The FX series *Justified* (2010–) is the most recent reworking of the western genre on television, with its narrative centering on deputy U.S. Marshal Raylan Givens’s (Timothy Olyphant) effort to establish law and order in Harlan County, Kentucky. Yet, the series also features strong, unruly female characters exhibiting a range of complex character traits and compelling storylines that both subvert and adhere to archetypes of the western heroine. On the one hand, unlike typical western heroines who serve roles secondary to that of the hero, *Justified*’s female characters play important, even central, roles in the narrative. On the other hand, the series’ female characters are largely marginalized and victimized within the narrative. Hence, *Justified* advances a paradoxical amalgam of pre-feminist (read: before the interventions of second wave feminism) and pro-feminist ideas. The goal of this essay, however, is not to categorize its female characters as either feminist or antifeminist, but rather to call attention to the complexity and ambivalence of feminist ideas portrayed in the series in the context of contemporary feminist discourse.

Merri Lisa Johnson, in her book *Third Wave Feminism and Television*, observes that the assessment of whether a media text or character is “feminist enough” has been a primary focus in recent decades (Johnson 10-12). Shifting from this focus, third wave feminism privileges a less totalizing analysis by transcending such polarizing dichotomies of positive/negative, progressive/backlash, and feminist/antifeminist representations. Based on the acceptance that today’s media texts offer “a mixture of feminist, postfeminist, antifeminist and pseudofeminist motifs,” third wave feminist media critics typically incorporate feminism with poststructuralism, postmodernism, queer theory, and postcolonialism in an effort to investigate the conflicting dramatization of women’s issues in contemporary film and television (Johnson 17-19). Amanda D. Lotz similarly advocates a new approach through which media critics avoid binary paradigms of thinking, which reinforce hegemonic gender roles and patriarchal structure, and instead implement “both/and” thinking through an acknowledgement of the paradoxical, multifaceted nature of contemporary media culture. For instance, Lotz maintains that “we currently exist in a period of intermezzo. We have entered a new era in feminism: one between the overwhelming structural impediments to gender justice that existed before the activist efforts of second wave feminism yet a world in which complete equity has not been achieved” (Lotz 72). Therefore, in order to explore complicated cultural constructions in this period of feminist intermezzo, feminist scholars need to utilize
a critical framework that allows for the interrogation of dominant, emergent, and residual ideologies simultaneously present in contemporary media texts (Lotz 80-81).

Informed by third wave feminist media theory, this essay analyzes the capacity and limitations of *Justified*’s feminism by focusing on the central female characters in the series’ first and second seasons, Ava Crowder (Joelle Carter) and Mags Bennett (Margo Martindale). Although confined by pre-feminist forms of gender discrimination, classism, and repressive local culture, Ava Crowder refuses to be a helpless victim of unjust power relations and economic conditions. Ava’s complex character arc involves her constant rejection of a fixed feminine role in favor of female unruliness and agency. Ava’s transformation deviates from a typical passage to a properly submissive woman in the essentially masculine western genre while demonstrating such pro-feminist ideas as self-reliance, independence, and defiance. This essay also examines the life and death of Mags Bennett, a criminal matriarch who serves as the principal antagonist in season two. As a complex character, Mags Bennett is an aggressive, yet generous matriarch who embodies pro-feminist ideas through her disruptive power and social influence extending beyond the limitations of domesticity and family. Her ultimate demise, however, compounds notions of matriarchal agency and female unruliness with traditional, pre-feminist tropes of the self-sacrificing mother. Paying special attention to the intersections of gender representations and regional identity, this essay explores the ways in which Ava and Mags challenge, reinforce, and reconfigure hegemonic gender roles in the series’ narrative.

**Life in the Pre-feminist Harlan**

The women of Harlan County – namely wives, ex-wives, and widows of local criminals – appear confined in pre-feminist forms of patriarchal domination and exploitation. Echoing the historical formation of its regional identity, Harlan embodies an isolated, static region that has not experienced the interventions of second wave feminism. Far from the image of liberated women who seemingly have the freedom to make their own decisions, the women of Harlan appear to have little control over their lives. These women’s lives are inextricably implicated in economic disparities between Harlan and mainstream America, yet their material conditions are exacerbated by their shiftless spouse’s criminal activity. As deputy U.S. Marshal Raylan Givens encounters a variety of criminals in each episode, the series also introduces their wives, ex-wives, and widows. They are mostly working-class women, born as daughters of miners and now trapped by previous or current marriage. In this section, I focus on how the historical formation of Harlan’s regional identity contributes to the predicaments of *Justified*’s hillbilly women primarily through a comparative analysis of two characters, Raylan and Ava.

*Justified*’s narrative is filled with male characters who make poor choices as well as female characters who largely stand by their men regardless of the legitimacy or lawfulness of their actions. Raylan’s aunt Helen (Linda Gehringer), who raised him in place of her dead sister and who now lives with his criminal father Arlo (Raymond J. Barry), expresses the sentiment that sums up womanhood in Harlan in the episode “The Lord of War & Thunder.” When asked why she puts up
with Arlo’s criminal behavior, Helen bluntly replies, “We suffer well together” (season 1, episode 5). For outsiders, the masochistic wives, ex-wives, and widows in Harlan County may come across as victims due to the multiple forms of oppression that systematically position them at the intersections of gender discrimination, classism, and repressive local culture.

Located in the heart of Appalachia, Harlan County, Kentucky, provides an ideal setting for Justified’s contemporary take on the western due to the enduring image of Appalachia as a less civilized, culturally backward region. As a distinctive cultural region, Appalachia encompasses rural areas in the eastern United States ranging from West Virginia and North Carolina to Kentucky, Tennessee, and Georgia (Abramson and Haskell xix-xxv). Separated from surrounding areas by high mountain ridges, residents of Appalachia have long been associated with notions of ruggedness and untamed wilderness. In her study of the creation of regional identities and stereotypes in Appalachia, Katie Algeo maintains that Appalachian stereotypes, such as isolated country folk who are ignorant, poor, insular, and suspicious of outsiders, originate from the late nineteenth century’s “local-color” novels. Largely written by outsiders, local-color novels were sentimental, nostalgic stories about the region and its people with a simple plot structure that described the mountain community as distinctly separated from the whole of modernized, mainstream America (Algeo 28-32). Algeo argues that scholars, such as folklorists, geographers, and ethnographers, of the early twentieth century further reinforced the Appalachian stereotype through their romanticized outsider accounts of the region and its culture. As a result, Appalachia and its inhabitants became linked with notions of wilderness, cultural inertia, and lawlessness (Algeo 33-34). The stereotypical portrayal of mountain folk, or hillbillies, continued throughout the twentieth century in a variety of popular media including films, television, and comic books.¹ The resulting pattern of imagery and associated values formulate a sense of Appalachian “Otherness,” anchoring the region in America’s uncivilized past.

The representation of Harlan County and its residents in Justified does not diverge from the aforementioned stereotypes, depicting Appalachia as an economically and culturally destitute region. Borrowing from centuries-old views of the region, the series constructs its setting, Harlan County, as a metaphorical Wild West of sorts. The series’ narrative continually represents Harlan as an underdeveloped, lawless region largely removed from outside influences and populated with fugitives, drug dealers, and clan-feuding hillbillies. In addition, the series’ protagonist, Raylan Givens, is visually identified as a western hero through the iconography of the genre, such as his cowboy hat, boots, and most importantly, his gun. Just like traditional western heroes, Raylan maintains a nomadic lifestyle by often residing in a motel instead of owning a home, an act indicative of his solitary status removed from the community despite his deep involvement with the people of Harlan County. The series repeatedly emphasizes Raylan’s superiority to local criminals not only through his sharp skills with a gun but also his verbal prowess. Raylan possesses an intellect higher than most of the Harlan residents who are uneducated, unintelligent, and ignorant – i.e., the homogenously backward people constructed in the popular imagination.

Stemming from the depiction of Harlan County as a backward
region, the prospect of escaping Harlan for a better life constitutes a central trope in the series' narrative. Yet, despite their efforts, the characters in *Justified* are rarely successful in their attempts to leave Harlan. Thus, physical mobility becomes a powerful signifier of agency within the series' narrative. Unlike the people of Harlan County, Raylan is able to move around across county lines. As a U.S. Marshal, he travels frequently between Lexington and Harlan, chasing criminals and transporting inmates. Raylan is repeatedly depicted on the move, driving in a car, visiting Harlan locals in their home, and interviewing prison inmates. Moreover, Raylan's backstory spans different cities, states, and even another country.

In contrast to Raylan's physical mobility, Harlan functions largely as a permanent, inescapable home for Ava. Expressing a desire for anonymity and freedom of the big city, Ava discusses her wish to leave Harlan in the following manner: “Since I was nineteen years old, I always dreamed if I saved enough money I’d move to Lexington….you probably don’t remember what a relief it is to walk around every day and all you see is strangers. [In Lexington] I can walk into a store or a coffee shop. Nobody knows anything about me or my family” (season 1, episode 6). Ava’s desire to escape stems not just from her wish to improve her material condition but also from the perceived liberation from the oppressive patriarchal culture in Harlan. Married one year after high school to one of the Crowders, Ava's life has been inextricably linked to her husband's family business. As women's social status and reputation are constantly judged by their husband’s family name within the local community, Ava wishes to move away from her pre-feminist hometown where she has no choice but to be associated with the villainous patriarch of Harlan County, her father-in-law, Bo Crowder. However, while Ava dreams of starting a new life and indeed takes the bold first step by shooting and killing her husband at the start of the series, such efforts prove futile. Ava’s physical and social immobility thereby becomes a recurring motif, particularly in season one, signifying one of the most fundamental constraints for the local women in contrast with Raylan’s ability to come and go as he tries to solve crimes and restore order to the community.

**The Ballad of Ava**

Ava Crowder is a tough, resilient working-class woman who often violently opposes the region's patriarchal order, represented by her husband and father-in-law. As a victim of repeated domestic violence, Ava finds justice by killing her husband as the series opens. She also threatens her father-in-law Bo Crowder (M.C. Gainey) with a shotgun in order to stop his subsequent harassment. In what J.W. Williamson terms “democracy of violence,” in his book *Hillbillyland: What the Movies Did to the Mountains and What the Mountains Did to the Movies*, the possession of a gun functions as an “equalizer” that grants filmic hillbilly women the same power and control, at least temporarily, which men have always assumed for themselves (Williamson 225-26). Ava portrays just such a strong and defiant hillbilly woman while conveying the qualities of both victim and villain as the series’ narrative progresses. Unlike the other women of Harlan who seem to have no choice but to endure and suffer, Ava maintains a level of control throughout seasons one and two by defiantly trying out the different roles ascribed to the women living the
Pam Cook argues that western heroines typically represent a civilizing force that tames the wilderness in order to help male protagonists build a new society in the Western frontier (Cook 293-95). More often than not, women assume secondary roles as mother figures, educators, or social mediators in the service of the hero’s causes and goals. Cook analyzes recurring female character types and their narrative treatments in the genre by focusing on the characteristic trajectory of the western heroine from tomboy to wife, which ultimately functions to reestablish the patriarchal control of femininity at the narrative’s resolution (Cook 295-99).\(^2\) Ava’s transformation, however, deviates from a typical passage to femininity while occupying a continuum between traditional notions of the western genre’s femininity and masculine necessities in pre-feminist Harlan. Ava constantly inverts the dichotomy between static-uncivilized Harlan and mobile-developed mainstream America through her active experimentation with multiple roles. Throughout seasons one and two, Ava moves across the spectrum of different femininities, thereby disrupting normative formations of masculinity (read: active, in control, public, etc.) and femininity (read: passive, victimized, domestic, etc.). Her struggle for identity, coupled with the series’ emphasis on the social constraints of gender, class, and local identity, is emblematic of Justified’s ambivalent feminism.

In her first appearance in the series, Ava displays the image of a nonconforming, unruly woman. In the pilot episode, “Fire in the Hole,” Raylan visits Ava the day after she killed her husband, Bowman, in her kitchen because “she got tired of Bowman getting drunk and beating her,” as Raylan’s co-worker explains (season 1, episode no. 1). Yet, surprisingly, Ava appears unperturbed and genuinely happy to see Raylan, her crush since she was twelve years old. After nonchalantly offering a drink to Raylan, Ava rather proudly, and even with a sense of excitement, describes how she executed the killing: “I had his favorite supper on the table. Ham and yams, and cream-style corn and leftover okra fixed with tomatoes. I waited till he was shoving food in his face, then I got his deer rifle from the kitchen closet and I went in there and I did what I had to do” (season 1, episode 1). With unkempt hair and bloodstains on her shirt, she also reveals that she has just finished cleaning up the kitchen. In front of lawman Raylan, who appears dumbfounded by her carefree demeanor, Ava is undoubtedly a rebellious lawbreaker. Yet, Ava’s action is justified within the series’ narrative as she has endured repeated domestic violence.

Kathleen Rowe observes that the unruly woman transgresses normative formations of feminine beauty and decorum by using humor and excess. From Mae West to Miss Piggy and Roseanne Arnold, unruly women portrayed in films and television assert their desires through their loud and crude manner of speech and domination of men. They are also characterized by their large size, which relates to such notions as looseness, sloppiness, and deviancy. Ava’s image does not necessarily draws on the iconography of the unruly woman as she portrays a traditionally attractive, young woman. Yet, her refusal to play the passive victim herself along with her relentless effort to retain agency grants her unruly status in opposition to the patriarchal structure of both the western genre and Harlan’s regional culture.

After introducing Ava as an unruly woman who is self-reliant
and defiant, the series explores her wife-like qualities in the following season one episodes, as if testing her potential as Raylan's romantic partner. In “Fixer,” Ava drinks beer and plays pool with Raylan in a bar. Feminine in her dress, Ava is playful and seductive when she asks Raylan how he met his ex-wife, Winona (Natalie Zea). Although they look like a couple out on a date, their conversation points to Raylan’s reluctance to getting romantically involved with the local woman Ava. Upon hearing Raylan’s plan to stay in Kentucky only temporarily until he gets reassigned, Ava looks disappointed, but she acts as if she is planning to leave as well. At the end of the episode, however, Raylan visits Ava’s house at night, telling her that he has found something that makes him want to stay, which leads to a passionate kiss. This pattern of taming the unruly Ava continues in “The Lord of War and Thunder,” with Raylan and Ava sharing a romantic evening sitting on the hood of Raylan’s car, looking down at Lexington’s city lights. Ava looks beautiful and relaxed with her long blonde hair blowing in the wind, but Raylan is still reluctant to have a romantic relationship with her.

Toward the end of season one, after witnessing Winona leaving Raylan’s motel, Ava realizes that Raylan is not the rugged hero who will rescue her and protect her from the uncivilized Crowders. Equipped with a sawed-off gun she acquires from Helen, Ava decides to rely on herself and regain control of her life. After experimenting with a feminization process typical of a conventional western scenario, Ava reverts to her rebellious-self, more defiant than ever, standing alone against the violent patriarch of Harlan County, Bo Crowder. In “Fathers and Sons,” Ava barges into Bo’s bar and points a shotgun at him because he has been harassing her for killing his son. As Bo tells her to leave Kentucky and never come back, Ava decisively replies, “I ain’t leaving” (season 1, episode 12).

Although Ava refuses to be civilized and become an archetypal western wife throughout the series, she undergoes a brief period in which she functions as a civilizing force. Season two begins with Ava living with Boyd (Walton Goggins), her brother-in-law, whom she previously called “creepy” (season 2, episode 1). In this phase of unlikely cohabitation, Ava portrays a mother figure who tames Boyd’s wildness, albeit temporarily, as she tries to keep him away from his outlaw ways and bring him back into society. A scene from “The Life Inside,” for instance, emphasizes Ava’s civilizing influence on Boyd when he comes home wounded and disoriented. After tending to his facial injury, with a stern expression, Ava issues the following ultimatum: “We’ll pretend like this never happened. It happens again, though, and I will put you back in whatever gutter you just pulled yourself out of” (season 2, episode 2). Ava looks and sounds like a mother with Boyd playing the role of the disciplined son. However, Ava’s mothering period comes to an end rather quickly when Boyd’s co-workers enlist him in a daring payroll robbery at the coal mine where he works. In “Cottonmouth,” Boyd outsmarts and kills his co-conspirators at the mine, and then sits down with Ava at home across a table to explain the justification for his wrongdoing. Ava scolds Boyd at first, but she eventually decides to take the pilfered money and help Boyd conceal his crimes. In need of money for her mortgage payment, but more importantly, upon realizing that she cannot pretend to be someone else anymore, Ava transforms from Boyd’s mother figure to his accomplice.
Toward the end of the second season, Ava transforms herself once more, shifting from Boyd’s accomplice to his romantic partner. Yet, Ava portrays the image of a defiant rebel rather than that of a wife, separating herself from the pre-feminist womanhood in Harlan. In “Full Commitment,” Helen offers a piece of advice to Ava while Arlo and Boyd are “talking business” inside the house: “There have been lots of times I wished I knew less about what he [Arlo] does. I can’t ever remember a time I wished I knew more….Well, just remember, honey, no matter what anyone does to you, how much they scare you, how much they hurt you, you can’t tell what you don’t know” (season 2, episode 11). Despite Helen’s motherly counsel for Ava to distance herself from masculine drives, however, Ava does the exact opposite in the same episode when she announces to Boyd, “I don’t want you to keep anything from me. I want to know everything” (season 2, episode 11). As if pledging never to be a silently suffering wife again, the rebellious Ava defies Helen’s wishful advice, and instead chooses to cavort with Boyd. Ava’s decision is indicative of her desire to exercise autonomy by knowingly choosing to travel the hard road with Boyd, the series’ principal antagonist.

Ava’s character arc also departs from a typical female transformation in tomboy narratives. Kristen Hatch notes in Little Butches: Tomboy in Hollywood Film that tomboy films inevitably entail the disciplining of female gender. The narrative logic of these films serves to reestablish masculine dominance and feminine submission after briefly showing the thrill of young women’s acting against gender norms (Hatch 76-79). Unlike these Hollywood films, Justified portrays Ava’s continuous metamorphosis into traditionally non-feminine identities. After being introduced as a victim of domestic violence, she becomes complicit with the male violence and criminality, which once caused her physical and psychological entrapment. Ava seems never to want to settle down while exhibiting complex character traits as conflicted as many other male characters in the series. Ava’s transformation is predicated on her decisive rejection of pre-feminist victimhood, represented by Helen. The untamable Ava refuses the possibility of succumbing to male domination, and in so doing she chooses to actively participate in the dominant mode of masculine activities in Harlan – i.e., running criminal, illegal businesses. While the series never allows Ava to escape the trappings of her local, rural, working-class identity, she is able to move rather fluidly between contradictory roles of both “passive” victim and “active” villain.

The Life and Death of a Matriarch

Justified’s first season concludes with the death of the patriarchal villain, Bo Crowder, and its second season introduces a new character, Mags Bennett, the mother of the Bennett family, which has a long, contentious history with the Givens’ family. Whereas Ava does not develop into a full-fledged villain in the series’ second season, Mags serves as a matriarchal villain who continuously frustrates Raylan Givens and his fellow U.S. Marshals’ efforts to bring order to Harlan County. Prominent and powerful, yet far from the warm, caring image of the archetypal western mother, Mags portrays a criminal matriarch who has laws of her own. With her three adult sons, she presides over the local marijuana trade, ruthlessly protecting her family and business.
The representation of Mags Bennett both adheres to and diverges from the typical image of a powerful matriarch. In her book *Ladies of the Evening: Women Characters of Prime-time Television*, Diana Meehan identifies “the matriarch” as one of the ten female character types portrayed in American television. According to Meehan, the matriarch characteristically exercises two types of power: social power and actual power. This character type has a considerable amount of social power and influence over others in the community gained through her wisdom and experience. The matriarch also enjoys her actual power through the ownership of resources including land, business, money, and medicine. Regardless of such power and prestige, however, the matriarch’s narrative treatment differs significantly from male heroes in two principal ways: her association with domesticity and vulnerability. First, the matriarch’s actions largely concern her family and home; and second, she is frequently subject to victimization within the narrative (Meehan 101-106). While Mags’s image and narrative treatment shares much with Meehan’s conception of the television matriarch, Mag’s characterization distinguishes her in a number of ways.

Ostensibly, Mags portrays a significantly less respectable matriarch in *Justified* due to her involvement with the illegal marijuana trade as well as her violent means of operating the business and maintaining order. Yet, as the owner of Bennett General Store, she takes care of those who are ill with her backwoods medicine and moonshine, and is thus respected by the Harlan locals. In Arlo’s words, she is “an old lady helping people with their glaucoma and stomach upset” (season 2, episode 2). With her motherly care, Mags functions as Harlan’s medicine woman of sorts, specializing in herbs and homemade remedies, and with her understanding of local culture, she also embodies a protector of Harlan County. Her social power and influence lies with her role as a caretaker of local people, but her true power emanates from her ability to break down the boundaries of private and public spheres, thereby making the entire Harlan community her extended family. Mags’s domesticity expands beyond her own family and home, as she owns multiple properties including her store, cabins, and marijuana gardens around Harlan County. As such, Mags serves as both the matriarch of the notorious Bennett clan and, by extension, the whole of Harlan County. In “The Spoil,” Mags delivers a powerful speech at a town meeting, advocating for the solidarity of Harlan’s unique, local culture in the face of Black Pike Coal’s corporate interests: “The big-money men come in, take the timber and the coal and the strength of our people. And what do they leave behind? Poundments full of poison slurry and valleys full of toxic trash!...We got our own kind of food, our own music, our own liquor. We got our own way of courting and raising children and our own way of living and dying. And to protect all that, we have got to say ‘No, thank you to…Black Pike Mining’” (season 2, episode 8). Mags’s speech, juxtaposed with reaction shots of local people nodding, agreeing, and cheering, epitomizes her role as an emotional and moral leader – one who unites the community at a time of a crisis, in opposition to outside influences that may be destructive toward their local, indigenous culture. Hence, Mags receives considerable respect through her devotion and loyalty to the local community as well as her service as a caretaker of the ailing local people.

Yet, in contrast to the conventional matriarch whose influence
results from her appeal and persuasion, Mags maintains her power and reign in the community through intimidation, coercion, threat, and even murder. Mags abides by her own rules, and those who disobey her are often subject to extreme punishment. In the season two premiere, “The Moonshine War,” Mags pays a visit to Walt McCready (Chris Mulkey), who has been growing marijuana without her permission and who has called the police to report on a sex offender that works for the Bennett clan. In an apparent gesture of goodwill, Mags offers her signature moonshine to Walt only to poison him as retribution for violating the Harlan code. Calmingly staring a dying Walt in the eyes, Mags proclaims, “You never go outside, Walt. You know that” (season 2, episode 1). Mags even holds Walt’s hand and comforts him by saying that she will raise his daughter, Loretta (Kaitlyn Dever), as Walt takes his last breath. Simply put, Mags is the law that all members in the extended “Harlan family” follow. Interestingly, in this metaphorical showdown scene, no guns are fired, but a glass of Mags’s homebrewed apple pie moonshine is used as a lethal weapon. As a benevolent, yet violent matriarch of Harlan County, Mags subverts the traditional notion of domesticity by utilizing her homemade beverage as an instrument of punishment.

The inside/outside distinction persists in Justified’s narrative while reinforcing the longstanding Appalachian stereotypes – i.e., insular mountain people suspicious of outsiders. Mags embodies an Appalachian matriarch who shows generosity and hospitality toward faithful insiders while displaying hostility and aggression toward interloping outsiders. Ironically, toward the end of season two, Mags herself “goes outside,” betraying the people of Harlan, her extended family of sorts. For all her posturing as the protector of the Harlan community, Mags strikes a legacy deal with Black Pike Coal, ensuring that her family, especially her grandchildren, will have a better life outside of Harlan. For Mags, her grandchildren and Loretta represent the future, as Harlan is a hopeless place tied to the regressive past. Yet, Mags’s decision to leave Harlan brings about her eventual demise in the season two finale, when she kills herself by drinking her poisonous moonshine.

Justified’s season two is bookended by metaphorical showdown scenes, which function to visually represent the rise and fall of Mags’s power while utilizing the generic conventions of the western. The two apple pie showdown scenes mimic the visual structure of the infamous shootout scene that sets the entire series’ narrative in motion. The series premiere, “Fire in the Hole” opens with a violent confrontation in Miami between Raylan Givens and Tommy Bucks (Peter Greene) to whom Raylan has given an ultimatum to leave town within twenty-four hours. As the men exchange their confronting views while sitting on the opposite sides of a table, Raylan occupies the left side of the screen looking at Tommy who is positioned on the right side of the frame. This scene ends with Raylan shooting and killing Tommy Bucks, which, although justified by the fact that Tommy pulled his gun first, leads to Raylan’s transfer to Kentucky, the last place in which he wants to be relocated.

The shot composition and screen direction of the series’ opening scene continues to structure the subsequent showdown scenes, thereby constituting a series-wide visual pattern. In a later scene of “Fire in the Hole,” Raylan and Boyd engage in a violent confrontation while seated across from each other at Ava’s kitchen table. Mirroring the first
shootout scene in Miami. Raylan is located on the left and Boyd on the right. The first apple pie showdown scene in “The Moonshine War” repeats this visual structure, with the powerful Mags – the victor of the showdown – occupying the left half of the frame. A similar shot composition recurs in the final scene of “Bloody Harlan,” in which Mags occupies the right side of the screen sitting across from Raylan, which signifies her ebbing of power. Mags’s loss of power stems from her privileging the security of her immediate family over that of Harlan community.

Mags’s body image not only evokes the iconography of the unruly woman, but her social power and public visibility within the narrative also signify her unruly standing vis-à-vis Harlan’s patriarchal culture. Justified’s melodramatic structure, however, posits limitations for her power that intrudes upon the masculine space of economic advancement. Whereas Roseanne’s unruliness is more paradigmatic than syntagmatic, as Kathleen Rowe argues, Mags’s transgressive, large body carries a more syntagmatic meaning primarily as a maternal body. Mag’s death symbolically points to a thematic pattern within Justified that valorizes female sacrifice. As previously discussed, the series depicts its women characters as suffering wives, ex-wives, and widows living in economically underdeveloped and culturally backward Harlan. Interestingly, the narrative tends to represent these women in a sympathetic, even heroic manner only when they make decisions for the sake of their own survival, particularly for their family and children. The series’ tendency to privilege maternal sacrifice is also evident in Mags’s characterization. For instance, in “Reckoning,” Mags explains how she became the head of the Bennett clan after her husband’s death: “I had every intention of living a simple life, raising my boys, keeping house. Then Pervis got killed, and I accepted this role, did what I had to do for my family. I may not have lived the life I wanted, but I’ll be damned if my grandchildren are gonna live it the same way” (season 2, episode 12). In her own words, Mags is a devoted mother who is dedicated to her family and who values self-sacrifice at the expense of her own happiness. She has no choice but to accept the traditional role of a sacrificial, suffering mother – the dominant womanhood in the static, pre-feminist Harlan.

Yet, just like Ava, Mags’s unruliness inverts the stasis/mobility distinction through her active involvement with the male-centered realm of criminal, illegal endeavors. The business dealings between Mags and Black Pike provide this matriarchal villain with further mobility across the boundaries of both gender and class. However, Mags’s intention to leave Harlan behind serves as her ultimate, unjustifiable transgression. As a local woman to the core, even this powerful, criminal matriarch is never able to actually “go outside.” Justified’s narrative suggests that women can carry a gun – the equalizer in the lawless wilderness – or can own a local business with an illegal, criminal operation. Women can even enjoy social power and influence much greater than any other men in the community. Yet, making a business deal that results in the abandonment of her local identity is not an option for the Harlan woman. This narrative logic functions as a reminder of the predicaments from which the women of Harlan can never escape. Throughout season two, Mags negotiates her liminal position between a self-sacrificial protector of tradition and family and an ambitious businessperson whose power transcends the private sphere outside of Harlan. The life and death of Mags, therefore,
epitomizes the capacity and limitations of female power and agency in Justified’s narrative, which constantly highlights the constraints for women in Harlan County. However, while Mags’s suicide softens her image by associating this matriarchal villain essentially with her domesticity and family-oriented-ness, her death also serves as her final act of agency. Rather than being reduced to a helpless victim of repressive locality, Mags ends her life face-to-face with the law. Such narrative ending confirms the ruthless commitment of her unruly matriarchy to the end.

Conclusion

The women of Harlan County, mainly Ava Crowder and Mags Bennett, portray a mixture of pre-feminist and pro-feminist ideas in Justified’s narrative context of masculine conflicts and violence. The paradoxical nature of Justified’s feminism, in which women’s positions are constantly inflicted by cultural constructions of gender and regional identity, requires a critical framework that allows for the discussion of the complex and ambivalent feminist ideas represented in the FX series. Third wave feminist media theory provides an intricate approach with which to investigate how these two hillbilly women challenge, reinforce, and reconfigure established generic conventions and hegemonic gender relations in the process of the series’ narrative. On the one hand, the prevalent Appalachian stereotype positions both female characters outside of feminist interventions. As a result, Ava and Mags represent victims of unjust power relations and economic conditions, trapped in pre-feminist womanhood. On the other hand, both women refuse to remain helpless victims.

With her own brand of justice, Ava portrays a strong, unruly woman while melding and bending different femininities. With her own brand of power, Mags embodies a violent yet benevolent matriarch as well as a respected pillar of the Harlan community. As unruly, nonconforming Harlan women, both Ava and Mags embody such pro-feminist ideas as self-reliance, defiance, and control through their distinctive qualities of female power and agency. However, their power has limitations as well. The series constantly foregrounds the social constraints of gender, class, and regional identity in pre-feminist Harlan, which function as fundamental trappings for Ava and Mags. As such, Ava fails to develop into a full-blown villain in her own right, and instead transforms into a coconspirator by siding with the series’ principal antagonist, Boyd Crowder. A similar narrative logic dictates the fate of Mags’s matriarchal villain. This powerful, ambitious female who behaves like a man is linked back to domesticity and maternal sacrifice – the characterization that brings about Mags’s ultimate demise. Although Justified consistently emphasizes the constraints for women in Harlan County, associating its womanhood with pre-feminist values, the series also constructs complex character traits and compelling dramatic arcs for Ava and Mags, in a manner that creates the inversion of the series’ stasis/mobility trope. In this way, Justified’s paradoxical portrayals of female characters highlight the complicated, multifaceted cultural constructions of femininity and female agency, thereby reconfiguring hegemonic discourses of gender representation in this era of feminist intermezzo.
Notes

1. The development and repetition of such stereotypes ranging from a romantic South to a caricature of backwoods outlaws is well documented in a number of articles and books (see Heider, Williamson, and Von Doviak).

2. Caught between the Garden/Wilderness or Culture/Nature dichotomy, tomboys and saloon girls represent “bad girls” in the Wild West. Whereas the “good, respectable women,” such as wives and mothers, embody the feminine ideal in the western, tomboys and saloon girls are adventurers and often lawbreakers that violate sexual boundaries in the Western frontier. Tomboys are independent, yet unfeminine cowgirls, typically wearing pants, carrying a gun, and riding a horse. Although not necessarily prostitutes, saloon girls are duplicitous fallen women, contaminated by the laws of the wilderness, who often become complicit with male violence in the western narrative. See Pam Cook, “Women and the Western” and Blake Lucas, “Saloon Girls and Ranchers’ Daughters” in The Western Reader.

Works Cited


Johnson, Merri L., ed. Third Wave Feminism and Television: Jane Puts in a Box. London, UK and New York, NY: I.B.
The FX series Justified (2010-) is the most recent reworking of the western genre on television, with its narrative centering on deputy U.S. Marshal Raylan Givens's (Timothy Olyphant) effort to establish law and order in Harlan County, Kentucky. Yet, the series also features strong, unruly female characters exhibiting a range of complex character traits and compelling storylines that both subvert and adhere to archetypes of the western heroine. On the one hand, unlike typical western heroines who serve roles secondary to that of the hero, Justified's female characters play important, Justified is an American Western crime drama television series that premiered on
March 16, 2010, on the FX network. Developed by Graham Yost, it is based on Elmore Leonard's Raylan Givens stories, particularly "Fire in the Hole". Timothy Olyphant portrays Raylan Givens, a tough deputy U.S. Marshal enforcing his own brand of justice. The series revolves around the inhabitants and culture in the Appalachian mountains area of eastern Kentucky, specifically Harlan County where many of the main characters Women continue to learn, too late, that feminism reinforces the basest male behavior and uses that behavior as a moral framework for themselves. They make themselves objects and then decry being objectified. The solution is for women to de-objectify themselves and refuse to participate in these degrading rituals. They should refuse to indulge the appetites of indiscriminate men. Expect more.