

The search for a sense of place away from the Victorian confines of the east, both in fiction and in real life, led many adventurous women out west, triggering tales of their adventures in both literature and film. Evidence of this is well documented, as Lesley Poling-Kempes' work led her to uncover "a narrative that connected an informal alliance of remarkable women. Women left the security and comfort of conventional society in the first decades of the twentieth century and journeyed into Indian country in search of a wider, deeper view of themselves and the world" (2015, 4). Jane originates from similar origins and her trek west sets her at odds with some of the values associated with the "female frontier" experience, in which

> owing to the structure of frontier economies and the relative shortage of women, marriage was more obviously a matter of economic necessity on the western frontier than it was in the East, compelling many couples to set aside sentimental ideals in their choice of a mate. (Lamont 2016, 24)

It is from this perspective that Jane's relationship with Father arises, and the importance of this lies in the continued connection between matters of economy, and power acquired through it. These concepts are interwoven into the fabric of human relations out of necessity and, in the west, survival. Jane's backstory builds from this worldview. Although we see her initially as mother to the child in her arms, we later discover that the child is not her own. She stole the baby out of the arms of a poor family, victims of Father's drive to collect and sell orphaned children. Jane, in her selfish desire to have a child, chose to raise the baby as her own. Like Ellen, she is a tormented, haunted soul looking for retribution and, through female friendship, she will discover the strength needed to resolve this.

The narrative requires two women, each battling their own issues, to work together to fight and overcome the obstacles put in their way. For Jane, her method of attacking physical obstacles as a chemist connects her to the explosive power of black powder. Like the animal coat she wears, her own occupation symbolises her dual nature. On one level, she is a destroyer of physical things, such as the families she broke up in her quest to make money. On another level, her mastery of black powder, and its potential use as a controlled tool of national progress, suggests her progressive, positive role as an agent of social change.

The strength of Jane's character has been built into the construction of her narrative arc from her initial making-an-entrance moment. Her character arc requires her to further the collective cause of the women and children she presently oppresses. The script makes it clear that Jane has the power to see, just like Thomas and the other children. Immediately, she notices shadows in the forest, and alerts Father that "They know we got the kids. They're in the woods. Listen." Her awareness and ability to read her environment translates to narrative power that has the potential to do more than merely influence the behaviour of men. As a narrative device, Jane functions to push Ellen beyond "individualism, choice and empowerment" (Gill, 2016, 153), as a character that does not engage with social concerns outside her own life, and creates the possibility for her to

extend female power into collective action. Through these two women, female solidarity as means to overcome male oppression within hybrid genre confines has been established. The process of achieving those aims will develop through their interaction as the story progresses. Therefore, placing Jane, at the outset of the story, as a force of patriarchal oppression allows her a narrative position that is the polar opposite from where she will end up at the climax of the story. Her growth, and the realisation that her inherent power needs to be shifted to affect the social good for women as a gender-collective, engages the post-feminist aim I had for Jane's character during my writing process.

A Supernatural Post-Feminist Western/Horror Landscape

In a western, Jane Tompkins writes, "more than anything, nature gives the hero a sense of himself" (1992, 81). It is through the centralised character's relationship to nature, and their ability to master the terrain, that a western hero derives power. Tompkins stresses this notion repeatedly, stating:

> 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. The ethical system the Western proposes, which vindicates conflict, violence and vengeance, and the social and political hierarchy it creates, putting adult white males on top of everyone else in descending order beneath — this code and this hierarchy never appear to reflect the interests of beliefs of any particular group, or of human beings at all, but seem to have been dictated primordially by nature itself. (73)

As discussed previously in Chapter Two, true 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. In female-led westerns, the female characters must demonstrate their capacity to endure the hardness of the landscape, which "challenges the body to endure hardship — that is its fundamental message at the physical level. Its spiritual message is the same: come, and suffer" (71). The inclusion of the supernatural in that landscape changes the requirements for her to succeed within it. It's no longer a matter of simply, like the men, coming to know herself within the landscape but, ultimately,

she must learn that her understanding of the laws of nature is insufficient. This requires a change of thinking.

Robert Warshow proposes that "very often [the] woman is from the East and her failure to understand represents a clash of cultures" (1954, 36). The demarcation of gender and behaviour, as defined by the ideological tension of space, has long been contested as a rather one-sided "analysis [that] oversimplifies in isolating the attitudes [of Eastern and Western ideals]" (Kitses 1998, 59). *They Sound Human* suggests that such a demarcation extends to any individual who falls outside a highly specific localised culture within the west, and not just the west, as a grand ideological collective. In viewing Ellen as an outsider, Father attempts to limit her rights within a western environment by situating her outside a field of understanding as granted by birthright and gender. It's not that Ellen is from the east, it's just that she "doesn't know our kind of folk out here" meaning those raised around the hills, who have grown up with the horrors that seep into the fabric of their being and construct their understanding of the laws of nature as such. If Ellen is to challenge the laws of this supernatural, patriarchal environment, she must first come to know how it works, and what it requires to survive within it.

Ellen Ventures West: Elevating Female Power in Supernatural Space

In *They Sound Human*, Ellen's making-an-entrance opening moments occur within the interior space of a motionless wagon, which sits temporarily at rest, while men argue outside about the cause of a young girl's violent demise. If the central idea is that what the land in a western represents is power, then Ellen must actively learn to read the signs provided by nature to attain such power. This requires a heightened awareness of her surroundings, as achieved through a willingness to confront an inherently violent landscape controlled by men and the supernatural. Thus, the script quickly moves to exterior spaces in order to set up the elements of horror that redefine and compound the nature of the threats within its vast, threatening landscape, as the following section begins to indicate:

A TREELINE parallels the wagon train. Suddenly, the dog stops, glares out into the uneasy calm of the cold, dark woods.

A MONSTROUS SHADOW quickly passes between two trees. The SOUND of AN OWL, which curiously morphs into an odd, guttural humanlike moan. Pecks YELPS.

Feminist author Kath Woodward states that "in the nature — culture binary, nature is coded female, and consequently devalued" (2019, 10). Her work sets out to contest this imbalance and, in doing so, reconfigure cultural and gender associations between the female body and the social sphere. In a progressive western landscape, the centralised female character must exemplify the same connections that, historically, the male characters in the western genre exhibit: being linked to exterior space through the constant reinforcement of the images of man and horse, man and landscape, man and the open space. The female character must prove her narrative position within an exterior environment, through which she can demonstrate that the qualities the land possesses are qualities that she also embodies. This will allow her to begin to redefine herself on the exterior stage along with the men and oppressive, false-patriarchal females who control the landscape.

In *They Sound Human*, this connection of woman to exterior space plays an essential function in the narrative, as mentioned previously, and will be integral to the development and post-feminist progressive aims of Ellen's character arc.

Mastering a Supernatural Land

As stated previously, the seeds to character growth and post-feminist development must be planted immediately in an exterior landscape through which the reader is forced outside to endure, along with her, the bitter harshness of the western landscape. In these monstrous, infected hills, somewhere "between the apocalyptic moments of creation and dissolution the landscape sends a multitude of other messages, messages that seem as true and incontrovertible as the mountains and the plains. It is the genius of the western that it seems to make the land speak for itself" (Tompkins 1992, 71). Ellen must learn how to communicate with the hills. The result of which will allow her the power and insight to fight

them. Father recognises that Thomas may have that understanding, and it "made him sick. Got in his blood [and] he couldn't handle it." This implies that, for Ellen, to truly see the horror through which she will acquire the power of understanding the hills, she too must have a "little wild in her." She must become part of the space, the exterior space, to function successfully within it, and overcome the threats that it presents.

Almost immediately, the world of horror crashes down in front of her, pulling the characters and viewer deeper into the supernatural influence that springs from the deep-rooted toxic history that male violence and patriarchal oppression have had on the land itself. Ellen must confront a landscape where the deep imprint of male patriarchy and violent bloodshed has birthed demonic, child-stealing entities.

Suddenly, A LARGE WILD BOAR rushes out. Its lathered tusks frothing as it charges forward.

Ellen swipes up her pistol, fires at the creature.

The animal's throat bursts open, it slides half-dead toward her. Ellen looks down at the near-dead boar, blood splattered on her face. She takes a deep breath.

ELLEN
There's your beast. I've known hogs to kill people.

The boar's CHEST quivers oddly, a SHAPE within pushes the thin flesh upwards, then sinks down. THE FAINT SOUND OF A CHILD CRYING from within.

The boar's mouth opens, THE CHILD'S CRYING sounds less and less human by the second.

A BABY'S HAND slowly emerges between the animal's teeth, tiny fingers reach out, very much alive.

Horror provides the means to increase the symbolic, narrative potential of the land and to challenge the centralised, female hero's relationship to it. In this new western landscape, the natural animals themselves have been so severely poisoned by the land's deep-rooted toxicity, that grazing within it results in physical transformation and the body's total rejection of the toxic influence the hills

propagate. The horror genre's ability to poison the life giving-potential of the land exponentially increases the threat of death — a threat historically associated with the western landscape. The resulting transformation of the landscape and the toxic influence of a deep-rooted evil potentially transforms all life that grows there. This effect is witnessed in the scene detailed above, where the lifeless body of a malformed boar horrifically rejects the negative power of the hills. The mutation expunges river water along with the horrific image of a baby's hand, which supernaturally continues to move.

By creating a new western landscape, one that manifest an evil within the very fabric of the land, the codes and conventions of horror elevate the level of patriarchal opposition into the symbolic realm of the supernatural. As previously mentioned, according to Tasker and Negra, a post-feminist heroine must prove herself "capable of success within traditionally male working environments" (McClearen 2015, 840), then her fight for independence, self-empowerment, and active-narrative agency within a new hybrid space could potentially prove an even greater narrative challenge, but also opportunity. Therefore, the inclusion of horror and its supernatural transformative effects on the fabric of the western genre allows for a means to expand on the traditional associations and use of landscape as a storytelling device. This "new landscape" concept, coupled with the requirement that female characters develop and fulfil the needs of their character arc primarily in an exterior western landscape, provide a partial methodology to craft progressive, female-led, hybrid narratives. In doing so, innovative opportunities to craft a post-feminist heroine, unafraid to face the challenges provided by a deeply threatening, supernaturally oppressive, western/horror hybrid landscape, develop.

The Post-Feminist Necessity of Secondary Female Characters

Helen Jacey writes that "a major part of feminine identity is the requirement for a woman to put her needs second to those she loves, as well as people she doesn't know so well" (2010, 102). She labels this female inner conflict as self-regulation, stating that

> this need to self-regulate one's own needs to be better able to look after other people can pose major internal conflicts for many women, who can feel split between wanting to do things for themselves (while fearing to be seen as selfish) and wanting to be reliable (102).

While described by Jacey as inner female concerns, similar types of emotional self-regulation can be felt by men as well but, as she states, perhaps for men, "it isn't such a cultural expectation" (102). Regardless, the application of these thematic issues presents each female character with difficult choices:

Ellen, her baby tucked securely within her thick coat, holds a small "pepper-pot PISTOL". She stares out toward the trees, then down -

ALONG THE WAGON TRAIN

which appears abandoned. She walks cautiously toward the front. A HAND suddenly reaches out from between one of the wagons, pulls her in.

MUSTY JANE
That girl had no one. Not a soul. Drown her own baby in a river. Now she's dead too.

Ellen looks over, sees SNOWY'S DEAD BLOODY BODY on the ground, the severity of the carnage inflicted clear from this vantage point.

Jane is the first to vocalise these ideas, and the viewer is finally shown the gory remains of Snowy's fallen body. Her words emphasise Snowy's humanity, which stands in direct contrast to Father's previous declaration that the fallen girl represents collective financial loss. To Jane, these women are human beings and deserve to be recognised as such, even in death. Her explanation is that Snowy was incapable of the inner strength required to raise a child alone. This inner-character flaw has been explored previously in Ellen's making-an-entrance moment, as she debated suffocating Thomas. We learn that Snowy also went through similar inner conflict, and chose to kill her child as a means to increase her own odds of survival within the west. As explained to her by Jane, Ellen sees now that a woman alone will likely encounter a desolate end.

This moment plants the seed supporting female solidary and empowerment through working together as the most effective methodology to not only survive, but to succeed on one's own terms. This includes developing healthy emotional relationships with other adults and with the children we raise. But these are lessons Ellen and Jane must learn through the experience gained while driving the action of the script. At present, both characters exist at the furthest end of the spectrum away from completing those aims. As such, Jane's current narrative role acts as an obstacle to these realisations. She has yet to come to these conclusions based on her understanding of her place in the world of men.

For the time being, Ellen sees the violent results that befall women in such a world, which foreshadow her own potential future. Through Snowy's death, Ellen understands the dangers a lone mother must overcome, as dictated by the landscape and the character requirements necessary to successfully manoeuvre within that landscape.

Female Solidarity is a Structured Process

The secondary female characters do not have to function as an immediate support system for the centralised female heroine. Initially, Jane advises Ellen to protect the small world in front of her, the world that she can grasp directly, and nothing more.

JANE
Thomas has been touched by those things in the hills. Your lack of love did that. Forget your sister.

Her counsel reinforces the fragility of female power that can, at any moment, be taken away through male intervention. Or, if not by man, then by the monsters that the environment spews forth to prey on emotionally vulnerable women. To counter this, Ellen must demonstrate her resolve, independence and drive to confront injustice head-on. With shotgun in hand, Ellen asserts her position as an emotional protector of victimised individuals, though she misguidedly positions her agency in support of Fig, who is revealed as a charlatan (like Father) and a murderer of women. As witness to Ellen's tenacity and resolve through physical action, the beginnings of Jane's long-term feminist transformation are established.

Jane discovers a potential equal in her eyes. Ultimately, their transformations will require them to fight alongside each other against a collective, supernatural evil, as represented in the form of both men and beasts. The story continues to build toward these possibilities, as expressed in this dialogue:

JANE
This black dust gives me worth, elevates me above other women. Brings me as close to being a man as any woman out here ever got. I'm a chemist. What other woman you know can say that?

Jane's declaration of female self-empowerment reveals her recognition of an unfair society, wherein only by embracing a highly dangerous, typically male profession (at that time), can a woman attempt to be looked at in equal terms.

The structure and timing with which character-defining moments are written into the script directly affect the long-term post-feminist readings that acts of female heroism provide. For Ellen, this comes in an early moment that demonstrates her capacity to control her environment, using the character of Fig. On freeing himself from potential "unfair injury," as victim of a trailside hanging, Fig shoots Father. Jane calls on Ellen to shoot the boy on his (and her) behalf. The act would, in Jane's eyes, bring the two women closer and would appear to further my female solidarity argument. Instead, Ellen chooses compassion and allows the boy to escape.

Ellen demonstrates her inability to inflict violence against others in order to control the narrative. In a western landscape, as Father warned her previously, "kindness may get you killed girl," but in this case, it nearly gets him killed; for the western requires the hero to validate, through action, a willingness to, according to Tompkins, "take pain and give it, without flinching" (121). She adds that the hero is required

> not to cry or show that (he) cares. For to show that your heart is not hard, to cry when you feel pain, your own or someone else's, is sentimental – indulging in excessive or unnecessary feeling in response to a negligible stimulus – in other words, soft, womanish, emotional, the very qualities the Western hero must get rid of to be a man. (121)

As Tompkins continues, "this gender system catches the hero in a trap" (128). Ellen proves, at this very moment, that she has not yet developed the qualities required of her to exert and maintain control over a threatening western landscape. Jane glimpses Ellen's inner weakness and Ellen is punished by the narrative for it. Father exiles Ellen from the group, throwing her and her children (Thomas and Alice) onto the roadside, which instantly shifts her narrative perspective and alters any potential readings of Ellen as a passive narrative vehicle. Isolated and alone, she must now learn to control her environment and act according to the terms that it dictates in order to survive and ensure the survival of her family.

Jane stares sympathetically toward her friend.

ELLEN
Wait. Please, wait.

The wagon train comes to a brief halt. Ellen extends baby Alice out to Jane.

ELLEN
I'll come find you, take her with you. It's only temporary.

Jane reaches out, takes the baby from her arms. She looks over at Father, who lies silently dying.

JANE
I won't let him near her.

ELLEN
I know.

They Sound Human demands Ellen make immediate decisions that test her moral fibre and force upon her unfair expectations. She must not only endure numerous forms of "unfair injury" within the harshest of environments but, at the same time, act as caretaker and protector of the children who depend on her as well. As with Snowy's failure before her, Ellen finds herself, under similar circumstances, as a woman alone, forced to take control of her life. Those demands proved too much for Snowy, and she chose to take the life of her children. Ellen, on the other hand, chooses to put her faith in the women around her. She realises her own weakness

and the severity of the situation at hand, and makes the difficult decision to protect her child by giving her to Jane to care for until she can come back for her.

This one decision will provide the long-term plot goals for the remainder of the story. Through this, the potential for female heroism as demonstrated through a power-with approach aligns Ellen with Jean-Anne Sutherland's "female-power-model". In addition, it provides a narrative structure that demands a progressive post-feminist heroine fight alongside other women, allowing for a narrative through which one can "think about the kind of power that diverse women can exercise collectively when [they] work together to define, and to strive to achieve, feminist aims" (Allen 1998, 32).

Therefore, by placing such character-defining moments early on in *They Sound Human*, the narrative structure allows Ellen the space and capacity to develop through the continued, forced demonstration of intelligence, determination and the use of strategy to overcome obstacles, aided by her own mental and physical strength. Most importantly, it allows her room to grow as a character. Standing alone on the roadside, Ellen's central character shift begins. From being a willing paid passenger under the patriarchal control of the male-dominated group, the script requires her to fight and survive on her own terms through active narrative agency.

Future Research and Craft Revisions

Throughout this exegesis, 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. In the process of working through my practice-led research (PLR) approach, I have discovered and targeted key areas of concern, and attempted to address 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 my craft approach. This exegesis presents structural and narrative guidelines that provide a contemporary writer, with similar creative ideological aims to mine, with a more informed position upon which to continue the sociological, cultural and gender-based conversation that my creative work engages.

My feature screenplay, *They Sound Human*, has centred active female characters, including a lead who is empowered and empowering. In addition, I have drawn from Jean-Anne Sutherland's "female-power-model" to advance my craft goals. In choosing to adopt Sutherland's highest *power-with* tier to test my craft aims, this post-feminist lens tracked the success and circumstances of my screenplay. Additionally, my post-feminist lens has framed my discussion of relevant history and genre analysis in support of my post-feminist screenwriting intent. In doing so, I have presented a new craft-based and theorised methodology, as developed and tested through my craft approach and the political framings of the project, that allows centralised female characters to expand the limits of power beyond the patriarchal boundaries of the existing western/horror storytelling.

Based on my discoveries through the process of this PLR study, I have discovered potential tensions in my decision to include the voices of Native American children as part of my post-feminist solidary argument. The various Indigenous female orphan children, humanised through the family turmoil explored between two Miwok sisters (Pati and Helta), support my aim to include the voices of various ethnicities and races. That said, the choice to depict Indigenous children as a means to support my post-feminist female-driven narrative runs the risk of reinforcing power geometrics in the same way the film *Woman Walks Ahead* (Susanne White 2018), as discussed in Chapter One, potentially explores a similar white-salvic hero myth.

In *They Sound Human*, the craft strategies that have begun to emerge during the creative research process concerning issues of race should not be overlooked to prioritise my gender concerns. The inclusion of Pati and Helta works to support my post-feminist female solidarity argument, but also potentially set up a complicated subtext to the narrative surrounding the history of Indigenous children being taken away from their parents. This provides an ideal platform for future practice-led research that might reassess and fine-tune the strategies that explore similar screenwriting concerns. In general, screenwriters interested in exploring multiple points of view have a responsibility to accurately and honestly approach creative representation of marginalised voices. The PLR process supports exactly this type of investigation wherein potential outcomes

"bring into view, particularities that reflect new social and other realities" (Barette 2010, 4) that may not otherwise emerge from a more traditional, qualitative research methodology. As such, the narrative strategies used to depict the Indigenous voices, male or female, should also be reassessed. Armando Jose Prats speaks to this very issue, and writes that

> To complement that [proposition], I offer this other: if we could narrow, so far as it is possible, this temporal and cultural distance, we might acquire a heightened sense of the narrative strategies and cultural assumptions whereby the Western — both silent and sound, old and new — configures the Indian. (93)

It is my intent to apply and expand upon the ideas discussed in this exegesis, and continue exploring the craft approach that best supports empowered centralised female heroes in hybrid narrative storytelling. This also includes an exploration into effective narrative strategies that better represent and progress the marginalised voices of less-represented individuals, including non-white, Indigenous characters in western/horror genre writing.

In closing, through my PLR methodology, my academic and creative work seeks to extend existing critical and theoretical research in western/horror screenwriting. My craft work, and accompanying exegesis, interrogates the potential advances that occur in this limited, minor-genre script form when approached from a post-feminist point-of-view.

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SCREENPLAY

THEY SOUND HUMAN
by
Bryan Ott

EXT. FOREST LAKE – NIGHT

PECKS, a female wagon train malamute, stands on the edge of an icy lake. The dog’s piercing blue eyes fixate on a dense, snow covered pine forest that looms across. She WHIMPERS, afraid.

EXT. TREELINE – NIGHT

A MONSTROUS SHADOW quickly passes between two trees. The SOUND of AN OWL morphs into an odd, guttural humanlike moan.

EXT. MIDDLE OF AN ICY LAKE – CONTINUOUS

SNOWY, a teenage, single mother, waist deep in the slush of partially frozen water, struggles to hold her baby above it.

A full-body swaddle hides the baby’s face, as her SCREAMS break the frozen air. Pecks on the water’s edge behind, barks inaudibly.

SUPERIMPOSE: “California Oregon Border, Winter 1855”

Snowy, panic stricken, slowly pulls back the cloth to look at her child. Cleary, she is afraid of what might be revealed.

SNOWY
You’re not a demon. Your face. Please God, show me my little girl’s face.

Snowy, stares down at her child, loses all control of her emotions. She WAILS in hysterics, the echo resonates throughout the forest.

She immediately submerges her baby down under the freezing water, holds her there. The cloth wrap floats up to the surface, and is gently pulled by the current downstream.

Snowy looks into the woods. A PAIR OF LARGE RED EYES burn, stare back at her.

INT. COVERED WAGON – NIGHT

ELLEN, mid-20’s, Irish, bright red hair, breathes heavily. It appears she has been crying. Nestled snug

in her arms, baby ALICE, no older than 2, sleeps soundly. Ellen looks down at -

THOMAS, 12 years old, deathly ill, hair matted wet and face coated in sweat from the monstrous fever intent on killing him. He lies, eyes closed, shivering under an animal skin blanket inside the motionless covered wagon.

Ellen picks up a POCKET HARMONICA next to the sick boy, turns it over, reads the personalized etched inscription on the back. It says “Your Loving Mother”.

Ellen places the instrument in Thomas’s hand, his fingers close feebly around it.

He opens his eyes slightly, look up at Ellen. His body quivers under the strain of even the slightest movement.

THOMAS
(voice weak)
Mom?

ELLEN
No. We haven’t found her yet.

THOMAS
I heard the animal calling my name, again. From the woods. Like an owl. A sick owl.

ELLEN
It’s a fever dream. They can do that. Make you see things that aren’t real. Close your eyes. Go back to sleep.

THOMAS
(imitating the sick owl call)
Thooooo...whooo...whooo...mamasssss. No, it’s not a dream.

Thomas closes his eyes, sleeps. His hoarse deep breaths, broken by intermitted mumbling. MEN’S VOICES are heard arguing violently outside.

She picks up a small pillow beside the boy, holds it just above his face, giving the impression she intends to suffocate the sick child. She hesitates.

ELLEN
Forgive me Thomas.

From out of nowhere, A DOG GROWLS. Ellen looks over, sees –

PECKS, the same blue-eyed Malamute, staring at her. THE HEATED ARGUMENT OUTSIDE continues.

Ellen stares at the animal, still holding the pillow above Thomas. Pecks growls again.

Behind the dog, AN ARMED WAGONMEN runs swiftly past. Followed by a SECOND MAN, holding a large WOODEN CAMERA on stilts. A SHARP WHISTLE sends Pecks running off.

EXT. WINDY MOUNTAIN TOP – NIGHT

A NOOSE clenches around the thin neck of FIG, mid-teens, whose shaggy, unkempt hair partially blocks his shifty eyes.

FIG
I swear that’s how I found her.
Next to the river, dead.

Snowy’s lifeless, bloody body lies at his feet.

FATHER, mid-40’s, an imposingly large, thick-mustached priest and wagon master of this westward bound expedition, holds a shotgun on the emotional, blubbering teen.

The words “Shepard Hills Orphanage” have been hand-painted in grease across the wagon canvas behind him. Panning supplies hang from the side.

FATHER
Those creatures don’t come down this far south. You did it.

Inside the wagon, A HANDFUL OF CHILDREN, dirty and disheveled peer out through the cloth opening. Father pulls it shut.

FATHER
I kept you around. Taught you this business like my daddy taught me.

TWO NATIVE AMERICAN BOYS, in thin attire, are shackled to the rear. Freezing and exhausted, they hold each other for warmth.

FATHER
Hell, I could have been a father to you, boy. But killing Snowy affects us all. Financially speaking. And that makes all the difference.

A random wagonman throws the hanging rope over the tree. Fig struggles desperately to free his bound-hands. He cries.

MUSTY JANE, mid 30's, a woman of noticeable strength, a violet shawl around her neck stands out clearly against her thick, dark fur coat.

She holds a blonde baby boy, RICHARD, in her arms, as she inspects a LARGE WOODEN CRATE strapped atop a mule. THE SIGN nailed to the front reads "Black Powder – Dangerous."

FATHER
What you say, Jane?

She lifts the crate lid, removes a powder sack, inspects it.

Jane strides over to the Fig, looks at his HANDS, black dust caked under his finger nails.

She reaches into his coat pocket, pulls out a small, stolen woven-sack full of explosive powder, gives Father a firm look.

MUSTY JANE
Rip his clothes off.

FATHER
You heard the woman. But leave the boy his boots.

A LARGE OMNIOUS SHADOW MOVES nearby. Musty stares intently out into the dark forest, grows uneasy.

MUSTY JANE
They know we got the kids.

INT. COVERED WAGON – NIGHT

Ellen removes the pillow from Thomas's face. He lies motionless, eyes closed. Her baby girl cries behind her.

She places her cheek in front of his nose, feels HIS BREATH on her skin. She wipes her eyes, looks over, sees –

AN UNNATURALLY LARGE SHAPE moves past the wagon canvas. It emits a SHARP GUTTERAL GRUNT, startles her.

Suddenly, her wagon jolts sideways as an unexpected tremendous THUMP sends it sliding out of control. The contents within fly in all directions, including baby Alice.

The wagon settles into quiet stillness. Thomas MOANS, opens his eyes slightly.

In a panic, Ellen inspects her screaming baby.

EXT. TREELINE - NIGHT

KEROSENE LAMP LIGHTS move swiftly around deep in the wood line. PECKS BARKS somewhere nearby.

Ellen, her baby tucked securely within her thick coat, holds a small "pepper-pot PISTOL". She looks out –

ALONG THE WAGON TRAIN

which appears abandoned. She walks cautiously toward the front. A HAND suddenly reaches out, grabs her.

MUSTY JANE
That girl had no one. Not a soul.
Drown her own baby in a river.
Now she's dead too.

Ellen looks over, sees SNOWY'S DEAD BLOODY BODY on the ground, notices HER EYES have been gouged out.

Behind the body, Fig clutches the noose around his neck.

FIG
(mouths words)
Help me. Untie me.

ELLEN
He couldn’t have done that. Looks like a bear, maybe.

Musty grabs onto Ellen, pulls her in uncomfortably close.

MUSTY JANE
A mother must love her children. Our own and those given to us. It protects them. Keeps the devils away.

ELLEN
Thomas belongs to my sister.

MUSTY JANE
Thomas has been touched by those things in the hills. Your lack of love did that. Forget your sister.

ELLEN
He’s not my son.

MUSTY JANE
You’re better than that. I know it.

Ellen looks down at her baby.

MUSTY JANE
Do you love your children?

EXT. FOREST TREELINE - CONTINUOUS

Suddenly, A LARGE WILD BOAR rushes out. Its lathered tusks frothing as it charges forward.

Ellen swipes up her pistol, fires at the creature.

The animal’s throat bursts open, it slides half-dead toward her. Ellen looks down at the near-dead boar, blood splattered on her face. She takes a deep breath.

From the dark forest, Father emerges with Pecks at his side.

FATHER
God’s given me a mission, a calling to save his flock from these hills.

Holding his shotgun at Ellen, he grabs the hanging rope with his free hand, yanks it.

ELLEN
There’s your beast. I’ve known hogs to kill people.

THE SOUNDS OF FIG GURGLING. His feet twitch, swiftly elevate.

FATHER
You hear em’ yet? Your sick boy sure does. It’s why they followed us all this way.

Fig chokes. Father tugs harder on the rope.

FATHER
Now, this young man got the hills in his blood, too. Like Thomas. Like this hog.

The boar’s CHEST quivers oddly, a SHAPE within pushes the thin flesh upwards, then sinks down. THE FAINT SOUND OF A CHILD CRYING from within.

The boar’s mouth opens, THE CHILD’S CRYING sounds less and less human by the second.

FATHER
Infected with its love.

Ellen nervously steps back, her weapon still drawn tight.

A BABY’S HAND slowly emerges between the animal’s teeth, tiny fingers reach out, very much alive.

Father drops the hanging rope. Fig hits the ground hard behind him. He fires his shotgun at the mutating beast.

The boar GURGLES, spews out a stomach-full of dirty river water. The animal deflates unnaturally to half its original size. The crying stops. The baby’s hand gone.

Ellen stumbles back in disbelief.

FATHER
Don’t you trust your own eyes?

Musty Jane steps out from between the wagons. Her blond, baby boy nuzzled in her arms.

MUSTY JANE
This baby, my baby, they don’t want it. My heart is too strong.

Jane wipes some black powder off her baby’s cheek, kisses her. She lifts her baby high above her head facing the woods.

MUSTY JANE
They can feel I am a real mother. And this black dust only adds to my worth. Elevates me above other women. Brings me as close to being a man as any woman out here ever got. What can you say?

Jane stares at Ellen, her baby still elevated.

ELLEN
I’m out here to find my sister, return her boy and do what’s right for my family. Not hers. That gives me worth.

EXT. TRAILSIDE WAGON - CONTINUOUS

Father SLAPS his hand across HIS PANNING SUPPLIES, they CLANK together. He pulls back the canvas, exposing the wagon load of ORPHAN CHILDREN huddled inside.

FATHER
We all need family. What’s the harm in profiting in that?

Jane pours BLACK POWER all over the dead boar, makes the sign of the cross over it. Ellen watches her.

AT THE BASE OF A TREE

Fig props himself up, looks carefully around the group, reaches into his boot, pulls out a small COLT POCKET PISTOL.

Jane lights the boar afire, it ERUPTS instantly, sizzles.

MUSTY JANE
The name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit -

The bound Native American boys watch Fig. He signals them to remain quiet, then aims his pistol at Father.

FIG
Amen.

Ellen looks over, just as Fig fires a shot.

Father gets hit in the chest. Dropping his shotgun, he falls.

Jane carefully lunges down on top of him, inspects his wound.

Fig stands up, removes the noose from his neck, flings it off.

MUSTY JANE
Shoot him.

Ellen raises her weapon at the boy.

MUSTY JANE
(yells desperately)
Now. Kill him.

Ellen, finger on the trigger, looks at Fig. She does not fire.

Fig slowly reaches down, picks up his coat. He unexpectedly flips her off and walks away.

Ellen lowers her gun. Musty Jane lowers her head. A light snow begins to fall.

ELLEN
I’m sorry.

FATHER
Clear out her stuff. All of it.

EXT. TRAILSIDE - NIGHT

A SMALL CARRY CASE thumps onto the cold ground.

Ellen holds baby Alice, watches her bags being tossed onto the trail. Thomas, unconscious, lies wrapped in furs at her feet.

ELLEN
We won’t make it.

EXT. BACK OF AN OPEN WAGON - NIGHT

Musty Jane holds pressure on Father’s wound with her violet shawl, now coated thick with blood.

MUSTY JANE
What about her sick boy?

FATHER
Don’t forget my damn dog.

ELLEN
I can’t take Thomas. He’s too sick.

The wagon train starts to move.

ELLEN
I’ll tell my sister he didn’t survive the journey.

MUSTY JANE
I won’t do it.

ELLEN
We won’t survive out here. Not with my baby. Jane, help us.

MUSTY JANE
Love them both. Equally. It’s the only way to keep them safe.

The snowfall thickens. Ellen watches the wagon train head off.

Baby Alice screams, as the bitter cold stings her pale cheeks red. Ellen wipes snow from her soft face.

THE SOUND OF A HARMONICA. Thomas blows into his instrument.

THOMAS
They told me you tried to kill me.

Ellen looks down at the boy, his eyes open.

THOMAS
I need my mother.

EXT. FOREST ROAD – NIGHT

Musty Jane stares sympathetically toward her banished friend.

ELLEN (OS)
Wait. Please, wait.

Ellen runs toward the departing wagons. The horses NEIGH. The wagon train comes to a brief halt.

Ellen extends baby Alice out to Jane.

ELLEN
I'll come find you, take her with you. It's only temporary.

Jane reaches out, takes the baby from her arms. She looks over at Father, who lies moaning, unaware.

MUSTY JANE
I won't let him near her.

ELLEN
I know.

The wagons are WHIPPED into motion along the trail.

Jane kisses Alice on the forehead, comforts the crying baby as she tucks her under the thick coat. She WHISTLES for the dog.

Ellen watches until the last glimpse of the wagon train disappears from view. When it does, Ellen falls to her knees and cries.

HUMAN-LIKE VOICE (OS)
Alice. Aliiiiiiice.

INT. SHEPARD HILLS ORPHANAGE – NIGHT
From behind a red-headed girl, as she looks out -

THROUGH A CRACKED SNOW-BLASTED WINDOW

Icy wind pounds on a large, partially unhinged barn door, it thrashes open and closed. The shadows of an unknown, immense animal-like form pivots. Odd grunts HUFF, guttural and sharp.

HUMAN-LIKE VOICE (OS)
Aaaaaaliceeeee.

ALICE, almost 12 now, a stubborn, freckled redhead, stares transfixed into the darkness, faintly aware of the odd, tonal voices outside.

SUPERIMPOSE: “Shepard Hills Orphanage, California, 1865” (10 years later)

Pecks, the same Malamute from years ago, raises her head, GROWLS at the window. Alice strokes her gently.

ALICE
You hear it too, don’t you girl?

INT. ORPHANAGE KITCHEN - NIGHT

Strong brown female eyes glare straight ahead unmoving. Long bangs are tossed down in front, half-covering the face of PATI, a 13-year-old, Native American Miwok girl.

A pair of scissors abruptly clips the hair off, it falls to the floor in chunks.

IZZY, 13 year old white girl, in thick bedtime attire, aggressively cuts the girl’s hair. A CATHOLIC CROSS hangs from her neck and swings back and forth as she slices.

Pati, though not verbally protesting the invasive haircut, suppresses her anger in long deep breaths.

Reaching over, she grabs her little sister’s hand, HELTA, 10, who rubs her newly clipped head, sobbing intermittently.

IZZY
Might not be pretty, but, you were born with the misfortune of being cursed both in gender and heritage. Odds of finding a new home are better this way. For you and your brother.

Pati pulls her sister’s hand to her lips, kisses it.

PATI
Sisters.

IZZY
You’re brothers now.

INT. ORPHANAGE BEDROOM – CONTINUOUS

Alice sits on an old bed, stares down at a small body, covered in thick animal skin blankets in front of her.

She pulls back the covers, reveals RICHARD, also 12, blonde hair. The boy coughs uncontrollably, seemingly near death.

IZZY (OS)
Sick or not, he’s coming. Father’s orders.

Izzy, bible wedged under her arm, stands in the door frame.

Alice wipes the sweat dripping from the boy’s moist brow. Eyes closed, he breathes in harsh quick chops. Chemical burn scars, from years prior, cover his neck and upper chest.

IZZY
He ain’t even your real brother. Otherwise, his mama would have burned you all up too.

Alice ignores the girl. The malamute jumps on the bed next to Richard, nestles in close to him, WHIMPERS affectionately.

ALICE
We got a real mother and she's coming back for us.

Izzy removes the bible from under her arm, holds it out.

IZZY
His mama was a whore. Probably yours too. But his played with fire and god punished her.

ALICE
We're not going.

The barn door outside SLAMS viciously against the frame. Alice looks back outside. The dog raises her head toward the sound, emanates a lengthy, deep fearful GROWL.

IZZY (OS)
God will bless us, Alice. He hears both our prayers and our ill wills. All our thoughts. Don't you damn us.

ALICE
Shh...You hear that?

Richard's eyes open, he looks up at Alice. Smoke rises from his flesh, as if the burns are still afire.

RICHARD (VO)
They love you Alice. They want you to feel that. Just listen.

Alice looks back down at Richard, his eyes closed, fast asleep, body twitching in fever dreams. His scarred skin returned to its normal imperfections.

IZZY (OS)
Your mother ain't never coming back. She don't want you no more. We all been left.

Alice notices A SMALL MENSTRAL BLOODSTAIN on the bed sheet below her. She reaches her hand under her dress, touches herself. Blood speckles coat her fingertips.

Alice quickly closes the curtains.

EXT. ORPHANAGE - NIGHT

Cocooned in thick snow cover, an isolated, semi-derelict wooden farmhouse stands on the edge of a dense tree line.

The large barn, with its swinging door, looms behind. ODD TONAL HUMMING floats out from within.

INT. ORPHANAGE - NIGHT

A SMALL GROUP OF FEMALE ORPHANS, their heads clean shaven, in various stages of undress, try on male Sunday-school clothes, playfully exchanging items for the best fit.

Pati, her hair reduced to short tuffs, holds Helta tightly.

PATI
Stop crying. Stop it.

HELTA
(speaks native Miwok)
I don’t understand.

Pati wipes the tears from her sister’s eyes.

HELTA
(speaks Miwok)
Why are they doing this?

Hearing the native Miwok language spoken again, Izzy dashes toward her, slaps the little girl across her cheek.

IZZY
English. You’re American now.

Without warning, Pati grabs Izzy by the throat, slams her up against the wall.

PATI
I am not afraid of you little devil girl. This is my sister. My family.

Alice stands in the doorframe watching Pati tighten her grip on the girl’s neck. Izzy cries like a scared

child, whatever semblance of power she once held, abruptly dissipates.

IZZY
Father told me what to do. I'm trying to help. Find you a new home. I'm not doing anything wrong. I'm a good person.

Eyes watering, Izzy silently pleads for Alice to help her, but she just watches.

Pati abruptly releases her hold. Izzy's frantic breathing slows. She struggles to regain composure.

IZZY
That savage almost killed me. And you just stood there. You're both horrid, evil monsters. No family would have you.

ALICE
There's something in the barn.

Alice walks to –

THE FRONT DOOR

puts on a thick, animal skin coat. Izzy watches her.

ALICE
They say I'm old enough to know things. To see things.

Pati looks at Alice. Clearly, she hears them as well.

IZZY
I don't hear anything.

Izzy retreats slowly toward the backroom behind her.

Alice takes a step toward her, extends HER HAND out closer, menstrual blood covers her fingers.

ALICE
They say I'm a woman, now.

IZZY
Father will punish you for this.

ALICE
He’s not my father. Or yours. He doesn’t love you, or any of us.

IZZY
The devil in you.

Izzy reaches the backroom, SLAMS the door shut.

Alice walks behind Pecks, slowly reaches for the wooden latch. Suddenly, a LOUD SERIES OF KNOCKS breaks the silence.

Helta screams. Alice freezes. The door shakes, then stops.

They stand still. The SOUND OF HEAVY FOOTSTEPS, like a herd of buffalo, crunching in the snow outside, rush off.

Helta removes her sister’s cupped hands from her ears, holds them securely, seeking comfort.

ALICE
They know where my mother is.

Alice lifts the latch, the door swings open, reveals the empty snow-covered field ahead. WIND HOWLS. The dog darts out, disappears into the darkness.

PATI
The forest devils feed on your sadness. They eat your mind with poison words. Show you things that aren’t real. Stay with us.

Alice removes a lit kerosene lamp from the door exterior.

Helta looks up at her older sister. Pati covers her ears.

HELTA
I hear them too.

EXT. FORESTED PATH - NIGHT

Alice heads toward the barn.

ALICE
Come here girl. Where are you?

HUMAN-LIKE VOICE (OS)
(slurred)
Come here girlllllllllll.

Alice freezes in her tracks, stares up at the large barn door, half-open, no visible movement inside.

Suddenly from within, A HORSE WHINNIES a loud, prolonged call.

Standing directly under –

THE LARGE BARN DOORFRAME

Alice raises up the lamp, searches for movement within the dark corners of the cathedral-like space.

The HORSE WHINNIES again, followed by a DEEP, GUTTERAL HUFF emitted from a second, much larger animal.

Alice drops the lantern. Kerosene spills out, setting a small fire to hay-covered floor.

The space glows warmly, partially filling the shadows. A momentary glimpse of the massive backside of a BULKY CREATURE thrusting back and forth.

Alice, stares confusedly ahead. She takes a step back. The door SLAMS forward, catapulting her deeper inside.

She slides along the floor toward through the flames. Her dress catches fire.

Looking up in shock, she trembles. Tears well up. THE HUFFING SOUND amplifies to near-deafening volume.

Each rippled muscle on the dark grey back of an enormous creature quivers, as the unnatural beast penetrates a horse from behind, thrusting aggressively.

The beast turns to face Alice. The flames burn out. Darkness.

GUTTERAL VOICE (OS)
Alice...

INT. TOWN HALL – DAY

A BEASTLY MASK, fastened from buffalo hide and fur, pops out of the darkness of the kerosene-lit frontier stage. White-painted outlines encircle small eyeholes barely visible.

A WOMAN SCREAMS, LAUGHTER and cigar smoke hang heavy.

More kerosene lamps light up, reveal NUMEROUS TOWN PATRONS, men and women in frontier winter attire. They stand shoulder to shoulder, mesmerized by the monstrous performance.

EXT. TOWN HALL – DAY

The words ‘Property of Shepard Hills Orphanage’ are written across the back of a WAGON-CANVAS.

From behind, A NUN, clothed in her formal black garb and habit, watches the wagon from a distance. Her face, slightly lowered, hidden from view.

The wagon canvas opens. One by one, THE FEMALE CHILDREN emerge in proper schoolboy’s attire, heads clean shaven, eyes down.

The nun secretly watches. Izzy steps out, notices the nun, makes the sign of the cross in respect.

A HAND smacks her across the back of the head.

It is Father, mid-50s, his bushy, black mustache now grey. He looks out toward the nun, but she is gone.

FATHER
Keep Richard backstage during the auction. If he dies, leave him.

INT. THE TOWNHALL MAIN STAGE - DAY

A bare-chested THEATER PLAYER, wearing the beast mask, kidnaps a handmade prop-child. He pretends to devour the doll. Other actors, dressed as gold panners, fire POP-GUNS.

The beast collapses, over-acting his suffering.

INT. TOWNHALL BACKSTAGE - DAY

A FEMALE HAND turns the metal dial of a kerosene lantern.

The flame illuminates ELLEN, now in her mid-30's, wearing formal nun attire.

Richard sleeps on a bed in front of her. His eyes closed, breathing extremely labored, he moans in deep pain.

Ellen pulls out Thomas's METAL HARMONICA, completely malformed. Its holes, intentionally enlarged, have hollow bones tightly secured within.

The personalized engraving "Your Loving Mother" still visible.

She places the instrument close to the sick boy's ear, puts it to her lips, blows gently. Strangely, it emits no sound.

Richard, eyes still closed, HUMS, a slightly off-key sound.

ELLEN
That's good. It'll get quiet again, their voices will weaken, find mine.

Ellen blows another silent note. He HUMS again.

RICHARD
He don't want me to talk to you. He loves me. Calls me Richard.

ELLEN
Your mother gave you that name. I knew you both a very long time ago. I have been searching for years to find her. She has my little girl.

RICHARD
My mother burned me and left me in the snow.

Ellen looks at the boy in shock.

RICHARD
She was the cruel one. A monster.

Ellen pulls back the covers, slowly unbuttons his shirt to reveal his entire upper body covered in chemical burn scars.

ELLEN
Her name was Jane. She was no monster. There is a man here in this building who is though.

RICHARD
They know your name, Ellen. And Thomas, but he’s gone now.

Richard opens his eyes, startles Ellen. The boy looks at the odd harmonica in her hand.

INT. ROOM CORNER - CONTINUOUS

Pati and Helta watch in secret behind a stack of old crates and theater items. Richard closes his eyes.

INT. BEDSIDE – CONTINUOUS

Ellen moves in even closer to the sick boy.

ELLEN
She’d be your age now. Red hair. She didn’t arrive with you here, but you know where she is, don’t you?

RICHARD
You didn’t love him?

ELLEN
I know a train that runs through the Sierras and there are families on the other side.

THE SOUND OF APPLAUSE from the front room. Ellen pauses.

ELLEN
Take me to Alice, and we can get you well. Find you a new home.

RICHARD
People always lie to kids.

Eyes closed, he COUGHS BLOOD onto Ellen’s white habit.

ELLEN
That’s what adults do. They lie to children all the time.

RICHARD
Do you believe that monsters are real?

ELLEN
I know they’re real.

RICHARD
(voice garbled, non-human)
A name makes someone real. Not just having one, but hearing someone say it.

ELLEN
I promised my baby I’d come back for her a long time ago. I don’t want to be a liar too.

RICHARD
A mother always knows her own child. Say his name so he knows you loved him. You haven’t said it for a long time. Thomas.

ELLEN
I was never his mother.

RICHARD
(normal voice returns)
You were to him.

INT. TOWNHALL MAIN STAGE - DAY

Nervous laughter and conversation overpower Father, as he emerges from behind the red stage curtains, shirttails untucked. He waves his thick arms to quiet the crowd.

The bare-chested beast player lightheartedly mock-attacks Father, which fuels the audience laugher.

BEARDED PATRON (OS)
We shouldn’t mock the hill devils. They’ll have all our children.

Enraged, Father shoves the masked player off-stage.

Hitting the hard dirt floor, the beast-mask tumbles off, reveals Fig, now in his early 20's, the same eye-length, unkempt hair.

TOWNHALL MAIN FLOOR - CONTINUOUS

The heavy BEARDED PATRON reaches down to assist the boy. Fig notices A PISTOL holstered above A THICK MONEY POUCH, tucked under his newly-tailored jacket.

FIG
The mask, kindly.

Fig looks back up at Father, with a wink, the two exchange knowing eye-contact.

The bearded patron returns the mask to the boy. Fig reaches into the man's coat pocket, steals the MONEY POUCH.

FATHER (OS)
Monsters in the hills? Blasphemy I say. But lost lambs, for there are aplenty.

The man notices his wallet missing.

BEARDED PATRON
Stop that boy. Thief.

INT. TOWNHALL STAGE – CONTINUOUS

Father WHISTLES sharply, refocusing the confused theater patrons.

He extends his hand backstage and with a slow, exaggerated curling of fingers, gestures those behind to emerge.

THE FEMALE CHILDREN walk onstage, line up for inspection. Pati and Helta are noticeably absent.

FATHER (OS)
Fit strong boys abandoned, robbed of a childhood, when gold-lust beckoned their weak, cruel-hearted parents.

Izzy straightens the line, adjusts their postures.

FATHER
Did they get rich? Who knows.
Killed by your hill monsters?
Murdered by their fellow man?
If there's any justice, perhaps.

Pati peeks through the curtains, firmly holding onto her sister's hand. Father yanks her out.

He shoves his fingers deep into her mouth, opens her jaw wide, showing the girl's teeth to the audience. She gags.

FATHER
The teeth do not lie. Fit and
healthy boys to the last.

INT. TOWNHALL BACKSTAGE – CONTINUOUS

Richard moans out in severe pain. Ellen runs her fingers softly through his hair, kisses him on the forehead.

RICHARD
The Indian sisters know.

Ellen moves in closer to his ear, blows another note. Silence.

RICHARD
(throaty animal voice)
We love Alice more than you do. We
love all the children.

Ellen jumps back, startled. Richard cries out, crippling pain shoots through his body.

RICHARD
It hurts. Make it stop.

Ellen tears up, she takes a deep breath.

RICHARD
Make it stop. Make it stop.

Ellen removes THE PILLOW from behind the boy's head.

RICHARD
Please. Make them go away.

Ellen firmly presses the pillow over the boy's face. He kicks up against her. She pushes down harder. He cries out.

As he submits to her efforts, his body simmers to a gentle twitch, then comes to rest.

INT. THEATER STAGE - CONTINUOUS

People inspect Izzy and the children like cattle, examining their teeth, gums and bodies.

FATHER
For a trifle donation to the church, you can save a child of God.

A filthy, ELDERLY GOLDPANNER, stares at Helta longingly. He touches caresses her cheek.

ELDERLY GOLDPANNER
How much for the young one?

Pati slaps away the man's encroaching hand.

INT. TOWN HALL SIDE ENTRANCE - CONTINUOUS

Ellen enters. Her nun's garb attracts attention.

Behind Ellen, the bearded patron bursts through the door, with a steady grip on Fig's collar. He drags the boy inside, accidentally knocks into Ellen.

FIG
Sister.

He never breaks eye-contact with Ellen; a slight look of recognition crosses his face.

BEARDED PATRON
I knew I seen that charlatan a few months back with this same boy. They steal them kids they're hawking here. From good families.

The bearded patron pulls out his PISTOL.

BEARDED MAN
Boss dog, you ain’t no priest.

Father cowers behind the children. The crowd screams.

FATHER
Families massacred, their mothers, horrible sins done to them, don’t make me paint you a picture.

INT. THEATER NOTICE BOARD - CONTINUOUS

Covered in “Child Auction” signs, A SINGLE WANTED POSTER stands out.

It advertises Ellen, not in name, but in likeness: ‘Wanted for the Murder of Children’

Ellen rips HER WANTED POSTER from the board. A religious woman stands directly behind her.

RELIGIOUS WOMAN
Bless you dear for saving the children from the evil in these hills.

Ellen stares back toward the panicked children. She removes her black nun’s veil, her long red hair cascades down.

FATHER (OS)
Orphan children are free to claim. It’s state law. God’s law. Now back off you sons-of-bitches.

Ellen crumples her wanted poster, buries it inside HER VEIL.

She removes the glass covering from a kerosene lantern, hands it to the religious woman, notices the woman eyeing her concealed PISTOL.

ELLEN
For ten years I’ve been searching for my little girl up in those hills, and there’s something evil up in em’.

Ellen pours kerosene oil all over her veil, now pinned to the board. She looks at Father on stage, fending off his pursuers.

ELLEN
But evil's often a lot closer than you think.

With the flick of a MATCH, she lights her pinned-veil on fire.

ON THE STAGE

BEARDED MAN (OS)
How you know them parents were killed?

Father removes a RED-HANDLED PISTOL from his pocket. The men encircling him take a few steps back.

FATHER
Cause I killed them.

Fire consumes the notice board, spreads quickly up the walls.

People panic, run frantically. Smoke engulfs the room.

The bearded patron gripping Fig's collar, fires at Father.

The bullet rips through Father's arm, nearly tears it off. Blood splatters in all directions.

Fig removes a SMALL BLADE hidden within his boot, stabs the bearded man in the gut repeatedly, then in the eye. The man drops.

Father fires a headshot at the old goldpanner holding Helta's arm. His head explodes.

Helta looks down at the bits of blood and brain that coat her Sunday-school attire. Pati freezes in a state of shock.

Father slides off-stage holding his limp arm. He fires his pistol, dispersing the men who encroach him.

INT. TOWNHALL STAGE - DAY

Ellen corrals the terrified children. Izzy, now reduced to a whimpering child, kisses her CROSS NECKLACE repeatedly.

ELLEN
You speak English?

Pati, in mild shock, wipes blood from her sister's face. She looks up at Ellen, nods her head.

ELLEN
I can take you far from these hills. To a train through the mountains. An orphan train.

Pati surveys the terrified faces of all the girls. Izzy's deep sobs isolate her from the others.

ELLEN
For kids like you and your sister. All of you. Real families.

Pati spots THE PISTOL hidden under Ellen's clothes.

PATI
We don't want your kind of real families.

ELLEN
I need your help to find my daughter. We can help each other.

As the stage curtain catches fire, Izzy and the others move closer to Ellen. Pati holds her sister back. The group divides.

PATI
I need only her.

A BULLET rips through the flaming curtain. Father fires a shot intended for Ellen.

ELLEN
You hold her tight. Never let her go.

She quickly pushes the children through. Pati and her sister remain behind.

EXT. TOWNHALL - DAY

Smoke funnels out half-open windows. Patrons scurry out onto the muddy, snow-covered street. A state of overall confusion and panic ensues.

Ellen hastily lifts the children up inside –

A COVERED WAGON

one by one, they climb in. To her side, Ellen sees –

A sandy-colored mule tied up, with A DOZEN NATIVE AMERICAN SCALPS strapped across the animals back.

With the last child hidden within, Ellen fastens together the two sides of the cloth door, the words ‘Property of Shepard Hills Orphanage’ reconnect.

Ellen rips the Native American scalps off the mule, tosses them to the mud.

Immediately, A GUNSHOT WHIZZES past her head, tears through the wagon canvas. The children scream.

Father stands under –

THE TOWNHALL MAIN DOORS

A halo of flames and dense smoke surround him. He fires another wild shot, then immediately reloads.

ELLEN
Heads down, girls.

She pulls out her pistol, the swell of panicked voices and screams simmer to near silence. Ellen calmly raises a steady arm, takes aim at –

Father’s shaky hand, fumbling to reload his pistol with his one good arm. He looks up right at her. She FIRES.

The bullet severs the threads of hanging flesh. The flaccid arm falls to the ground, the wet THUD of shredded appendage.

A random townsman approaches the fallen priest, his coat removed ready to wrap around the percolating half-arm.

ELLEN
Do not help this man. Actions have consequences. He needs this lesson.

Ellen stands above Father, pistol pointed at his good arm.

FATHER
I know you. A killer of children has no right to demand nothing.

ELLEN
Ten years ago, you threw me off your wagon train, left my family to die in the snow. Forced me to give my daughter over to Jane.

Father looks for his pistol. Covered in blood, it lies slightly out of reach.

Ellen chambers a round, fires a second shot into the shoulder of his good arm. The townspeople back off. Father screams.

ELLEN
You stole everything I had, my family.

FATHER
They ain’t children no more. Not like nature intended. You can feel it when they get inside em’. I ain’t done nothing wrong.

ELLEN
I trailed you all over this country, I’ve spoken to all the families you ripped apart. Each one.

FATHER
That doubt, that hesitation you feel. Am I really doing the right thing killing those sick kids? Is it mercy or pleasure? Sometimes we can’t be sure.

Ellen places the barrel tip on his temple.

FATHER
You got the taste for it. I can tell. That never goes away.

BEHIND THE CROWD OF ONLOOKERS

Pati and Helta head toward Ellen’s wagon unnoticed.

INSIDE THE WAGON

The girls nestled together. The canvas door opens. Pati helps her sister inside.

PATI
That woman killed Richard. She will kill us all given the chance. We have to protect each other. There are no new families.

Pati walks around to the –

FRONT OF THE WAGON

The horse NEIGHS. Unexpectedly, THE THEATRICAL BEAST-MASK swings around forcefully, smacks her directly the face. She falls to the ground hard.

Fig sits atop the carriage, whips the horse in motion.

THE WAGON WHEELS tread over the fallen scalps, submerging them deeper into the mud and wet snow. Helta peers out from the back of the charging wagon.

HELTA
(in Miwok)
Sister. Get up. Pati.

Pati gets to her feet, runs hopelessly after the speeding wagon. Helta reaches out the back, crying desperately.

PATI
Helta, jump. Now, jump. Don’t be scared.

EXT. TOWNHALL – DAY

Ellen looks back over her shoulder, sees –

THE WAGON rapidly fleeing the town perimeter. Helta stands midway through the canvas opening. She grips onto the cloth that whips fiercely around her.

Pati runs behind. The distance lengthens beyond hope.

Fig looks back, flips Ellen off for the second time.

FATHER
We do everything for our children
and look how they treat us.

The escaping wagon disappears into the forest. Father smiles.

FATHER
I never hurt her. Alice is special.
Only the sick ones, just like you.
I only help the sick ones.

Reluctantly, she lowers her pistol and breaks through the encroaching crowd.

AT THE TOWN PERIMETER

Riding the sandy mule, Ellen comes to trot alongside Pati, who jogs toward the hills.

Pati lunges up for Ellen’s pistol, knocks her off the mule.

The gun falls to the ground. Pati grabs it, aims at Ellen.

ELLEN
I wish I had your strength when I
was your age.

Pati stares at the mule, her hand quivers nervously.

ELLEN
But I know where it comes from. I
can help you get your sister back.

PATI
She didn’t jump. All she had to do
was jump out.

Ellen slowly stands up, her hands out in front.

ELLEN
She was scared. Like you are now.

PATI
She’s not sick. She can’t hear
them. She only pretends she can.
She’s strong, healthy.

ELLEN
I had a sister once. And she got what she deserved up there. Your sister don't.

Pati pulls out a crumpled piece of parchment, gives it to Ellen. She unfolds it. THE WANTED HANDBILL – 'For the Murder of Children' clearly legible.

PATI
You kill children.

ELLEN
Only when they're past hope. Too far gone. I help them get free of the devil.

A momentary deadlock. Pati maintains her focus.

ELLEN
I lost family to those things. We can save ours now.

Pati slowly lowers the gun, and hands it to Ellen.

PATI
Alice may be sick. She'll see things. Some of it real, some not. She'll believe it all.

Ellen mounts the mule, reaches down to help Pati.

PATI
My village has seen sick children return from the woods. They got better.

ELLEN
They never get better. It only looks that way for a while. I've been to that dark place and I'm not going back.

PATI
If you're looking for her, you are going back.

Pati grabs her hand, mounts the mule and wraps her arms around Ellen. Together, they ride up the trail into the deep woods.

EXT. SHEPARD HILLS ORPHANAGE – DAY

HORSE HOOVES crunch down on the thick snow-covered road past THE SHEPARD HILLS ORPHANGE SIGN that lies fallen, split in shredded halves. The hooves abruptly stop.

An unnatural silence empties the woods of all life. Ellen scans the area for movement. The horse EXHALES sharply.

Ellen spots deep WAGON TRACKS carved into the snow.

Pati jumps down off the horse, inspects the tracks, looks at –

THE SNOW-COVERED ORPHANGE AND BARN

silently dormant, half-encased in fresh snowfall.

PATI
No footsteps. He never got down off the wagon. He turned fast, sped out.

Ellen steps down, hands the reigns to Pati.

PATI
He was scared.

Ellen sees something in the snow, picks up Izzy’s CATHOLIC CROSS NECKLACE. A FALLEN BRANCH SNAPS within the woods.

THICK FOREST

surrounds both sides of the narrow trail, Ellen pulls out her pistol, prepares for whatever may be moving within.

FEMALE VOICE (OS)
(slightly non-human)
Come here girlllllllll.

Suddenly, Pecks the Malamute, leaps out from the brush, her thick coat covered in blood.

Pati examines a section of fur torn from her underside, the wound fresh and still bleeding.

Cowering, the dog's terrified whimpers grow erratic. She BARKS, runs off toward –

THE BARN

Ellen watches the dog with her back to the woods.

Pati stares into the dark forest, sees movement. A SHAPE crosses between the trees. THE SOUND OF APPROACHING FOOTSTEPS.

Pati steps back, instinctively grabs Ellen's pistol from her holster. She aims at the swiftly moving shadow.

ELLEN
No, don't.

Pati FIRES. The shot impacts. A child's painful WAIL.

The BUSHES explode. Izzy falls through, hits the ground at their feet. In shock, Pati drops the pistol.

Ellen picks up the fallen child, examines the spot the bullet entered below her shoulder. Izzy moans.

IZZY
(in faint whispers)
Alice. Don't touch me. Alice, no.
Your hands. Your hands, stop.

Ellen turns the girl over. Her entire back looks like a briar-bush of shredded flesh.

ELLEN
Never fire at what you cannot see.

Ellen picks up her weapon, returns it to Pati.

ELLEN
Fix your eyes to the woods, you
glimpse anything unnatural, shoot
the knees first, then the throat.
I hear the shots, I'll come
running back.

Izzy, mumbling incoherently, bleeds into the snow.

IZZY
Alice is a monster. A monster.

INT. BARN – DAY

The heavy BARN DOOR creaks open. Ellen stands in the doorframe, sees –

A CHARRED PIECE OF A CHILD’S DRESS within an ash ring of burnt hay. The SOUND OF A HORSE DEEPLY EXHALING.

The violated MARE stands firmly ahead, plants an aggressive hoof, exposes her large teeth. She SNORTS challengingly.

Ellen slowly approaches from the side, holding her hand out, averting her eyes. She sees a POOL OF BLOOD under the animal.

ELLEN
(to the horse)
What happened to you?

ALICE (OS)
She’s sick.

IN THE DARK STALL CORNER

Alice hides behind the fierce mare.

ALICE (OS)
But she won’t hurt me. She’s protecting me.

Ellen walks in closer. The mare SNORTS again.

ALICE (OS)
The hairy man did it. Made her sick. He put something in her belly. I saw it moving.

ELLEN
(choking up)
Alice? I can’t see you. Come out from there. Let me see your face.

The horse NEIGHS LOUDLY, grows increasingly agitated. Ellen moves in closer, looks between the horse’s legs.

ELLEN
Show me your pretty face.

Ellen crouches down. The horse STOMPS the ground.

ALICE
My brother Richard. He’s sick.

Alice moves out of the darkness. Faintly crying, she intentionally hides her hands under her coat.

Ellen recognizes her daughter immediately. She cries.

ELLEN
Alice, my god. I’ve found you.
I found you. Come out of there.

ALICE
They’ll punish me more if I
leave.

Alice scoots out, dangerously close to the stomping mare.

ALICE
Sometimes they show me things
that don’t seem right. Like my
hands. I’m scared.

Suddenly, AN UNNATURAL SHAPE inside the horse’s belly shifts, a slow, horrifically unsetting wave rolls across the flesh.

Ellen sees it, looks at Alice.

ELLEN
Grab my hand, Alice.

The animal emits A GUTTERAL WAIL, then suddenly kicks up. Its legs repeatedly SLAM into the wall next to the young girl.
Terrified, she screams. The boards splinter.

EXT. FORESTED TREELINE – DAY

Pati, alerted by the LOUD CRASHING from the barn, cocks back the pistol hammer.

She places her open palm above Izzy’s mouth. The girl, no longer breathing, lies dead.

LARGE SHAPES cross in the forest. Pati nervously aims at them.

PATI
The coward shoots with shut eyes.

The pack mule next to her nervously stomps its feet in the snow, CRUNCHING down, SNORTING wildly.

INT. BARN – DAY

Hearing A GUNSHOT, Ellen turns momentarily toward it.

The afflicted horse, bucking wildly, repeatedly smashes the barn walls. Alice cries in terror, trapped behind the animal.

ELLEN
Alice, reach for my hand.

The pounding hoof splinters a hole in the wall, large enough for a child to squeeze through. Alice looks out, her hands still hidden.

ALICE
I’m afraid to touch you. They changed me.

The panicked horse bolts forward, barreling into Ellen, knocking her against the stall post. She falls to the floor.

Grounded, Ellen stares out, temporarily immobile, toward –

THE HOLE IN THE BARN WALL

Alice crawls through, disappears outside.

A LOUD THUMP as something lands on the barn roof. The impact sends HUGE CLUMPS OF SNOW falling off, blocking the newly formed hole in the wall.

The afflicted mare bolts out -

THE BARN DOOR

slams shut, light diminishes, a haunting dread manifests.

A LARGE SHADOWED FORM crosses into the light. Ellen glimpses its massive physique, before it falls back into darkness.

She crawls toward the small hole blocked by snow.

ELLEN
(screams)
She’s mine. You can’t have her.

Ellen frantically digs away at the compacted snow with her bare hands. A DOG GROWLS. She glances over, sees -

Pecks barking protectively, defends her from the unseen beast.

EXT. TREELINE – DAY

Pati slowly walks backwards in terror, her eyes transfixed on the woods. She watches –

Izzy’s DEAD BODY swiftly dragged, feet first, back into the woods. A TRAIL OF BLOOD streaks the path.

Pati drops the pistol, dashes up –

THE HILL

toward the barn. She slams into the afflicted barn horse.

She falls to the ground. The horse crosses directly over her.

Pati looks up, as THE LARGE SHAPE inside the animal’s stomach engorges, like a pulsating tumor. An ODD TONAL SOUND vibrates from it.

Suddenly, Ellen’s pack mule collapses. Blood drains from its eyes, at first a few drops, then gushes out.

In the distance, a rider on horseback rapidly approaches, his identity unclear.

EXT. HOLE ON THE BARN WALL – DAY

The thick snow blocking the hole shudders. A HAND reaches through. VICIOUS BARKING from within the barn.

Ellen emerges, desperately struggles to pull herself free from the small opening. The barn wood presses up against her body.

A shadow crosses in front. She looks up, sees Alice.

ELLEN
I’m stuck. Take my hand.

Alice stares at Ellen’s hand.

ALICE
Are you real?

ELLEN
I’m your mother, Alice. I have come back for you.

Ellen again reaches up toward her daughter.

ALICE
They made me a monster. My hands.

ELLEN
I’m here now and they can’t hurt you anymore.

Alice removes her hand from under her coat. It appears completely normal, nothing noticeably strange. She breathes a sigh of relief.

At the moment their fingers are about to touch, ANOTHER HAND seizes Alice’s waist, pulls her back hard.

Father, holds the girl close to him. His severed arm, in a sling, around his chest.

FATHER
Your friend Jane, she lost her mind. Ran off a long time ago. Before she did, she burned her boy to hell, left him, and yours with me. That woman failed all of us.

ELLEN
Let go of my child.

FATHER
I thank you for stopping me from hanging that boy. When anger grabs hold, it’s hard to let go.

Ellen furiously attempts to free herself.

FATHER
Everyone needs family. He and I made a lot of money uniting families all over this country. He’s like a son to me. You gave me that.

Father reaches down, grabs Alice’s hand, kisses it.

FATHER
Red Alice here, don’t need a family the way you think she does, not anymore. I’ve been keeping her for myself. Years invested. And she’s practically a woman now.

Ellen screams. The barn wood splinters into her side, as she unsuccessfully attempts to push through.

FATHER
Out here, a man can forgive another man for shooting him, but not no women.

Alice looks at her hand. She stares up at Father, smiles sweetly.

ALICE
I never asked you to touch me.

Alice tightens her grip. Her fingers appear to grow around Father’s, consuming them within her own.

FATHER
Let me go, girl. What the devil?

ALICE
You shouldn’t touch someone unless they let you. Now, you’ll hear them too.

Father desperately pulls his hand away, grabs his pistol. He aims at Ellen. Suddenly, HIS THROAT explodes.

His body collapses lifelessly.

Pati stands, smoking pistol in hand at the side of the barn.

PATI
(stammering)
They ate the mule. Ate it.

Ellen stares at Father's contorted, limp body. Blood pools rapidly around his neck and head. His red-handled pistol lies at his side.

A forceful POUNDING from inside the barn hurls a wooden plank off at the far corner. A second BOARD smashes off.

ELLEN
Get me out of here.

Pati runs over to her, pulls with all her strength. A third and fourth board flies off. BARKING resumes inside the barn.

With a forceful final pull, her board snaps. Pati frees Ellen.

Ellen grabs her pistol, FIRES a shot blindly through the exposed barn opening. The pounding stops, as does the barking.

ELLEN
Right now. Let's go.

PATI
His gun?

ELLEN
No. A red handle's bad luck.

Ellen grabs Alice, pulls her. She resists.

ELLEN
Alice, we have to leave. Now.

Alice stands, looking in the barn hole.

ALICE
Come here girl. Come out girl.

Ellen puts her arms around Alice.

ALICE
(crying)
Richard loved that dog.

ELLEN
That boy wasn't your brother. He belonged to someone else and he's gone now.

Pati secretly picks up Father's RED-HANDLED PISTOL, tucks it under her clothing.

Ellen clutches Alice by her coat sleeve, drags her away from the barn. Alice fixates determinedly on –

THE HOLE

Nothing emerges, uneasy stillness. Suddenly, a YELP. The dog pops through, runs toward them, her fur a patchwork red.

ALICE
Good girl. Good girl.

Behind them, Father's body is slowly dragged into the hole.

His lifeless FINGERS pulled along the snow disappear into the darkness. GUTTERAL GRUNTS.

EXT. BOTTOM OF THE HILL – DAY

Pati stands above the half-eaten dead mule, holding the saddle. Father's DEAD HORSE next to it.

The afflicted barn horse SNORTS LOUDLY, slowly approaches.

ALICE
She won't hurt me. We ride her.

PATI
That thing ain't natural. Got one of them in its belly.

Alice reaches her hand up, the horse lowers its head. She strokes it gently. The dog GROWLS nervously.

ALICE
Told you.

Ellen holsters her weapon, looks at Pati.

ELLEN
Let’s go find your sister.

EXT. LOWER SIERRA NEVADAS – DAY

Helta looks out the back of the swiftly moving wagon, sees –

A PAIR OF CHINESE LABOR WORKERS, weighed down with heavy supply bags and railroad materials, hiding within the brush.

Scanning the brush behind, Helta glimpses A LARGE MONSTROUS FIGURE in silhouette step out.

The wagon horse NEIGHS, bucks up. The wagon jolts.

Helta loses her balance, lunges face-first outward. She lands hard on the snow-packed ground. The orphan children SCREAM.

Helta watches as the wagon rides off.

The children peek out through the canvas curtain, visible until the wagon clears the hill.

Helta surveys the woods in mild panic. THE SOUND OF A BREAKING BRANCH nearby alerts her attention toward -

An unclear MASSIVE SHAPE. It drops like a spider on all fours, bending unnaturally low, indecipherably fast.

Trembling, she covers her ears. A PAIR OF GUTTERAL VOICES communicate in near-human articulation. It soon disintegrates into horrific BARKING.

Helta hides. THE ODD BARKING stops, silence. A HUMAN WHISTLE.

Both Chinese labor workers signal Helta to approach.

With unfathomable speed, THE LARGE BEAST bursts through the forest behind him. It cracks the man’s body into a tree.

Helta darts off. Branches slash her face.

She trips, falls on –

SNOW COVERED RAILTRACKS

She looks up the railway leading toward –

THE SIERRA NEVADA MOUNTAIN RANGE that looms beyond.

MATCH CUT TO:

EXT. RAILWAY – DAY

Pati looks up toward the same mountains.

The bloody, desecrated bodies of the two Chinese railworkers lie on the ground below.

ELLEN (OS)
She’s heading up, smart girl.

Ellen kneels down at a set of CHILD’S FOOTPRINTS along a ridgeline just above the tracks.

ELLEN
We’re a few hours behind. She can make it from here on foot.

PATI
So can we. We’ve got to kill that sick horse.

EXT. TRAILHEAD - DAY

Alice sits alone atop the afflicted horse. The animal SNORTS sharply, startling Alice.

ALICE
Everything’s okay.

The Malamute sniffs the horse’s underside, WHIMPERS.

Alice rests her head on the horse’s neck.

ALICE
She wouldn’t do that. That’s not true.

Alice appears to fall into a small trance.

ALICE
Nobody hurt Richard. He’s fine.
No. She didn’t do that. You lie.

Alice’s body twitches oddly, seizures pulse. She falls limply off the horse.

She convulses on the ground. The dog barks at the horse’s belly. It expands and quivers.

The horse wildly stomps its feet inches from Alice’s head.

Alice, still seizing, opens her eyes. She watches the HOOVES thrashing dangerously close to her face, helpless.

ALICE
Don’t punish me. Don’t punish me.

Pecks runs up the hill barking.

RAILWAY TREELINE - CONTINUOUS

Ellen hears the barking, immediately runs back to -

EXT. THE TRAILHEAD - DAY

The belly of the barn horse looks like a flesh-balloon burst wide. The carcass and guts are spewed about beside her.

Alice lies motionless beside the animal.

Ellen scoops the fallen girl from the mess, holds her.

ELLEN
Alice. Open your eyes. Alice, wake up.

Ellen removes the girl’s blood-soaked coat. She pulls her child in close, listens for a heartbeat.

ELLEN
She’s alive. Alice, wake up girl.

Pati looks down at the decimated horse. A trail of blood curves toward the spot where Alice fell.

PATI (OS)
Something crawled out of the belly. This animal burst from the inside.

Suddenly, blood drains from Alice's nose.

ELLEN
We got to get to that train.

EXT. CENTRAL PACIFIC SUPPLY TRAIN – DAY

A mild blizzard peppers the Shepard Hills WAGON, half-covered in snow, its front wheel torn from the hinges. THE CANVAS, shredded, flaps freely in the harsh wind.

The horse that drove it, lies disemboweled, eaten.

A FOUR-CAR WOOD SUPPLY TRAIN sleeps on tracks that run uphill. Large claw markings have been ripped into the sides.

The train engine is a specially modified JULL-SNOW PLOW with a massive CORKSCREW METAL-DRILL mounted menacingly to the front.

The enormous drill, currently malfunctioning, vibrates hopelessly against an imposing ten foot –

ICE-PACKED SNOW WALL

A HAND holding A CLEAR JAR, filled with a murky yellow-liquid, reaches into a hole dug deep into the ice wall.

FEMALE VOICE (OS)
Do not set that nitro in the snow.

Fig turns to the voice.

FIG
We have to blast out of here. Those things will come back. They will kill us. God have mercy.

A WOMAN, weaponless but powerfully commanding in presence, steps out from behind the train. It is Musty Jane, 10 years older, the same VIOLET SHAWL, blood-stained and slightly torn, wrapped around her neck.

JANE
The cold from the ice will cause instant combustion. They'd find an arm or two here and the rest of you three counties over.

Jane holds up her left hand, layers of severe scar tissue from a decade-old explosives injury visible.

JANE
A single drop...

Fig stares at the injury, then at his arm, half-submerged.

Jane notices Fig's RIFLE propped up against the snow.

FIG
Don't even think about it.

JANE
Seeing you again makes me think about a lot of things.

Past the train, Jane sees HAZY FIGURES approaching on foot.

She grabs the rifle, chambers a bullet, runs off.

FIG
You get me out of here, I'll give you half what I make selling the kids. I'll blow us all up, I swear to god I will.

The Jull-corkscrew, a colossal piece of machinery, jolts slightly. It attempts to rotate. GEARS GRINDING, cuts off.

CONDUCTOR (OS)
Half sounds fair to me.

AN ARM reaches out from the space between the drill and the train housing, grabs a TOOL from the snow.

CONDUCTOR
You got a buyer for them kids on the other side?

Fig looks back over at his hand in the hole.

FIG
There's always a buyer.

CONDUCTOR
I get you through the hills, we get rid of her, even split. Now pull your arm out of that hole. Show me you're more than what my eyeballs see, boy.

EXT. BACK OF THE TRAIN – DAY

Black smoke wafts out from under the last train car. Jane peers below, sees –

BARE CHILDREN'S LEGS, flesh searing as flames burn, yet they stand calmly.

The legs walk slowly to the back of train. Jane follows, turns the corner, nothing.

RICHARD (OS)
It burns Mommy. It burns.

Again, Jane looks under the train, sees –

Richard, age 5, his blonde hair unmistakable. He crouches down, his upper body and arms on fire.

RICHARD
Mommy.

Jane bolts upright. The smoke stops. The air immediately clear, as if the child was never there. A DOG BARKING.

In front of the approaching shadows, A CHINESE LABOR WORKER stands, waving at Jane. He smiles, then explodes instantly.

Crimson vapor dissipates into the blizzard haze. Through it, THE APPROACHING INDIVIDUALS emerge. The malamute in the lead.

Ellen, exhausted, lumbers up with Alice strapped to her back. Pati runs alongside.

EXT. TRAIN CABOOSE – CONTINUOUS

Jane fixes her rifle at the group. They stop walking.

JANE
Don’t bring them here. Go back. It’s not safe.

Ellen peers through the falling snow.

ELLEN
Where are the children? Are they safe?

Jane fires a shot in the air.

JANE
The Central Pacific don’t stand for the trafficking of children, despite what you may have heard.

Ellen sees the decimated wagon, quickly surveys the damage.

She looks up at Jane for the first time, recognizes her instantly. Jane lowers her rifle.

ELLEN
Jane?

JANE
I know you?

Ellen stands directly in front of her.

ELLEN
Look at my face and tell me you don’t know who I am. Look at my daughter’s face. And tell me.

Jane looks past her toward the wrecked wagon and the shredded canvas, “Shepard Hills Orphanage” visible.

Ellen tugs at the violet shawl around Jane’s neck.

ELLEN
Father’s dead. You remember him?

INT. TRAIN CABOOSE - DAY

The busted door opens. Ellen looks in, discovers the orphans huddled together. Their faces terrified, a child screams.

Ellen lays Alice's comatose body in front of the children. They all quickly back away. Pati darts inside.

FEMALE ORPHAN
Don't close us in here with her.

PATI
Where's Helta? Where is she?

SECOND ORPHAN
She fell out of the wagon. Before the monsters came.

The dog runs in and nestles up close to Alice. Ellen looks over at the far corner, sees –

NUMEROUS SMALL BARRELS stacked up. Some are marked "Glycerin" others "Nitrate" and others as "Sulfuric Acid."

JANE
Harmless when separated, but a little fire, a basic kettle, the right proportions.

Ellen lovingly covers her daughter with an animal fur from a pile in the corner. She kisses her head.

JANE (OS)
Railroad got the Chinese blowing themselves up doing it. Still can't get through that mountain. Tunnel's a dead end.

ELLEN
Alice stays with the nitro. Alone. We move the others.

Jane looks down at Alice.

ELLEN
We have to get this train running.

EXT. SIDE OF THE TRAIN – DAY

Ellen and Jane walk swiftly. The children follow.

JANE (OS)
We barreled through a good bit of it until we hit that snow wall, jammed right up. Then they attacked.

THE SECOND TRAINCAR DOOR

marked “Non-Flammables” slides open revealing a completely empty space.

ELLEN
They take away the things we don’t deserve. You told me that.

The children rush inside.

ELLEN
I’m not losing her again.

EXT. SECOND “NON-FLAMMABLES” TRAIN CAR – CONTINUOUS

Ellen secures THE DOOR closed. She looks Jane directly in the eyes, then down at the rifle gripped in her anxious hands.

Ellen slams Jane up against the sidecar.

ELLEN
She was my baby. I trusted you.

JANE
I had no choice. To survive out here a women’s gotta be ten times tougher than any man. And I couldn’t do it.

Suddenly, the train jolts forward. The children POUND on the train door from within.

JANE
When we hand our problems off to others, we have a chance to become someone else.

Pati jumps down from the roof, runs off into the hills without saying goodbye.

JANE
Take Thomas. I’ll tell my sister he died. She’ll understand. Your words.

Ellen releases her collar, pulls away.

JANE
Just like that Indian. People run. Most people. We just leave our problems. This country's built by people who ran away from something else.

ELLEN
She's not leaving. She going for her sister. That girl would never do the things we done.

The train jolts again, the wheels lift off the tracks.

Jane looks along the train toward the drill car. LOUD MALE SCREAMS echo from the front. A FIGURE dashes into the hills.

ELLEN
I'll kill all those kids if need be to save them from those things. Alice too if it comes to it. You don't get to stop me.

JANE
I won't stand in your way.

INT. NITRO CAR – DAY

On the floor, Alice stares over at –

THE NITRO BARRELS. The car shakes again. The strap loosens, the heavy barrels inch forward slightly.

Alice emits an ODD TONAL SOUND. The dog bolts up, BARKS anxiously.

BEHIND THE NITRO BARRELS

A figure stands in the shadows, watching her.

INT. TRAIN DRILL HOUSING - DAY

Jane peers nervously inside, rifle in hand. THE HUM OF THE PULSATING JAMMED DRILL, grinding gears half-rotate, suddenly shut down, exposing a canvas of smeared blood.

RICHARD (OS)
It burns, Mommy.

Startled, Jane tenses up, takes a step back.

A BLOODY HAND slowly creeps out from the darkness of the drill-house. She fires a shot.

The housing lights up, reveals THE OLD CONDUCTOR. He slides down. The TRAIN TOOLS in his hand fall.

CONDUCTOR
(garbled)
Kill that boy.

INT. NITRO CAR – DAY

Fig emerges from behind the nitro barrels, body shaking.

ALICE
You want to feel it? My soft skin.

Alice reaches her hand out, fingers extended, unnaturally folded back too far, oddly gruesome.

ALICE
I said you can, so you can now.
You have my permission. Touch it.

Fig takes a step closer. The train car shakes again. The nitro barrel loosens a bit more, rolls forward a few inches.

ALICE
When we were kids, you used to hold
my hand all the time.

Fig takes another step forward, reaches out. Alice grabs his hand, pulls the boy in close.

Her FINGERS grow monstrously and completely engulf his hand.

FIG
(mumbles)
Let me go. Don’t. Don’t.

ALICE
When I'd run away, you'd find me. You knew my hiding spot. That burrow in the woods. You'd crawl inside, sit with me and hold my hand. I'll never tell Father where you go, you'd promise me each time you found me.

Alice squeezes ever harder. Fig's face tenses up, flushes red. His eyes squint painfully.

ALICE
You told me I should never run away cause one day my mother would come back for me. And, I wouldn't be there. I'd miss her.

FIG
Alice, let go.

ALICE
Why did you lie to me?

Blood trickles down his forearm. He screams.

FIG
He told me you were special. That we'd be a family.

ALICE
They want me to make you someone special.

Alice whispers inaudibly into his ear, places her free hand on the back of his head. Her hand enlarges, envelops his head like a cocoon and swallows hers within it as well.

INT. THE NITRO CAR DOOR - CONTINUOUS

The latch moves, it opens. Ellen enters.

Alice, eyes closed, rests alone on the floor. She appears comatose, unchanged from last time Ellen saw her. Light snow gently falls down on her through AN OPEN CEILING HATCH.

Ellen kneels next to her daughter. She reaches for Alice’s hand, which has returned to normal size and appearance. She holds it.

ELLEN
Your name is Alice Gayle Woods, born in the Black Hills, Ireland. You were my first-born.

Ellen removes THE HARMONICA from her inner pocket.

ELLEN
We made it all the way to this country together, in my arms the entire journey, babies screaming all around, but not you.

Ellen moves in closer to Alice, kisses her daughter.

ELLEN
Show me again how strong you are.

Ellen BLOWS a few notes on the malformed harmonica. The girl’s body quivers.

ELLEN
Whatever they tell you, it’s all lies. Find the sound, Alice. They don’t like it. You find it.

Ellen plays another silent note. Alice does not respond.

ELLEN
Thomas wasn’t strong enough, but you are.

Ellen plays the harmonica again.

Alice emits AN ODD HUMMING SOUND, quiet but discernable.

Ellen gently strokes her daughter’s hair.

ALICE
He was. But you killed Thomas, you monster.

Ellen immediately cries, a deep, heaving breath.

ALICE
(animal sounds)
And you liked it.

Alice twitches sharply.

She opens her mouth wide. A DEMON'S HAND lunges out. It grabs Ellen by the throat.

Ellen panics. She grabs the animal skins, rolls them into a solid mass of thick woven hide and fur. She presses them down hard over Alice's face.

ELLEN
I won't let them have you.

She pushes the furs down even harder. Alice starts to fight back, her legs kick up.

---A SERIES OF QUICK SHOTS---

-- THOMAS, age 12, stands at the edge of a wood line, hammers on something with the butt of an AXE.

--He picks the object up, forcefully shapes it, before lifting THE WARPED HARMONICA to his lips. SMALL BONES, hollowed-out, protrude from each opening; blood stains and gristle remain.

--He blows. The instrument emits the same OFF-KEY TONAL SOUND, blood on his lips.

--He looks out toward the forest. The same tonal sound responds to his playing. He bends the metal and bone again, blows. This time it plays silently.

--Ellen, mid-20s, watches him through a sodbuster window, as he talks inaudibly to the forest. The boy's disposition shifts, enraged, screaming inaudibly into the woods.

--In the trees, A HIDEOUS FACE emerges, demonic. She sees it, for a split second. Thomas suddenly stands directly in front of the window, looking in at her, mouthing words.

--He blows another silent note. Screams into the woods. He turns to face the window, blood covers his lower face.

THOMAS
They don’t like the sound. They don’t like it.

--Ellen slowly backs away from the window, afraid.

--Thomas sleeps, emitting ODD TONES. Ellen crying, holds a pillow above his head, looks down at him.

--THE MALFORMED METAL AND BONE HARMONICA slides across the floor. It spins, kicking up dust and hay. Thomas’s legs kick.

MATCH CUT TO:

Alice’s LEGS kicking desperately. Her muffled screams heard.

Ellen, in a daze, presses down with all her strength.

Suddenly, A RIFLE BARREL cracks her from behind.

Alice, choking, gasps for air. Jane picks Alice up, coaxes the life back into her.

JANE
Breathe. Deep breaths. Breathe. Come on, Alice.

Ellen sits motionless, through the blur of wet eyes and confusion and watches Alice recover.

ELLEN
I’m sorry. I’m sorry.

Ellen sits up, cries uncontrollably. Jane pulls her in close, holds the three of them tightly, a small unit of strength.

ELLEN
I never loved him right. When he got sick, I gave up on him. I killed my sister’s child.

Alice opens her eyes, looks up at Ellen.

ELLEN
I’ve hurt a lot of kids. I didn’t want to hurt her, but they don’t get better, Jane. They don’t.

JANE
They might. If we believe they can. They just might. They need family.

ELLEN
I killed your boy too. He was sick, too far gone. I don't want to be like this anymore.

JANE
I wanted a boy to call my own, I was crazy for the idea. What Father and I was doing, weren't right, but I did it. My Richard. My baby. That child's real family had no food, no water, their crop was nothing but husks. So I told myself I was doing good. I got a son just like I wanted. Stole him from his mother's arms. I didn't deserve that child either.

ELLEN
I'm sorry.

JANE
You got a second chance here.

Jane looks over at THE NITRO. The dog paces in front.

ALICE
Mommy?

Jane looks back at Ellen, who wipes the tears from her eyes.

JANE
We get that drill working. Blast through that tunnel. Save all these kids.

EXT. TRAIN ENGINE FRONT – EARLY EVENING

Ellen inspects the conductor's body, discovers gnarled gashes across his back.

ELLEN
Only chance any of us have is cracking through this ice.

Jane stands guard, peering deep into the forest.

JANE
I need to get in there, take a look at what's jamming it up. A working drill's our only option.

Jane squeezes –

INSIDE THE VIBRATING DRILL HOUSE

the bloody walls slick. She peers deep into the inner working of the machinery, nervously reaches her hand inside the dark pulsating metal space.

The drill lurches a bit, she quickly extracts her hand.

EXT. TRAIN FRONT – CONTINUOUS

Ellen sees A LARGE SHAPE moving in the forest ahead. It moves behind a tree, remains hidden there.

She aims at the tree, eyes fixed on the entity's hiding spot.

A LARGE BRANCH drops from high up, comes crashing down.

In the upper branches, Ellen sees THE SAME HIDEOUS DEMONIC CREATURE that she glimpsed behind Thomas years prior.

Larger than any human, its muscular body flexes. Its flesh covered in patches of black hair like a dog with mange, the exposed skin grey and scabbed. Its dead eyes, a cavernous void, fixate on Ellen.

GUTTERAL VOICE (VO)
They never get better.

INSIDE THE DRILL HOUSING – CONTINUOUS

Jane watches Ellen slowly lift her pistol and fire up.

THE LOUD BLAST echoes throughout the valley. Nothing falls from the tree.

She quickly grabs Jane's RIFLE, propped up against the drill housing and FIRES two more shots.

Jane slides back out the housing. Her clothes catch on the lurching drill. It cuts her arm slightly. She bleeds.

ELLEN
It spoke to me. Heard its voice.

JANE
These kids aren't alone anymore and these things know it.

She hands Jane back her rifle.

ELLEN
They're animals. Flesh and blood. And animals can be killed.

The drill jolts, a violent surge of built-up friction.

JANE
If I heat up the nitro a bit, I can use it to soften the metal, unjam it. I can fix the drill. But I won't be able to shut it down.

Ellen looks at THE DRILL churning more discordantly, daring someone to fix it. She notices Jane's bleeding arm.

JANE
I can press up against the inside of the housing, away from it, and squeeze out. I can make it out in time.

ELLEN
No way. We nitro the ice.

JANE
I need the nitro for the tunnel. There's still a few feet of solid rock yet.

Without warning, A LARGE ROCK, lobbed through the air barely misses Jane's head and smashes into the side of the engine car. A SECOND ROCK hits the train, dents the metal frame.

Ellen and Jane dash –

UNDER THE FIRST CAR

Reaching her arm out, Ellen fires a single shot into the woods. BEASTLY VOCALIZATIONS call out, then fall silent.

JANE
I doing this. Regardless.

ELLEN
That drill turns even once with you in there.

JANE
I never let him have your baby. He ripped her from my arms, kicked me off like you. I set fire to Richard so he couldn't have him. I poured nitro all over his little body. This is my second chance too.

Jane smiles for the first time, her face softens.

JANE
This gives me worth.

Behind Jane, A PAIR OF FEET run past. A DOG BARKING.

Ellen sees Alice run off into the thicket. She instinctively dashes off after her, pistol in hand.

EXT. TRAIN DRILL – EARLY EVENING

The grinding gears of the jammed drill rumble the train.

A STEAM GASKET bursts from the engine. THE BOLT sizzles into the ice wall, burrowing a deep steaming hole. VAPOR rises.

MATCH CUT TO:

INT. ENGINE CAR – CONTINUOUS

STEAM ENGINE VAPOR heats a kettle that Jane babies over the hot air. She carefully observes the bubbling liquid.

THROUGH THE TRAIN ENGINE WINDOW

Daylight fades. The forest behind the ice wall darkens.

The train lurches forward, the kettle shakes in Jane’s hand.

A small amount of warm nitro spills onto the train floor, SIZZLES as black smoke rises.

JANE
Easy, easy, easy now.

EXT. DEEP FOREST – EARLY EVENING

Ellen follows ALICE’S FOOTSTEPS over a ridge, down into –

A CLEARING

finds Alice, bent over, her head and half-body hidden partially within a burrowed snow tunnel. Trickles of blood surround the hole.

Ellen stops in her tracks.

ALICE
She’s sick. She ran inside. I can get her.

ELLEN
Come out Alice. Leave her be.

Alice scurries deeper in the hole. Ellen rushes to grab her, but she’s too late.

ALICE
(from deep inside)
I hear her. She’s sick.

Ellen digs away at the snow, reaches in further.

ALICE
I can feel her fur. She’s shivering. It’s so cold in here. I got her.

Behind Ellen, A LARGE SHADOW moves, CRACKS A BRANCH. Ellen looks back. Fear overtakes her.

ELLEN
Let go of the dog, Alice.

Ellen pulls back forcefully, but her child does not emerge.

ANOTHER BRANCH breaks nearby. HUFFING DEEP BREATHS echo. A large creature approaches.

Ellen pulls hard, TEARS a piece of Alice’s dress. She falls back. The girl still stuck deep inside.

ALICE
(screams)
Let me go. It won’t let me go.

Ellen pulls out her gun. NUMEROUS LARGE SHADOWS surround her.

She FIRES blindly into the forest. THE SHOT ECHOES.

INT. DRILL HOUSING – EARLY EVENING

Holding the steaming kettle of nitro, Jane squeezes into the small space. Her clothes snag the vibrating drill.

From deep within the forest, GUNSHOTS ECHO. Jane looks out.

IN FRONT OF THE GEAR BOX

She sets her RIFLE up against the wall.

With her free hand, removes a small BLACK POWDER POUCH from her inner pocket. She uses her teeth to open it.

She spits out some powder unintentionally consumed. As she wipes her lips on her collar, she accidentally drops the pouch onto the drill housing floor.

She takes a deep breath. The drill VIBRATES violently.

Built-up steam pressure HISSES. A cloud of hot air bursts within the housing. Visibility lessens by the second.

Jane gently places the hot kettle on the vibrating gear housing. The hot liquid splashes within.

With the pulsating drill shaking the kettle above her head, she bends down to retrieve the fallen pouch.

The drill shakes again. The kettle teeters on edge.

She grabs the pouch, and quickly rebalances the wobbly kettle. Nothing spills. She exhales.

JANE
God, I promise to pray more. Maybe even go to chapel on occasion.

Jane reaches into the dark gearbox, pours black power onto the jammed interiors, and rubs it around evenly.

She lodges her rifle up against the drill, securing it.

THE DRILL convulses. The train shakes, building and releasing bellowing clouds of hot steam.

Jane lifts the nitro kettle into the gear box, her arm deep within.

The train rolls unexpectedly forward. THE WHEELS rotate, slamming the TIP OF THE DRILL BIT against the ice-wall.

HOT NITRO spills all over the gear interior.

CRACKING POWER BURSTS, a partially obscured fireworks display. SPARKS fly out, burning Jane’s cheeks and forehead.

METAL SIZZLES. The jammed bit CLANKS free, allowing the heavy drill to rotate partially, trapping Jane’s arm.

She screams out in desperation. Pain shoots through her body.

Her rifle wobbles in place. Its fragile metal body bends under the stress of the churning drill.

A HAND suddenly latches onto the butt of the gun.

Jane looks up, sees Fig. His hand clenches the rifle.

EXT. FOREST CLEARING – CONTINUOUS

Ellen reaches back into the small hole, grabs Alice.

ELLEN
I got you. Now let the dog go.

Unexpectedly, the white snow surrounding the small hole, morphs a deep red like a bloated bloody sponge.

ALICE (OS)
(demonic)
A real mother would never give up her child.

Ellen's arm is yanked deeper within, knocking her head and face against the bloody snow bank.

Her PISTOL drops near her feet, she reaches for it.

Her fingers swipe the shaft, but fail to grasp it.

Icy snow cuts her face with every hard jolt.

INT. DRILL HOUSE – CONTINUOUS

Jane cries. Gears grind against her arm. Smoke rises.

Fig makes no effort to help her.

JANE
You're not a bad kid. Please, we can help you. You just need someone to turn you around. Show you things. Take care of you.

Fig stares at Jane, hesitates. He swallows.

JANE
Help us get these kids through the hills. You're a good kid, I know it. Please. We can find you a new family, I'm sure.

The nitro catches fire within the housing. Jane's arm catches fire. Her flesh burns. Fig inhales deeply.

FIG
You watched him burn. His screams. His horrible screams.

Using her free hand, Jane vigorously attempts to pull the lodged rifle out. Smoke thickens.

FIG
Burning flesh smells like no other.

The drill rotates down harder on her burning arm. Finally, she yanks the rifle free and fires a single shot.

The bullet slices Fig's cheek, tearing his flesh.

He drops to the snow. Blood flows down his face.

The train grinds forward. The drill spins. Cracks in the ice wall begin to spread.

EXT. SNOW TUNNEL – CONTINUOUS

The dark and vacuous hole consumes Ellen, contorts her body, as she fights to reach her gun.
Her fingers loop the hammer. She fires a shot into the hole.

Instantly, it releases her. She falls to the ground.

The hole retches out a churning funnel of blood and carnage.

The red snow that surrounds her on all sides turns back to white. The blood dissipates like vapor up in the air.

EXT. TRAIN – NIGHT

The drill cracks the ice wall, rotates full throttle. Steam HISSES out. The train crunches forward.

Fountains of SNOW shoot out in pillars from exit pipes.

EXT. SNOW TUNNEL – NIGHT

Hearing the train grind forward, Ellen looks back and sees the snow shooting up into the night sky.

Ellen looks at her hand. It is covered in bite marks, the flesh torn and bleeding.

Behind her, MOVEMENT within the small hole. Ellen looks back.

Alice slides out, soaked in thick blood. Crying, she looks up at Ellen.

ALICE
(normal voice)
I don’t hear them anymore.

She lifts her arms to be held. Ellen picks her up and embraces her child. THE SOUND OF THE TRAIN cracking ice.

ELLEN
Get on my back.

Alice looks back at the hole in the ice wall. Faint DOG WHIMPERS from deep within. Ellen restrains.

ALICE
She needs our help.

The Malamute sticks her head out of the hole, her sad eyes watery and afraid. She WHIMPERS again. Alice reaches out.

The dog exposes a LARGE MOUTFUL OF OVERSIZED CANINES, which appear to grow as her jaw widens. She BARKS, but more like a half-roar.

Alice screams. The encroaching forest shadows return. Their oddly shaped silhouettes expand upwards near ten feet tall.

Ellen lifts Alice onto her back, runs at full sprint toward the moving train. LOUD ICE CRACKS echo as the drill bursts through the ice wall.

Alice watches as the dog mutates mouth first. Its flesh tears back, the inner body bursts through. Entrails drip.

The enormous demonic creature emerges completely. It stands upright, a half-dozen other creatures materialize behind it.

Flanked on both sides by sprinting creatures, Ellen runs, pistol in hand. Alice grips desperately to her.

The creatures hurl rocks from both sides, narrowly missing.

The train spews out funnels of crushed ice. It lumbers forward just ahead of them.

INT. TRAIN NITRO CAR – NIGHT

Fig stares at THE SMALL BARRELS OF EXPLOSIVE CHEMICALS.

He releases the safety strap. The barrels hit the floor.

The contents of a single barrel “Glycerin” spill.

He topples over THE BARREL marked “Nitro”; the liquid topples over, mixes with the liquid on the train floor. Smoke rises.

Fig aims the rifle at the spilled liquid mixture, chambers a bullet, his finger on the trigger. He blows his shaggy hair out of his face, smiles.

INT. NON-FLAMMABLES TRAIN CAR – NIGHT

The group of scared orphan children huddle together.

The CEILING HATCH opens. Moonlight illuminates the interior.

The girls look up. Helta peeks down in at them.

SCARED ORPHAN
Helta. She found you.

EXT. TRAIN ROOF – NIGHT

Pati holds tight onto a rooftop safety handle, helps her sister down inside the hatch.

Smoke crosses her face, draws her attention to the last car.

Flames burst through the ceiling. A SMALL EXPLOSION shakes the train. It teeters sideways.

Pati loses her grip, falls off into the snow.

She lands onto a –

SNOW BANK

As the train passes her, the rear caboose back completely blasted off. Fig stands inside, his middle finger extended into the air. He waves it at her.

The train rides off. Pati gets to her feet.

EXT. FOREST – NIGHT

The creatures move in closer, partially exposing themselves between the light and shadow of the thick forest pine.

Ellen runs hard. Alice slides down her back, slowing her pace.

A rock hits Ellen in the back of the neck, sends her flying forward. She slides across the snow.

She lay motionless a few yards away from Alice. The creatures hide just out of sight. GUTTERAL VOCALIZATIONS heard.

Hands trembling, Alice tugs on her Ellen’s leg.

Ellen does not move. Her gun lies in the snow at her side.

Alice reaches for the weapon. The moment she does, THE SHADOW of the large demonic creature falls across her body.

Alice looks up. The demonic creature looms above.

The creature HUFFS, its breath envelopes her frail face. Her scarlet red hair glistens as moisture adheres to it.

ALICE
I don’t hear you anymore.

Moving in closer, the creature inhales her scent.

ALICE
I don’t see what you show me.

It extends a disjointed, oddly cupped hand towards her face.

ALICE
I won’t let you touch me.

Alice slowly rises to her feet. She stands weaponless in front of the towering beast, looks up at it.

It GRUNTS, another puff of hot breath surrounds her.

ALICE
You will not touch me.

Behind her, A GUNSHOT FLASHES. Ellen fires up at the creature, the bullet shreds through its kneecap.

It drops to the ground. She fires a second shot, hits the animal in the neck. Blood spurts out.

Injured, the beast crawls on all fours toward them.

Ellen squeezes the trigger, CLICK. The gun’s empty.

Quickly, she pulls out a small gunpowder sack, pours the granules into the cylinder. The scurrying beast nears.

Her cold fingers struggle to hold onto the icy bullet. Alice screams. The beast towers above them.

She loads the round, FIRES and hits the beast in the throat. The animal falls onto its back.

While reloading, Ellen looks down at the creature. Its massive chest heaves up and down, as it gasps for air.

ELLEN
It’s just an animal.

At point blank, she holds the pistol over its mouth. It WHEEZES. Between laborious breathes, it emits a soft gentle tone, which sounds almost like a baby crying.

ALICE
Don’t kill it.

Suddenly, A MASSIVE PINETREE cracks thunderously. Air swooshes as it falls down above them. Large beasts, uproot a second tree. It CRACKS, falls.

Ellen grabs Alice and pulls her to safety. The first tree HAMMERS down upon the snow-covered ground.

ELLEN
Can you run?

Before she finishes asking the question, Alice sprints off past her toward the train. Ellen follows.

As she runs, Alice looks back.

The wounded demon stands, now morphed down to human-size.

It is Father. He stares back at her with a lifeless face.

EXT. TRAIN ROOF - NIGHT

A HAND grips onto the metal train-roof rim.

Pati climbs onto the roof. She looks toward the front, sees -

Fig walking along the rooftop. He holds a SMALL BARREL OF NITRO. His rifle tucked in his waist strap.

Clothes scorched, cheek bleeding, he fires at Pati. It misses.

At that moment, the TRAIN DRILL crashes hard into a thick section of ice, jolts to near standstill.

Fig drops THE NITRO BARREL. It falls between the cars.

Frantic, he looks down and locates the barrel lodged in a tight crevice behind the engine car.

Fig looks back up. Pati stands above him now. She kicks him in the face. He slides off the roof, disappears over the side.

Looking out –

ALONG THE TRACKS

Pati sees Ellen reach the side of the train.

EXT. NITRO CAR SIDE LADDER – NIGHT

Alice climbs up the ladder of the nitro car in front of Ellen.

ELLEN
I’m right behind you.

Unexpectedly, A SMALL EXPLOSION and orange liquid-flames pour out the train sidewalls onto the moving wheels. CRACK. They splinter off.

The nitro car drops directly onto the tracks. Sparks fly.

A huge jolt. Alice is no longer on the ladder above.

ELLEN
Alice!

Momentary confusion, as the panic of loss hits. Ellen looks over the –

TRAIN ROOF

Alice, on all fours, clutches desperately onto the train.

Pati above her, secures her in place. Ellen exhales.

PATI
I got her.

As the train turns a sharp corner, Ellen spots Fig hanging to the side. In a flash, he hides between cars.

Suddenly, the forest CRASHES. Trees fall. A creature SLAMS into the moving train, sending the caboose off the rails. It slides near the edge of the mountain.

ELLEN
(to Pati)
Secure the girls. Go, now.

Ellen stares down at –

THE ICY CONNECTING PIN

hitched to the derailed nitro caboose.

Ellen quickly squeezes in, pulls up hard on the heavy frozen connecting pin. It barely moves despite her strenuous efforts.

She peers inside the nitro caboose door window. The floor burns, dripping flaming, liquid nitro out the open back sizzling onto the snow.

She sees –

A SINGLE SMALL NITRO barrel still upright, useable.

BEHIND THE TRAIN

The massive demon beast, not dead as she suspected, leaps toward the open train back. It lands within. Its red eyes target Ellen. She pulls out her pistol.

The train corners hard, sending the caboose up against her, pinching her body upright against the opposite wall.

Screaming, she weathers the pain until the train straightens out, releases her.

Immediately, she rests back up next to the –

CABOOSE WINDOW

looks in, sees THOMAS. The creature now morphed into the image of her nephew age 12, stares back at her. His mouth moves rapidly, emits no sound.

Startled, she stumbles and drops her gun. It hits the tracks below. The caboose CRUNCHES through it, wood and metal splinter.

INT. ORPHAN CAR – NIGHT

The HATCH opens again. The children look up. Wind blasts loudly, but no one comes through.

Alice stands hesitantly. She reaches up to close the hatch.

Fig tumbles in, pushed from behind. He lands hard.

Pati appears through the hatch opening. She lowers Fig’s RIFLE down. Helta grabs the gun.

PATI
Now’s our chance to hurt him back.

ALICE
He’s just sick.

PATI
He’s always been cruel, hurtful.
Always been sick.

Helta looks at her sister. She notices Father’s RED-HANDLED PISTOL still tucked under her waistband.

HELTA
Pati. Don’t hurt him.

Alice pulls out the warped harmonica, blows a silent note. Fig covers his ears in pain.

Alice blows again. He covers his ears harder, cries out.

Helta backs away from them. She crawls up the hatch with the rifle. Nobody notices.

EXT. NITRO CABOOSE LADDER – CONTINUOUS

Ellen hangs desperately onto the frozen side ladder. The derailed caboose hits snow bank after snow bank, inches from cliff’s edge. She fights to hold on.

Looking down, THE VALLEY whizzes by. Her feet dangle momentarily before finding a foothold.

THOMAS (VO)
Ellen. Can you hear them? Voices.

She swings back to safety, looks through the window again. The fire inside burns dangerously close to the LAST NITRO BARREL.

She stares in. Her face aglow in reflected flame.

THOMAS (VO)
They know where my mother is.

EXT. FOREST TREELINE – DAY (FLASHBACK)

Thomas, age 12, stands next to a woodcutting pile, an AXE lodged into a large stump. Ellen at his side, they stare off in the woods.

She turns back to face their small SODBUSTER HOUSE.

ELLEN
It’s just the wind.

Unnoticed by Ellen, Thomas reaches for her hand.

THOMAS
Mom. I didn’t do it.

Ellen walks off. His hand drops to his side.

EXT. FRONT OF THEIR SMALL SHEEP CORRAL - DAY

A HANDFUL OF DEAD SHEEP ripped open, bleed from every orifice.

A baby sheep-beast mutation lies shivering on the ground. It lets out an odd-metallic pulsating sound.

Ellen picks up the AXE, without hesitation, smashes the mutation to a pulp.

Thomas plays a melodic note on his bent harmonica.

Ellen grabs it from his hand violently. She throws it as far as she can into the forest.

ELLEN
This is your fault. You’re sick.
You brought this evil here.

Thomas watches her storm off. He cries softly.

THE SAME NOTE Thomas played moments earlier, calls back from the woods. He turns to face it.

Thomas picks up the axe, brings it down hard. SMASH.

CUT TO:

EXT. SHEEP CORRAL - NIGHT

Thomas rips the skin off the mutated half-sheep exposing the innards and bones. He looks back to see if he is being watched. A lit lantern rests at his side.

He pulls out the animal’s ribcage, snaps off a bone and notices it is hollow.

He blows into it. The bone makes an ODD MUSICAL TONE.

He inserts the hollow bone into his malformed harmonica. It is the final piece of his now completed metal and bone infused instrument. He blows another note into the forest.

The same note echoes back at him from the woods. He turns, faces it. He blows through the bone again.

INT. SODBUSTER HOME – CONTINUOUS

Ellen stares out the window, watching Thomas build the harmonica. The lantern light glows fire red.

BACK TO PRESENT DAY

INT. NITRO CABOOSE – NIGHT

Ellen looks in through the window. Flames reflected on the glass in front of her face.

A stream of burning liquid nitro rapidly snakes toward the last NITRO BARREL. It will certainly explode.

Ellen bursts in, grabs the barrel at the last moment.

UNDER THE CABOOSE DOORFRAME - CONTINUOUS

Father enters, blocks the doorway. His body, appears larger than normal, a false mutation of his human-form.

Startled, Ellen turns to face him, nitro barrel under her arm.

On the floor, the nitro flames pour out past Father, igniting the space outside between the cars. Flames burn atop the frozen connector pin.

Father’s legs catch fire. The flames rise up his mutated body.

FATHER
You can’t have her. Alice is mine.

He steps toward her. Suddenly a GUNSHOT. The bullet hits Father in the back. A second shot, hits again.

With unnatural speed, he leaps up through the doorway, disappears outside.

Ellen looks up -

BETWEEN THE CARS

Helta stands on top of the car behind, rifle in hand.

HELTA
That wasn’t Father.

ELLEN
Get back with the others now.

Ellen kicks the flaming connecting pin, now thawed. It moves slightly. She kicks it again.

EXT. SNOW COVERED TRAIN ROOF - NIGHT

Ellen sets the barrel down in the ice, looks down the train.

Helta runs toward the front holding the rifle.

The train jolts to the side. Helta falls to her knees. The rifle slides along the rooftop. It catches on the side.

Orange light sets the train top aglow around Ellen.

THE DEMONIC BEAST stands behind her. Its body in flames, rapidly spreading up toward its massive head.

Ellen turns to run. The creature steps down on her lower body pinning her in place. She struggles, but cannot move.

Liquid fire drips from its massive body. Snow steams around her. The creature presses down. Ellen winces in pain.

Ellen looks at the BARREL OF NITRO still wedged into the snow at her side, then up at the creature.

Its ghastly face blackened, near invisible in the darkness of scorched flesh.

She struggles to kick free.

Reaching for the barrel, she slams her fist down on the top to knock in the covering. It doesn’t open. She pounds harder.

The creature presses down again on her legs.

EXT. ANOTHER TRAIN ROOFTOP - CONTINUOUS

Helta crawls along the rooftop toward the fallen rifle.

The train takes another sharp turn. Helta slides sideways toward the lodged rifle hanging on the roof's edge.

She grabs onto the rooftop safety handle, slips over –

THE SIDE OF THE TRAIN

Hanging on, the rifle teeters above her head.

Her fingers slip. At the last second, A HAND grabs onto her arm, yanks her up.

Her sister Pati, securing the rifle underfoot, lifts Helta back onto the rooftop.

Pati picks up the rifle and takes aim at the creature attacking Ellen atop the caboose.

EXT. NITRO CABOOSE ROOF – CONTINUOUS

Ellen desperately pounds the barrel top, but it doesn't bust.

ELLEN
I heard you in the woods around our house. I knew you were there. Calling for him.

She pounds the barrel, nothing. A GUNSHOT ECHOS, but misses.

Ellen looks back, sees Pati firing her rifle at the beast.

Another shot, another miss. The beast CALLS OUT to its herd. LOUD ECHOING RESPONSES reply. Liquid fire pours off the creature, cascading all around her.

ELLEN
But, I did nothing. I was afraid.

A GUNSHOT hits the beast in the upper torso. It buckles the creature, but doesn’t fall.

ELLEN
I’m not afraid anymore. You can’t have Alice. You can’t have her. Any of them.

The beast presses down again. More liquid flames drop onto Ellen, scorches her clothes.

A GUNSHOT. The bullet hits the creature’s chest. The animal lifts its foot, releases its weight off her.

Ellen quickly slides over the edge, falls between the cars.

Helta looks at her sister, the smoking rifle in her hand.

HELTA
You killed Ellen.

A few seconds of uncertainty, Pati loads another bullet. She runs toward Ellen.

The demon creature’s eyes lock onto Pati.

Suddenly, THE CONNECTING PISTON slams down on the nitro barrel in front of the beast.
The top implodes inside. Liquid splashes.

Ellen, piston in her hand, whacks the open barrel at the creature. A volatile burst of heat and flame erupts.

Ellen jumps onto the car behind. The caboose, unhinged, slides freely with its own momentum.

Pati, behind Ellen now, quickly hands her the rifle.

The beast, cocooned within a wall of flaming nitro, falls to its knees on the caboose roof.

Just as the train turns another corner, Pati pulls out Father’s RED-HANDLED PISTOL. She takes aim.

Ellen steadies her rifle, the creature lined up for a perfect head shot behind the gunsite.

The caboose quickly glides toward the mountain ledge. The beast rises to its feet.

Pati squeezes the red-trigger behind her. BOOM. The gun misfires. Sparks and powder explode out, cloud the air.

Ellen loses her focus. The caboose propels off the ledge. The creature leaps off toward Ellen.

With little time to re-aim, Ellen lifts the rifle.

ELLEN
(to herself)
For Thomas.

Ellen FIRES. The shot, perfectly centered, splits the creature’s forehead. It coils backwards in midair.

Gravity sends the flaming demon down into the deep ravine.

Ellen watches the nitro caboose explode, a brilliant cacophony of nitrous, black powder and decimated evil.

ATOP THE CAR BEHIND

Pati, her hand bleeding, holds onto Helta. With arms around each other, they gaze into the ravine.

Ellen looks back at the girls, sees –

THE IMPOSING SIERRA NEVADA MOUNTAIN RANGE

directly ahead of the train and the unfinished construction tunnel leading inside.

PATI
I don’t think Jane made it.

The train passes CHINESE LABOR CREWS. They shout and yell, waving their arms at them to stop.

Ellen runs full sprint –

ON THE TRAIN ROOFTOP

THE SOUND OF CHILDREN SCREAMING from inside increases, as she approaches the -

ORPHAN CAR HATCH

It opens to reveal all the children, teamed up, forcefully pinning Fig down.

INT. ORPHAN CAR - NIGHT

Alice presses BUNDLED ANIMAL SKINS down on the boy's face, suffocating him.

The moment she sees Ellen, she completely breaks down. As if coming out of a trance, she realizes her mistake.

Ellen pulls in her close, holds her tight against her.

ELLEN
Nobody's going to hurt you anymore. I'm here. It's okay. You're okay now.

The orphan girls release Fig. The boy sits up, coughing.

FIG
You're monsters. You're all monsters.

He runs up the ladder to the OPEN CEILING HATCH.

The train SWOOSHES, air vacuums inside the car, as they enter the darkness of the mountain tunnel.

ELLEN
Everyone up against the far wall. This tunnel doesn't go through.

Holding each other, they press up against the far wall, a unit of combined strength.

Ellen joins them, arms enclosed around Alice. Pati reaches for her sister, then for Ellen. They lock bloody hands.

ELLEN
She made it. She's a strong woman. She'll stop us. I know it.

INT. TUNNEL – NIGHT

Fig crawls on all fours along the –

TRAIN ROOF

He peers down into the space between cars. He locates HIS NITRO BARREL, still lodged in the same place.

EXT. TRAIN DRILL FRONT HOUSING – CONTINUOUS

Fig climbs down beside the large rotating metal drill, nitro barrel under his arm. He squeezes –

INSIDE THE DRILL HOUSING

Inching along the narrow space, his foot nearly slipping off the thin inner walkway edge. The massive rotating drill spins perilously close to his face.

FIG
Monsters. They’re all monsters.

He jams the nitro barrel against the inner drill housing, secures it tight, double checks the placement.

FIG
Can’t let them through.

From out the darkness A WOMAN’S HAND reaches out, grabs Fig.

Jane, bloodied, battered and weak, latches onto the boy. Fig lashes out, struggles to break free.

JANE
They’re going to make it through.
I promised them.

Jane forces the boy’s upper body against the drill. It burns his cheeks. He screams.

JANE
(out of breath)
No more monsters Fig, no more.

EXT. SIERRA NEVADA MOUNTAIN RANGE/NEVADA SIDE – NIGHT

An unpolluted winter’s night sky delicately floats above the imperial Sierras. The teasing whispers of early dawn rise.

A few CHINESE LABOR workers set down their railroad gear, anvils, iron bolts, and sledge hammers drop with a CLANK.

Over a small fire, they share tea from a kettle. They speak in Chinese, converse in friendly banter.

Behind them, the mountain explodes, first within causing the ground to shake, then a glorious expulsion of rock, fire and debris.

Their attention focused on the mountain base as the front of the DRILL HEAD bursts through violently.

The labor workers grab their tools, run up the hill.

EXT. MOUNTAIN WRECKAGE – EARLY MORNING

The men slam pick axes against rock, tearing the rubble away from the partially exposed drill engine. The metal drill front, shredded and nearly ripped from the housing.

CHINESE LABOR WORKER
(in Chinese)
Anyone in there? Can you hear us?

The men continue working, their axes SLAM the rubble, the constant pounding near deafening.

A worker holds up his arms, signals the others.

LABOR WORKER
Stop. Stop. Listen. I hear something.

The men put their ears to the rubble, listen in silence. From within the mountain FAINT CALLS FOR HELP slip through the cracks. The labor workers cheer.

Ellen reaches HER INJURED HAND through a space between the rock. She wiggles her fingers. The man grabs it, laughs.

EXT. EASTERN PACIFIC RAILROAD CHINESE LABOR CAMP – DAY

A Chinese woman finishes cleaning Ellen’s injured hand, wraps a fresh cloth around it. She speaks non-stop in Chinese, Ellen not understanding a word of it.

Alice sits down next to Ellen. She wears layers of fresh clothes and holds a cup of hot tea in her hands. She takes a reluctant sip.

ALICE
This is my first cup of tea in my life.

ELLEN
You still got Thomas's instrument?

She reaches into her pocket, pulls out the bone-infused HARMONICA. She holds it out in front of Ellen.

ELLEN
I want you to throw it as far away from us as you can.

Alice looks at her, hesitates.

ELLEN
I mean it.

ALICE
Are you sure I'm your daughter?

ELLEN
What's that?

ALICE
Are you sure?

ELLEN
A mother always knows her own child.

Alice takes another look at the harmonica, then throws it as far as she can down the mountain.

Ellen pulls the girl in close to her. They watch -

Pati and Helta help a group of CHINESE WOMEN prepare noodles for the orphan girls. The children slurp noodles and laugh.

ELLEN
Alice, listen. Tell me what you hear.

Alice listens to the sounds of nature, the still serene quiet.

ALICE
I don’t hear anything.

Ellen smiles, rests HER BANDAGED ARM on the snow at her side.

Blood seeps through the white bandages, drips unnoticed onto the snow beneath.

INT. TUNNEL – DAY

A CHINESE LABOR WORKER squeezes through rubble. He passes the melted metal drill, oddly warped and eerily misshapen.

He lights the candle, adhered with melted wax to front of his helmet. The orange glow improves his limited visibility.

He looks inside the drill housing space, sees the mutated, burnt, partial remains of both Jane and Fig morphed together, plastered against the drill-siding.

FOOTSTEPS from the tunnel ahead. He looks out toward the approaching sound.

CHINESE BOY (OS)
(in Chinese)
Daddy? Why’d you make me do that? You told them I could fit, that I was small. You let them put me in the hole.

The man stumbles backwards in fear, as a CHINESE BOY, age 10, steps out into the light. His face dirty, he cries.

CHINESE BOY
I couldn’t get out. I kept burning.

LABOR WORKER
It can’t be. No. Go away. Go away.

The man starts to cry. The boy lifts his arms up from out of the tunnel darkness into the candle light. Both arms are melted off to the bone.

END.