

Julia LaPlante
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Stallions and Bears: Queering Cowboys in Pop Culture

The archetype of the cowboy has ruled over masculinity as the most powerful figure in American pop culture. The image of a tough man in chaps and spurs, covered in a layer of sweat and dust, staring at the setting sun over the plains is easy to conjure in the minds of most Americans. Cowboy imagery values hidden emotion, hard morals, and pure masculine strength. It also often promotes camaraderie with fellow men. In this archetype the queer community of America has found one of its most historic tropes: the gay cowboy. Since cowboys began finding their way into culture across all fifty states, so has the idea that said men might love and lay with each other. In modern times, no instance of queer cowboys is more popular than the story of writer Annie Proulx's "Brokeback Mountain." It's valuable to examine how this trope began, where "Brokeback Mountain" fits in, and how the work changed the way we see the West.

It important to acknowledge that the works of artists depicting gay cowboys are not without history to back them up. On the plains of America, male workers often bonded with each other in deep and long-lasting ways. With a lack of women, this often led to frequent relationships between men. In their piece "Homos on the Range", Jana Bommersbach examines the history of queerness in the old West. They write, "[w]ithout the presence of women, the always unstable line dividing the homosocial from the homosexual... became even more blurred. As traditional notions of 'normal' gender roles were challenged and unsettled, men could display both subtly and openly the erotic connections they felt for other men". Bommersbach also cites Alfred C. Kinsey, a notable researcher on the activities and lives of queer men. Bommersbach quotes Kinsey's writing that "the highest frequencies of the homosexual we have ever secured

anywhere have been in particular rural communities in some of the remote sections of the country... These are men who have faced the rigors of nature in the wild. They live on realities and on a minimum of theory. Such a background breeds the attitude that sex is sex, irrespective of the nature of the partner with whom the relation is had". As is shown here, the culture of sexuality, gender, and intimacy in the West is historically quite fluid. However, it should be noted that at the time these experiences would not have been labeled as 'gay' or 'queer'. The sexuality of these men would most likely simply be regarded as fluid, or not even regarded at all. It is only in recent generations that we have begun to label these feelings and assign them to categories. During this shift to label and divide society into gay or straight — villainizing one and upholding the other — society saw the transformation of cowboys and Western workers not only as careers, but now as silver-screen icons.

When the lifestyle of the West made its way to movies, tropes were quick to arise amongst the films. Lone heroes, often embodied by John Wayne or Clint Eastwood, fought bad guys and did so while looking ruggedly masculine. They sold not only the lifestyle of working hard and living with the land, they sold what it meant to be a man. They held their emotions tight and saved the damsels in distress. Journalist Sean McGeady writes, "[h]istorically, western protagonists have not been forthcoming with their feelings. John Wayne and Gary Cooper's characters were 'men's men', celebrated for their stiff upper lips, broad shoulders and steely resolve. Even when they saved the West and got the girl, the resulting relationships were hardly teary-eyed love-ins". However, the one place Western films often broke this emotional dam was in the depictions of rural men's relationships with each other. They depicted the deep emotions and lifelong bonds that often formed between men. As writer Mel Woods puts it "The 'Spaghetti Western' films made in Italy during the 1960s and 1970s were particularly known for their

inherent queerness. Films like *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (1966) and *A Bullet for the General* (1966) feature strongly bonded male friendships, where the men often express deep emotional love for each other, and eschew relationships with women in favour of spending time together”. It is easy to understand how queer audiences have flocked to the cowboy as a symbol of gay culture. There is an inherent knack for subversive thinkers to dissect often highly traditional notions of gender and sexuality into queer stories. When considering Western media and its traditional roles, lack of heterosexual relationships, abundance of male intimacy, and documented history of fluid Western sexuality, it’s no surprise that cowboys were adopted as a queer archetype.

The shift of cowboys from traditional masculine figures to a staple of queer culture is one that does not go over the heads of many critics. As Sue Brower writes, “indeed, ‘cowboy’ has taken on a theatrical, artificial, camp, and/or homosexual connotation” (48). This notion is reinforced by Addison Herron-Wheeler when she writes, “[t]he acceptance of gay cowboys in counterculture seems to be a middle finger to the system, infusing homosexuality and non-status-quo behavior into an area that was originally seen as more traditional.” Queering cowboy culture soon became a way to deconstruct and reclaim certain aspects of gender and sexuality. Mel Woods writes of queer cowboy culture, referencing “The cowboy from The Village People and the overwhelming number of leather chaps that can be spotted in many queer spaces today.” Cowboys are now a solidified trope in queer culture. Many books, movies, and songs have been responsible for this; however, none have been so influential as “Brokeback Mountain.”

Originally published in 1997, Annie Proulx’s “Brokeback Mountain” was not the first piece of media to suggest that Western workers could have deep feelings for each other. However, in modern consciousness, mentions of cowboys and queer culture immediately conjure

images of the short story and following 2005 movie by the same name. Interestingly enough, Proulx didn't intend for the story to be seen as a 'gay' story. James R. Keller and Anne Goodwyn Jones write that "[w]hen she was asked about the theme of the narrative, Annie Proulx said that her story is not about 'gay cowboys' but about 'rural homophobia'". Despite Proulx's intentions, her story like many others depicting Western men, was still adopted as a favorite of the queer community. This is for a number of reasons. Two which writer Katie Arosteguy cites are that "Proulx rewrites the genre of the Western from a feminist perspective that deconstructs the figure of the image of US masculinity" and "Proulx criticizes the mythology of the cowboy figure" (117). These kinds of deconstructions of gender and sexuality norms are always in high demand by groups labeled subversive or outside the norm. Proulx's work also depicts main characters Jack and Ennis in a deeply emotional way. She did not resort to stereotypes or caricatures. Instead, Proulx wrote a deeply emotional and hard hitting story of two men with the world seemingly pitted against them. Their story is one of love and tragedy. Herron-Wheeler frames this appeal in terms of the movie when she writes, "the idea that while the trope of two male cowboys getting it on may be hot, two men denying their love for each other because of circumstance and prejudice is a tragedy". Audiences consumed "Brokeback Mountain" not merely for its queerness, but also for its depth. Proulx's story doubtlessly made its way into the collective consciousness of America — and solidified cowboys as a truly queer concept — with the release of the 2005 film directed by Ang Lee, *Brokeback Mountain*.

Brokeback Mountain was an instant success. It was a hit with audiences and critics, going on to win countless nominations and awards. It is not an exaggeration to say that *Brokeback Mountain* is now many people's main touchpoint for Western films. The film also brought to the public the link that scholars had already been connecting of homosexuality and cowboy culture.

Mel Woods puts this phenomena into words when they write “...*Brokeback Mountain* didn’t invent the wheel when it comes to depicting homoeroticism in Westerns... *Brokeback Mountain* was one of the first high-profile examples of making this subtext text...”. It’s important to acknowledge that “*Brokeback Mountain*” in either of its forms was not the first piece of media to link cowboys and homosexuality, but it has become the most influential. Keller and Goodwyn Jones also notice this effect when they quote various critics of the movie: “Grundmann hails the film as a ‘long overdue move for a mainstream film’ ‘irreversibly linking the classic Western scenery and iconography with explicit images of cowboy homosexuality’” and “Clarke observes that *Brokeback* merely clarifies an element that has always been present in the Western—’men getting it on (or squabbling) with other men’” (23). *Brokeback Mountain* is not without its critics. Even those who appreciate gay couples being brought into mainstream have thoughts on how the film upholds masculinity and gay relationships as always ending in tragedy. However, even those with criticisms can acknowledge what a cultural phenomena “*Brokeback Mountain*” has become. So, while other authors and thinkers had been considering the idea of cowboys and homosexuality, it was truly Proulx and director Ang Lee who solidified cowboys as a queer icons.

Cowboys have and likely will always be a staple of American culture. Any group as complex as Western workers will have its array of different sexualities, genders, and personalities. With a long history of both traditional masculinity and fluid sexualities, cowboys continue to toe the line between all around traditional and powerfully subversive. Media has always been drawn to this inner dichotomy and has depicted it for decades. None have done it as powerfully and famously as “*Brokeback Mountain*.” It will stay in public conscious as the work that truly strengthened cowboys’ ties to the queer community.

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