Cowboys Are Frequently Secretly Fond of Each Other: The Fictitious vs. The Historical Figure of The Cowboy and His Effect On Queerness, and Western Culture & Politics.

Leigh Mayon
16396606

Department of Communication Design
Moving Image Design

2022

NCAD DUBLIN

National College of Art and Design

School of Visual Culture

I declare that this **Critical Cultures Research Project** is all my own work and that all sources have been fully acknowledged.

Signed: Leigh Mayon

Programme / department: Moving Image Design

Date: January 30th, 2022

Table of Contents

List of Illustrations

Introduction

From the Lone Ranger to the Man With No Name, Rufus Buck to Willie Nelson, both on screen and off, in literature, in music, and in reality, the Cowboy has been a cultural icon and shining example of masculinity, freedom, and, to many, queerness. I will be exploring the facts and the fiction about the figure of the Cowboy throughout the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries and questioning what exactly it means to be a Cowboy, how that has evolved through generations, and analysing the implications of this figure on queer lives, queer expression, and queer culture as a whole.

When we think of a cowboy, we often think of the rough and tough Clint Eastwood type, a white, cisgender, heterosexual man who lives life by his own rules. He's rugged, conventionally attractive, and he's out only for himself and his own gain in a dog eat dog world. This well known character, brought to us initially through dime novels, of the likes written by J. T. Edson, during the American Civil War, and later through American cinema with the introduction and popularisation of spaghetti westerns during the Cold War and onwards, influenced generations of men, giving them licence to act entirely within their own interest, take what they want, and remain both morally and politically neutral in a world that already serves them. I will be exploring how, as a poster boy for misogyny, racism, and homophobia, the Hollywood Cowboy has deviated far from the true historic figures of the cowboys that he was based on, such as Nat Love/Deadwood Dick, as discussed by Tricia Martineau Wagner, leaving us with a bastardised curation of the real Cowboy, created to be sold to white Americans en masse and used, like all media, as political propaganda.

One of the many overlooked aspects of the Cowboy, which serves as a contradiction to the white, colonial, Confederate soldier sympathising figure fed to us by old Hollywood, was the fact that a large percentage of cowboys were black and people of colour. With reference to the writings of Marcus Williams and Nikita A. Lynch, which recontextualise the Cowboy in a more realistic light, I will be further unravelling the myth of the Hollywood Cowboy.

Referencing the writings of Chris Packard, I will be discussing the figure of the Cowboy as a subversive, queer character, who defies heteronormativity and social and cultural expectations and standards such as courting, marriage, children, and non-nomadic settled living. The 19th century man, and therefore the cowboy, was beheld to social standards that were in many ways much different than those one is beheld to in 2022, as discussed by Brett & Kate McKay, and Andrew C. Isenberg, and that has affected the literary evidence of the gay cowboy.

Once the true variety and diversity of the Cowboy has been established, I will be filling in the gap between the historic figure of the Cowboy and the larger than life, slick, handsome character of the Hollywood Cowboy that we know today. The link that I will be focusing on between these two figures, is perhaps the most famous Cowboy, and one of the most successful showmen in the West, Colonel Buffalo Bill, the creator of Buffalo Bill's Wild West.

Throughout the 20th and 21st century, queer performers in Western media from Hollywood to gay clubs, have returned again and again to the aesthetic, sound, and character of the Cowboy in their work. This is seen in the work of artists varying from The Dodge Brothers, Tom of Finland, and Lil Nas X. This leads me to the question - why does the Cowboy resonate so strongly with the queer community both among A-list stars, and among the drag kings in your local gay bar. As seen in the writings of Jeremy Atherton Lin, the combination of these aspects - of being an outsider, being above the law as a result of not being under its' protection, of an atypical lifestyle that casts aside the nuclear family and the timeline and social scripts of cis-heteronormative living, of itinerant living, and of being the poster boy for peak idealised masculinity whilst incorporating a flamboyant aesthetic flair that quite easily drifts into the realm of camp - create a hugely subversive, layered, and highly relatable figure for queer lives. The true figure of the Cowboy is a champion of queer ideaology, as well as a romanticisation of a life that defies societal norms, without the protection of the state. This is a concept explored in the writings of Anna North. As well as this, the Cowboy serves as a self insert fantasy for people of minimal power and means to hypothesize a world in which we can have the freedom of the cis,

straight, white man who needs only himself and his wits for protection, as in CMAT's 2020 single, *I Wanna Be a Cowboy, Baby!*

Chapter 1. The Hollywood Cowboy: Clint Eastwood As The Posterboy For White American Dick Swinging

“He’s *tall*, isn't he?” swoons the hotel landlady in the 1965 film, *For A Few Dollars More*, after the blonde haired, blue eyed, mysterious man from out of town. He’s attractive, he’s smart, and he floats above it all. Directed by Sergio Leone in the 1960s, the films, *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964), *For a Few Dollars More* (1965), and *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly* (1966), also known as the *Man With No Name Trilogy*, starring Clint Eastwood, introduced the genre of the spaghetti western and solidified in our minds who exactly the modern character of the Cowboy is. Inspired heavily by popular cowboy dime novels during the American Civil War, the *Man With No Name Trilogy* introduces us to a character who changed Western Culture as we know it, indefinitely. In order to understand why the character of the Man With No Name is so impactful, we will need to dissect his appearance, actions, and motivations, as well as look at the period in history during which he was created, and why.

Fig 1. Still of Clint Eastwood in The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly (1966) Dir. Sergio Leone

It's the 1960s, America is smack bang in the middle of the Space Race, The Cold War, and has just joined the Vietnam War. Lyndon B. Johnson is president of the United States of America, following the asassination of John F. Kennedy. Martin Luther King Jr. becomes a household name as the Civil Rights Movement gains traction. It is a time in history where white America feels helpless, emasculated, and somewhat lost. Desperate to come out on top over Russia in any and every way possible, and to assert dominance and superiority over the rest of the world, white Americans need an all American hero to get them through this politically tumultuous time. Western movies are gaining traction as a source of entertainment, as are the James Bond films starring Sean Connery, pushing a cultural phenomenon of this incredible, resilient man who can seemingly get himself out of any situation through any means necessary. For all of these reasons, this is the perfect time for the introduction of the Man With No Name.

Now that we have a basic understanding of the sociopolitical world that the Man With No Name was created to entertain, we can dissect what it is about him that was so appealing to the white, cis, straight American audience at the time.

At the end of the opening credits of *For A Few Dollars More*, the second film in the Man With No Name trilogy, there is a piece of text displayed stating, "Where life had no value, death, sometimes, had its price. That is why the bounty killers appeared." The Man With No Name is, first and foremost, a bounty hunter - a man who acts purely in his own best interest, and for monetary gain, regardless of the effect of his actions on those around him. This is exemplified most plainly in the first film of the trilogy, when the Man With No Name says, "When a man's got money in his pocket, he begins to appreciate peace." More than just a flyaway remark, this statement encapsulates the character's entire ethos, and reflects his repeated actions throughout all three films.

Throughout the trilogy, the Man With No Name stands by and watches a man and his small child get beaten, plays two families against each other in order to receive monetary compensation, which results in the violent mass murder of an entire family, allows an elderly man to be beaten viciously as punishment for hiding him whilst he

watches in secret, throws a man out of his hotel room unprovoked purely because he wanted it, steps on an older man's shoe to assert his dominance over him, among countless other selfish acts to varying degrees of severity. This sense of self importance, and staggering display of machismo, is something that resonated deeply with men in 1960s America, giving them permission and encouragement to hero selfishness.

Despite his frequent disregard for the welfare of those around him, the Man With No Name does show compassion to the Confederate Soldiers fighting in the American Civil War. A significant scene in *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly*, shows the Man With No Name walking among the dead and dying Confederate Soldiers post battle, where he takes off his coat to lay over a dying man, and gives him a lit cigar to enjoy in his last moments. The musical score swells, signifying that this is a moment where we as the audience are supposed to feel emotional at this gesture, an act of kindness to a man who died defending his desire to own and enslave black people. The Man With No Name has been deemed *The Good* in this story, meanwhile, *The Bad* in this same story, the character Angel Eyes played by Lee Van Cleef, is an army officer on the Union side of the war - a slavery abolitionist. This unsubtle way of showing support of the Confederates and of slavery, most certainly appealed to a large portion of white America in the 1960s, which, as we've established, was when the Civil Rights Movement began to gain major traction. This scene, and these character choices, solidify *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly* as racist propaganda, and champions a self servicing racist as a cultural icon and hero.

This promotion of racist ideals and favourable presentation of the Confederacy through the character of the cowboy is something that began in cowboy dime novels. The protagonist of numerous novels by J. T. Edson, Dusty Fog, a Captain for the Texas Light Cavalry during the American Civil War, was used in the same way that the Man With No Name was in order to put racism, and those who support it, on a pedestal. *In Under The Stars And Bars*, among other novels in the series, Dusty Fog is portrayed as a hero, while the Unionist soldiers are made out to be deplorable villains.

While these things play a part in the popularity of the Man With No Name amongst white male audiences, there is something that I feel is even more fundamental to this, and that is the mystery that surrounds him.

“I’ve never seen him before,” says the Sheriff to Captain Mortimer in *For A Few Dollars More*, as says seemingly everyone wherever the Man With No Name seems to go. He has no past, he has no story, he has no love interests, no friends, no family - he is a social outlaw, but with no back story we never find out why. Being, in many ways, a blank slate, the Man With No Name allows audiences to project their own feelings and experiences onto him. He is universally relatable because he has no definitive story. Because of this, cis, straight, white men can look to the Man With No Name, see an outlaw that looks like them, and identify *themselves* as an outlaw too, despite having never been on the fringes of society in their lives.

The decision to make the Man With No Name a man with no name, as well as all of the other things he is - an outlaw, a traitor, selfish, racist, arrogant - has characterised the Cowboy as the right wing white man with a sense of self entitlement that we know of today, and given license to men to act in the same way.

This is the cowboy we know, however it is not the cowboy who actually existed. The Hollywood Cowboy is a bastardisation of the true American Cowboy in all his forms, which were historically queer, black, Latino, and even Native American. Only in recent years has Hollywood started to produce Cowboy films that hold similarities to the true historical figure of the Cowboy, an example being *The Harder They Fall* (2021) dir. The Bullits. Based on real historical figures from the old West, such as Rufus Buck, Nat Love, and Stagecoach Mary to name but a few, the film shines a light on some of the hugely overlooked icons from the era of the Cowboy. However, while the cast is almost exclusively made up of black actors and actresses, the willingness to portray these characters accurately had its’ limits.

The most controversial decision for the film was perhaps the casting for the character, based on the real woman, Stagecoach Mary. The difference in looks between Stagecoach Mary and Zazie Beetz, is enormous. While Hollywood will allow

black cowboys on screens, with multifaceted characters that have nuance and layers, casting a fat, dark skinned black woman to play a fat, dark skinned black woman is not yet on the cards.

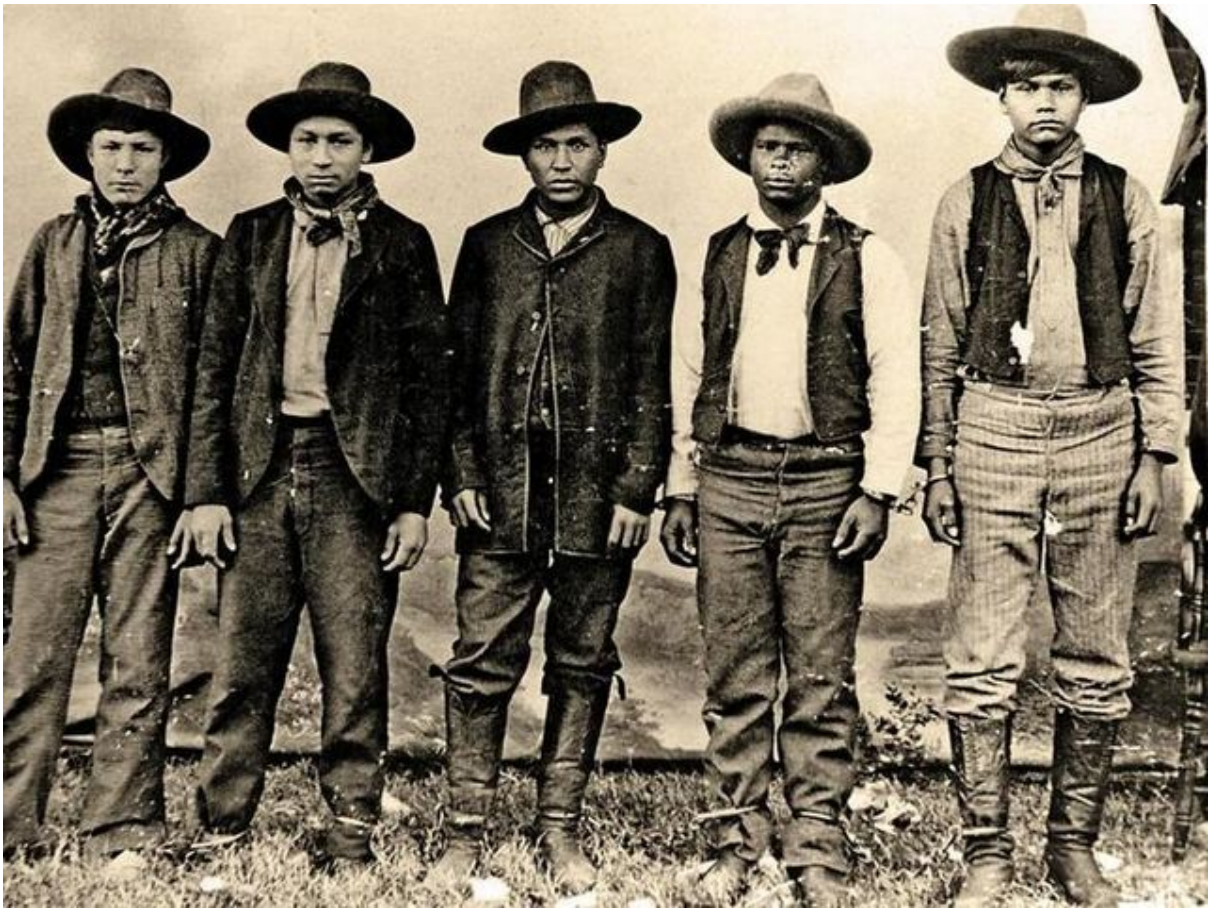

Fig 2. Photograph of Rufus Buck (center) and members of the Rufus Buck Gang.

Similarly, the character of Rufus Buck, based on the real man, a legendary Native American outlaw and leader of the Rufus Buck Gang, the members of which were black and Creek Indian, was played by Idris Elba - a black man with no Native American background. Again, while Hollywood and pop culture has come far in being able to fathom a black cowboy, casting a Native American actor to play a character based on a Native American man is not something that we can see on our screens.

The well known film, *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) dir. Ang Lee, based on the short story, *Brokeback Mountain* by Annie Proulx, brought the first explicitly queer cowboy to the big screen. While it was a huge success, Brokeback Mountain is not

necessarily a story about queer cowboys, and is more a tragedy about homophobia in 1960s America - the time during which the Man With No Name among the numerous other macho cowboy heroes who were saturating the film industry, such as John Wayne, were reinforcing the idea of what American masculinity is. This means that despite being a literary and box office success of major critical acclaim, Brokeback Mountain does not feature the character of the Hollywood Cowboy, but is a response to the influence of the Hollywood Cowboy.

Chapter 2. Limp Wrist & A Steady Hand: The Truth About Cowboys In The Old West

There are enormous discrepancies between the Hollywood Cowboy and the actual historical figure of the Cowboy. The true diversity of the figure of the Cowboy, Hollywood's best kept secret up until recent years, is something we have already touched upon, but will now delve into thoroughly, referencing both real historical figures and the literature they inspired.

In recent years, historians have estimated that roughly one in every four cowboys in the American West were black. (Lynch, 2021, n.p.) Some even estimate that up to "40 percent of all cattle workers were African-Americans." (Packard, 2005, p.16) One of the only ways for black men to rise above their station after the abolition of slavery in the United States in 1865, many black men sought out positions as cowhands and ranchers during the late 19th century. Black cowboys were so common that the etymology of the term 'cowboy' is rooted in anti-black racism. African American men being referred to as 'boy', "regardless of their age stems from slavery and the plantation era," (Lynch, 2021, n.p.) and, as explained by the character, Rome, in *Concrete Cowboy* (2021, dir. Ricky Staub), over time "cowhand became cowboy."

As well as cowboys having been historically black, many cowboys of particular acclaim were black and then whitewashed by Hollywood. "Even the Lone Ranger were black," continues Rome in *Concrete Cowboy*, in reference to Bass Reeves, a black man born into slavery in the United States of America, who became a Deputy Marshall, and is widely believed to be who the character of the Lone Ranger is based on. (Williams, 2017, n.p.)

Reeves is not the only black man from the American West who inspired fictitious cowboy heroes, one of the most notable being Nat Love. The dime novel hero, Deadwood Dick, from the works written by Edward L. Wheeler, is said to be based on Nat Love, including by Nat Love himself. This is due to him having been given the nickname of Deadwood Dick long before the release of any of these novels. The character, also referred to as The Black Rider of The Black Hills, was always assumed to be based on a real cowboy, and despite the character being white, his

alternative title would suggest that he was inspired by a black man. (Wagner, 2010, chapter 4, 18min)

The term ‘cowboy’, beyond its original definition of being a man who works herding cattle, has grown over the years “to appear in popular culture as an amalgamation of … job-specific characters – a wanderer of the golden West, often with unclear connections to employment.” (Scofield, 2019, p.7) When referring to the Cowboy, let it be clear that the cowboy can mean anything from a bandit to a cowhand, or even to a law man like Bass Reeves.

While there is a considerable amount of literature on the history of black cowboys and cowboys of colour, it is somewhat more difficult to source information on queer cowboys in the late 19th and early 20th century. This is likely largely due, for the most part, to the impossibility to disguise one’s race, resulting in facts and data, which does not apply to one’s sexuality. It is very possible to hide one’s sexuality and sexual activity. A person’s sexuality, if not explicitly stated, can be debated. This, in combination with historians’ frequent refusal to entertain the possibility of historical figures being queer, has resulted in minimal literature on the sexuality of Cowboys.

As well as this, back in the late 1800s, and even up until the early-mid 1900s, sex and sexuality were discussed in totally different ways - partly in the sense that they were rarely spoken about explicitly, and partly because homosexuality, or as it was then called, “inversion”, technically didn’t exist until the early 20th century. Before this, two men having sex was referred to as sodomy, which defined the act, but this did not imply that it was a compound of one’s being, it was simply a choice. (Isenberg, 2009, p.146)

While there are no accounts of explicit homosexuality among specific men considered Cowboys in the Old West, there is most certainly *thinly* veiled homoerotic themes and relationships in 19th and 20th century Cowboy fiction literature, and other prose and poetry of the time. As we know, the majority of Cowboy dime novels were based on real men and the behaviours of real cowboys, meaning the likelihood of some correlation between the queer coded happenings of these novels and actual

life on the American Frontier is extremely high. In the writings of Owen Wister, his Cowboy protagonist in the novel, *The Virginian*, experiences a highly homoerotic friendship with a Native American man, continually lamenting the beauty of his physique, his hair, his facial features, expressing utter awe and admiration for the man he shares his time with. The character of the Cowboy in *The Virginian*, is based on Wister's extremely close, long-time friend, George West. (Packard, 2005, p.52)

While there is no explicit evidence, no recorded history, of men in the Old West being queer and having gay relationships, a recurring theme in all media based on the lives of Cowboys is a disinterest in women. Chris Packard writes:

> Most people, if they think about it at all, assume that the cowboy in history and in literature practiced sexual abstentation until he arrived in a town, where he practiced the acceptable vice of dalliances with female prostitutes. But this explanation is counterintuitive and is not supported in the literary record. (2005, p.3)

While Cowboys are widely believed to be sexually rambunctuous when it comes to sleeping with female sex workers at any given opportunity, both historically and fictitiously, there is almost never any evidence long term interest in women, in a romantic connection with a woman, or with the idea of marriage, children, and settling down. However, the relationship between the Cowboy and his partner on the road can, and frequently is, viewed as deeply romantic and intimate. Given the closeness of Cowboys and their partners on the Frontier, it is highly unlikely that these relationships never had erotic leanings. For these reasons, the cowboy is a queer figure who subverts the cisheteronormative practice of marriage, children, and living a non-itinerant, settled life.

Given that male friendships were treated very differently during the late 19th century to how they are now, it is much harder to differentiate between a male friendship and a romantic queer relationship between to men. Up until the early 1900s, the Old West was a largely homosocial world, meaning that men spent most of their time with other men, and women spent most of their time with other women, not typically crossing paths socially. (Isenberg, 2009, p.146) During this time, male intimacy and

tenderness was much more common than it is today. This is thought to be due to the increase in hostility, and societal and systemic prohibition, of homosexuality that emerged in the early 20th century. (McKay, 2021, n.p.)

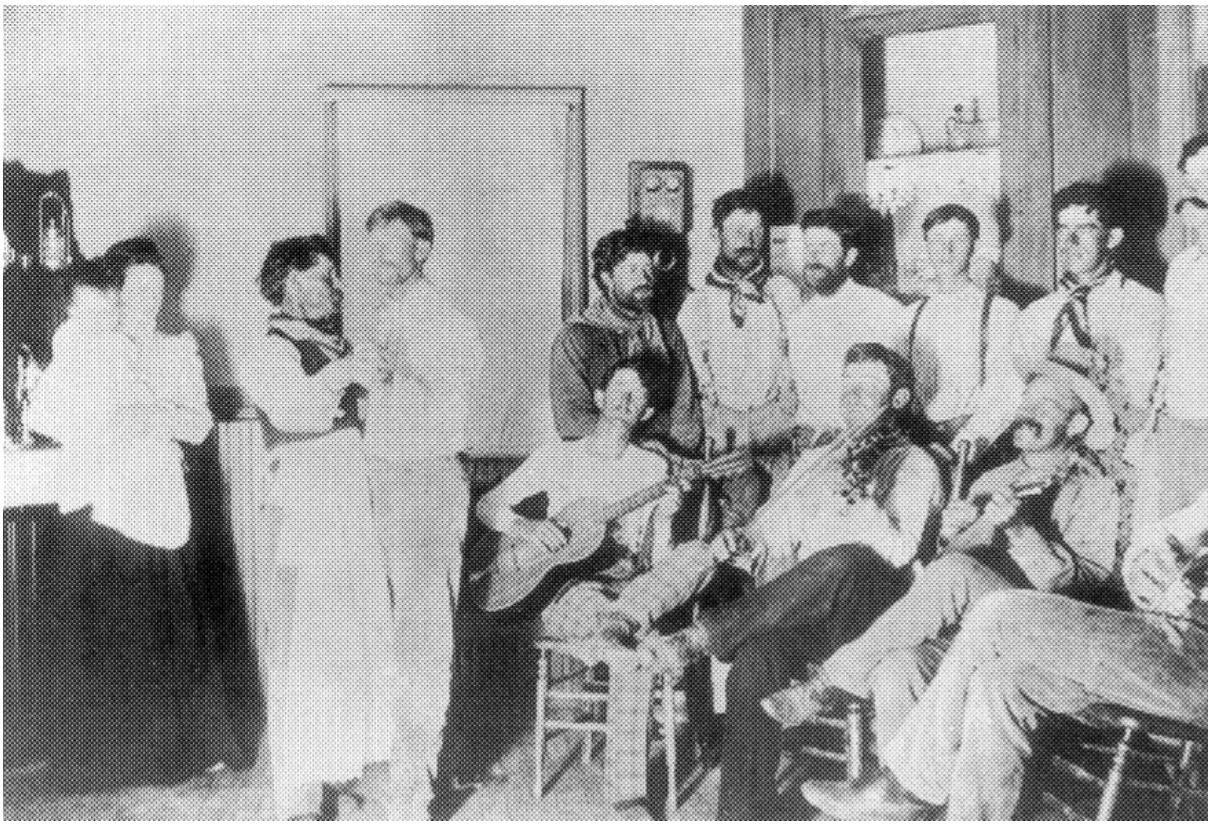

Fig 3. Two men slow dancing as a woman holds a child in the background. From the Texas State Libraries and Archives via *Queer Cowboys: And Other Erotic Male Friendships in Nineteenth-Century Literature*.

In the same way that women in history, right up until the present day, are constantly assumed to, no matter the circumstances, be platonic in their relationships with each other, due to a combination of heteronormative thinking enforced by Western cultural standards, and it being totally socially acceptable for women to be affectionate, intimate, and loving with their platonic friends, it is likely that this also applied to men in the 1800s. As male homosexuality has historically been prohibited much more severely than sapphism and lesbianism, due to its inability to be sexualised by the straight male majority in power, and because tenderness is thoroughly outlawed when emulating the rugged machismo that is the ideal in Wester society, this would explain the severe shift in expression only of *male* affection and friendship.

If the actual history figure of the Cowboy was black, latino, Native American, and queer, as we have just established, then what happened in between this period in time and the 1960s when the Cowboy was white washed, straight washed, and commodified for public consumption? The answer to this is the world famous Buffalo Bill's Wild West. Buffalo Bill's Wild West was a rodeo meets outdoor theater show created and run by William F Cody, better known as Buffalo Bill.

Buffalo Bill is perhaps the most significant link between the historic figure of the Cowboy, and the Hollywood Cowboy, due to him having *been* both of them at different points in his career. Trained by his father, Isaac Cody, and his uncle, Horace Billings, in trade, shooting, and horse riding, by the age of eight, William Cody was "a man among men," working alongside his father and treated as a professional equal. (Unknown, 2017, p.5) At the age of nine, Cody was the sole provider for his family following the death of his father, and in that same year is said to have murdered a Native American man on a cattle drive. Cody claims he was heralded as "the youngest Indian slayer on the plains." (McMurtry, 2005, p.40) In later years he became such a notoriously proficient buffalo hunter that he was given the name Buffalo Bill, a nickname that stuck for the rest of his career. A man of exceptional horseman skills, Cody is said to have killed more Buffalo than any other man in the Old West, which was an honourable achievement among his circles at the time. (McMurtry, 2005, p.6) Cody's career took a turn when he began to take people of note on guided buffalo hunts, dipping his toes into performing the life of the Cowboy for an audience, as opposed to actually living it.

It was at this point that Cody began a brief career as an actor in on-stage Western melodramas, and was beginning to be paid homage to in countless dime novels. This step into the fictitious is when Buffalo Bill transitioned from being a true Cowboy, to being what we have established as the Hollywood Cowboy, or the fantasy Cowboy. From this point on, the significant moments in Cody's career, such as expertly hunting buffalo and killing Native American men of repute such as Yellow Hair, became elaborate performance bits in his show. Run with the assistance and direction of James Bailey of Barnum & Bailey - a duo known for dramatisation and the bending of the truth for entertainment's sake, to say the least - Buffalo Bill's Wild

West toured North America and Europe bringing the life of the Cowboy to ordinary people, making celebrities and icons out of performers such as Annie Oakley and her husband, Frank Butler.

By the height of his career, and until the end of his life, Buffalo Bill was an A-list celebrity, performing for and associating with royalty across Europe, and an American hero. This evolution from buffalo hunter to showman is arguably the biggest catalyst for the creation of the fantasy of the Cowboy, giving us the Cowboy we know today.

Chapter 3. I Wanna Be A Cowboy, Baby! The Queer Fantasy Of Life On The Range

Within queer communities, from masc4masc muscle gays to drag performers – there's always been something about the Cowboy that just makes us tick. Is it the leather chaps and fringe? The equilibrium of machismo and flamboyance? Or on a deeper level is it the aspiration to live by one's own rules, above the law that was never meant to protect you? Whether it is one of these things or a combination of all of them, the Cowboy has been a source of inspiration, an object of desire, and a fantasy to queer people as long as his image has been on our screens and his song has been hitting the airwaves.

A wide brimmed hat on his head to protect him from the glare of the sun, a three inch heel on his boot to fit the stirrups of his saddle, while these are choices made for functional reasons, the stylistic choices of the cowboy have created a genre of fashion that has resonated in every generation since its creation among all genders and walks of life. Cowboy fashion has made its way to major runways and into streetwear style in the 1970s due to Ralph Lauren's popularisation of the double denim look, an upsurgence of the wearing of fringe and suede. The popularisation of the cowboy boot throughout the 60s, 70s, and 80s can be attributed to Marilyn Monroe, Raquel Welch, and perhaps most notably, Princess Diana. By wearing an uncharacteristically casual ensemble of blue denim and brown cowboy boots, as a celebrated figure by queer communities among many others, Diana ultimately changed fashion for the royals and for the

Fig 4. Princess Diana pictured wearing denim jeans and brown leather cowboy boots. Taken from CR Fashion Book.

public. (De Berker, 2018, n.p.) In more recent years, brands such as Chanel, Christian Dior, and, perhaps most notably, Versace have taken Western influences into their collections. Whilst being functional in nature and design, Cowboy attire clearly has resonated culturally on an aesthetic level in a huge way.

Beyond runway fashion and streetwear, the Cowboy aesthetic has had a huge impact on queer fashion in leather and fetish scenes. Leather chaps and boots have become a classic look in leather bars, and the Cowboy is a common character featured in the works of gay erotic illustrator, Tom of Finland. Into the 1970s, the Cowboy look was primarily associated with gay men more than with anyone else. In the 1969 film, *Midnight Cowboy*, directed by John Schlesinger, Ratso says to his companion, a straight male sex worker struggling to build a clientele, that, “that great, big, dumb cowboy crap of yours don’t appeal to nobody except every jacky on 42nd street,” meaning that only gay men would find his look, which he refers to as, “that faggot stuff,” in any way appealing or attractive. This look, while popular in some circles, had gained a connotation of being camp and queer.

The undeniably camp elements of the Cowboy aesthetic, in combination with the masculine connotations of the Hollywood Cowboy, when struck in a certain balance, has appealed hugely to queer performers from drag kings and cabaret performers to Grammy award winning musicians. The Cowboy created a niche type of masculinity that remains rugged whilst being undeniably fun and whimsical. As explained by Silas Flipper of the Dodge Bros, in an interview conducted by Jack Halberstam, “men in suits are just too boring to imitate with their suits and parted hair, there’s no theater there.” (1999, p.137)

The theater and flamboyance of the Cowboy is exemplified greatly by Lil Nas X’s custom Versace, bright pink and gold, leather cowboy look, worn to the 2020 Grammy Awards Ceremony. Lil Nas X has continually embodied the effeminate and the masculine in the Cowboy in his personal styling, affirming the Cowboy as a camp, queer figure. While Lil Nas X heightens certain things about the Cowboy aesthetic to new levels of extravagance, the elements that he riffs on such as

leather, fringe, and pattern, are already based in the reality of classic Cowboy aesthetics, and aren't a huge deviation from the clothes worn by the likes of classic country musicians in the 60s or even by Buffalo Bill Cody. In a statement made by General H. E. Davies, a soldier on the Unionist side of the American Civil War, Buffalo Bill is described as wearing, "a suit of light buckskin, trimmed along the seams with fringe of the same leather, his costume lighted by the crimson shirt worn under his open coat, [with] a broad sombrero on his head." (McMurtry, 2005, p.27)

Fig 5. Lil Nas X wearing custom Versace at the 2020 Grammy Award Show.

If we consider the resonance of the Cowboy within queer communities beyond just aesthetics, there are some very clear paralells between the Cowboy and queer people to be considered, as well as some stark differences that would strike a chord with queer people.

Both communities that have been white washed and commodified for the mass consumption of a cis, white audience, queer people and Cowboys have a similar history. In the same way that, through dime novels and Western films, the Cowboy that is known by most has become a totally different character to the true figure he

was originally based on, queer people have been and still are experiencing this involuntary metamorphosis.

Perhaps the biggest perpetrator of the gentrification of queer culture, specifically drag, in order to make it marketable to a wider, cisgender, heterosexual majority, is the television series, *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Making butchered, inaccurate references to the New York Ball Scene of the 1970s to the 1990s, airing transphobic slurs, and denying post-op transgender women the right to appear on the show, *RuPaul's Drag Race* has taught an entire generation that drag means something totally opposite to what it is in its origin. Historically, drag and transness are inextricably linked, and many of the most significant drag pioneers and LGBTQ+ activists have been trans and black people of colour. Trans drag performers fronted the queer liberation movement in North America. As the legend goes, Marsha P Johnson, a black, trans drag queen, threw the first brick at the Stonewall riots, and Stormé De Larverie, a black drag king, threw the first punch. Despite this history, *RuPaul's Drag Race* has pedalled the narrative that drag has always been cisgender men dressing as women, and that women and trans people doing drag is something new and unprecedented, and has won RuPaul more consecutive Emmy awards than any other person of colour in the process. (Del Rosario, 2021, n.p.)

In *Outlawed*, a 2021 novel written by Anna North, a queer, trans, sapphic retelling of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969, dir. George Roy Hill), an infertile woman named Ada runs away to become a part of the Hole in the Wall Gang, all the members of which are queer women and trans people who have been chased out of their home towns, run by a gender ambiguous leader named The Kid. *Outlawed* illustrates perfectly the desire to live outside of and above the law that was never created to serve or protect you, but was in fact made to do the exact opposite. The Hole in the Wall Gang is an idealisation of a queer utopia, where the downtrodden can live the same life that everyone else is allowed to live. Before going out on a job, the character Elzy says to Ada, "The Kid reminds us who we are… Didn't you hear? We're kings." (North, 2021, p.89)

Outlaw status is perhaps the most important link between queer people and the Cowboy. Where the straight, cis, white man of 1960s America can watch a spaghetti western and convince himself that he is in some way the down trodden of society, queer people have a natural affinity with the Cowboy, the Bandit, the Outlaw. Note that I say ‘queer’ and not ‘gay’, as queer implies an element of rebellion to societal norms, a defiance of assimilation and a desire to create a new world, a Wild West, outside of the boundaries of the hegemonic oppressive society we were born into. ‘Queer’ suggests no desire to be palatable or acceptable to the cisgender, heterosexual majority. In a similar vein, Jeremy Atherton Lin says,

> “To be a fag was to be a bandit. I liked the way fag looked from the outside. It made me want to fuck myself. For me, identity wasn’t about finding something within – a cicada biding time in my underground – but about sensing myself out in the world. Looking at it that way, identity could be … *photosynthesis*.” (2021, p.160. Emphasis in original text.)

The desire to be the Cowboy being rooted in the desire to be the complete opposite to oneself is a theme explored by CMAT in her song, *I Wanna Be A Cowboy, Baby!* Upon interviewing CMAT about the catalyst for this song, she explained that after breaking up with her cis, straight, male partner, she explains that she no longer had, “the license to have the same kind of life [following the breakup] as I did when I was essentially being chaperoned around by a man.” When you are in any way a minority, the world around you is in many ways a constant threat, that you may not always have the resources or skills to liberate yourself from – this is where queer people differ from the Cowboy, and is the source of our fantasy. CMAT goes on to describe the cowboy as, “a symbol for freedom,” because he has the ability to pick up and leave for months on end, with only himself for protection, which is something that is almost impossible, and inarguably much more dangerous, as a woman or as a queer person. Cowboys are a symbol of freedom to us because, as CMAT states, “they are the opposite of us,” especially those of us who live in densely populated cities.

Conclusion

The Cowboy is a figure with a dense history who has influenced generations socially, aesthetically, and politically. Whilst perceived at first glance to only be a representative for conservative ideals, toxic masculinity, and selfishness, much like Clint Eastwood's character in the Man With No Name trilogy, once the vast history of the Cowboy has been delved into it is undeniable that he is a subversive, queer figure, and that he is more than the self serving white man fed to us by spaghetti westerns and cowboy films in the 1960s and 1970s. Though he has been commodified for the consumption of a white, cisgender, heterosexual, usually male audience, the Cowboy is black, is queer, and is a rebellious outlaw to the societal roles put upon us – this is exemplified by real life figures such as Nat Love and Bass Reeves. These two figures, the gap between which can be filled by the likes of Colonel Buffalo Bill and his colleagues in show business, also show us that the Cowboy has become more than simply a cowhand or cattle wrangler, but is also an umbrella term for any man in the Old West who lived by his own set of rules. Both of these sides of the Cowboy are equally as valid, and both of these fascets of the Cowboy have influenced queerness and appeal to queer audiences in different ways. The Cowboy is a theatrical performance of masculinity, something that has resonated with queer people accross intercommunity cultures for decades. Where he is a figure for queer people to relate to in his defiance of the nuclear family, settled living, and state imposed laws, the Cowboy is in some ways the total opposite of queer people in that he has the freedom and the wherewithall to survive, and to thrive, out in the world on his own. The world is truly the Cowboy's oyster, the only threats to his safety being other Cowboys and the elements, which is an experience foreign to queer people, along with any minority figure. For this reason the Cowboy is an aspirational figure, and, ultimately, a queer fantasy.

Bibliography

Atherthon Lin, J. (2021) *Gay Bar: Why We Went Out*. London, Granta Publications.

Edson, J. T. (1979) *Under The Stars And Bars*. 3rd ed. London, Transworld Publishers Ltd.

McMurtry, L. (2005) *The Colonel and Little Missie: Buffalo Bill, Annie Oakley, and the Beginnings of Superstardom in America*. New York, Simon & Schuster.

North, A. (2021) *Outlawed*. London, Weidenfeld & Nicholson.

Packard, C. (2005) *Queer Cowboys: And Other Erotic Male Friendships in Nineteenth Century American Literature*. New York, Palgrave MacMillan.

Proulx, A. (2006) *Brokeback Mountain*. HarperCollins Publishers, HarperAudio.

Scofield, R. (2019) *Outriders: Rodeo At The Fringes Of The American West*. Seattle, University of Washington Press.

Unknown (2017) *Classics Illustrated, No.63: Buffalo Bill*. Berkshire, United Kingdom, CCS Books.

Volcano, D. L. and Halberstam, J. (1999) *The Drag King Book*. London, Serpent's Tail.

Wagner, T. M. (2010) *Black Cowboys of the Old West: True, Sensational, and Little-Known Stories From History*. HarperCollins Publishers, HarperAudio.

Isenberg, A. C. (2009) 'The Code of the West: Sexuality, Homosociality, and Wyatt Earp', *Western Historical Quarterly*, 40(2), pp. 139-157

Bommersbach, J. (2001) *Homos on the Range: How gay was the West?* True West Magazine. Available at: https://truewestmagazine.com/old-west-homosexuality-homos-on-the-range/

De Berker, E. (2018) *The History of Fashion's Obsession With Cowboy Boots: Charting The Classic Style From The 1940s Through To Today*. CR Fashion Books. Available at: https://www.crfashionbook.com/fashion/a19664612/history-of-fashions-cowboy-boots/

Del Rosario, A. (2021) *Rupaul Slays Record For Emmy Wins By Person Of Colour As 'Drag Race' Nabs Fourth Reality Competition Series Trophy*. Deadline. Available at: https://deadline.com/2021/09/rupauls-drag-race-wins-2021-emmy-outstanding-competition-program-1234839038/

Lynch, N. A. (2021) *Black On the Range: African American Cowboys of the 19th Century*. Rancho Los Cerritos. Available at: https://www.rancholoscerritos.org/black-on-the-range-african-american-cowboys-of-the-19th-century/

McKay, B. and McKay, K. (2012) *Bosom Buddies: A Photo History of Male Affection*. Art of Manliness. Available at: https://www.artofmanliness.com/people/relationships/bosom-buddies-a-photo-history-of-male-affection/

Williams, M. (2017) *Bass Reeves: The Real Lone Ranger Was Black*. Paces Connection. Available at: https://www.pacesconnection.com/g/NJ-Resiliency-Coalition/blog/bass-reeves-the-real-lone-ranger-was-black

The Harder They Fall (2021) Directed by The Bullits [Netflix]

A Fistful of Dollars (1964) Directed by Sergio Leone [YouTube Movies]

For A Few Dollars More (1965) Directed by Sergio Leone [YouTube Movies]

The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly (1966) Directed by Sergio Leone [YouTube Movies]

Midnight Cowboy (1969) Directed by John Schlesigner [YouTube Movies]

Concrete Cowboy (2021) Directed by Ricky Staub [Netflix]

Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid (1969) Directed by George Roy Hill [YouTube Movies]

Mayon, L. (2021) interview with CMAT by phone, 22nd of December