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**“I’ve Been Looking for You”: Reconfiguring Race, Gender, and the Family
through the Female Agency of *The Keeping Room***

The independently produced *The Keeping Room* (2014), based on a debut script by Julia Hart and directed by Daniel Barber, is an uncompromisingly violent film set during the last days of the American Civil War. It opens with an epigraph quoting Union Army Commander, General William Tecumseh Sherman: “War is cruelty. There is no use trying to reform it. The crueler it is, the sooner it will be over.” Sherman famously made this chilling philosophy manifest in the late-1864 Savannah Campaign (the “March to the Sea”), during which his army rampaged through the Confederate State of Georgia deliberately terrorizing the civilian population, burning, raping, and looting as it went. While providing a suitable historical framework within which to situate *The Keeping Room*’s violence, Hart and Barber choose to localize and personalize their take on the conflict by basing the film’s action at a remote farmstead in South Carolina where a different kind of war will take place.

Living there are three young women: Augusta (Brit Marling), her younger sister, Louise (Hailee Steinfeld), and their family slave, Mad (Muna Otaru). Introduced effectively as orphans, their mother already dead before the film begins and their father and brother away fighting for the doomed Confederacy, the siblings exist in uneasy isolation with each other and with Mad. They are alone, but know that danger could come at any moment. It is when Augusta ventures outside the confines of home in a desperate bid to obtain medical supplies to treat her sister’s infection (the result of a raccoon bite) that this restive space is shattered. A few miles away at a local saloon, she encounters Moses (Sam Worthington) and Henry (Kyle Soller), two scouts riding ahead of Sherman’s rapidly approaching army. Nominally charged with foraging for supplies and rounding up deserters, these two “boomers” really just lay waste to whatever and *whomever* they come across. Like manifestations of the Freudian id, or

perhaps just Sherman's army in microcosm, they satisfy their diabolical predilections for rape, murder, and arson with a willful abandon. Following her brief, near fatal confrontation, Augusta manages to escape, only for Moses and Henry to track her back home. At nightfall of the following day, they lay siege to the farmstead intent of the worst kinds of violence. With no other choice, and no help coming, Augusta, Mad, and Louise determine to defend their home and each other.

Though largely contained within this single location and with only a small number of characters, *The Keeping Room's* ostensibly simple premise actually belies a number of thematic complexities. This includes, as I shall argue, a critical reflection of and rumination on the traditional Western's engagement with the cultural politics of Hollywood's classical narrative paradigm. This is to say, an ideological structuring of gendered and racial identities predicated on white male supremacy, a depiction of violent masculinities as heroic, and a celebration of the paternal family unit as social ideal. I consider how *The Keeping Room* deploys an intriguing mélange of genre elements and tropes to develop a counter-narrative to both the traditional Western and the classical paradigm, one that exploits the cultural connotations of its geo-historical setting to address issues of gender, race, and male (sexual) violence from an avowedly female perspective. I also suggest the film uses the interracial composition of its trio of female characters to engage with intersectional feminist concerns. The result is a work of defamiliarization that challenges the classical paradigm in its attempts to disavow, conceal, and repress the reality of these issues as part of a past unpalatable to a popular-cultural imaginary attracted to a more heroic version of its own history.

Before engaging directly with *The Keeping Room's* critical-, or, counter-ideological capacity, it is important to consider how the Western engages with this historical narrative and how its associated values have commanded ideological belief in America for so long and on such a mass scale. In its classical formulation, the Western is often defined through the

conflict between the opposing forces of “wilderness” and “civilization.” This conflict endures in the “dominant” US collective consciousness due to the largely mythologized accounts of the nineteenth-century frontier experience. The source of this mythology was a political discourse informed by notions of racial superiority and American Exceptionalism. For Thomas Schatz, the Western promoted this discourse, serving “to ‘naturalize’ the policies of westward expansion and Manifest Destiny” (47). Douglas Pye stressed the Western’s identity politics to observe a “triumphalist . . . White *male* genre, its terms of representation dominated by that fact and the ideological viewpoint it implies” (12). More recently, Neil Campbell suggests that the “classic” Western’s most iconic films “spoke loudly of triumphal conquests of land and people, the establishment of communities and economies, and the violent assertion of law and social hierarchies of gender, class and race” (46). From this perspective, the genre’s long-standing commitment to a frontier myth informed by racist and sexist notions of white male centrality galvanized social belief in a national identity predicated upon the marginalization or outright elision of women and other races, the suppression of non-male non-white agency, and the silencing of any voices opposed to the status quo. Its typical plot-types provided a ready-made cornucopia of heroic “town-tamer,” “revenge,” and “rescue” plots that idealized heroic male agency and its emphasis on the gunfighter identity and the “shoot-out” structured male subjectivity accordingly. The narrative strategies and ideological concerns of the Western were embodied in the image of a predominantly white family unit that promoted the norms of settler colonialism and provided the genre with a suitable metaphor or metonymy into which we are encouraged to read “nascent American civilization.” As the object of the male hero’s protection from the “savagery” that threatens it in this as-yet un-tamed frontier, the family typically sanctions his otherwise morally dubious violence in the name of a defense of all that it stands for: something redemptive and historically necessary.

Another way in which Hollywood's classical narrative paradigm can be said to command ideological belief is through its expression of the principal structures of the so-called "dominant fiction." Kaja Silverman defines the dominant fiction as a collective belief through which "a society's 'reality' is constituted and sustained" and whereby "a subject lays claim to a normative identity" (15). The privileged subjectivity within this ideological conception belongs, almost exclusively, to the masculine. "Not only," Silverman explains "because ideology holds out the mirror within which that subjectivity is constructed, but because the latter depends upon a kind of collective make-believe in the commensurability of penis and phallus," an image of "classic masculinity" through which the male subject is encouraged to see himself (15). Silverman writes, "if ideology is central to the maintenance of classic masculinity, the affirmation of classic masculinity is equally central to the maintenance of our governing 'reality'" (16). With solicitation of faith "above all else in the unity of the family and the adequacy of the male subject," the dominant fiction is "the absolute imbrication of ideology and subjectivity . . . a category for theorizing hegemony" (16-30).

Silverman grounds her analysis in the earlier work of Jacques Rancière, who stresses the representational uses of this hegemony. Silverman relates how Rancière describes "a reserve of images" and a "manipulator of stories" expressed through multiple popular culture forms. He "maintains that America's dominant fiction is 'the birth of a nation,' and that this story of national origin can be staged in several different ways, all of which hinge upon binary opposition—upon the adversarial relation of whites to Indians, North to South, and law to outlaw" (30). From this comes a powerful symbiotic relationship: "the dominant fiction consists of the images and stories through which a society figures consensus; images and stories which cinema, fiction, popular culture, and other forms of mass representation presumably both draw upon and help to shape" (30). For Silverman, the prime example the

adversarial relation is the binary between male and female: “its most central signifier of unity is the (paternal) family and its primary signifier of privilege the phallus” (34).

It follows that the assumptions of masculine authority presented through cultural artifacts serve to perpetuate belief in the dominant fiction. However, despite its assertions of permanence and pretensions to being natural, the dominant fiction exists always in a state of flux, constantly assimilating and disposing of images and narratives based of cultural expediency in order to maintain its relevance and to protect itself from renegotiation. Relevant here are what Silverman calls “the ideological components which are most central to the dominant fiction,” all of which are “significantly inflected by the ideologies of gender, class, race, and ethnicity” (34). As such “signifiers like ‘town’ and ‘nation,’ or the antithesis of power and the people exist in a metaphoric relation to these terms [and] derive their conceptual and affective value from that relation” (35). For these reasons, the site of representation and signification through “which the dominant fiction comes into existence . . . would also seem to provide the necessary vehicle for ideological contestation—the medium through which to reconstruct both our ‘reality’ and ‘ourselves’” (48).

Taking this notion of “ideological contestation” into account, we must caution against making broad statements about the “classical” Western as a conservative or unreflective genre; indeed, against the very outline I offered above. Susan Kollin, for one, insists that “the popular Western is not a monolithic genre, but a divided and contested form that has the ability to articulate ideas across the political spectrum” (1). Indeed, Forrest G. Robinson pointedly observed that what we frequently see in the traditional Western is “an unstable compromise between assertions of prominent social and political ideals on the one hand, and unsettling glimpses of lapses from those same ideals on the other” (3). He identifies a “persistent pattern of doubleness,” a (perhaps) unconscious “self-subversive tendency” that works against the conscious narrative meaning of the text that “undermine[s] what it appears

so clearly to approve” (3). Considering such provision, Patrick McGee argues that, although often displaying a “deep-rooted cultural conservatism [that stresses] extreme versions of masculinity and individualism, there has always been another side to the Western, another shadow that it casts, sometimes in the form of anti-Westerns . . . but also in the more traditional Westerns” (xiv). In effect, most Westerns represent texts in tension, which inhere within their traditional adversarial constructions of race and gender, and in the more basic incompatibility they demonstrate between the individualist tendencies of the hero and the communal values of settler families. They inhere especially within its depiction of a paternal family as the cherished core of a social order that seeks to reduce female agency to a subordinate position therein. Such tensions evoked between relational structures of power can help the Western renew its narrative form and resist paradigmatic reduction. Such narrative renewal was key to Campbell’s notion of the so-called “post-Western,” which he described as a “project of positive creation” that saw a series of revisionist examples “through which to interrogate the very ideological frameworks that had established [the Western] so centrally in the American psyche in the first place” (47). From this, it is apparent that the Western is, or at least can be, a “necessary vehicle for ideological contestation” that in turn generates capacity for more explicit forms of cultural critique, apparent in the anti- and post-Westerns to which McGee and Campbell allude.

In general, the characterization of anti-, or post-Westerns relates to a number of types encountered in the traditional Western film but portrays them in a manner that undermines their typical roles and meanings. Equally, some of the groups missing from traditional films of the genre—women, Blacks, Native Americans, and other racial groupings—find their place within it. As a result of such films, Emma Hamilton argues that “the West became correspondingly wider, preoccupied by a range of voices with competing interests and experiences that sought to be woven into the fabric of the American past” (131). For its part,

The Keeping Room is probably best described as a post-Western, the credentials for which can be located chiefly in its female-centric narrative, which structures its divergence from (and challenge to) the classical paradigm and America's dominant fiction. As E. Ann Kaplan reasons, since the reduction of female agency in mainstream cinema is necessary to the functionality of patriarchy, "it follows that the displacement of women" to the foreground of a given film "would disturb the patriarchal system, and provide a challenge to that world view" (2). In *The Keeping Room*, this disturbance sees the inversion of the white male hero and exposes the oft-disavowed and concealed role of sexual and racial violence in establishing America's patriarchal social formation. It also goes so far as to question the very institution of the paternal family as something even *worth* defending. Most strikingly of all, the film confronts what Robert Burgoyne has called "the fundamental contradiction at the center of [America's] narrative of nation—the contradiction posed by race" (3).

At first glance, viewing a film like *The Keeping Room* through the interpretive lens of the Western appears somewhat problematic. It stands as an example of a film that raises the perennial (perhaps, unanswerable) question: what *makes* a Western? After all, film genres develop with time to the effect that it is extremely difficult to tell where definitive boundaries lie. This is especially true of the Western as films challenge the assumptions of other films in the genre, and it is quite possible for a film to "belong" to two genres or more, to be a generic hybrid. To my mind, this is the best way to read *The Keeping Room*. The film indeed has the feel at times of a contemporary feminist revision of the Western, with its lone homestead, the women confronted by the violence of the late-Civil War South (a "frontier" of sorts), their need to defend the home from external violence, and then abandon it in the face of the encroaching Union Army. This is to say, to ultimately "head west" out of the march of "progress." At the same time, its narrative is shot through with archetypes and plot variants taken from other genres. There are clear allusions to the iconic "Final Girl" trope of the

“slasher” film, which sees a female character as the last “man” standing following her defeat of the monster. It is also a “home invasion” thriller, that well-worn premise typically featuring women in peril at the hands of bad men. As well, it engages with the related “rape-revenge” stories that concern the vengeance of a sexually abused woman on her attackers. *The Keeping Room* also contains elements of the increasingly popular “apocalypse” narrative, which often fuses elements of the Horror genre with a variety of end-of-days scenarios. This hybridity allows *The Keeping Room* to articulate its major post-Western themes. For example, the Final Girl is important to its counter-narrative assertion of female agency. Carol J. Clover argues persuasively that the Final Girl, a protagonist who is “on her own in facing the menace, without help from ‘authorities’” (17), has a potentially empowering dimension. “It is not only in their capacity as victims that these women are in these films,” she observes. “They are, in fact, protagonists in the full sense: they combine the functions of suffering victim and avenging hero” (17). Such a figure is relevant to *The Keeping Room*, which also pluralizes the Final Girl trope, making Augusta, Mad, and Louise its surviving *heroes*, its *Final Girls*, if you will. They are the victims of male sexual violence who, working together and “without help,” manage to ultimately defeat Moses and Henry: their *monsters*.

The Keeping Room’s engagement with the Civil War film is also a significant to its post-Western status. Most obviously, the film’s late-Civil War, South Carolinian setting contrasts with the Western’s more typical post-Civil War locations west of the Mississippi: Southwest Texas, Wyoming, Nebraska, the Dakotas, and so on. While it is true that the Civil War and the Western have a long-standing relationship—indeed, as Michael Marsden points out, “the modern Western had its origins in the horror of the battlefields of the Civil War” (3)—academic consensus holds that the genre has, at least historically, tended to deal with the conflict only indirectly. Referring to Edward Countryman’s “Civil War” entry into the *BFI Companion to the Western* (1988), Adrian Danks reiterates this common orthodoxy:

“Although the conflict is central to our understanding of the Western, and is an event that provides a significant backstory to a range of films, it is rarely dealt with or encountered by the genre” (31). Danks suggests that Countryman “overstates this critical absence,” but he agrees with him insofar as “the classical Western is generally reticent in representing the Civil War and often guarded in terms of how it examines its contentious themes and conflicts” (31). As he rightly points out, “The vast majority of classical and even post-classical Westerns are set in the period and geography of the twenty-five or so years after the Civil War and regard the cessation of the conflict as a key instigating and even unifying event that enabled the wholesale expansion into the American West” (31). Similarly, Marsden sees this guarded examination of the Civil War within the genre as part of a broader historical (and mythical) development following the conflict, in which “[F]rontiersmen and frontierswomen fled the South and the North to seek the renewal promised by the West” (3). He continues: “Regeneration was not possible, they believed, east of the Mississippi. The Western story as we know it is both a fleeing from our collective past and a celebration of it, and it includes all that was gained and, more importantly, all that was lost” (3).

Having said all this, Danks observes a more explicit engagement with the Civil War in a significant minority of Westerns. He points out that “It can be clearly argued that the Civil War emerges, unsurprisingly, as a more common if troubling element of the Western during its revisionist phase in the late 1960s and 1970s . . . and the form’s relative resurgence in the 1990s” (32). This latter group of Westerns, in which he includes *Dances with Wolves* (Kevin Costner, 1990), *Ride with the Devil* (Ang Lee, 1999), and *Cold Mountain* (Anthony Minghella, 2003), engage more directly with the Civil War than did their predecessors. For Danks, these films constitute part of “a series of works that revisit and interrogate the history, legacy, and experience of this internecine conflict” (32). Therefore, the “contemporary Civil

War film,” as he calls it, is typified by “its particular focus upon modern, mechanized combat; race; gender (specifically in relation to the role of women); and domesticity” (34).

The Keeping Room arguably fits Danks’ definition of the contemporary Civil War film insofar as it places great narrative emphasis on race and gender within the context of its specific social system: i.e., a slave-holding agricultural South “destined for extinction” as the emancipatory industrial North overwhelms it (34). While we might look to place *The Keeping Room* within this bracket, we should remind ourselves that, despite its temporality, the film avoids direct engagement with the Civil War. This points it, at least in this sense, toward the traditional Western’s indirect engagement with the conflict. For, aside from one disjointed dream sequence in which Louise imagines her father and brother appealing for her to “help them” in the stormy aftermath of some imagined battle, *The Keeping Room* contains no actual pitched battle scenes. Equally, it contains no heroic speeches as thinly disguised paeans to unifying narratives of post-Civil War national progress and national identity. At the same time, even though not strictly a contemporary Civil War film either, it is nonetheless evident that the specter of that conflict clearly haunts *The Keeping Room*, providing a significant backdrop that shapes and informs its counter-narrative: its characters and their conflicts, its action and, to a certain extent, its plot. The last major point to note here is that by holding its action in the crumbling social structures of the antebellum South and not on the heroic frontier of the post-War West, *The Keeping Room*’s counter-narrative forces a direct confrontation with America’s unpalatable past. It situates itself in the furnace where the narrative of national unity, America’s post-Civil War, post-slavery ideology, was forged in an attempt to replace the disavowed trauma of the Civil War and thus, by extension, the narratives that typified the traditional Western with its own post-Western “project of positive creation.”

To further explore the main aspects of *The Keeping Room*'s own divergence from (and challenge to) the paternal family, we can develop our observation that Augusta's is one clearly marked by the absence of traditional culturally encoded delineations of matriarchal and patriarchal roles, and thus by the attendant (assumed) natural authority of the latter. As if to emphasize this, neither Augusta nor Louise, and much less Mad as the family's ostensible property, have a patronymic signifier. Added to which, the isolation of the farmstead and of the film's general depiction of the war-era "Deep South" as near-deserted wasteland also means that the women are largely oblivious to the facts of the actual Civil War. As such, they operate in a kind of liminal space that is effectively cut off from civilization and, consequently, from the version of history being shaped around them. Augusta even asks Mad at one point: "What if all the men killed all the other men? What if it's the end of the world and we're the only ones left?" The narrative reflects this defamiliarization in its slow disassociation of their space from the residue of the patriarchal structures that underpin and inform the gender-and-race based social-familial hierarchies that dominate both the Western and the actual society reimagined by and mythologized through it. The upshot of an environment in which traditional elements of community, patriarchal authority, and protecting male heroes are all absent is that the film constructs its own counter-mythology based around gender. Wherein women creatively interpret their own past, imbuing themselves with prominence and agency; ultimately becoming their own heroes, their own protectors from external threats.

In an article for *We Got This Covered*, Sarah Myles praises *The Keeping Room*'s "Civil War setting [as] a fascinating choice, precisely because this tale would achieve the same in any time frame or location" (Myles). This curious, some would say contradictory blend of historical specificity and universalism was evidently key to screenwriter Hart's intentions. "I wanted the film to have kind of an allegorical feel to it—like a universal feel,"

Hart states. “At the same time, I also wanted to ground those themes in a specific time and place, because it grounds them in a way that, in arbitrary apocalyptic landscapes, those ideas end up getting lost—because there is no physical space and time, or world that they’re existing in” (Myles). This historically rooted universalism seemingly allowed Hart to construct the film’s gender-based mythology. In an interview for *The Mary Sue*, she says, “I did a lot of research, and the sad reality is that most of what has been documented comes from the white, male experience” (Coffin). From this, she reasons that “as women, if we are undocumented we have to create our past . . . I thought that because of the place [that August, Mad, and Louise] are in, this almost post-apocalyptic rural setting, there is a sense that they are not in their own world. But that also fit the story, because women have often felt out of time” (Coffin). This female-centric mythology stands the film in contradistinction to most Westerns, the mythology of which is, as Myles argues “turned on its head by having the women drive the action—telling this western-style tale from their perspective, and having the men be the characters that are held at arms’ length” (Myles).¹

This brings us onto *The Keeping Room*’s inversion, or rather subversion of the white male hero. In particular, his socially and spiritually redemptive violence and his role as protector of the family/social order. Following Sherman’s “War is cruelty” maxim, the film opens with a shot of a female slave wearily trudging along a dusty trail. Before long, she sees a large dog, teeth bared, sitting in the middle of the trail and looking back at her. It barks aggressively at the woman who, nervous and unsure what to do, starts to bark back. Following this bizarre standoff, we cut away to reveal a horse and carriage stationary on the trail just ahead. A single-toned note starts to resonate ominously on the soundtrack, amplifying as the film cuts to a medium close-up of the driver, a male slave who, evidently in a state of shock, looks back at the woman. Before we can interpret what is going on, a terrified white woman emerges from the carriage and runs away screaming. A single shot of

gunfire sounds, striking her in the back and throwing her down to the ground dead. Shortly after, a man in a Union Army uniform, who we subsequently identify as Henry, emerges from the carriage, smoking rifle in hand and trousers undone. He looks up, sees the female slave on the trail and turns nonchalantly back toward the carriage. Emerging from off-screen behind the woman, another man. Obscured by shallow focus, this blurred figure raises his pistol, cocks the hammer and, before the woman can turn around, shoots her through the back of the head. As her lifeless body drops down, the camera pulls focus on him. As we note his long dust jacket, six-gun, and wide-brimmed hat we feel an uncanny sense of familiarity. He appears as the prototypical Western hero. This is Moses. As he walks toward the carriage, and with the driver still rooted to the spot in fear, Henry jams a rag into a whiskey bottle, lights it, throws it into the carriage, and slams the door shut. We instantly cut to a black screen where the title of the film emerges. This is the world of *The Keeping Room*. We then cut to a shot of the carriage on fire with the driver, now murdered, and slumped in his seat as the frightened horses charge forward pulling their macabre baggage behind them to reveal a panoramic wide shot of the sparse Southern landscape. This establishes the film's subversion of the classic hero. Moses and Henry are not protectors of civilization but *the* major sources of threat to it; atavistic individuals who are unable and, ultimately, *unwilling* to extricate themselves from the dehumanizing consequences of a horrific fratricidal conflict.

Even with Hart's assertion that "there was enough documentation about soldiers breaking off from Sherman's March, and engaging in the activities that you see [Moses and Henry] engage in" (Myles), one has to be careful here and contend with the potential *The Keeping Room* has in perpetuating what *Jacobin* film critic Eileen Jones calls "the 'Lost Cause' rewrite of American history" (Jones). This refers to Hollywood's seemingly endemic habit of romanticizing the antebellum South "finding it easier to make heroes of those who lost a war and fought to preserve chattel slavery" or at best a wet-rag condemnation of "the

violence on both sides” (Jones). Jones even notes, with some sarcasm, that “it may actually be possible to count pro-Union films on one hand” and, furthermore, that “when watching Civil War films, it’s a pleasant shock every time a soldier in a Yankee uniform isn’t represented . . . as a villain stealing food out of the mouths of the poor, or about to set fire to a plantation house and possibly rape the Southern belle who’s hiding behind a pillar” (Jones). Despite Moses and Henry clearly adhering to this descriptive, I contend, when it comes to its female characters, who are, after all, the protagonists of the film, that *The Keeping Room* actively tries not to reinforce the ignorance of white Southern romanticism.

The Keeping Room’s initial pacing is slow, allowing the viewer to spend time with Augusta, Mad, and Louise, giving the women moments alone and together to help us understand who they are and who they are to each other. The film initially shows them make pretense to the effort to maintain traditional hierarchies but they must adapt to their new reality. We see Augusta, rifle in hand as she attempts (unsuccessfully) to hunt for game in the surrounding forests, the camera following her almost as if she is the one being hunted. We cut to Mad tending a horse, and then Louise sitting by her mother’s grave. Another scene shows Augusta remonstrating with Louise, the latter seemingly more interested in trying on her dead mother’s dresses or otherwise idling her time away on a swing in the backyard than she is doing anything useful. But it will not be long before Louise is disabused of her Scarlett O’Hara-like pretense. The first key moment in this respect comes as Augusta and Mad are working together in the vegetable garden. Louise arrives late and wearing her dead mother’s dress. She refuses to help, stating rather petulantly: “I don’t feel like hoeing.” When Mad shoots her an angry glance, Louise returns it briefly then, looking at Augusta, says “I don’t like her looking at me that way either.” When Augusta orders Louise to take off the dress and come back to work, Louise motions to Mad. “She’s the nigger. She should do it.” Mad stops hoeing and shoots Louise another angry glance, standing up to her defiantly. Augusta looks

unnerved and says to her sister, “Like I told you, Louise. We all niggers now.” As Kate Erbland observes of this scene, “the younger of the two sisters does herself a disservice by believing that she can uphold the status quo” whereas “Augusta has abandoned any notion of status, race inequality, or gender disparity, admirably bearing down getting done what needs to be done” (Erbland).

Taken alone, this comment seems somewhat misguided (if not outright insulting). As if even many months of Augusta or Louise having to perform manual labor equates in any way to Mad’s years of slavery. However, soon after when Louise is bitten by the raccoon, the film shifts dramatically, setting up the more progressive tone that follows. Upon hearing Louise’s screams, Augusta and Mad come running. Augusta immediately blames Mad for not looking out for Louise. When Mad protests that she cannot be expected to keep an eye on her all the time, Augusta slaps her across the face. After a moment, Mad looks directly at Augusta and slaps her back, drawing blood from her nose. Augusta looks shocked, and even Louise stops screaming long enough to share in this reaction. It is a tense moment, but it is a revelatory one for the two white women when they realize that, within their liminal space, there is nothing they can do about it. As Hart relates in another interview, this time with Jessica Luther of *Bitch Media*, “You have the residue of this structure they’ve all been conditioned under and its literally crumbling around them” (Luther). A more instructive assessment of the significance of this scene is offered by Muna Otaru, the actor who plays Mad:

The big thing about Mad was [she was] a woman who has been muzzled by slavery and is now trying to deal with the blurring hierarchy that is going on between these women. [Mad has] been oppressed for so long, not quite knowing where she fit in. It all had to be led by how the sisters wanted to treat

her at every moment. At that moment, she'd had it. It was her breaking point.

(Luther)

This historical context is key for, although Augusta and Louise are penalized by their gender through growing up in a patriarchal society, they have enjoyed the undoubted advantage over Mad in terms of race, social standing, and, above all else, *legal status*. By essentially removing the women from the social formation, the film throws all of these socially constructed indicators of identity into disarray. To its credit, however, the film does acknowledge this important historical fact, even as it depicts the social system that supported slavery collapsing all around. And although Augusta, a white woman, remains the lead role, demonstrating a great deal of strength, courage, and fortitude in essentially assuming the position of *de facto* head of the family, I contend that it is Mad's status as a black woman in a slave-holding society in its desperate final days that emerges as the more important aspect of the film. She brings a nascent intersectional feminist perspective to *The Keeping Room's* gender dialogue and enriches the cultural significance of the complex counter-familial relationship she shares with Augusta and Louise as the daughters of her (now former) master. Indeed, its attempt to imbricate themes of gender and race and then frame them within a female perspective that does not seek to dissimulate the historical distinctions between white and black female experience is at the heart of the film's appeal for some critics. As Luther writes:

On the largest level, *The Keeping Room* is a film about what war does to people, how it leaves some people vulnerable and other people with seemingly unstoppable drives for violence. On a smaller scale, it is about the particular ways men use sexual violence to terrorize women. Even as the threat of rape impacts most women, *The Keeping Room* explores how that reality is different for Black and white women (Luther).

This is demonstrated most devastatingly following Henry's rape of Louise, for which Mad shoots him dead. She saves Louise who, understandably traumatized, hugs Augusta in a sisterly embrace. Both are sobbing. Augusta wounded in an earlier pitch-black shoot-out with Moses, who is himself now wounded. This sequence, easily the most horrific in the whole film, holds multi-layered significance in relation to the central themes with which *The Keeping Room* is concerned. Mad tells the story of a shed on "her second farm" where, at the age of ten she was told to go to. "And then a man come in," she tells them. "And he had me." That was the day her childhood ended and it was the first of many rapes she had to endure growing up. "Sometimes they cut the babies out. Other times they keeps them." This monologue, almost unbearable to endure, is by far the most significant moment in the film. And as Mad reveals a childhood and young womanhood characterized by rape and resulting in pregnancies, abortions, and children sold down the river, a significant aspect of Americas repressed unpalatable past returns. Hart relates the importance to her of including a black female perspective about rape in a time of slavery: "Here is this white girl raped once, but that experience has been her entire life. And that is a big wake up call for Augusta and Louise" (Coffin).

As the women begin the final search for a now gut-shot and wounded Moses, we see the assumption of their phallic authority. Here the tenets of the Final Girl engages most directly in *The Keeping Room*. Clover insists that the climax of films featuring this trope mark a narrative "shift underwritten by storyline as well as camera position" (45). Indeed, the camera is now with Augusta, rifle in hand—with Mad and Louise also armed and in support—not, as before in the earlier scenes of her hunting in the forest, watching (stalking) her. Cinematographer Martin Ruhe's shooting style now interspersed with point-of-view shots aligns us with female agency. The hunted become the hunters. When Augusta finally tracks Moses down, gut-shot and dying, we witness the final confirmation of this turnaround.

“I’ve been waiting for you,” he says. “Well, I’ve been looking for you,” she replies. He resigns to his fate, wanting to die, unable to redeem himself from the monster war has made of him. In the context of what he, along with Henry have done, however, it is too late for us to really sympathize. This is not *their* narrative. Augusta obliges him and pulls the trigger, but not before he tells her “a whole army is behind us . . . Uncle Billy’s coming. Burning down everything in his path.” And, in a reiteration of the film’s opening epigraph: “Rest assured, it will be cruel. The crueller it is, the sooner it’ll all be over.” Moses and Henry were just the beginning.

Augusta’s assumption of phallic power through the enactment of violence does not signal a mere reversal of gender roles in as much as redemptive violence is possible if enacted by a woman. Far from it. Augusta’s accidental killing earlier on of Mad’s husband, Bill (Nicholas Pinnock), puts paid to any such notion. A freedman soldier fighting for the North, Bill had also broken away from the Union Army. But unlike Moses and Henry, he had come to find Mad and to protect her, to tell her “It’s all over.” As he lies dying in Mad’s arms, he warns her to hide, “they coming.” It is a tragic moment that leads to another powerful moment within the film’s historical context: a tearful Augusta kneels before Mad, her eyes pleading for her forgiveness. Mad says she is not angry at her and, in a show of benevolence (that one has to wonder if it would be bestowed were the situation reversed), gently cups Augusta’s chin, saying “When you gonna learn? What don’t happen don’t matter. You just go on.” It is a tragic event, but it was an accident. And when considered in the context of the violent and chaotic events of the night, understandable. Men are a clear and present danger. As Hart, who admits to crying when she wrote this scene, puts it: “War has turned men into enemies of these women, and Augusta says ‘if a man walks through that door, you shoot’” (Coffin). Beyond this, Augusta’s tragic slaying of Ben relates to the film’s

post-Western credentials in as much as it asserts a “project of positive creation”: it ensures that violence is never redemptive.

The next day, and with Sherman’s army fast approaching, Augusta declares “It’s our home. We’re gonna defend it.” But Mad and Louise, convince her that they have to abandon it. Disguising themselves in the clothes of the now deceased men, they torch the house and wander off into the wilderness just as the Union Army arrives on the scene. Their destruction of the farmstead, of the home, is a symbolically charged moment. The film’s final significance might well lie in what its counter-narrative indicates can emerge from this. Not nihilistic despair, but an attempt to renew the narrative form, to reimagine the social-familial compact from scratch: a small but not insignificant contribution to the post-Western project, a glimpse at the possibility of the violent liberation of gendered and racial identities from under the yoke of patriarchal authority.

The Keeping Room uses its hybrid style and female-centric narrative, along with the emotive power generated by the symbolic capital of its geo-historical setting, to force a discussion on gender, race, and male sexual violence that is both rooted in America’s history and patently relevant to its present. It holds this discussion in relation to its deconstruction of the cultural narratives of the family and of the socio-symbolic role of gender and race hierarchies within this most sacred of American institutions. It uses the liminal space of its geo-historical setting to interrogate, and then expose what is often “hidden” from view in the traditional Western, buried under the symbolic weight of the discourse of white male centrality within the ideological “reality” of America’s dominant fiction. And from this, the film lays the groundwork for its counter-narrative, for its alternative female-centric post-Western mythology. Its localized and personalized focus on the foundational trauma generated by one of the darkest periods in the United States’ history spreads out to address important questions surrounding the continuing belief in the unifying narrative of national

progress that followed slavery and the Civil War. In turn, it offers us an alternative perspective on women's submissiveness within the Western and, through at least a notional gesture toward transformative renewal of the narrative form, a tentative glimpse of a world beyond racial and patriarchal hierarchies, *beyond* the family.

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Note

¹ It should be pointed out that since 2010 a number of Western films focusing on female protagonists have emerged. Notable examples include Kelly Reichardt's *Meek's Cutoff* (2010), Logan Miller's *Sweet Vengeance* (2013), Tommy Lee Jones' *The Homesman* (2014), Gavin O'Connor's *Jane Got Gun* (2015), and Martin Koolhoven's *Brimstone* (2016). Excepting Reichardt, however, female *directors* of Westerns remain largely and lamentably absent. Although Hart's powerful screenplay does place her, if only obliquely, in context with an oft-neglected literary corpus of female authored Westerns. Victoria Lamont charts this "hidden" history of women's writing in her new study, *Westerns: A Women's History* (2016), observing that, from early on, women not only wrote Westerns but they often "put the [form] to different uses than did their male counterparts" (8). Hers is an attempt to "recover some of the many women's texts that have helped shape the western and to help expose and dismantle the processes and structures that have hitherto excluded them from view" (9).