

## (Anti-)Liberational Feminism in the Neo-Westerns *Harriet* (2019) versus *Terror on the Prairie* (2022)

DOI: 10.7311/PJAS.17/2024.17

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**Abstract:** This essay aims to put the neo-Westerns *Harriet* and *Terror on the Prairie* into dialogue as pop-cultural texts that convey intersectional and conservative Feminism, respectively. As John G. Cawelti remarked, the turn to armed self-defense of Grace Kelly's character in *High Noon* (1952) legitimated violence on the frontier when practiced by virtuous female settlers. In fact, the Westward expansion of the U.S. necessitated both, the participation of Euro-American women and the resistance of Indigenous and enslaved Black women. The biopic *Harriet* literally commemorates the agency and legacy of the formerly enslaved Harriet Tubman who led masses of fugitive African Americans to Canada via the Underground Railroad. Like the Black Westerns of the Harlem Renaissance, the film deploys recognizable frontier aesthetics to conjure a Biblical struggle between heroism and savagery with the twist that a Black woman embodies superior moral authority with intersectional implications. In contrast, the independent film *Terror on the Prairie* with its controversial lead Gina Carano explicitly aligns itself with "anti-woke" conservatism in the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd in 2020. While its title reminds of the nationalistic rhetoric of the War on Terror, the former MMA fighter Carano's central performance as a settler mother violently slaying her husband's avengers to protect her family constitutes a reactionary celebration of the foundational "myth of regeneration through violence" that Richard Slotkin described. Since both films evoke the cultural climate of their production, the flexibility of the Western as a genre can be underlined.

**Keywords:** Western cinema, Feminisms, American frontier, culture wars

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### Women in Frontier History, Literature, and Film

This essay argues that the pop cultural genre of the Western negotiates contemporary developments regarding Feminism and that the two exemplary films *Harriet* (2019; dir. Kasi Lemmons) and *Terror on the Prairie* (2022; dir. Michael Polish) are no exceptions. According to Malgorzata Martynuska, who discussed the four representative Westerns *Stagecoach* (1939), *High Noon* (1952), *Little Big Man* (1970), and *Dances with Wolves* (1990), the filmic genre commonly referred to as the "Western" and previously as "horse opera" or "cowboy picture" has been "glorifying the fast-fading values of the mythical West" since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (60). On the one hand, it is characterized by repetition. In this sense, Martynuska names the basic themes as "conflicts between white pioneers and Native Americans as well as between cattle ranchers and fence-building farmers" and lists typical settings as "lonely isolated forts, ranch houses, the isolated homestead, breathtaking settings and open landscapes, the saloon, the jail, the livery stable, the small-town main street, or small frontier towns that are forming at the edges of civilization," "Native American sites or villages," and recurring symbols such as "the hanging tree, horses,

spurs, saddles, lassos and Colt .45's, canteens, stagecoaches and distinctive western clothing (denims, chaps, boots, etc.)" (59). Martynuska summarizes, "the central plot of the western film is maintaining law and order on the frontier" along a binary dichotomy of "good vs. bad, virtue vs. evil, settlers vs. Native Americans" in which the heroes are male "ranchers, army officers, cowboys, territorial marshals, or skilled gunfighters" whose personality she likens to "the Japanese samurai warrior, or the Arthurian knight of medieval times" (59). In American culture, this Western hero's triumph over nature and Indigenous tribes has come to symbolize "an ideal expression of the equality of opportunity" for everyman (60). On the other hand, Martynuska notes that the genre has been affected by cultural shifts over time. For example, Indigenous characters have transformed from "savage beasts attacking for no apparent reason" to "likeable characters exterminated by white colonists" due to the rise of political correctness (59). Therefore, Martynuska defines the Western film as "one of the oldest, most enduring and flexible *genres*" (59; italics in original), since its formula has timeless appeal but is still always able to translate the interests of diverse producers who approach it.

Against this backdrop, this essay sees a relation between popular culture and hegemony. This understanding follows from the pop culture theorist John Storey's paradigmatic fifth definition of popular culture (9). He connected it with the hegemony theory that Antonio Gramsci had developed (Storey 9). Storey explained, "Those using this approach see popular culture as a site of struggle between the 'resistance' of subordinate groups and the forces of 'incorporation' operating in the interests of dominant groups" (11). As an example, Storey specifically pointed to how Feminist publishing companies resist subordination from the margins while still struggling with incorporation by publishing female authors who must conform to the genre conventions of popular genres such as science fiction or detective fiction (10-11). The Western genre could appear as a particularly difficult choice to incorporate Feminist politics, since its earliest iterations have been marked by patriarchy. As will be shown, however, *Harriet* and *Terror on the Prairie* both comply with and subvert the Western formula by centering female heroines. Further, both films were produced roughly around the same time during the simultaneous rises to mainstream popularity of intersectional and conservative Feminism. Since *Harriet* can be seen to perform intersectional Feminism and *Terror on the Prairie* conservative Feminism, this essay puts them into dialogue as reflections of and interventions into the cultural competition between these two variants of contemporary American Feminism.

Thus, literary critic Jane Tompkins claims that men wrote the first Western novels in rejection of Christian women's 19<sup>th</sup> century domestic novels and that, "If the Western deliberately rejects evangelical Protestantism and pointedly repudiates the cult of domesticity, it is because it seeks to marginalize and suppress the figure who stood for these ideals," namely, the white housewife (39). Actually, British Victorian culture heavily influenced American cultural production at the time with its emphasis on modesty, purity, and introversion—values that men might have

appreciated in women but rejected for themselves along with what they perceived as “women’s language” of expressing emotions (Tompkins 64). Against this backdrop, Tompkins views the self-imposed silence of the typical male Western hero as his resistance against the sentimental women’s culture of his time of birth in the Victorian era (55).

Similarly, genre theorist John G. Cawelti characterized the male Western hero as a rugged individual who manifests his aggression on the rigidly gendered frontier while only women live traditional domestic lives and care for their families (85-86). In this sense, Helen M. Lewis argued regarding paradigmatic Westerns starring John Wayne as their hero that female leads featured as part of “a restricted bride pool” despite the actual lack of women on the historical frontier (15). Whereas, however, “Women journalists, dentists, writers, artists, and scientists populated the West” in real life (Lewis 9), the women of classic Westerns are exclusively defined by their social function in relation to men as “available virgins, ... aging spinsters, as well as widows, widows with children, divorcees, and prostitutes” (Lewis 7). These archetypal figures appear as damsels to be conquered but with minimal romantic courtship; instead, the hero either liberates them from their families or enemies of their families (Lewis 11). In fact, Lewis notes, “the wedding trip often equaled the move to the homestead” in the history of the American West (11). To underline the cultural relevance of the Western genre as an epitome of American foundational values, the women of John Wayne Westerns can be metaphorically reborn through his love (Lewis 13). Whatever their lives looked like before meeting him, he acts respectfully towards them, for example, by not usurping their wealth or by fathering their children from previous marriages (Lewis 13). Lewis summarizes that parallel to Wayne’s aging, his onscreen relationships with younger women grew increasing platonic and thus evolved as a model of personal virtue for the public (14).

This typical Western woman of constant or recuperated virtue, then, might refuse the Western man’s violent ethos but eventually condone it and rarely come to participate in it (Cawelti 87). In this sense, Cawelti identifies a rare transgression of the Western’s gender binary in the film *High Noon* from 1952 when the female lead who is a pacifist Quaker played by Grace Kelly picks up a gun to protect her husband from outlaws (87). Such rare scenes set the stage for a modern mythical plot to emerge which is “the conversion of the female to the new ethos of violence and rugged individualism” that persists in 20<sup>th</sup> century American capitalism (Cawelti 88). However, “in order to affirm the new values of mobility, competition, and individualism, the female must remain feminine while at the same time being forced to recognize that when the chips are down, there is no moral resort but the strength and courage of the isolated individual” (Cawelti 88). According to Cawelti, the female lead of a Western must never act interchangeably with the male hero, let alone dress in his clothing lest the heteronormative, patriarchal status quo of late industrial capitalism be disrupted (86). Therefore, the classic Western cinema (re-)told the history of the American frontier from the hegemonic view of white men.

### **Feminisms at War: Intersectionality versus Conservatism**

In fact, it must be stressed that the Westward expansion of the United States of America necessitated the participation of white women as much as the resistance of Indigenous women and the forced labor of enslaved Black women. While it is the task of Feminist historiography to unveil the hidden histories of women on the frontier, the two films that were selected for this essay point to the heightened importance of frontier history for American women today who seek greater representation in politics and popular culture, including in Western cinema. Against this backdrop, this essay argues that contemporary culture wars about American history are reflected and intervened into by contemporary Western films with heroic women at their center.

The first critical perspective in what could be termed the current American Feminist culture wars pertains to intersectional Feminism whose foremothers range from the abolitionists Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth with her speech “Ain’t I a Woman?” (510-511), to the Black lesbian Feminist Audre Lorde (134), the sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (227), and the prison abolitionist Feminist Angela Y. Davis (“The Legacy of Slavery: Standards for a New Womanhood”). But this movement proliferated more widely in name since Kimberlé Crenshaw first defined “intersectional experiences” that had been overlooked by both Black liberationists and Feminists (166). Among other examples, she famously referred to Black female workers who were denied the right to sue General Motors for hiring discrimination because its diversification measures only considered white women or Black men (Crenshaw 141-142). Crenshaw therefore argued against individual inclusion without collective structural change to benefit marginalized groups to the point that it can be said, “When they enter, we all enter” (167).

While Crenshaw discussed multiple social justice movements that marginalized Black women by focusing on one “single-issue” at a time (152), she concluded her seminal essay “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics” (1989) with the reminder that,

It is enough, for now, that such an effort would encourage us to look beneath the prevailing conceptions of discrimination and to challenge the complacency that accompanies belief in the effectiveness of this framework. By so doing, we may develop language which is critical of the dominant view and which provides some basis for unifying activity. (167)

While Crenshaw’s goal of challenging intersectional discrimination by developing a critical language may not seem particularly divisive, since “When they enter, we all enter” (167) because by then society would have had to be restructured towards fundamental inclusivity, her approach has also been met with criticism. Notably, the conservative former Harvard law professor Alan Dershowitz even accused the concept

of having become “a code word for anti-American, anti-Western, anti-Israel and anti-Semitic bigotry” because it allegedly allows too many and too different experiences of oppression in the West to be linked to the same capitalist superstructure. Instead, he distinguishes “important liberal causes” from “repressive extremists, who falsely claim the mantle of progressivism” (Dershowitz). Dershowitz claims that the latter group has formed around “hatred for their fellow students who are ‘privileged’ because they are white, heterosexual, male and especially Jewish.” Here, his usage of citation marks around the adjective “privileged” already demonstrates his rejection of any comparative discussions of structural privilege of identities.

Although Dershowitz’ specific criticism of intersectionality is connected to his own male, white, heterosexual, Jewish positionality, his skepticism of intersectionality as the theoretical foundation of the Black Lives Matter movement (2012-) is common in conservative circles. This reading of intersectionality further justifies perceptions of the journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones’ Pulitzer Prize-winning *1619 Project* (2020) as un-American, since it also centers a Black Feminist perspective to criticize traditional American historiography. Thus, on the four hundredth anniversary of the arrival of African slaves in the British colony of Virginia, *The 1619 Project* in *The New York Times Magazine* provocatively proposed rewriting American history through the eyes of the oppressed slaves. Jake Silverstein’s editor’s note explained the choice of the date of 1619 as follows,

It is not a year that most Americans know as a notable date in our country’s history. Those who do are at most a tiny fraction of those who can tell you that 1776 is the year of our nation’s birth. What if, however, we were to tell you that this fact, which is taught in our schools and unanimously celebrated every Fourth of July, is wrong, and that the country’s true birth date, the moment that its defining contradictions first came into the world, was in late August of 1619? Though the exact date has been lost to history (it has come to be observed on Aug. 20), that was when a ship arrived at Point Comfort in the British colony of Virginia, bearing a cargo of 20 to 30 enslaved Africans. Their arrival inaugurated a barbaric system of chattel slavery that would last for the next 250 years. This is sometimes referred to as the country’s original sin, but it is more than that: It is the country’s very origin. (4)

Silverstein’s suggestion can be understood as an intersectional reading of America’s foundational history from the bottom, since it leads to the conclusion that American freedom did not exist before it was extended to the Black slaves as well when slavery was abolished by President Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation (1862). Yet, beyond the scope of Dershowitz’ gendered positionality, American conservatives of both sexes have rejected *The 1619 Project* in favor of the hegemonic narrative of the Republic’s birth on the frontier where European settlers fought the British Crown and Indigenous tribes. In the following, the conflict between intersectional and conservative Feminism that permeates current culture wars will be shown

to influence contemporary neo-Western cinema as well. As implied by the term “conservative,” political conservatism seeks to maintain the given status quo and following American women’s suffrage and liberation movements throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, can accommodate female politicians in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Thus, Marsha Blackburn, a Republican senator from Tennessee provides an illustration of the American conservative women’s movement in her book, *The Mind of a Conservative Woman: Seeking the Best for Family and Country* (2020), “This isn’t radical feminism. This isn’t a bra-burning, man-hating, child-resenting, bitter-edged approach to life and politics. No. Good women love life, love their men, and are lovingly devoted to their children. They also love their bras! What they want is the freedom to be the magnificent creatures they are made to be” (xxiv).

Of course, Blackburn’s opposition to “radical feminism” rehashes derogatory stereotypes that have typically been used by men to gloss over the political demand of gender equality by reducing Feminists to non-conforming personal choices like, for example, to not marry a man or have children. Her usage of the evaluative adjective “Good” (xxiv) that she applies to heterosexual mothers could imply that those women who are neither heterosexual nor mothers and whom she lumps together under the label “radical feminism,” are by contrast “bad women.” However, despite her personal estimation, Blackburn can be seen to refrain from an essentialist definition of “Good women” with her wording, “the magnificent creatures they are made to be,” since she does not explicate whether God or society “made” them in a certain way (xxiv). Following her distinction between “radical feminism” and the conservative women’s agenda (xxiv), Blackburn continues by outlining the political focus of Republican female politicians as their rejection of state welfare which they perceive as enforcing dependency of a government that obstructs them in their pursuits “to rise as high as their gifts will carry them” in an idealized individualistic meritocracy (xxiii). Commenting on conservative women’s absence from the Women’s March in 2017, Blackburn further clarifies, “Putting ‘pussy hats’ on their heads would only diminish them, as it does the women on the left” (11). As an alternative to their globally visible, vocal, public protest, Blackburn commends her own act of silently remaining seated as a student when the liberal Feminist Gloria Steinem spoke at a women’s student government convention which she attended (12).

Some exemplary foremothers of Blackburn’s contemporary conservative women’s movement include the Republican Jeannette Rankin from Montana, who served as the first woman in Congress in 1916 (Meiritz and Schäuble 16) when the women’s suffrage movement was dominated by white, middle-class women with Victorian values, Phyllis Schlafly, an activist against the Equal Rights Amendment (Meiritz and Schäuble 16-17), and Eleanor Howe, a Catholic mother who protested against sex education in Californian schools in the 1960s (Meiritz and Schäuble 67). However, it was the former Governor of Alaska and Republican Vice-Presidential candidate Sarah Palin, who explicitly called for a conservative Feminism in America (Meiritz and Schäuble 20). In their book *Guns n’ Rosé* (2022), the Washington, D.C.-based German correspondents Annett Meiritz and Juliane Schäuble discussed

American conservative women from female Republican politicians to ordinary women, whom they interviewed during their campaigns for school board offices (50; 58). While nearly 90% of Americans enroll their children in public schools and many parents felt excluded from determining their children's education during the Covid-era lockdowns (Meiritz and Schäuble 51), school libraries have since removed hundreds of books deemed controversial for their depictions of racism, sexuality, and gender, including Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *The 1619 Project* (2019) (Meiritz and Schäuble 57). As Meiritz and Schäuble note, American conservative women value freedom of opinion but effectively exclude, for example, Black perspectives that indict police brutality (58) and would thus challenge patriotism. Indeed, in response to the viral *1619 Project* under then-President Donald Trump, the alternative *1776 Commission* aimed to draft a curriculum that would (re-)enforce patriotism (The President's Advisory 1776 Commission 16). In its reference to *The 1619 Project*, the *1776 Commission* repeats above-mentioned talking points of conservative Feminists as well, "Such works do not respect their students' independence as young thinkers trying to grapple with social complexity while forming their empirical judgments about it. They disdain today's students, just as they doubt the humanity, goodness, or benevolence in America's greatest historical figures" (The President's Advisory 1776 Commission 36). Although the *1776 Commission* does not explicitly address the simultaneous replacement of President Andrew Jackson's likeness on the \$20 banknote with that of Harriet Tubman, its emphasis on conformity regarding patriotic accounts of foundational American history negates such critical inclusions.

### ***Harriet: Reclaiming Black HerStory***

After this comparative introduction to intersectional and conservative Feminism as well as their roles in contemporary American culture wars, I will analyze how two exemplary neo-Westerns negotiate this tension. The first film is the Academy Award-nominated *Harriet* with a screenplay that was written in the 1990s which stands as the first major Hollywood biopic dedicated to the life of Harriet Tubman (Ifeanyi), who escaped slavery herself, fought for the Union in the Civil War, and guided at least 70 slaves to Northern states or Canada and into freedom through a route called the Underground Railroad (Britannica). Cynthia Erivo portrays Harriet, who mostly remains silent but claims the power of receiving messages from God. At the beginning of the film, she still carries her slave name of Araminta or Minty and is about to be sold because even her owner's wife and son suspect her of having willed their father to suddenly die. She embodies the ruggedly individualistic Western hero's claim to a divine mission when she communicates her desire to flee to her family through the gospel song, "I'm bound for the promised land" and the plantation priest tells her the parting message, "Fear is your enemy. Trust in God." No social ties restrain her, as she calls to her master from a bridge, "I'm gonna be free or die." As if by a miracle, she overcomes multiple obstacles until a collaborator

in Delaware offers to drive her over the border to freedom, but she responds, before looking into the sunset, that she will walk with the Lord. Besides herself, God is the only other power that she relies upon, as she also testifies to the secretary of the Anti-Slavery Society that even when her skull cracked following a beating, "Hole in my head just made God's voice more clear." Meanwhile, her hostess in Philadelphia, a Black woman who had been born free, reproaches to the renamed Harriet that she stinks "like a barnyard animal"—a classist judgment that Harriet dismisses with the words, "Guess you've never had the stink of fear."

Yet, after her flight, Harriet misses her husband. Despite the danger, she defends her choice to travel back to the plantation and help him flee with an intersectional Feminist statement, "If I'm free, they should be too" because without her family she is like "a stranger in a strange land." However, when she discovers that her husband has meanwhile remarried, she figures that "I thought I come for him. I see now, I come for all of you" and thus renounces any liberation that is exclusively individual and becomes an Underground Railroad conductor. Her leadership is recognized by the group to the point that when she goes into an epileptic spell, they assume, "Minty's peculiar that way" rather than doubt in her. Still, when the group questions her order to cross a river although some members cannot swim, she pulls her gun and offers them the choice, "Now, you be free or die" to initiate them into the struggle she faced. Epic music follows her miraculous crossing of the neck-deep water after which she insists to be only called by her self-chosen name of Harriet by the "freedom-seeking slaves" who nickname her Moses. Although she performs communal care, Harriet grounds her mission in an individual call from God, "Seem like I learned to see and hear God like some learn to read a book. I put all my attention on it. And without question." Thus, Harriet's illiteracy never poses any obstacles, since her inner voice is her guide.

While Harriet's divinely ordained mission may or may not accurately reflect the conditions of her life on the frontier between slavery and freedom, I argue that this neo-Western film participates in contemporary culture wars over American history. At a time when gender performances are politicized, Harriet is depicted as a communal mother who cross-dresses, refuses to pose in photographs with male collaborators, and pulls her gun on her sister who will not flee with her just like on the Black tracker who eventually joins her cause. She is labelled an "abolitionist in Blackface" as if she was part of a conspiracy that steals from Southern plantation owners and proudly calls herself "Moses, the slave stealer." Still, Harriet continues her mission while insisting to her mother, "Mama, I ain't no angel come to take you to heaven. I'm Minty come to take you north" in a clear rejection of the Victorian cult of the female angel in the house. Appropriately, her former mistress plots to burn Harriet at the stake "like Joan of Arc" who also transgressed the gender binaries of her time to follow God's plan for her. Through solidarity and collaboration, Harriet enlists other slaves in her missions who also cross-dress or pass as white to outsmart slaveholders. This way, Harriet's group unsettles the racial hierarchy from within by challenging identity categories which would be equally provocative today, as

conservative outrage over transsexual teenagers and identity politics suggest. During their final faceoff, Harriet once again proves how she has always already subverted her master by correcting his impression that she prayed for him when he was sick as a child. She recalls, “I asked God how a sickly little boy could think he owned me.” In the footsteps of cinematic Western heroes, Harriet rides off into the sunset on his horse and is only seen again motivating her Black troop to shoot the enslavers with the reminder, “We’ve waited years to be allowed to fight in this war against our own enslaver. You ready to kill the snake?” Of course, reptilian imagery had just been famously applied by President Trump to migrants (Pinchin) whereas in *Harriet*, the snake image is applied to the enslaver.

### ***Terror on the Prairie: Restoring Settler Domesticity***

By contrast, *Terror on the Prairie* from 2022 will be shown to stand as an example of conservative Feminism. It literally exists due to the conservative politics of its lead actress Gina Carano. The well-known former mixed martial arts fighter and fitness model used to star in mainstream productions until she allegedly compared being a Republican in America to being a Jew during the Holocaust on social media—an appropriative narrative (Castillo). Then, she refused to abide by California’s masking and vaccine mandates during the pandemic (Burroughs). Following these controversies, the conservative American website *The Daily Wire* embraced Carano and produced their only Western to date in which she would star (Castillo). *Terror on the Prairie* was filmed in Montana, where the fictional plot is also set just after the Civil War. Carano plays a woman from St. Louis, Missouri named Hattie McAllister who is homesteading with her husband John and two children but initially dislikes the frontier lifestyle.

Like in classic Western female conversion narratives, Hattie initially rejects her lifestyle and is instead depicted in Marian poses as a loyal wife and mother who dutifully performs her chores with her baby always by her side. In an early scene, she is hesitant to use violence against a writhing, hissing snake that approaches her baby. Although her husband shoots it, he later insists, “Deep down, you’re the toughest woman in the territory.” Indeed, without flinching, she stitches the wounds of an Indigenous woman whose husband gratefully gifts her with a dagger and symbolically transfers the power to defend the land to her. Hattie must comply since John claims it is “our dream to build a living on own land.” At a first glance, John could appear as the Western hero because of the secret he hides from his admiring son. Hattie’s revelation that John was not a sharpshooter in the Union Army but that “Pa used to be Rep. Things weren’t simple back then” unsettles their son but is interrupted and relativized by the arrival of a gang of men on horseback.

When the leader of the group expresses his discomfort to “talk business with a lady,” Hattie immediately lets her son answer for her and offers to cook them breakfast, thus accepting the conservative role of the housewife that they project upon her. The leader detects Hattie’s Missouri accent, which he shares. She amicably

lets him cradle her baby to the Confederate anthem “Dixie Forever/Down with the Eagle/Up with the Cross.” But only after she notices the dried scalps they carry on their saddles and how suspicious they become of her son when he identifies the “Rep song,” she slips bullets into her apron in a gesture symbolizing the will to defend her family. Immediately, she pulls her gun on them with the words, “I don’t feed killers in my house” that again demarcates her authority as the lady of the house in line with conservative gender roles. Appropriately, her strategy to defend herself and her children from the enraged men is to barricade herself into her house although she straps on their gun belts. She even points her gun at them through the window while casually breastfeeding her baby. Hattie is not only physically fiercely protective of her family but also of her husband’s image in her son’s eyes. She clarifies in her longest speech in the film that “Your Pa wasn’t a rebel. He may have been gun fighting for the South but he ended the war as a patriot. Sometimes, you wake up and realize you’re on the wrong side of things.” Her words do not only underline her husband’s morality, but also imply her acceptance of him with his Confederate past in the name of freedom of conscience which also legitimates contemporary conservative Feminism.

Nevertheless, Hattie does not condone the mission of the men to punish traitors to the Confederacy such as John. She never echoes their disdain for “the tyrant Lincoln.” Instead of directly attacking the men or calling on an authority to help her, she sends smoke signals to her neighbor whom the men slay while reprimanding her that “it’s not dignified of a woman to holler.” Yet, unlike Harriet, Hattie never abandons her feminine gender role, as she teaches her son how to cook coffee in their hideout. She reminisces about meeting John and realizing that she wanted to marry him because “nothing in this world would ever cause him to give up and whatever would come, he would stand up and protect me” which describes her ideal of masculinity. The viewer is paradoxically made to believe in John’s efficacy as a defender of his family although at this point, he is only shown rejecting the advances of a prostitute after being denied jobs in town. When her son points this out to Hattie, her response is that “You’re your father’s son, it’s our turn to protect him” which acknowledges the fact that they must rely on themselves but still ascribes a superior status to the father. Indeed, when John does arrive in a *deus ex machina* moment by jumping on the back of the group’s leader who is revealed to be his former Captain, he invokes the Confederate code of honor to not hold women captive, as if this paternalistic set of rules still applied to them. Still, John is captured as well and forced to march in shackles alongside Hattie, who loyally vows, “I’m not leaving you. Now or never.” Back home, she accordingly distracts the men from executing John by promising them sex but stabs and shoots two of the three remaining men while John shoots the third on his horse from a distance. Hattie and John stand as a golden couple worthy of their land as they kiss while their house burns down. In the final scene, Hattie, unlike any classic cowboy, is not seen riding into the sunset but towards her husband who is already busy building a new house where their lost one stood.

### The Western: A Flexible or a Confining Genre?

To sum up, the production of *Harriet* and *Terror on the Prairie* at the same historical moment characterized by cultural wars between intersectional and conservative Feminism, points to the flexibility of the Western genre. Rather than subvert the formula of the genre to bring women to the forefront of action, the filmmakers can be said to have integrated their different “Feminist” politics into the aesthetics of the genre because of its ideological tenacity. As a historical genre, the hero in Western novels had already anticipated Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis before its articulation upon the close of the frontier in 1893.

Soon after Western films entered cinemas, the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s brought forth Black-led musical Westerns, as studied by the media scholar Julia Leyda. Importantly, these films did not primarily intend to show Black heroes to white audiences, but to let Black audiences repurpose the mythic frontier origins of American identity for themselves. In Leyda’s words, “these movies assert the rightful place of African Americans at the moment and the location of the nation’s most heroic embodiments, the western frontier. The constructions of Black masculinity in these films... actively participate in the formation of an identity that is uniquely African American” (66). I suggest that in 2019, *Harriet* follows in this tradition of revisiting the Western mode to assert cultural pride in African American identity, including through the use of call-and-response gospel songs that Harriet is heard singing. Significantly, the film gives a lead role to a Black woman by literally showing her freeing herself from the stereotypical role of a slave. Unlike in the 1920s and 1930s, however, Harriet drives the plot. She does not merely portray any man’s one-dimensional love interest. However, she is never shown fighting any Indigenous people which is common for Black Westerns that aimed at allegiances with white society (Leyda 61). Instead, she only fights those Black characters who collaborate with slaveholders as trackers and is not explicitly shown killing whites. So, the strategy of *Harriet* to use the Western mode to tell African American history might not be new, but its take speaks to the cultural moment of its production.

In contrast to *Harriet*, *Terror on the Prairie* expresses reactionary politics although it aligns itself more with the classic structure of Hollywood Westerns at a first glance. As described by John G. Cawelti (88), it is a classic tale of a relatively refined woman who converts to the violent frontier lifestyle for the sake of her husband that would have been progressive in the 1950s, but is not culturally subversive anymore in 2022. Particularly, the film’s usage of the word “terror” in the title cannot be detached from the contemporary term “War on Terror” with its imagery of a home front that is under attack by external forces of evil. Actually, the counterterrorist imaginary goes back to Puritan captivity narratives from the frontier era, as the cultural critic Richard Slotkin argued. Unlike Westerns, these narratives might have centered white settler women like the paradigmatic one by Mary Rowlandson (Slotkin 42). However, she portrayed herself as a damsel in distress to warn settler men of the fate that could befall them if the latter did not militantly expand white “civilization.” As Slotkin

summarized it, “This is the paradigm: the American in his pastoral country, troubled by an obscure malaise, a sense of weakness and threat, finds in the first assault on his world and values the concretion of all terrors and villainies, both cosmic ones and ones which are intimate parts of his own family or his own being. His world view polarizes, he suddenly perceives his role in the drama as that of victim” (51). Although *Terror on the Prairie* casts the Confederate avengers in the role of the villains, it is easy to imagine how Hattie and John act according to this dynamic that Slotkin mapped which has meanwhile become synonymous with American expansionism rather than justice. So, the very different takes on the Western through the intersectional Feminist lens of *Harriet* and the conservative Feminist lens of *Terror on the Prairie* to contemporary American polarization, given that they are made for completely different audiences. For example, admirers of Harriet Tubman could hardly be imagined to sympathize with John who did fight for the slaveholding Confederacy at one point. Or, those who applaud Hattie’s performance as a housewife would likely condemn Harriet for leaving behind her husband to escape slavery. Yet, as explained above, both films recur to the Western aesthetic and their female leads share traits with the traditional frontier hero type. An explanation of their differences can be found in John Storey’s theorization of popular culture itself. He outlined that “A fourth definition contends that popular culture is the culture that originates from ‘the people’. It takes issue with any approach that suggests that it is something imposed on ‘the people’ from above” (Storey 9). Yet, in the current polarized climate of American society, progressive liberals and reactionary conservatives each claim to “authentically” constitute “the people” and attribute the role of the imposing “above” to the other group, even beyond the political arena. At the same time, Storey reminds that commercialization leads to the proliferation of any people’s culture. Thus, the different publics implied by *Harriet* and *Terror on the Prairie* already point to the rivalry between polarized superstructures who benefit from the cultural wars. In the end, the differences between the two films discussed in light of the movements they represent, speak to an ongoing cultural divide at the heart of American society that shows no sign of halting at what used to be its most unifying historical myth, that of the Western frontier.

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