

# The Reclamation of the American Cowboy

## OVERVIEW

### ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How has the image and history of the American cowboy been reclaimed in the 21st Century?

### OVERVIEW

*In this lesson, students will explore how the myth of the American cowboy developed by analyzing historic images, music, and film posters. Students will consider how the white American cowboy and the romanticization of the West excluded people of color, despite the historical existence of Black and brown cowboys. Finally, they will participate in a station activity where they will analyze sources that provide different perspectives and interpretations of the cowboy.*



Still from Solange, *When I Get Home*

When the word “cowboy” is mentioned, images of western film stars like John Wayne and Gary Cooper may be the first thing to come to mind. This Hollywood version of the cowboy is usually portrayed as a hero who leaves a trail of destruction in their wake, and is regularly juxtaposed by harmful stereotypes of Native Americans. For over a century, this version of the cowboy has been an emblem of Americana—but it is one that oversimplifies and ignores the true origin of the figure.

The profession of the cowboy most likely originated in 17th century Mexico, when Native American and Hispanic *vaqueros* practiced the livestock herding traditions first developed in Spain. Centuries later, the *vaquero* lifestyle moved to the Western United States. Following the Civil War, Black freedpeople migrated to the West to escape the discrimination of the South, joining Native American and Mexican Americans in this profession.

Soon, the notion of the cowboy working in the untamed “frontier” of the American West reached the Eastern United States, and the cowboy became a romanticized figure in the American imagination. One of the most prolific people to advance this romanticized image was none other than Theodore Roosevelt, the 26th President of the United States who is often referred to as the “Cowboy President.” Growing up a sickly child New York, Roosevelt developed an obsession with the cowboy which he maintained throughout his life. As an adult, he took up big game hunting and ventured West in 1883 to hunt bison, at a time when the animal was nearing extinction due to over-hunting by settlers. He would regularly take photographs in a Manhattan studio outfitted in cowboy attire, made frequent trips to the Dakotas, and bought two ranches in the West.

During the Spanish American War, Roosevelt led the First U.S. Volunteer Cavalry, which he called the “Rough Riders.” The term was borrowed from Williams Frederick Cody, otherwise known as “Buffalo Bill” Cody. A soldier and professional bison hunter, Buffalo Bill likewise played

an enormous role in developing the romanticized notion of the cowboy. In the 1870s, his “adventures” began being published in print, and their market success inspired a traveling show that featured horses, shooters, and dramatic reenactments of battles between cowboys and Native Americans, who were usually depicted negatively as aggressors and the enemy. These performances were accompanied by Buffalo Bill’s Cowboy Band, a brass band led by cornet player William Sweeney which played heroic and lilting music to fit the spectacle’s adventurous spirit. The show was immensely popular and traveled around the globe.

The popularity of live Wild West shows caught the attention of the burgeoning film industry in the early 1900s. Starting with the 1903 silent short film *The Great Train Robbery*, “Westerns” became their own immensely popular film genre. White men such as John Wayne, Gary Cooper, and Clint Eastwood became synonymous with the cowboy figures they played in movies. In their celebration of the romanticized cowboy lifestyle, such films usually neglected to acknowledge the destruction to Indigenous land and violence towards Native Americans caused by white settlers, and all but erased the presence of Black and brown cowboys who worked in the American West.

In spite of the whitewashing of the cowboy and the romanticization of the West, in the 21st century people of color have begun reclaiming the cowboy image, and remind audiences of a more accurate history of the American west. The *vaquero* origins of the U.S. cowboy is still seen in Regional Mexican music. Legends like Joan Sebastian and Los Tigres del Norte don cowboy hats for performances. Sebastian was known for performing on horseback and Los Tigres del Norte’s catalogue is composed primarily of “corridos,” which originally were narratives of cattle drivers living near the border. Today, 20 year old Norteño artist Christian Nodal is rarely seen without a cowboy hat. The *vaquero* lives on in Regional Mexican music.

Other artists and creatives of color have used their medium to reclaim or re-imagine the cowboy as an American figure. Indie rockstar Mitski named her fifth album “Be the Cowboy,” as a response to the stereotypical white cowboy “being able to do whatever they wanted.” Numerous Black artists have reinserted themselves into the cowboy narrative, reminding people that there were Black cowboys in the American West. Singer-songwriter Solange dedicated her fourth album to her hometown of Houston, TX and the Black cowboys she grew up seeing. The imagery of Black cowboys is found throughout the album’s accompanying film. Rapper Lil Nas X caused controversy with his trap-country hit “Old Town Road,” which wasn’t seen as a country enough by gatekeepers and was accused of appropriating country.

Outside of music, Black fashion designers Telfar Clemmons (Telfar) and Kerby Jean-Raymond (Pier Moss) have used the cowboy and Western imagery in their collections. Jean-Raymond’s first collection included actual Black cowboys in its campaign: the Compton Cowboys. Even before their collaboration with Jean-Raymond, the Compton Cowboys had a strong social media presence, spreading their mission of keeping Compton kids off the streets with horseback riding.

While Roosevelt and the popularity of the Buffalo Bill Wild West shows helped make the cowboy the representation of the Western American hero and the epitome of white American masculinity, these artists have reclaimed both the spirit and historical realities of the cowboy.

## OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

### 1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- The evolution of the cowboy from a working class ranch hand to a symbol of American masculinity
- The roles of President Theodore Roosevelt and “Buffalo Bill” Cody in developing the romantic image of the American West
- The music that often accompanied Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show
- The reclamation of the cowboy and cowboy culture through, actual cowboys such as the Compton Cowboys, fashion brands such as Telfar and Pyer Moss, and artists of color such as Mitski, Solange, Lil Nas X, Los Tigres del Norte, Joan Sebastian, and Christian Nodal

### 2. MASTERY OBJECTIVE:

- Students will analyze how the American cowboy became a glorified myth that celebrated white masculinity, and how communities of color have reclaimed the cowboy and its history separate from the myth.

## ACTIVITIES

### MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY

1. Ask students to list on a piece of paper the images, ideas, or attributes that come to mind when they think of a cowboy. Then ask students:
  - What are some of the things you wrote down that came to mind when you think of a cowboy?
  - Where might your ideas about cowboys have come from? Have you ever met a professional cowboy?
  - Do cowboys still exist? If so, what do they do?
  - What are some ways real cowboys might differ from their representation in the media?
2. Show **Image 1, Historic Cowboy**. Tell students this is a historic photograph of a cowboy, and ask them:
  - In what ways does this image meet your expectations of a cowboy? In what ways might it not?
  - What do you think daily life was like for the cowboy featured in the photograph? How might he have made a living?

3. Now show **Image 2, The Westerner**. Ask students:

- What is this image?
- What differences do you see between the historical photo and this film poster?

## PROCEDURE

1. Tell students that they will be examining the ways the cowboy, who was first known as a *vaquero* in Mexico, became such a symbol of American masculinity—and how recent artists of color have been reclaiming the image of the cowboy
2. Show **Image 3, Theodore Roosevelt Recalls The West**. Ask a student to read the quote aloud, then ask students:
  - Do you know who is featured in this image? Is the name familiar?
  - Using your own words, how does Roosevelt describe the West? How does he describe life in the West? How does he describe the people living in the West?
  - Examine the picture. Does it look to be taken outside, or in a studio?
  - This photograph was taken in a studio in Manhattan, New York. Why might have Roosevelt wanted to take a picture of himself dressed in a cowboy outfit?
  - Roosevelt was often ill as a child. Growing up in New York City, he became enamored with the West. Based on the quote, what might have appealed to Roosevelt about the West?
3. Tell students that Roosevelt remained enamored with the West and cowboys his entire life. During the Spanish American War, he led the First U.S. Volunteer Cavalry, which he called the “Rough Riders”, a term he

borrowed from Williams Frederick “Buffalo Bill” Cody. Buffalo Bill was a soldier and professional bison hunter who created a traveling “Wild West Show” that popularized the adventurer idea of the “Wild West.”

4. Show **Clip 1, “Equestrian (Buffalo Bill) March.”** Tell students the image in the clip is a poster advertising one of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West shows, and the music is a reconstruction of what would be likely heard at one of the performances. Ask students to write down any observations they make about the images, words, and music presented in the clip. After students share some of their observations, ask them:
  - How do the images and words on the poster reinforce the idea of the West and the cowboy described by Theodore Roosevelt?
  - What sorts of people or activities might be missing in the poster, which was part of life in the West?
  - How would you describe the music you heard in the clip? Does it remind you of anything else?
5. Play **Clip 2, “Going Down the Road Feelin’ Bad,”** a traditional American song performed by musician Dom Flemons. Ask students to pay attention to the instruments and the lyrics. Then ask students:
  - What observations did you make of the

second song? How did it sound to you? What did you picture in your head as it played?

- In what ways does this song differ from the “Equestrian March” you listened to earlier?
- What were the lyrics of this song about? Who’s perspective might be represented in these lyrics?
- Which of the two songs might be more likely to be played by actual cowboys? Which might be more representative of the lifestyle of a cowboy? Why?

6. Display **Image 2, The Westerner** once again. Ask students:

- How is this poster similar to the Buffalo Bill Wild West Show poster? Do you see any common themes shared between the two?
- Who might be the audience for these images and these films?
- What do you think the goals were in depicting the cowboy in this way? What narratives are missing in these depictions? Do you think it was intentional?
- Who is not being represented in these images? How might such a person feel when seeing them?

7. Play **Clip 3, James Baldwin on Gary Cooper**. Tell students the following video was a debate that took place in 1965 between writers James Baldwin and William F. Buckley Jr., at Cambridge University. After watching the clip, ask students:

- What might Baldwin mean when he says “it comes as a great shock when the same flag you pledge allegiance to does not pledge allegiance to you”?
- Baldwin goes on to say “it comes as a great shock to discover that Gary Cooper killing off the Indians, when you were rooting for Gary Cooper that the Indians were you...” What might he mean by this?
- What is Baldwin saying about the problematic cowboy vs. “Indians” trope and how does it relate to race relations in the U.S.?
- Why does Baldwin use the example of the Western here? What larger point might he be making about growing up a Black person in the United States?

8. Tell students they will now be examining the ways people of color have begun reclaiming the idea of the cowboy. In groups, have students visit the six stations below. Students can either provide answers to the questions in each station on a scrap piece of paper or with this **Station Question Worksheet**.

- **Station 1: Mitski, “Be the Cowboy”** (*note to teacher: instead of reading the transcript, students may watch the video of Mitski’s interview on Youtube here. This handout contains some strong language.*)
- **Station 2: Los Tigres del Norte**
- **Station 3: Solange, *When I Get Home***
- **Station 4: Compton Cowboys**
- **Station 5: Lil Nas X, “Old Town Road”** (*Note: This handout contains some strong language.*)

- **Station 6: Telfar and Pyer Moss - Black Cowboy Aesthetic in Fashion**

9. Pending time, have student groups visit a single station, or rotate through multiple stations. Once the activity is completed, have each group share their discussions and what they learned. Students not presenting should take notes on scrap paper or on the **Station Question Worksheet**.

## SUMMARY ACTIVITY

1. Display **Image 3, Writing Prompts**. Ask students to respond to the images on a scrap piece of paper. Alternatively, teachers may ask students to discuss each question in small groups.
2. Ask students or student groups to share their responses with the rest of the class.

## EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Find a contemporary song, music video, or fashion with references to the American cowboy. Explain how it deviates from or plays into the stereotype.
2. Read the New York Time's article "The Last of New York's Black Cowboys" here: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/10/nyregion/black-cowboys-nyc.html>. Then write a one page response.
3. Bri Malandro coined the term the Yeehaw Agenda in 2018 and created the successful Instagram account of the same name, where she documents Black people in cowboy attire. Read the Jezebel piece here: <https://jezebel.com/what-everyone-is-getting-wrong-about-the-yee-haw-agenda-1833558033>. Then write a one page response to it.
4. Do research on Theodore Roosevelt's domestic and foreign policy when he was president. Then, write a short paper consider how Roosevelt's interest in cowboys and the West may have informed portions of these policies.





## STANDARDS

## COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

*College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading (K-12)*

Reading 1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

Reading 2: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas 7: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas 9: Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity 10: Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

*College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Writing (K-12)*

Text Types and Purposes 1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

Text Types and Purposes 2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

Production and Distribution of Writing 4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

Research to Build and Present Knowledge 9: Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

*College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Language (K-12)*

Language 1: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.

Language 2: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.

Language 3: Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in



different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.

### *College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening (K-12)*

Comprehension & Collaboration 1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

Comprehension & Collaboration 2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

Comprehension & Collaboration 3: Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.

Presentation of Knowledge 4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

## **SOCIAL STUDIES – NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES (NCSS)**

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 2: Time, Continuity, and Change

Theme 3: People, Place, and Environments

Theme 4: Individual Development and Identity

Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

## **NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR MUSIC EDUCATION**

### *Core Music Standard: Responding*

Interpret: Support interpretations of musical works that reflect creators' and/or performers' expressive intent.

Evaluate: Support evaluations of musical works and performances based on analysis, interpretation, and established criteria.

### *Core Music Standard: Connecting*

Connecting 11: Relate musical ideas and works to varied contexts and daily life to deepen understanding.





## RESOURCES

### VIDEOS

- “Equestrian (Buffalo Bill) March”
- “Going Down the Road Feelin’ Bad
- James Baldwin on Gary Cooper

### HANDOUTS

- Station 1: Mitski, “Be the Cowboy”
- Station 2: Los Tigres del Norte
- Station 3: Solange, “When I Get Home”
- Station 4: Compton Cowboys
- Station 5: Lil Nas X, “Old Town Road”
- Station 6: Telfar and Pyer Moss - Black Cowboy Aesthetic in Fashion
- Station Question Worksheet

# Lesson Materials



# Image 1, Historic Cowboy



# Image 2, *The Westerner*



**EPIC DRAMA OF THE BIRTH OF A BORDER EMPIRE!**

Roaring Prairie Fire • Desperate Fighting • Flaming Romance

**SAMUEL GOLDWYN**

presents

# Gary COOPER

# THE WESTERNER

with  
**WALTER BRENNAN**  
**DANA ANDREWS**

directed by

**WILLIAM WYLER**

Re-Release

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# Image 3, Theodore Roosevelt Recalls The West



"...it was not until 1883 that I went to the Little Missouri, and there took hold of two cattle ranches, the Chimney Butte and the Elkhorn. It was still the Wild West in those days, the Far West, the West of Owen Wister's stories and Frederic Remington's drawings, the West of the Indian and the buffalo-hunter, the soldier and the cow-puncher. That land of the West has gone now, "gone, gone with lost Atlantis," gone to the isle of ghosts and of strange dead memories. It was a land of vast silent spaces, of lonely rivers, and of plains where the wild game stared at the passing horseman. It was a land of scattered ranches, of herds of long-horned cattle, and of reckless riders who unmoved looked in the eyes of life or of death. In that land we led a free and hardy life, with horse and with rifle. We worked under the scorching midsummer sun, when the wide plains shimmered and wavered in the heat; and we knew the freezing misery of riding night guard round the cattle in the late fall round-up."

-Theodore Roosevelt, *An Autobiography* (1913)

# Image 4, Writing Prompts

## **Writing Prompts:**

**How does the media portray the American cowboy? Is it an accurate reflection of who was actually a cowboy? Explain your answer.**

**How have musicians reclaimed the cowboy? Why might reclaiming an image or history be significant? Use examples from the station activity.**

**What are some other tropes or figures that have been romanticized? Explain how does the romanticization of such figure affects the history.**



## Station 1: Mitski, “Be the Cowboy”

*In 2018, singer-songwriter Mitski released her fifth album Be the Cowboy. On The Daily Show with Trevor Noah, Mitski talked about the title of her album and its meaning to her as a Asian-American woman. Read the transcript below, and answer the following questions.*

**Trevor Noah:** Welcome to the show. Congratulations on a new album. I’m dying to find out, what is the message you’re trying to get out with “Be The Cowboy? What are you trying to get people to do?

**Mitski:** Well, when I say cowboy, I don’t mean like the working cowboy of today, I literally mean like the cowboy myth. Like the Marlboro commercial cowboy where there’s like a white man leaning on a fence and squinting, or like Clint Eastwood riding into town. Like that kind of cowboy. There’s such an arrogance and a freedom to it that is so appealing to me, especially because I’m an Asian woman, and I think I have to walk into a room and have to apologize for existing. And I was so attracted to that idea of freedom and arrogance and not having to apologize. So this album, I think its protagonist is someone like me who feels like they want to channel or embody that energy of the cowboy.

**Trevor Noah:** Would you say that growing up for yourself culturally, is Asian culture the furthest thing from cowboy-ness? Is that like the complete opposite?

**Mitski:** Yeah I would say so.

**Trevor Noah:** Like you’ll kick down the doors and then you’ll be like, “sorry about that”?

**Mitski:** Yeah, I think the cowboy, the idea of the cowboy is so American, because the idea of a man riding into town, wrecking shit, and then walking out like he’s the hero. . .

(Laughter)

**Trevor Noah:** That’s the way life should be lived! I like that, “be the cowboy.” I want to be the cowboy, that sounds like fun.

**Mitski:** Yeah, exactly!





### Questions:

Mitski clarifies that she means “not the working cowboy but the cowboy myth.” What characteristics does Mitski attribute to the myth of the cowboy?

Why are these attributes appealing to Mitski and/or her listeners who possess identities opposite of the media portrayal of the cowboy?

## Station 2: Los Tigres del Norte

*Los Tigres del Norte and Christian Nodal are Norteño artists, which is Regional Mexican music. Los Tigres del Norte has been performing for over fifty years and have a large fanbase. Their songs are often corridos, a narrative ballad. Los Tigres tackle issues of the border and immigration in their songs, often centering the working class near the border. Read the below news article and respond to the following questions.*



### Immigration Blues: On the road with Los Tigres del Norte

By Alec Wilkinson, *The New Yorker*, May 17, 2010

A few days before Christmas, the norteño band Los Tigres del Norte, four brothers and a cousin, were aboard their bus in San Antonio, Texas, on their way to Randy's Ballroom, on the city's west side, which is rough. The brothers are Jorge, Hernán, Eduardo, and Luis Hernández, and the cousin is Oscar Lara. Jorge, the oldest, is the leader. He is watchful and determined, and he dreams of a boardroom where the band for the Super Bowl is chosen by someone who says, "Why not Los Tigres again?" Hernán, who dresses tastefully, and has black hair, with a streak of gray, is gracious, genial, and thoughtful. Eduardo is soulful and reserved and the most gifted musician among them. Luis, who is the youngest, is the heartthrob, and Oscar has the slightly remote air of a man who often appears to be amused by his thoughts...

In the past few years, Los Tigres have spent several hundred thousand dollars on close-fitting suits made for them by the Nashville tailor Manuel, who is sometimes called the Rhinestone Rembrandt. At Randy's, they wore green suits with silver rhinestones arranged in a leaflike pattern that descended from their shoulders like wings. An announcer began chanting, "Tigres! Tigres!" Jorge, who plans the band's entrances, strode onstage, already singing into a microphone attached to his cheek, and the curtain fell. Three generations of families sometimes show up to see Los Tigres, and in the front row was a young man who carried a small boy on his shoulders. Behind them were rows of cowboy hats, like a skyline.

Los Tigres sing in Spanish—mainly about things that happen to poor people in Mexico, or to Mexicans in America. When I asked among the crowd what the songs were about, a woman replied, "This is about a man with a dog, and they tell him, 'You better watch your dog, or it will get away,' and it does get away. It's about how the Mafia has taken over Mexico." She was describing the band's most recent song, "La Granja," which means "The Farm," a fable involving barnyard animals, which begins, "If the dog is tied up / even barking all day long / you should not untie her. / My grandfather said, 'If they do, they will regret it / 'cause they don't know.'" In six more verses, the song describes, metaphorically, the havoc caused by the drug lords with the connivance of the government.

Norteño is country music from the vicinity of the border. It features succinct and dramatic narratives told in an aloof, almost deadpan language, with high-pitched singing and clipped accordion figures. It is an older, less worldly relation to Tejano, or Tex-Mex. A norteño band includes the bajo sexto (Eduardo and Luis), the electric bass (Hernán), drums (Oscar), and, occasionally, the alto saxophone (also Eduardo), which plays in close harmony with the accordion (Jorge and sometimes Eduardo, too). So as not to distract from the stories, which are usually grave, and sometimes sentimental, the arrangements are compact and spare. The accordion customarily plays an introduction (usually scripted) and makes remarks among the verses, but there are no solos. To convey the import of the song, the singers enunciate as carefully as stage actors.

The trade magazine *Billboard* classifies norteño as Mexican regional music, a subcategory of Latin music. According to Leila Cobo, who covers Latin music for *Billboard*, “No other band is quite as influential or important as Los Tigres, or has had quite the impact, or is quite this well known.” Since 1972, they have sold thirty-four million records. In Mexico, fourteen movies, in which they appear, have been adapted from their songs. In 2002, more people saw them at the Houston Astrodome than had ever seen a concert there before: 67,002. (Fifty-five thousand people heard the Beatles at Shea Stadium in 1965.) In Mexico City, an audience of a hundred and twenty thousand is typical. John Reilly, Los Tigres’ press agent, at Rogers & Cowen, a firm that has also represented the Rolling Stones and Elton John, told me that most acts have to be taken through the kitchen when they return to their hotels, to avoid the fans in the lobby. Los Tigres have to go through the front door. “You take them through the kitchen, and you shut down the hotel,” he said. “There is no room service, no more maid service, and the housekeeping closes down.”

Los Tigres may be the only arena act in the world that doesn’t use a set list. Customarily when they take the stage, they have in mind three songs to play. Meanwhile, people write titles on scraps of paper that they hand through the crowd until the papers are thrown onto the stage. The band picks up the papers. The concert is over when the stage is clean.

Los Tigres call their performances dances, not concerts. The distinction embodies the traditions of norteño, which was originally made by people who worked all day, then played in the evening for the people they had worked beside, who would dance. How long they played depended upon how long the dancers wanted them to play... A few weeks ago, in Brooklyn, Los Tigres took the stage at around one in the morning and played until four; they would have played longer but the building, an armory, had a curfew. Eight thousand people, many of them dressed like cowboys, paid fifty dollars for a ticket. Balls of paper flew in arcs between the crowd and the musicians, and sometimes grazed them. Los Tigres wore black suits with red and green highlights in a sort of twining, peacock-feather pattern. A few hundred feet from the stage, shadowy figures could be seen rising and falling, like hobby horses—couples dancing.

The majority of Los Tigres’ songs are corridos, a species of compressed ballad characteristic of norteño. Corridos are a form of bulletin. Something of consequence, usually violent, happened somewhere, and the corrido is the medium for broadcasting it. (One could think of the *Iliad* as a long-form corrido.) Corridos began to appear in northern Mexico in the eighteen-sixties and have

a single reference, the border. They emerged to express the strife that ensued when a remote and unified territory was divided suddenly, following the Mexican War. No corrido has been written that is not somehow in the shadow of this circumstance. Antique corridos had bad men and cattle drives and border disputes as subjects, as did cowboy ballads—the explanation being that the culture of the region was an amalgamation of Mexican and Anglo elements. According to the corrido scholar Elijah Wald, this is why so many cowboy words, such as “lasso,” “rodeo,” “bronco,” “buckaroo,” “canyon,” and galón, which means braid, as in ten-gallon hat—a hat tall enough for ten braids—are Spanish.

The villains in many early corridos were the Texas Rangers, who were regarded as violent henchmen for land-grabbing ranchers. Often, the Rangers, called “rinches,” were described satirically. In an old-fashioned corrido, a Texas Ranger might kill the hero’s wife—or his children or parents or brothers and sisters—in a cowardly way. The hero kills the Ranger, Texas sends more Rangers, who are afraid of the hero, who kills them, too. Eventually, the hero is killed, often by Rangers who overwhelm him or trick him or creep up on him and shoot him in the back, or, as a matter of honor, he allows himself to be captured. Essentially, corridos describe a defeat, but a dignified one. Had the hero not been provoked, he would have lived peacefully. Because an indefatigable antipathy existed between the Mexicans and the Rangers, there were always new corridos.

During the early twentieth century, the corrido became a sympathetic home to war stories, and lots of corridos were written about Pancho Villa, the peasant bandit and hero general who raised an army of cowboys during the Mexican Revolution. A dominant theme in modern corridos is the anxieties and dangers of crossing the border illegally.

In addition, corridos are almost always factual, or at least claim to be. Their audience no more cares to hear about imaginary characters and imaginary happenings than the readers of the Wall Street Journal would care to read about made-up businessmen and made-up business deals. Corrido writers often collect material as if they were reporters. Paulino Vargas, who has written for Los Tigres, has said that when he hears about something that might provide a fit subject for a corrido he likes to visit the place where the event took place and talk to people who witnessed it.

For the majority of their songs, Los Tigres rely on four or five writers, a few of whom specialize in corridos. (The band also sings boleros—romantic songs—and cumbias, which are the equivalent of light verse.) People write letters to Los Tigres telling their stories. They shake hands with the band members as they pose with them and say, “The first time we came to the border, my wife was pregnant and they turned us away, because they said we were undesirable and a threat, so we paid a man my brother-in-law knew in Tijuana with a truck. . . .” When Jorge hears a story that he thinks will make a good corrido, he consults with one of the band’s writers. The writer works up a draft, and Jorge responds. “There’s a lot of editing,” he said. He likes a corrido to resemble a play, with characters whose mistakes or misfortunes seem real to the audience. Chris Strachwitz said there will always be norteño music, because there will always be people trying to cross the border...



**Questions:**

How do Los Tigres Del Norte intertwine vaquero culture in their artistry and stage presence?

How does the history behind Norteño music connect to the origins of the vaquero/cowboy?



### Station 3: Solange, “When I Get Home”

*In March 2019, singer-songwriter, artist, and producer Solange Knowles released her fourth album When I Get Home. Read Solange’s interview on The Daily Show with Trevor Noah, examine the images, and answer the questions below.*

**Trevor Noah:** I truly appreciate what you’ve created with the short film that goes with [the album] because it’s very rare that you get a visual representation of what your mind couldn’t even comprehend... I mean you see imagery of cowboys but, at the same time, in, like, a fine arts space... But, like, how did you chose that style? And why did you choose to signify that album in this way?

**Solange Knowles:** ... I really actually developed a fear of power and feeling powerless and not feeling control of my body. And so going back home to Houston was really me reclaiming that and the Black cowboys and their stories and reclaiming their stories. I did a fashion campaign and I remember it was supposed to be about Americana and American Western culture, and it was all white men. And I was like, ‘That don’t look like the cowboys that I grew up seeing in Houston, Texas.’ Like my uncles and the thousands of men who get on horses from Houston to Louisiana and do trail rides and saying through this film that our Black stories are art, our everyday notions are art. The way we move and the way we speak and just elevating the experience. I don’t know, I just feel like when I think about creating these landscapes that I want to leave behind and reimagining what the Coliseum could look like in 20 years with these bodies and these faces and these stories and these celebrations, that’s what I’m trying to achieve.





**solange knowles** ✓

@solangeknowles

Follow



THANK U TO ALL THE BLACK COWBOYS  
IN THE LAND, SINCE THE BEGINNING OF  
TIME !

Directed and Designed by me and my heart



[apple.co/WhenIGetHomefi...](https://apple.co/WhenIGetHomefi...)



11:07 AM - 24 Mar 2019







### Questions:

In the interview Solange mentions that none of the cowboys and imagery associated with Americana and the American West looks like the cowboys she grew up seeing. Why might this be?

How is reclaiming the ignored cultural contributions of Black cowboys a form of reclaiming power, according to Solange?

Based on the stills from the short film for *When I Get Home*, how are cowboys represented?



## Station 4: Compton Cowboys

*Established in the 1980s, Compton Cowboys met while participating in a non-profit that aimed to keep youth from gang life and gun violence through horseback riding. The Compton Cowboys have participated in rodeos, featured in fashion campaigns such as Pyer Moss, and interviewed by numerous media outlets. Read the below profile of the Compton Cowboys and respond to the following questions.*

### **For the Compton Cowboys, Horseback Riding Is a Legacy, and Protection**

A group of childhood friends wants to create a safer community and challenge the notion that African-Americans can't be cowboys.

By Walter Thompson-Hernández, *The New York Times*, March 31, 2018

For Anthony Harris, 35, walking to the corner store to buy a soda in his hometown, Compton, Calif., often comes with the risk of being stopped and searched by the police. But when Mr. Harris and other members of a group of horse riders known as the “Compton Cowboys” choose to ride their horses to the store, something entirely different happens.

“They don’t pull us over or search us when we’re on the horses,” Mr. Harris said while riding a dark brown horse named Koda as two police cars slowly drove past him on a recent trip to the store. “They would have thought we were gangbangers and had guns or dope on us if we weren’t riding, but these horses protect us from all of that.”

The Compton Cowboys, composed of 10 friends who have known one another since childhood, but officially came together as a group in 2017, are on a mission to combat negative stereotypes about African-Americans and the city of Compton through horseback riding.

The tight-knit group first met more than 20 years ago as members of the Compton Jr. Posse, a nonprofit organization founded by Mayisha Akbar in Richland Farms, a semirural area in Compton that has been home to African-American horse riders since the mid-20th century. Like other nonprofits, the Compton Jr. Posse and the Compton Cowboys rely heavily on donations from alumni, government grants and local community support used to sustain the cost of the horses on the ranch.

Most of the Compton Cowboys were first encouraged to join the organization by friends or relatives who believed horse riding would offer an alternative to gangs and violence prevalent throughout the city.

“When I was 11, I saw a black guy who was washing his horses outside of his home,” said Charles Harris, 29. “I walked up to him and started asking him questions about horses because I had only seen horses on TV before that.”

The man told him about the Compton Jr. Posse. The next day, Mr. Harris and his mother signed the papers and paid a fee to be a member.





For the Compton Cowboys, living in a community best known for the gangster rap group N.W.A. and high murder rates — 35 murders in 2016, with the crime index being nearly double the average in the United States, despite the fact that it has declined since 2002 — has been a motivating factor in their choices to ride horses.

“We’ve always wanted to give people a different side of Compton besides gangster rap and basketball,” said Leighton BeReal, 28, a member of the group who was born and raised in Compton...

Still, while the Compton Cowboys believe that they are helping to eradicate some of the negative stigmas of their city, their mission is to also break into a predominantly white western rodeo circuit. The group members have individually tried to do so over the years, albeit with some challenges. A typical horse can cost \$10,000 to \$50,000, depending on the breed, but the Compton Cowboys have had to rely on auctioned horses that cost approximately \$200, and were victims of abuse, malnourishment and other forms of trauma.

Resources are scarce, and they often rely on secondhand riding gear, which can put them at a disadvantage when riding against those with more resources. In addition, training with a limited number of saddles often means having to ride “bareback,” which, according to Randy Hook, has now become a staple of their style. Their unique style, however, is believed to be one of their strengths as they continue to challenge conventional cowboy culture in a rodeo world that often prides itself on tradition.

“We’re different than most cowboys because we wear Air Jordan’s, Gucci belts and baseball hats while we ride,” Anthony Harris said. “But we could also dress like other cowboys.”

For the Compton Cowboys, riding through the city brings different reactions from local residents. Some react to the sight of African-American men on horses with fascination and disbelief, creating what Mr. Hook, 28, describes as a “Compton paparazzi” experience. But some are used to seeing them, scarcely pausing to take a second look.

Combating the stereotype that African-Americans do not ride horses has always been an issue for the group, particularly because they are largely omitted from media like movies and books. African-American cowboys first emerged in the southwest United States at the conclusion of the Civil War, when freed African-American slaves migrated west to seek opportunities in a host of professions including cow herders and ranchers. According to William Loren Katz, author of “The Black West: A Documentary and Pictorial History of the African-American Role in the Westward Expansion of the United States” there were 5,000 to 8,000 black cowboys and cowgirls after the Civil War when wild herds of cattle were rapidly growing throughout the West.

“Being a black cowboy opened up professions for black men that they could not find in the North or South where they were often forced to work as street cleaners and elevator operators,” he said. Mr. Katz also said that black cowboys — although often erased from historical narratives — are an indelible part of United States history.







**Questions:**

What are some of the goals of the Compton Cowboys?

According to the *New York Times* piece, what are some of the obstacles the Compton Cowboys confront?

How are the Compton Cowboys different from popular depictions of the cowboy? Why is this significant?

## Station 5: Lil Nas X

*In December 2018, Atlanta rapper Lil Nas X released his hit single “Old Town Road,” which some have described as country trap. In spite of the song containing elements of traditional country songs, the song was removed from the Billboard Hot Country charts igniting controversy and discussion about how country is categorized. The song went on to become the longest running number one song on the Billboard Hot 100 chart. Read the article below and answer the questions that follow.*

### Lil Nas X: How the West Was Won

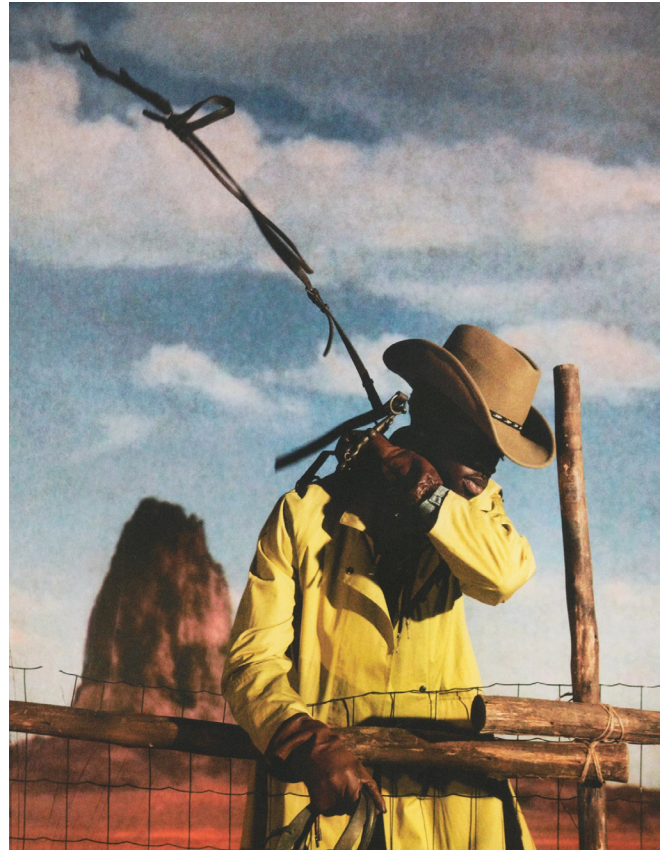
Blazing the trail for a new kind of cowboy, Lil Nas X is the viral star whose country-trap sound brought chaos to Nashville, and sent thunder through the internet

By Jack Mills, *Dazed Digital*, July 30, 2019

At the end of last year, the myth of the ‘lonesome cowboy’ crept into the imagination of a 19-year-old rapper from the Atlanta suburbs. “I literally saw myself in a movie,” he recalls, “a loner cowboy western. I wanted to run away from everything.”

Montero Lamar Hill – now better known as Lil Nas X...

When Hill enters the red clay set for the video to “Old Town Road” – which co-stars Diplo, Vince Staples and Chris Rock – he isn’t just wearing spurs and fringed chaps, the usual cowboy getup. He’d had Indiana-based designers Union Western imagine a black suit embroidered with racing-pink and electric-blue unicorns – the kind made for events such as the Rose Parade, where prestigious carriages lined the streets of Pasadena. Hill has been immersed in character ever since his “Old Town Road” revelation, lacing his earlobes with miniature horse shoes and elongated leather tassels that remix the ‘bolo tie’ shape worn by movie sheriffs. Looking like one of Kenneth Anger’s kaleidoscopic Hell’s Angels on the set of this cover shoot, Hill is the hero figure of a narrative thread that traces back centuries of American history.



Hill has spoken at length about the ways he wrote in “Old Town Road”’s meme-ability (“I was like, ‘I gotta make sure this song has quotables in it,’”), but the biggest fire lit for the track was on TikTok, an app in which users share 15-second homemade clips. A Massachusetts man called Michael Pelchat – or @nicemichael, to his six-figure TikTok following – found a meme clip of “Old Town Road” back in late January, and decided to dance to it on his channel. The set-up was simple: appear at the start of the clip in your usual clothes, and transform into full cowboy attire at the click of the bass drop. By early March, Pelchat had reached more than 100,000 people, and many were replicating the format under the hashtag #TheYeekawChallenge. He believes that “Old Town Road” and the Yeekaw Challenge have cleared a bright new path for music marketing, one that signals



the death of the traditional music video. “I can guarantee you it is better for an artist to invest in a content creator to make a video,” says Pelchat, who now charges hundreds of dollars for clips off the back of his “Old Town Road” break. “They can easily drop a music video on their YouTube channel with no followers, but they’re not tapping into a new market.”

Ultimately, it was the internet as a whole that spun Hill’s song into a cultural cataclysm, and the internet that came to its defence after an attempt to silence it. In March, Billboard removed “Old Town Road” from its country-music chart, and their ahistorical statement – about the song not having the right blend of country music ingredients to qualify for it – was a reminder of the long shadow the Nashville establishment still casts over the industry. “Clearly, race is vital to Billboard’s rejection of the original song, (and) it is undeniable that many high-ups in the country music industry are interested in policing the racial boundaries of the music, trying to ensure the ‘whiteness’ of the genre,” says Tore Olsson, a historian and lecturer at the University of Tennessee.

“Musically speaking, it’s not that far off from what’s happening in a lot of mainstream country music today,” adds Stimeling, whose job it is to trace the genre’s subtle evolution. Hip hop has an undeniable presence in the country-music mainstream, he argues, from “Over and Over”, a 2004 collaboration between Nelly and country favourite Tim McGraw, to Meghan Linsey and Bubba Sparxxx’s 2014 song “Try Harder Than That”. “Country is more blocked off and this was a pierce,” Hill told journalist Zach Sang. “It’s like, ‘If we allow this, what the fuck is next?’”

For all the facts, figures, retweets, memes and smashed records underpinning the success of “Old Town Road”, witnessing its impact in a real-world setting is still shocking. Currently, it has the power to rip the bottom out of dancefloors across the world, and one viral video shows the Texas Tech American Football team destroying a locker room to the song after a match. Another clip, posted in May, shows Hill performing the song to elementary school kids, who dip, twist, rise and sit to Hill’s gestures like a starling murmuration. “(Hill) said, ‘I need y’all to be quiet’ a single time and got an entire school to shut up,” 22-year-old Eric, a Lil Nas X fan from Pennsylvania, tells me. “There’s not another living artist with that kind of influence.”

But for Bri Malandro, who runs the Instagram page The Yeehaw Agenda, the clip holds a far more profound significance. Malandro coined the term after seeing Ciara wear a white cowboy hat on the cover of King Kong magazine last September. She started the account to document the various other black cowboy moments she could find across pop culture, from musician Oyinda’s outfit at Telfar’s AW19 fashion week show, to 21 Savage in a fringed western jacket for a Saint Laurent campaign.

### **Station 5: Lil Nas X**

“The video made me realise that, for the majority of kids growing up today, (Hill) is the first cowboy they’ve ever seen,” says Malandro. “When they find out the detailed history of black cowboys, they won’t be as shocked as people seem to be today – because they’ll have known about him.” Stimeling points out that, after the civil war, an estimated one in four cowboys in the US were African-American. More broadly speaking, he argues, the erasure of the black cowboy from popular culture is clogged in the industrial mechanisms that made the censorship of “Old Town Road” such an urgent piece of controversy. Hill, who credits the country-trap sound to his Atlantan elder Young Thug, says he is “hoping this opens the door for even more acceptance, within all and any genre”.

**Questions:**

How has Lil Nas X taken his own approach to the American Cowboy and country music?

Why do you think there has been backlash towards Lil Nas X being on the Billboard Country charts?





## Station Question Worksheet

### Station 1: Mitski, "Be the Cowboy"

*In 2018, singer-songwriter Mitski released her fifth album Be the Cowboy. On The Daily Show with Trevor Noah, Mitski talked about the title of her album and its meaning to her as a Asian-American woman. Read the transcript provided in the station and answer the following questions:*

Mitski clarifies that she means "not the working cowboy but the cowboy myth." What characteristics does Mitski attribute to the myth of the cowboy?

Why are these attributes appealing to Mitski and/or her listeners who possess identities opposite of the media portrayal of the cowboy?

### Station 2: Los Tigres del Norte, Joan Sebastian, and Christian Nodal

*Los Tigres del Norte and Christian Nodal are Norteño artists, which is regional Mexican music. Los Tigres del Norte has been performing for over fifty years and have a large fanbase. Their songs are often corridos, a narrative ballad. Los Tigres tackle issues of the border and immigration in their songs, often centering the working class near the border. Christian Nodal is a 20 year old artist who combines mariachi and norteño. Read the article and analyze the pictures in the station, and then answer the following questions:*

How do these artists intertwine *vaquero* culture in their artistry and stage presence?

How does the history behind Norteño music connect to the origins of the *vaquero*/cowboy?



### **Station 3: Solange, “When I Get Home”**

*In March 2019, singer-songwriter, artist, and producer Solange Knowles released her fourth album When I Get Home. Read Solange’s interview on The Daily Show with Trevor Noah, examine the images, and answer the questions below:*

In the interview Solange mentions that none of the cowboys and imagery associated with Americana and the American West looks like the cowboys she grew up seeing. Why might this be?

How is reclaiming the ignored cultural contributions of Black cowboys a form of reclaiming power, according to Solange?

Based on the stills from the short film for *When I Get Home*, how are cowboys represented?

### **Station 4: Compton Cowboys**

*Established in the 1980s, Compton Cowboys met while participating in a non-profit that aimed to keep youth from gang life and gun violence through horseback riding. The Compton Cowboys have participated in rodeos, have been featured in fashion campaigns such as Pyer Moss, and interviewed by numerous media outlets. Read the profile of the Compton Cowboys in the station and respond to the following questions.*

What are some of the goals of the Compton Cowboys?

According to the *New York Times* piece, what are some of the obstacles the Compton Cowboys confront?

How are the Compton Cowboys different from popular depictions of the cowboy? Why is this significant?

### **Station 5: Lil Nas X**

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How has Lil Nas X taken his own approach to the American Cowboy and country music?

Why do you think there has been backlash towards Lil Nas X being on the Billboard Country charts?

### **Station 6: Pyer Moss and Telfar**

*Pyer Moss was founded by New York City-born designer Kerby Jean-Raymond in 2013. Telfar, a unisex clothing line, was founded by Telfar Clemens in 2005. Both fashion brands have incorporated cowboy imagery and aesthetics in conjunction with representations of Black identity in recent collections. Read the quotations below, examine the pictures, and answer the following questions:*

How is the cowboy incorporated into the Pyer Moss collection? Telfar collection?

Based on the quotes and images, what narrative is Pyer Moss trying to tell through his designs? What is Telfar trying to say?