# FRONTIERS OF IDENTITY:
# RECLAMATION OF BLACK COWBOYS AND COWGIRLS IN THE WESTERN GENRE THROUGH THE HARDER THEY FALL AND CONCRETE COWBOY

Eefje Ella Hoekstra
s2881950
MA North American Studies
Leiden University
Supervisor: Dr. J.J. Morgan-Owens
Second Reader: Dr. W.M. Schmidli
December 2025

David Lee, *The Harder They Fall*, 2021
Courtesy of TIFF, *Concrete Cowboy*, 2020

# Acknowledgements

I would first like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor, Professor Jessie Morgan-Owens, for her time, careful guidance, and thoughtful feedback throughout the writing process. Her trust in both my research direction and the final outcome has been invaluable, and her critical engagement consistently helped sharpen my thinking and strengthen this thesis.

Furthermore, I would like to thank Leiden University for providing an academic environment in which I was able to further explore and refine my interests. The freedom to critically investigate film, memory, and representation within an interdisciplinary framework made this research both possible and meaningful.

On a more personal note, I am deeply grateful to my family, friends, and fellow students from the MA North American Studies. Their trust, patience, and constant willingness to listen, alongside much needed moments of distraction, encouragement, and shared reflection, were essential in bringing this project to a successful conclusion. Without their support, this thesis would not have taken its present form.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge those who, through their dedication to sharing and circulating films that were otherwise difficult to access, played an important role in sustaining and deepening my interest in cinema over the years. Their efforts made it possible for me to continue discovering, watching, and loving film, and ultimately contributed to the foundation from which this research emerged.

Abstract

In this thesis I investigate how contemporary Western films reshape cultural memory of the American frontier by foregrounding Black cowboy and cowgirl identities that have long been marginalized within the genre. Through a comparative analysis of *The Harder They Fall* (Samuel, 2021) and *Concrete Cowboy* (Staub, 2020), I examine how these films function as cinematic interventions in the Western's racialized and gendered memory system. Drawing on cultural memory theory, intersectionality, and Black feminist film criticism, I argue that these films do not merely diversify representation but actively challenge the ideological foundations of the Western as a national myth centered on white masculinity. Using close reading and historical contextualization, the analysis demonstrates how both films mobilize counter-memory by exposing mechanisms of erasure and rearticulating the frontier as a space of Black presence, continuity, and belonging. Particular emphasis is placed on the representation of Black women, whose historical and cinematic invisibility constitutes a form of double erasure at the intersection of race and gender. By analyzing narrative structure, visual strategies, and spatial configurations, in this thesis I show how contemporary, Black-centered Westerns reframe violence, community, and identity, transforming the frontier from a site of conquest into a relational and contested cultural space. In doing so, the research contributes to scholarship on the Western genre and cultural memory by positioning contemporary film as a critical site where the meanings of the American past are actively renegotiated.

Key words: *Western genre, Cultural memory, Counter-memory, Black cowboy and cowgirl representation, Intersectionality, Black feminist film theory*

Contents

## Introduction: The Western's Cultural Return

In recent years, American popular culture has witnessed a surprising resurgence of Western iconography (Berlinger). Fashion houses have revived prairie silhouettes and cowboy aesthetics; TikTok cycles through "cowboycore" and "yeehaw style" trends; and mainstream musical artists increasingly draw from the sonic and visual language of the frontier. For example, Beyoncé's 2024 album *Cowboy Carter* exemplifies this cultural shift. Its fusion of country traditions with Black musical genealogies unsettled popular assumptions about who "belongs" in the Western imagination. The album's success demonstrated that the cowboy and cowgirl are once again culturally legible figures, no longer confined to whiteness (Fowler). The cowboy and cowgirl have become contested cultural symbols through which questions of identity, memory, and belonging in the United States are currently being renegotiated.

This renewed fascination with Western imagery is part of a broader cultural moment in which American historical narratives are being reassessed. Public debates about racial injustice and structural inequality have intensified attention to the mechanisms of historical exclusion, prompting artists from marginalized communities to revisit and reinterpret the cultural forms that once erased them (Gergaud 159–160). In this context, the Western becomes a particularly revealing genre. Because it has long operated as a foundational national mythology, its representational choices continue to shape public understandings of the American past. Yet this mythology has historically been narrowing in scope, centering white masculinity and frontier heroism while minimizing the presence and contributions of nonwhite communities.

The twenty-first century Western thus emerges as a site where these inherited myths can be confronted and reworked. Contemporary filmmakers interrogate the genre's assumptions, introduce figures previously absent from its narrative frame, and experiment with new settings and temporalities. These interventions do more than update familiar tropes; they signal a transformation of the memory system that the Western helped establish. Rather than reproducing a singular national story, the modern Western increasingly accommodates multiple histories and perspectives, revealing the frontier as an ongoing cultural negotiation rather than a fixed ideological inheritance.

Within this shifting cultural landscape, two films stand out for their sustained engagement with Black cowboy and cowgirl identities: *The Harder They Fall* (2021) directed by Jeymes Samuel and *Concrete Cowboy* (2020) directed by Ricky Staub. Though they differ in tone, setting, and narrative structure, both works challenge the dominant cultural memory of the American West by presenting Black experiences as fundamental rather than marginal to this

narrative. *The Harder They Fall* reimagines the nineteenth century Western through an all-Black ensemble cast, reclaiming historical figures who were systematically erased from cinematic representation. *Concrete Cowboy*, rooted in the real-life urban riding clubs of Philadelphia, reveals the continuity of Black equestrian culture into the present, challenging assumptions that associate cowboy identity solely with rural, white contexts. Together, the films not only recover neglected histories but also expand the aesthetic, narrative, and ideological boundaries of the Western genre.

In this thesis, I examine *The Harder They Fall* and *Concrete Cowboy* as interventions in that memory system. Both films reveal historical omissions and propose alternative ways of imagining the frontier. Drawing on memory theory by Astrid Erll, Paul Connerton, Michel Foucault and others, I argue that representation is not simply a matter of inclusion but a practice that actively reshapes cultural memory. Film does more than transmit stories from the past; it constructs and circulates narratives that determine what societies remember and what they forget. The frontier myth has been reproduced, naturalized, and contested throughout American cultural history, and contemporary cinematic works possess the capacity to disrupt these established patterns of remembrance.

Central to this thesis is an inquiry into how contemporary Western films reclaim and redefine Black cowboy and cowgirl identities, challenging the racial and gendered exclusions that have long shaped frontier mythology. Through close readings of *The Harder They Fall* and *Concrete Cowboy*, I show how these films bring previously marginalized histories into the center of the Western frame while also revealing the complex dynamics of visibility, belonging, and cultural memory. Their narrative strategies, aesthetic choices, and rearticulations of frontier space contest the Western's dominant memory system and open the genre to new possibilities.

Particular attention is given to the representation of Black women. While Black men have increasingly entered revisionist Westerns, Black women remain subject to what I will later describe as "double erasure", excluded both from canonical Western narratives and from many histories of the Black West itself. By foregrounding female and queer characters this thesis investigates how gender intersects with race in acts of cinematic reclamation and how these representations challenge established systems of memory and identity.

This discussion leads to the central research question that structures my thesis: "How have contemporary Western films *The Harder They Fall* and *Concrete Cowboy* contributed to the reclamation and redefinition of Black cowboy and cowgirl identity, including the often-overlooked role of Black women, and how does this reclamation reshape our understanding of the American frontier?" This question requires attention both to the

ideological foundations of the Western and to the specific interventions made by contemporary, Black-centered films. The following chapters adhere to this logic. In the first chapter of my thesis, "Myth, Memory, and Movies of the Frontier," I analyze the construction of the American frontier myth and the Western genre's role in shaping racialized cultural memory. I examine how nineteenth, and twentieth century narratives transformed westward expansion into a national origin story rooted in white masculinity, and how cinema helped naturalize this mythology. In this chapter I also identify the mechanisms of forgetting, erasure, distortion, and selective remembrance, that rendered Black cowboys and cowgirls invisible within mainstream accounts of the West. This conceptual framework establishes the ideological terrain that contemporary films must navigate and contest.

Building on the historical and theoretical foundation of Chapter 1, my second chapter, "Intersectional Frontiers: Violence, Belonging, and Double Erasure," delves deeper into *The Harder They Fall* and *Concrete Cowboy* as cinematic works of reclamation. I analyze how these films repurpose genre conventions to foreground Black experience, how they articulate alternative forms of community and belonging, and how their portrayals of Black cowboys and cowgirls function as acts of counter-memory. In this chapter I argue that these films transform the frontier into a space of multiplicity and reinterpretation, disrupting the genre's entrenched racial hierarchies and offering new frameworks for understanding American identity.

# Literature Review

This literature review establishes the historical, theoretical, and methodological foundation necessary to understand how *The Harder They Fall* and *Concrete Cowboy* engage with the cultural memory of the American West. This review synthesizes scholarship on frontier mythology, Black Western history, gender and race in film, memory studies, and intersectional methodologies.

## 1. Historical and Cultural Context

Scholarly inquiry into the Western genre begins with the historical and cultural context of the frontier and shows the ideological foundations that shaped the genre. Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 frontier thesis *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* has had a central influence on American national identity, particularly of the West, transforming territorial expansion into a moral narrative of white masculine democracy. Although Turner wrote decades before cinema became mainstream, his thesis functions as a primary ideological source, offering a conceptual blueprint that Hollywood later mythologized in the Western. His claim that the frontier produced the American character framed westward movement as a civilizing force and positioned white settlers as the rightful agents of national progress.

Richard Slotkin expands this framework in his extensive work on violence and mythology in American history, *Gunfighter Nation* (1992). Slotkin demonstrates how the frontier evolved from a lived historical process into a durable ideological system that ultimately became myth. His concept of regeneration through violence clarifies how stories of conquest and conflict shaped American cultural expression throughout the twentieth century. Slotkin's identification of the Western as the central mythmaking vehicle of the frontier is especially significant for this thesis. Contemporary filmmakers do not inherit a neutral genre, but an ideological formation structured by historical exclusions and narrative hierarchies that must first be made visible before they can be meaningfully challenged.

Scholarly analyses of cinema further show how frontier ideology was translated into a visual grammar of the Western. Long shots of empty landscapes, the heroic framing of white male protagonists, and the erasure of a Black and/or Indigenous presence reinforced a memory system in which whiteness became synonymous with historical agency. Together, these studies establish a crucial foundation for understanding the Western: the genre does not merely depict history but actively constructs national memory

2. Black Presence in the West

Although the Western canon marginalized nonwhite actors in frontier history, historians and cultural theorists have shown that Black presence in the nineteenth century West was substantial. Scholars including William Loren Katz (*The Black West*, 1971) and Kenneth W. Porter (*Negro Labor in the Western Cattle Industry, 1866-1900*, 1961) document the everyday roles of Black cowboys, soldiers, outlaws, and ranchers. Their findings that nearly one quarter of nineteenth century cowboys were Black directly challenge the dominant image of the cowboy as exclusively white and masculine. This body of scholarship functions as a historiographical corrective to Turner's mythologized frontier and provides essential grounding for contemporary cinematic reclamations such as *The Harder They Fall*, which draws several of its characters from real historical figures.

More recent work continues to expand this historical framework. Mia Mask's *Black Rodeo: A History of the African American Western* (2023) traces Black contributions to the Western across performance, sport, and cinema. Mask argues that Black cowboys, both historical and contemporary, serve as sites of cultural memory that preserve alternative narratives and unsettle settler colonial interpretations of the West. Her analysis of Black rodeo circuits and urban riding clubs illustrates how these communities articulate distinct relationships to land, mobility, and belonging. This perspective is particularly relevant to *Concrete Cowboy*, which portrays the Fletcher Street Riding Club in Philadelphia as a living archive of Black equestrian tradition.

Taken together, these scholars converge on a central point: Black cowboy and cowgirl identities are not products of modern revisionism but historically rooted traditions that have been systematically obscured in mainstream narratives. Their work underscores that acts of cultural reclamation should be understood not as inventions of the present but as restorations of historical truth.

3. Representation, Race and Gender in Cinema

A third major body of scholarship examines how film produces racialized and gendered forms of visibility. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam describe in their book *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (1994), Hollywood cinema as a hegemonic institution that naturalizes ideological hierarchies through repetition and narrative structure. Their work on Eurocentrism demonstrates how classical Westerns positioned whiteness as normative and universal while casting Black, Indigenous, and other racialized groups as peripheral or antagonistic.

bell hooks' writings on the oppositional gaze provide a foundational framework for understanding Black female spectatorship and representation. In *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992), hooks argues that Black women develop critical modes of viewing because dominant visual culture historically excluded or objectified them. This perspective clarifies why the inclusion of Black women in contemporary Western narratives, such as Stagecoach Mary, Trudy Smith, and Nessie, requires more than simple presence to be fully understood. It demands a reorientation of cinematic grammar itself to include these figures in the canon.

Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975) complements hooks' critique by showing how visual pleasure in classical cinema often aligns with patriarchal points of view. Although Mulvey's essay predates contemporary Black Westerns, its insights remain useful in examining how *The Harder They Fall* frames female bodies, particularly in moments where spectacle risks reinforcing gendered hierarchies even within a revisionist context.

Together, these scholars highlight the tension between visibility and agency. Representation alone does not ensure empowerment, and efforts at cinematic reclamation must contend with inherited visual codes that shape how bodies are seen and understood.

4. Memory Studies

Memory studies provide the conceptual vocabulary for analyzing how films shape collective remembrance. Astrid Erll's theory of cultural memory, as described in *Memory in Culture* (2011), defines memory as an active process shaped by media, institutions, and social practices rather than a passive repository of facts. Her work clarifies how the Western genre operates as a memory machine, repeatedly generating the same racialized frontier myth until it becomes accepted as historical truth.

In his 2008 study, "Seven Types of Forgetting," Paul Connerton discusses the typology of forgetting. He offers insight into how certain histories disappear from cultural consciousness, particularly through repressive erasure and structural amnesia. Connerton's framework helps explain why Black cowboys and cowgirls faded from mainstream narratives despite extensive historical documentation; rather than the result of oversight, their absence was structurally embedded in representational systems.

Michel Foucault's describes the concept of counter-memory in his book *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* (1977). Counter-memory is especially relevant to contemporary Black Westerns. It refers to practices that challenge

dominant historical narratives by retrieving suppressed stories and reframing how the past is understood. This perspective illuminates how films such as *The Harder They Fall* and *Concrete Cowboy* disrupt the established grammar of frontier memory by foregrounding characters, communities, and experiences historically omitted from the genre.

Together, these theorists provide the analytical tools necessary for understanding the films not only as cultural texts but also as interventions in the production and transformation of collective memory.

5. Intersectionality and Black Feminist Approaches

Kimberlé Crenshaw's 1989 article, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex", is essential for understanding how race, gender, and power interact within cultural texts. She addresses the concept of intersectionality, which she developed as a critique of legal frameworks that failed to protect Black women and has since become a broader analytical tool for examining the overlapping structures of oppression. Crenshaw's insights clarify how Black women in both historical accounts and genre conventions often experience a form of double erasure, rendered invisible through racial as well as gendered exclusions.

Thirty years later Sylvanna Falcón extended intersectionality with the concept of counterpublics and went from individual identity to collective practices of resistance. Her work offers a framework for interpreting spaces such as the Fletcher Street Riding Club as living archives of Black cultural memory and as alternative publics that sustain histories marginalized or ignored by dominant institutions.

bell hooks is also an important source when it comes to intersectionality and Black feminist approaches. In her book *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (1990), she describes the concept of the homeplace. This concept adds another dimension by emphasizing the political significance of Black women's practices of care, nurturance, and community building. This framework helps illuminate characters like Nessie in *Concrete Cowboy* as custodians of cultural continuity and survival, not peripheral figures. Together, these scholars illustrate how race, gender, space, and visibility intersect in the Western genre and why representing Black women is vital to any effort to rewrite or reclaim the frontier myth.

The existing scholarship reveals three central debates. First, the frontier myth persists as a powerful ideological formation that continues to shape American identity in contemporary media. Second, although Black presence in the West is well documented, it has been systematically erased from cultural memory, prompting renewed scholarly and artistic efforts

to restore these histories. Third, gender remains an underexamined dimension within studies of Black Westerns, particularly in relation to the experiences and representations of Black women. This thesis contributes to these debates by bringing these strands together. While previous work has examined Black cowboys, revisionist Westerns, and memory studies, few analyses consider how contemporary films employ cinematic counter-memory to reclaim Black identities while also confronting the double erasure experienced by Black women. By placing historical recovery alongside intersectional analysis, this thesis advances the discussion of the Western as a dynamic site of cultural memory, a space in which the American past continues to be rewritten.

# Methodology

The methodology for my thesis emerges directly from the debates and theoretical insights outlined in the literature review. Because the research question concerns cultural memory, identity formation, and intersectional representation within contemporary Western films, the methodological approach must be interpretive, qualitative, historically grounded, and attentive to the cultural processes through which meaning is produced. The following discussion explains what this thesis examines, how the analysis is conducted, and why these methods are suited to answering the research question.

The central research question guiding this thesis asks how *The Harder They Fall* and *Concrete Cowboy* contribute to the reclamation and redefinition of Black cowboy and cowgirl identity, including the often overlooked role of Black women, and how this reclamation reshapes our understanding of the American frontier. Addressing this question requires attending both to the ways these films represent Black figures and to the ways they intervene in systems of cultural memory that have historically erased such identities. The methodological choices adopted here therefore combine close interpretive analysis with historical contextualization, enabling a dual focus on cinematic form and cultural memory.

The selected corpus consists of two films that are especially well positioned to address this inquiry. Both are recent contributions to the Western genre and appear at a moment when popular culture is actively reimagining the meanings and legacies of the American frontier. Their releases coincide with heightened public engagement with Black history and representational politics in the United States. Although they belong to the same genre, they offer contrasting approaches to reclamation: *The Harder They Fall* is a highly stylized, fictionalized vision of the nineteenth century West, while *Concrete Cowboy* transposes Western motifs into a contemporary urban landscape. Examining them together enables a comparative understanding of how reclamation functions across distinct temporal and spatial contexts. Both films also engage directly with Black cowboy and cowgirl histories, foregrounding communities that were long marginalized in mainstream cultural memory. Their explicit challenge to the dominant frontier myth makes them valuable case studies for exploring the role of cinema in producing counter memory.

Close reading serves as the primary analytical method. It allows for detailed examination of narrative structure, character formation, cinematography, sound, costuming, and the construction of space. These elements are central to the Western, a genre whose ideological force has historically relied on the repetition of specific visual and narrative

conventions. Through close reading, the thesis analyzes how *The Harder They Fall* reconstructs Western iconography through Black aesthetics and stylization, how *Concrete Cowboy* draws on realist techniques and community participation to frame the cowboy as a contemporary communal identity, how Black women are positioned visually and narratively, and how landscapes and spatial arrangements function as sites of identity and memory. Close reading thus operates not only as stylistic interpretation but also as a means of uncovering how films generate cultural meaning and participate in the formation of collective memory.

Close reading is paired with historical contextualization. Because both films consciously respond to omissions in historical and cinematic accounts of the American West, it is essential to situate the cinematic representations within the histories they reference. This involves drawing on scholarship that documents the presence of nineteenth century Black cowboys and cowgirls, and analyses of how classical Hollywood Westerns marginalized Black identities. This contextual grounding provides the empirical basis necessary for assessing how contemporary films reinterpret the West and what cultural work these reinterpretations perform.

The analysis also integrates several theoretical frameworks. Cultural memory studies, particularly the work of Erll, Connerton, and Foucault, offer tools for understanding how the Western genre stabilizes ideological narratives and how contemporary films challenge these narratives by retrieving suppressed histories. Intersectional theory, grounded in the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw, enables scrutiny of how race and gender interact in the representation of Black cowboys and cowgirls, highlighting the ways Black women and gender nonconforming figures have often experienced a dual form of erasure. Black feminist film theory, particularly bell hooks' oppositional gaze and her concept of the homeplace, as well as Mulvey's theory of cinematic looking, further informs the analysis by illuminating the visual and narrative treatment of Black women and the political significance of their presence or absence.

This methodological design allows the thesis to address its research question in ways not fully developed in existing scholarship. Historians have documented Black presence in the West but have rarely connected this history to contemporary practices of cinematic counter-memory. Scholars of the Western have analyzed revisionist films but have often overlooked the specific dynamics of racialized and gendered erasure. Intersectional theorists have examined structures of marginalization but have seldom applied these insights to Western film studies. By integrating close reading, historical contextualization, and intersectional memory theory, this thesis develops an interdisciplinary method capable of addressing both representation and remembrance. It examines not only what the films depict but also how they intervene in the narrative machinery that produced the erasures they now seek to challenge.

In this sense, the methodology itself participates in an act of counter-memory. It seeks to recover histories and identities that the Western genre long excluded and to analyze how contemporary films contribute to a reframing of the American frontier within cultural memory.

# Chapter 1: Myth, Memory, and Movies of the Frontier

In this chapter I examine how the myth of the American frontier has been produced, circulated, and preserved through practices of cultural memory. The discussion begins with Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis, whose formulation of settler expansion as the engine of American democracy established a national narrative grounded in white masculinity and territorial conquest. Building on this foundation, I draw on Richard Slotkin's work to show how the frontier became mythologized, transformed from a contingent historical experience into a durable ideological system that organizes cultural meaning.

Drawing on key concepts from memory studies, including cultural memory and counter-memory, I explore how film has functioned as one of the most influential technologies for translating this myth into narrative form (Shohat and Stam 103). Through its visual tropes, character types, and narrative structures, film stabilizes certain versions of the past while suppressing others, thereby solidifying or challenging what the nation comes to regard as its cultural memory. As a result, the Western has long sustained a narrative in which Black people, and especially Black women, are made marginal, invisible, or peripheral to the nation's imagined past. Finally, I will argue that contemporary Western films such as *The Harder They Fall* and *Concrete Cowboy* attempt to disrupt this established mythology by exposing its historical omissions and challenging its racialized logic.

## 1.1 The Frontier Thesis

The American frontier has long stood at the center of how the United States defines itself (Carter 1). It was not merely a geographical line separating east from west, but a symbolic threshold, a place where the nation imagined its beginnings and projected its destiny. To move westward was, in the American imagination, to move toward freedom, self-determination, and the promise of reinvention. It was imagined as a realm of opportunity and renewal, a place where one might earn a reputation or a fortune, and where the self could be made anew through struggle and perseverance. It became a cultural template through which the United States narrated its own identity, a mythic landscape where individual struggle translated into national meaning.

The persistence of this narrative is no coincidence. In 1893, historian Frederick Jackson Turner articulated what would become one of the most influential theories of American identity in his paper *The Significance of the Frontier in American History.* Turner argued that "the frontier is the line of most rapid and effective Americanization," suggesting that the process of

westward expansion had shaped not only the nation's territory but also its character (2). The frontier was in Turner's view the primary mechanism through which immigrants became Americans, the place where European traditions were transformed by the demands of the wilderness into a distinct national ethos (2-3). As he wrote, "the frontier is productive of individualism," and "frontier individualism has from the beginning promoted democracy" (6). The hardships of settlement, the confrontation with vast landscapes, and the absence of old-world hierarchies all, he believed, forged a new kind of citizen who was independent (3). This theory, as historian Richard Hofstadter later observed in his book *The Progressive Historians* (1968), turned the frontier into the defining metaphor of the American spirit, a symbol of endless opportunity. "America," Hofstadter wrote, "had been another name for opportunity" (53). Turner's essay, as Charles A. Beard, a fellow historian of Turner's generation, famously noted, was destined "to have a more profound influence on thought about American history than any other essay or volume on the subject" (47-48).

Turner's frontier thesis did more than describe American expansion; it offered the United States a powerful national narrative through which its past and identity could be interpreted. When Turner presented his paper to the American Historical Association at the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago, he offered not simply a historical account but a national creation story. *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* emerged during a moment of national uncertainty. In 1890 the U.S. Census Bureau described "the western part of the country as having so many pockets of settled area", and therefore officially declared that there was no longer a clear, unsettled frontier line (US Census Bureau). In other words, the land between the settled East and the "unsettled" West was now fully occupied and mapped. According to Turner, America's story of becoming a nation, defined by exploration, settlement, and expansion, had reached its conclusion (9). The closing of the frontier symbolized the end of an era in which the nation's character had been forged.

This "end," however, was not interpreted simply as loss. The closure of the frontier provoked both anxiety about decline, but also renewed confidence in the nation's capacity for reinvention (Jones and Will 39). At precisely the moment when the frontier was declared closed, efforts intensified to define its supposed meaning. These interpretations overwhelmingly reflected the racial and cultural assumptions of the people empowered to write the nation's history. The closure did not produce a neutral or comprehensive account of western expansion. Instead, public discourse increasingly solidified a Eurocentric and white-centric interpretation of the frontier. This interpretation framed westward movement as a civilizing achievement led by white settlers who were seen as the rightful inheritors of the land. This narrative

systematically privileged European-descended Americans as the central agents of national progress. While they were historically present, it minimized, distorted, or erased the dispossession of Indigenous peoples, the presence of Black people in the West, and the contributions of other non-white communities. The frontier was remembered less as a complex, multiracial site of contact and conflict and more as a narrative of white endurance and triumph.

This selective framing did not emerge organically. It reflected the political and cultural priorities of those shaping national memory at the end of the nineteenth century. By centering whiteness as the engine of American development, the frontier became an interpretive framework that validated expansionist ideals while obscuring the violence, displacement, and exclusions on which westward expansion depended.

It is in this climate that Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis gained its extraordinary influence. Turner described the frontier as the engine of American progress, the driving force behind the nation's political and moral development (2). In his narrative, each movement westward represented a new beginning, a cycle in which society was constantly reborn through struggle and adaptation (3). The frontier became a space where old hierarchies dissolved, and the American character emerged purified and self-reliant (4). As a result, the West came to signify far more than a geographic region: it became the symbolic point of origin for American identity. To confront the frontier was to confront one's own limits, to measure oneself against the vastness of the land, and to emerge stronger, freer, and more fully "American". In this way, Turner transformed the West into both a geography and a moral ideal, a mythic proving ground in which the essence of the national character was repeatedly forged.

### 1.2 The Frontier as Myth

This specific framing transformed a history that had already been shaped into an *ideology*. What Turner formulated was not simply historical analysis but the foundation of a powerful ideological system. In his pioneering book *Gunfighter Nation* (1992) culture critic and historian Richard Slotkin defines ideology as "the basic system of concepts, beliefs, and values that defines a society's way of interpreting its place in the cosmos and the meaning of its history" (5). Ideology, in other words, is the lens through which a society gives coherence and moral meaning to its own story. Turner's thesis exemplified this: his frontier narrative articulated a worldview that celebrated expansion, individualism, and conquest as the natural engines of progress, values that would come to define the American sense of self.

Slotkin continues by explaining how ideology is not confined to abstract thought but expressed and reinforced through culture: "In any given society certain expressive forms or

genres provide ways of articulating ideological concepts directly and explicitly. But most of the time the assumptions of value inherent in a culture's ideology are tacitly accepted as 'givens'" (5). So, ideology does not exist independently of the forms through which it is communicated. It requires repetition, representation, and affect to take hold within a collective consciousness. Cultural forms, such as literature, art, folklore rituals, and eventually cinema, translate abstract ideas into images and stories that can be socially shared. Genre, in this sense, becomes one of the primary vehicles through which ideology operates. Genres stabilize meaning by offering familiar conventions that audiences recognize and internalize. They provide symbolic frameworks through which societies imagine themselves, defining who belongs within the narrative of the nation and who remains outside it.

I will delve further into the Western genre's formal conventions later in this chapter. For now, it is important to note that the genre emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, shortly after Turner's lecture. It translated his intellectual thesis into emotional, visual, and moral narratives accessible to millions. At this point, ideology turns into *mythology*. Slotkin writes that the meaning of these genres "is expressed in the symbolic narratives of mythology and is transmitted to the society through various genres of mythic expression. It is the mythic expression of ideology" (5). Myth gives ideology its emotional force: it takes abstract values like freedom or heroism and materializes them in recognizable characters, landscapes, and plots. In the Western, this process produced enduring icons, the lone cowboy, the open plain, the frontier town, that continue to shape collective ideas of what America stands for. Slotkin states that "the concepts of ideology, myth, and genre highlight three different but closely related aspects of the culture-making process" (5).

Each of these terms capture a stage in the transformation of Turner's frontier: from historical reality to ideological system and cultural myth. The *Myth of the Frontier* became America's "oldest and most characteristic myth", one that dramatized the nation's moral consciousness (10). What had once been a geographical process of settlement now lives on as an ideological system, a way of understanding who Americans are and what they believe in. By the early twentieth century, this ideology had been absorbed and amplified by popular culture. Slotkin observes that once the frontier was mythologized, it ceased to function as a real geography and became instead a *mythic space*, one entirely defined by the fictions created about it (61-62). Detached from its historical realities, the "mythic West" became the stage on which new acts of national mythmaking would unfold. It became a simplified narrative that reduced the historical complexity of the nineteenth century frontier into easily recognizable oppositions.

Central to this space are the binaries that have long structured Western storylines: cowboys versus Indians, civilization versus savagery, and regeneration through violence (14).

### 1.2.1 Characterization of the Mythic West

At the center of this mythologized West stands the cowboy.[1] Once he was a practical and low-paid laborer of the cattle industry; in the myth the cowboy was transformed into a national hero (Carter 8). The reimagining of the cowboy was crucial to the formation of the American self-image at the turn of the twentieth century. As the physical frontier disappeared and industrial modernity took hold, the cowboy offered a reassuring figure of continuity. He embodied the values that Americans feared were slipping away: self-reliance, toughness, and simplicity. The cowboy's moral authority stemmed from his apparent freedom from social constraint, he stood apart from institutions, bound only by his own sense of justice. As a result, the cowboy became "the final version of the hero from the frontier," the true essence of the American mythic imagination (Carter 8).

However, this heroic elevation must be understood in relation to the narrative opposition through which his identity was constructed: the figure of the "Indian." As Ella Shohat and Robert Stam argue in their book *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (2014), Western cultural texts stabilize colonial hierarchies by portraying Indigenous peoples as obstacles to progress. This legitimizes settler domination (115). Within this framework, the frontier is imagined as a battleground where the fate of "civilization" is secured through force. Nineteenth century frontier narratives developed a recurring structure of the "savage war" or "Indian war": stories in which violent confrontation with Native peoples was framed as both inevitable and morally purifying (Slotkin 12-13).

The cowboy figure's power stemmed from this idea of "regeneration through violence," the belief that the American spirit could be renewed through confrontation with the "wilderness" and the subjugation of those cast as outsiders (Slotkin 12). The cowboy versus Indian binary was a cultural logic that provided Americans with a simplified moral universe (Slotkin 14). The cowboy represented order, progress, and legitimacy, while the "Indian" was constructed as disorder, resistance, and obstruction. In this narrative, Indigenous nations were reduced to a single, antagonistic stereotype. This stereotype served as a foil against which the cowboy's moral authority could be affirmed. The cowboy's heroism depended on the erasure

[1] I acknowledge that the myth of the West has historically centered on the cowboy. However, in this thesis I also consider the presence of cowgirls, whose representation is essential to understanding how race, gender, and memory operate within the Western imagination.

and dehumanization of Indigenous peoples. His courage was proven through combat, his justice through domination, and his freedom through dispossession. This narrative structure established the archetype of the white Wild West hero as the self-made man who redeems society through justified violence.

### 1.3 Cinema as the Engine of Frontier Ideology

As the frontier shifted from a historical process to an ideological construct, cinema emerged as the most suitable medium for sustaining, elaborating on, and spreading its mythology (Carter 1, Shohat and Stam 101). Film possesses a unique power that earlier cultural forms could only suggest. Through movement, sound, and repetition, cinema fuses image and emotion, turning abstract values into lived experience. Cinema's photographic basis gives it a privileged relationship to reality, allowing it to transform historical perception into affective presence (Kracauer 28). More than any written history, film enables audiences not only to see the past but also to feel it. When the frontier was pronounced "closed" in the 1890s, film technology was only just taking shape. This overlap appears more than coincidental: the disappearance of the geographic frontier created a cultural vacuum that cinema quickly filled with a symbolic one. As Shohat and Stam note, "films arrange events and actions in a temporal narrative that moves toward fulfillment, and thus shape thinking about historical time and national history" (102). Through this narrative structuring, cinema became the medium through which the mythic West was not simply represented but narratively organized as a coherent past, one that audiences could repeatedly enter, recognize, and accept as the foundation of American identity.

Early Westerns such as *The Great Train Robbery* (Porter, 1903) and *Stagecoach* (Nichols, 1939) established the genre's foundational visual and narrative grammar. Their landscapes were not simply backdrops but ideological terrains: vast open spaces framed in long shots that equated the West with freedom, emptiness, and the presumed right of white settlers to claim it. Through close-ups and character framing, white male protagonists were positioned as the natural arbiters of order and justice. Costume design and casting further reinforced this racial hierarchy, presenting whiteness as both normative and heroic while relegating Indigenous, Black, and other nonwhite figures to peripheral or antagonistic roles. Narrative conventions such as rescue missions, duels, cattle drives, and masculine quests provided audiences with familiar arcs of danger, sacrifice, and redemption. These tropes created a predictable moral universe in which violence perpetrated by white protagonists was consistently portrayed as necessary, justified, and virtuous.

These representational strategies not only elevated manhood and whiteness but also actively obscured the diverse populations who shaped the historical West. The erasure of Indigenous peoples was not the only omission. Despite extensive historical evidence that Black Americans were integral to the region's development, the presence of Black individuals in the West was also deliberately minimized or relegated to marginal roles. Records indicate that as many as one in four cowboys were Black and that Black men and women served as soldiers, law enforcement officers, ranchers, and builders of towns and trade networks across the frontier (Callahan, Katz xix-xx, Porter 347). Like other non-white groups, they played a central role in shaping the economic and cultural landscape of the West. However, by reducing the frontier to a Eurocentric narrative of white male heroism, the dominant story left little room for the many other histories that could have been told. This narrative excluded accounts of collaboration, resistance, intercultural exchange, and alternative forms of belonging that fall outside the binary of civilized settler and savage "Other."[2] Repeating these selective stories in literature, art, and especially film entrenched the idea that male whiteness is synonymous with agency, ownership, and historical importance. Consequently, Indigenous, Black, (nonwhite) female, and other presences were marginalized in Western narratives, reduced to supporting roles that served to highlight the heroic journeys of white protagonists. Thus, the cultural construction of the West as a defining American space relied on elevating male whiteness while excluding the region's multiracial and gender-diverse histories.

Hollywood translated the myth of the West into its own idiom by "substituting the gun for the plough" and transforming Turner's farmer-pioneer into a white gunslinger cowboy (Jones and Will 61). In doing so, the Western genre established a moral logic in which a white man's authority derived not from communal belonging or democratic participation but from his ability to inflict sanctioned violence. Thus, the archetypal cowboy, shown through the eyes of Hollywood, had qualities that came to define the American national character in the popular imagination. Cinema's ability to circulate this idealized figure's image across the nation with unprecedented speed and consistency gave him symbolic power. Through continuous repetition, the Western genre solidified this vision of the West as both emotionally resonant and historically authoritative. At the same time, cinema's mass circulation transformed individual spectatorship into a collective act of memory formation (Ellis 24-29). Audiences did not merely watch these stories; they absorbed, repeated, and came to understand the past through them.

[2] The capitalized term "Other" refers to the theoretical concept used in postcolonial studies to describe groups constructed as fundamentally different or inferior by dominant cultures.

As these movies circulated, they perpetuated a specific vision of the American past. This vision celebrated white heroism and framed violence as regenerative and civilizing. It marginalized or excluded the histories of Black, Indigenous, and multiracial individuals who played a crucial role in the history of the West. By continually presenting the West as a domain in which white masculinity shaped national destiny, the Western genre served as a potent cultural tool. It stabilized the frontier myth, masked its exclusions, and ultimately transformed ideology into cultural memory. Cinema hereby became not only a storytelling medium, but also the primary means by which the frontier myth was perpetuated and established as foundational to American identity.

### 1.3.1 Memory, Forgetting and Repetition

The Western's ideological power thus did not lie only in what it represented, but also in what it remembered and, crucially, in what it forgot. Its lasting power as a cultural form comes from the same processes of selective remembering and forgetting that scholars of cultural memory describe. Astrid Erll reminds us in her book *Memory in Culture* (2011) that *cultural memory* is not the "other of history nor simply the opposite of individual remembering"; rather, it is the medium through which societies continually reconstruct their relationship to the past (7). Memory, in this view, is not a fixed archive but a dynamic process shaped by sociocultural contexts. Erll writes: "The individual person always remembers within sociocultural contexts, and cultural formations are based on a 'collective memory,' in other words on symbols, media, institutions, and social practice which convey versions of a shared past" (9).

In this sense, the Western genre functions not as a record of history but as a *memory machine* for cultural remembrance, one built upon the enduring myth of the frontier. This dynamic reflects what film scholars describe as *hegemonic cinema*, a system in which dominant cultural institutions, notably Hollywood, produce narratives that consolidate power by presenting selective versions of the past as universal and authoritative (Shohat and Stam 103). Hegemonic cinema works through repetition, affect, and familiarity: it privileges certain identities, values, and histories while relegating others to the margins or erasing them entirely (Shohat and Stam 103). In the case of the Western, this means that the genre not only remembers a particular version of the frontier but continually legitimizes it, ensuring that the white-settler perspective remains the normative framework for understanding the American past. The Western here does not reproduce history as it happened; rather, it reflects the needs and desires of those who remember it in the present moment (Erll 8). For the classic Western movies of the twentieth century, that "present" was defined by the ideological framework of the myth itself:

a vision of America shaped by the solitary white cowboy conquering a harsh wilderness. Films such as *High Noon* (Zinnemann, 1952), *Shane* (Stevens, 1953), and *The Searchers* (Ford, 1956) reaffirmed this vision through repetition, transforming myth into memory and memory into identity. These films taught audiences not simply what the frontier was, but what America imagined itself to be: white, heroic, and destined to civilize the wilderness.

Erll reminds us that remembering is never complete without forgetting: "Forgetting is the very condition of remembering," and "it is necessary for memory to operate economically, for it to be able to recognize patterns" (8). This insight clarifies how the Western operates as a medium of cultural memory. Through repetition, its familiar landscapes, moral oppositions, and archetypal heroes, the genre creates a stable pattern that allows audiences to "recognize" America's past as a coherent story. Yet this coherence depends on exclusion. To remember the West as a space of freedom, white heroism, and renewal, the genre must also forget the diversity and inequality that truly defined it.

Anthropologist Paul Connerton provides a framework for understanding how this forgetting operates in cultural narratives. In his essay "Seven Types of Forgetting", Connerton identifies several forms of forgetting, two of which are especially relevant to the story of the West. The first of them is *repressive erasure*: the deliberate or structural removal of certain memories from collective consciousness (60). By erasing the historical reality that Indigenous and Black people made up much of the cowboy population, these groups were excluded from the cultural memory framework, allowing their perspectives to disappear from both the visual and narrative frames. The result was a version of history in which the frontier appeared exclusively white. The second type, *structural amnesia*, closely follows this pattern. It is a form of forgetting embedded within systems of representation (64). This kind of forgetting determines which figures are remembered and which are omitted. In the case of the Western, it ensures that only heroic white cowboys are remembered and not nonwhite people, specifically nonwhite cowgirls, as the true agents of civilization. These forms of forgetting are not accidental; they are built into the genre's very structure, shaping how cultural memory is produced and sustained.

For over a century, Hollywood's Westerns have performed this ritualized act of remembering and forgetting. Each film restages the repetition of gestures, symbols, and rituals that sustain collective identity. The white cowboy, endlessly resurrected on screen, becomes both the vessel and the performance of cultural memory. His image, silhouetted against the horizon, condenses the genre's entire ideological system: independence, morality, and conquest. With each repetition, however, the cowboy's historical ambiguity was erased and

replaced by a single, universal image: the solitary white man on horseback, the unquestioned symbol of the American West. Even the term *cowboy* reflects this erasure, as it has "racially charged origins" (Gattuso). Once "cowboy" was used as a diminutive for Black cattle workers, while their white counterparts were called "cowhands" (Gattuso). Over time, the term became whitewashed, symbolizing a trade and a mythology that excluded those who helped define it (Gattuso). Through these mechanisms, the Western created a national identity out of a repetitive image-world that teaches its audience what to remember and what to forget.

### 1.3.2 Counter-Memory in Contemporary Cinema: *The Harder They Fall*

However, both Erll and Connerton stress that memory is never static. The very repetition that stabilizes cultural memory also opens it to disruption. When cracks appear in the Western's mythic structure, when its absences and exclusions are exposed, the genre's memory can be rewritten. This is where *counter-memory*, a concept developed by philosopher Michel Foucault, becomes crucial. Counter-memory challenges dominant versions of the past by retrieving suppressed stories and reframing how history is remembered (160). The contemporary Western films *The Harder They Fall* and *Concrete Cowboy* exemplify this process.

*The Harder They Fall* represents a groundbreaking intervention in the Western genre. Featuring a predominantly Black cast, the film challenges the traditional depictions of the American West and reclaims agency for Black historical figures who have often been overlooked. The film does not simply insert forgotten Black figures into the Western's established narrative; it also reimagines the very grammar of remembrance through which the genre has operated. While the plot is fictional, it takes inspiration from real-life people who lived during the era of the Wild West. The story follows Nat Love (Jonathan Majors), a skilled and charismatic cowboy who is determined to seek revenge on the man who killed his parents, Rufus Buck (Idris Elba). Both Nat and Rufus are loosely based on the real historical outlaw figures of the same name. Similarly, the historical figures Stagecoach Mary (Zazie Beetz), Bill Pickett (Edi Gathegi), Cherokee Bill (Lakeith Stanfield), and Jim Beckwourth (Ronald Cyler II), are reimagined as fierce and independent people who stand alongside Nat in his mission. The central conflict of the story unfolds as Nat and his gang track down Rufus, a ruthless outlaw recently freed from prison. The film portrays both men as complex, larger-than-life characters, erasing the line between hero and villain while adding depth to the narrative. By doing so *The Harder They Fall* moves away from the traditional Western and creates a narrative space where Black cowboys can assert their identity and heroism (Holt 83-85).

According to Mia Mask, writer of *Black Rodeo: A History of the African American Western* (2023), *The Harder They Fall* also reconstructs the cowboy archetype by reflecting distinctly Black experiences and aesthetics (255). This reconstruction is not limited to narrative choices; it extends to the film's bold, immersive aesthetic, which plays a pivotal role in reshaping the genre. Director Jeymes Samuel's vision is deeply informed by his background as a multifaceted artist. Known by his stage name The Bullitts, Samuel is a singer, songwriter, and music producer whose expertise in blending visual and auditory elements creates a unique cinematic experience. Together with screenwriter Boaz Yakin, Samuel deliberately engaged Jay-Z, a globally renowned Black musician, to curate the film's soundtrack (256). This decision reflects the filmmakers' intention to infuse the Western genre with a vibrant Black cultural sensibility. Film critic Leila Latif argues that "Samuel gives *The Harder They Fall* a hyper-stylized polish, everything from Idris Elba's gold pistols to Zazie Beetz many layered outfits look plucked from the pages of Vogue." From the blending of hip-hop, reggae, and traditional Western scores to the costume design, the film infuses the genre with a vibrant Black cultural sensibility and therefore becomes a celebration of Black artistry and style.

This reclamation is then not merely an act of representation, but also a redefinition of what it means to be a cowboy. By placing Black characters at the center of its narrative, the film dismantles the monolithic image of the white cowboy and asserts that the West was a multicultural and complex environment. Moreover, *The Harder They Fall* addresses the erasure of Black cowboys by rewriting the genre's historical narrative. By fictionalizing real characters who likely never crossed paths, the film creates a *counter-mythology* that highlights the contributions and struggles of African American cowboys and cowgirls in the West. This counter-mythology functions not merely as an act of imaginative storytelling, but as an intervention in collective memory itself, demonstrating how narrative forms can reshape what societies remember and forget (Giesen 10-11).

By reimagining the West through a Black-centered lens, the film critiques the limitations of traditional historical accounts. The film's vibrant characterizations, its bold recombination of historical fragments, and its incorporation of distinctly Black cultural expressions, ranging from music choices to fashion aesthetics, work together to reconfigure the visual and affective vocabulary of the Western. These stylistic choices not only diversify the genre, but also challenge its fundamental conventions. They offer viewers an alternative framework for understanding the West as a multiracial, culturally dynamic space that has always existed beneath the surface of dominant memory.

### 1.3.3 Counter-Memory in Contemporary Cinema: *Concrete Cowboy*

While *The Harder They Fall* turns to the nineteenth century to rebuild the cultural memory of the cowboy, *Concrete Cowboy* demonstrates how counter-memory also operates through contemporary forms of storytelling and embodied community practice.

The film is based on Greg Neri's novel *Ghetto Cowboy* (2009) and draws inspiration from the real-life Fletcher Street Riding Club in Philadelphia. This organization, which has existed for over a century, preserves the traditions of Black horsemanship, and serves as a community hub in a predominantly Black neighborhood. *Concrete Cowboy* is a coming-of-age urban Western that tells the story of Cole (Caleb McLaughlin), a troubled Black teenager sent by his mother to live in North Philly with his estranged father, Harp (Idris Elba). There, Cole is exposed to the Fletcher Street community, a group of Black city cowboys and cowgirls in which his father plays an active role. In the film, Cole faces two choices: he can either follow his childhood friend Smush (Jharrel Jerome), who is involved in the exciting but dangerous life of dealing drugs on the streets, or he can embrace the tough but structured life of a cowboy. Although the story does not take place in the geographical West, *Concrete Cowboy* redefines what "the West" represents, it transforms the frontier from a physical landscape into a moral and social one. It exposes how the frontier has always been less a matter of geography than of identity.

A central counter-memory strategy in the film is its use of non-professional actors drawn directly from the Fletcher Street Riding Club. A unique and authentic aspect that brings in the tradition of realist cinema, which adds credibility to the story (Mask 252-253). The presence of these cowboys and cowgirls complicates the boundary between fiction and lived experience: these riders do not simply perform roles but bring with them personal histories, oral traditions, and practical knowledge of horsemanship that the classical Western has historically erased. Their gestures and testimonies function as embodied archives, challenging the sanitized mythology of the cowboy as an isolated white frontiersman and offering instead a living record of Black equestrian culture.

This becomes especially clear in the appearance of Michael "Miz" Upshur, a long-standing member of the Fletcher Street community, who plays himself in the film. Miz recounts how the stables shaped his life, describing the community as a structure of guidance and protection during periods of instability. His reflection that "the horses kept me off the streets and gave me something to live for"[3] encapsulates the film's central counter-memory gesture: it

[3] Transcribed from the film.

foregrounds a form of cultural inheritance grounded in care, discipline, and shared survival rather than mythic heroism. The presence of Miz and other real-life riders anchors the film in lived experience, exemplifying how embodied knowledge transmits forms of memory overlooked by dominant historical narratives.

Moreover, *Concrete Cowboy* redefines the cowboy through the relational labor of sustaining community life. The care required to train, feed, and ride horses becomes a narrative counterpoint to the rugged individualism of the classical Western. These acts of maintenance, mucking stalls, repairing equipment, and teaching younger riders operate as counter-memory by revealing dimensions of cowboy culture traditionally excluded from cinematic representation. What is remembered here is not the drama of violence or expansion, but the quiet, continuous work that allows a community and its traditions to endure.

The film also challenges dominant memory by foregrounding father-son dynamics, peer mentorship, and collective responsibility. Cole's initiation into the community is framed not as a heroic adventure but as a process of learning how to belong to people, to practices, and to histories he had not previously recognized as part of himself. The transmission of knowledge in *Concrete Cowboy* thus becomes a counter-memory practice: it binds characters together through shared experiences and positions the cowboy figure as a custodian of cultural continuity rather than an agent of conquest.

Taken together, these representational strategies show how counter-memory in contemporary Western cinema can emerge through performance, embodiment, and relational practices. *Concrete Cowboy* offers an alternative way of remembering the cowboy and cowgirl, as one grounded in the everyday labor, emotional resilience, and intergenerational knowledge of real communities, rather than in the mythic narratives traditionally associated with the American West.

### 1.4 The Frontier Reimagined

These analyses demonstrate that the Western's mythic frontier functioned not only as a reference to historical events, but also as a cultural framework that organized memory, identity, and power through selective remembering and forgetting. From Turner's frontier thesis to the visual grammar of classical Hollywood Westerns, the genre transformed the frontier into a site where white masculinity became synonymous with agency, legitimacy, and historical presence, while Indigenous, Black, and multiracial histories were structurally erased. Contemporary films such as *The Harder They Fall* and *Concrete Cowboy* intervene in this entrenched narrative by activating counter-memory. They reintroduce suppressed histories, challenge the racial

foundations of the genre, and foreground the forms of embodied knowledge, cultural practices, and alternative communities that have long existed beneath hegemonic memory. These films reveal that the mythic West, far from closed, remains a dynamic field in which cultural memory can be contested and reimagined.

Yet expanding racial representation only opens the first layer of what remains a deeply stratified cultural structure. As I will show in the next chapter, the politics of visibility in the Western cannot be fully understood without an intersectional framework. Drawing on the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw and Sylvanna Falcón, Chapter 2 examines how systems of race and gender interact to produce what can be described as double erasure in the genre: the simultaneous marginalization of Blackness and womanhood that continues to shape Western narratives, even in revisionist films. Through analyses of violence and belonging as intersecting conditions, in the chapter I explore how *The Harder They Fall* and *Concrete Cowboy* negotiate the tensions between presence and legibility. Characters such as Stagecoach Mary, Trudy Smith, Cuffee, and Nessie illuminate how intersectional identities disrupt and reconfigure the spatial, visual, and narrative logics of the Western. The chapter therefore reframes the frontier as an intersectional landscape in which agency is stratified, belonging is contested, and memory itself is unevenly distributed.

## Chapter 2: Intersectional Frontiers: Violence, Belonging, and Double Erasure

In this chapter I approach *The Harder They Fall* and *Concrete Cowboy* through the concept of *intersectionality* as developed by civil rights advocate Kimberlé Crenshaw and expanded by scholars such as Sylvanna Falcón.

In her essay "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics" (1989), Crenshaw introduced intersectionality to reveal how overlapping systems of power produce harm, exclusion, and misrecognition, demonstrating that individuals are shaped not by one axis of oppression but by several that operate simultaneously (140). This means that oppression does not come from only one source, such as racism or sexism alone, but from how these forces interact with each other in real-life experiences (Crenshaw 140, Falcón 27-31). This feminist approach requires us to pay attention to how power operates differently depending on someone's social position in society (Falcón 27).

Although originally formulated as a legal analytic tool, I will show that intersectionality also provides a productive framework for reading cinema, where cultural memory is constructed through practices of visibility and erasure. Cinema, as discussed in the previous chapter, determines who appears as a subject of history and who remains outside its frame, and the Western in particular has long centered white masculinity while rendering Black people, and especially Black women, structurally invisible. Extending intersectionality to cultural analysis makes it possible to understand how race, gender, and space interact in the Western genre. It illuminates how violence is organized and distributed, how belonging is made available to some and denied to others, and how landscapes themselves become sites where power is negotiated. These dynamics shape the narrative worlds of *The Harder They Fall* and *Concrete Cowboy*, which both rework the conventions of the Western by placing Black communities, Black forms of care, and Black geographies at their center.

Building on Crenshaw's account of intersecting structures of oppression, Falcón expands intersectionality by emphasizing its social and collective dimensions. She notes that intersectionality describes not only how exclusion occurs, but also how marginalized groups form alternative communities in which their experiences are recognized. She terms these as *counterpublics*: public spheres in which marginalized people create new forms of visibility, knowledge, and solidarity (27). This concept is essential for understanding how both films imagine Black communities as sites of resistance and world-building.

By foregrounding violence, belonging, gendered erasure, and the spatial politics of landscape, this chapter examines how contemporary Black Westerns transform the frontier from a terrain of conquest into a relational space shaped by memory, care, and collective survival.

## 2.1 Violence and Belonging Reimagined

The concept of violence becomes crucial for an intersectional reading of the Western. Intersectionality is not only concerned with how identities are categorized but also with how harm is organized, distributed, and normalized. As Falcón argues, structural and systemic violence is rooted in a lengthy history of exclusions that operate simultaneously through race, class, and gender (27). Violence is therefore social and symbolic as much as it is physical. It defines who is allowed to belong, whose safety is protected, and whose pain is rendered ordinary. In the Western genre, violence historically affirmed the white cowboy's right to the frontier, suggesting that moral authority was secured through the domination of land and people (Slotkin 33). However, when Black characters (re)turn to the Western frame, the meaning of violence necessarily shifts. Violence becomes tied to reclaiming presence within a history that has denied it. It is in this context that *The Harder They Fall* and *Concrete Cowboy* reveal two themes as deeply intertwined rather than separate: violence and belonging. The violence faced by the characters in both films is not incidental; it is rooted in the same intersecting structures of race, class, and gender that Crenshaw and Falcón describe.

In both *The Harder They Fall* and *Concrete Cowboy*, violence plays a central role in shaping the lives and identities of the protagonists, but it also serves as a driving force that leads characters to seek or reinforce their sense of community. Violence thus acts in both films as a catalyst for the formation of communities, but the communities themselves serve as a defense against the violence Black people face. The violence is not only external but also becomes a shared experience that binds characters together and forms the foundation for their resistance against systemic oppression. In this sense, both Nat Love's outlaw community and the Fletcher Street riders, function as counterpublics, according to Falcón's definition: communities that exist outside of dominant social structures and thereby produce alternative forms of knowledge, security, and belonging (27). They develop their own methods for addressing violence and exclusion. This shared experience creates a public space that is not shaped by the dominant culture's norms, but rather by the community's own needs. Together, the themes of violence and belonging reframe the traditional Western narrative, offering a more nuanced, complex view of the American West that emphasizes resistance, survival, and collective identity.

*2.1.1 Violence as Condition*

*The Harder They Fall* features violence from the start, with the murder of Nat Love's parents by Rufus Buck. Nat's personal quest for revenge evolves into a collective mission, as he gathers a group of outlaws equally motivated by the injustice done to them. On the surface, the film presents a classic Western story about a man hunting for the person responsible for his trauma. However, director Samuel suggests in an article in the *Los Angeles Times* that at its core the film explores the cyclical nature of violence:

> It's a love story about two men caught in a never-ending cycle of violence because of their loss. It's a story where both the hunter and hunted are essentially the same person, only to have a final confrontation with tears.

Samuel emphasizes the emotional and moral complexity of this relationship. Nat Love and Rufus Buck are mirror figures, reflections of each other's pain, driven by the same thirst for revenge that has been passed down for generations. In the final confrontation between them, Nat discovers that Rufus and he are half-brothers. Rufus killed their father because he wanted revenge on his father for murdering his mother when he was a young boy. They are trapped in a shared history of loss. When in the final act Rufus screams "It is time to take your revenge, Nathaniel Buck",[4] Nat gets and takes the opportunity to stop the cycle of violence only by repeating its terms, enacting the same logic that produced his suffering. The act becomes both closure and continuation. Samuel's intention, as he explains, was to "shed a light on what goes on and ask the question, 'Why?'" Violence here is not romanticized as frontier justice but interrogated as a social condition, one rooted in systemic inequality and inherited pain.

The violence Nat experiences and witnesses is personal and symbolic of the larger violence Black people endured in the West. Nat and his allies can only hope to reclaim agency and justice by forming a community. The film's focus on collective action in response to violence challenges the individualistic nature of traditional Westerns, in which protagonists usually confront danger alone. In contrast, the Black outlaws in *The Harder They Fall* show that surviving and resisting violence in the frontier requires solidarity, trust, and a shared purpose. Through Nat's story, the film exposes how structural oppression is internalized and reproduced within marginalized communities, reflecting what Falcón identifies as intersectionality. The film is Samuel's way of shedding light on the cycle of violence that

[4] Transcribed from the film.

marginalized communities, including Black communities, still endure to this day. He draws parallels to real-world contemporary issues without explicitly offering solutions. The statement reveals Samuel's intent to provoke reflection, rather than provide simple resolutions. He wants the audience to consider the reasons behind the violence, how it spreads, and the lasting impact it has on individuals and communities.

Similarly, in *Concrete Cowboy*, violence does not function as a spectacle; rather, it is a structural condition that shapes the lives and identities of its characters. Instead of frontier shootouts, the violence depicted is systemic and corresponds (as in *The Harder They Fall*) with Falcón's idea of intersectionality: economic marginalization, over-policing, environmental displacement, and generational trauma. In North Philadelphia, where the film is set, violence is not only something that happens to individuals, but also something embedded in the urban landscape itself, a consequence of intersecting systems of racial discrimination, poverty, and spatial erasure through gentrification. Against this backdrop, the Fletcher Street community becomes both refuge and resistance. It provides a counter-narrative to the dominant image of Black urban life and offers practices of belonging that emerge from care, discipline, and shared responsibility rather than domination.

Initially, Cole struggles to understand or accept this community. He arrives seeing the cowboy lifestyle as disconnected from the realities of the city, yet it is precisely this perceived distance that allows the community to serve as a site of healing. After his friend Smush is killed in a drug deal gone wrong, positioned in the film as a direct consequence of systemic forces that limit economic mobility, Cole begins to recognize how his father's commitment to the cowboy way of life is a response to historical trauma and structural violence. The emotional core of this realization is expressed in the stables, where Harp finds and takes care of Cole after Smush's death. Both sitting on a stool in the hay, Harp tells Cole the following:

> I feel like I was born with a boot on my neck. Taught from the jump. "Watch your back out there." That's what my mama used to tell me. "Watch your back out there, boy." I don't know who they expect us to grow up to be if we… watchin' over our shoulder all our fuckin' lives. The only home I ever known was… on the back of a horse.[5]

Harp articulates violence here not as an event but as a condition, one that shapes identity from birth. His words reflect Crenshaw's central insight: the experience of oppression is not singular, but produced at the intersection of race, class, social vulnerability, and inherited grief (151).

[5] Transcribed from the film.

The Fletcher Street community therefore offers more than physical protection; it is a site where violence is confronted through collective presence rather than individual retaliation. By teaching horsemanship, accountability, and interdependence, the cowboys enact a model of belonging rooted in continuity rather than rupture. This is affirmed in the film's final sequence when the community rides through the city as their stables are demolished. Harp's declaration: "Home ain't a place. It's a fam. That's what make us cowboys […] Well, shit, we gonna do what we always do. We gonna ride",[6] redefines the frontier not as land to be conquered but as community to be sustained. In this sense, *Concrete Cowboy* reframes the Western away from heroic individualism and toward relational survival, where identity is forged through shared vulnerability and collective care. The community's resistance to displacement and erasure demonstrates that belonging, for marginalized subjects, is not given but continually made, through presence, memory, and the refusal to disappear.

### 2.2 The Fight Against Double Erasure

However, centering violence through the experiences of Nat, Rufus, Cole, and Harp risks reaffirming the gendered imbalance that has long shaped the Western genre. Kimberlé Crenshaw reminds us that race and gender are interconnected systems that structure how oppression is experienced, rather than separate forces that can be examined in isolation (140). Applying this insight to *The Harder They Fall* and *Concrete Cowboy* requires recognizing what I conceptualize in this specific case as the *double erasure* experienced by Black women. Within the conventions of the Western, women have generally appeared not as agents of action but as narrative devices, and in many cases, they are omitted from the story altogether (Masihleho).

This dynamic remains visible even in other highly praised contemporary Westerns that attempt to re-center Black protagonists. *Django Unchained* (Tarantino, 2012) provides a clear example. The film situates its entire narrative around the liberation of Broomhilda (Kerry Washington), the enslaved wife of protagonist Django (Jamie Foxx). Although her captivity motivates the plot, Broomhilda is largely rendered passive within it. She is shown primarily as the object of violence inflicted by enslavers and is granted little narrative autonomy or interiority; actions unfold around her rather than through her. Even in the film's concluding sequence, where Django rescues her and they ride away together, her role remains secondary to his triumphant performance of masculine mastery. The image of Broomhilda now dressed as a cowgirl does not signal an expansion of her agency, but rather her incorporation into a

[6] Transcribed from the film.

narrative arc driven by male heroism. In this sense, the film reproduces the genre's longstanding alignment of freedom, violence, and narrative centrality with masculinity, leaving Black women visible yet narratively constrained. This dynamic offers a useful point of comparison for *The Harder They Fall* and *Concrete Cowboy*.

*The Harder They Fall*, like *Django Unchained*, centers a male protagonist shaped by violence, but it complicates this structure by reintroducing three important figures: Stagecoach Mary (Zazie Beets), Trudy Smith (Regina King), and Cuffee (Danielle Deadwyler).

### 2.2.1 Stagecoach Mary

*The Harder They Fall* brings the character of Stagecoach Mary to the center of the frame in ways that actively challenge the Western's history of sidelining Black women. The original Mary Fields, also known as Stagecoach Mary, born in 1832, was a formerly enslaved woman who became the second woman and the first African American woman to be a star-route mail carrier in the United States (Hine). She was known for her physical strength, independence, and refusal to conform to gendered expectations of behavior. She occupied a position of authority and respect in a predominantly white, patriarchal frontier environment (Hine).

Her historical presence unsettles the myth of the Western as an exclusively white and male space. The film draws on this archival reality but reshapes it to meet the demands of contemporary cinematic representation, transforming Mary into a figure who embodies both autonomy and vulnerability within a masculine narrative structure. Mary's role in *The Harder They Fall* is one of tactical intelligence and emotional restraint. She runs a saloon, is a performer, gives commands to her gang full of men, participates in combat, and negotiates social relations among the outlaws. Her presence signals a disruption to the genre's symbolic order, which has traditionally linked authority to white masculinity. Yet, as Crenshaw's work on intersectionality makes clear, visibility does not automatically translate into agency (151). Unlike Broomhilda, the film does grant Mary autonomy. However, the narrative continues to structure Mary's significance in relation to the male protagonist. Her decision to rejoin Nat's mission, her kidnapping, and her injuries all occur at the points where the film needs Nat's narrative to progress. This is what can be described as *partial legibility*: an acknowledgment of identity that remains bounded by the structures it seeks to challenge.

To understand the significance of Mary's partial legibility, bell hooks' concept of the *oppositional gaze* provides a productive interpretive lens. In her book *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992) hooks argues that Black women develop a critical mode of looking shaped by exclusion from dominant visual culture (117). Black women have long had to read

themselves into narratives that do not address them (119). When viewed through such gaze, Stagecoach Mary's role becomes more than that of a supporting character. She is far more visible than Black women have traditionally been in the Western genre, and she demonstrates real agency through her capability, decisiveness, and involvement in several key moments. The film even closes with her final line, "We got work to do, Mr. Love,"[7] after they run away together into the unknown. This underscores her significance within the narrative. Taken together, these elements signal meaningful progress, as her character challenges the genre's long history of excluding Black women altogether. At the same time, her role exposes the limits of how far the Western is willing to go in reimagining its conventions. Although Mary is strong and capable, her agency remains closely connected to Nat, and her storyline unfolds primarily through her relationship to him. She becomes the target of violence and must be rescued by Nat's gang, which reinforces her position within a familiar narrative pattern. This tension shows that while director Samuel is willing to broaden representation in the genre, he still maintains boundaries that prevent Black women from occupying fully central, story-defining roles.

### 2.2.2 Trudy Smith

The second important role is addressed to "Treacherous" Trudy Smith. She is portrayed as a formidable outlaw within Rufus Buck's gang. Actress Regina King imbues Trudy with a sharp voice, a hard-edged attitude and clear ambition, capturing the few known details about the legend Gertrude "Trudy" Smith that inspired her. Trudy's prominent placement on the "villain" side of the story gives her more narrative weight than many female characters in historical Westerns, signaling progress in representation. At the same time, however, her role, like Mary's, reveals the boundaries of change. This tension is made especially visible in the film's climactic sequence, where Mary and Trudy confront one another in a hand-to-hand fight while the male characters settle their conflicts with guns. The contrast between these forms of violence is telling. It foregrounds Mary and Trudy as physically capable and narratively present in a moment typically reserved for male characters, yet it also marks a gendered division in how agency is expressed.

In analyzing this fight scene, it is also essential to attend to the formal mechanisms through which the film frames Mary and Trudy. The scene reproduces a gendered distribution of agency that separates women's visibility from men's narrative authority by combining specific framing choices with choreographed bodily movement and a hierarchical visual

[7] Transcribed from the film.

ordering of action. This dynamic becomes visible where the fight choreography positions them in close physical proximity, grappling and wrestling rather than wielding firearms. Whereas guns in the Western symbolize power, range, and narrative consequence, hand-to-hand combat visually restricts movement and confines the women's actions to an intimate, bodily register. The result is a form of representation that, even while granting visibility, still aligns female agency with containment rather than expansion.

Cinematographically, the scene employs tight framing, close-ups, and tracking shots that accentuate the physicality of Mary's and Trudy's bodies. Film theorist Laura Mulvey describes this visual structure as the *male gaze*, a mode of looking in which the camera aligns with a heterosexual masculine spectator and renders women objects of eroticized or controlling visual attention (11). One expression of this gaze is *voyeurism*, where the camera lingers on the female body, isolating gestures or movements so that the viewer looks *at* the woman rather than seeing *from* her perspective (17).

This logic shapes the staging of the fight between Mary and Trudy. Their combat is filmed through intensified bodily focus, while male gunfights elsewhere in the film receive wider compositions and greater spatial depth that position men as narrative agents embedded in the broader geography of the battle. The contrast signals a gendered hierarchy of visual authority: men direct the action of the Western landscape, whereas women are framed as bodies that occupy it.

bell hooks' analysis of spectatorship deepens this reading. In *Black Looks*, hooks argues that cinematic looking has historically been structured by phallocentric power,[8] producing images in which women, and particularly Black women, appear as objects within patriarchal systems of representation (118). Even when Black filmmakers intervened in racial stereotypes, hooks notes that they often reproduced these gendered visual codes, maintaining a voyeuristic lens that subordinated Black women's subjectivity (117). Applied to this scene, hooks' critique reveals the limits of *The Harder They Fall*'s revisionism. Although the film challenges the racial foundations of the Western by foregrounding Black women, its visual grammar continues to align with patriarchal conventions. Mary and Trudy are permitted physical strength and tactical competence, yet the camera frames their bodies as the primary site of spectacle rather than framing them as agents shaping the spatial and narrative outcome of the confrontation.

As a result, their fight becomes an act of embodied performance rather than strategic authorship within the story world. What initially seems like representational progress, two

[8] Having the male, or male sexual feelings or activity, as the main subject of interest (Cambridge Dictionary).

Black women engaged in a climactic showdown, is complicated by a visual logic that foregrounds their corporeality over their narrative agency. Crucially, this effect is not incidental but produced through deliberate stylistic decisions. The cinematographer actively frames Mary's and Trudy's bodies through tight compositions, lingering close-ups, and restricted spatial orientation, thereby directing the viewer's attention toward their physicality rather than their tactical command. Even in a revisionist Black Western, the gendered logic of spectacle persists; women fight, but the visual framing limits the expressive range of their power, binding their agency to aesthetic display rather than allowing them to shape the narrative space with the same authorial force granted to male characters.

### 2.2.3 Cuffee

Cuffee offers one of the film's most layered explorations of the intersections between race, gender, and identity. The character draws inspiration from Cathay Williams, the real nineteenth century African American woman who disguised herself as a man in order to enlist in the U.S. Army (Blanton 102). This historical reference already situates Cuffee within a tradition of Black women who navigated, and at times subverted, rigid gender boundaries as a survival strategy (Hunter 237-238). Yet, *The Harder They Fall* moves beyond historical reconstruction by reframing Cuffee's gender expression not as temporary disguise, but as an inherent and self-determined identity.

The film signals this early in Cuffee's first encounter with Nat Love. When Nat asks, "What do they call you?", Cuffee simply replies: "They call me Cuffee."[9] They exchange ends there. The abruptness of this moment can function as a narrative wall: Cuffee offers just enough for recognition but withholds further explanation. This withholding suggests both self-protection and the social reality of queer and gender-nonconforming Black identities, which often require forms of strategic opacity in order to navigate hostile environments. The name itself also carries a layered genealogy: Cuffee is "a traditionally masculine name from which originated in West Africa and was often used as a derogatory term for Black people" (Collington). By choosing it as their chosen name, Cuffee reclaims and repurposes a term historically used to diminish Black identity. The film thus treats naming as an assertion of agency, but also as a reminder of the racializing violence embedded in language.

The film deepens this complexity in a later sequence when Nat asks Cuffee to rescue Mary by disguising them in a dress. Cuffee initially refuses, visibly uncomfortable, before

[9] Transcribed from the film.

reluctantly putting on the outfit. Nat respectfully turns away while Cuffee changes, but the other gang members look. Jim Beckwourth then remarks, "Close fucking shave. I thought I was falling for a fella for a little bit. […] Well, I ain't the only one."[10] Although the moment is played for humor, it also reveals the instability of the rigid gender binaries that the Western genre has historically relied on. Jim's admission, followed by the subtle acknowledgment shared between Nat and Cuffee, suggests the presence of queer desire and misrecognition in a genre that usually suppresses both.

The scene is underscored by the song "Black Woman" by Fatoumata Diawara and Lauryn Hill, composed specifically for the film. Its placement over Cuffee's transformation reframes the moment not as comic relief but as an affirmation of Black femininity, masculinity, and fluidity existing outside white, heteronormative frontier mythology. The affective weight of the song counters the potential for ridicule that often accompanies cross-dressing in Western narratives and instead encourages the viewer to attend to Cuffee's interiority. By drawing from Afrocentric and diasporic musical traditions rather than the orchestral or guitar-based sound typical of the Western, the soundtrack disrupts the genre's established auditory codes and situates Black gender expression within a broader global lineage. The thematic emphasis of the song on identity, resilience, and multiplicity expands the interpretive frame beyond binary categories and aligns with the film's larger effort to reimagine the Western through Black perspectives. In this context, Jim's momentary attraction becomes less a comedic aside and more an acknowledgment of the permeability of gender and desire. The music softens the potential for mockery and transforms the sequence into a moment of tenderness and affirmation that repositions Black gender complexity at the center of the Western's narrative field.

Upon entering Maysville, an entirely white-coded town, Cuffee's discomfort in the dress becomes almost symbolic. The visual contrast between Cuffee's Black gender-nonconforming body and the town's monochromatic whiteness foregrounds the racialized and gendered surveillance historically imposed on Black bodies. When Nat later asks for Cuffee's "real" name, Cuffee responds that Cuffee *is* their real name, but that they were born as Cathay Williams. The clarification asserts that gender identity need not align with birth assignment and that self-naming constitutes a form of personal sovereignty.

This representation aligns with Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, which posits that Black queer individuals exist at the convergence of multiple structures of oppression that limit their legibility and visibility in cultural narratives (Crenshaw 143-151). The film illustrates this

[10] Transcribed from the film.

dynamic: although Cuffee is respected within Nat Love's gang and granted moments of significant agency, the narrative ultimately refrains from exploring their queer identity in depth. Although Cuffee is presented as valued and respected, a choice has been made when the film sidesteps an explicit exploration of their queerness. This suggests that the Western genre is able to include queer Black characters (as seen with Black women representation) but is also not able to let that queerness challenge the central narrative shaped by male characters. This omission reflects Crenshaw's argument that institutions, including dominant cultural forms like cinema, struggle to accommodate identities that fall outside established categorical frameworks (10:58-11:33).

Cuffee is therefore both visible and constrained: their presence disrupts the genre's masculinist grammar, yet the film stops short of fully articulating the implications of their queerness. In this sense, Cuffee becomes a figure of counter-memory within the film. By occupying a role historically denied to Black, queer, and gender-nonconforming individuals in the Western, Cuffee's character challenges the genre's foundational assumptions about who belongs in the narrative of the American West. Their silences, resistances, and redefinitions of selfhood puncture the Western's mythic binaries and carve out an interpretive space for LGBTQ+ spectators to identify alternative histories and possibilities within a genre long shaped by exclusion.

Taken together, the representations of Stagecoach Mary, Trudy Smith, and Cuffee operate as acts of counter-memory discussed by Erll, while also aligning with the tradition of the oppositional gaze articulated by hooks. Each character reintroduces figures who were historically present in the American West but rendered absent from its dominant visual and narrative traditions. By centering Black women and queer characters, *The Harder They Fall* disrupts the hegemonic memory of the Western and reclaims space for identities that white supremacist storytelling practices have long suppressed or rendered illegible. These figures do not merely diversify the cast; they intervene in the historical imagination that underpins the genre and remind audiences that such individuals not only existed but were systematically pushed aside to maintain the illusion of a white, masculine frontier. Their presence challenges viewers to reconsider who has been excluded from official accounts of the historical West and to recognize the layered, intersectional realities of those who lived it. Even with the limitations that remain, the film creates a space in which repressed histories resurface, making visible the forms of Black womanhood and queer existence that dominant narratives, both cinematic and historical, have long sought to erase.

## 2.3 Maternal Counter-Memory

In *Concrete Cowboy*, the figure of Nessie (Lorraine Toussaint) shifts the Western's visual and moral landscape from spectacle to intimacy. Where the genre has traditionally associated belonging with masculine conquest and the taming of the frontier, Nessie embodies a different mode of presence: one rooted in care, continuity, and collective survival. Her calm authority and nurturing energy over the horses and young people provide the emotional and ethical foundation of the Fletcher Street community. Through her, the film transforms the Western's mythology of domination into an intergenerational practice of preservation. This turn from violence to care reframes what it means to inhabit the mythical frontier, presenting belonging not as ownership of land, but as responsibility for others.

In her book *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (1990) hooks explains the concept of the *homeplace*, which also clarifies Nessie's significance. hooks defines the homeplace as a site of Black female resistance, a space where love, nurture, and community care operate as counterforces to racial oppression (42). Within such spaces, Black women have historically cultivated dignity and hope against the violence of systemic dehumanization (42). Nessie's home becomes precisely this kind of site. It shelters the displaced and provides a stable center within an unstable environment marked by poverty, state neglect, and urban redevelopment. Her domestic labor, cooking, advising, and mediating conflicts among the cowboys, might appear ordinary, but it carries profound political meaning. Through practices of care and maintenance, this labor generates forms of oppositional knowledge that sustain community, dignity, and survival outside dominant structures (48). By sustaining community life, Nessie performs the invisible work that undergirds survival and memory in spaces threatened by erasure.

This process connects Nessie to Falcón's notion of counterpublics. Nessie is the embodiment of this concept. She builds the social, emotional, and cultural basis on which the community relies. Her home, care, rules, and rituals form an alternative public sphere in which Black experiences can circulate outside of the hostile, dominant public structures. While the dominant culture associates Black urban life with violence and alienation, Nessie maintains the circulation of counter-memories, preserving those social and emotional histories that the dominant public, embodied in the film by state power and urban developers, seeks to displace. She determines what is valued within the community and which values are passed on. Thus, Nessie is not only a maternal figure but also an architect of a counterpublic that redefines the Black Western experience as a social, non-territorial frontier.

In this sense, Nessie's role can be read as a form of *maternal counter-memory*. She does not fight for visibility through spectacle, as Mary and Trudy do in *The Harder They Fall*, but through persistence and care. Her motherhood extends beyond biology; it becomes a communal ethic that shapes the social world of the stables. Nessie guides younger characters such as Cole, offering him emotional grounding at a moment when he is suspended between displacement and belonging. She provides moral counsel to Harp, reminding him of responsibilities he would rather avoid, and she safeguards the fragile ecosystem that allows this marginal community to survive. None of this is framed as sentimentality. Instead, it functions as an alternative politics of presence, one that does not depend on dominance, violence, or spectacle to assert meaning. Through everyday gestures, feeding people, creating routine, and insisting on dignity, Nessie transforms ongoing trauma into a sense of continuity and the community's marginalization into a lived experience of belonging. Her presence shows that care itself can be a form of resistance, memory-making, and world-building.

By foregrounding such maternal labor, *Concrete Cowboy* also expands the meaning of intersectionality. Crenshaw's original formulation centered on how overlapping structures of race and gender produce exclusion within legal and social systems (140). The film extends this logic into the domain of cultural memory, showing how the labor of Black women sustains communities even when their contributions remain unseen. Nessie's work is the invisible infrastructure of the Western's reimagining. While male characters confront violence through action, Nessie confronts it through endurance and care. Both responses are necessary, but only hers ensures the long-term survival of the community.

In this way, Nessie's character interrupts the repetitive patterns through which cultural memory stabilizes itself (Erll 8-9). The Western's long-standing omission of Black women is precisely such a repetition. *Concrete Cowboy* breaks this cycle by centering a character whose authority derives not from conquest, but from connection. Nessie's presence rewrites the grammar of the Western's memory-making: she stands as a counter-memory not through violence, but through nurture. Her home becomes a site where care itself becomes political, where belonging is maintained through love, and where history is remembered not in monuments or battles, but in the quiet persistence of community.

Through Nessie, the film offers a vision of the West that is not about domination or individual redemption but about shared endurance. She embodies the everyday heroism that sustains marginalized communities, transforming the Western's mythic frontier into a homeplace of relational identity and resistance. In doing so, *Concrete Cowboy* redefines what

it means to survive and to remember, turning motherhood and care into radical acts of cultural preservation.

## 2.4 Landscape as Intersectional Space

If violence and belonging reveal how Black identity in the Western is shaped through interpersonal and communal relationships, the landscapes in *The Harder They Fall* and *Concrete Cowboy* show how these identities are also negotiated spatially. The Western genre has historically relied on vast landscapes and expansive frontiers to symbolize freedom, conquest, and rugged individualism. Yet these spaces are never neutral. As film theorist Martin Lefebvre argues in his book *Landscape and Film* (2006), cinematic landscapes function as narrative and symbolic agents, shaping how stories are told and how power is distributed on screen (37-38, 49). In "traditional" Westerns, the frontier appears as a site of opportunity, but only for white protagonists. This spatial ideology reinforces myths of American exceptionalism while erasing the presence, histories, and labor of Black and Indigenous communities.

Throughout this chapter, intersectionality has served as a framework for understanding how race and gender shape visibility, memory, and agency. The landscapes of *The Harder They Fall* and *Concrete Cowboy* extend this framework by showing how space itself is produced through power, exclusion, and reclamation. As Crenshaw notes, structures of oppression operate not only on individuals but also through the environments they inhabit. Similarly, Falcón's emphasis on counterpublics highlights how marginalized communities create alternative material and symbolic spaces that preserve memories erased by dominant narratives. Within the Western genre, then, landscape becomes both an archive of exclusion and a site for counter-memory.

### 2.4.1 Redwood and Maysville

In the classical Western, the open frontier symbolizes possibility, but only for those marked as its rightful inheritors. The genre naturalizes a racialized vision of space: white men expand outward into supposedly "empty" territories, while Black and Indigenous people appear only as obstacles or vanish entirely. Erll's notion that repetition governs cultural memory is clearly visible here: the West repeatedly appears as empty, available, unclaimed, and thus ready for white settlement.

*The Harder They Fall* revisits this spatial logic by placing Black characters at the center of the Western landscape and giving them control over its symbolic and material dimensions.

The film's two principal towns, Redwood and Maysville, serve as visual and ideological inversions of genre convention. Redwood, built and governed by Rufus Buck, at first appears to replicate the form of a traditional frontier town (Fig. 1 and 2). Yet its meaning is radically different. Entirely inhabited, run, and sustained by Black people, Redwood becomes a symbolic Black space within the genre: a representation of autonomy, cultural pride, and self-determination. The town's rich visual palette, what production designer Martin Whist describes as having "some soul to it", embodies a deliberate aesthetic counter-memory that refuses the washed-out iconography of classic Western towns (Giardina). In Redwood, space becomes a practice of world-building rather than world-taking.

However, intersectionality reveals fissures beneath this triumph. Redwood is racially reclaimed, but still structured through masculine forms of power; Nat Love, Rufus Buck, and their crews determine much of the town's direction. Stagecoach Mary may move confidently within this space by having her own saloon, but the landscape does not fully register her as a central agent. Her partial visibility echoes the earlier argument that recovery projects can still replicate gendered erasures. Thus, Redwood is an intersectional landscape, corrective in terms of race, but still limited in terms of gender.


Fig. 1. David Lee, *Redwood*, 2021.

Fig. 2. David Lee, *The Mayor's Mansion*, 2021.

Maysville, however, is depicted as an uncannily all-white town, with white residents, white buildings, and even white horses, providing "a surreal contrast to Redwood's colorful bustle" (Bosley) (Fig. 3). Its monochromatic design, as Whist notes in an interview with *Tudum Netflix*, creates a "supernatural quality" that flips the genre's racial coding by rendering whiteness strange, sterile, and other (Harrison). The scene in which Nat and Cuffee enter the bank makes this inversion explicit (Fig. 4). When the white bank teller tells Cuffee she "must be lost" and should "try Redwood," the film reveals how space functions as a racial sorting mechanism: Maysville is imagined as a space where Black presence is unthinkable, if not

outright impossible. Nat's remark during the robbery, "times have changed, ain't they?",[11] operates as a pointed disruption of this spatial logic. It calls attention to the absurdity of a frontier historically imagined as open and egalitarian but in practice reserved for white subjects.

By reversing the racial coding of space, the film performs the same counter-memory work seen elsewhere in its representation of Black characters: it exposes how the geography of the Western has always been political rather than natural or inevitable. It challenges viewers to recognize that the geography of the Western has always been political. Director Samuel thus uses the physical and social space of Redwood and Maysville to explore broader themes of Black identity and empowerment. Through bold aesthetic choices in both towns, they become a visual celebration of Black resilience and creativity. This reclamation of space disrupts the genre's tendency to depict the frontier as a monolithic and exclusionary domain, instead presenting it as a site of cultural expression and agency.


Fig. 3. David Lee, *Maysville*, 2020.

Fig. 4. David Lee, *The Bank*, 2020.

2.4.2 Fletcher Street

If *The Harder They Fall* rewrites the historical frontier*, Concrete Cowboy* demonstrates how frontier logic continues to influence contemporary urban settings (Fig. 5). North Philadelphia's Fletcher Street Riding Club, a real community with over a century of history, exemplifies what Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods describe in their book *Black Geographies and The Politics of Place* (2007) as *Black geographies*. These are not fixed or biologically determined spaces, but complex and continually shifting spatial practices through which Black communities negotiate, reshape, and contest their environments (6-7). Rather than reducing Black space to marginality or to the supposed natural outcome of historical neglect, Black geographies highlight how belonging, memory, creativity, and everyday practices produce

[11] Transcribed from the film.

alternative spatial meanings that challenge dominant spatial orders (6-7). Where the classical frontier imagined land as empty and unclaimed, the urban frontier exposes how space is socially constructed, contested, and reshaped under pressures such as surveillance and gentrification.

Fig. 5. Aaron Ricketts, *Harp and Cole at Fletcher Street*, 2020.

Fig. 6. Timothy A. Clary, *Outside Fletcher Street Urban Riding Club*, 2017.

Intersectionality provides again a crucial insight into the spatial dynamics at work in *Concrete Cowboy*. The threats facing the Fletcher Street community are not only racial; they reflect the convergence of class inequality, political disenfranchisement, and spatial dispossession (Fig. 6). Gentrification functions here as a contemporary extension of frontier violence, reenacting the logic of territorial removal that has historically targeted Black communities. Within this context, Falcón's framework of counterpublics clarifies the role of the Fletcher Street Riding Club: it is a community-created institution that safeguards memories, practices, and cultural lineages systematically erased from dominant historical narratives. What the riders protect is not merely a set of equestrian traditions, but a broader archive of Black geographies, histories of cowboying, family networks, and collective care that have long existed outside the white-centered imagination of the West.

Cole's emotional arc renders this spatial politics visible. His movement through North Philadelphia, from alienation to disorientation, to belonging, embodies the chapter's broader argument about visibility, memory, and reclamation. Through his bond with Boo, Cole learns discipline, patience, and responsibility, qualities that counter the chaotic and often destructive influences in his life. This transformation reflects a wider narrative within Black identity in which reclamation of control and strength is found in traditions that offer stability and purpose (Jackman 00:11:30 – 00:12:47). For Cole, caring for Boo is not only an act of taming a horse but also a means of tempering his own restlessness and anger, providing a constructive outlet for emotions shaped by instability and systemic neglect.

The act of riding horses through the streets of Philadelphia operates as a symbolic reclamation of urban space and a defiance of the forces that seek to marginalize the community. As Cole begins to ride, he transitions from an outsider to an active participant in the social and spatial life of the Fletcher Street community. The presence of horses in this urban environment softens the harshness of the landscape and interrupts the visual logic of deprivation, creating a counterpoint to the structures of violence that define much of Cole's surroundings. By learning to ride and care for the horses, Cole redefines his relationship to the landscape and asserts his agency within it. The streets that once signified alienation and danger become pathways for self-expression and cultural continuity, echoing McKittrick and Woods's insistence that Black geographies emerge from practices of persistence and reassertion in the face of spatial erasure (6-7). In this sense, Cole's personal progression mirrors the collective work performed by the Riding Club, transforming vulnerability into continuity and reinscribing Black presence within an urban frontier that has long attempted to exclude it.

By situating this culture within an urban environment, *Concrete Cowboy* challenges the conventional associations of the cowboy and redefines the frontier. This reframing highlights the adaptability and resilience that have long characterized the lives of Black people in America, as life after slavery required an extraordinary capacity for adaptation and reinvention within the confines of ongoing oppression (Hartman 6). The film's portrayal of Black equestrian traditions in the heart of Philadelphia embodies this improvised resilience, demonstrating the capacity to transform exclusionary structures into spaces of belonging. Through its portrayal of urban cowboys and cowgirls, the film highlights the resilience and adaptability of Black cowboy culture (Mask 253).

The urban environment surrounding the stables, marked by infrastructural neglect, police surveillance, and impending displacement, initially appears antithetical to the pastoral landscapes associated with cowboy mythology. Yet, through the work of the community, this landscape becomes a living frontier. Horses serve as instruments of healing, discipline, and intergenerational transmission, linking the present-day riders to a much longer genealogy of Black horsemanship. Nessie articulates this philosophy when she explains to Cole that a horse is not meant to be dominated but understood through care and mutual respect. Her words reframe horsemanship as a metaphor for Black survival: endurance through relationality rather than conquest.

The demolition of the stables, depicted near the end of the film, exposes the precarity of these Black geographies. Gentrification appears not as neutral development but as a modern frontier project, a renewal of spatial conquest that threatens to overwrite the histories rooted in

the community's material space. The riders' resistance to displacement underscores that the frontier remains contested: a place where survival depends on solidarity, cultural memory, and everyday practices of care. Through this lens, *Concrete Cowboy* reveals how Black communities continue to reimagine and reclaim space even within environments marked by structural hostility.

## 2.5 The Relational Landscape

In examining *The Harder They Fall* and *Concrete Cowboy*, in this chapter I have shown how contemporary Black Westerns operate as intersectional counter-memory projects that reconfigure both the ideological architecture of the genre and its spatial grammar. Where the classic Western relied on repetition, what Erll describes as the cyclical and self-reinforcing logic of cultural memory, to naturalize myths of white masculinity, conquest, and frontier violence, these films interrupt that pattern by placing Black life, Black histories, and Black communities at the center of the frame. The result is not only diversification of casting, but also a rethinking of how memory, identity, and belonging are constructed within the Western imaginary.

If race produced the first erasure of Black cowboys from historical and cinematic memory, gender enforced the second. Drawing on Crenshaw, in this chapter I have demonstrated how Black women and queer figures were historically rendered doubly invisible within the Western's visual and narrative landscapes. *The Harder They Fall* and *Concrete Cowboy* intervene in this gap through Stagecoach Mary, Trudy Smith, Cuffee, and Nessie. Together, these figures show that the reclamation of Black presence in the Western cannot be achieved through masculine heroism alone. Their storylines make clear that reclaiming Black visibility requires not only inserting new bodies into familiar spaces, but also revising how cinematic landscapes register agency, care, and vulnerability.

Across both films, spectacular resistance and intimate care function as parallel modes of counter-memory. Nat Love's outlaw crew and the Fletcher Street riders confront violence through collective action, while Mary, Trudy, Cuffee, and Nessie transform the terms on which that collectivity is imagined. Redwood, Maysville, and the Fletcher Street stables exemplify what I call a *relational landscape*: space produced through interdependence rather than domination and through continuity rather than conquest. These locations operate as counterpublic spaces in Falcón's sense, generating alternative forms of knowledge, visibility, and historical consciousness for communities that the Western tradition has habitually

excluded. At the same time, they reveal the limits and compromises that persist when questions of gender remain only partially addressed.

In this relational landscape, belonging is not secured through mastery over land, but through responsibility, care, and mutual recognition. Intersectionality provides the analytic key that reveals who is allowed to belong, under what conditions, and how that belonging is continually negotiated within structures of racial, gendered, and spatial inequality. By reframing landscape as a lived and contested environment rather than a neutral backdrop, The *Harder They Fall* and *Concrete Cowboy* broaden the conceptual frontier of the Western and open space for new memories and new communities. The films do not resolve all the tensions that arise when Black and female and queer histories enter the Western frame, but they make those tensions visible and thinkable. In doing so, they prepare the ground for further reimaginations of the American frontier.

# Conclusion: The Frontier Reopened

In this thesis I questioned how two contemporary Westerns, *The Harder They Fall* and *Concrete Cowboy*, contributed to the reclamation and redefinition of Black cowboy and cowgirl identity, foregrounding the often-overlooked position of Black women, and how this cinematic reclamation reshapes the meaning of the American frontier in cultural memory. Returning to this question now, after examining historical, theoretical, cinematic, and intersectional frameworks, it becomes clear that the process of answering it has required a sustained engagement with three intertwined issues. First, the American frontier is not merely a historical event but a mythic structure whose power lies in its capacity to shape cultural memory. Second, Black cowboy and cowgirl identities have existed continuously yet have been repeatedly erased, fragmented, or displaced in dominant representations. Third, contemporary cinematic reclamation is neither complete nor uniform; it opens certain possibilities while leaving unresolved tensions, particularly around gender and narrative authority.

Taken together, these findings allow for a more expansive understanding of how the Western genre continues to function within the cultural imagination and how contemporary interventions both challenge and reproduce its structures. In this conclusion I therefore bring together the major threads of my thesis, revisiting the arguments made in each chapter and drawing them into a more comprehensive reflection on the frontier as a cultural formation that remains fundamentally open to rearticulation.

In many respects, this thesis has traced the frontier twice. First, historically, by examining how nineteenth and twentieth century narratives transformed westward expansion into a foundational national mythology. Second, cinematically, by following the ways in which contemporary Black filmmakers revisit, challenge, and restage that mythology. Throughout this dual trajectory, I have demonstrated that the Western genre has served as a memory system that organizes American identity by selecting which histories to preserve and which to forget. The frontier's ideological force, as Turner, Slotkin, and others have shown, lies not in its factual accuracy but in its symbolic utility: it provides a template through which the nation narrates itself as a product of struggle, independence, and conquest.

As Chapter 1 established, this symbolic structure is inseparable from practices of forgetting. Through Connerton's typology of forgetting and Erll's insights into cultural memory, the thesis identified the mechanisms by which the Western historically excluded Black and Indigenous histories from its narrative frame. This exclusion was not incidental but structural. The genre relied on an imagined geography in which whiteness was synonymous

with agency, belonging, and historical consequence. By contrast, Black presence in the West, despite extensive historical documentation, was rendered marginal, invisible, or peripheral. The Western thus became a genre that materially shaped what Americans remember about their past and, equally important, what they do not.

By laying out these foundations, the thesis created the conditions for examining what happens when that memory system is disrupted. *The Harder They Fall* and *Concrete Cowboy* were selected not because they are the only films participating in such disruption but because they do so with unusual clarity and distinct strategies, allowing for a comparative understanding of reclamation across different cinematic modes. The process of analyzing these films involved both close reading and historical contextualization: how do these works use the visual, narrative, and spatial language of the Western to critique, reclaim, or transform its cultural memory? The result is a two-part account of frontier reconstruction. One part stylized and historical, the other lived and contemporary. Both are interventions in a mythic landscape that has been centuries in the making.

The analysis of *The Harder They Fall* showed that the film enacts reclamation primarily through aesthetic and narrative reinvention. Its strategy is to take the classical Western's formal grammar and saturate it with Black presence, Black performance, and Black cultural sensibilities. By centering characters drawn from historical archives, such as Nat Love, Stagecoach Mary, Cherokee Bill, and Rufus Buck, the film confronts the structural amnesia that erased Black cowboys from collective memory.

At the same time, I identify that the film's interventions are most forceful on the level of race and less transformative on the level of gender. Mary, Trudy, and Cuffee broaden the representational boundaries of the genre, but their narrative functions remain constrained by long-standing gender hierarchies embedded in Western storytelling. They appear, they act, and they disrupt, but they do not entirely escape the structural patterns that have historically assigned women, especially Black women, roles that revolve around male narrative arcs.

This observation does not diminish the film's accomplishments. Rather, it locates them within a broader cultural landscape in which racial reclamation has advanced in visible ways, while the gendered dimensions of that reclamation remain in a process of negotiation. From an intersectional perspective, this partial reconfiguration is meaningful precisely because of its incompleteness: it reveals where the genre has expanded and where its boundaries continue to hold.

The examination of *Concrete Cowboy* offered a noticeably different model of reclamation. Instead of reconstructing the nineteenth century West, the film collapses the distance between the mythic frontier and the contemporary city. In doing so, it challenges the cultural assumption that cowboy identity belongs exclusively to the rural past. The Fletcher Street Riding Club becomes a living demonstration of how Black equestrian traditions persist through community practice, relational care, and embodied memory.

Throughout the analysis, I have emphasized how the film uses realism, community participation, and intergenerational storytelling to depict the frontier not as a zone of conquest but as a zone of continuity. The frontier here is not land to be taken but land to be held, preserved, or reclaimed against forces of displacement. In this sense, the film adapts the Western's central spatial motif, the frontier, from a site of expansion to a site of resistance.

As in *The Harder They Fall*, however, gender remains an incomplete site of transformation. While the film acknowledges the importance of women's labor, especially in sustaining community structures, it does not center women as narrative agents in the same way it centers male characters. Thus, even as the film challenges racial and spatial assumptions within the Western, it reproduces some of the genre's gendered limitations.

Across the two case studies, three findings emerge consistently. First, the frontier remains a potent cultural symbol because it is a site of ongoing negotiation rather than a closed historical narrative. Second, contemporary Black Westerns participate in this negotiation by reintroducing historical truths and lived practices long excluded from dominant representations. Third, reclamation in contemporary Westerns proceeds unevenly: racial recovery moves more rapidly than the restructuring of gendered hierarchies. In this sense, the frontier becomes a conceptual space where cultural memory is continually revised. The Western genre, once a vehicle for stabilizing a narrow and exclusionary narrative, is now a site where new identities, geographies, and forms of agency can be articulated. Yet the work is far from complete. The structures that produced earlier erasures still shape the limits of representation today.

Every conclusion must also acknowledge its own limits, and several questions remain open. First, in this thesis I examined two films in depth, but the landscape of contemporary Westerns is far larger. How would the findings shift if additional films, Indigenous Westerns, feminist Westerns, and queer Westerns, were included? Second, while in this thesis I focused on the reclamation of Black cowboy and cowgirl identities, the question of how fully the Western can be decolonized remains unresolved. The genre itself is built on a settler colonial narrative; how far can it stretch before it becomes something else entirely? Finally, there is the broader question that extends beyond film: how does the public's renewed interest in cowboy

iconography, visible in fashion, music, and popular culture, reshape cultural memory in ways that exceed cinema? And what roles might contemporary audiences play in sustaining or challenging the mythic frontier as it evolves? These questions point to the frontier's ongoing status as a cultural problem rather than a solved narrative.

What I am able to claim with confidence on the basis of this thesis is the following: the American frontier is not a static myth inherited from the past but a dynamic, contested narrative continually reworked through acts of cultural memory. Contemporary Black Westerns intervene in this narrative not by rejecting the frontier outright but by reopening it, reentering it, and reshaping its possibilities. They expose the exclusions on which the frontier myth was built, yet they also demonstrate that new forms of presence, identity, and agency can be written into its frame.

If older Westerns once told a story of who Americans imagined themselves to be, *The Harder They Fall* and *Concrete Cowboy* suggest that the story of the West is still being written, reshaped by those whose histories were previously pushed to the margins. The frontier that emerges from these films is not the frontier of Turner, nor the frontier of classical Hollywood, but a frontier of multiplicity, memory, and ongoing negotiation. The Western, in this sense, is neither dead nor resolved. It remains a cultural landscape in which new futures can be imagined and in which the act of remembering is itself a form of reclamation.

# Bibliography


Berlinger, Max. "How Cowboycore Became 2024's Defining Aesthetic." *GQ*, 12 Sep. 2024, https://www.gq.com/story/what-is-cowboycore-2024.

Beyoncé. *Cowboy Carter*. Parkwood Entertainment and Columbia Records, 2024.

Blanton, Deanne. "The Black Soldier." In *Searles. Buffalo Soldiers in the West: A Black Soldiers Anthology*, Bruce A. Glasrud and Michael N. Searles, 1st ed., Texas A&M University Press, 2007, pp. 97-113.

Bosley, Rachel. "Bad Blood: The Harder They Fall." *The American Society of Cinematographers*, 3 Dec. 2021, https://theasc.com/articles/harder-they-fall.

Callahan, Shannon. "What Was Life Like for Cowboys in the 1880s American West?." *History Hit*, History Hit, 14 Mar. 2022, https://www.historyhit.com/what-was-life-like-for-cowboys/.

Carter, Matthew. "Introduction." *Myth of the Western: New Perspectives on Hollywood's Frontier Narrative*, Edinburgh University Press, 2014, pp. 1-25.

Clary. Timothy A. Outside Fletcher Street Urban Riding Club. Getty Images, 2017.

Collington, Faefyx. "The Harder They Fall's LGBTQ+ Representation Explained." *Screen Rant*, Nov 8, 2021, https://screenrant.com/harder-they-fall-movie-cuffee-lgbtq-representation-history/.

*Concrete Cowboy.* Directed by Ricky Staub, Tucker Tooley Entertainment, 2020.

Connerton, Paul. "Seven Types of Forgetting." *Memory Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2008, pp. 59-71.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, Chicago Unbound, no. 1, 1989, article 8, pp. 139-167, https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8/?utm_source=chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8&utm_medium=PDF&utm_campaign=PDFCoverPages.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "The urgency of intersectionality | Kimberlé Crenshaw | TED." *YouTube*, uploaded by TED, 7 Dec. 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=akOe5-UsQ2o.

Diawara, Fatoumata, and Lauryn Hill. "Black Woman." *YouTube*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zaZrdLPYEbw.

Ellis, John. "Cinema as Cultural Event." *Visible Fictions: Cinema: Television: Video*. Second Edition, Routledge, 1992, pp. 23-37.

Erll, Astrid. "Introduction: 'Why Memory'?." *Memory in Culture*, Palgrave Macmillan London, 2011, pp. 1-12.

Falcón, Sylvanna M.,"Intersectionality and the Arts: Counterpublic Memory-Making in Postconflict Peru." *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. 26-44.

Fowler, Richard. "Beyoncé's Cowboy Carter Is Rewriting American Culture — And Boosting The Economy." *Forbes*, 27 Jul. 2025,

https://www.forbes.com/sites/richardfowler/2025/07/27/beyoncs-cowboy-carter-is-rewriting-american-culture---and-boosting-the-economy/.

Foucault, Michel, et al. "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History." *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*. Cornell University Press, 1977, pp. 139-164.

Gattuso, Reina. "Race and the Pop Culture Cowboy." *Curationist*, Jan. 2023, https://www.curationist.org/editorial-features/article/race-and-the-pop-culture-cowboy.

Gergaud, Sophie. "Indigenous Cinemas and Futurisms: How Indigenous Visual Arts Are Shifting the Narratives and Offering a New Relationship to Space and Landscapes." *Recherches Anglaises et Nord-Américaines*, vol. 54, no. 54, 2021, pp. 151-69.

Giardina, Carolyn. "How the Western Locations in Netflix's 'The Harder They Fall' Became Their Own Characters." *The Hollywood Reporter*, 16 Nov. 2021, www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-features/netflix-the-harder-they-fall-western-locations-1235044558/.

Giesen, Bernhard. "Introduction." *Triumph and Trauma*, Routledge, 2004, pp. 1-14.

Hardaway, Roger D., "African American Cowboys on the Western Frontier." *Negro History Bulletin,* vol. 64, no. 1-4, 2001, pp. 27-32.

Harrison, Olivia. "How the Harder They Fall's All-White Town Was Created." *Netflix Tudum*, 23 Nov. 2021, www.netflix.com/tudum/articles/all-about-the-all-white-town-in-the-harder-they-fall.

*High Noon*. Directed by Fred Zinnemann, United Artists, 1952.

Hine, Darlene Clark. "Fields, Stagecoach Mary (1832-1914), Frontiersman / Pioneer, Postal Official." *Black Women in America,* Second Edition, Oxford University Press, 2005.

Hofstadter, Richard. "Turner and the Western Revolt." *The Progressive Historians*, Alfred A. Knopf, 1968, pp. 47-83.

Holt, Sarah. "Chapter Three: The Devil's Hatband." *Writing From a Profound Edge: The Construction of (Radical) Black Western Identities, 1856-1997*, Staffordshire University, 2021, pp. 82-115.

hooks, bell. "Homeplace: A Site of Resistance." *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, Second Edition, Routledge, 2015, pp. 41-49.

hooks, bell. "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators." *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, South End Press, 1992, pp. 115-131.

Hunter, Tera W. "The Most Cruel Wrongs." *Bound in Wedlock: Slave and Free Black Marriage in the Nineteenth Century*, Harvard University Press, 2017, pp. 233-260.

Jackman, Charmain. "I Am Because We Are: Reclaiming African Culture as A Source of Strength in Black Communities." *YouTube*, Mental Health America Webinars, 30 July 2021, Webinar, www.youtube.com/watch?v=H1hfcvcnSks&t=666s.

Jones, Karen R., and John Wills. "Frontier Germ Theory." *The American West*, Edinburgh University Press, 2009, pp. 39-59.

Katz, William Loren. "Introduction." *The Black West*, Fulcrum Publishing, Revised Edition, 2019, pp. xvii-xxi.

Kracauer, Siegfried. "General Characteristics." *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, Oxford University Press, 1960, pp. 27-76.

Latif, Laila. "The Harder They Fall: A Brilliantly over the Top Revenge Tale." *BFI*, 6 Oct. 2021, www.bfi.org.uk/sight-and-sound/reviews/harder-they-fall-over-top-revenge-tale.

Lee, David. Maysville. Netflix, 2021.
Lee, David. Redwood. Netflix, 2021.
Lee, David. The Bank. Netflix, 2021.
Lee, David. The Harder They Fall, 2021.
Lee, David. The Mayor's Mansion. Netflix, 2021.
Lefebvre, Martin. "Between Setting and Landscape in the Cinema." *Landscape and Film*, Routledge, 2006, pp. 19-59.
Masihleho, Boitumelo. "The Untold Story of Black Cowboys and Cowgirls in the American West." *FunTimes Magazine*, 24 Feb. 2024, https://funtimesmagazine.com/the-untold-story-of-black-cowboys-and-cowgirls-in-the-american-west/.
Mask, Mia. *Black Rodeo: A History of the African American Western*, University of Illinois Press, 2023.
McKittrick, Katherine, and Clyde Woods. "No One Knows the Mysteries at the Bottom of the Ocean." *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place*, Between the Lines, 2007, pp. 1-13.
Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen*, vol. 16.3, 1975, pp. 6-18, https://web.english.upenn.edu/~cavitch/pdf-library/Mulvey_%20Visual%20Pleasure.pdf
Neri, G. *Ghetto Cowboy,* Candlewick, 2009.
"Phallocentric." Cambridge Dictionary, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/phallocentric.
Porter, Kenneth W. "Negro Labor in the Western Cattle Industry, 1866-1900," *Labor History* 10, no. 3, 1969, 347.
Ricketts, Aaron. Harp and Cole at Fletcher Street. Netflix, 2020.
Samuel, Jeymes. "How 'Harder They Fall' Was Rolling along until Murphy's Law Went into Overdrive." *Los Angeles Times*, 29 Dec. 2021, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/awards/story/2021-12-29/jeymes-samuel-writing-directing-harder-they-fall.
*Shane*. Directed by George Stevens, Paramount Pictures, 1953.
Shohat, Ella, and Robert Stam. "The Imperial Imaginary." *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*, Second Edition, Routledge, 2014, pp. 100-136.
Slotkin, Richard. "Introduction: The Significance of the Frontier Myth in American History." *Gunfighter Nation*, Atheneum, 1992, pp. 1-28.
Slotkin, Richard. "The White City and the Wild West: Buffalo Bill and the Mythic Space of American History, 1880-1917." *Gunfighter Nation*, Atheneum, 1992, pp. 63-87.
*Stagecoach.* Directed by Dudley Nichols, Walter Wanger Productions, 1939.
*The Great Train Robbery*. Directed by Edwin S. Porter, Edison Manufacturing Company. 1903.
*The Harder They Fall*. Directed by Jeymes Samuel, Overbrook Entertainment, 2021.
*The Searchers*. Directed by John Ford, Warner Bros, 1956.
TIFF. Concrete Cowboy, 2020.
Turner, Fredrick Jackson. *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*. Chicago, Annual Report of the American Historical Association, 1893, https://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/gilded/empire/text1/turner.pdf.

US Census Bureau. “Following the Frontier Line, 1790 to 1890.” *U.S. Census*, 6 Sept. 2012, www.census.gov/dataviz/visualizations/001/.