

Revising the Western: Connecting Genre Rituals and American Western Revisionism in TV's *Sons of Anarchy*

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Abstract

In this article, I analyze the TV show *Sons of Anarchy* (SOA) and how the cable drama revisits and revises the American Western film genre. I survey ideological contexts and tropes that span Western mythologies like landscape and mise-en-scene to struggles for family, community, and the continuation of Native American plight. I trace connections between the show's fictitious town setting and how the narrative inverts traditional community archetypes to reinsert a new outlaw status quo. I inspect the role of border reversal, from open expansion in Westerns to the closed-door post-globalist world of SAMCRO. I quickdraw from a number of film theory scholars as I trick shoot their critiques of Western cinema against the updated target of SOA's fictitious Charming, CA. I reckon that this revised update of outlaw culture, gunslinger violence, and the drama's subsequent popularity communicates a post-9/11 trauma playing out on television. Through the sage wisdom of autoethnography, I recall personal memories as an ideological travelogue for navigating the rhetoric power this drama ignites. As with postwar movements of biker history that follow World War II and Vietnam, SOA races against Western form while staying distinctly faithful. Ultimately, I argue the show's Western evocation updates audience concerns amidst the ideological war on terror.

Keywords

ideological criticism, Westerns, *Sons of Anarchy*, genre, family, cable TV, autoethnography

One of my grandfathers served as both a trucker and blue-collar oil fieldsman while another worked simultaneously in military service, mechanical engineering, and carpentry. In addition, the latter always exuded his motorist enthusiasm. I came to experience the eras of their passions second-hand, which gave me a kind of liminal insight into what I might call secular *salt of the earth* White lower-middle class and Mid-American values. These values emphasize(d) *family*, *community*, and *loyalty*, and varying contortions of this form. I recall the endless array of Westerns always playing on my grandfather's brown-paneled television set, the modest reward to a hard day's work, the visual aesthetic complementing simpler pleasures like coffee and cigarettes and uncalculated naps in the recliner.

In hindsight, I can easily identify ritualistic patterns and ideological behaviors exerted between my two grandfathers, one closely aligned with characteristics of simple life found in Westerns while the other emanating a Red-Blooded drive toward mechanics, the open road, and the trouble that comes with it. Although I paid little attention to the narratives of these Westerns growing up, as researcher I now appreciate the sentiments they communicated to working class generations of Americans. As cultural ideology, I recognize the persuasive appeal (or what scholars consider

rhetorical power) such repetitious imagery conveys. Thus, I find it both reaffirming and timely to witness these postwar thematics resurface in *post-network era*¹ of cable drama supremacy, particularly on *Sons of Anarchy* (SOA).

In this article, I examine the FX cable drama *SOA* and read the show as a revision of the American Western film genre. I examine common tropes and ideological context that ranges from mythic conceptions of landscape to the mise-en-scene of the Native American plight. I tease out connections between the show's fictitious town setting and how the show inverts traditional archetypes of place and reinserts the outlaw narrative as the new status quo. I examine the role of borders in how they reverse, from opening and expanding in Westerns to closing amidst the post-globalist narrative world of SAMCRO.² I draw on a number of film theory scholars as I reposition their critiques of Western cinema against the updated backdrop of *SOA*'s fictitious Charming, CA. I argue this revision and update of outlaw

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culture, gunslinger violence, and the show's subsequent popularity communicates a post-9/11 trauma playing out on television. Specifically, like the history of biker movements following World War II and the advent of the biker film genre in and around Vietnam, *SOA* plays with Western form in a way that posits distinctness amidst familiarity. Thus through evoking the Western genre, the show updates these ideological criticisms in ways that synchronize such historical (and historicized) themes for modern audiences.

Splitting Time: Discursive Tensions Between Network and Cable TV

In 2008, cable channel FX premiered its newest "edgy" drama, *Sons of Anarchy*. *SOA* focuses around a modern biker gang that work as mechanics by day and illegal gun-runners by night. At the show's core, attention to the tensions and relationships between characters and the protection of their club/town/ideological border situates *SOA* as a drama that updates and revises key themes resonant of the American Western. *SOA* embraces many aspects of the Western film genre. As TV drama, it often avoids trappings of choosing between cinematic genre modes due to its prolonged state as a serialized program. In fact, *SOA*'s episodic and shorter season structure allows the show to explore numerous genre terrains associated but never exclusive to genres of Crime, Biker history, and in the case of this analysis Western cinema. While the drama evokes numerous incarnations and genres (indeed a growing trend indicative of postmodernity), *SOA* becomes a coup de tat that synthesizes televisual form with Western archetype.

Amidst a postmodern split between network and pay cable broadcasting, episodic programming often splinters between differing styles of execution and presentation. Networks still cast the largest net of reach and thus must appease the largest possible audience base. For this reason, the majority of non-reality, scripted television devotes continued focus toward serialized programming. This style of program consists mostly of weekly, standalone formats, in which new plots are both introduced and resolved within the constraints of the half hour or hour allotment. CBS's consistent regularity of procedural dramas comes to mind, as does CBS's reliant, if not predictable, stable of raunchy sitcoms. Compare this against cable channel American Movie Classics (or AMC, where "story matters") for their stream of character-driven genre-bending critical darlings like *Mad Men*, *Breaking Bad*, and *The Walking Dead*. FX's new breed of TV dramas more closely resembles the latter, and the gratuitous aesthetic among FX programming no longer appears to appease only the young male demographic.

In sharp contrast, many but not all cable dramas follow the format established by pay cable programmers like HBO, Showtime, or even public broadcasters like PBS.

Close attention to character development becomes a central motif. As well, shortened seasons allow for tighter script management that results in stronger arches of character and situational development. While network shows wrap up weekly lessons or storylines, cable dramas tend to overlap stories utilizing cliffhanger endings and unresolved tensions.³ Similarly, this narrative approach recalls Richard Comb's assessment of Fred Zinnemann's *High Noon* (1952) in *The Western Reader*, where the latter's "starkly compressed and stylized storyline goes with a psychological realism that simultaneously diffuses and complicates the plot" (Combs, 1986, pp. 169-170). Instead of the network trend of 22 to 24 episodes per given season or year, cable networks often produce 10 to 13 episodes. This shorter structure allows writers to guard their creative property closely and procure the highest *quality* out of their storytelling opportunity. In this case, *SOA* creator and show runner Kurt Sutter guards his passion project while he simultaneously maintains brand management over numerous facets of *SOA*'s operational avenues both directly and indirectly related to the show.

The *SOA*'s televisual landscape splits between the terrain of featured set pieces and the terrain composing an enormous cast of characters. While the cast of characters expands and contracts from season to season, the show ultimately focuses on family. The staple group includes Jax, the "heir apparent" Vice President to the motorcycle club (MC) throne; his Old Lady Tara; Jax's stepfather and club President, Clay; and Jax's mother, Clay's wife, and "club Matriarch" Gemma.⁴ The core members of SAMCRO (SC) include Treasurer Bobbi, Jax's best friend Opie, Opie's father Piney, Clay's right hand man Tig, Juice, Chibs, Happy, and club Prospect Half Sack. Outside the club, feature players include corrupt police Chief Unser, incorruptible Deputy David Hale, and Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF) agent Stahl. As well, numerous additional friends, family, club members, rivals, and rotating cast members construct a dense universe of interactive parties. While this large cast creates a rich scope for entertainment purposes, I concentrate attention on characters and elements that specifically attend to American Western patterns. With so many characters shifting in action and motivation, *SOA* might best be understood through Christopher Frayling's description of Sergio Leone's approach to *Once Upon A Time in the West* (1968), where "each of the main characters in the story 'moves' like a chess piece, the chess-board being . . . 'the mythological system, that is, the cycle of conditioned action.'" (Frayling, 2006, p. 194). At the helm, creator/show runner Sutter controls the pieces, and each season shifts these pieces around the board, extending new power positions to some while reducing power and agency among others.

Among these shifts or "cycles of conditioned action," Sutter (2008, 2009, 2010, 2011) employs narrative shifts

through various recollections of the American Western. In the following sections, I highlight ways in which Sutter's *SOA* embraces archetypal genre tropes of the American Western. Acknowledging these tropes, I explore instances where *SOA* pays homage to the Western, and outlaws in particular, while paving stories in a postmodern terrain of moral ambiguity. In this way, *SOA* operates as both a morality play in the history of Shakespearean tragedies like *Hamlet*, while updating stories that resonate with ideological themes of the American West. Ultimately, through this blended, fragmented, and thus postmodern lens, *SOA* revises history so that a new story might be told in the fictitious present. Embracing the genre of Western cinema history, I analyze how *SOA* tackles genre tropes of landscape, Western style, the small town, the psychological Western, the Native American plight, and outlaw-gunfighter justice. Examining each of these avenues, I argue *SOA* embarks on its own transformational journey, an updated critique of post-9/11 tensions of militarism, recession, and moral class division in America.

Western Landscape in Physical Terrain and Outlaw Biker Style

Edward Buscombe contends, "Landscape in [the Western] tradition is an aesthetic object. Its function is to be gazed at, in an act of reverential contemplation" (Buscombe, 1995, p. 118). As a televisual aesthetic, the architecture of *SOA* intends to be gazed upon by viewers, immersing them in the world of SAMCRO. This landscape stretches from the mountainous hills of their outskirt rides to main street Charming to the stylistic grunge apparent in each character.

The *SOA*, aka SAMCRO (SC), suggest wardrobe archetypes of the Western through distinct biker style. The most important elements of an MC member are his cut and his bike. The "cut" is a black leather vest with white lettering, including patches detailing the member's rank in the organization. The club's dedication to a uniform style recalls the tan dusters sported by Frank's gang in Leone's *Once Upon A Time in the West*. The back of the vest features a large Grim Reaper carrying an AK-47 with a sickle hanging off gun barrel. This symbolism points to the club's motif as "Reapers" and to their gunrunning specialty, the AK-47. The remainder of their wardrobe fashions itself in typical combinations of tattered jeans, black leather, optional earrings, and heavy doses of various "ink" or tattoos.

The other critical element the Harley Davidson functions as an updated stand-in for the Western horse. The bike serves as an intricate element of frontier spirit for club members. In fact, in several episodes regular automotive vehicles are viewed as "cages," revealing their less-desired status for vehicular travel. With the club operating a

mechanic/repo shop, their tow truck functions as the group's personal stagecoach. In the Season two episode *Eureka*, members scramble on in a pinch when they use the vehicle to illegally rescue Tig. Tig, held hostage in a motel room by a group of bounty hunters, ducks for cover as the tow truck crashes through the wall. SC members, guns pointed, reenact a makeshift Wild West ambush, which creates enough shock for the club to retrieve Tig without further incident. Like the outlaws they are, the truck drives away without tending to the structural damage to the low-end building.

Other visual markers also heighten the authenticity of biker and Western lore. Members smoke cigarettes with regularity and excess, never stopping to consider modern messages against the now-taboo use of tobacco.⁵ Clay is often depicted smoking a large cigar, a phallic signifier that designates both his leadership as club President and the hyper-masculine atmosphere in *SOA*. Most members sport grisly facial hair and unkempt greasy long locks of greasy hair. These rugged appendages recall the wild nature of wilderness trappers and fur traders, and further accelerate a visual separation between SC and civilization.

The MC fortifies its base at the Teller-Morrow automotive shop in Charming, CA. During most days, the shop exists as a legal business for mechanics both in and out of SC. The metal sighting and steelwork replace log walls with spiked edges common among Western cavalry settlements. Yet behind the doors of the onsite clubhouse, SC meets in an exclusive room for "patched" members only.⁶ Their sacred meetings are called "church," and at these meetings the men-only vote on key decisions that affect the future of the club. Thus, the Teller-Morrow compound forms a fortified border, a modern day fort, protecting SC from threats outside its walls.

As an MC, the club performs illegal gunrunning as its main source of income. Through gunrunning, SC functions as a modern outlaw gang situated within the small town Charming. Yet the Sons see themselves as protectors of Charming, keeping unwanted big businesses, urban developments, and increased law enforcement beyond its borders. In other words, SC works diligently to keep the progress of civilization at bay. The tension between frontier wilderness and civilization resonate a consistent theme among Westerns. John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939), *The Searchers* (1956), and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962) display themes of impending civilization at different levels. Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man* (1995) opens with an extended train ride west across the American frontier. In *Dead Man*, the further west the train travels, the less civilized and more rouge-ish the inhabitants become. This pattern of spatial tension resonates with *SOA*, as the biker gangs compete for both urban and rural territories in the general Pacific West region. Exploring the vagueness of the Pacific West region opens an additional avenue of the Western archetype, depictions of landscape.

The Ideological “Small Town”: Eden Versus Affliction

The town Charming has an *ironic* name, similar to other ironic towns in Westerns like Leone’s “Sweetwater” in *Once Upon a Time in the West* or “Machine” in *Dead Man*. Charming evokes the names of other Edenic paradises. Visually, Charming could be read as any small town “main street America,” with its diner, barber shop, Sheriff’s station, and small fixture of locally owned stores. Yet ironically Charming appears as Edenic for SC alone, while other townspeople either resist or streamline the club’s hegemonic lean on commerce. In Season one, Donna, wife of MC member Opie, refuses the Sons help, hoping Opie’s recent stint in the “Chino” prison will lead to an awakening that allows their family to leave SC. Darby, a local White supremacist meth dealer, resents SC for refusing him the right to deal meth inside town borders, while privileged property owner Oswald must remain a loyal servant to the club cause, due to the blackmail evidence Clay hangs over his head.⁷

In Season two’s *Smite*, the group visits Oswald’s horse ranch. Oswald rides up to the group. Tig orders him to “get off your high horse” before Clay updates him of the latest town proposal to develop Oswald’s land. Oswald reveals that the city and county want expansion, a city issue that is beyond his control. Clay notes that “Charming’s problem is the club’s problem,” a callback to Clay’s intent to keep Charming small and safe from expansion. Clay’s ideological perspective, although motivated to keep the MC in control, evokes the idealized state of melancholia experienced in the opening scenes of *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence*, specifically as Hallie Stoddard visits Doniphon’s gravesite amidst scenery of the town’s expansion. This parallel highlights the Western tensions of expansion and resistance, and the motives behind each.

Deputy Sheriff David Hale, the solitary moral compass of Charming, must regularly resist temptation from all sides, with a goal of bringing down the Sons. In the Season two premier *Albification*, David argues with his brother Jacob in the diner parking lot, after Jacob attempts to align “Davie” with the town’s newest inhabitants, the “White Hate” group the “League of Nationalists” [LoN]. As the brothers bicker, Sheriff Hale declares, “I am not going to swap one group of outlaws for another,” yet his words become inaudible as the deafening interruption of SC’s noisy motorcycles drown out any resolution. Through the lens of these ordinary citizens, the only people that appear to favor the outlaw presence are those that benefit from their existence, namely, Old Ladies and their families, corrupt authority figures and politicians, and those businesses that cater to the Sons’ endless needs for booze, sex, and entertainment.

In Season two, Ethan Zobelle, a businessman and supposed supporter of “White Power,” moves to town to extend

his latest branch of “Impeccable Smokes” cigar shops. Like the outsider attempting to settle in the outlaw town, Zobelle experiences a swath of setbacks and challenges. In the opening of *Eureka*, the club revs through town on their way out to assist with a “local blood drive.” The bikers drive through Charming’s main street as the camera pans up to show Zobelle hoisting his new storefront sign. This panning shot of the main street ride through is a staple of *SOA*. Like the tracking shots of cavalries marching through films landscape in films like Ford’s *Stagecoach* and Arthur Penn’s *Little Big Man* (1970), the shot evokes the club’s stranglehold on the Western town. Numerous shots also feature SC riding through the mountainous and then urban terrain of eastern California. Large cyclist hoards recall the cavalry rides opening several Ford Westerns. The ambiguous landscape denotes this terrain to exist “everywhere” and “nowhere.” The cuts featuring the long drive typically feature accompanying music, typically Southern rock in sound, evoking imagery of the American South and its rebellious (if not Confederate) history.

In Season two, the character Gemma receives the ultimate cultural shame when a White supremacist group gang rapes her for revenge against the club. I read this transgressive act as a direct inversion and reversal of the White fear common in Westerns that women captors faced rape or worse at the hands of “savage” tribes typical in Ford Westerns in particular. Gemma connects the *savage attack* she receives to employees of the smoke shop when she runs into White supremacist Weston outside. The connection occurs when she notices his “tribal marks” or the *peace sign* neck tattoo observed during her attack. Gemma confronts Sheriff Unser with the news, and Unser, the corrupt Chief on the club payroll, delivers a message to Zobelle. In his speech, Unser summons the supernatural power of Charming in an effort to cast a thin veil over his intent. Unser warns, “I know who you are, what you do. I’m not talking about what you do with a suit and tie. I’m talking about what you do with rubber masks. Things work themselves around. Your time’ll come.” Clarifying the situation, Zobelle, reserving complete innocence and ignorance, acknowledges, “That sounds like a threat.” Chief Unser assures him, “Charming’s a *special town*. Not many folks take to it. I like to think the town chooses its occupants. Right ones stay, wrong ones disappear.” If *SOA* were a more traditional revisionist Western, Unser might employ the supernatural as a voodoo scare tactic in the literal sense. But Charming is an aging town fighting modern times, and rational thought advances its border. Thus, Zobelle does not heed the warning. While Unser’s words are metaphoric in a sense, they also recall and repeat the code of the Western and the town that lies just beyond civilization. In addition, they also acknowledge how *SOA* functions similarly to the psychological Western.

The Psychological Western

In the same way that SC maintains control over Charming, most of its residents are left without a sense of agency. The town's dependency on the Sons, whether to loan money or keep the peace, keeps citizens indebted to the organization. Thus, reading *SOA* as a psychological Western, several key ties might be made. First, I examine the lack of agency among citizens. While noted citizens like Donna, Hale, and Darby push for progress that doesn't involve SC, their lack of hegemonic power and cultural sway subjugates their ability to command change.⁸ This lack of agency could be compared to another psychological Western, Anthony Mann's *The Naked Spur* (1953). In *Spur*, the sole female character Lina, played by Janet Leigh, suffers a habitual lack of agency as she is pulled between the hegemonic tensions of not only James Stewart's Howie and Robert Ryan's Ben, but later the revelation that her motivations recall unresolved Daddy issues. Thus, Lina functions as a pawn between protagonist and antagonist, flip-flopping effortlessly between action set pieces.

Deputy Sheriff Hale can be read as a similar flip-flopper throughout *SOA*'s Season two. In Season two, Hale begins shifting aid between SC and Zobelle's LoN based on singular pieces of "evidence" leaked to him by each faction. Consider the following exchange between Hale and Clay in the episode *Fa Guan*. As Hale busts a crank and prostitution that Zobelle setup to look like SC, Hale visits Clay after Zobelle gives him "one more chance" to "do your job." Hale delivers two tips on meth labs, noting "I know the bigger devil when I see him."

Hale: Zobelle's putting down roots. Backing my brother for mayor. And he wants me on his team once I'm chief.

Clay: Why are you telling me this? Are the Hales on board for the "bright new day?"

Hale: I know the greater devil when I see it. Zobelle is flooding this town with Darby's crank and pussy, and he wants me to shut it down to prove to Charming they don't need the Sons. [Handing the tip to Clay] You have til the end of the day to be heroes.

Clay: You had to swallow a lot to hand this over.

Hale: It's not about humility. My biggest priority is going to be shutting you down. But I'm gonna do it the right way.

Here Hale, unable to maintain his Season one level of self-righteous superiority, depowers himself through the constant manipulation of his actions by the club and league. Hale, like many of the conflicted characters in *SOA*, resonate themes of Anthony Mann's anti-heroes. As Jim Kitses (2004) notes, "the Mann hero is ever at the mercy of paradox and contradiction" and often "morally ambiguous"

(p. 143). Ultimately, flip-flopping siphons Hale of any true agency, and resolution must then come from an outlaw source.

SOA also posits the psychological Western through the source of influence in its premise, William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Creator, show runner, head writer, producer, and actor Kurt Sutter admits his initial *SOA* pitch to FX envisioned "Hamlet on Bikes." Thus, the show resonates numerous themes that recall and revise perhaps Shakespeare's most notorious tragedy. In the show, the central psychological tensions lie between Jax, his mother Gemma, stepfather Clay, and Jax's "Old Lady" Tara. Jax, often referred to as "the Prince," with his golden locks and boyish charm, situates an ideal Hamlet. An ideological wedge forms between club Vice President Jax (the VP position marking his "heir apparent" birthright to the "throne" of club President), and club President, Clay. Jax's late father and founding member, John Teller, left behind a secret manifesto, the contents of which "haunt" Jax through the voiceover narratives of Teller.⁹ This revelation of secret thoughts leads Jax to believe in a new direction for the club. Jax demonstrates a kind of Oedipal relationship with his mother Gemma, the club "Matriarch."

Gemma, regularly referred to as the "Queen" to Clay's "King," often reinforces a manipulative Oedipal nature through ambiguous open-mouth kisses with Jax, his ex-wife Wendy, Tara, and other club members. Her protection of Jax creates narrative tensions with Tara, and the slowly unraveling truth about John Teller's death leads to greater tensions of family throughout the show's run.¹⁰ As Slotkin (1998) theorizes, "the psychology of the revenger has its roots in the outlaw Western" (p. 382). In addition, the same psychology of revenge in *SOA* shares roots with the tragedy *Hamlet*. Thus, by updating the narrative to a modern outlaw tragedy, the show mines new psychological terrain through the lens of counterculture biker drama. Just as Eastwood's work contested "construction of masculinity" and "what constitutes heroism" (Kitses, 2004, p. 289), *SOA* mines this terrain through the slow-grinding and always complicated transformation of Jax. Thus, through this counterculture revision, other cultural aspects of the Western, specifically the Native American plight, emerge as visibly tragic markers of the present.

The Native American Plight Continues

Just as *SOA* centers on a core group of White male outlaws, this neo-Western revisits the cultural construct of the Native American plight. Similarly, this plight updates a continued problematic via stereotypical representation and subjugation. In the Season two episode *Balm*, the club stumbles onto an opportunity as they visit "Indian Territory" to exercise a repo for Teller-Morrow. Loading an SUV to the tow truck, a "Squaw" begs them not to take the vehicle, as she

confesses the truck's full of her "beads" for "weaving." Opie offers her a cold, "I'm sorry" and they repossess the car. Back at T-M, Half Sack opens the supposed box of beads, only to find each box full of "unstamped" homemade ammunition. Thus, the beginning of a *treaty* soon occurs between SC and the tribal nation, where the "Waheebah" now become SC's new ammunition dealer.

Unfortunately, Native American relations often follow through a stereotypical lens. As SC visits the reservation site (or Rez), Tig discusses the situation with a young man:

Tig: Tonto speak up.

Ferdinand: My name's Ferdinand.

Clay: Hey, Ferdinand, we make guns. You, make bullets.

Now, I could either help you or crush ya'.

Ferdinand: Okay

Clay: Smart boy.

The club relies on historical hegemony with their Native Americans engagements. The club's personal pension for extortion resorts in continual threats and one-sided advantages that favor the [privileged] White male. Scouting the Rez, they visit a school bus, where Ferdinand gives a tour of how the tribe builds their ammunition. When the tribe admits they can manufacture 1000 AK-47 rounds in a matter of "hours," tribal parties demand in return a list of drug dealer contacts for their reservation surplus of "hallucinogenic mushrooms." What is interesting in this interpretation is how the Native American presence aligns with outlaw ideological practices. Thus, the alignment both condemns their behavior but also highlights continual hegemonic subversion of Native American cultural practices under current U.S. laws.

Much like the sprawling desert landscape wilderness of California, *SOA* plays with other landscape motifs central to the sprawling narrative of its expansive terrain. In particular, the Indian Reservation just outside Charming plays a pivotal role in several episodes. Beginning in Season two, the Rez is featured as an off-the-grid site where SC obtains illegal ammunition for their gunrunning trade. Instead of the tribal teepees, the Indians typically work out of low-end trailer homes. This updated division of the modern equivalent to impoverished yet portable living spaces reaches to the Western past while situating furnishings marked in the present. Likewise, the Reservation is spatially situated as a post-colonialist marker of defined space and government-distributed territory. Yet the privatization of the space, due to the ramifications of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Native American treatment, isolates the reservation from government interference. Thus, the space becomes a pivotal destination for illegal activities that cannot be tracked nor impeded. In this way, the Rez becomes a liminal space of significance for the SC as well as an atmosphere conjoining the past and present in *SOA*.

During a visit to the Rez in Season four, two club members happen upon a body buried in dirt, with only the victim's head above ground. Covered in ants and slowly being eaten alive, the still-living hostage serves as a warning to SC that anyone attempting to double-cross "the Tribe" suffers a fate steeped in ancestral torture methods. The barbaric visuals of the scene invoke clichéd stereotypes of Native American ritual and disturbing myths of brutality. During one encounter, two SC sit forced to wait in front of a buried White man whose exposed head slowly decays. While their Indian counterpart retrieves an item of barter, one club member shows a kind of "outlaw sympathy" by smothering the hostage to death before his captor returns. By coding what constitutes appropriate White man's death, SC communicates a racial bias whereby only bikers clubs are afforded the agency of advanced medieval torture.

This scene recalls the Western trope where men see it better to kill women than have them suffer the fate of capture by Indians. Such fears are portrayed and/or referenced in *Stagecoach*, *The Searchers*, and *Little Big Man*. Whereas Ford played this approach with genuine fear in addition to its clear dysfunction as a method of solution, Penn used the trope as biting critique against the Western American mindset. Similarly in *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976), Eastwood problematizes this scenario, where the ruthless rapists comprised a conglomerate of vile men composed of mixed races. Ultimately, *SOA* uses this scene to invoke both a fearsome depiction (those "savage" practices continuing in modern times?!) and as an addition to Sutter's usual bag of disparaging scenes with wink, as much as they wince, with humor. With the scene playing out in this fashion, the viewer is reminded of who makes the ultimate decisions of "right" and "wrong" in the West, and those decisions never come from native tribes, even on their own land.

In Season four, the land is used as a faux courtyard for Opie's wedding. The wedding itself is not a farce, although lingering problems between marrying bikers and porn stars does lend the situation an heir of tumult. However, the site also serves as a neutral site to exonerate revenge killings against the Russians for a jailhouse stabbing that occurred between seasons. Just as the land offers no risk of police interference, the land further serves as the makeshift disposal site for unwanted corpses. In this way, counting both the undoubted mess left behind at the wedding reception, coupled with the array of decaying Russian bodies, the narrative evokes "Indian Territory" as a ceremonial dumping ground for waste. This traumatic repetition recalls the history of land desecration and Native American treatment for suiting purposes of White politics. I contend the *SC/SOA* Native American treatment posits a decidedly nihilistic and pessimistic attitude that does not suggest a sympathetic revision let alone legitimacy to the Native American plight. Instead, these ambiguous markers—authentic or degrading or both?—leave the audience in contemplation for resolution.

Perhaps these representations best mirror America's continuing psychological obstacles dealing with American Western history and its ideological confusions with Native America.

Blending Western Aspects of Outlaw and Gunfighter Mythology

No other Western theme emerges more often in *SOA* than comparisons with outlaws. Outlaws and outlaw justice compose much of SC's ideological code of ethics. As Zabelle notifies Jacob Hale in the Season two premiere, "We're aware of your town's outlaw problem." Yet as David Hale counters to his brother Jacob, "I am not going to swap one group of outlaws for another." Or perhaps Chief Unser best explains the tangled ideological code in this exchange with Clay in Season one's *Hell Followed*, "The deal always was, 'outlaws live in Charming, [but] shit beyond the borders.' You can't change the rules, or it all goes to hell." Unser's comments denote a naïve understand that Charming's borders provide an imaginary marker to which outlaw justice resides just outside of. Upon closer examination, *SOA* simultaneously portrays numerous identities of what Slotkin (1998) constitutes as "The Cult of the Gunfighter," where *SOA* methods of plot development might range from "town-tamer" to "outlaw Western" to "psychological" and "ideological" arguments, often code-switching within the same scene or operating through a conglomerate of approaches (p. 379).

In addition to verbal references to outlaw mythology, the deeds and actions of SC clarify the show's portrayal of outlaw justice through gratuitous violence and other lurid content. Whether murderous hits, revenge kills, or self-defense, the landscape of Charming is littered with as many buried corpses as buried secrets. The Sons embrace strong-arm tactics in a majority of their encounters, and thus methods of relief compliment their sordid tastes. Elder members Clay and Tig comprise a villainous duo eerily similar to William Holden and Ernest Borgnine's Pike and Dutch in Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969). Yet if the thieving, backstabbing, murderous Clay epitomizes the moral compass of the two, then Tig's heinous behavior recalls the ruthless Vietnam critique of *Wild Bunch*. Tig and Clay often exchange ambiguous looks of empathy, knowing the lifestyle they've chosen, but like Pike and Dutch, neither can or will give up such practices. In addition to excessive violence and other proclivities like smoking and drinking, SC bides its time with a host of "crow-eaters" and "hangarounds," the lowly females that circulate clubs with endless sexual favors in exchange for boos and protection. Yet as Clay warns Tig's urgency to join the "patch party" in Season one's *Patch Over*: "[the] last time you had free range on pussy, you throat-pumped two brownies, [and] your DNA almost brought us down."¹¹

Tig needn't be reminded of his transgressions, as they are a regular installment in his vocabulary. In Season one, Tig and Clay break into the morgue to retrieve identifiable markers on two club-related corpses unearthed by Charming's Sheriff's Department.¹² Upon opening the first bag, Tig rolls his eyes in euphoria, and asks Clay if he's ever "ya know . . . with a *cold one*?" Clay responds with utter disgust, leaving the audience to connect the dots that Tig is experienced with necrophilia. Another example can be seen when Tig gets kidnapped by bounty hunters in Season two's *Eureka*. Tig forces the group to confess the nature of his apprehension by challenging their individual masculinities. One member finally acknowledges Tig is wanted in "Oregon" on counts of "indecent exposure" and "lewd acts" at a "livestock" venue. Here again the vague assumption (left to the viewer) is that Tig engaged in public proclivities, and perhaps worse than that, bestiality.¹³

Ultimately, Deputy Hale perhaps puts it best in this Season two exchange with Jax and Clay:

Hale: You guys cruise around here like heroes, and you and I know the truth.

Jax: And what truth is that?

Hale: You're white trash thugs holding on to a dying dream.

Clay: That is so poetic Chief . . . oh I'm sorry, it's just Deputy Chief, right?

Hale: It doesn't matter if I'm chief or not, you can't stop progress. It won't be long before SAMCRO is an ugly memory in the history of Charming. You enjoy the ride, while you still can.

Of course, in Clay's mind Hale is just "a half-bright clerk with a Wyatt Earp complex." Yet Hale's warning promotes a larger theme of *SOA* and later gunfighter Westerns like *The Wild Bunch* and John Sturges's *The Magnificent Seven* (1960), the history of progress cannot be stopped, only briefly postponed. The progressive world has no place for outlaws, and thus, the outlaw code can be viewed as a tragedy, something that cannot or will not end well.

Revising the Western and Biker History for a Post-9/11 Critique

Just as Peckinpah uses the Western to craft aesthetic forms of social commentary (Kitses, 2004), I argue Sutter performs the same function through his revision of Western genre tropes as a modern biker drama. Historically, motorcycle clubs evolved out of a response to veterans returning home from World War II. In a way, the motorcycle experience beset a kind of cultural coping mechanism for postwar anxieties. Fast forward 60 years, American has been

involved in multiple wars, now eclipsing years of wartime involvement in and beyond World War II, the Korean War, and Vietnam. Wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and circulating themes of war on terror and government control following 9/11 permeate U.S. culture. This cultural permeation occurs through the lifeblood of connective tissue, media. 9/11 posits one of the most mediated events in history. The subsequent war on terror and aftermath become the first wars mediated *live* in first-person style. Along with thousands of troops experiencing fatal injuries, America experiences the fatal wounds of wartime financial burden. As an arguably war-induced economic recession began in the mid-2000s, alternative media forms began resonating escapist themes that provide mediated outlets for counterculture lifestyle. Passive programming like out of time escapism in Matt Weiner's *Mad Men* (2007) mediates [and medicates] the past through the lens of nostalgia, as a way to avoid or perhaps rethink the present. Vince Gilligan's *Breaking Bad* (2008) synthesizes border tensions and class warfare with the war on drugs in a post-recession America.

Meanwhile, cable's own "rebel" FX focuses on the present and engages the flaws of post-9/11 America through its biker gang immorality play *SOA*. I argue that in the same way actual biker gangs evolved out of real veterans in post-war America following World War II, *SOA* mediates biker gangs for a generation steeped in visual culture, media literacy, and America's often-indirect exposure to the perils of war. Thus, in this way, *SOA* revises the histories of biker culture and the story of the American West, and uses such revisions to critique and cope with modern civilization in ways that straightforward debates have failed. In critiquing society through stylistic drama, through Shakespearean tragedy, Sutter might offer a new hope to an otherwise bleak perception of society. Indeed, I believe we can observe how Sutter carefully repeats and revises the Western genre as an ideological and methodological pedagogy more so than proto-American genre toolbox. But audiences and scholars must weigh this dramatic pedagogy cautiously. Just as *SOA* resurfaces themes like the Native American plight, it still subverts this kind of topicality by marginalizing the theme yet again for plot convenience and kitschy pulp exploitation. Sutter and *SOA* heighten conversations about borders and boundaries of family and community but still must be held accountable for how we constitute these physical, ideological, and televisual spaces and histories.

Concluding Thoughts on a Western Ideological Genealogy

Collectively, *SOA* speaks to certain ideological codes steeped in hypermasculinity but contradictory to civil society and "politically correctness." While exaggerated

for TV, this convergent problem between former and current masculinity norms arguably belies a telling fate older generations must now endure. I cannot directly experience the conflicts my grandfathers faced in their lifetimes any more than I can speak directly for them. Like the tough cowboys in Westerns or the gruff bikers on *SOA*, men like my grandfathers sometimes struggled to balance the tragic paradox between toughness and cruelty. Often their conflicts internalized, forcing them to find alternative ways to cope with their patriarchal pressures. I can with reservation call some of their methods antiheroic, perhaps on occasion tragic, yet ultimately human. While my grandfathers did not approach each situation atop a horse or bike, adorned in cowboy hat or riding helmet, they did navigate their individual journeys with consistent ideological codes. These codes diverged between small town living and urban setting, John Wayne and John Cassavetes,¹⁴ but aligning emphasis on family and community, coffee and cigarettes, and hard work amidst grief and strife. Those Western values seem almost translucent now, the muddled biker morality as palpable as it is pulpy. *SOA* seems intent on entering its final seasons with deeper submergence into darker themes. I suggest that if audiences cannot course correct these ambiguous cultural pedagogies like prior generations absorbed from genre Westerns, American viewers might only be able to cope with its past and present through continuous cycles of repetition and revision.

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Notes

1. In *The Television Will Be Revolutionized* (New York: New York University), Amanda Lotz (2007) designates this shift between traditional network TV supremacy and the paradigm shift to satellite and then cable television.
2. In the series, SAMCRO stands for "Sons of Anarchy Motorcycle Club Redwood Originals," designating the club as the first of its numerous charters.
3. This is not to say that network TV plays every show safe or vice versa. Many examples exist of each company producing

- programming that attempts to breach the form of the established TV norms. Yet overwhelming evidence continues to suggest these trends remain segregated to an extent, with serialization on the network side and character-driven productions cultivated by cable programming.
4. *Sons of Anarchy (SOA)* focuses on family, and the dynamics between Jax and Clay in particular share traits with McGee's critique of "mobility" versus "immobility" between Shane and Joe in George Stevens's gunslinger Western *Shane* (1953) (McGee, 2007, p. 4). In this comparison, Jax, the youthful and progressive-minded of the two, often butts heads against Clay's insistence that the club function through the same traditional methods. As well, like *Shane*, *SOA* bears a strong commentary on class, and just like *Shane*, Jax temporarily assumes a "nomad" status (p. 6) in Season two as a way to negotiate his class standing against the club's hegemonic status quo.
 5. Season two's *Eureka* features a callback to the shift from Western cultural practice to symbolic Western materialism. Outside the smoke shop, new businessman Ethan Zobelle sets up a Wooden Indian statue, recalling the statues typically associated with smoking, smokes shops, tobacco, and the history between Indians and tobacco use, so regularly recurrent in Western cinema. Examples include Grandfather's habitual excuses to "smoke" in *Little Big Man*, Nobody's repetitive requests for "tobacco" in *Dead Man*, and Clint Eastwood's repetition of tobacco spitting in *The Outlaw Josey Wales*. Smoking and tobacco remain remnants of Western culture and Western cinema, a visual aesthetic that continually constitutes the biker world of SC. As a stand-in for the Western trading post, numerous key scenes throughout Season two take place in Zobelle's cigar shop. And much like the snake oil salesmen of *Josey Wales*, *Little Big Man*, *Stagecoach*, capitalism spreads throughout the West, and every town faces the impending expansion of capitalism. And just like the nature of the snake oil salesman, Zobelle's interests reflect dual intentions, as he is ultimately shown to be a greedy businessman whose only color of interest is "green." Thus, for most of Season two, the outsider League of Nationalists pose the threat to Edenic paradise, forcing the outlaws to shift to a pseudo-moralist center.
 6. I note all quotes listed without citation are referenced with regularity within the show, and can be observed in numerous episodes. Larger quotations are otherwise pulled from the episodes they appear in.
 7. See *Fun Town* from Season one.
 8. SPOILER ALERT: A moral lesson of this show often circulates that those who oppose SC meet a fate worse than living under their domain, as each of these citizen examples face unrelated fatal consequences.
 9. Specifically, in Season two episode *Balm*, Jax calls Teller's journal a "Half angry manifesto, half love letter," signifying the manual's dual nature as a progressive political text and its reference to Shakespeare's poetics.
 10. SPOILER ALERT: In Season three, as SC visits Ireland to settle their gunrunning problems with the Irish, the Hamlet metaphor of *SOA* foregoes any ambiguity in its attempt to pay homage to the show's initial source material.
 11. *Brownies*, of course, refers to the Mexican prostitutes that burned to death in a house fire.
 12. The corpses are the "two dead Brownies," to be specific.
 13. Thus, Tig's desire to transcend boundaries goes beyond the spatial to reject moral and even human borderlines.
 14. Dancing outside the boundaries of Westerns, John Cassavetes plays an iconic loner-antihero "Cody" in Director Daniel Haller's biker B-movie *Devil's Angels* (1967) released by American Pictures International.

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