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The Western, Violence, and Queer Expression in *Red River*, *Brokeback Mountain*, and *Thelma &*

Louise

Of all the tools the film industry has used in the past and present to contribute to American myth-making, the Western is the most iconic. From the recognizable, reproducible costumes, to the black-and-white morality, to the basic, often revenge-driven plots, the Western has twisted the history of the North American frontier into a fantasy that imposes a strict social hierarchy even as it celebrates disorder. Without an established police organization, the small towns and sprawling ranches of the Westerns can only hope a cowboy with a loaded gun and an Arthurian-like honor code comes along to protect them. Violence, in the classical Western, operates as a morally neutral tool whose righteousness depends upon the man (and it is always a man) wielding it: when used to defend a community's honor code, violence isn't simply expected, it's awesome, a spectacle for the audience to enjoy; when used to strike against someone else's honor code (most often in the form of bandits stealing supplies or Native Americans and Mexicans defending their land from the white invaders), violence is suddenly a problem, a scourge. Although the Western fantasy dispenses with institutional order, by constructing an honor code that uplifts whiteness and white brutality as necessary or adventurous, that deifies men and defines masculinity by ability to commit violence and inability to express sentimentality or tenderness for more than one person at a time, that demonizes racialized others as chaotic savages greedily hoarding land that they won't use, and that doesn't

permit women except as sex workers or impossible chimeras that exemplify both femininity and masculinity—then the Western, for all its love for freedom, constricts righteousness, morality, and American identity as narrowly as any other power fantasy. What we now call toxic masculinity, or hypermasculinity, defined partially by excessive and glorified violence against others, features in the Western as simply the standard by which every John Wayne or Clint Eastwood must live. An integral part of the John Wayne myth, the lone cowboy, is heterosexuality (or the veneer of); however, since the frontier is a space without women, the Western hero must prove his heterosexuality and thus his masculinity through demonstrations of virility (breeding animals, starting a successful ranch, farming) and violence. If, as critic J. Hoberman argues in a *Village Voice* article, “the Western has always been the most idyllically homosocial of modes,” and, as film scholar Erika Spohrer writes in her article about genre and *Brokeback Mountain* (2005, dir. Ang Lee), “by inserting *Brokeback Mountain* into the Western canon, critics force a re-vision, a re-seeing of all Westerns that have preceded it,” then I argue for the necessity of pursuing that critical work and analyzing gay- or lesbian-coding in Westerns, traditional and revised (Spohrer 5). Like Alexander Doty, I don’t present my comments as “alternative” readings, “against the grain” of the film’s true, heterosexual mission; instead, I agree with Doty’s suggestion that “within cultural production and reception, queer erotics are already part of culture’s erotic center” (3). My mission isn’t to apply “queer theory” to a text as if gayness were something foreign to that text that needed to be introduced—but rather to elucidate the gayness already within the text at every level.

In this paper, I interrogate how *Red River* (1948, dir. Howard Hawks), *Brokeback Mountain*, and *Thelma & Louise* (1991, dir. Ridley Scott) negotiate violence and gay themes with the Western genre. *Brokeback Mountain* and *Thelma & Louise* build on traditional, albeit

gay-coded, Westerns like *Red River* and adapt violence, classically a tool used to reify heterosexual masculinity, into a device that signifies queerness, whether within the narrative violence hides queerness or reveals it. By using violence to code the central relationships of these movies as queer, the movies successfully adapt the hyper-heterosexual, hypermasculine confines of the Western for gay purposes, and thus prove that even the most inflexible, most purely American genre can evolve.

In his article “*Red River* and the Loss of Femininity in the John Wayne Persona,” Jim Sanderson frames *Red River* as Tom Dunson’s (John Wayne) struggle to return to femininity, which Sanderson connects to civilization, family, and lack of violence, after leaving his only lady love behind and learning of her death later. When, at the end of the movie, Dunson’s adopted son-figure Matt (Montgomery Clift) couples with Tess Millay (Joanne Dru), Sanderson argues that while Matt has achieved the perfect masculinity because it’s complemented by perfect femininity (in other words, men are incomplete without a woman partner), Dunson is too old and scarred to do the same, and so Dunson ends the movie a semi-tragic figure who can only live vicariously through Matt and Tess (Sanderson 6). This analysis is the most heterosexual way to read the movie, particularly since Tess is one of only two women who appear at all, and the only woman in more than one scene. Where Sanderson cannot or refuses to imagine masculinity without heterosexuality, I counter that *Red River* purposely excludes women from its narrative and we cannot analyze Dunson’s and Matt’s relationship in terms of the women partners they’re presumably missing, but instead in terms of one another, their roles in the Western genre, and how they express their feelings for each other, positive or negative, through violence.

On the other side of the critical spectrum, Vito Russo in his book *The Celluloid Closet* summarizes *Red River* as, simply, “A cowboy love story,” (340). He says of the heterosexual

plot in the third act, “[Director] Hawks’ only use for Joanne Dru is to have her tell John Wayne and Montgomery Clift what we can already see. ‘Stop fighting!’ she screams in the climactic scene. ‘You two know you love each other.’ Yet the nature of that love... remained hidden,” (78). With this analysis, Russo subtly argues that even though a conventional reading of the end of the film, where Tess reminds Dunson and Matt of their love for each other and Dunson finally promises Matt a permanent place in the family by adding his initial to their ranch’s brand, assumes that Matt and Tess will get married and have children, a closer reading reveals Tess’s irrelevance. What “remained hidden” about Matt and Dunson’s relationship, the sexual and/or romantic elements that censors forced Hawks and the crew to obscure, can be teased out by examining how violence features in their relationship.

When they first meet, it’s twenty years before the main story of the film and Matt is a child whose only possessions are a loaded pistol and a small cow. Like Dunson, he intends to colonize the south Texas wilderness and establish a ranch for himself. Also like Dunson, he has no family, no personal connections. Their first encounter is marked by four separate demonstrations of violence: they slap one another; Dunson disarms Matt, whose gun is his only protector; Dunson shoots a Mexican envoy who came to warn Dunson that the land he’s on belongs to a Mexican rancher, tells Matt to remember what he just saw and not to trust anyone, and gives Matt his gun back; and, now a family, Dunson’s single bull joins Matt’s lone cow (a breeding pair that symbolizes the virility and productivity of their burgeoning relationship), and they brand the animals with Dunson’s initials. This first meeting establishes the motif of violence as a communication device, as well as Matt’s gun as a symbol for his masculinity, his phallus, and his gayness simultaneously. Rather than talk things out like in a typical Hawks drama, these Western men only understand action; thus, amiable violence becomes the main method to

express their thoughts and feelings. By slapping each other, they communicate mutual suspicion; by taking Matt's gun, Dunson telegraphs his physical superiority and commands respect, and when he gives it back, he demonstrates his willingness to mentor Matt until Matt is as superior as he is; by letting Matt watch as he shoots the envoy, Dunson establishes his personal honor code (no mercy against racialized others like Mexicans, defend one's homestead at any cost, and don't trust anyone); and by branding their cattle together, they seal their compact, to borrow a word from Sanderson, that they will live as a family on the ranch together.

While Matt is a child, obviously their relationship is platonic. Twenty years later, however, things have changed. Their breeding pair has successfully spawned almost 10,000 cows, making Dunson one of the most prolific ranchers in south Texas. They've evolved to communicate via words, cigarette sharing (a traditionally masculine habit famous for its sexual connotations in almost every genre of film), and silently riding their horses next to each other as they survey the ranch, but they still resort to violence to express their most intense feelings. Next to Montgomery Clift (a gay man in real life) and his sensitive, lithe-bodied masculinity (Sanderson quotes Garry Wills when he describes Matt's masculinity as "boyish, brooding, sissy, [and] soft"), John Wayne's gruffness easily reads as overcompensating (qtd. in Sanderson 2). The violence they share still reads as masculine, as it traditionally does, but an exaggerated masculinity, performed for the sake of other men.

The most famous scene that illustrates this is between Matt and Cherry Valance (John Ireland), upon their first meeting: Cherry admires Matt's gun and asks to see it, Matt hands it to him and Cherry reciprocates with his own, Cherry makes a provocative comment, and he and Matt in succession shoot a tin can higher and higher in the air. This is the scene that really establishes Matt's gun as a symbol of potency, masculinity, and sexuality, as he and Cherry show

off their skill and the beauty of their respective guns. Even this demonstration between Matt and Cherry involves Dunson, since Dunson taught Matt how to use his gun at all: when Cherry boasts, “That puts two of us at the head of the list [of excellent shooters],” Matt cautions, “Better leave room for a third,” referring to Dunson. This kind of schoolboy glee at judging each other’s skill demonstrates how a show of violence, the ability to shoot to kill, can operate within the narrative as an act of trust, friendship, and perhaps attraction.

A similarly suggestive interaction happens between Dunson and Matt just a scene earlier: Dunson has put Matt in charge of separating their cattle from other ranchers’ that had mixed together, but when Matt questions Dunson’s order to slap their own brand on every cow regardless of its ownership, Dunson pushes back. Matt complains, “You’re gonna wind up branding every rump in the state of Texas except mine,” which is suggestive enough on its own, but Dunson takes the joke further by saying, “Hand me that iron, Teeler,” pausing, and adding, “You don’t think I’d do it, do you?” Although Matt smiles at him and replies, “I don’t,” the (amiable) threat of violence—particularly a violent act like branding, which declares permanent ownership, with Dunson’s initials—against Matt’s backside with an iron rod, an easy phallic symbol, carries undeniable sexual implications.



"I don't." Montgomery Clift and John Wayne in *Red River* (1948)

The encounter also communicates the hierarchy Dunson has imposed upon their relationship, which becomes the crux of the conflict when Matt finally rebels against Dunson once Dunson has taken his honor code too far, to the extent of murdering men he'd previously known as friends. Dunson always shoots to kill; Matt, on the other hand, is sentimental and caring, which Cherry points out as a detriment when he says to Matt, "But your heart's soft. Too soft. It may get you hurt some day." When Matt and the rest of the surviving ranch crew take the cattle and desert Dunson, Matt disarms Dunson and shoots out his leg, anticipating Dunson's promise to kill him. He aims to slow Dunson down, but not to stop him. Matt could have shot to kill, like Dunson no doubt would have, but Matt's affection for him wins out over his disappointment and fury. This is the difference between Dunson's masculinity and Matt's: Matt is willing to perform amiable violence, but he isn't willing to actually hurt people he loves.

This love, although it "remains hidden," fuels the second half of the movie. At the final confrontation, Dunson repeats Cherry's earlier accusation when Matt refuses to fight him, but

instead stands steady and stoic as Dunson takes his gun and shoots around Matt: “You’re soft! Won’t anything make a man out of you?” The implication here is, of course, a man who isn’t willing to kill isn’t a man at all. Hawks uses Tess to disprove this philosophy of Dunson’s, perhaps to drop a veil of heterosexuality over the real gay text; either way, the movie concludes that although amiable violence can sometimes be an expression of friendship, curiosity, and love, aggressive violence that actually results in harm isn’t anything but cruel.

Brokeback Mountain deconstructs the masculine violence that defines the gay relationship in *Red River* and reveals its costs. Spohrer’s article, “Not a Gay Cowboy Movie?” reviews and analyzes the difficulties reviewers, consumers, and even the cast of the movie have with regards to labelling *Brokeback Mountain* as either a gay movie, a Western, and both/either. Spohrer pushes against attempts to call the movie “universal” or “a great romantic tragedy like *Romeo and Juliet*” (the director Ang Lee’s words), and instead insists that its historical and cultural specificity is an integral part of the movie (28). To those who would argue the practice of organizing films by genres unfairly limits those films to a narrow range of characteristics, she rebuts with an understanding of genre as something cumulative, that once a new, different work enters the genre, it changes the genre, and in this way genres adapt over decades (29). I argue, like Spohrer does, that *Brokeback Mountain* becomes indecipherable if, in an attempt to universalize it, one removes the specifics: that these are two men, in homophobic parts of the country (Texas and Wyoming), in the 1960s through the 1980s, who are sheep herders who have inherited decades of Westerns that aim to teach them what kind of men they should be.

All of these social conditions inform and necessitate Ennis’s violence, which he uses as a closeting device to reify his (assumed heterosexual) masculinity in response to perceived challenge or doubt. There are some examples of amiable violence—a good number of Ennis and

Jack's physical encounters during their first summer on the mountain begin as play fights—but these light moments are side effects of a greater problem: Ennis's toxic masculinity and self-hatred that culminate in aggressive outbursts throughout the film. Instead of allowing Ennis to stand in for the mythic John Wayne figure, stoic by nature, Ang Lee positions Ennis in conflict with that figure, that idealized masculine self, by giving Ennis a series of traumas and abandonments in his early childhood that led to his fear of sentimentality and empathy. His parents died, his older siblings that raised him abandoned him after they got married, and when he was young, his father took him to the scene of a double murder, a hate crime against two assumed gay ranchers, as a warning against disobeying society's honor code, which allows only straightness. Ennis's stoicism is pathological and dangerous to himself and others, not the cornerstone of a healthy masculine identity. In the closet and deeply paranoid, Ennis uses the myth of the cowboy, particularly his honor-driven violence, to shield himself from suspicion, express his feelings for Jack, or to express anything at all.

I focus on Ennis and not Jack, because while Jack participates in Ennis's play fights and the two trade domestic and hunting duties freely, Jack expresses his feelings primarily through speech. Jack initiates their encounters, sends Ennis the first postcard asking to meet him at Brokeback Mountain again, completes the long drive from Texas to Wyoming alone, and returns to Ennis again and again, at any opportunity that arises, to ask Ennis to abandon his false heterosexual domesticity that falls apart sooner than later and join Jack as co-ranchers. Unlike Ennis, Jack doesn't feel the need to act more masculine than he naturally is, and he definitely has no use for repression. He attempts to cruise in Texas at a rodeo bar after losing a match—one of the most hypermasculine places imaginable, yet he tries anyway. After the man rebuffs him with some vaguely homophobic comments, Jack seems self-conscious, but like Christopher Sharrett

says in “Death of the Strong Silent Type,” “[while] at some points Jack is mindful of how he measures up in the hyper-masculine Texas culture... at other moments (the Newsome Equipment scene), he is oblivious to the low esteem in which he is held by mainstream society,” (23). In the scene to which Sharrett refers, Jack demonstrates to potential buyers how the tractor he’s selling works, while two Texan men call Jack a “piss-ant” to his father-in-law and comment upon his failed rodeo career. Jack can’t hear them and confidently jokes with the buyers. Men around Jack appear to identify him as gay, or at least insufficiently masculine, on sight; in a role reversal, Jack finds himself the pursued instead of the pursuer when David Harbour’s character flirts with him and suggests they have a tryst during a weekend “fishing trip” while their wives sit at the same table, unaware. This is the first time the two men have met. The only time Jack attempts to assert his dominance, and thus masculinity, over another person is during a Thanksgiving dinner, when his father-in-law insists on keeping the television on despite Jack’s wishes, and more importantly takes aim at Jack’s masculinity with a comment about the sports game on television making Jack’s son more of a “man.” In response to this affront, which undermines the patriarchal authority Jack is owed as a father but appears not to claim, Jack finally gives in to his own violent outburst, yells at his father-in-law, “Sit down, you son of a bitch!”, and stands to carve the turkey. Aside from this singular demonstration, Jack makes no attempt to personify the stoic, strong, violent John Wayne mythic figure. This freedom from expectation allows him to accept his gay feelings for Ennis more easily, but his visibility as a gay man leads (arguably, depending on interpretation) to his death.

Ennis survives, but at what cost? His reliance on expressions of violence to protect himself from his own fear sours him into a man who cannot accept the real love he’s offered; perhaps, like Sanderson says of John Wayne’s Dunson at the end of *Red River*, Ennis’s

masculinity is only half-formed, dangerous in its incompleteness, missing what Sanderson calls femininity and what I call tenderness. Early in the film, after their boss cuts their summer job and thus their tryst short by a month, Ennis and Jack are play-fighting when Jack accidentally knees Ennis in the face and breaks his nose. Jack is contrite and tries to stem the bleeding with his own shirt sleeve, but Ennis's temper snaps and he clocks Jack on the jaw, sending him to the ground. Several things stand out about this interaction: Jack gleefully participates in amiable violence, but never intends serious harm and regrets it when it happens; Ennis doesn't see the boundary between amiable and aggressive violence and oscillates between the two; and Ennis responds with aggressive violence specifically in response to Jack's show of tenderness, as an attempt to distance himself from Jack's affection and further closet himself even in the middle of the wilderness. In an earlier scene, Ennis also uses the suggestion of violence to reinforce his masculinity/heterosexuality to Jack: Jack lounges on a hill that overlooks the valley; when Ennis enters the shot, the shotgun in his right hand precedes Ennis himself; Ennis holds the shotgun between himself and Jack throughout their conversation, an attempt to align himself with that mythic cowboy whose gun, like Matt's in *Red River*, is his only line of protection. Ennis needs that protection to discuss his and Jack's relationship directly, even as he undermines their connection: "One shot thing we got goin' here... I'm not no queer." With these early scenes between Ennis and Jack, we can see how the film deconstructs the toxic masculinity that *Red River* and Westerns like it established as integral to cowboy heroism and so connected violence to affection; as Ennis struggles with the mythic cowboy persona, he finds himself with a non-choice between defending his status as a man or expressing and accepting love.



"I'm not no queer." Heath Ledger and Jake Gyllenhaal in *Brokeback Mountain* (2005)

As part of his lifelong endeavor to prove his straightness, Ennis marries a woman, Alma (Michelle Williams), but maintains his affair with Jack throughout their marriage. At the center of this tension, as much a tool to prop up Ennis's masculinity as his guns and violent outbursts, Alma quickly tires of allowing Ennis to lie to himself and confronts him about his relationship with Jack at Thanksgiving dinner after their divorce, to which he responds by yelling at her, grabbing her arms and shaking her, and almost physically assaulting her. He finds the wherewithal to leave the house, but then he attacks a random man on the street and allows the man to beat him into unconsciousness. Sharrett says of the scene, "Not only is [Ennis] losing the fight, but his crisis is spiraling toward a terrible conclusion that follows the expectations imposed upon him," or in other words, Ennis's toxic masculinity will kill him (25). Although Ennis does outlive Jack, this doesn't suggest that Ennis's violent self-protection/self-closeting is the best survival method. Ennis may be alive, but he's lost his one chance at real, honest love, and he won't get another one. The devastating last few scenes cement this conclusion: Ennis visits

Jack's childhood home, sees Jack's bedroom for the first time, and finds on a coat hanger in the closet (of course) two shirts, the sleeves bloodstained. They're the shirts they wore during the aforementioned play fight, one of their last moments together on Brokeback Mountain before they separated and got married. Jack had kept both of them, chosen not to wash them, and hung them together on the same hanger. The effect this discovery has on Ennis comprises one of the most memorable parts of the film: Ennis finally, stripped of self-conscious stoicism and paranoid violence, allows himself to cry. It took Jack's death, and this proof of Jack's love for Ennis in spite of the blood that stained their relationship, for Ennis to realize that his violence won't protect himself or anyone else, but will instead suffocate any connection he tries to make. This suffocation is the "terrible conclusion" to the "expectations" of masculinity and heterosexuality that the idealized, impossible mythic cowboy imposed upon Ennis. *Brokeback Mountain's* tragedy comes not only from Jack's death, but also from Ennis's inability to express his love for Jack in a human, healthy way while Jack was alive. By turning the fantasy of the cowboy into a tragedy, the film seeks to deconstruct and reverse the romanticization of stoicism, strength, isolation, and violent masculinity that previous Westerns, even gay-coded *Red River*, established.

Where *Brokeback Mountain* deconstructs, *Thelma & Louise* subverts and reinvents. Like *Brokeback*, there's some debate over whether the movie really qualifies as a Western and if it's useful to assign a genre to it at all. Like *Brokeback*, it's my position that contextualizing *Thelma & Louise* as a Western (even if one must call it neo- or revisionist)—specifically a Western wherein two women find freedom from the male violence they receive in patriarchal, heterosexual society by acting out the John Wayne cowboy fantasy—allows insight into the film's deeper, culturally impactful messages. Some critics, like film scholar Glenn Man, interpret *Thelma & Louise* as a conscious remixing of several genres: for Man, the melodrama, the

mobster film, and the Western (42). I see *Thelma & Louise* as a descendant of *Red River* to the same degree as *Brokeback Mountain*. Unlike Ennis and Jack, Thelma (Geena Davis) and Louise (Susan Sarandon) aren't stuck in a Western, confined to the toxic masculinity of the cowboy, but are instead stuck in a melodrama and choose to escape into a Western. The melodramatic aspects of their former lives (Thelma's dismissive and arguably abusive husband, her boredom as a housewife, Louise's frustration at her boyfriend's absence) disappear in the face of the self-defense murder Louise commits, and faced with the choice between confessing their crime and reintegrating into lawful (male-dominated) society, the two decide to reject law/society and align themselves with the most famous, most glorious of outlaws, the cowboy. Louise borrows his masculinity and honor code, and Thelma borrows his bravado and violence. Like Ennis, they use the cowboy fantasy to protect themselves from oppressive violence (homophobia in his case, misogyny and arguably also homophobia in theirs), but unlike Ennis, as women they cannot fall into the trap of toxic masculinity, but can only rework femininity to suit their needs (as Thelma does) or incorporate masculinity into their womanhood (as Louise does). Like Man says, "The women's trek from the city to the open desert releases them from the tug of a complacent domesticity at the same time that they take on the frontier values of rugged individualism, self-reliance, and the survival of the fittest," as well as of course the most visible "frontier values," masculinity and violence (45).

Although both women reject traditional femininity—patriarchal society's honor code, which includes acceptable feelings and actions as well as self-presentation—Louise embodies more obviously the butch lesbian, the most visibly nonconforming and so most dangerous lesbian. In film scholar Richard Dyer's essay "Seen to Be Believed" about the conflict between the necessity of creating stereotypes (or as he called them, simply "types") about gayness and

gay people in order to make their sexuality visible on screen and the weaponization of these types by homophobic filmmakers, he emphasizes the butch and the queen as the two most obvious queer types, because of their gender nonconformance, or “in-betweenism” (“Seen to Be Believed” 31). He says of these types’ weaponization, “The form this [homophobia] often takes is the tag that gay men and lesbians are not ‘real men’ and ‘real women’, which expresses the assumption that true masculinity and femininity are in large part defined in heterosexual sexuality,” a gender/sexuality essentialism that motivates Tom Dunson’s cruelty and Ennis Del Mar’s aggressive violence (“Seen to Be Believed” 36). The butch lesbian in particular “is frequently represented as dangerous and threatening” because her reappropriated masculinity and sexual confidence threatens straight men’s claim on femme women, whom straight creators represent as too childlike or capricious to commit to straightness or lesbianhood (Dyer 37). Dyer points out that while, in gay usage, “in-betweenism” or gender nonconformity operates as an act of rebellion against rigid gender and representation rules, in straight usage the butch or the queen represents a failure to be either completely man or woman, and so becomes a tragic figure (37). Representations of butchness, calcified in straight culture as the threat of being labelled a lesbian and stripped of one’s woman- and personhood, becomes in film a warning sign, a counter-example of how girls and women should act, deserving of punishment and alienation.

Thelma & Louise, thankfully, doesn’t resort to that polemic, but it appears that its male characters do. Working circularly, it follows that women who accept alienation, welcome men’s scorn, deprioritize men in their lives, and eschew or modify feminine representation read as butch. Louise’s journey to peak butchness spans the entire film, but the trained eye can identify her immediately: in the first scene, she calls Thelma from the café where she works, and despite her immaculate dress uniform and bright makeup, the cigarette she smokes subtly evokes power

and masculinity; Louise confirms this first impression when she rebuffs a man asking Thelma, on the phone, to run away with him by saying, “Not this weekend, sweetie. She’s running away with me;” in the first scene where we see Louise at home, out of her uniform, she wears a simple white shirt and blue jeans, which contrasts with Thelma’s pink silk house robe; she recognizes Thelma’s fragility and protects her as much as possible (what heterosexual culture interprets as butches’ violence is actually fierce protectiveness of less physically intimidating femmes), and this protection leads to their first crime; while Thelma carries out her first armed robbery, Louise sits in their car, notices an old man and woman staring at her dirty, disheveled appearance, self-consciously pulls out her lipstick, and starts to apply it, before she gives up and throws the lipstick onto the road; and Louise later pawns all of her jewelry, including an engagement ring her boyfriend gave her, to fund her and Thelma’s retreat to Mexico. Louise ends the movie covered in grime, her hair a red mess, wearing ripped jeans, a stained white shirt, a wide brown belt, and no bra. All this to say, as Louise accepts her permanent alienation from (male, straight) society, she adapts the cowboy’s rugged masculinity into an expression of butchness visible to anyone who cares to look. For Louise, this is a declaration of power rather than sexuality (unlike how Ennis’s masculinity works as a conscious declaration of his heterosexuality), but as mentioned earlier, butches are easy to spot. The men around Louise appear to recognize her butchness: Harlan and J.D. target Thelma for their manipulative flirtations, and both treat Louise as an obstacle, a challenge to their superiority, so their plans necessitate separating Thelma from Louise; and although Louise’s boyfriend, Jimmy, cares for her and wants to marry her, he cuts his own proposal short, because he knows that she’s leaving with Thelma and she would never abandon Thelma to begin a domestic life with him. By portraying Louise as a woman who appropriates the mythic cowboy’s masculinity to express her butchness, *Thelma & Louise*

transforms the hypermasculine scourge that plagued Ennis into a way for butch women to freely, with all the awe and respect the cowboy receives, embody their natural masculinity and their lesbianhood.



Susan Sarandon rejects lipstick in *Thelma & Louise* (1991)

Note that, in this movie, masculinity doesn't assume violence, and masculine characters like Louise can express their romantic and sexual feelings for the same gender without resorting to violence against one another; instead, for Louise and Thelma, the violence they commit against others are protective acts for the other's sake, justified (and glorified) by their cowboys' honor code. Thelma and Louise don't kill and rob people (men) because they can or they're evil, but because they have spent their lives as women in hetero-male society, the targets of men's daily, inane acts of violence, and they can't divorce themselves from that society without invoking men's ire. Louise, as strong and certain as she is, is terrified to drive through Texas because, the text implies, she was raped there; Thelma's husband Darryl creates a hostile home environment for Thelma, who factors Darryl's happiness or fury into every decision she makes and who as a housewife has no other outlet than her relationship with Louise; Harlan preys on

Thelma at a bar, drugs her, ensures everyone in the club saw her dancing with him, tries to coerce her into sex, and when that doesn't work attempts to rape her; Harlan's response when Louise demands an apology is "Suck my cock," an act of verbal harassment that sends Louise over the edge; and, as an example of institutional violence against women, Louise and Thelma embark on their journey in the first place because they recognize that the legal system will not accept a self-defense plea even with evidence of Thelma's attempted rape. These are experiences that every woman must fear, spend her energy to avoid, and bear the blame for if she's victimized anyway; these are the "women's issues" that fuel melodramas. It's no wonder that Thelma and Louise resort to the Western, with its escapist fantasy of the invulnerable mythic cowboy, to survive their situation.

Once they cross the event horizon, when Louise comes to terms with the murder she committed for Thelma's sake, the film takes on the hue of a revenge fantasy—one of the stock Western plots that allows cowboys, outlaws, and runaways to perform violence with impunity. As mentioned earlier, Louise murders Harlan to protect Thelma, and this act—breaking the law, bending their own morals, and giving up their places in society to defend the relationship they've created—sets the precedent for every following example of violence. While on the road, they encounter a trucker who harasses them by honking his horn and making crude hand gestures; they manage to ignore him until, after the third time they encounter him, they trick him with their feminine guiles into thinking they're interested in him, wait for him to pull over to the side of the desert highway, demand that he apologizes, and when he doesn't, they shoot his truck until it blows up. The explosion, and the fantasy of men facing consequences for their actions, is as glorious and satisfying as any Western shoot-out. After Thelma meets J.D. (Brad Pitt), she adopts his John Wayne swagger and copies his armed robbery routine exactly the way he

described it, successfully enough to fund their escape. In other words, Thelma commits violence (or threatens it) to serve her and Louise's relationship, which aligns with their cowboy's honor code of loyalty to any extreme. Thelma's new confidence with her gun (a loaded symbol for Matt and Ennis) shows when, in a role reversal from the beginning of the film, she has to save Louise from a police officer who pulls them over for speeding and could give away their location to the FBI. Louise is terrified, unable to reach for her own gun, and compliant, but Thelma sneaks up to the officer, holds her gun to his head, and stuffs him in his own truck without hesitation. Like their rejection and emasculation of the trucker symbolizes revenge against sexual harassment, their refusal to submit to the police officer represents a refusal to submit to the larger legal system and the concept of law itself, tied up with patriarchy as it is. Their final act of violence, the suicide pact, is the only time they use violence to communicate their love for one other, like Dunson and Ennis do in *Red River* and *Brokeback Mountain*—but before they drive off the cliff, they kiss and Louise takes Thelma's hand, signs of romantic affection visible to the plainest eye. It's difficult to call their deaths, an addition to the tradition of a cowboy ending his life with guns blazing, a tragedy. By driving off the cliff into the indomitable desert, they refuse for the final time to capitulate to the FBI, society, order, and heterosexuality, and declare themselves, for a precious few seconds, free.

The classical Western, for all intents and purposes, is dead. There are a couple theories about why this is, but the most pervasive seems to be the idea that the Western died “due to its refusal to change,” like Spohrer argues every genre must do in order to “keep the type from becoming sterile,” in the face of ever-shifting American culture (29). Despite the genre's new irrelevance, we would be remiss to leave unexamined the ways in which neo- or revised Westerns, blended with other genres like the melodrama or crime action-adventure, build upon

traditional Western tropes like violence to communicate something new, or continue a discussion an older film started. Sharrett connects “the repression of male friendship beyond its ‘good friends’ aspect” and consequent expression of “the complexities of male sexuality” through “not eroticism but violence” in the Western to the nation-building and myth-making the genre does, as does Spohrer, who concludes, “If the Western is thus quintessentially ‘American,’ a re-vision of what it means to be a Western then means a re-vision of what it means to be an American” (Sharrett 18, Spohrer 31). Dyer agrees, stating the main mission of stereotypes (which I extend in this conversation to apply to genres) is to demarcate “sharp boundaries” between who or what is acceptable in society and who or what is not (“The Role of Stereotypes” 16). This means a conventional analysis of why the Western genre resorts to violence to express same-gender love and sexuality is to defend the interconnected social constructs of masculinity, heterosexuality, moral righteousness, the West, and America itself from critique—to maintain the myth at any cost, because without the myth, we have no collective or individual identity and no justification for oppression. I picked the films I did because, in a paradoxical effort to bend and twist the Western’s most rigid tropes, they succeed in adapting violence to express gay sexuality as explicitly as the time and culture in which they were made allowed. These movies prove any attempt to erase queerness from cinema and American culture in general is futile; Hollywood’s homophobic stereotypes and stringently straight genres will only yield more possibilities, more opportunities to render ourselves visible.

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