

The Evolution of Cowboys and Indians: An Expansion of System Circles, New Common Ground, & Remaining Separation

At the beginning of the semester, we created distinct “system circles” for cowboys and indians, comprised of characteristics we thought fit each group. Traits of cowboys included being an adult male and acting like a hero or “good guy;” traits of indians included having a native heritage and attending powwows. Over the course of the semester, the texts we have read exposed us to new qualities obtained by both groups of people that were not initially thought to be included in the system circles, like female cowboys and non-native indians. Independently, the system circles for both cowboys and indians have expanded to include such newly discovered traits, as depicted through gender roles, age, heritage, violence, and generational issues. But while these aspects have brought cowboys and indians to share a more common ground in literature, they are still depicted as two identifiably different groups in literature, whether their relationship is shown as abrasive or peaceful.

In our original system circle, we defined cowboys as “males,” as they are often stereotypically portrayed as rough and tough men in books and film. However, “War Party” by Louis L’Amour introduces us to what can be considered a female cowboy. The character Ma has a number of aspects reflecting cowboys: she is somewhat of a loner, a leader who guides people through the West, rides horses, and has a brave character (L’Amour, 1959). A similar character we encounter is Mattie Ross in *True Grit*. Like Ma, Mattie is tough and “speaks her mind,” and she also rides a horse, carries a gun, and travels out West (L’Amour, 304). Because Ma and Mattie contain such qualities typical of cowboys, we as readers view them as such, thus expanding our system circle of cowboys in literature to include females.

Indians in literature are also not exclusively males, nor are males the only dominant forces within Indian communities. In “A Man Called Horse,” an old Indian woman named Greasy Hand is the head of the family, and even has control over a white male prisoner (Johnson, 1949). Our initial system circle for Indians included anyone with Native Indian heritage, so Greasy Hand already fits within the boundaries. But she expands our pre-existing idea of gender roles (that men are the leaders and breadwinners), as she is the sole head of her family, just like Ma in “War Party.”

From these depictions of gender roles, cowboys and Indians come to share more common ground in literature. Characters like Ma and Mattie Ross establish that cowboys are not exclusively males, just like Indians, whose men and women are often born into “Indianness.” Additionally, the characters’ dominance within their communities proves that females can have power in both groups of people. After reading the texts, we see that the dynamics of the two groups—cowboys and Indians—are more similar than how they were initially perceived, in part by their shared treatment of gender roles.

A second factor that has expanded our system circle of cowboys is age. Our original circle identified cowboys as adults, but the literature we’ve read in class has proved this is not always true. Mattie Ross (the tough, horse-riding girl in *True Grit*) has been established as a cowboy, and her character is only 14 years old when most of the action takes place. To put Mattie back outside the boundaries of cowboy because of her young age would (in my opinion) be a mistake, because even though she “never claimed to be a cowboy” (Portis, 171), she does contain many cowboy-like qualities.

Similarly, Bud from “War Party” is a teenager (only 13 years old) when the story occurs. Like the typical cowboy, Bud often has a “rifle over [his] saddle and ready to hand” (L’Amour,

1959). At one point he stands face-to-face with a party of Sioux indians, demonstrating his bravery that most cowboys have. Just as 14-year-old Mattie is included within the system circle, Bud is too. His cowboy-like characteristics are enough to include him in the boundaries, despite his young age that is not typical of other cowboys.

As we said at the beginning of the semester, indians are usually born into the group, so every native indian –from newborns to the elderly –are deemed inside the boundaries of the system circle. Being an indian is not limited solely to adults, and, as evidenced by teenagers Mattie Ross and Bud, no longer is being a cowboy restricted to adults. Both groups accept members of varying ages, another similarity that was not considered before reading this semester's texts.

One of the major differences between cowboys and indians that we noted at the beginning of the semester is, again, how indians are born into “indianness” and cowboys become cowboys over time. That is, becoming a cowboy is transitional, but becoming an indian is automatic on the basis of heritage. However, the class texts have (in some regards) removed the role of heritage in becoming part of either group. Take, for instance, “A Man Called Horse,” a short story in which a white man is taken as a prisoner of a Crow Indians tribe. He has no biological links to the tribe, but after spending time with them and learning the Crow customs, he begins to identify himself as one of them. The author says, “He was no more a horse but a kind of man, a half-indian” (Johnson, 251) who eventually refers to his Crow captor as “Mother” (Johnson, 256).

Consider, also, the novel *Eye Killers*. A woman named Diana Logan is described as being of European descent: “Her sea-green Irish eyes” (Carr, 17). She has no biological connections to any indian tribes, but at the end of the novel, Diana becomes an “unofficial” member of the

Navajo tribe. Michael Roanhorse (who is of genuine Navajo descent) refers to her as *shi'yazhi*, meaning “daughter,” and even calls her his granddaughter (Carr, 341).

Without the requirement of a heritable link to be an “indian,” the indian system circle is significantly expanded. The system circle of cowboys, too, contains people of different races. In *Blood Meridian*, for example, the main band of cowboys (deemed such in part of their loner tendencies, horseback riding, and ventures in the West) consists of white and African American men. Some readers may also consider the Mexican characters cowboys, too, because of their characteristics that are similar to the others (McCarthy, 1985).

With heritage losing importance in regards to acceptance of being a cowboy or indian, the two groups again come to share more common ground. Both are open now to arguably any ethnicity, making them equally accessible for people to join.

Another factor –one that is found especially in *Blood Meridian* –that has expanded our system circles is violence. In our original system circles, we thought of indians as more violent and likely to initiate an attack, while we considered cowboys to be more heroic. In fact, we do see acts of heroism from cowboys in some of the texts, like *True Grit*. At one point in the novel, Rooster Cogburn and LaBoeuf (seen as cowboys for their loner, rugged lifestyle and horseback-riding, gun-shooting ways) rescue Mattie Ross from a snake pit. Later, Mattie would recall how Rooster “was...to be praised and commended for his grit. He had certainly saved my life” (Portis, 218).

But we also observe cowboys instigating violence in the texts. In *True Grit*, Tom Chaney murders Mattie’s father after claiming he was cheated in a card game. There was no “provocation” from her father to cause Chaney to kill him, only Chaney’s apparent desire to kill (Portis, 16). Lucky Ned Pepper’s band of thieves is another example of violent cowboys in *True*

Grit. Chaney joins the gang after the murder, and they spend their time riding around the countryside, stealing and killing innocent people along the way.

The most violent text we read this semester is probably *Blood Meridian*. While both cowboys and indians appear in the novel, it is the cowboys who are debatably the most sadistic, which opposes our initial expectation that indians are the more aggressive of the two. The main group of cowboys travels throughout parts of the country wreaking “mindless violence” (McCarthy, 3) on innocent communities and individuals. Exposure to such violence encourages the reader to expand the system circle of cowboys to include violence, because the men conducting the acts in *Blood Meridian* are still very much cowboys (remember: loner tendencies, gun-carrying, and traveling through the West).

Expanding the system circle for cowboys to include potentially violent acts makes cowboys and indians somewhat more equal in literature. After reading our chosen texts, indians are not considered any more violent or aggressive than cowboys, because both parties have participated in numerous violent activities. After this semester, we may not initially think of indians as the “bad guys” and cowboys as the “good guys.”

A final factor that we have encountered throughout the semester’s texts that has significantly altered the system circles of indians and how they relate to cowboys is generational issues; more specifically, the assimilation of young indians into modern culture. One example is found a character in *Love Medicine*: Albertine, a member of the younger generation of the Chippewa tribe. Her predominantly traditional family does not encourage Albertine to pursue her career in nursing, because they believe that education is invasive to their community. Most in the tribe view modernization overall in a negative light (Erdrich, 1984).

In *Eye Killers*, the character Melissa faces a similar situation. The young girl is encouraged by her grandfather to learn and practice traditional Navajo songs and customs, but Melissa does not take the time to remember them. Instead, she spends her time (like Albertine) pursuing her modern education (Carr, 1995).

In our initial system circle for indians, we noted that indians typically practice traditional customs, such as attending powwows. But the texts we have since read revealed that this is not always the case, especially for people in younger generations. With this information, we could alter the system circle of indians to include both those natives who do practice traditional customs, and those who have assimilated more to modern living.

Cowboys have almost always been viewed as more modern than indians, so suggesting that a person can be an indian while living a modern life allows for cowboys and indians to share even more common ground. Before reading these texts, we may have believed that the two groups were separated completely by their different conventions, but we now have evidence that indians, too, can be modern.

We have observed evidence of cowboys and indians coming to share common ground in literature through issues regarding gender roles, age, heritage, violence, and assimilation to modern culture. While the two groups may be seen as more equal now, cowboys and indians are still often depicted as two identifiably separate groups, whether their portrayed relationship is abrasive or peaceful.

Often times in literature, indians will be described as one group, and everyone else is viewed as “outsiders.” This includes cowboys who (although share some common ground) are still a different clique than indians. The two may interact, but it is almost always noted that they have different identities. Take, for example, a chapter from Dawn Karima Pettigrew’s book *The*

Way We Make Sense titled, “Wealthy Place.” In the scene an indian woman is walking down the street when a car full of white male “cowboys” drives by her. One cowboy speaks to her, and she describes it: “‘Hey darlin’,’ they say, crude calls in the threatening tone cowboys use for Indians” (Pettigrew, 105).

The woman notes that the “tone” is used particularly when speaking to indians, suggesting that another tone is used when speaking to fellow cowboys. This reinforces the idea that the two groups are distinctly separate from each other and interact with the other group in manners different than with their own. We see evidence of this in other texts, in which cowboys do not refer to indians as “those men” in an equal manner, but as “savages” or “others.” And even though cowboys and indians have come to share more common ground in literature, they may continue to be depicted as identifiably separate groups. That is, perhaps, until the boundaries between what it means to be a cowboy and what it means to be an indian mesh more, if that ever does happen.

At the beginning of the semester, our “system circles” for cowboys included traits like being a heroic adult male, while traits of indians were things like native heritage and traditional customs. With evidence from the texts we’ve encountered, we have re-developed these system circles and learned more about the dynamics between cowboys and indians. Independently, the system circles for both cowboys and indians have expanded to include newly discovered traits, which as depicted in the texts through gender roles, age, heritage, violence, and generational issues. While these aspects have brought cowboys and indians to share a more common ground in literature, they are still depicted as two identifiably different groups in literature, whether their relationship is shown as abrasive or peaceful.

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