Fall 2023

Lessons From Cowboys and Nature's Narratives: Symbolic Interactionism and The Cowboy's Environmental Encounter

Isabel Piper Danishmend
Bard College

Lessons From Cowboys and Nature's Narratives:

Symbolic Interactionism and The Cowboy's Environmental Encounter

Senior Project Submitted to

The Division of Social Studies

of Bard College

By

Isabel Piper Danishmend

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

December 2023

Dedicated to Alix.

Without you, this simply would not have been; with you, it became so much more than a memorable adventure. I will never forget it. Thank you.

Acknowledgements

First, I must thank all of the people I interviewed and talked to in Taos, New Mexico. Without your willingness to sit down and open up with me, this project would not have gone anywhere. I am eternally grateful for the stories you all shared and I had such a great time talking to each of you. Thank you for your wisdom.

Thank you to my parents for making this possible. I could not have done this without you all. Thank you to my mom, for always being the first person to rally behind my ideas and for turning many of them into reality. Thank you to my dad for giving me so many relevant and inspiring books to fuel my creative fire and for always being a phone call away to discuss them. Thank you to John, who I know I can count on whether it is to help me move from apartment to apartment or to have a sentimental chat about how much we love Mother Earth. Thank you to my grandmother for being the ultimate adventurer and inspiring us all to follow in your footsteps. You and Opa created such a lovely nest for us all to connect to each other, and the earth, more profoundly and I will never be able to properly express how grateful I am for that gift. Thank you to my brother, who has always rooted me deeply. Thank you to my dear friend and roommate Milena for listening to all of my random ideas (and for so much more) and to Ava for reliably being the best partner for all of our adventures. Thank you to Nadia for letting me borrow your little Cowboy book, it will be back on your bookshelf soon! (:< Thank you to Jill who sat with me helping to edit my questions in the depths of the summer and for telling me to read *A Land Remembered*, a book that in many ways inspired this project. And of course, thank you to my advisor Peter Klein for both encouraging and grounding my creativity, when at times it felt a bit chaotic. It truly takes a village.

Table of Contents:

Preface

I am inclined to let you know a little bit about what I am trying to achieve here in these sixty something pages. History is simply (and not so simply) a compilation of personal stories passed down through generations. In these pages I endeavor to tell you a story, a story about America and how the most iconic American figure, the cowboy, connects to the land and nature that so much history, so many stories, have taken place on. I went out to New Mexico to chase down these narratives. I sat for many hours listening, asking questions, hearing personal anecdotes, and sharing some of my own in the process. Most of us know the cowboy through stories, movies, books, songs, and art. Pop culture has fed us a narrative about what the cowboy is and what it means to be one. In a sense, these stories are myths. Some of them steeped in truth yet others made up to entertain audiences. What an actual cowboy is, is never covered. If you see men in hats and cowboy boots, one often assumes they are cowboys, especially when a horse is nearby. I went to see the new Scorsese film, *Killers of The Flower Moon*, and men like this were everywhere in the film (Scorsese 2021). I turned to my friend in the theater and asked her "are those cowboys?" She said, "I mean yeah, they certainly look like cowboys." They weren't cowboys. They were just men living in a small town in the western United States wearing the symbolic clothes we associate with cowboy attire.

In the next couple of pages I will begin to tell you a new myth of sorts. Not something made up exactly, but myths are traditional stories that capture the "history of people explaining some natural or social phenomenon, and typically involve supernatural beings [cowboys in a way] or events" ("Myth," Oxford Reference, 2023). Myths help people make sense of the world around them. They teach us important lessons and often have cultural values embedded in them. Myths help cultures create meaning. Often, there are true stories woven into the myths.

Sometimes it can be difficult to distinguish truth from reality. What I write is a retelling of personal myths. I chose to write this in a narrative form. I do this not only because ultimately I am telling you a story, but because I want to make readers acutely aware that these are not my own stories. Hopefully, by sharing my perspective I have accomplished what I intended to. I have my own perspective, my own bias, and my own positionality that I do not shy away from. There are lessons to be learned by paying attention to other people's perspectives. These are not my stories and without the people who shared them with me this project would be nothing. I want to honor them while also playing with the medium of storytelling to capture an iconic American relationship to land and nature. I hope that when woven together, these stories will help form a tapestry of American history in connection to Mother Nature.

Introduction

I. The Man At The Rip in The Earth

The dry heat sucked the water out of my skin. The sky was immense. The colors felt more vivid and saturated. The crystal blue of the heavens. The burnt sienna of the earth beneath me. Earth that felt steeped in history. Twenty thousand years of stories (Montaigne 2020). Stories of survival, in such a harsh yet tender backdrop. The mountains were jagged, not the sloping silhouette of the Catskills that mirrors the shape of a sleeping woman that I was used to, navy blue hips wide. Here, they felt intimidating. In some spots near the canyon where the river stretched for 1,900 miles carving its way through Colorado, New Mexico, Texas, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo León, and Tamaulipas you can hear your voice echo in the vastness, bouncing off the ancient volcanic rock (Brand 2023). I stood in the middle of the bridge that united the two sides of the canyon. There was a rumble beneath me as cars went across, or if a gust of wind came you could hear the bridge sigh. I looked down. The river was so far beneath me it almost felt like it was part of another world. Like looking down into a crack in the earth, something you weren't supposed to see, some intimate part of the Earth's history, exposed. Stories are what brought me here. I wanted to peek into the intimate, the practical, the everyday personal histories that when woven together interlace to create a comprehensive story of America's relationship to the Earth, to the land that has lifted us up. The backdrop that sets the scene.

At this very rip in the earth's crust, fifty years earlier, in the early 1970s, there was no bridge. A young man named Rex Wilder had recently moved from New England to Taos, New Mexico. He was called to this land by stories. A spiritual, almost magnetic draw to this region. He had read Frank Waters, *The Book of The Hopi*. Waters, who was part Cheyenne, worked with a translator and thirty elders of the Hopi tribe to document the Hopi worldview "for the first time

ever in written form" (Livingston 2013). A book featuring many ancient myths. Rex came to this land because of those stories and "because you could get houses for cheap, abandoned old homesteads that were more like ruins." We were sitting at a cafe in the hot summer heat in Taos, when he opened his interview with a story. Before you could cross the Rio Grande Gorge on a bridge, there was a rope. On that rope was a little cable car, "like a swing seat." If Rex wanted to get home, he had to pull himself across the gorge on this little cable car. Sometimes, mysteriously, the cart would be on the other side of the gorge, if that was the case he had to swing like a monkey, dangling across the canyon, and pull the cart back across to the other side. Here he would pick up his pregnant wife, his little kids, his horse, or his groceries. In my mind's eye I can see a young man, legs dangling down to the depths of that open crack in the earth, waiting to swallow him. But it never does. Instead he channels the fearlessness one needs to embrace freedom in the land of endless space. Endless possibilities, endless connections.

Rex's story tells us something. A contrast that exists between humans and nature. We know this. Land can be harsh, death can lurk around unforeseen corners when civilization is far away. But Rex did not tell this story with any shred of fear in his voice. If he was fearful even at the time, he had to push that aside to do what needed to be done. He needed to get home, so he had no other choice but to get on that rope, like a monkey, and climb to the other side of the gorge to grab the cable car. It was his duty, it was necessary for survival. And he chose that life. The romance of being one with the land and one with nature called him to that very gorge, that very situation. Something about this feels almost supernatural, superhuman, for a man to do. For a cowboy to do. Yet instead of choosing to be fearful, Rex walked a different tightrope. You either look down into that crack in the earth beneath you and see it as something waiting to swallow you up, or you look down and you choose to see the beauty in it. You dangle above that

cavernous space in awe of the wild and vast earth around you. Is that teasing death, or respecting earth? That's the cowboy way.

II. The "Real" Introduction

The cowboy way begs to be unpacked. So many questions swim beneath the surface of this topic. Ultimately, I have been moved towards this subject as a means of understanding how Americans relate to the land and to nature. I once thought of these words as meaning the same thing. How is land different from nature? But from my research, it seems that to a cowboy, they are certainly different things. Earth has become so far removed from us, we are no longer familiar with land or with nature. At least not those who live in cities, like 80% of Americans do ("Nations Urban and Rural Populations" 2022). Once humans lived so close to earth, the land was known like a family member. It is so difficult to care about things far away from you. We cannot properly act to heal the planet if we do not feel close to it, if we do not care for it like we would a sick loved one. The cowboy has always been an American close to nature and to the land, iconically so. Through the lens of the cowboy, one of the most famous Americans, famous for their relationship to the land, a deeper comprehension of the way America in general connects to the land can be found. Their way of life teaches us many lessons and potentially shows us how we can forge a better connection to the earth. This is how I arrived at my question: How does the lived experience of being a cowboy or existing within cowboy culture, shape individuals' perceptions of their own relationship between 'land' and 'nature?' Moreover, how is this understanding cultivated?

Everyone's perception of the world is shaped by their personal experiences. Cowboys, or those who live within cowboy culture, have a unique perspective of the land shaped by their

careers and passions. They live close to the earth. In this body of work I will explore this topic through the analysis of the historical portrayal of cowboys in pop culture, like their experiences charted in music. Historic cowboys, from the 1850s to the early 1900s, did not often write in diaries, but they did sing. Their definitions of nature and land could be found historically documented in the songs they sang. I will look at how this myth in a sense, was created and what messages it sends about land and nature. I will also look into how cultures use myth to create meaning and understand the world around them. Language even, is a type of myth in that it is a sound associated with symbols or experiences, often our own personal experiences. The cowboys' unique relationship to the land and to nature will be defined through interviews I conducted in New Mexico with cowboys and those associated with cowboy culture. Their perspectives and personal stories help provide insight into how the iconic cowboy, the “real” cowboy, the 21st century cowboy, relates to land and nature. Hopefully their stories will provide a deeper explanation of the many ways Americans relate to land and to nature and will pave a way forward to reacquaint ourselves with our roots. To deepen our connections to earth.

III. The Cowboy In The American Imagination

I first came to the cowboy through Theodore Roosevelt. I was trying to determine who the most influential historical figures were, who connected their identities and personal narratives to the land. Roosevelt was one of the first to do this (Watts 2003). Though he was born into a wealthy family in Manhattan he later found solace in the Wild West, becoming a self taught cowboy (The White House 2023). He was one of the first presidents to draw significant attention from the public towards the land (National Park Service 2023). He knew that the wildness of the west was already dwindling, that railroads were carving their way through the

untamed wilderness, posing a threat to the way of life of the few settlers that inhabited these areas. Posing a threat to the natural beauty in the expansive openness. Roosevlet moved to create national parks and was a conservationist himself. Not only did he “popularize nature,” but he also introduced the American Cowboy to East Coast elites (Watts 2003). Theodore Roosevelt had so much to do with nature and the west, that he became a cowboy of sorts (Watts 2003).

Since then, the cowboy has expanded far beyond Theodore Roosevelt. Their characters became integral to American identity. Growing up, there were old posters hanging in my house from the 1930s that charted all the different types of cowboys and styles of dress. I had always pictured a cowboy like that, he sat astride his loyal horse amidst the boundless American frontier. This image of course is mythical, while also being steeped in true stories from America's history of western expansionism. The story that we have all become so familiar with perpetuates a romantic and rugged symbol within the realm of American pop culture, serving as an emblem of unfettered freedom, relentless adventure, and stoic masculinity. However, I was not sure if those cowboys still existed, if both the cattle industry and the world had changed so much that their culture was a thing of the past. I would get that question a lot from east coasters “do cowboys like that still actually exist?” I didn’t know if the cowboys of today would even look like the cowboys that I “knew” of, the ones from the posters I mean. I had actually met “cowboys” in Vermont before, that is I had met farmers who raised herds of cattle. But they didn’t dress like a cowboy, walk like a cowboy, or speak like a cowboy. They didn’t ride horses, they rode on tractors. They were certainly not the cowboy I had imagined. So much so, that it only occurred to me years later when I began this project, that I had actually met cowboys before. I had just thought of them as being farmers. Perhaps it really is the setting of the west that is what creates the cowboy of the American imagination.

Unfortunately, for many, the relationship with nature and land has become equivalent to an ephemeral encounter with a mythical entity. Both have been relegated to the status of a momentary attraction, like a revered piece of art, admired in a museum yet existing detached from our reality. Alternatively, it may be compared to a western movie, providing a brief, escapist diversion, enjoyed for a mere two hours from the comfort of a sofa or, if you're lucky, in a movie theater. The perpetual thrum of nature, resonating above and beneath the paths we tread to class, the roads we drive to the market, and the routes we commute upon, often eludes our acknowledgment. Nature and land, like the cowboy, have become distant concepts, scarcely intersecting with our daily existences. So distant, in fact, that I occasionally found myself questioning whether they still exist.

Literature Review

I. Symbolic Interactionism

In order to get reacquainted with the distant concepts of nature, land, and the cowboy, it is important to be familiar with the processes in which cultures and individuals prescribe meaning to words. Symbolic interactionism was a term first coined by the sociologist Herbert Blumer, it is a micro level theory that captures how humans understand the world around them (Dingwall 2001). Humans respond to stimuli as symbols (Blumer 1986). Language is a great example of this as the compilation of sounds are constructed together to form words which humans then impart meaning onto (Blumer 1986). If there is a shared symbolic system, then the speaker should assume that the listener would be able to interpret the sounds made and prescribe meaning to the words (Blumer 1986). Without this process, words would not have meaning at all. This understanding however depends on a shared symbolic system. The listener's

interpretation of these formulated sounds is potentially limited to their own understanding, experiences, and associations of these symbols (Dingwall 2001). For example, one's understanding of what a “cowboy” is depends on their own experience of that word. If the listener only has been exposed to the concept of a cowboy through pop culture, they may think that a cowboy could be anyone wearing a western hat and boots. They may think that cowboys are just outlaws or criminals, like how they are often depicted in classic westerns like *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly* (Leone 1966). Yet, someone with a closer experience to cowboys, someone who does not just define what a cowboy is through representations in pop culture, may instead understand that a cowboy does not often engage in gun fights or standoffs but are actually pretty similar to farmers. Cowboys can be people who work with livestock, especially in regards to herding cattle. Perhaps their vision of a cowboy would not even be someone wearing a western hat and boots at all. Maybe their cowboy rides on a four-wheeler to herd cattle, not even on a horse, and wears hiking boots.

This theory helps to contextualize how culture can impact how we understand the world around us. We can all individually have different interpretations of symbols. This means that nothing has meaning unless our cultures and societies give it meaning based on shared histories, experiences, and associations. All are necessary to create a shared symbolic system. This is why our understanding of what nature and land means changes if you speak to a cowboy versus if you speak to someone who grew up in a city for example. Their experiences with nature and land are different, and therefore they have different associations and interpretations of what meanings those words hold. These experiences go all the way back to childhood, which may be why all of the interview subjects started with their experiences of nature, land, and cowboys from their

early childhood, to construct a clearer definition of what those words mean when asked to define them.

II. *Naturework and The Human Exceptionalism Paradigm*

The sociologist Gary Alan Fine took the concept of symbolic interactionism and made it something even more specific to nature and our environment. Fine talks about how we must "embrace the metaphor" as in, the word "nature" is simply a metaphor (Fine 1997). For example, he states in his essay "Naturework and the Taming of the Wild: The Problem of "Overpick" in the Culture of Mushroomers," that we should instead be asking what "what is nature like" instead of "what is nature?" He explains that today, most Americans engage with nature during "leisure pursuits" (Fine 1997). Nature is dependent on cultural metaphors and is interpreted in light of experience (Fine 1997). Fine suggests that there are three different kinds of ways of understanding the metaphor of what nature is.

In reference to environmental literature he proposes three "competing metaphorical visions of nature" which are the protectionist view, an organic view, and a humanistic view (Fine 1997). The protectionist view is one that deprivileges human exceptionalism. Human exceptionalism is a theory developed by the environmental sociologists William R. Catton and Riley E. Dunlap. The human exceptionalism paradigm, or the HEP as they call it, is the concept that humans are separate from the environment because they have culture which makes them unique from other species (Catton 1978). Human behavior is most influenced by culture and within cultures, humans maintain free will. This means that humans are separate from their natural environment, indicating that anything can be solved when humans put their minds and ingenuity behind it. The human exceptionalist perspective neglects to acknowledge that human

society relies on ecosystems (Catton 1978). To contrast this idea, an alternative perspective would see humans as just one species among many, within interconnected biological communities that influence social existence (Catton 1978). In this view, the same biogeophysical factors that limit nonhuman ecosystems also impacts human societies (Kim et al. 2023). In the protectionist view, this is how they interpret humans as relating to nature. Humans must be the protectors. Nature is fragile and uncontaminated (Fine 1997). It is separate from the human world, on the other side of culture. However, just because it exists in a separate space, does not mean that humans should not act to "manage" and "protect" ecosystems from our own intrusions. We must "save us from ourselves" which often means creating policies that "sacrifice our interests" (Fine 1997).

The organic view, as Fine defines it, sees no boundary between the natural and human worlds (Fine 1997). We are part of the environment, we are part of nature. This is where naturework comes into his explanations. Naturework is how we experience a lack of separation from the human world. Here, one acts with nature to become one with it (Fine 1997). Nature only exists within our perspectives, perspectives shaped by the cultural contexts one inhabits (Fine 1997). This practice can be observed through the work the mushroom hunters do. In Fine's study, when asked what about the environment the mushroom hunters treasure, they immediately went to discussing their experience in nature saying "Early in the season, hunting in the cool, magnificent giant redwood forests . . . can produce both many choice edible mushrooms . . . and an exquisite sense of beauty, tranquility and exultation from the deep silence and sheer size of the trees. Right next to a thousand-year-old 300-foot-tall giant, you can find tiny, fragile, elegant Lepiotas ... and Mycenas, which can set your sense of proportion and perspective atingle" (Fine 1997). This way of understanding what nature is, through naturework, is similar to the ways of

the cowboy. They engage with nature and land constantly because of their cultural context, because of their role as cowboys. In this sense, they do not see themselves as being entirely separate from it as it is their way of supporting themselves physically, financially, and even spiritually.

The humanistic view is like the protectionist view in that humans and nature are separate but the humanistic view does not see nature in need of protection. The humanistic view is often understood as the "imperial" view of nature. In that nature is gifted by God to humans in order to act upon it in whatever way they see fit. Many of the cowboys interviewed saw nature through this lens, or at least saw nature as a gift from God for the benefit of humans. Often, in this perspective nature is seen as needing to be "tamed" or is seen as being dangerous. Interestingly, this is where conservation was born. Nature was to be used for human pleasure such as going fishing in a natural park and if not for pleasure, you can sell the fish you catch for profit. It is not so simple to interpret cowboys actions as strictly being in one of these three categories. Their relationship to nature is most often a blend of these three different ways of relating to the natural world.

III. Mythologies

Zooming out from words and language, one comes to the stories the words weave together to create. Claude Lévi-Strauss was an anthropologist who founded the structuralist movement in anthropology (Morales 2013). Much of his research covered myths and meaning making in cultures. Lévi-Strauss said that myths are like language in that they are a metaphor (like words) that must be told in order to exist (Lévi-Strauss 1955). In a way, similar to symbolic interactionism. He was particularly fascinated in the repetitive nature of myths, which become

universal elements that transcend individual cultures (Philen 2005). Simultaneously, these repetitive storylines are deeply rooted in cultural contexts. The purpose of a myth is to have a shared sense of understanding in a culture (Philen 2005). Though these stories touch on repetitive elements, they bring order to an otherwise chaotic world by offering explanations for natural phenomena or social norms (Philen 2005).

Roland Barthes was a philosopher who studied semiotics, the study of signs and symbols. Semiotics, symbolic interactionism, and naturework have many overlaps. Both theoretical approaches examine how humans use signs and symbols to communicate as well as to make sense of the world around them (Barthes 1972). Barthes wrote *Mythologies*, a book that is a collection of essays that analyze various myths in contemporary French culture, including in advertising, fashion, and popular culture, using semiotic analysis to reveal hidden meanings and ideologies (Barthes 1972). Here, Barthes argues that myths serve as a tool for conveying and reinforcing ideological messages in society (Barthes 1972). He suggests that myths often naturalize or legitimize certain social practices, values, and power structures, making them seem normal or inevitable (Barthes 1972).

The repeated recounting of narratives within the western genre underscores the extent to which Americans have made associations with the cowboy a normalized part of their cultural fabric. This normalization has become so ingrained that the cowboy's rugged strength was effectively leveraged in advertising campaigns, such as in the portrayal of cowboys in Marlboro Cigarettes advertisements, a practice that spanned from 1954 to as recently as 1999 (Stanford Research into the Impact of Tobacco Advertising, n.d.). To this day, they are still referred to as “cowboy killers.”As if a cigarette is the only thing that could ever kill a cowboy.

Both Lévi-Struass and Barthes write about the importance of myths in shaping meaning within cultures. As a myth is a way to use language to tell a story embedded with messages, western stories that depict cowboys are a kind of American myth. An iconic myth or an archetype due to the role they have played in shaping the cultural identity and narratives of the United States. Similar to the way certain objects or figures are elevated to mythic proportions in Barthes's analysis. Cowboys are often portrayed as rugged, individualistic, and embody the spirit of the American frontier. This portrayal reinforces cultural values of independence and self-reliance. This mythic status can even be seen in the story Rex Wilder tells about crossing the Rio Grande Gorge, dangling from the rope above the canyon waiting to swallow him. There, Wilder embodies the rugged, individualistic spirit of the cowboy. He hangs on that rope above the canyon, alone.

As stated above, Lévi-Strauss felt that myths were habitually repetitive and simplistic (Philen 2005). The western fits within this understanding of what a myth is as more often than not, the narratives follow a repetitive structure. Typically there are villains and heroes, or "good" and "bad" characters. Films like *El Dorado*, directed by Howard Hawks, capture this dichotomy in action. In it, a powerful rancher attempts to force a family of cattle herders to give up their water rights. Defending the family is a group composed of a steadfast sheriff, a spirited young adventurer, and a seasoned, straight-shooting gunslinger iconically portrayed by John Wayne (Hawks 1966). John Wayne's character is known for his tough exterior, sharpshooting skills, and a strong sense of loyalty and morality (Hawks 1966). Hollywood Westerns became so popular for communicating the values of this mythic figure. The cowboy became synonymous with traits like a strong sense of morals, strength, freedom, and the ability to tame the wild. Simultaneously, this imagined archetype captured a spirit of rebelliousness and autonomy, defying institutional

authority and societal norms, while embracing a life unbounded by the conventional structures of civilization. These are just a few of the American cultural values that these “myths" teach us. In turn, the frequent portrayal of this archetype led to the association of the depiction of men wearing clothing (cowboy boots and hats) which became symbols associated with their role as well as their character. Like a knight to his shining armor, a cowboy is as readily associated with his hat, boots, and his gun (Leone 1966). These iconic items hold these cultural meanings, they have become symbolic of these very values.

These character tropes are even embedded within the titles of films like in the case of *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly* (Leone 1966). *The Good, Bad, and The Ugly* follows not one but three morally ambiguous characters as they search for buried Confederate gold (Leone 1966). Though they are not technically cowboys, as in they herd cattle, the characters are identified within American culture as cowboys through their dress, behaviors, and ultimately the landscape in which they inhabit. The film is a tale of greed, rivalry, and survival in the harsh, unforgiving lands of the American Southwest, though it was filmed in Italy (Leone 1966). The director, Sergio Leone, captured the expansive “western” setting through long shots of the scenery paired with close up of the stoic and unflinching Clint Eastwood as Blondie (Leone 1966). A skilled gunslinger, often with a cigar in his mouth, the contrast of his nearly blank facial expressions in the face of danger captures this ideal of rugged masculinity.

However ironically, Eastwood's character Blondie (The Good) is a rather morally ambiguous individual. This is because the film was part of the subgenre of the Hollywood Western known as the Spaghetti Western (McClain 2010). The Spaghetti Western often further complicated the “myth” of the cowboy by capturing more morally ambiguous characters. It was a subgenre that was reactionary to the popular tropes in Hollywood Westerns (McClain 2010).

These films were produced by Italian studios and often filmed in Europe instead of out west. Spaghetti Westerns are known for their grittier, more violent, and ethically uncertain tone, unlike the often clear-cut morality and heroism portrayed in Hollywood Westerns. Characters in Spaghetti Westerns, like Clint Eastwood's "Blondie," are typically more anti-heroic, operating in a morally complex world, compared to the more straightforwardly heroic figures in Hollywood Westerns. These characters wander between the complexities and moral quandaries of the Wild West. The cowboy endures as an integral fixture of American storytelling and iconography.

Even in contemporary pop culture the cowboy “myth” endures. Though, it occasionally seeks to reevaluate and deconstruct the cowboy mythos, exploring its intrinsic ties to colonialism, violence, and toxic masculinity, thereby generating nuanced dialogues that probe beneath the stoic exterior of the American cowboy. A now classic example of this type of deconstruction is the film *Broke Back Mountain*. This movie is about the complicated romantic and sexual relationship of two cowboys (Lee 2005). Here, the director Ang Lee challenges the traditional norms of masculinity, especially within the fabrication of the hyper masculine cowboy. Whether glorified or critiqued, the cowboy perpetually rides through the American cultural landscape, symbolizing a myriad of narratives, ideals, and contradictions inherent within the tapestry of American identity and history, rich with the imagery of land and nature

This connection to cowboys and myths was specifically explored in the book *The Wild West: The Mythical Cowboy and Social Theory*, by Will Wright. Wright delivers a comprehensive examination of the complex relationship between the historical realities of the American West and the enduring myth of the cowboy. The book explores the various factors that have shaped the cowboy myth over time. Wright argues that the cowboy myth has become a powerful symbol of American identity, rooted in the nation's frontier heritage and its values of

individualism and freedom (Wright 2001, 8). He explores how this myth has been shaped and perpetuated through a range of cultural forms, including literature, film, television, and advertising. All the while, he examines how these cultural representations of the cowboy have contributed to a broader national narrative about the West, one that continues to influence American culture and politics to this day (Wright 2001, 8).

The cowboy myth has been shaped by a range of social and cultural forces, including economic interests, racial and gender politics, and the media. Even politicians have used the iconic imagery of the cowboy to their advantage. Wright recounts a tale of a global economic summit in which President Clinton distributed cowboy hats to the world leaders attending the event. This move was to help argue,"for more free trade at that summit, greater market individualism, and the cowboy hats, as the leaders understood, were symbolic of that argument" (Wright 2001, 8).

This myth has been used to reinforce gender and racial stereotypes, and to marginalize and erase the experiences of women, Native Americans, and other disenfranchised groups. Archetypal values of masculinity are often captured in stories of the cowboy such as "as shooting straight, acting alone, and riding tall in the saddle" (Wright 2001, 8). These are traits emblematic of the standard American society has for men, just cowboyified. One can interpret these traits as being tough, not needing anyone else but yourself, standing tall, being proud and skilled. Are these not the traits historically celebrated in American men? Even the word "cowboy" holds history that has been erased by the images of cinematic heroes like John Wayne and Clint Eastwood. White cowboys were once known as "cowhands" and as a pejorative term, black cowhands were instead called "cowboys" (Rancho Los Cerritos, n.d.). This was because "African American men being called "boy" regardless of their age stems from slavery and the

plantation era in the South. Many southerners moved to the west and westerners would have been familiar with southern racial etiquette. So, it is no surprise that the racial issues prevalent in the North and South were also impacting the American West" (Rancho Los Cerritos, n.d.).

Though Wright refers to the cowboy as a myth, this does not mean that cowboys do not exist or that there isn't truth in these western tales. He reminds the reader that the cowboy, "still rides from the western wilderness to create a civil society, and he still portrays the individualist promise, the promise of freedom and equality" (Wright 2001, 6). A critical examination of the cowboy myth and its origins is important to gain a deeper understanding of the complex social and cultural forces that have shaped American history and identity to this day. Especially, for the purposes of this thesis, to look at what this story has to say about how cowboys relate to land and nature. How Americans relate to land and nature.

There are many truths and true stories that come together to form the history of the west. Any story we tell has embellishments or "falsehoods" woven into them. That is the crisis of the human part of storytelling. We cannot be entirely objective. We have our own perspective that whether we are aware of it or not, will somehow make its way into our narratives. Instead of devaluing story telling altogether as a medium full of "falsehoods," it is important to remember that even if this is the case there is knowledge to be gained. Why pretend humans can be devoid of bias when we can learn so much more by looking into how subjectivity impacts the intellectual property we produce. By acknowledging the presence of ourselves in the narratives we tell, we become more aware of our own perspectives and limitations. This awareness encourages humility and prompts us to approach information with a critical mindset, recognizing that no single perspective is entirely objective. Instead of accepting narratives at face value, we become more inclined to examine underlying assumptions, motivations, and agendas. This

critical thinking enhances our ability to discern the nuances of a myth. It encourages us to question, challenge, and evaluate information rigorously. This skill is valuable not only in consuming information but also in producing more nuanced and thoughtful narratives

Methods

I. Songs As Myths

I used a mixed methods approach to answer my research question, a combination of quantitatively analyzing themes in songs as well as conducting qualitative interviews. In order to understand how cowboys of the past related to land and nature, I decided to look into cowboy ballads. It was difficult to find primary sources that recounted how a cowboy felt about land and nature but in song, this was not a difficult feat. Cowboy ballads are in fact another type of storytelling, another form of myth making. The period of time I was focusing on was from the 1850s to the early 1900s and ballads were very popular in this time period (Sid Richardson Museum 2016). Ballads are songs which recount long stories, they were often edited by the men that sang them, changing slightly as they were continuously passed along to the next cowboy. Often, they sang them during their long days of labor intensive work out in the prairies, or later in the evenings gathered around a campfire (Hull 1939). This was their way of expressing themselves. Capturing the desires, feelings, and experiences of being a man in the Wild West (Hull 1939). The most famous cowboy ballads were typically about outlaws, a way of passing on information from one area to the next such as “The Ballad of Jesse James” (The Lone Writer 2022).

I analyzed a book called “Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads” collected by John A. Lomax. This book was published in 1922 and mostly chronicles songs from the 1860s to the

1910s (Lomax 1922). After reading through a good portion of the songs twice, I came up with a list of codes to analyze what I was reading more efficiently. I paid attention to mentions of the land, the animals, the elements, the light, the plants and foliage that generally surround the cowboy in the great expanse of land they spent their time in and created codes relating to these topics. These codes included categories such as "#dangerinnature, #lonelinessinnature, and #beautyinnature." I created a google spreadsheet that outlined all ten codes that I decided to use and went back to collect quotations from songs that fit under the prescribed categories.

For example, from the song "Tumbling Tumbleweed" the quote "See them tumbling down. Pledging their love to the ground. Lonely but free I'll be found. Drifting along with the tumbling tumbleweeds." These lines were copied into my spreadsheet and coded with an "x" for each category I felt this line encompassed, #lonelinessinnature, #beautyinnature, and #freedominnature. "Loneliness in nature" being a description of loneliness in nature and "freedom in nature" being a description of the freedom felt in the west, identified through this explicit line "lonely but free I'll be found. Drifting along with the tumbling tumbleweeds." The contrast between the experiences these songs described, being lonely and free in nature all at once, was a common theme in the songs I coded for. The goal of tallying these songs was to provide a form of background research, how did cowboys once think of land and nature?

The main method used in this research however, was qualitative interviews. I had one week in Taos, New Mexico, where I attended a rodeo and spent time with cowboys. I interviewed as many cowboys as I could get in contact with through snowball sampling, a technique often used in qualitative research. This is when the initial subject or contact helps the researcher to connect with more participants. This method is particularly effective for reaching specific, niche, or hard-to-reach populations where participants are more likely to respond

through personal connections. I gave each of the participants pseudonyms to protect their identities..

II. The Journey To Cowboys In New Mexico

I had a hard time finding cowboys from the vantage point of upstate New York. At first, I reached out to contacts I found online, facebook groups, rodeo organizers, photographers, or even to authors I admired who wrote on similar subjects. I did all I could think of, to break into a world very distant from my own. I needed one connection, someone who could give me the access I needed. I imagined it would be very difficult to get cowboys to want to talk to me if I was just some strange, random girl from New York, asking a lot of personal questions. I needed to be trusted. Eventually I started to get desperate as time went on, reaching out to friends and family to see if they knew anyone who knew anyone. All the while I was frantically putting together what I needed for when I actually found some cowboys to talk to. I wrote up consent forms for the supposed participants to read and sign. I created a verbal script to read about the project and the identity protection I would grant to participants who agreed to participate. I prepared a set of questions, another script really, that included things like, “What’s a cowboy?” and some follow ups like “What does a cowboy do? Is there anything that is misunderstood about a cowboy? What defines a cowboy? Who is a cowboy and who is not?” Or, “I’ve been thinking a lot about nature and land and if there is a difference between them or not and I'm really not sure. Do you think there’s a difference between them? What do each of those words mean to you?”

Thankfully, sometime in the early summer, a childhood friend of my mothers who lived out west called telling me to book a ticket to Taos, New Mexico as soon as possible. She knew

cowboys and there was a rodeo coming up that I shouldn't miss. I had originally imagined myself conducting interviews in Montana or Wyoming, little did I know, New Mexico would be the perfect place for this research. I got on a plane, one small bag packed with my clothes, an audio recorder, and a tiny little book on cowboys. In New Mexico I interviewed four participants using snowball sampling to get into contact with them. The interviews ranged from being an hour and a half long, to four hours long. Three out of the four, were close to four hours long. I took with me to each interview a notebook to take notes on the interviews and an audio recorder. Below is a table with basic information of each interview subject:

Name:	Age range:	Born in Taos:	How long they have lived in Taos:	Profession:
Dylan Jackson	Mid 70s	Yes	Majority of his life	Cowboy
Adrian Caceres	Mid 70s	Yes	Majority of his life	Cowboy
Rex Wilder	Mid 70s	No	Roughly fifty years	Farrier
Meg Dutch	Late 60s	No	Roughly forty years	In horse tourism and worked on a ranch

Table 1: Basic Information of Each Interview Subject

III. Site - New Mexico

I had been given a little book called *Cowboys,* by Jay Clark, to borrow towards the beginning of this project. It's from the 1950s and is the perfect little book to slip into your jacket pocket or bag. It came with me everywhere all summer. Honestly, I had at first been suspicious of the information it touted and imagined I would use it in a more analytic or critical way of understanding what a cowboy was to Americans in the 50s. But, as I did my own research I began to find that much of the content was historically accurate. I also showed this book in my interviews to get the modern cowboys perspectives on it. All of them were impressed by how

much “correct” information it supplied in its few pages. After 70 years, it still holds up. Early on in the book, the area that is now known as New Mexico is mentioned. Cattle first came to the Americas in the late 1400s early 1500s, along with the Spanish conquistadors (McTavish 2013). Horses were also brought back to the Americas around this time; they had existed in the Americas long before but had disappeared from the archaeological record 10,000 years ago (Sullivan 2023). Cowboys, or vaqueros, were Spanish cowherders who rode on horseback. When they came to the Americas, they were unfamiliar with the land and terrain. Because of this, missionaries on newly established ranches, would force Native Americans into training to become cowherders. They became the Vaqueros, the first American cowboys (Clark 1954).

The land in New Mexico has been settled by Native Americans for thousands of years. The adobe style building of the Pueblo in Taos, has been continuously inhabited for over one thousand years (Taos Pueblo, n.d.). Coming from New York, where the ancient history of this land has been erased, leaving very little trace of the Indigenous people who lived here long before Europeans ever thought of finding a new trade route to India, it is hard to describe how it feels to be in a place that doesn’t have so much pavement covering up its history. That is something that I didn’t expect to be so struck by. You look around New Mexico and you can *feel* how long people have been living on the plains, in those deserts, and up those mountains. The Anasazi, a name given by the Navajos meaning “ancient enemy” is the only surviving record of the name of the tribe that lived in the region from approximately 1200 BCE to the late 13th century CE (New Mexico History, n.d.). Today, this name is considered controversial, as it only captures one side of the story of these ancient peoples, unfortunately there is no record of what they called themselves (Indian Pueblo Cultural Center, n.d.). Now, they are known as the Ancestral Puebloan tribe that lived in the four corners region of what is now the United States

(Indian Pueblo Cultural Center, n.d.). This is land in and around Utah, Colorado, Arizona, and New Mexico. The Ancestral Puebloans settled around the river banks, specifically around the Rio Grande (New Mexico Tourism Department, n.d., "Native American Communities"). This river goes through Taos, forming a deep gorge indicating how long this river has been flowing through the state, carving its way deep into the earth. This is the same canyon that in the 1970s Rex Wilder would cross on a rope. The area however was not just settled by the Ancestral Puebloans, today there are twenty three tribes in the state of New Mexico. Nineteen Pueblos, three Apache tribes, and the Navajo Nation (New Mexico Tourism Department, n.d., "Native American Communities"). Though, this is only a fraction of the number of tribes there used to be, due to the ongoing forced removal and violence perpetrated by colonizers towards Indigenous populations (Fontaine 2014).

In 1598, Juan de Oñate led the Spanish colonization of the province of New Mexico. He established his first capital in San Juan de los Caballeros at the confluence of the Rio Grande and Chama Rivers (Aron 2015, 20). In 1610 Santa Fe was founded and became the new capital. Something I came to understand while being in New Mexico is that though the Spanish imagined the land and the people living there as being "conquered," there was much push back from Native Americans on this "conquered" label (Aron 2015, 20). They did not yet feel conquered, they had not imagined they lost this battle (Aron 2015, 20). While driving through Galisteo, a census designated place outside of Santa Fe, a historic sign said that "Spanish explorers found several Tano-speaking Pueblos in the Galisteo Basin in 1540. They were among the leaders of the Pueblo Revolt of 1680. 150 Tano families were eventually resettled in Galisteo Pueblo in 1706. Droughts, feminine, Comanche raids, and disease led to its abandonment by 1788, with most of the survivors moving to Santo Domingo" (Historical Marker Project 2014). Someone

had taken a marker to the sign and put quotation marks around “found” with an arrow pointing to it that read “lol.” I felt this was a real sign of the times, for centuries now Indigenous people have been trying to reclaim their historical narrative of colonization and now people are finally beginning to listen. Spanish settlements were constantly being raided by the Navajos and Apaches and the Pueblo people tried to seek protection from the Spaniards. After many failures on the Spanish side to provide protection and decades of “religious repression, economic suppression, and sexual exploitation of women had generated discontent among the Pueblos sparked periodic flare-ups of local, anticolonial fervor” (Aron 2015, 20). So when the Pueblo Revolt came in 1690 it was not much of a surprise to the Spanish (Aron 2015, 20).

New Mexico eventually gained independence from Spain in the early 19th century and became a Mexican territory. Santa Fe quickly became a trading route and American settlers began to pour in via the Santa Fe trail (History.com Editors 2021). New Mexico was not part of Mexico for very long because in 1846 violence between Mexicans and Americans erupted and soon the Mexican American War began. General Stephen W. Kearny took Santa Fe without “significant” Mexican opposition. Two years later “the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ceded New Mexico to the United States, and in 1853 the territory was expanded to its present size through the Gadsden Purchase” (History.com Editors 2022).

Because of New Mexico's rich and diverse history it became the perfect place to conduct this research. It held evidence of some of the earliest American cowboys and ranches. It is a place where people still refer to themselves as being either Anglo, Indian, Chicano, or Hispano meaning a descendant of the conquistadors. Some cowboys still call themselves vaqueros and use terms such as majordomo which means the head cowboy. It is a land very much informed by its history and combines so much diversity. I had one cowboy say to me after hearing who I had

interviewed already “oh you are really getting everyone, the anglo, the gringo, the chicano, the woman, you need the Indian.” Furthermore, as the challenges posed by climate change intensify, the arid desert environment is becoming even more unforgiving. Among the cowboys I interviewed, there was a consensus that water has taken on an unparalleled significance, with some describing it as "more valuable than land." They expressed genuine concern, acknowledging the looming possibility that "someday soon, all the water is gonna be gone."

IV. The Subjects and What Even is a Cowboy Anyway?

After purchasing a ticket to Taos, I reached out to some of the contacts I had been given trying to see if they would be willing to speak with me and eventually sit down for an interview. They were often hard to get a hold of, not being near their cellphones. As I approached the date of my flight, I was concerned that I did not have enough official confirmations from my potential interview subjects. I was told not to worry and to trust that I would at least find some cowboys to talk to at the rodeo.

The individuals who ended up agreeing to participate in official interviews with me, where we would sit together for a few hours and talk with my recorder turned on, were hard to come by. The first interview I had was with Dylan Jackson. A self described “gringo,” a white man in his mid 70s born and raised in Taos, New Mexico. He was characterized by others as being a “real cowboy.” He too defined himself as a cowboy. In our interview I asked him to clarify what he meant by “cowboy” and he said that “anyone can be a cowboy. A cowboy is someone who can take care of cattle, can take care of horses, that can ride a horse.” I asked him if a farrier could be considered a cowboy and he said “in some cases yes.” He clarified that the bronc riders I had witnessed at the rodeo the previous day, who competed to stay on a bucking

horse for as long as possible, were a different group. He referred to them as "athletes, they're not cowboys, most of them at least." As an illustration, he mentioned, "one guy by the name of Danny Belvicio from New York. He was just an athlete. He wasn't a cowboy at all."

I also interviewed Adrian Caceres, a self described descendant of the Spanish conquistadors who arrived in New Mexico in the 1540s (Aron 2015, 18). His family had owned the land he currently lives on for at least three generations. Adrian was also in his 70s, born and raised in Taos and a friend of Dylan's. I was told that he too was a "true cowboy," he described himself as being on too. When asked what a cowboy was, he explained that today cowboys are not nearly the same as they were even just a generation ago. "The real cowboy" he said was "macho" and had to be very brave. They didn't live as long as the cowboys of today do, because "you don't work as hard." They needed to wrestle with the elements and did not have the same type of technology that the cowboys today have. He mentioned that cowboys now have luxuries like a trailer or a proper bed, propane, a radio, a TV even, and that has made them weaker. Modern cowboys don't need to fight for their lives like the older cowboys had to do. Even the horses are not as strong. A cowboys horse now could never travel the same distances that older cowboys horses could. He explained that now, a horse gets tired after six hours of work. Older horses would be pushed for days. When I asked him what made someone a cowboy he said "taking care of your horse, feeding your horse oats every evening." He also said that "you have to take care of your fences." This is because your property is "your sovereignty." He described a story where someone's horses got onto Pueblo land and because they were on someone else's land they were lost to the horses original owner. I could not find any law that specifically stated this but, a law Adrian mentioned was that unlike in other states, in the West you must fence

livestock out of your land instead of fencing your livestock into your land. He said he didn't agree with this law but that is the way it is in New Mexico.

Next, I interviewed Rex Wilder. He is a retired farrier, a profession that deals with shoeing horses. He is originally from Massachusests and New York and moved out to New Mexico in the 1960s. He too was a friend of Dylan's and familiar with Adrian, like them, he is in his 70s as well. Though he did not identify as being a cowboy, by the other two cowboys definitions, Rex fit in with the "requirements" as he was very familiar with "working with a horse" and even with livestock. Not only does Rex have experience with horses, real intimate experiences with them as a farrier, but he has also raised livestock. I was told by the person that initially introduced me to Rex that while working for cowboys "he has seen everything and would be a great person to talk to." When I asked him what he thought a cowboy was, he said "well anyone who thinks they're a cowboy is. But then it's just like well what kind and how good." He said cowboys have a "real sense of pride" and even suggested that the real modern cowboy is a truck driver. He explained that this is not only because was there would be a good chance that the driver would be wearing "a western hat and western boots, I learned a long time ago you don't call them a cowboy hat and cowboy boots," but that the truck drivers of today were part of a long legacy of a Union called the Teamsters Union. Rex explained that "the union goes back before the age of the automobile. So if you were a Teamster, you were good at the reins [horse reins], and you carried heavy freight in these wagons. So there's a whole gob of people that that working profession was with horses, but they were Teamsters. They weren't cowboys. They weren't ranchers. They were truck drivers. And so the tradition is carried over into the 18 Wheeler. Our professional Teamsters today, if you go back in their family tree, their

daddy was a Teamster before them, and their daddy was a Teamster before them, and then somebody was behind a team of horses."

Then at the end of my week in Taos, I interviewed Meg. My only cowgirl, she was in her 60s and originally from Ohio. She moved out to Taos in the 1970s in search of some "wildness." Before being introduced to her, Meg was described to me as being a "psychedelic cowgirl." However, like Rex, Meg also did not identify as being a cowgirl. Although she too fits into the categorical definition of a cowboy by the standards of Dylan and Adrian, Taos's "real cowboys." While living and working on a ranch up in the mountains of Taos, she would sometimes help the other cowboys herd cattle or find cows that had wandered away from the herd. She also has had a lot of experience taking care of horses. That is her main profession, she works in "horse tourism." She takes out tourists on long rides through the wilderness of Taos on horseback. She has many horses on her property and worked with Rex for many years, as he was her farrier. In the interview I asked her if she saw herself fitting into cowboy culture at all and she said, "no not really, I prefer to call it "natural horsemanship" cowboys are rough and tough with their horses, not all of them, but that is because they had to be." She explained that a cowboy really is "someone who goes out to take care of the cows, tends to the cows." Later, she talked about her experience doing that same thing, taking care of the cows up in the mountains. Though, it was not often in her career that she did engage in that type of work. She had also competed in Rodeos as a kid, doing barrel racing. This is an event in a rodeo where you ride on a horse around barrels, competing to see who can ride around the barrels in the fastest amount of time. Apparently she did have a really fast time, so much so that even Rex told me about Meg's barrel racing speed.

Results and Discussion:

I. Results of the Cowboy Ballad

Out of twenty songs randomly selected in the book "Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads" collected by John A. Lomax there were nine themes that came up with regularity in regards to nature and land (N+L). For the purposes of this part of the results, nature and land are combined as one. There was no clear distinction between nature and land in these songs but that could also have been because I had not yet had an understanding that cowboys today, and perhaps of late, see nature and land as two separate entities. This could have been the fault of my own positionality while reading and listening to these songs, not coming from a cultural background that stewed on the differences between land and nature in my daily life, unlike the cowboy. These themes provide insights into how cowboys in the late 1800s and early 1900s, when these ballads were written down, felt about nature and land. Most often their primary source accounts were filled with poetic descriptions of the landscapes they spent their time in. In these descriptions, most frequently its beauty was discussed (9 times) and then a sense of belonging in that landscape (9 times). The combination of a sense of danger (7 times) and of loneliness (7 times) was also seen. These themes are still relevant to the ways in which the cowboys of today view nature and land and their relationship to earth.

	Descriptions of N+L	Danger in N+L	Beauty of N+L	Death and N+L	Loneliness in N+L	Freedom in N+L	Vastness of N+L	Belonging in N+L	Livelihood and N+L
Total Mentions:	15	7	9	3	7	3	6	9	3

Table 2: Frequency of Themes in 20 Randomly Selected Songs From "Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads" by John A. Lomax

II. Creating The Culture of The Cowboy - Early Childhood and Identity

I am not sure exactly what I expected to find when I went out to New Mexico. Perhaps my pursuit of the cowboy mythos stems from its stark contrast to my East Coast upbringing, rendering it as elusive and enchanting as chasing a mythical being from a fairy tale. The cowboy that I had been exposed to at the start of this project was the cowboy of the American imagination. Brimming with symbolism, this "myth" ignited my curiosity to explore the relationship between contemporary cowboys and their connection to land and nature.

Before this project was on my horizine, I read *Braiding Sweetgrass* and was deeply moved by how Robin Wall Kimmerer discusses the Indigenous American way of relating to Earth. Out of the many wise words she wrote, one quote really resonated with me. She explains that the reason she taught her daughters to garden was "so they would always have a mother to love them, long after I am gone" (Kimmerer 2013). This is really what is missing, relating to Earth as a nurturing mother, as a guiding entity of its own, subjectified in a way, a spiritual and almost sentient being. Earth should be loved like a family member, like a mother, and that sacred relationship begins at birth. It's hard to care about something that isn't close to us, that seems so abstract and unreal. Kimmerer teaches her daughters to garden, so they can express love and care to the Earth and receive love and care back. Sure it is not the same, but as gardeners they will always have a mother to feed them, as long as they listen to what she has to say carefully. It is a different kind of language (Kimmerer 2013).

The cowboy has a similar story. Their relationship to the Earth begins nearly at birth. When asked how they got into their careers (some as ferriers, some as cowboys, some as majordomos, some as horse trainers, some in horse tourism) each of the people I interviewed immediately went all the way back to their childhood to chart their explanation. This is because

this is where identity is formed. From birth, their relationship with the Earth is shaped by the sociocultural environment, where the act of interacting with nature through activities like horse training or ranching is not just a career but a way of life. This interaction frames their identity and their understanding of nature and land. The culture they grow up in, steeped in the tradition of the cowboy, molds not just their career choices but also their perception of the natural world, a classic example of naturework (Capek 2020). Their understanding of and relationship with nature is continuously constructed and reconstructed through daily interactions and experiences, showcasing the principles of symbolic interactionism (Capek 2020).

Dylan Jackson

The first cowboy I interviewed was Dylan Jackson. I was connected to him through a friend of a friend named Samantha whose land he kept cattle on. I called Samantha at some point over the summer to explain what I was doing and to see if she could connect me to any cowboys. She was a realtor from Texas living in Taos on a piece of property that used to be part of a bigger ranch. Bringing up Dylan quickly as a contender to sit for an interview with me, she described him as "A real cowboy, a Vietnam vet, a horse trainer, who runs the Taos rodeo. He wears a fresh crisply starched pressed shirt, with pearl snaps, everyday." She told me that the cowboys she knew were in the business not just as a money making endeavor, but because they have an intense connection to land and to the animals they work with. She said land can be harsh and they are at the mercy of nature.

A story Samantha told me while on the phone for the first time, was of a day on the ranch where she was asked to come help a calf who was born with its uterus outside of its body. The cowboys instructed her to hold the calf's head while a doctor came by to massage the uterus with

salt. Over time, the uterus was supposed to shrink and could slowly be pushed back up into place. This process took hours. Samantha held the calf's head in her hands petting her nose. The cowboys, including Dylan, held her too, stroking her side and humming to her. Samantha said that after hours of staring into these fearful little calves' big brown eyes, realizing she was being helped the calf slowly began to relax. “How could you not be connected to an animal after an experience like that, you see their soul and they see yours.”

I called Dylan a few days before I flew to Taos, asking him if he would be interested in speaking to me and if he did, when he would be available. He told me to meet him at the rodeo on Sunday. “How would I find you?” I asked. He told me that if I asked anyone they would be able to point me in his direction. Roughly speaking, he would be on the west side of the ring near a John Deere tractor. I found him at the rodeo but he seemed preoccupied and I wanted to talk in a place where we could have minimal distractions, a rodeo not being an ideal place for this.

Meeting the next morning on the mutual friend's property, Dylan pulled up in his pick up truck in a double denim look, freshly starched shirt with pearl snaps included. He kept his western style hat on inside. To begin his story, Dylan told me about how his grandad had had a dairy farm and that “that’s how it all started.” Born in the 40s, he himself was born and raised on the same land his grandfather had settled. When talking about his early childhood he described how he was the “only gringo in school” and “never wanted to be inside, I always wanted to be outside.” I asked if his father had been a cowboy, too. He responded by saying his father had shot himself before he could ever know him “but that was the way it was.” Instead, he was raised by his grandparents and mother on the dairy farm with his many sisters. As a self described troublemaker, he had a hard time staying in school and instead began working. Far from home in Wyoming and Utah, he would take horses up into the mountains “packing goop” as a young

teenager and hauling up fuel, leaving cans on trees and collecting empty ones on his way down. He was all alone in these mountains. He knew people were near enough, but he would never encounter anyone else on his way up there.

His bond with nature was created then, in his childhood and early teenage years. He learned how to be still in a natural environment, to observe its ques. When I first arrived in Taos I went straight to the rodeo. Sitting in the bleacher seats with a view of the expansive sky and the daunting mountain range, I saw a cloud coming towards us in the distance. There was rain falling in sweeping tendrils, the sunlight dancing through its sparkling wisps. The woman sitting next to me turned towards me, seeing that I was watching the cloud. “It's a rain walker,” she said. I asked Dylan about this concept and he said he hadn’t heard of them before. Though he didn’t have a name for these rain clouds, he knew how to listen to nature. Discussing this, he said “Well, when I'm cutting hay or baling hay - if that rain comes from the south, or the southwest. If it comes up the gorge and it gets over the mountains over there. I won't quit. It's gonna go right around me. And if it comes out of the east. Then I'm gonna get it.” He told me he had a cowboy friend named Tony Red who passed away, that he could predict the weather for the next season. This knowledge comes from decades of listening.

Adrian Caceres

Another cowboy Adrian, born and raised in Taos, had a similar answer when asked “Are you a cowboy? How did you get into your career?” I had been introduced to Adrian through another friend of a friend. A psychoanalyst from California who moved to Taos. Similarly to Samantha from Texas, the analyst had land that was taken care of by Adrian. He would pasture his horses on her property. Originally, she wasn’t sure if she wanted to put in a word for me with

Adrian as keeping their relationship “sacred and simple” was paramount. To me, she described Adrian as being a true cowboy. A town celebrity, a father figure, and a patriarch of Taos, who had worked with the Forest Service for decades. Eventually, she did give me his contact information. But once I had sat down with Dylan for our afternoon conversation, he sent me Adrian and other local cowboys numbers who he thought would be interested in speaking to me. After connecting with Dylan, I was told other cowboys would follow his lead.

Adrian and I met a few days after the rodeo for a coffee at a local shop. We sat outside. It was a beautiful blue sky, sunny day. There were nameless dogs off leash, walking around at our feet. Adrian knew them all by name, pointing out their owners nearby, exchanging hellos to people as they passed us. He was wearing his cowboy uniform - the hat, pearl snap button down, and jeans. Something of note was that both Dylan and Adrian wore hiking boots instead of cowboy boots, despite the rest of their more traditional ways of dressing.

Right off the bat, he delved into stories about his family legacy intertwined with cowboy culture; his father, uncle, and he, himself, lived the cowboy life. Additionally, they held the revered position of majordomos in Taos, a role intrinsically linked to water management. As a majordomo, the responsibility of overseeing the community’s water supply fell squarely on their shoulders. This role, I believe is part of why the psychoanalyst whose land he worked on described him as a patriarch of Taos. Merriam-Webster defines a majordomo as someone who acts as a chief steward, managing arrangements and operations, typically in substantial households or enterprises (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). In this case, the household is the land.

During our interview, he attended to several calls, allowing me to listen in. These conversations predominantly revolved around inquiries from landowners and farmers, questioning whether their water supply would be activated that day, with his response most

commonly being, “not today.” In New Mexico, the presence of ancient ‘acequias’ is quite prominent. Initially established by Spanish colonizers, these narrow canals transport water across vast distances, proving essential in the arid landscapes (Medrano 2021). Community management predominantly oversees these acequias, unless one possesses individual water rights.

Life in the desert demands a heightened awareness and conscientious management of available natural resources, necessary to ensure survival. Without access to private wells or water sources, reliance on communal provisions for necessities like crop irrigation and drinking water becomes paramount. Growing up in a lineage of majordomos, honored positions in Taos, instilled in Adrian a profound respect and consciousness of the Earth’s limited resources, shaping a backdrop to his daily existence. In our interview, he told me that these days you have to be prepared for the water to just disappear. Any day now, it may never come back.

At the core, he wanted to be a cowboy because it was “a nature thing.” He could continue to do the things he loved as a kid like hunting, chasing cows on horseback, and going up into the mountains. As a cowboy, he got to do that for a living. He recognized that because he was around that as a child, these activities became hobbies, ways of entertaining himself. And as he grew up, these activities turned from hobbies into his livelihood, still a way of life he takes great pleasure from.

Rex Wilder

Another cowboy I met with from yet another mutual friend, was Rex Wilder. I had heard of him from the very beginning of my time scouting cowboys to talk to in Taos. But, he isn’t technically a cowboy, he is a farrier. A farrier is a skilled craftsperson specializing in the care,

maintenance, and treatment of horse hooves. Their responsibilities includes a range of hoof-related tasks such as trimming the hoof to promote proper balance and growth, removing old horseshoes, cleaning and inspecting hooves for any signs of diseases or injuries, and fitting and nailing new horseshoes, if shoes are necessary based on the horse's specific needs and activities. Farriers have to be highly attuned to the animals they work with, otherwise they put their own lives in great danger.

I spent an afternoon in Taos on the property of a local horse trainer, Meg. Though I ended up interviewing her later on, this time I sat with her sharing some beers while talking and watching as her horses were shod by a young farrier. Meg used to work with Rex Wilder but in his old age he has retired. His body was sacrificed to his craft. Decades of squatting underneath a horse in all sorts of positions, gently waiting for the animal to hand over its hoof, all while holding smoking hot irons and horse shoes, his body had become achey. His knowledge ran so deep, his role being essential in ensuring the overall hoof health of the horse, thereby contributing to the horse's comfort, mobility, and performance. His and other farriers expertise combines elements of blacksmithing and knowledge of equine anatomy and physiology, enabling them to create and adjust horseshoes effectively, and provide specialized care tailored to each horse's individual requirements.

Though Rex does not identify as being a cowboy, he has worked with them and been around cowboy culture for decades now. He has "seen everything." Because of this distance, Rex had a unique perspective and could critique the cowboys bias from his own vantage point. Meeting at a restaurant for a beer, once again stationed outside, there was soft guitar music strumming in the background throughout most of our interview. He wore a sunny yellow pearl snapped button down, jeans, and a hat with sunglasses perched on the brim. He had a mustache,

and reminded me of Sam Elliott, the actor who is often in modern westerns. Unfortunately, I don't remember what shoes he wore, but I do remember he walked just like the cowboys in the movies. A slight sway and a sturdy, quiet confidence.

Originally from the East Coast himself, he talked about his journey beginning in childhood where he had an immense love for nature. He got on his first horse at five and at fourteen he got a job at a riding stable. Here, he said he was paid in riding, meaning instead of getting a paycheck Rex could hop on a horse and take it for a ride. As a kid he was a sheep and goat 4 H'er. The 4 H I learned, stands for Head, Heart, Hands, and Health. It is a club that encourages kids to get involved in farm activities, raising sheep for example and competing with other kids to see who raised the best flock. He said it "taught him how to have an eye, to see confirmation from an animal. This is how you determine an animal's strengths and weaknesses." This skill served as both a foundation for his future career but also as a spiritual way of being that he carries with him always. Listening to animals and nature he says gives us a glimpse into a, " whole spiritual world that's moving under us and through us all the time. And all we have to do is pay little attention. It's like an art form. It's like meditation or anything else. It's not going to happen unless you give it a try. And the more you try, the more it's going to happen. Yeah, but it's not going to happen by itself."

Meg Dutch

I was introduced to Meg through the contact that originally brought me to Taos, a family friend. Rex Wilder was also close to Meg as well, having worked with her for many years shoeing her horses. I had spent a day hanging out with her on her property, but our more "formal" interview took place inside my family friend's house. We sat together in the living room

talking. She was dressed like how she was first described to me, as “a psychedelic cowgirl.” She wore flowy clothing that often had tie dye included somewhere. You could tell she was tough and very loving all at once. I noted that down in my journal when I went to watch her horses getting shod. She spoke to her horses and her dogs like they were family members, she was not afraid to tell them what to do but every touch and command was filled with affection.

Like the other interviewees, when asked how she got into her career she started her story from the very beginning of her life. From as early as she could remember she could not sit still. Growing up in Ohio, her parents said that she was born with an ear ready to listen to nature. She remembered, “I was, back then as they called it, hyperactive. I didn't always play well in elementary school. I didn't play well with others. I was definitely a tomboy. I was climbing down into the sewers to chase down raccoons. And I was just always with nature. My dogs, cats… we had tons of animals. My mom gave me a pony when I was little. I got into the 4 H too but I rode the pony all over my neighborhood. I had the best childhood, riding all around. Now it is all built up and gone.” She said that if she had grown up in the west she probably would have instead competed in Rodeos instead of at the 4 H.

Later on in life in her 20s, she would go on to move to New Mexico during a wild blizzard. She and her partner had spotted a sign while driving that said “Shadow Mountain Guest Ranch Horse Riding.” They drove up this three mile long road and finally came across the ranch. “It was spectacularly beautiful,” she said, “ we went to this guest ranch where all these Native Americans were and had all these Mustangs and cabins, and we went snowmobiling and horseback riding. I was like, oh my god, this is so great!” Eventually, they were asked if they wanted to stay and work at the ranch, the rest is history. She has been living in New Mexico since the 1970s. However, she no longer lives at the ranch, it closed years ago. Now, she takes

people on guided horseback rides through her property and up into the mountains on the outskirts of Taos. Meg does this to share her knowledge set. She says her personality in general, was always more attuned to animals and to nature than to anything else. She has a sensitivity to the "animals psychology, language, and body."

Spending time in land and nature from a young age is so important and so influential to these individuals. I asked some of my friends and family about how they got into their careers as a mini experiment and not one of them started by talking about their childhood. These cowboys, and every other person I interviewed all began in this way, by starting with their childhoods and the amount of time they spent outside getting acquainted with nature. Just like Robin Wall Krimmers children, they learned to listen to the earth, to connect to the earth, like a family member, as to the cowboys, the land gives them their livelihood as well as fulfilling their passions.

In these first four interviews, as well as in every interview afterward, each person began with their childhood as a stepping point to answer my questions. In their early formative years, their identities as cowboys or as someone who at least exists close to cowboy culture, begins to be pieced together. Starting from the very beginning of their lives they start to tell their personal narratives. This way of answering my questions echoes the "once upon a time" format that opens up a fairy tale, emphasizing the mythic format that the interviewees are unintentionally engaging with. They were crafting their own personal narratives, their own personal myths really, as we spoke. To call these stories "personal myths" does not mean that they are "false" stories, it means that these are the tales told that communicate something about how these cowboys construct their identities, how they see themselves.

Supported by the concept that when a memory is recalled, each time the details within the memory become slightly altered, the memory becomes mythical in nature because there is a blend that exists between “truth” and personally crafted fiction (Loftus 1983). This is one of the reasons why eyewitness testimonies are not considered unreliable (Loftus 1983). But, this should not devalue a personal story. Instead, these stories, whether entirely “factual” or slightly altered by the waves of time, say something even more important. They detail the ways in which these cowboys create meaning and experience a culturally situated identity (Barthes 1972). The cowboys' identities are rooted in childhood memories, often situated in nature. Such as Dylan’s experiences alone in the mountains as a young teen “packing goop,” Adrian growing up in a family of cowboys and majordomos spending time in a cabin in the woods, Rex’s experience as a child competing as a 4 H’er, or Meg’s childhood spent on her pony riding around the neighborhood. Fine's concept of naturework emphasizes how individual and collective identities, especially within a specific culture like cowboys, are formed through interaction with nature. The notion that memories and stories, even when altered or mythologized over time, contribute to the construction of a culturally situated identity aligns with naturework (Fine 1997). It even echoes the structure of the cowboy ballad, being slightly altered each time a new cowboy learned the song and began to make it his own. This concept suggests that our understanding of and relationship with nature is shaped through social interactions and narratives. Thus, the cowboys' tales of their experiences in nature become a crucial part of how they understand themselves and their cultural identity, exemplifying the intertwining of nature, land, memory, and social construction. Telling these stories is how they create their identities, identities deeply connected to nature and land. This afterall, is how humans create meaning (Philen 2005). In order to form a culture around cowboys they must have stories that go along with it.

III. Defining Land vs Nature - As Separate Entities

Throughout my time in college I have been tasked to stew on nature quite often. I had never been called upon to muse on the subject before, specifically about the meaning of nature. The language, the word choice, what even is nature? Is it a place, is it all around us, are animals part of nature? When we say things like, "I need to go sit in nature for a bit," what are we actually saying? This statement for example implies that nature is a destination separate from our daily lives. It is something you have to go find in order to "sit in." Various classes I have taken while at Bard have challenged me with these questions and I never felt there was a clear answer. Nature is a constructed subject that's definition varies culture to culture. This is an example of symbolic interactionism, a micro-level sociological theory that focuses on how individuals and society as a whole create and interpret symbols (words) to develop and communicate meaning (Capek 2020).

As stated, nature, and also land, do not inherently have meaning (Capek 2020). They are words that different cultures within the English language even, interpret and prescribe meaning to (Fine 1997). Often the interpretation of these words are based on an individual's experience with land and nature, as well as their own cultural backgrounds (Capek 2020). This can be seen in the way cowboys interpret land and nature, every one of them explaining that the two words mean very different things. In contrast, from the knowledge set of my own cultural background I am not sure I always saw such a clear distinction between these words.

These musings not only made me question what nature is but also what land means, and how it potentially stands in contrast with, or compliments nature. When I started to toy with these ideas it only started to make me wonder about other ways of constructing what nature and land are. To address this in my interviews, as I was specifically curious to hear what the cowboys

had to say about this, I'd say "I've been thinking a lot about land and nature, and I'm curious if there is a difference between them. I'm not sure. Do you think there is a difference between those two things?" I didn't want to impose my own ideas of the distinction (as at this point in my academic career I felt there was a difference between these two words). I only wanted to call attention to the words and possibility of a difference between them. This is the question I would ask to learn more about how the cowboys felt about nature and land, especially if they understood them as being separate, how they would interpret them.

Dylan Jackson

In our interview, I asked Dylan what he thought nature was and he said "nature is taking care of the land." He went on to say "Mother Nature is basically all I think about. You know, you plow it, you disc it, you level it, you plant it, and watch it reap and grow…taking care of the land." This captures symbolic interactionism at work. Because he is so close to nature, his whole life seems to revolve around it. Both in the sense that nature is the space in which he finds joy, but also in that this is how he financially supports himself. He has spent so much of his time in nature, that this is really all he thinks about. It is everything. It is part of his culture, to be so immersed in the natural world. The way he sees nature, is as something that needs to actively be cared for and engaged with. In a way, perhaps this is his declaration that humans have a responsibility to work with nature and to protect nature. In return, it often protects him in a sense. As in, nature is what grants him his livelihood. It is how he supports himself and all those he loves and cares for.

Land on the other hand, seems to be all encompassing. When asked about what land is, he paused and said, "land is everything, water and land." Without land, there would be no nature

to interact with, to care for, to make a profit from. In the same way, water is tied to that concept as well. Without water, you do not have anything to support your crops, but also to support yourself. Water is life, and perhaps what he is saying is that land is life as well. Land and water are resources that you can use to help you cultivate nature.

But cultivating nature is not just about making a profit for Dylan. In fact, he actively chooses to avoid making the largest profit possible. The most lucrative deal he could make would be to sell his land. When talking about how young people do not care about land or nature, that they just want to sell the land that has been in their family for generations he said, "yeah, I can sell my place for over a million dollars. But what would I do with that money? Go find it [land] somewhere else. I love it here." Even though land still exists as a resource, his connection to it runs much deeper. Land is what sustains him. It is what gives him life, it is where love is cultivated.

This interpretation of land and nature is a perfect example of symbolic interactionism. Because Dylan is a cowboy and makes money from producing natural goods, grown on land, using water (the resources), he has a unique understanding of what nature is and what land is. His vantage point, his experiences high up in the mountains "packing goop" as a teenager, or herding cattle in the valleys, have made him see nature through a particular light. He sees nature as something to actively engage with in order to keep alive. Land is what grants you the ability to engage with nature. Perhaps if he wasn't a cowboy and didn't have the relationship to the land that he does, he would have already sold it. Land means something different to him than what it means to a developer from out of state for example. Because he is a cowboy, land is everything and mother nature is all he thinks about. When I asked him why he loves the land so much his

reply was “I like the country, I like the weather, I cuss at weather, but that doesn’t matter.” He loves it.

Adrian Caceres

Adrian defined nature in a slightly different way, he said, “we are kind of religious you know, so we believe that God, God put Him in nature. If it wasn’t for God you would have no nature.” As he continued to explain what that meant to him, he clarified that nature to him encompassed the wildlife, the birds and the bobcats in the mountains for example. A cowboy, he said “cares about nature, about the beauty of the resources. So, I’ll try to protect it.” As a majordomo, Adrian pays very close attention to resources, especially to water. This provides an even more specific vantage point that makes him see everything, nature and land, as a resource but one that is beautiful and deserving of his care. The way he defines nature is yet another example of symbolic interactionism. His definition of nature is influenced by the Bible. By saying “we are kind of religious” he is implying that where he comes from, his family in this case, sees nature through the filter of Christianity. He acknowledges in a sense, that his cultural background is what helps him understand what the meaning of nature is. God created nature and put man in it, nature is a gift from God. This is symbolic interactionism at its core. Someone who was not raised Christian and does not believe in God for example, would likely not understand nature as a creation of God made for man.

One can imagine that this understanding of nature may influence how you relate to, or comprehend, this word's meaning. If you see nature as something given to you, it is in the realm of possibility that you could act upon nature however you would like to. It is your possession.

Alternatively, because it was gifted you may develop a deeper layer of respect and care for nature. Backed by an understanding of its sacred nature.

When I asked Adrian to explain to me what he thought land was, he could not at first define it though he did feel it was different from nature. The way in which he eventually talked about it was through describing to me his family's relationship to their own land. This calls upon naturework and symbolic interactionism because in order to define the word “land” he had to think about his, and his families, experience with their own land. He said that the land his family has had was first settled by his great grandfather back in the 1800s. Adrian told me that when you have land “everyday there is something to do.” After the interview, Adrian had a plan to go to his land in the mountains, where he has an old family cabin, to cut down some trees that are close to the house. These trees are leaning too close, so if they fall they would damage the cabin. “It’s a lot of work on your property,” he said he will cut them down sparingly, he elaborated, it is both to make it “look nice” as well as providing lumber either to sell or to use in his own fires. He always has to be engaged with the land, “there's a lot to tend to.”

Similar to Dylan, Adrian has had conversations with his kids in which he has explained that his desire is to keep this land in the family for generations to come. Though Adrian understands that there is more monetary value to gain by selling his land off, the more important thing to him is to hold on to the land as it is a place that holds a lot of sentimental meaning. To him, land means more than just the financial gains one can reap from it. Recounting a conversation he had with his children, he said “our property is gonna go from your kids, to their kids, to their kids, you know that's the way.” He and his wife have written in their Will that their children will inherit the land, that they can never sell it. However, he knows that it is impossible to truly make sure that his wish is fulfilled once he is gone. He has witnessed families sell off

their land. Most commonly, when the older generation dies, the younger generations sell the land to turn a profit, “it’s not good” he said. This indicates that land perhaps has a different meaning to the younger people of Taos, calling again upon symbolic interactionism and naturework. Younger generations are not as connected to the land, it is perhaps more valuable as an investment asset. Younger generations, as both Dylan and Adrian said, are connected to their phones, not to nature. Therefore they have different experiences with the land and nature, and in turn, a different understanding of their meaning. Something I noticed both Dylan and Adrian say is that they will not be around for much longer. They both felt better about this fact because they won’t be around to see how the land and nature will change in their absence. In this way, they can avoid the heartbreak.

Rex Wilder

The individuals I interviewed who were not born and raised in Taos, but had moved to the area later in life, also experienced nature and land as being separate entities. However, I felt their explanations of the two were expressed slightly differently than Dylan and Adrian. This is probably because though they exist in similar cultures, as they all are cowboy types who live in Taos, they still came from different positionalities. Rex for example, who is from the East Coast had a fascination with Indigenous ways of thinking about nature and land from a young age. This wisdom felt far away. In his 20s he read *The Book of The Hopi* by Frank Waters. This book had a profound spiritual impact on him. He told me about how he used to sit outside under a light and read this book. Admitting sometimes he would smoke a little weed before reading, he swore that the important words would appear like they were highlighted in purple. These words spoke to him. Within a year he was living in the four corners area, around Taos, all because of this book.

One morning he woke up to find his horse had run away. He assumed he had probably decided to go on his own adventure. Rex walked for hours, trying to see if his horse had gotten into anyone's property. Finailly, when it was near dark, he came across a house that had its gates open. There was a little grove of Aspen trees and he saw his horse waiting there for him in the back. A man came up to him in the dark, and said “I’ve been waiting for you. Knew your horse needed a little rest, so we let him have some grass in here.” Rex paused while telling this part of the story, his voice cracked. He seemed to get a little misty eyed. He swallowed and continued on, he said the man said “nice to meet you, my name's Frank Waters.” Something was calling Rex to this land, to this nature. He said it was a beautiful full circle moment, he was in the right place.

This certainly had a big impact on how Rex understands nature and land. Speaking to him about what nature meant to him he said “when I get troubled a lot, I go back to Native American philosophy, which is just so much kinder to animals. I'm kind of anti-biblical, in the sense that the Bible goes “oh you know, all this is yours. Just to do with whatever you want, God provided it for you.” No. I think you know, maybe God provided, but it ain't all for us. And it's greedy of us to think so. And it's out of touch, and it's not natural.” When I asked specifically what he thought nature was he said “it's pretty much what was here before we got here. We're the unnatural animal that changes everything, whereas all the other animals live with how it was.” He went on to explain that once upon a time, nature and land were bound together, but that we “have so many other uses for land today. We try to rip nature off the land. So that we can make it something else, a town or a parking lot. A highway.” He felt that there are fewer spaces now where you can properly experience nature, where you can connect to it. We’ve had a loss of

knowledge of nature. We do not know how to forge, or even raise animals. He said “the whole lore is being abandoned.”

Meg Dutch

Meg saw land and nature similarly to Rex. They both understood nature and land as previously existing as one, but human intervention is what created the division between the two. Like Rex, Meg is also deeply influenced by Indigenous ways of thinking and spent a lot of time in the mountains in Taos working and living on a ranch. She spent a lot of time with some Native Americans who worked up on the ranch too. She told me that “it was absolutely amazing up there, that place was so special” and that there she felt much more admiration for the Native American way of relating to land and nature. The “cowboy thing” did not speak to her as deeply, she said “the cowboy thing is a fantasy” though she later added to some people “ so is the Indian thing.” But as someone who really was called to nature through her relationship to horses, a connection that goes way back into her childhood as well, she said the way the Native Americans were with their horses was invigorating to watch. It was so different from anything she had seen before in Ohio where she was from, but different from the traditional cowboy way too. They were “loose and free and open. Their horses had so much more mileage on them.” By this she meant that their horses could continue for miles longer than other horses could. They were used to the high elevation and not easily spooked like the other horses she had worked with. These years in the mountains in Taos were deeply influential. She was taught how to listen to the land, to navigate the wild terrain. Here, symbolic interactionism shows its impact, as her experiences in the New Mexican mountains and her sacred exposure to Indigenous knowledge sets impacted how she understood what these words meant. She became more attuned to land and nature.

Along with land and nature once being more deeply intertwined, Meg questioned too what I meant by “land.” She felt that there were even different types of land, a type of understanding of the environment that is also impacted by her experiences. She asked if the land I was referencing in my question was land that had cattle grazing on it, or was it land that someone owned? Was it a place where someone built a house, could land even be a city? I had no answer myself. She concluded that nature was “the wildness,” the untamed. Instinctually, Meg said “I look for nature everywhere I go.” She always searches for a little bit of the wild in the land.

When I was at her house watching her farrier work on her horses one day, I commented on her hummingbird feeders. I had never seen so many hummingbirds. They were dipping and diving, even at times whooshing right past my face. She was so excited that I noticed them, so she asked me to listen. She could even hear the slight variations between the sounds of the different hummingbirds that gathered around her feeders. She pointed out their wildness, she brought my attention to the nature in the land. I felt a deep sense of privilege to be privy to her instinctual search for nature. She was attuned to the sounds and immersed in her activated senses. I felt like she could hear the heart beats of the horse getting shod a couple feet away. I felt like she could hear what the hummingbirds were saying to each other, and in a way she did.

These interviews vividly illustrate the concept of naturework, showing how individuals’ interactions with their environment profoundly influence their perceptions and relationships with nature (Fine 1997). Fine's concept of naturework is centered around individuals culturally constructing one’s own place in the natural environment through communities with shared systems of assigned meaning (Fine 1997). This can happen through storytelling, as the

interviewees exemplify above. Fine notes that naturework is a universal activity, not limited to enthusiasts like cowboys, hunters, or birdwatchers for example (Fine 1997). It encompasses everyone who shapes their community through stories, songs, and myths which form one's understanding of nature and land within a cultural context (Fine 1997).

For example, Dylan's deep connection to the land is evident in his active engagement with nature and his reluctance to sell his land, despite lucrative offers. His approach to nature is not just utilitarian; it's an intricate part of his identity. He sees himself as a steward of the land. Similarly, Adrian's view of nature as a divine creation reflects his religious beliefs and his commitment to preserving his family's land for future generations.

This can be seen as an example of the humanistic view of relating to nature though viewing Adrian's relationship to nature and land through only one lens is too limiting. Fine's concept of the humanistic view, often deemed as the "imperial" view of nature and land, posits that nature is to be seen as a divine gift (Fine 1997). But just because the humanistic view understands nature and land as a gift from God does not mean one must treat the land as a resource given for humanity to use at their disposal. Adrian's understanding of nature and land is more complex than that. He understands more than anyone, as a majordomo managing water rights, that the earth's resources are limited and sacred.

In these narratives one can also see examples of symbolic interactionism at work (which of course happens in conjunction with naturework as they are related concepts). Rex's and Meg's experiences highlight how individual interactions and cultural exposures construct personal and cultural meanings of the environment. Rex's journey, influenced by Indigenous philosophies and a significant encounter with Frank Waters, and Meg's experiences with Native Americans while working on the ranch, showcase the diverse influences that shape their understanding of nature

and land. Because of Rex's work as a farrier, he has to be deeply attuned to the horses he works with. This work with both animals (horses) and tools (hoof care equipment), imbues them with meaning and cultural significance. His understanding of nature and land is shaped by these interactions. The careful, skillful work required to maintain horse hooves symbolizes a deeper respect and connection to nature and the land. This occupation, rooted in tradition and necessity, reflects how human activities, even those seemingly practical, are enriched with cultural and symbolic dimensions, influencing the farrier's view of the natural world. Meg's attunement to nature, seen in her instinctual search for the wild even in the sounds of hummingbirds, further illustrates how personal experiences and social interactions contribute to the construction of meaning in relation to the natural world (Capek). These stories collectively demonstrate the dynamic interplay between individual experiences, cultural background, and the social construction of environmental concepts.

Conclusion:

In my attempt to answer how the lived experience of being a cowboy or existing within cowboy culture has shaped individuals' perceptions of their own relationship between 'land' and 'nature' I discovered so much more than anticipated. The life experiences of the people I interviewed, cowboys and people who exist within that cultural sphere, like the farrier or the woman in horse tourism, showed how important it is to be close to nature and land in order to remain connected. Each individual I spoke to felt that land and nature were separate entities, both to be revered. Their understanding of the differences between these words were informed by their personal histories, their experiences within land and nature. This connection is deeply intertwined with the sociological concepts of symbolic interactionism and naturework.

As these sociological perspectives emphasize the importance of symbols and meanings in social life, the cowboys' deep connection with nature and land is reflected in their language and practices. For example, Dylan Jackson's view of "nature as taking care of the land" and Adrian Caceres' belief that "God put Him in nature" highlight how their experiences and cultural backgrounds shape their interpretations of nature and land. Adrian's understanding that water could disappear at any given time or as he said, a cowboy "cares about nature, about the beauty of the resources. So, I'll try to protect it." His role as a cowboy, his cultural background, and his role as a majordomo, enforces an understanding of the land and its resources as being vulnerable. Rex Wilder and Meg Dutch both included detailed accounts of how their experiences in land and nature were influenced by Indigenous philosophies and alternative perspectives, relating to the concept of naturework, as they created "new" meaning embedded with cultural values different from their own. This emphasizes how these lived encounters with other cultures and ways of creating meaning shaped their views of land and nature.

This close relationship to the earth renders their identities deeply intertwined with the environment. It exists both as something spiritual and as something that supports their livelihood. The creation of their identities in connection to the land is shaped starting from early childhood, as exemplified in their stories. Each individual began with their childhood to chart their journeys to become integrated within cowboy culture. The cowboys' narratives align with the creation of cultural myths that provide meaning and identity. Their stories were always intertwined with the land, and often echoed the structure of fairy tales and myths, revealing how these narratives shaped their identities and cultural perceptions. The notion of cowboys as part of a larger mythos or cultural narrative reflects how societies use myths to create and reinforce collective identities and values. The cowboy mythos, with its emphasis on harmony with nature and a rugged,

independent lifestyle, plays a significant role in shaping the cowboys' self-perception and societal role.

In conclusion, the cowboys' understanding of nature and land is deeply rooted in their personal and cultural experiences, shaped by symbolic interactionism, naturework, and the creation of cultural myths. These factors influence how they perceive, interact with, and derive meaning from their environment, reinforcing their identity and cultural significance within their community. It is critical to pay attention to the way we identify ourselves in relation to the earth. There is much to be learned from the cowboy way of being. Understanding that a connection and a deep care for land and nature must be a foundational part of our cultural identities is deeply relevant to the world we live in today. As 80% of Americans now live in cities, we must continue to cultivate this connection to nature and to land in order to have thoughtful relationships to the earth ("Nations Urban and Rural Populations" 2022). Without this caring and connected relationship, we have little incentive to act to protect our mother, Earth.

References:

Allen, Michael. "'I Just Want to Be a Cosmic Cowboy': Hippies, Cowboy Code, and the Culture of a Counterculture." *Western Historical Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (2005): 275–99. https://doi.org/10.2307/25443192.

Aron, Stephen. *The American West: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. New York: Noonday Press, 1972.

Blumer, Herbert. *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986.

Brand, D. Dilworth and Schmidt, . Robert H.. "Rio Grande." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, December 1, 2023. https://www.britannica.com/place/Rio-Grande-river-United-States-Mexico.Bird,

Capek, Stella M. "Lesson 1: The Social Construction of Nature: Of Computers, Butterflies, Dogs, and Trucks." In *Twenty Lessons in Environmental Sociology*, edited by Kenneth A. Gould and Tammy L. Lewis, 3rd ed., pgs 13 - 27. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020.

Catton, William R., and Riley E. Dunlap. "Environmental Sociology: A New Paradigm." *The American Sociologist* 13, no. 1 (1978): 41–49. http://www.jstor.org/stable/27702311.

"Cowboy Songs & Frontier Ballads – Page 14 – Legends of America." Accessed April 5, 2023. https://www.legendsofamerica.com/we-cowboysongs/14/#tumbling-tumbleweeds.

"Cowboys and Kings Theodore Roosevelt - Google Search." Accessed February 27, 2023. https://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=Cowboys+and+kings+Theodore+Roosevelt&stick=H4sIAAAAAAAAAONgFuLQz9U3MM-ozFbiArHMMvJKClO

0pLKTrfST8vOz9RNLSzLyi6xA7GKF_LycykWsKs755Un5lcUKiXkpCtmZeenFCiEZqfkp-UWpCkH5-cWpZak5JQBiaLTDWwAAAA&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiX4P2z67X9AhUJFlkFHXLjDDUQ9OUBegQIHxA5&biw=1304&bih=723&dpr=2.

Clark, Jay. *Cowboys*. New York: Golden Press, 1954.

"Deadwood Dick and the Black Cowboys." *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 22 (1998): 30–31. https://doi.org/10.2307/2998819.

Dingwall, Robert. "Notes Toward an Intellectual History of Symbolic Interactionism." *Symbolic Interaction* 24, no. 2 (2001): 237–42. https://doi.org/10.1525/si.2001.24.2.237.

Faber, Michael J. "The American Frontier as State of Nature." *World Affairs* 181, no. 1 (2018): 22–41.

Fehn, Bruce. "Theodore Roosevelt and American Masculinity." *OAH Magazine of History* 19, no. 2 (2005): 52–59.

Fine, Gary Alan. "Naturework and the Taming of the Wild: The Problem of 'Overpick' in the Culture of Mushroomers." *Social Problems* 44, no. 1 (1997): 68–88. https://doi.org/10.2307/3096874.

Fontaine, Theodore. *Colonial Genocide in Indigenous North America*. Edited by ANDREW WOOLFORD, JEFF BENVENUTO, and ALEXANDER LABAN HINTON. Duke University Press, 2014. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11sn770.

Gaard, Greta. *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature*. Temple University Press, 1993.

History.com Editors. "New Mexico joins the Union." HISTORY. Last updated January 4, 2021. Originally published February 9, 2010. Accessed December 5, 2023. https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/new-mexico-joins-the-union.

History.com Editors. "Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo: Definition & Terms." HISTORY. Last updated September 21, 2022. Originally published November 9, 2009. https://www.history.com/topics/19th-century/treaty-of-guadalupe-hidalgo.

Historical Marker Project. "Galisteo Pueblo." Historical Marker Project. Last modified October 13, 2014. https://historicalmarkerproject.com/markers/HM181M_galisteo-pueblo_Galisteo-NM.html.

“Howard Adams - Google Search.” Accessed March 14, 2023. https://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=Howard+Adams&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8.

“Hunting Trips of a Ranchman.” Accessed February 27, 2023. https://www.google.com/search?client=safari&sa=X&rls=en&biw=1304&bih=723&q=Hunting+trips+of+a+ranchman&stick=H4sIAAAAAAAAAONgFuLQz9U3MM-ozFbiArHMzPNKSsy0pLKTrfST8vOz9RNLSzLyi6xA7GKF_LycykWs0h6leSWZeekKJUWZBUDBNIVEhaLEvOSM3MS8CWyMAHkeWstVAAAA&lei=Wsj8Y-yzNPuiptQP3N6A2AU.

Hull, Myra.“Cowboy Ballads.” *Kansas Historical Society. Vol. 8, No. 1 (1939): 35 - 60*. https://www.kshs.org/p/cowboy-ballads/12777.

Indian Pueblo Cultural Center. "What Does 'Anasazi' Mean, and Why Is It Controversial?" Indian Pueblo Cultural Center. Accessed November 27, 2023. https://indianpueblo.org/what-does-anasazi-mean-and-why-is-it-controversial/.

Johnson, Leslie Anne. “Logging Songs of the Pacific Northwest: A Study of Three Contemporary Artists,” n.d.

Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*. Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013.

Kim, Ji Yun Jessie, Natalie Betz, Benjamin Helmuth, and John D. Coley. "Conceptualizing Human-Nature Relationships: Implications of Human Exceptionalist Thinking for

Sustainability and Conservation." *Topics in Cognitive Science* 15, no. 3 (July 2023): 357-387. https://doi.org/10.1111/tops.12653.

"Kristina Beltran Citizenship Is Cruelty - Google Search." Accessed March 17, 2023. https://www.google.com/search?q=kristina+beltran+coitizenshuip+is+cruelty&client=safari&rls=en&biw=932&bih=725&ei=t5IUZKeMGrbm5NoP69y5uAk&ved=0ahUKEwjnw93druP9AhU2M1kFHWtuDpcQ4dUDCBA&uact=5&oq=kristina+beltran+coitizenshuip+is+cruelty&gs_lcp=Cgxnd3Mtd2l6LXNlcnAQAzoKCAAQDRCABBCwAzoGCAAQFhAeSgQIQRgBUPoDWNNnYOhqaANwAHgAgAGBAogB_x6SAQY2LjE5LjSYAQCgAQHIAQHAAQE&sclient=gws-wiz-serp.

Lee, Ang, dir. *Brokeback Mountain*. 2005; Los Angeles, CA: Focus Features.

Leone, Sergio, dir. *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly*. 1966; Rome: Produzioni Europee Associati (PEA).

Lévi-Strauss, Claude. "The Structural Study of Myth." *The Journal of American Folklore* 68, no. 270 (1955): 428–44. https://doi.org/10.2307/536768.

Livingston, Joan. "'Book of the Hopi' 50 Years Later." Taos News, October 14, 2013. https://www.taosnews.com/book-of-the-hopi-50-years-later/article_75ee5998-5168-500d-a881-9e566fc912c8.html.

Lomax, Recorded Alan, Harry B Welliver, and Edited E C Beck. "Songs of the Michigan Lumberjacks," n.d.

Mazzullo, Allison. "Seeing Mother Earth: Beyond Nature and Gender." *Senior Projects Spring 2012*, January 1, 2012. https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2012/26.

McClain, William. "Western, Go Home! Sergio Leone and the 'Death of the Western' in American Film Criticism." *Journal of Film and Video* 62, no. 1–2 (2010): 52–66. https://doi.org/10.5406/jfilmvideo.62.1-2.0052.

McTavish, Jane, et al., “New World cattle show ancestry from multiple independent domestication events,” PNAS Vol. 110, February 2013. https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.1303367110#:~:text=The%20first%20cattle%20in%20the,until%20~1512%20(13).

Medrano, Lourdes. "Climate Change Puts New Mexico’s Ancient Acequias to the Test." Audubon, October 12, 2021. https://www.audubon.org/news/climate-change-puts-new-mexicos-ancient-acequias-test.

Merriam-Webster. "Majordomo." Merriam-Webster Dictionary. Accessed November 27, 2023. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/majordomo.

Montaigne, Fen. "The Story of How Humans Came to the Americas Is Constantly Evolving." Photographs by Rafal Gerszak. *Smithsonian Magazine*, January 2020. https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/how-humans-came-to-americas-180973739/.

Moore, Jacqueline M. “‘Them’s Fighting Words’: Violence, Masculinity, and the Texas Cowboy in the Late Nineteenth Century.” *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 13, no. 1 (2014): 28–55.

Morales, Salomé Sola. "Myth and the Construction of Meaning in Mediated Culture." *KOME - An International Journal of Pure Communication Inquiry* 1, no. 2 (2013): 33-43. http://komejournal.com/files/3Myth%20and%20the%20constof%20meaning.pdf.

"Myth." *Oxford Reference.* ; Accessed 7 Dec. 2023. https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100220460.

National Park Service. "Theodore Roosevelt and Conservation." Theodore Roosevelt National Park. Accessed November 27, 2023. https://www.nps.gov/thro/learn/historyculture/theodore-roosevelt-and-conservation.htm.

New Mexico History. "Pre-Contact Period." The Office of the State Historian, State Records Center & Archives. Accessed November 27, 2023. https://newmexicohistory.org/timelines/pre-contact-period/.

New Mexico Tourism Department. "New Mexico Native American Communities | Pueblos & Tribes." Accessed November 27, 2023. https://www.newmexico.org/native-culture/native-communities/.

Philen, Robert C. “Reflections on Meaning and Myth. Claude Lévi-Strauss Revisited.” *Anthropos* 100, no. 1 (2005): 221–28. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40466483.

Rancho Los Cerritos. "Black on the Range: African American Cowboys of the 19th Century." Accessed November 27, 2023. https://www.rancholoscerritos.org/black-on-the-range-african-american-cowboys-of-the-19th-century/.

Roosevelt, Theodore. *Cowboys and Kings: Three Great Letters by Theodore Roosevelt*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1954.

Rotundo, E. Anthony. “Body and Soul: Changing Ideals of American Middle-Class Manhood, 1770-1920.” *Journal of Social History* 16, no. 4 (1983): 23–38.

Scorsese, Martin. 2021. Killers of the Flower Moon. United States: Paramount Pictures.

Sid Richardson Museum. “Cowboy Journals and the Art of Handwriting.” *Sid Richardson Museum - Fort Worth, Texas* (blog), April 29, 2016. https://sidrichardsonmuseum.org/cowboy-journals-and-the-art-of-handwriting/.

Stanford Research into the Impact of Tobacco Advertising. "Marlboro Men." Accessed November 27, 2023. https://tobacco.stanford.edu/cigarettes/filter-safety-myths/marlboro-men/.

Stevens, James. “Logger Talk.” *American Speech* 1, no. 3 (1925): 135–40. https://doi.org/10.2307/452535.

Summerfield, Elizabeth. “Like Father, like Son: Modeling Masculinity for the Ethical Leadership of President Theodore Roosevelt.” *Journal of Values-Based Leadership*, July 1, 2019. https://doi.org/10.22543/0733.122.1272.

Sullivan, Will. "New Research Rewrites the History of American Horses." Smithsonian Magazine. April 3, 2023. https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/native-americans-spread-horses-through-the-west-earlier-than-thought-180981912/

Taos Pueblo. "History." Taos Pueblo. Accessed November 27, 2023. https://taospueblo.com/history/.

“The Cowboy in Movies.” Accessed March 14, 2023. https://xroads.virginia.edu/~ug00/3on1/cowboy/movie.htm.

"The Lone Writer." "Western Song: Jesse James." Western Writing, 2022. Accessed November 27, 2023. https://www.westernwriting.com/western-song-jesse-james/.

The White House. “Theodore Roosevelt.” Accessed February 20, 2023. https://www.whitehouse.gov/about-the-white-house/presidents/theodore-roosevelt/.

ThriftBooks. “Holy Old MacKinaw: A Natural History of... Book by Stewart Hall Holbrook.” ThriftBooks. Accessed March 26, 2023. https://www.thriftbooks.com/w/holy-old-mackinaw-a-natural-history-of-the-american-lumberjack_stewart-hall-holbrook/369658/.

United States Census Bureau. “Nations Urban and Rural Populations: 2020 Census.” December 29, 2022. https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2022/urban-rural-populations.html.

Watts, Sarah. Excerpt from "Rough Rider in the White House: Theodore Roosevelt and the Politics of Desire." University of Chicago Press, 2003. Accessed November 27, 2023. https://press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/876071.html.

Wood Splitters Direct. “The Amazing History of Logging in the United States,” February 7, 2020. https://www.woodsplitterdirect.com/blogs/wsd/the-amazing-history-of-logging-in-the-united-states.

Wright, Will. *The Wild West: The Mythical Cowboy and Social Theory*. SAGE, 2001.

Yellow, Michael. “Cowboys and Indians: Toys of Genocide, Icons of American Colonialism.” *Wicazo Sa Review* 19, no. 2 (2004): 33–48.