Riders of Lavender and Dust:
Queering the Cowboy for the 21st Century

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There are cowboys in Manhattan. In the basement of La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club, on a night in late November 2019, a couple dozen spectators walk into a reality where Studio 54 was a ranch on the prairie. The show is *Virgo Star,* the latest production by the experimental theater group Pioneers Go East. Before taking seats in the main performance area, people are directed into a small room drenched in cool magenta by thin floor lights. A video plays of a young man talking to his grandfather, an old man wearing a flower crown and a seething stare, about falling for a cowboy from Kentucky. “I tried one of them once, those damn *cowboys,”* the grandfather spits. “But when I *mounted* him, he tried to *horseplay*...when I penetrated him, he didn’t show *any* enthusiasm!”

“Well, grandfather, some of us don’t rush into it,” the younger man responds. “Well that surprises me,” the grandfather says. “I thought they were all assholes.”

“No. I know some that are brave just like us.” The pair then shares a joint.

There are cowboys in Brooklyn. Early in the new decade, there was a hootenanny of sorts at the Branded Saloon, a honky tonk decorated with Western memorabilia and a big rainbow flag above the front door. The night was the first Queer Country Quarterly show of the year, a local mainstay for the past nine years formally known as the Gay Ole Opry. The back room is packed with people hooting and yelping, and a few brave souls even harmonizing, with Nashville-based artist Justin Hiltner. This song was a cappella, sung with a melancholic twang you might hear on old Lomax Appalachian field recordings. It

could have passed for an old folk spiritual, if it weren't for the lyrics. "Here's the offensive one," Hiltner said, clutching the neck of his banjo before he hollered the fourth verse of his original song:

Come face your sins Republicans, come face your sins
Come face your sins Republicans, come face your sins
Christ himself would be sick a little, to hear you call 'evangelical'
Come face your sins Republicans, come face your sins.

There are cowboys in pop culture, too, in a high-profile trend. Except, it isn't a return to the age of Hollywood macho men like John Wayne and Clint Eastwood. This time, it's Kacey Musgraves being a guest judge on *RuPaul's Drag Race All Stars,* a show that crowned country singing queen Trixie Mattel its winner. It's Orville Peck, his face hidden under his Stetson and leather fringe mask, crooning about "the boys as they walk on by" on his single "Dead of Night." There's a comment on the song's music video that reads, "My dad said this isn't country music and that this isn't cowboy culture. Okay boomer." It's Ellen DeGeneres introducing Lil Nas X as a "gay hero" at the Grammys, right before he performed his record-breaking, CMA Award-winning hit, "Old Town Road." Cowboys are back in style, but this time they're undeniably, unabashedly queer.

The gay cowboy has found a new spotlight in the mainstream over the past year thanks to a recent trend coined "the Yeehaw Agenda" by Twitter user Bri Malandro. The name is a catch-all for the recent interweaving of cowboy

imagery within black and queer culture, putting a fresh spin on a long dormant cultural figure that expands upon its straight, white, male origins.

Queer country is a little known but thriving subgenre with its own history, starting with the Seattle-based band called Lavender Country. Founded by musician and activist Patrick Haggerty, Lavender Country released its self-titled debut album in 1973. With songs like “Cryin’ These Cocksuckin’ Tears” and “Come Out Singing,” the latter opening the album with the line, “Woke up to say hip hip, hurray I’m glad I’m gay,” the record had all the twang of traditional country, but with songs from an unapologetic voice that was proud, cheeky, sad, and raging all at once.

For the past decade or so, New York City has been the epicenter of activity by LGBTQ artists exploring the American cowboy and western aesthetic. The Queer Country Quarterly, created by musician and writer Karen Pittelman, went from a one-off gig among friends to the become the heart of the queer country community. Though Pioneers Go East have only dissected the Hollywood cowboy recently with productions like *Virgo Star* and 2018’s *CowboysCowgirls,* founder Gian Marco Lo Forte took the name from Walt Whitman’s “Pioneers! O Pioneers!” and applies its spirit of transcendental individualism to their productions:

All the pulses of the world

Falling in, they beat for us, with the western movement beat

Holding single or together, steady moving, to the front, all for us

Pioneers! O pioneers!

Still, social conservatives in the country-music world seem to feel it just isn't big enough for them and gay cowboys. The Nashville country establishment has a long history of shutting out queer artists, with many coming-out stories following the same pattern: Rejected by fans, ostracized by peers, and blacklisted by the industry. Artists Ty Herndon and Billy Gilman both came out as gay on the same day in 2014, and in a now-deleted Youtube video, Gilman talked about how "Being a gay male country artist is not the best thing." Since then, he has talked about how he was shut out of the country industry post-coming out, and dealt with years of depression and suicidal thoughts from the fallout. "The sad thing is I never chose to leave country music, they left me," he told *People* in 2019. Before Chely Wright even came out publicly in 2007, mere rumors about her sexuality threatened her career. In a 2011 interview, she recalled how John Rich, half of the pop country heavyweight duo Big & Rich, aksed her point blank if she was gay in 2005. She lied, and Rich replied, "Thank God."

Even now, some country fans online are resistant to change: The comments on a video titled "Lil Nas X 'Old Town Road' + Country's Secret Hip-Hop Love Affair," posted by music blog A Taste of Country, exemplify the debate over whether the quirkly song by an openly gay singer and songwriter qualifies as "country" in the first place. "Not country and never will be," and "It's a complete

insult to call that garbage ‘country,’” are exemplary of the prevailing sentiments, save a few detractors: “Country is evolving. Let it be.”

On one hand, the country music industry leaves people in the queer community who enjoy country music and western culture feeling unwelcomed. On the other hand, for those who are queer and from rural areas or grew up with country and roots genres, there is a sense of feeling like a “closeted country fan” when they move to more liberal urban areas in search for greater queer acceptance. Imagine a conversation about music tastes almost anywhere north of the Mason-Dixon line. How often do you hear, “Anything but country”? It’s social norm close to a rule that you can’t be queer *and* country without sacrificing one for the other. That’s where shows like Queer Country Quarterly come in – spaces created by and for like-minded artists and fans to be seen and validated.

“I like that I can go to shows and recognize the same people I've been seeing in these audiences all these years,” said Rachel Cholst, a local music writer and Queer Country regular who has covered the genre for No Depression, Wide Open Country, and her own alt-country blog Adobe and Teardrops. “I'm from New York City, and my parents didn’t listen to country music, so this is my access point to country. But for a lot of other people, I think it's affirming of something they grew up with but felt left out of.”

Cowboy culture goes far beyond cowpoking as an occupation. It's an aesthetic and philosophy that has ebbed and flowed in popularity, but has nonetheless been a constant presence in American culture. In terms of visuals, Stetson hats, leather pointy boots with spurs, neckerchiefs, and jackets with optional tassels are just some of the popular indicators. If it's a cowboy from Hollywood, he'll typically have a gun and a horse; if it's one from the country stage, an acoustic guitar and Nudie suit. A certain pathos comes with such iconography as well: In its heyday, the images of cowboys riding across the untamed West, confident and ready for anything, represented ideals of fierce self-reliance, unbridled individuality, and being the sole keeper of one's own destiny. These qualities are broadly appealing, especially so for those who feel at odds with everyone else, fighting back against pressures to conform or hide who they are.

For all their attributes as emblems of stalwart virtue, cowboys have often been portrayed on film and TV in regressive terms -- as white, male, and violent. John Wayne tore through an entire campsite with nothing but his fists and another human body in the 1943 film *In Old Oklahoma*. Thirteen years later, he would send Comanche Indians into the river with a shotgun and his posse in John Ford's *The Searchers*. An entire room of people clear out for two furious cowboys in *Shane* – "This ain't our fight. If we get mixed up in it, we'll all get run out of this country" – while Clint Eastwood's nameless bounty hunter literally shoots a man into a grave in *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*. Country and western music also relies on a mythic, testosterone-fueled west largely defined

by the movies, mixed in with frat bro antics and Southern pride, from Rhet Akins' "Kiss My Country Ass" to Luke Bryan's "Country Girl (Shake it for Me)" to Trace Adkins' "Honky Tonk Badonkadonk."

But that understanding of country and cowboys doesn't cover the whole story. "George Bush Senior made a proclamation during his presidency about country music being 'Quintessentially American culture,' and I think -- yeah," said Nadine Hubbs, a professor at University of Michigan and author of *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music.* "The fact that it comes from Mexico, from African-Americans, from Irish and Scottish music and the Appalachians, from all these different places, it really is quintessentially American. More than we ever dreamed." To understand the cowboy myth is to understand it as such – a myth – and then push further beneath the surface and find something more nuanced.

There are cultural precedents for queer cowboys, pre-Yeehaw Agenda. In pop culture, we've seen the cowboys from the Village People and *Brokeback Mountain.* Cowgirls such as real-life sharpshooter Annie Oakley and her fictive counterpart Calamity Jane pushed against gender norms of their time and inspired cowgirls that in turn became early lesbian icons, like Betty Hutton in the film version of *Annie Get Your Gun* and Doris Day in the movie *Calamity Jane.* But through those figures, the truth of the cowboy myth's adaptability arises. At its core, the cowboy ethos represents personal freedom and rejection of oppressive societal conformity. The plains they rode were an escape from the world, riding towards an existence completely dictated by the self. For queer people who crave independence, an out from external expectations, and an

unshakable sense of self that pushes back against predjudice and persecution, the cowboy can be a perfect fantasy.

Still, there's the reckoning of the "anything but country" mentality, especially in queer circles. When we talk about LGBTQ+ culture and issues – marriage, music, lifestyle, stereotypes – we tend to do so from an urban, educated perspective. That leaves those who don't fit the typical queer-city-liberal mold unrepresented in the greater cultural narrative, and in limbo among their regional, artistic, and sexual identites. In *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music,* Hubbs explores the little known and complicated history between queerness and redneck culture, and how intellectual and historical narratives have shifted queer acceptance from a working-class to a middle-class norm, starting in the 1970s. "For much of the twentieth century, acceptance of gay, lesbian, and queer people was bad, and working class and aversion to them good and middle class," she wrote, "The current view, emergent since the 1970s, reverses the values that attached for decades to queer acceptance (formerly bad, now good) and queer aversion (formerly good, now bad) – or what we nowadays call homophobia."

A statement such as "anything but country," Hubbs argued, exposes the automatic associations people from middle-class, urban, and liberal background typically have with the genre – working-class, uneducated, and homophobic. "What you hear from a middle class position if you've been taught 'anything but country,'" she explained, "You hear [a Southern] accent, and you hear the twinning of a pedal steel, and those are forbidden sounds in, quote-unquote,

bourgeois rational discourse." When there have been gay cowboys in media, their identity has been relegated to subtext or the source of drama: *Brokeback Mountain* is about two cowbyos repressing their sexuality and love for one another, but they aren't gay *and* cowboys in the end. Only one of those lives can be out at a given time.

Patrick Haggerty started Lavender Country, and unwittingly the queer country genre, for two main reasons. First, it was to follow his father's advice, "Don't cheat, or you'll ruin your immortal soul." Second, it was the 1969 Stonewall Riot: Haggerty was in Missoula, Montana when it happened, and he came out the day after. As Haggerty, 75, reflected recently, he was far from the only one inspired by that event to step out and live truthfully. "Everybody who came out from Stonewall was coming from the same place. We were all icons in our own way," he said. "That was the activity: go forth into the world. Turn yourself into an icon. Let people see you, let people watch you, be an example...don't shut up."

The album was funded and released in 1973 with help from Gay Community Social Services of Seattle, and only 1,000 copies were pressed and advertized in the pages of gay magazines. The songs' explicit lyrics and themes also made radio play difficult – local DJ Shan Ottey played "Cocksuckin' Tears" on KRAB and subsequently lost her broadcasting license – and Nashville wasn't opening its doors, if anyone had even heard the album. The band struggled to

make a living and broke up in 1976; the album went forgotten for decades, until in 2000, when writer Chris Dickerson introduced Lavender Country to Nashville with her article “Country Undetectable: Gay Artists in Country Music” for the *Journal of Country Music,* a publication by the Country Music Foundation that ran from 1971 to 2007*.* The CMF also oversees the Country Music Hall of Fame, which archived *Lavender Country* after the article appeared. Dickinson was controversially fired from the Journal in 2002, an act that Haggerty and Darryl Bullock, author *David Bowie Made Me Gay: 100 Years of LGBT Music,* attribute to her push for LGBTQ representation in country music.

Interest in Lavender Country took off with the album’s full reissue by indie label Paradise of Bachelors in 2014, after label co-founders Brandan Greaves and Chris Smith discovered “Cocksuckin’ Tears” on YouTube. Since then, Haggerty has enjoyed a resurgence well after he had considered his music career dead. He revived the band with new members and has toured with artists such as Paisley Fields, Bay Area mainstays Secret Emchy Society, and San Francisco-based transgender artist Mya Byrne, and knows Karen Pittelman well after headlining Queer Country Quarterly shows. Though he considers himself to have a young man’s soul, he embraces his role as the “Grandfather of Queer Country.” He values the opportunity to serve as the icon for his community. “There weren't any gay elders [in the 1970s], and certainly not in an organized fashion. So I'm not only this respected elder in the community, but my generation is the first generation that has been allowed to assume that position,” he said.

Gian Marco Lo Forte loved Clint Eastwood as a kid. Specifically, he loved The Man With No Name, the antihero of few words and the face of the Spaghetti Western genre from Sergio Leone's *Dollars* Trilogy. The director and founder of Pioneers Go East, Lo Forte grew up in Perugia, central Italy in the 1970s and 80s, and was entranced by the fantasy these films conjured. "I loved how very large, like epic, it was. The beautiful vistas of the canyons and the horseback riding, all of that was really exciting to me," Lo Forte remembered while sitting in one of the rooms in the basement of La MaMa, about a week after *Virgo Star* completed its run. His gentle eyes below his thick, dark eyebrows lit up as he spoke with a grin, still finding joy from the daydreams of his youth.

That fantasy began to fade when Lo Forte was around 17 years old, as the lone ranger of his youth didn't seem to reflect his developing identity. What he once perceived as cool freedom fighters now seemed more like cruel men who aggressively exerted their machismo and dominance upon anyone within a bullet's distance. "I realized I'm not John Wayne, I'll never be John Wayne, and I don't think that's appropriate to ask kids or teenagers to be that and to go into adulthood thinking that that's what you have to be," Lo Forte reflected.

As time went on, Lo Forte fell in love with theater. He befriended La MaMa founder Ellen Stewart in 1999 when he was hired as an interpreter for the artist residency center La Mama Umbria International, and moved to New York a year and a half later to be part of the Greenwich Village experimental theater world. In

2010, Lo Forte founded Pioneers Go East, a collective inspired by the frontier spirit and dedicated to bringing together artists of a wide range of backgrounds, identities, and experiences, so that they can collectively share their stories and connect with others. His collaborators, like dancer and *Virgo Star* choreographer Beth Graczyk, have taken part in Lo Forte's productions time and time again, appreciating his all-voices approach. "I think that aspect of what he says around supporting queer artists, female artists, female identified artists, it feels really true to his form," she said. "He's very much doing that on all levels, and I think that's what keeps me really engaged."

Not long after Lo Forte began Pioneers Go East, in Spring, 2011, Karen Pittelman, frontwoman of Karen & the Sorrows, wanted to throw "a big gay show" for her birthday. She and Gina Mamone of the shuttered LGBTQ record label Riot Grrrl Ink invited local bands like My Gay Banjo and Nervous But Excited to play the now-closed Public Assembly in Brooklyn. The night was quite the bash – there was a fashion show in the midst of the musical performances, all the bands had one or more LGBTQ members, and everyone played music that could be classified somewhere within country or folk. Pittelman credits Owen Taylor of My Gay Banjo for coming up with the name for the night, a play on the classic country barn dance show: The Gay Ole Opry.

Pittelman wasn't sure what the response would be leading up to the show, as "queer" and "country" were rarely used together in a sentence then. But the show ended up being a hit, and the reactions were overwhelming. "People were crying and saying that they never thought there would be a space where they

could listen to music that they love and had grown up on, and also feel like it was okay to be queer and okay to be trans. So when that happened, I was like, 'Oh, well I better keep doing this!'" Pittelman said with a laugh of hardy, joyous "Ha's."

Gay Ole Opry shows became annual events for a few years after that, featuring live local music, gay two-stepping from Manhattan's Big Apple Ranch, and even bake sales. Eventually, the Opry found a residency at Branded Saloon and name-changed to Queer Country Monthly, until more recently becoming Queer Country Quarterly to suit Pittelman's schedule as a touring musician, activist, author, and writing coach. As time went on, word got around about these LGBTQ-friendly country shows until, seemingly out of nowhere, there was a full-blown community of queer country artists and fans in Brooklyn.

Pittelman, who was born and raised in New York, spent some time in the Boston DIY punk scene in her twenties, which gave her a first-hand education on how to organize shows and build a community around performing and supporting local music. Her father ran Heartland Music, a company that specialized in sold-on-TV country compilation albums for stars such as George Jones and Don Williams. She herself looks like a time traveller from 1960s Nashville: Her wardrobe on a given day is brightly colored or floral prairie dresses, cowboy boots, and skinny librarian glasses. With her wide smile and high-pitched voice, she's a ringer for Dolly Parton without the blonde wig. In spite of her upbringing, Pittelman initially had no intention of being a country artist; but after suffering what she described as a "great heartbreak," the country influences rooted in her soul came rushing to the surface. "I was in a punk band, and then I started

writing all these country songs," she explained, "I tried to stop, but I couldn't stop. It's been like 10 years now."

New York seemed to Pittelman like an odd place for a queer country community when the Gay Ole Opry began, but it makes sense to her in retrospect. She knew, after all, that she couldn't be the only one queer and country. "This is a place where queer and trans people will move, who didn't feel like they could stay where they grew up, or didn't want to stay where they grew up," she said. "There's a huge population of people here who grew up in areas of the country where the primary music is country music."

There's a scene in *Red River,* the 1948 Howard Hawks Western, in which Matt Garth (Montgomery Clift) meets and bonds with fellow cowboy Cherry Valance (John Ireland). "That's a good looking gun you were about to use back there. Can I see it?" Valence asks Garth without even knowing his name. Garth offers a smirk in return, then trades guns with Valence without saying anything. The two men hold and admire each other's pistols, spinning the chambers and weighing it in their hands from handle to barrel. "Y'know there are two things more beautiful than a good gun: a Swiss watch or a woman from anywhere," Valence says, "Y'ever had a good Swiss watch?"

There are plenty of homoerotic undertones throughout *Red River,* a movie that consists of sharply dressed and able-bodied cowboys shooting guns,

throwing fists, herding cattle on horseback, and rolling and licking each other's cigarettes. "Anybody with half a mind would know you two love each other!" Joanne Dru's Tess yells at Clift and Wayne's characters after several minutes of fighting in the mud, tearing at each other's clothes. It's movies like *Red River* that, at the time, reinforced the cowboy myth of man's men taming the wild and living by their own terms. But it also shows that even in his heyday, there was opportunity to queer the cowboy in ways more dramatic than casting a gay actor like Clift as a cowboy.

For some queer country artists, redefining cowboy culture means a reclamation of the right to be seen. Paisley Fields, aka James Wilson, is Brooklyn's gay cowboy who plays the part and owns the look while still being unabashadly himself. Rhinestones, sequins, and Nudie suits are all part of his wardrobe for shows, a play on long-held singing cowboy traditions with a modern, fabulous spin. The music video for "Brooklyn Rodeo" features multiple costume changes, including a black and white nudie jacket with bucking cowboys on the front and piano keys along the arms, and a blue blazer with studded roses and a sequined shirt combo. His hair is slightly longer and messier these days than in the video, which combined with his pale blue eyes further elevates the classic cowboy appearance. "I definitely feel really confident when I'm over the top in a real country look, and it's also about reclaiming that masculine thing that was reserved only for like the manliest men," Wilson said, "I can be like, 'Fuck you, I can be queer and wear a cowboy hat too.'"

Wilson knows that for some who watch his shows or listen to his music, the messages can seem contradictory. To the queer community, he's an anomaly for singing country music, and in the country community he's an anomaly for singing traditional country love songs about men. Still, Wilson has learned to navigate both worlds to sticking to the cowboy and country music's key traits: independence and authenticity. As a gay man who grew up in rural Iowa, surrounded by country and cowboy hats, Wilson thinks of Paisley Fields as his true self. "Country music is all about authenticity, and telling three chords and the truth as they say, and I think it would not make any sense if I wasn't coming from that place of speaking my truth," he explained.

He has dealt with difficulties as a result of such truth. He's had his share of people walking out of shows after hearing who his songs were about, and the occasional hateful comment online. Though it took him a while to realize that country music wasn't just for conservatives and evangelicals, being Paisley Fields has helped Wilson be more connected to all aspects of his life. He now doesn't have a problem ignoring Internet trolls, and he's almost always able to win over a crowd. "I've gotten pretty good at being able to read an audience and figure out how to engage them and what's gonna go over well," he said, "When we played the Iowa State Fair I was able to win over that crowd, and I saw a couple people leave, but for the most part I think audiences are pretty cool. It's more about the industry."

In general, owing to being indie, underground, and close-knit, artists in the queer country community have mostly avoided the level of backlash found in

mainstream Nashville. “If it had really mattered to me to fit in there, I would have at least tried,” Pittelman said in regards to trying to making it in Nashville, noting that closeted performers, songwriters, and business people are still open secrets that vein of the country world. “I don’t spend my time trying to get my foot in the door at places that may or may not accept me. Instead I spend my time creating the spaces where I want to be,” she added.

Others have learned to balance multiple aspects of their identity while operating outside of the queer country umbrella. Sam Gleaves, a multi-instrumentalist and songwriter based in Eastern Kentucky, teaches and specializes in traditional Appalachian folk styles, while also writing music that speaks to gay pride and his own life. Gleaves has long thought about the intersection of identities – in college, he and another Appalachian gay friend had a humor column in the school paper about being “Fabulachians” – and though he never hides who he is, he modulates his presentation somewhat to suit the audience. When he’s teaching a class or attending an old-time music retreat, for example, he will less likely play original songs and stick to the traditionals. “I just try to find a balance. Like, how can I tell the stories that I want to tell, sing the songs I want to sing, but also not alienate people,” he explained, adding that “preaching at” people isn’t his intention.

“What I've found more often than not is that people are more interested in playing music together than they are rejecting you,” Gleaves said. Though he admits that he sometimes feels as though he’s “passing for straight” in certain traditional music circles, and has to occasionally hear nonspecific homophobic

remarks from older musicians, he also doesn’t feel like anyone is actively trying to exclude him.

“Bascially, country’s gay. Country’s very gay. Incredibly gay,” said Mya Byrne, a San Francisco-based musician. She started exploring the gay presence in the historical Western frontier around the time she was transitioning, when her friend begged her not to throw out her eclectic Western shirt collection. Though Western style had long been part of Byrne’s life, she couldn’t help but wonder if there was any room for her in the country genre with her new identity. She had people ask her if she was going to play disco now that she had come out and transitioned.

Deciding to keep her Western shirts set her down a path to discover where queer people were in the Wild West, and where that had fit in the real, non-Hollywood cowboy world. She’s currently working on a film about the hanky code, a system used mostly during the 1970s by gay men to identitfy their tastes in sex practice by using colored bandanas, and its lesser known origins dating back to the Gold Rush in San Francisco. “I started to understand how certain things that are symbols in cowboy culture are also part of gay semiotics,” Byrne said, “Why do cowboys wear bandanas? ‘Cause they're practical, but why did they use bandanas of different colors? To symbolize which role they were dancing at these ‘men's dances’ where they would need to have a partner,

because there weren't enough women around to dance with them. That became the hanky code in Barbary Coast, San Francisco."

For Gian Marco Lo Forte and Karen Pittelman, their respective projects – Pioneers and Queer Country Quarterly – are routes to queer the cowboy's mythology and history in tandem. The former has honed in on the cowboy's iconography and persona in recent productions, placing the cowboy myth under heavy scrutiny to see just how much the Wild West and the American queer experience have in common. The latter is the beating heart of a vibrant and growing queer country community, and builds upon the groundwork Lavender Country placed four decades ago to challenge who is allowed to sing and enjoy the music of cowboys and mountaineers.

Pioneers Go East had many productions under its belt by 2016, the year Lo Forte would revisit the cowboy for the first time since his youth in an unexpected way. Lo Forte began a collaboration with Agosto Machado, a mainstay of the Village theater scene and a Stonewall-era gay icon. Machado, who performed with Warhol Superstar Jackie Curtis in Theater of the Ridiculous shows, was a member of the Gay Liberation Front, and led the first Gay Pride March in 1970, had attended many of Pioneers' shows over the years and struck up a friendship with Lo Forte. Lo Forte asked Machado if he could interview him every so often, just to talk about his life and work or even just to gossip. Lo Forte wasn't sure what would become of these interviews, but he knew that by hearing about Machado's esoteric life straight from the source, there was a special chance to create something new while also being a source for gay oral history.

Lo Forte filmed some of Machado's interviews with cinematographer Jon Burklund, and those sessions covered a wide range of topics, including life in 60s and 70s Greenwich Village, the GLF, and the role of fantasy in the street queens' daily lives. Machado also touched on the dress code in the scene, as the vogue image for gay men in that period was hyper-masculine. "The desirable object was a straight man or a masculine man that you could seduce or have sex with," Machado explained in one of the videos, which played as audience members shuffled to their seats during *Virgo Star.* "Naturally, we'd take cues from Hollywood movies, like John Wayne cowboy movies, and that was the masculine loner man."

Fantasy, role-playing, hyper-masculinity, and cowboys in the Village through the 60s and 70s made Lo Forte think back to his fantasy of the West and the heroic-toxic cowboys of his youth. He recalls researching images and finding one of a beautiful man, a cowboy in leather, hanging out at the piers in Chelsea. "Not with chaps, but like a leather vest, cowboy hat," he recalled, "So definitely the cowboy myth, the cowboy hyper-masculine role, it's definitely very present in gay culture. And [Agosto's] one of the people that presented that to me."

After this epiphany, Lo Forte went further to explore how the cowboy myth applies to the queer experience, and how the figure simultaneously represents a sense of personal freedom and a difficult, sometimes destructive, pressure to conform to social expectations. Pioneers' first show to take on the cowboy was *CowboysCowgirls* in 2018, an intimate production that featured Machado himself performing autobiographical monologues alongside Western-inspired characters

and stories around a West-meets-Mars campfire. The members of the audience were given cowboy hats, and were occasionally asked to get up from their seats and gather around the performers like a wagon train campsite.

A standout scene comes during a solo piece by Beth Graczyk. She plays a nameless lone ranger-type character who seems to not be part of the caravan; she picks a fight with the lead cowboy, played by Daniel Diaz, steals both of his guns, and points them in all directions as she lunges and convulses over an intense industrial beat. Though there are brief spurts of levity in her movements and expressions, she gradually represses those moments in favor of a building, violent intensity. But as she makes herself larger and larger, screaming in peoples' faces, the cast is able to see right through her, as in a disappearing act. Realizing the futility of her rage, she sheepishly waltzes off into the dark of the backstage, still swinging dual pistols as she leaves.

Though the cowboy persona was scrutinized in this scene, Pioneers thought that there were still aspects of the cowboy myth left to examine. *CowboysCowgirls* was more "playful and fun," argued the show's set designer and Lo Forte's longest Pioneers collaborator, Philip Treviño, as the majority of the show focused on finding collective empowerment through the persona, in a *I'm a cowboy, don't screw with me* kind of way. "We were, I think, playing more into the myth of the cowboy than we were trying to expose the myth in that production," he said. There was still the question of how John Wayne or Clint Eastwood could exist within the same genre as subtextually queer figures like

Matt Garth and Cherry Valence, and how the cowboy myth can be still be embraced today while still aknowledging its dated shortcomings.

“That’s a nice gun you got there.”

“Wanna see it?”

“You wanna see mine?”

“Nice, awful nice. Y’know there are only two things more beautiful than a good gun: A Swiss watch and a woman from anywhere. Ever had a Swiss watch?”

This exchange, almost verbatim from *Red River,* takes place about halfway through *Virgo Star*. In the deep purple lighting of the underground ranch-nightclub hybrid, the sound of cicadas and cows coming through the speakers, the gestures between the two men in black feel more intimate, more campy, more openly flirtatious. Daniel Diaz’s cowboy character stands behind actor Alessandro Magania, caressing him as they wildmill their arms in unison, shooting outward as some audience members flinch from the bullet sounds. Moments later, their shirts are off. They treat the front row to lap dances, they fight and then explode into a kiss as spaghetti western trumpets overpower the synth-y club beat.

Like *CowboysCowgirls, Virgo Star* explores the cowboy myth using Agosto Machado’s life as a starting point. One of the opening scenes features dancer

Bree Breeden, playing a cowgirl-type figure, interpretive dancing to Machado's recorded voice: "I'd fantasize about a cowboy on a white horse coming to save me and taking me away, and I loved him. A lot of us street queens...we fed each other's fantasies, we would change our names, we would pretend to be someone else."

From there, the show draws a line between queer and cowboy culture and, through a mix of artforms and non-linear narratives, detoxes the mythology from its outdated aspects to leave something inspiring and applicable to a range of identities. The characters have no names, but their archetypes are recognizable from Western movies: The two cowboys (Diaz and Magania); the cowgirl (Breeden); the Mexican woman and brothel owner (Anabella Lenzu), and even a singing cowboy (Chris Riffle).

Daniel Diaz's grandmother loved cowboy movies, but he was never impressed with them. Moreover, he didn't think he could play a cowboy because of its overbearing masculinity. Returning to the cowboy for a second time in *Virgo Star*, playing what he described as a "more grown up" version of his *CowboysCowgirls* persona, Diaz leaned into that idea of a man's man, even as he is proudly "feminine" in real life. "It was really an adventure into being very comfortable in my own masculinity, and breaking through my own toxic walls that I had no idea I had up," Diaz said. In doing so, he says, he learned that embodying such overwrought manlihood can take an emotional toll.

Each character has several monologues throughout the show, with varying degrees of fiction and non-fiction. The emotional pinnacle comes towards

the end with Diaz's final monologue, which was inspired by a five-line Facebook post and expanded into a Western tale of astounding violence. Diaz tells the story from the perspective of a young cowboy growing up in Wyoming, secretly in love with his friend Tom, "a real American cowboy." To earn Tom's approval and, in turn, his affection, he helps Tom bully a new kid, "an instant target" as Diaz described, after the boy is accused of being gay for Tom. "From that point on, every time we saw him there, Tom would take out his cock and slap him in the face with it," Diaz's character said, a mix of nostalgia and regret in his voice.

Tom and Diaz's character eventually kidnap the kid, bring him to an abandoned farm, and beat him mercilessly. "[Tom] kept telling him to fight back, 'real cowboys fight back,' but he wouldn't," Diaz said. The beating ends with Tom pissing on the kid's bloody face, and the narrator's shirt drenched in the boy's blood. Though Diaz himself never experienced such egregious levels of bullying growing up, he could empathize. "I felt like it was this curse men have, to never be able to express themselves or to express love. So they have this borderline psychotic way of expressing it, and it doesn't matter who they're hurting," he said. The narrator could never show his love for Tom unless it was destroying what was beautiful around him. But at least he was a real cowboy.

Treviño, who is Mexican-American and was raised on a farm in Gilroy, California, considered it important to show aspects of Hispanic and Vaquero culture and transcend the Mexican stereotypes in Westerns. He also brought his love and knowledge of horses to write one of the show's kinkiest scenes. On paper, it sounds like someone talking about riding their horse; pronouns were

intentionally left ambiguous. In performance, the innuendo roared to the surface. "I feel the rhythm of the trot, canter, gallup and adjust my own movements. Clicking using subtle kicks, or using my riding crop on its hind quarters when my horse needs a reminder of who's boss!," Diaz proclaimed as he strutted onstage while Lenzu interpreted his words with horse-like movements.

It's a scene that invokes images of BDSM as much as actual horse riding. But when an early version of *Virgo Star* premiered in June 2019, Beth Graczyk found the scene offensive. "It just felt like a heteronormative paradigm of 'S&M slave woman with her dude.' And I was like, no, the female's not empowered at all," she said. Graczyk was brought on to choreograph parts of *Virgo Star* and provide input from a lesbian perspective; she made sure that intimate scenes between pairs exuded both tough cowboy energy and believable sensuality. In the horse scene, she didn't see that balance happening. Instead, it felt complicit in embracing the toxic masculinity the rest of the show otherwise satirized.

True to Pioneers' mission of reflecting all voices, the scene was reworked at the last minute, and all parties involved were satisfied with the changes. Diaz and Lenzu leaned hard into camp to give the scene a more blatant sense of farce that softened the explicit dialogue. But Diaz also felt that even before the changes, the horse was in charge all along. In the show's final scenes, Diaz's cowboy is beaten down by Breeden's cowgirl, who rips off his hat and runs off with Lenzu, his "horse." "His ego is deflated. I was tackled down and my cap was ripped off by this cowgirl who stole my love away...my horse. I never really had that control," he explained. "The one thing that set me apart was that I was male

and I was trained to think that I had all of this power, but all that image is – it's just a hat. A hat, some boots, and a buckle. It was totally stripped away, and I was defeated."

If Pioneers Go East took on the legacy of the Hollywood cowboy, the heliosphere of queer country, with Brooklyn at its center, has given the music of the cowboy a broader and queerer meaning. All of the core elements of country – storytelling, bleeding-heart honesty, a community built on relatable life experiences – is still there when you put the word "queer" in front of it. That couldn't be clearer than it was at the first Queer Country Quarterly show of 2020, featuring Nashville-based artists Luisa Lopez and Justin Hiltner along with Karen Pittelman's band, Karen & the Sorrows, as the headliner.

The show took place at the Branded Saloon in Prospect Heights. By 9:45 pm, fifteen minutes before doors, the line for the backroom spanned through the bar and outside the thick wooden front doors. Once people huddled into the toasty performance area, it immediately felt like a gathering of old friends. "There's power in community, huh?" said Luisa Lopez as she tuned up her guitar, with a flurry of cheers and "yeahs" in response. From there, she opened with "Tired," a pensive song about yearning for change in an unchanging world, and the crowd went from rowdy to a hush within the first verse.

Justin Hiltner was so struck by the audiences' attentiveness that he made a last-minute adjustment to his setlist, switching out a couple energetic stompers for ballads he wouldn't usually play in bars. He did a Queer Country show in Nashville with Karen and the Sorrows, Paisley Fields, and Mya Byrne in late 2019, but he always heard about the amazing queer country crowds in Brooklyn, and this particular night didn't disappoint. "How many gigs like that are there in this country right now where you can go and be surrounded by people who are queer and love country music?" he said, later recalling the night.

Country music has always been infused with sadness. Hank Williams' record of "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry" and George Jones' version of "He Stopped Loving Her Today" are numbers four and three on *Rolling Stone's* 100 Greatest Country Songs list. Hiltner, the first openly gay artist to be nominated for an International Bluegrass Music Association Award, argues that queer people fit right in. "Country music is so great for queer people because they write better sad songs in country than in any other genre, and queer people are sad as fuck!" he laughed. His set embodied the wide emotional spectrum in country: Along with upbeat songs like the iconoclastic holler "Oligarchs, Nationalists, and Capitalists" and the jaunty two-step "I'm Not In Love With You," "1992" saw Hiltner contemplating the likelihood that in the same hospital he was born, someone in that building could've simultaneously been losing their life to HIV/AIDS. "Were the heavens mocking both of us when they traded me for you / 'Cause I didn't die in 1992," he sang to a spellbound audience, some sparse sniffling being the loudest crowd noise.

While music critics might call this open-hearted quality authenticity, Hiltner thinks of it as immediacy. “Just understanding that when a singer is opening their mouth to sing, you are so much closer to the source of that lyric, to that music, than in any other genre of music in this country,” he said. Numerous queer country artists also talk about being attracted to the genre because of this immediacy, and that ability to be plain and candid about their personal experiences with sexuality and identity. Paisley Fields’ music, for all its twangy party energy, also taps into the small, everyday hardships that might not be explosive in the moment, but leave emotional scars. His ballad “Can’t Stop Our Love” beautifully but devastatingly presents the reality for many people who have come out to unaccepting families: “And my mama might say, ‘Lord you got the devil inside you/I had three children, now I only have two.’”

Karen & the Sorrows closed out the night accompanied by additional string players, including banjo, mandolin, violin, and a second acoustic guitar, who were also featured on her most recent album *Guaranteed Broken Heart.* Before starting her set, she apologized for being out of breath from running the show and saying hi to everybody – she had given out many hugs and warm welcomes to people by that point. After the third song, “Something True,” she apologized again for missing a couple of her cues. “Everyone sounds so pretty I forgot to sing!” she said with a bubbly grin, motioning in a half circle to the musicians that stood beside her.

If the night proved something other than that queer country is thriving, it’s that Karen Pittelman has done the hard work to make a community happen.

Every queer country artist interviewed for this piece credited Pittelman for making queer country into the close-knit world it is today. In addition to maintaining Queer Country shows in Brooklyn for years, Pittelman also took the shows on tour in the South, incorporating local queer artists like Hiltner and Sam Gleaves into the lineups, and worked with Bay Area musician Eli Conely to help him launch Queer Country West shows in San Francisco. In 2017, she put on Another Country festival in Queens, showcasing more than a dozen artists across the LGBTQ+ spectrum playing music in roots genres.

"I just really look up to her in general, and I want to be involved with what she's involved with because there's so much goodness there, and it's all sincere," said Wiley Gaby of the band Goldenchild. On top of crediting Pittelman for bringing him back to the stage after not playing music for a long time, he was also inspired to put on his own queer country nights at Metropalitan Bar in Williamsburg.

Although she has already accomplished a lot, Pittelman knows there's more work to be done. She knows that changing country culture for the future means reassessing its history as well. Her next project is Country Music Against White Supremacy, an extension of an article she wrote on Medium in 2018, which will hopefully start a dialogue around acknowledging an unbiased and unfiltered history of country.

"I wouldn't be satisfied by just everybody in mainstream culture being like, 'Oh look, there's gay people in country music, too.' That's not enough," Pittelman said. The Yeehaw Agenda and its associated acts are currently killing it and look

great doing it, but Pittelman wants to redefine country. That starts with the cowboy: Acknowledging its roots in Mexican culture, celebrating the thriving black and queer cowboy communities, remembering the African-American Buffalo Soldiers and their record of incalculable violence. Myth and history on equal ground. “I'm not saying that we can't enjoy cowboy culture,” she clarified, “But also I think one of the things I love about country music is that it says, like, we need to know who we are. And I want country music to ask those things more honestly, and try harder to really look at where we came from and who we are and not use this nostalgic, whitewashed version that leaves all that out.”

A couple weeks after Queer Country Quarterly, Pittelman was back onstage for a less raucous show at Young Ethel’s, a quirky bar in Park Slope. This time, she and Wiley Gaby were playing in support of Paisley Fields and Nashville artist Mercy Bell, who were on tour together along the East Coast. The show’s format was a writer’s round, where the artists take turns playing songs. The performance space was decked out with red velvet couches, pinball machines, string lights, and floral wallpaper, more like someone’s living room than a commercial gig space. The intimate, unplugged setup let the four singers’ individual artistry and collective comradery come through. “Everybody’s playing my favorite songs!” Pittelman exclaimed after the first round, followed by her contagious laugh.

All four sat onstage, listened, and swayed to each other’s music. Paisley, dressed in a slim floral tux and a black ten gallon, parked behind an electric piano draped in glittery black fabric, while the others picked up acoustic guitars.

There were laughs all around when Paisley played “Ride Me Cowboy” (“Ride me cowboy, till the cows come home/Look deep in my eyes, put your hands on my thighs/And ride, ride, ride.”) Pittelman pulled out tissues as Bell belted “Black Dress,” a ballad about holding onto a fading love until its absolute final moments. But whether there was laughing or crying, there was a warm feeling in the air – an awareness of how meaningful it is to have not just a country night in the middle of Brooklyn, but a *queer* country night. Gaby reminisced about growing up in rural Florida before his song “Florida Road,” saying, “I liked country and was called a queer, but that was before we reclaimed the word.” This night, as with the other gay cowboy productions and queer country get-togethers, felt like a reclamation of a history that always belonged to everyone, a declaration that there are not only cowboys in Brooklyn, but a little Brooklyn in cowboys.

Sources

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Source Notes - See Hyperlinks

Post-Script

I thought of my idea for my Master's Thesis all the way back in August 2019, when "Old Town Road" by Lil Nas X became the inescapable song of the summer and the longest-running number one Billboard single of all time. That song was seemingly the pinnacle of "The Yeehaw Agenda," a trend where repurposed country and western aesthetics appear in non-country realms, from music to fashion to even internet memes.

I wanted to initially focus on just the Yeehaw Agenda for my thesis, but at the encouragement of my advisor, David Hajdu, I broadened my scope to understand where the movement fit into the larger history of the cowboy in popular culture. As the phenomenon originated from black and queer communities, and there had already been substantial coverage on the Yeehaw Agenda in context of black cowboy culture, I took the opportunity to deeply explore the queer cowboy's history and progression as a cultural archetype over time. Through my early research, I realized that there were queer artists challenging and redefining cowboy and western culture long before doing so had gone mainstream, so I felt that exploring the work done by these artists over the past decade would make for a deeper and more comprehensive story.

Securing subjects was a major challenge, as my initial candidates were unresponsive for weeks and ultimately declined to be involved. Luckily, within 24 hours of the proposal deadline, my seminar professor Alisa Solomon alerted me to Pioneers Go East and their upcoming production of *Virgo Star.* The show was exactly the kind of exploration of queer identity and the cowboy myth that I was

looking for, so I quickly reached out to the collective and they graciously agreed to meet with me. Along with PGE, I had also come across the Gay Ole Opry/Queer Country Quarterly in my research, and realized that not only were there artists that had been queering the cowboy long before the Yeehaw Agenda, but there was a great number of them based in New York City. I decided right before winter break to make the queer country scene in Brooklyn my second subject, and from there I approached my thesis with two distinct halves in mind: Part one was PGE and *Virgo Star,* and the queering of the "visual" cowboy from classic Hollywood films and Westerns, and part two was the queering of the "musical" cowboy by the queer country community. The cowboy as a pop culture entity originated from film and music, so it felt natural to examine the work being done in both mediums to make the cowboy more applicable to the queer experience.

I started reporting for this piece by first focusing on Pioneers. After seeing *Virgo Star* twice, I met with and interviewed each primary member of the collective individually, and in addition conducted a round table discussion with Gian Marco Lo Forte, Philip Treviño, and Agosto Machado. This part of the reporting process began in late November, with the first *Virgo Star* show I attended, and went until about early January.

The remainder of my reporting schedule (about two and a half weeks of winter break) went into the queer country community, which involved interviewing as many active queer country artists as I could, either in person or over the phone. I had begun corresponding with Karen Pittelman in early December, who

then referred me to other major artists in the community, including James Wilson of Paisley Fields and Cindy Emch. From there, I made sure to end every interview by asking, “What additional queer country artists do you think I should talk to?” and I would follow-up with whomever was recommended. There were obviously many different queer country artists in Brooklyn and beyond I could have talked to, but by approaching my reporting with a combination of prior research and word of mouth, I felt I succeeded in talking to the community’s most prominent figures. I also attended three Brooklyn queer country shows during this time, including Queer Country Quarterly at Branded Saloon, Queer Country Night at Metropolitan Bar, and a writer’s round with Paisley Fields, Mercy Bell, Goldenchild, and Karen & the Sorrows at Young Ethel’s.