

ROUNDING UP CHRISTIAN COWBOYS: MYTH, MASCULINITY AND IDENTITY IN
TWO TEXAS CONGREGATIONS

By

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To my parents

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The contemporary cowboy church movement is an American Protestant missionary effort devoted to reaching people who are attracted to the aura of cowboy identity and culture. This ethnographic study focuses on myth, masculinity, and identity formation in two Texas congregations. Using theoretical ideas from religious and cultural studies, this thesis attempts to understand how these churches function, how they attract members, and why individuals choose to attend them. This work argues that the success of the contemporary cowboy church movement can be explained by the hybridization of historical conceptions of the cowboy, popular culture, and evangelical Protestantism.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: ROUNDING UP CHRISTIAN COWBOYS

Thirty-five men and women sit mounted on horseback, surrounded by forty others, in a large pasture near Alpine, Texas. Sitting astride a horse in front of them, next to another man holding a large American flag, is their Pastor Wendell Elliot. He reads to them from the Bible of the wondrous changes brought by the Lord and then invites them to church the next day. The pasture roping hosted by the Big Bend Cowboy Church is now underway.

Big Bend Cowboy Church is one of 208 churches associated with the American Fellowship of Cowboy Churches (AFCC), an affiliate of the Baptist General Convention of Texas (BGCT).¹ The churches host rodeo events that reach out to members of the community who identify with western culture. The goal of the AFCC is to “remove as many of the barriers as possible that might be found in the more traditional church setting and offer a more relaxed ‘come as you are’ atmosphere where everyone is welcome!”² Individuals are encouraged to come, even if their spurs and chaps are caked with mud and manure. Sermons are simple and biblical. Pastors preach moral living as outlined by a fairly literal reading of the Bible. They call on masculine images such as having a car breakdown or killing a rattlesnake. Although some Christian groups have focused on reaching out to cowboys since at least 1890, the contemporary

¹ Data reflects document posted on August 2, 2012. The AFCC updates their church directory on an almost monthly basis. “AFCC Church Directory,” American Fellowship of Cowboy Churches. Accessed September 17, 2012. <http://www.americanfcc.org/content.cfm?id=2088>.

² Emphasis original. “Who We Are,” American Fellowship of Cowboy Churches. Accessed September 17, 2012. <http://www.americanfcc.org/content.cfm?id=200>.

cowboy church movement is a more recent development.³ During the 1970s, non-denominational organizations promoting a Christian message associated with the cowboy/rodeo/Western heritage lifestyle began to dot the American landscape.⁴

This thesis argues that the success of the contemporary cowboy church movement can be explained by the hybridization of historical conceptions of the cowboy, popular culture, and evangelical Protestantism. Until now, most discussions of cowboy churches have taken place in newspapers and popular magazines. Only one scholar, Katy Williams, has attempted an analysis of this movement. Her research employs Max Weber's concept of elective affinities to argue that cowboy churches offer an affinity between cowboy culture and evangelical Protestantism.⁵ Why and how this has occurred is left unexplored. Through an analysis of the available literature and ethnographic research into the lived experience of congregants in two Texas cowboy churches, my intention is to advance our understanding of this little researched phenomena in contemporary American religious culture in order to discuss masculinity and identity formation. I will begin this effort by first briefly locating this study in the

³ Deborah Bloys Hardin. "Bloys Camp Meeting," *Handbook of Texas Online*, Accessed March 25, 2012. <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/iyb01>.

⁴ These organizations include Cowboys for Christ, which is from Ft. Worth, Texas and the Fellowship of Christian Cowboys based in Canon, CO.

⁵ In his analysis on the subject, Richard Herbert Howe points out that "Thus, history would be a logical chaos were it not for an order in the universe of the meanings to which those actors orient their actions. That order is to be found in the elective affinities of words, the greater or lesser extents to which they possess inner affinity through the intersections of their meanings. It is this order in the universe of possible actions, which makes his social science possible. The actors' choices of possible actions are given by the elective affinities of their universe of meanings. The order of the actual, the course of history and the structure of society, is to be read from this order of the possible." Richard Herbert Howe, "Max Weber's Elective Affinities: Sociology Within the Bounds of Pure Reason," *American Journal of Sociology* Vol. 84, No. 2 (Sep., 1978), 382-383., Katy Williams, "Cowboy Churches: A Blast from the Past or A Gallop into the Future?" (Paper presented at the Southern Rural Sociological Association Annual Meeting, Corpus Christi, Texas, February 6- February 8, 2011) 5-7., and Katy Williams, "The Land-Grant Mission and the Cowboy Church: Diffusing University-Community Engagement" (M.S. Thesis, Texas A&M University, 2011).

available literature and articulating the theoretical and methodological approach of this study.

Literature Review

Until recently, Western historians have ignored religion while historians of religion have not paid attention to the American West. In the preface to his book *Religion in the Modern American West*, the late Ferenc Morton Szasz asserts that although historians in the latter part of the twentieth-century have “reinvigorated our understanding of western history... regardless of their ideological stance, most of these historians shared a common conceptual framework: they either marginalized or ignored the theme of organized religion.”⁶ Scholars of religion have similarly overlooked the role the West has played in the religious lives of Americans. Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp points out that while the academic study of the history of religion has vastly improved in the past century, religion in the United States is still treated as having moved from the Eastern to the Western United States. In ignoring movements of religion from North to South, West to East, and even Far East in and to the United States, scholars are left with “not simply an incomplete historical narrative, but unsatisfying accounts of religious experience.”⁷ Indeed, it was only in 2008 that the American Academy of Religion created a five-year seminar for scholars to present their work about the American West.⁸ Through this

⁶ Ferenc Morton Szasz, *Religion in the Modern American West* (Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona Press, 2000), xi.

⁷ Her goal is instead to move towards a more hemispheric approach to religion that eschews grand narratives in order to create “a world history of American religions.” Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, “Eastward Ho! American Religion from the Perspective of the Pacific Rim,” in *Retelling U.S. Religious History*, ed. Thomas Tweed (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 128 and 130.

⁸ “Seminar on Religion in the American West,” Religion in the American West Blog, Accessed October 5, 2012, <http://www.yale.edu/relwest/seminar.shtml>.

study, I hope to add to the emerging field of scholarship on religion in the American West through an ethnographic study of modern cowboy churches in Texas.⁹

My project is framed in part by the work of New Western Historians who emerged following the publication of Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land*. A large component of Smith's book was a rejection of Frederick Jackson Turner's "Frontier Thesis".¹⁰ While Turner argued that, by 1893, the frontier had been closed and the era of American expansionism was over, the implications of his "thesis" were far more nuanced. By presenting the West as embodying the values that allowed for both geographical movement and intellectual development as a nation, Turner framed the West in almost spiritual terms.¹¹ He presented it as a liminal space, thus allowing it to become a region of mythologized alterity. As Daniel Worster puts it, "Turner never stopped believing the old story was literally true. Returning to the wilderness, men could be restored to the innocence of their youth, sloughing off the blemishes of age." Smith, in contrast, "first told us what was wrong with the old history and dared to call it myth."¹² By daring to call the old history a myth, historians of the West were able to approach the region with new

⁹ This includes work done by Quincy D. Newell's *Constructing Lives at Mission San Francisco: Native Californians and Hispanic Colonists 1776-1821* and Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp's *Religion and Society in Frontier California*.

¹⁰ Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land; The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950).

¹¹ "The result is that to the frontier the American intellect owes its striking characteristics. That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom-these are traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier." Op. Cit. Turner.

¹² Donald Worster. "Beyond the Agrarian Myth" in *Trails: Toward A New Western History*, ed. Patricia Nelson Limerick, Clyde A. Milner II, and Charles E. Rankin (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 1991), 9 and 7.

theoretical and methodological tools which have since been referred to as the New Western History.

The shift in perspective from myth to reality is what opened the door for the work of Patricia Nelson Limerick, Richard White, and David G. Robbins.¹³ These New Western Historians place an epistemological focus on postmodern discussions of power, subaltern studies, gender, and the environment. While their movement has certainly expanded the history of the West by incorporating previously overlooked voices and perspectives, it lacks engagement with such popular cultural figures as the cowboy. The result is that much of the work being done by these historians fails to incorporate discussion of the impact of myth.

One exception to this unwillingness to address the mythic West is the work of Richard Slotkin. In *Gunfighter Nation*, he defines myth as “stories drawn from a society's history that have acquired through persistent usage the power of symbolizing that society's ideology and of dramatizing its moral conscious- with all the complexities and contradictions that consciousness may contain.” Employing this definition, Slotkin explores the myth of the West and describes how it changes decade by decade in American culture. Privileging the idea of myth, Slotkin shows how myth, and the symbols associated with it, shape and are shaped by society. Moreover, he demonstrates how aspects of the myth change in order to affirm the values of the society in which they are embedded.¹⁴

¹³ The New Western History movement is understood to have begun at the 1961 meeting of the Western History Association in Santa Fe, New Mexico Ibid.,11.

¹⁴ Slotkin depends on Clifford Geertz, Victor Turner, and Claude Levi-Strauss who also made significant contributions to the field of religious studies. Richard Slotkin. *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Atheneum, 1992), 9.

With the exception of Slotkin's work, scholarship devoted to studying the cowboy ended, for the most part, in the 1970s. The apparent assumption was that when the frontier closed, working cowboys disappeared, thus relegating the cowboy to the realm of myth. New Western Historians apparently view aspects of the West in the same homogenous fashion as Turner. By this I mean that they selectively study historically ignored aspects of the West, and in doing so, they fail to acknowledge that important cultural tropes continue to exist. In contrast, I intend to follow Slotkin by recognizing how myth is a vital aspect of culture which both influences and is influenced by different aspects of said culture. I believe this will help answer such pertinent questions as: What is a cowboy church? What are the social and economic backgrounds of members? How do these factors influence how they view themselves and church affiliation? How do these churches fit into the culture of the contemporary West? And what is the role of myth in affirming the lifestyle of rugged, independent men?

In addition to situating my work within the realm of New Western History, I intend to position my work in the context of more contemporary 19th and 20th century men's movements like Muscular Christianity and Promise Keepers. What I seek to answer is: What masculine cultural elements are present in cowboy churches? Why do cowboy churches appeal to men? How are these churches similar to, yet different from, these other movements? And, how do both men and women orientate themselves within these congregations? By answering these questions, I will come into conversation with authors who are historians and sociologists of religion including Clifford Putney, John P. Bartowski, and Dane S. Claussen, as well as sociologists of gender such as Michael Kimmel.

Although I will be focusing primarily on myth and masculinity, other subjects as diverse as politics, economic concerns, and weather patterns crept into my interviews, fleshing out the worldview of cowboy church attendees. By trying to understand how these individuals position themselves in the larger world, I seek to demonstrate how religion informs and is informed by other aspects of culture. Given the relative inattention to the modern cowboy in contemporary academia, I hope to shed light on the culture of a seemingly anachronistic lifestyle that still thrives in rural areas of the United States and how, in some areas, it has coalesced into a Christian cowboy culture.

Theory

My study draws primarily from three complementary theoretical approaches. The first approach reflects the concept of the social function of myth as understood by such scholars as Bruce Lincoln, Mircea Eliade, J.Z. Smith, and Thomas Tweed. The second involves work on hybridity and identity as explored by Néstor García Canclini, Jean Baudrillard, and Jan Nederveen Pieterse. The last approach refers to the framework of lived religion advocated by Robert Orsi and David Hall. By employing these three theoretical approaches, I seek to understand and explain the contemporary phenomena of the cowboy church.

Because religion often deals with origin and social order, myth is frequently a topic of study among scholars. Eliade claims that myth creates a “longing to recover the primordial epoch that began immediately *after* the creation.”¹⁵ J.Z. Smith, expanding on Eliade, points out that myths are reshaped and altered by the societies in which they

¹⁵ Mircea Eliade, “Cosmogonic Myth and ‘Sacred History,’” *Religious Studies* Vol. 2 No. 2 (Apr., 1967): 171-183.

exist.¹⁶ They are “best conceived not as a primordial, but rather as a limited collection of elements with a fixed range of cultural meanings which are applied, thought with, worked with, experimented with in particular situations.”¹⁷ Freeing myth from a static, purely historical concept, as Eliade views it, allows scholars to consider how myth fits into social narratives.

Building upon Eliade and Smith, Lincoln and Tweed explore the practical applications of myth as a component of culture that informs identity and religious belief. Lincoln does this by describing myth as the “stories through which groups accomplish the task of sociocultural reproduction by inscribing their values and sense of shared identity.” Myth, according to Lincoln, is one of the many avenues through which culture is propagated.¹⁸ Although I will argue that these churches do attract individuals who still live a real, non-mythologized cowboy lifestyle, decisions regarding congregation name, location, decorations, and sermon content are all informed by an attempt to appeal to the idea of what the cowboy should be. Tweed’s work, in turn, expands upon Lincoln’s treatment of the sociocultural attributes of myth by situating myth in the context of forming and sustaining religion and religious communities. While Lincoln looks solely at myth as a component of culture, Tweed treats myth as integral to religious and community identity. For Tweed, religions are flows that are simultaneously organic and

¹⁶ “I would not propose that there is no pristine myth; there is only application. That this requires that we not excise myth from its interpretive context of existential situation. That application and situation is not just a matter of belief or repetition but that it is as much play, skepticism, rebellion.” J.Z. Smith. “No News Is Good News: The Gospel as Enigma,” in *Secrecy in Religions*, ed. Kees W. Bolle (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1989), 77.

¹⁷ J. Z. Smith, “Map is not Territory,” in *Map is not Territory: Studies in the History of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 308.

¹⁸ Lincoln, Bruce, “Mythic Narrative and Cultural Diversity in American Society,” in *Myth and Method*, edited by Wendy Doniger & Laurie Patton (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 168.

cultural. A component of cultural flows includes what he calls “orienting tropes” which are “metaphors, similes, myths, allegories, personifications, and symbols—that function as figurative tools for making and remaking imagined worlds.”¹⁹ By thinking of myth as a trope, I will explore the methods by which cowboy churches construct their identity in order to attract the unchurched.

I will also engage with Néstor García Canclini, Jean Baudrillard, and Jan Nederveen Pieterse to examine how cowboy culture is constantly renegotiated and then mixed with Christianity to create a hybrid culture that sustains the contemporary cowboy church. As a starting point for discussing hybridity, I will employ Nederveen Pieterse's work on culture and globalization. Hybridity, he asserts, is “the ways in which forms become separated from existing practices and recombine with new forms in new practices.”²⁰ Nederveen Pieterse also explains how cultural mixing allows for the “emergence of new practices of social cooperation and competition” which are “interdependent” and “require and evoke new cultural imaginaries.”²¹ Beginning with his work, I will analyze how the culture and theology of the contemporary cowboy church are the result of combining the evangelical emphasis on reaching out to men within the western heritage culture.

Next, I will draw from Baudrillard's idea of the hyperreal and simulacra, and from Canclini's work on hybrid cultures. Referring to these concepts, I will explore the manner

¹⁹ He also discusses that tropes are not just found in religions, but in this context they are useful as “analogical utterances” that allow a way of thinking about the “suprahuman forces and ultimate horizons” that are “defining features of religion” Thomas A. Tweed. *Crossing and Dwelling: a Theory of Religion* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2006), 68.

²⁰ He uses the definition put forth by William Rowe and Viviane Schelling in their work on popular culture. Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *Globalization and Culture: Global Melange* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004), 70.

²¹ Ibid., 88.

in which cowboy culture has changed over two centuries and how it is negotiated within cowboy churches. According to Baudrillard, at this point in history, culture exists in a hyperreal space that is “produced from a radiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere” and it is the continuous change and renegotiating of hyperreal symbols that leads to the creation of cultural simulations and simulacra.²² Using Baudrillard as a starting point, I will look to Canclini in order to consider how contemporary networks of communication create a “*game of echoes*” in which the messages we encounter “on television are those that we reencounter in the streets, and vice versa: the ones are echoed in the others.”²³ Using the work of these two theorists, I will discuss how contemporary understandings of cowboy identity and culture emerge from constant renegotiations of myth and history that are inscribed on to one another, which makes it difficult to deduce what a “real” cowboy is. This analysis will allow me to discuss how cowboy and western heritage religion comes to be understood as part of and embedded in this hybrid culture.

During my nine weeks in the field spent visiting two cowboy churches, I utilized Hall and Orsi's model of religion as a lived tradition. According to Orsi, “religion comes into being in an ongoing, dynamic relationship with the realities of everyday life” and emphasizes the “subtle, intimate, quotidian actions on the world” through which “meanings are made, known, and verified” outside of traditional religious structures.²⁴

²² Jean Baudrillard, “The Precession of Simulacra,” in *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 2.

²³ García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 212.

²⁴ Robert Orsi, “Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religion,” in *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*, ed. David Hall (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 7.

Since cowboy churches are embedded in western culture, how parishioners, staff, and clergy orient themselves within this culture and within the rest of the world sheds light on the role of religion in their lives. The lived religion model allows for a flexible ethnographic approach based on conversation and experience rather than surveys and quantitative data.²⁵ By having conversations with congregants about their faith, attending church events, and sharing meals, I was able to overcome some of the barriers that frequently separate researcher from subject. While the people I interviewed were not uncooperative, they were wary of paperwork and bureaucracy in general. I believe that trying to do a congregation-wide survey would have been a failure, in part, because it would have come across as impersonal and prying. Recognizing this aspect of their culture, I approached individuals in an informal manner and tried to keep interviews as conversational as possible, even answering questions about my own life and background if prompted. I attempted to ask a standard set of questions in every interview, and each person responded differently to the prompts. Trying to keep the conversations as informal and comfortable as possible gave me the flexibility to allow people to share stories that would go unheard had I stuck to a survey or set script.

Method

This is intended to be a pilot study of a much larger phenomenon. Today, cowboy churches encompass multiple associations and geographic areas in the United States, Mexico, and Canada. These associations include the American Fellowship of

²⁵ While some scholars criticize this approach, I found it pivotal in gaining the trust of the congregants I interviewed. Russell McCutcheon, asserts that “there is no moral requirement whatsoever for us to converse” with the subjects who we study “so as to reach any mutually beneficial understanding.” In his opinion, this leads Lived Religion scholars who do so to be uncritical of their subjects. Russell McCutcheon, “It’s a Lie. There’s no Truth in It! It’s a Sin!”: On the Limits of the Humanistic Study of Religion and the Costs of Saving Others from Themselves.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 73/3 (2006): 729.

Cowboy Churches (AFCC), Cowboy Ministers Network (CMN), International Cowboy Church Alliance Network (ICCAN), Fellowship of Christian Cowboys (FCC), Cowboys for Christ, and the Cowboy Church Network of North America (CCNNA). Despite the plethora of Cowboy Church associations, I limited my fieldwork to two different churches within the AFCC. This freed me to analyze the communities without also having to navigate doctrinal differences that could potentially arise across associations. One of the churches I studied was formed by the AFCC, while the other existed prior to its inception. The differences between the two churches I studied included congregation age and size, location, and self-understanding of what is included in the western heritage. This left me with two distinct portraits of life in cowboy churches that, despite these differences, had similarities that I believe reveal the reasons for the contemporary existence of cowboy churches. By doing fieldwork in two churches, I hoped to avoid conclusions particular to one church and not suggestive of the movement as a whole.

Fieldwork

My fieldwork took place over a two and a half month period in the summer of 2012. I spent a month at the Big Bend Cowboy Church in Alpine, Texas and five weeks at Cowboy Fellowship in Pleasonton, Texas. At each church, I interviewed approximately twenty individuals and attended church services every Sunday. Other aspects of fieldwork included attending band practices, setting up cattle pens, attending a pasture roping, being present at barrel racing practices and clinics, and helping out with Vacation Bible School. Interviews occurred around kitchen tables, at local restaurants, in the church, and out in fields while on horseback. Conducting my fieldwork in a conversational manner gave me the opportunity to understand the lives of

the congregants and how they see themselves within the larger organization of the church, the AFCC, and their local communities.

Cowboy Fellowship, located in Atascosa County, which is about an hour south of San Antonio, began as a bimonthly roping event in 2001 that was organized into a church in 2003. The roots of this church pre-date the Texas Fellowship of Cowboy Churches and the American Fellowship of Cowboy Churches. It formed without the institutional assistance of either organization, and, because of this, functions in a way that diverges slightly from the AFCC model. My main reason for conducting fieldwork at Cowboy Fellowship was to experience a more mature version of a cowboy church. With a weekly attendance of around 800 people, Cowboy Fellowship is one of the largest cowboy churches within the AFCC. In addition to sizable weekly attendance, Cowboy Fellowship also offers over twenty different ministries in which congregants can become involved and is the social hub for many who attend. By studying a church that has existed for almost a decade, I hoped to grasp what the early development of a cowboy church was like and to understand how it has changed over time.

My other fieldwork site was Big Bend Cowboy Church (BBCC) in Alpine, Texas. Whereas Cowboy Fellowship is near a large metroplex and within driving distance of three small cities, BBCC is in the geographically isolated expanse of West Texas near Big Bend National Park and the Texas/Mexico border. Founded in 2006, Big Bend Cowboy Church serves as an example of a younger church that was planted by a representative of the AFCC after the movement became cohesive. During my visit, the church averaged about 120 worshipers a week. Because of its smaller size, BBCC does not offer the variety in ministries that Cowboy Fellowship does. However, there are still

opportunities for individuals to become involved in key groups such as the music ministry, arena team, and Bible study. Because it is geographically situated far from Cowboy Fellowship and was established at a later date by the denomination, I felt that BBCC would serve as a good juxtaposition to Cowboy Fellowship in order to carry out an effective comparative study.

Cowboy Fellowship and Big Bend Cowboy Church are both examples of modern, AFCC affiliated cowboy churches. In my chapter devoted to fieldwork, I will discuss the similarities and differences between the two congregations and the factors that influence the personality of each church body. Fieldwork provided me with the opportunity to become acquainted with the idiosyncrasies of each congregation, which helped me understand what draws people from varied walks of life to this movement.

Autobiography

While conducting my fieldwork, one of the most frequent questions I received from congregants was “How did you find out about us?” I admit, it must have seemed odd to them that a student from the University of Florida would choose to study groups in rural areas of Texas. However, I am originally from South Texas and, over the past few years, I began to notice cowboy churches on the highways and farm-to-market roads across the state.²⁶ Although I have no direct connection to western heritage or Protestantism, my family owns land and, until two generations ago, depended on dry land farming and ranching to make a living. We were not cowboys; rather, we were Catholic Polish immigrants who did what we could to make a living off the rural, arid land that exists southeast of San Antonio. The combination of growing up in a state with

²⁶Farm-to-market roads also go by the names ranch-to-market roads, farm roads, and ranch roads. They are used to connect rural areas to cultural centers in Texas.

a complex identity that depends heavily on myth and historical memory and my own remote connection to ranching piqued my interest in cowboy churches.

From a more academic perspective, for as long as I can remember I have been interested in studying conservative Protestants. This is partly because of my political science background and general curiosity about the Religious Right and 1st Amendment issues. As I moved into graduate studies, politics began to interest me less and, instead, I became drawn towards studies of lived religion and the dialogue between culture and religion. This interest in aspects of popular culture, including the construction of national myths, appeared to overlap with the emerging Cowboy Church Movement. It seemed like a natural fit for a native Texan to choose to study these churches.

Thesis and Argument

This thesis argues that the success of the contemporary cowboy church movement can be explained by the hybridization of historical conceptions of the cowboy, popular culture, and evangelical Protestantism. Since the Bloys Cowboy Campmeeting began in 1890 outside of Alpine, Texas, Christians have looked for ways to reach out to unchurched cowboys. By appropriating aspects of cowboy culture and infusing them with a Christian message, these churches appeal to individuals affiliated with the western heritage as well as those who may idealize it because they perceive it to be a masculine environment whereas most churches are traditionally viewed as feminine or feminizing. Although the movement itself is only a little over a decade old, it appears to represent an institutionalized and well-funded version of an idea that has existed since the 1890s.

Focusing on myth, masculinity, and cultural hybridity, I address both the construction of a Christian cowboy culture and how it appeals to modern, rural men. In using ethnography, I offer an assessment of cowboy church culture that incorporates both the institutional and the personal. While authentic, male cowboys are the demographic the AFCC targets, the casual atmosphere and simple, brief, services also attract men and women with varying levels of connection to western culture.

Chapter Outline

In the first chapter, I address how the cowboy has become entrenched in the historical narrative of the United States. To accomplish this, I explain the difficulty involved in determining where the West is located geographically. I then look at the lifestyle of working cowboys throughout history, the mythic dimension of cowboy culture that emerged with Buffalo Bill's Wild West Rodeo, and the lives of modern day cowboys. I will examine the gaps in contemporary literature that result in an unclear definition of the contemporary cowboy, from which emerges a figure that is the product of both myth and regionalism. Finally, I briefly overview history of groups and organizations dedicated to evangelizing to cowboys before evaluating the history and goals of the American Fellowship of Cowboy Churches.

In the second chapter, I offer my ethnographic work. Here, I relate congregational histories and analyze data compiled during my study of two AFCC cowboy churches in Texas. In this comparison, I paint a picture of the similarities and differences between the two churches. This is done in order to show the diversity in the movement and how churches adapt doctrine and culture to the needs of their communities. Bringing together my fieldwork, in the form of interviews and observations, allows me to discuss the major themes of cowboy churches. There, material culture, how myth is negotiated

within the churches, and the role masculinity plays within the communities. When discussing the churches, I focus on the construction of the church, dress, ministries, music, and church sponsored events. On the more individual level, I delve into how congregants view themselves and their church community. Paying attention to issues of gender and their self-understanding of western heritage allows me to determine how they orient themselves within the world of the church. In approaching the cowboy church at both the institutional and personal level, I hope to address the subject in a way that highlights the complexity of the movement and the individuals who are active in it.

In the third chapter, I analyze my fieldwork using theories from religion and cultural studies to discuss the myth of the cowboy and his culture as a hybrid entity that is used as a trope to inform religious and social culture. Following this discussion of myth and hybridity, I clarify how these factors shape issues related to material culture and masculinity within congregations. After doing this, I address how cowboy churches fit into the larger literature of Christian men's movements including Muscular Christianity and Promise Keepers. By orienting the cowboy church as an example of hybridity between myth, culture, and men's movements within American Christianity, I hope to look contribute to relevant discussions in these scholarly fields by locating my work within them.

Finally, in my conclusion I revisit my hypothesis in light of the data I have presented. Additionally, I offer suggestions for avenues of further study of cowboy churches in other parts of the Americas (Mexico and Canada), Spanish language cowboy churches in the United States, and churches that are affiliated with other

cowboy ministry organizations/denominations. It is my hope that by bridging the gap between Western and religious studies, I will contribute to the literature in both fields.

CHAPTER 2

THE HISTORY OF COWBOY CHURCHES

When you think of the word “cowboy” what comes to mind? John Wayne? Roy Rogers? Or is it the nameless man herding cattle on the open range? Do you think of modern rodeo riders? Although the Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the cowboy as “one who tends cattle or horses; especially: a usually mounted cattle-ranch hand,” this definition does not capture the array of identities the cowboy takes on within history or popular culture.¹ This chapter discusses where the West is located, the multiple identities of the cowboy, and historical efforts to evangelize cowboys and people who subscribe to a western heritage. In calling attention to these issues, I create a conceptual framework for discussing the history and goals of cowboy churches.

Where is the West?

How do we define the West? Debates among western historians reveal the contested regional identity of the West. Compared to the relative ease of defining the American South, which encompasses the states that fought for the Confederacy during the Civil War, and New England, which is associated with the thirteen original colonies, defining the West is more problematic.² In this section, after defining where I will situate the West and unpacking the complex relationship Texas has within this regional definition, I will situate the cowboy within this space.

Frederick Jackson Turner, in his Frontier Thesis, tied American growth, development, and exceptionalism to “the existence of an area of free land, its

¹ “Cowboy,” Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online, accessed October 8, 2012, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cowboy>.

² Gerald Thompson, “Another Look at Frontier/Western Historiography,” in *Trails: Toward A New Western History*, edited by Patricia Nelson Limerick, Clyde A. Milner II, and Charles E. Rankin, (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 1991) 94.

continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward.”³ Although aspects of Turner's thesis are problematic, including his treatment of the West as a universal, homogenous entity, his work attempts to capture what separates the West from other regions of the United States as well as what keeps it linked to the rest of the nation. However, Turner did not go so far as to define the physical demarcation concerning where the West began. The nebulousness of Turner's West underscores the debates about regionalism that permeate contemporary western studies.

Regionalism is a contested notion within present day scholarship in large part due to the postmodern turn that deconstructs traditional boundary demarcations in favor of a deterritorialized history. However, as Michael C. Steiner and David M. Wrobel point out in their essay on the new “Western Regionalism,” “recent developments in the field of western history testify to the renewed vitality of the theme of western regional distinctiveness.”⁴ Historians who pursue the new western history reaffirm the existence of the region. Analyzed, the mythic dimension of the West makes it difficult to territorialize.⁵ For example, the United States Census Bureau excludes states like Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, and the Dakotas. It is easy to problematize this

³ Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*, Accessed May 25, 2012. <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/turner/>.

⁴ Michael C. Steiner and David M. Worbel, “Many Wests: Discovering A Dynamic Western Regionalism,” in *Many Wests: Place, Culture, and Regional Identity*, ed. David M. Wrobel and Michael C. Steiner. (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1997), 9.

⁵ Steiner and Worbel claim the issue exists because “The West probably does have certain defining characteristics, but they are not readily and evenly applicable to all parts of the West. Furthermore, one of the most enduring of those characteristics may be the West's hallowed place in the American, or at least the Euro-American, imagination. And the mythic West of the imagination is not constructed through any conception of western regional diversity; instead, it is derived from the application of near-intangible generalities to 'the West'-notions of striking, colorful vistas; romantic, yet challenging landscapes; breathtaking frontier dramas. The West in this context becomes a 'state of mind'-something rather difficult to map.” Ibid., 11.

exclusion. Historically, these states are associated with the great cattle drives of the 19th century that contributed to the history of the mythic West. At the same time, Steiner and Wrobell are not so essentialist as to purport that the West is monolithic. Instead, they argue that scholars should account for how “regional consciousness developed differently in these many demographically divergent Wests.”⁶ To demarcate the divisions within the West itself, they depend heavily on a survey conducted by historian Walter Nugent.

Nugent's survey, published in 1992, is based on the author's opinion that, despite the issues with defining the West, understanding what factors contributed to people's views of the region would offer insight regarding why the boundaries of the West are so contested. What makes Nugent's survey useful in my discussion of the West is that he included members of a variety of professions in nearly 500 questionnaires. In soliciting opinions from members of “the Western History Association, a list of editors and publishers of newspapers and magazines from Colorado to California, and members of the Western Writers of America” rather than just historians, Nugent discovered that about “one out of 6” respondents defined the West in non-geographic terms.⁷ The people who predominantly held this position were writers who “perpetuate the myth” and “adamantly oppose the whole idea of demythologizing.”⁸ The unwillingness of fiction writers to locate the West geographically attests to the importance of the mythic dimension of the West and how this opinion continues to be reaffirmed in American

⁶ Ibid., 18.

⁷ He received “251 responses: 188 from WHA members (61 percent); 25 from journalists (26 percent); and 38 from WWA members (50 percent).” Walter Nugent, “Where is the American West? Report on a Survey,” *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* Vol. 42, No. 3 (Summer, 1992): 4-8.

⁸ Ibid., 7-8.

consciousness. It also underscores that there is both a geographic and cultural element to the region.⁹

For the purposes of this paper, I will define the West according to state boundaries rather than geographic boundaries and focus only on the geographic component of the region. My reason for doing so is clarity. Quite simply, it is easier to orient where state boundaries are using a basic map than to determine what constitutes the edge of the Great Plains. I will use the east most boundaries of North and South Dakota, Kansas, Nebraska, Oklahoma, and Texas as my geographic demarcation between the West and the remainder of the United States.

Although I include Texas in my definition of the West, the state has a complicated history that results in different historians placing it in different regions. As Ty Cashion points out in his article about the role of Texas in the West, “most of the recent works professing to be western in scope have ignored, marginalized, or misinterpreted the critical role that the Texan West played in the formative development of the larger region.”¹⁰ Texas’ involvement in the Civil War as a slave state leads some historians to label it as a Southern state. However, the state’s association with the great trail drives, cattle industry, and cowboys causes many to view it as a pivotal component of the West.¹¹ Ultimately, Cashion points out that during the Civil War, the state was hardly settled. After the war, expansion into the western part of the state fundamentally changed the culture that existed in the eastern part of the state, “to form a new region,

⁹ Ibid., 11.

¹⁰ Ty Cashion, “What’s the Matter with Texas? The Great Enigma of the Lone Star State in the American West,” *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* Vol. 55, No. 4 (Winter, 2005): 4.

¹¹ Ibid., 4-6.

familiar in some aspects, but one sufficiently different to make it unique.”¹² In his opinion, Southerners became Westerners during the process of settling the western part of the state. This process created a separate culture that resonates the perception of the mythic West rather than that of the eastern part of the state, which reflected Southern culture.

In his conclusion, Cashion voices his frustration with attempts to define the boundaries of the American West by saying they are “virtually meaningless without the realization that the region as a whole is composed of constituent parts bound together by characteristics that are not always shared in common.”¹³ In this sense, he, like Steiner, Worbell and Nugent, undermines Turner’s notion of the frontier and the West as a unified entity. I include this discussion on the contested nature of the West in order to frame the epistemological issues that arise when studying a figure, such as the cowboy, that is simultaneously historical, contemporary, and mythic, as is the space they inhabit.

What is a Cowboy?

From the hard working man on the open range to the morally upstanding loner trying to preserve good in the lawless Wild West, the word “cowboy” evokes a variety of images. As a historical figure, the cowboy raised cattle on the open range of the West. Following the closing of the range in the 1880s, cowboys were romanticized by Wild West shows and dime novels alike, thus ensuring their transformation from a respected historical figure into mythic entities in the pantheon of heroes and spaces of the dominant American myth. Despite the closing of the West, individuals continued to work

¹² Ibid., 8.

¹³ Ibid., 15.

cattle, and cowboy identity persisted. However, the term “cowboy” broadened in scope to encompass those who associated with the western heritage as well as rodeo culture. In this section, I present a brief history of the cowboy that emphasizes the dual identity of the contemporary cowboy as both a figure of myth and contemporary reality.

The 1840s-1880s are generally associated with the era of the historical American cowboy. Early cowboys were actually called vaqueros, who were Hispanic men charged with taking care of the herds of cattle that roamed parts of Mexico and America, including states as far east as Florida.¹⁴ As Americans moved West, white and African American men also became cowboys when new land owners began to develop a cattle culture. This was the time of the great overland cattle drives prior to the fencing in of the West with barbed wire, which effectively partitioned and divided the open range.¹⁵ Despite this, culture is not uniform across the West. Regional differences in style between Texan, Californian, Montanan, and even Hawaiian cowboy cultures can be observed.¹⁶ However, for the purposes of this paper, I will attempt to address the unifying themes that encompass cowboy history.

These historical cowboys were working men, and the title of their occupation was born from a derogatory term for Loyalists who stole colonists' cattle during the Revolutionary War. The title of “cowboy” denoted an individual's inexperience in the profession, which separated them both socially and economically from the higher paid

¹⁴ David Dary, *Cowboy Culture: A Saga of Five Centuries*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), 4.

¹⁵ Ibid. pp. 87 and 307.

¹⁶ Dary spends chapters two, three, four, five, and eleven discussing the major differences between cattle cultures and the culture adapted to fit different climates and landscapes. Differences in culture include manners of dress, saddle shape, roping method, and more. Ibid., 44-88 and 227-253.

trail bosses and ranchers.¹⁷ The clothes they wore were practical for the physically demanding tasks they had to perform on a daily basis, and were a far cry from the glitz outfits worn by later performers such as Roy Rogers. It is fair to say that the cowboy of popular culture is only remotely based on his historical predecessor.

Once a lowly working ranch hand, he has been re-imagined countless times. However, the West in which the cowboy lived has been changed to reflect, “the American experience not so much as it really was but how Americans would like it to be.”¹⁸ I am inclined to agree with Tristram P. Coffin’s statement about the cowboy myth from his 1953 response to Marshall W. Fishwick’s article on the same subject. Fishwick’s evaluation concluded that the cowboy ideal is a mix of “historical reality” and “fictional ideal” which appealed to the idea of freedom so valued by Americans. Coffin elaborates on the subject, and describes the cowboy myth as “a natural cultural manifestation of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century trends toward love of nation and glorification of everyday man on one side and of individual expression and lawless violence on the other.” Both men locate the origin of the myth of the cowboy as emerging from Rousseau’s idea of the “natural man” which was philosophically and culturally important during the time the mythic cowboy emerged.¹⁹

¹⁷ James R. Wagner, “Cowboy: Origin and Early Use of the Term,” in *The Cowboy Way: An Exploration of History and Culture*, ed. Paul H. Carlson. (Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University Press, 2006), 11 and 17.

¹⁸ Richard Aquila, “Introduction: The Pop Culture West,” in *Wanted Dead or Alive: The American West in Popular Culture*. Edited by Richard Aquila. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 11.

¹⁹ It’s interesting that most of the essays I found about the mythic Cowboy were written prior to the emergence of the New Western History movement. Tristram P. Coffin, “The Cowboy and Mythology,” *Western Folklore* Vol. 12 No. 4 (October 1953): pp. 290 and 292. and Marshall W. Fishwick, “The Cowboy: America’s Contribution to the World’s Mythology,” *Western Folklore* Vol. 11 No. 2 (April 1952): 78.

When and how then, did the myth of the cowboy emerge? The general consensus seems to be that it arose from the Wild West shows produced by William F. Cody, better known as Buffalo Bill, which toured the United States and Europe from 1882-1916.²⁰ The historical contribution of Buffalo Bill's Wild West is twofold. First, it played a role in the development of the rodeo culture that emerged after the close of the range. Since the cowboy profession was seasonal, during the offseason some men opted to compete and show off their cattle handling, roping, horsemanship, and other skills in Buffalo Bill's show. It was the popularity of these shows that opened the door for the development of rodeo as a sport which reflects the actual technical skills needed to handle cattle, horses, and other livestock.²¹ Secondly, although advertised as being historical, Buffalo Bill's shows introduced the East and Europe to a constructed history of the West that reflected Buffalo Bill's writing of as Slotkin puts it, "history' by conflating it with mythology. The re-enactments were not re-creations, but reductions of complex events into 'typical scenes' based on the formulas of popular literary mythology."²² Although people acting in these shows mostly came from the sort of Western background that these shows promoted, it is more truthful to refer to them as actors than by any other title. The manner in which events were portrayed, actors were dressed, and the values those actors represented both reinforced and created cultural stereotypes. By shaping how individuals who had never witnessed the cowboy and the

²⁰ Op. Cit. Slotkin 66.

²¹ Kristine Fredriksson, *American Rodeo: From Buffalo Bill to Big Business*. (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1985), 10-13.

²² Op. Cit. Slotkin 69 and 75.

West first hand viewed it, Buffalo Bill's portrayal of life in the West became the foundation for popular culture depictions of the West in the 20th century.

By the end of Buffalo Bill's Wild West shows, Americans had developed a taste for the fictional West and the figures who inhabited it. The theme has been developed in various works of literature, film, television, music, and art, and has also shaped the political identity of Americans.²³ Despite their importance in this myth, the cowboy and the West are not static figures. Rather, when they are portrayed in popular culture, they are manipulated to reflect the problems facing the culture from which the story emerges. Richard Slotkin points out that American mythology is "produced by mass or commercial media" and "has a particular role and function" in the culture that "addresses most directly the concerns of Americans as citizens of a nation-state."²⁴ The implication of the popularity of a myth created by mass culture is that it can easily be shaped to reflect the social and political reality of the nation. The cowboy and the western, as Slotkin and others discuss, fit this model and are examples of a myth that is dynamically tied to American culture.

When I began my fieldwork, I was under the assumption that in the 21st century, the cowboy had ceased to exist in any dimension but the mythic. The body of Western history available about the cowboy informed this assumption. In *Cowboy Culture: A Saga of Five Centuries*, published in 1981, David Dary concludes his detailed history of

²³ Richard Slotkin's *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* explores these themes in great detail and how the meaning of cowboy and the West change to reflect the cultural realities of the decade.

²⁴ I think it's interesting that Slotkin only uses cultural scholars such as Clifford Geertz to address the construction and role of myth. For my larger project, I will be incorporating theories of myth prevalent in religious studies by Mircea Eliade, J.Z. Smith, and Bruce Lincoln to explore how this American myth plays into the nation's Civil Religion and how that plays into the development of Cowboy Churches. Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*. (New York: Atheneum, 1992), 9.

the cowboy by relegating the figure to the realm of myth and, in a nod to Turner, declaring that legitimate cowboy culture ended when the range closed. The cowboy culture that exists today, from clothing to the use of trucks rather than horses is nothing more than “grabbing for bits and pieces of this mythical cowboy culture.”²⁵ I now believe this oversimplifies the manner in which western heritage has changed over the past century.

There certainly is some attraction to the myth. When visiting rural areas of Texas to conduct my fieldwork, I realized that, in pockets of the United States, cowboy culture is thriving. Their culture, moreover, is part of what fuels the success of the contemporary cowboy church. However, today there is little consensus about what defines cowboy culture. To some, it is working directly in or with the ranching industry, while to others it incorporates larger cultural markers such as participation in rodeo. The broadest definitions go so far as to encompass rural, self-sufficient culture and include oil-workers and others whose jobs that require manual labor in isolated locations.²⁶ In the contemporary age, it's difficult to define a cowboy. Nevertheless, western culture, tinged with myth, is still pervasive in rural areas of Texas.

Cowboy Religion

History leads us to assume that cowboys were typically raised in religious households; however, their daily religion was informed by the natural wonders they encountered on the job. In this section, I will look at some of the different ways

²⁵ Op. Cit. Dary 336-337.

²⁶ Interview by Author. Digital Recording. Alpine, TX., June 11, 2012., Interview by Author. Digital Recording Charlotte, TX., July 19, 2012., and Interview by Author. Digital Recording. Pleasanton, TX. August 2, 2012.

Protestant groups utilized western heritage individuals in the 19th and 20th centuries. I will then discuss the creation of the modern, cowboy church.

What was the religious background of the cowboy? This is nearly impossible to determine on an individual basis. Demographics on western states and territories taken by the United States government in 1830, 1870, and 1890, hold that cowboys who were raised in these territories were raised in households that defined themselves as Protestant.²⁷ In her book *Men of the West: Life on the American Frontier*, Cathy Luchetti, a popular author of the history of the West, paints a picture of preachers and clergy in the West who were from a variety of denominations. Although Luchetti's view of the West is, like Turner's, homogenous, she is one of the few authors to address religious issues during this time period. She writes that the historical West attracted a wide variety of missionaries who "scrambled west to save souls, found missions, and through pulpit, prayer, and the ubiquitous reach of Sunday school, unleash Divine Providence on the rowdy unchurched of the American Frontier."²⁸ In her discussion of religion, she emphasizes the role that itinerant preachers and Baptist and Methodist campmeetings played in bringing religion to isolated individuals in the American West.

Luchetti points out that people in the West attended church and were religious, but were perhaps not so picky about denomination. This reflects the difficulty in pinning down a dominant religious group in any particular state. She captures this indifference to denominational affiliation when discussing the frustration of one Episcopal minister who "was continually shocked at the disloyalty of western parishioners" and their

²⁷ Edwin S. Gaustad, Philip L. Barlow, and Richard W. Dishno, *New Historical Atlas of Religion in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), Figures C.3, C.4, C.5, and C.17.

²⁸ Cathy Luchetti, *Men of the West: Life on the American Frontier* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2004), 171.

tendency to change “churches on whim, and were unwilling to support earnestness over inspiration, departing if a sermon failed to be snappy.”²⁹ While Luchetti paints a broad picture of religion in the West and she does not address cowboy religion, her work is useful for framing the manner in which religious groups had to operate in order to minister to people during the formative years of the American West.

Ramon F. Adams wrote many books on cowboys based on his informal interviews with aging cowboys during the early 20th century. He is a problematic source to use, because his works contain no citations. In *The Old-Time Cowhand*, Adams addresses both “the cowman’s religion” and the “cowman’s ethics.” He points out that, despite the fact that many cowboys did not regularly attend church, they were still religious. Although it is safe to assume that historical cowboys were unchurched, Adams believes that this is not to say they lacked a code of ethics that guided their behavior. Adams asserts that these loose cowboy codes were never formal laws, but instead were respected by those on the range. They generally encompassed values such as courage, cheerfulness, perseverance, loyalty, fair play, honesty, respect for women, and self-sufficiency.³⁰ The values which Adams claims cowboys adhered to appear to be grounded in folklore. Together, they seem to have provided a loose framework for understanding how cowboys governed themselves during the historical period in which they lived.

When discussing religion specifically, Adams is of the opinion that “the average cowhand had been raised in a Christian home and taught by a Christian mother. . . But

²⁹ Ibid., 175.

³⁰ Op. Cit. Adams 53-61.

religion to 'im wasn't somthin' to be be fanatical 'bout, it was somethin' to use practically-to be lived instead of preached."³¹ This was compounded by the fact that the cowboy's work not only hindered the possibility for church attendance but, when he was able to go to town, he "didn't want to spend this rare freedom listenin' to psalm singin' and exhortations on sin."³² Despite this, Adams, like Luchetti, emphasizes that during this time, itinerant preachers were prevalent and brought the community together for sermons because of the lack of established churches. The Bloys Cowboy Campmeeting serves as one such example of a community brought together by religion in the sparsely settled Big Bend region of Texas.

Bloys Cowboy Campmeeting: Reverend William Benjamin Bloys, one of many western itinerant preachers, founded Bloys Cowboy Campmeeting in 1890 near Fort Davis, Texas. This annual campmeeting "has remained an important part of the isolated trans-Pecos ranch world of West Texas/New Mexico to the present day."³³ In 1888, Bloys relocated to Fort Davis with his family to live among cattlemen friends who had settled in the region.³⁴ Although he was never the official chaplain for the Fort, he remained in the region, carving out a ministerial circuit that took him to neighboring towns and isolated ranches in the Big Bend region.³⁵ During such excursions, he visited the family of John Z. Means whose wife Exa Gay "expressed the wish that a

³¹ Ramon F. Adams, *The Old-Time Cowhand* (New York: Macmillan, 1961,) 47.

³² Ibid., 47-48.

³³ Op. Cit. Szasz 44.

³⁴ Minnie D. Clifton, "A History of the Bloys Camp Meeting," *Sul Ross Teachers College Bulletin* 27 (June 1, 1947), 17-19.

³⁵ Lucy Miller and Mildred Bloys Nored Jacobson, *Jeff Davis County, Texas: The History of Jeff Davis County* (Fort Davis: Fort Davis Historical Society, 1993), 190-192.

campmeeting could be held in the area for the isolated ranch families." This suggestion paved the way for the first Bloys Cowboy Camp Meeting. According to most accounts, Rev. Bloys had already come to understand that cowboys preferred to worship outdoors under the "dome of the great world-wide wonderful cathedral God built for all men." This inspired him to lead an open-air campmeeting rather than holding it in a tent or a church.³⁶

The first campmeeting began on October 10, 1890 in Skillman's Grove, Texas, a site seventeen miles outside of Ft. Davis on the San Antonio-El Paso road. Meetings on this site continue to this day. From the outset, Rev. Bloys made clear that he intended the campmeeting to be open to believers of all denominations. As he declared, "there will be no line drawn because of different religious beliefs, but everyone is welcome to come and worship with us."³⁷ During the first year, about fifty people attended. However, by the end of the two-day meeting, participants were so pleased with the gathering that they began to plan for future years. Late August seemed to work best, because it "fell between the spring roundups and branding and before the fall shipping."³⁸ Like all future camp meetings, the dates were chosen according to the work schedules of ranchers in order to ensure that ranchers, cowboys, and their families would be able to attend.

According to William F. Evans, author of *Border Skylines: Fifty Years of "Tallying Out" on the Bloys Roundup*, by the second or third year, Rev. Bloys encouraged the

³⁶ Janet Edwards Franklin. "A History of Bloys Campmeeting: Gospel West of the Pacos" in Bloys Campmeeting, A Year of Celebration, 1989-1990: Bloys Cowboy Campmeeting Centennial (Austin: N. Business Graphics, 1989), 2.

³⁷ Op. Cit. Miller 199.

³⁸ Ibid., 200.

creation of daily, gender specific prayer meetings. The reason for doing so was to create an environment in which men could more easily talk about their experiences and encounters with God. These segregated prayer meetings provided men with a space and time to address gender specific spiritual concerns. In this setting, cowboys were brought together to create a “great brotherhood.”³⁹ Others who have written about the campmeeting emphasize the “cowboy style” of the prayer meeting. No preachers were allowed to attend these meetings unless invited, and if so, it was not to preach, but to engage in egalitarian fellowship with the rest of the men.⁴⁰ By creating a gendered space within the already cowboy focused campmeeting, men had an open fellowship with one another.

The Bloys Cowboy Campmeeting continued to grow and change year after year. In 1902, a non-profit association was formed to help organize the yearly event. By the next year, Bloys was encouraged to invite other pastors to come preach at the campmeeting. In keeping with the campmeeting's interdenominational origins, representatives from the Disciples of Christ, Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian traditions were invited to the celebration.⁴¹ Rev. Bloys passed away on March 22, 1917, but not before the cowboy campmeeting that bore his name had celebrated its 25th anniversary.⁴² His campmeeting continues to the present day. Although it has undergone considerable changes including the construction of permanent worship

³⁹ William F. Evans, *Border Skylines: Fifty Years of "Tallying Out" on the Bloys Round-up Ground* (Dallas: Baugh, 1940), 308-311.

⁴⁰ Op. Cit. Franklin 39.

⁴¹ Ibid., 7.

⁴² Op. Cit. Clifton 22.

buildings and kitchens, and the transition from horse and wagon travel to the automobile, the Bloys Cowboy Campmeeting is a fixture of religious life in the Big Bend.

Other cowboy campmeetings continue to exist in the modern West. They include Lenapah Cowboy Camp Meeting in Lenapah, Oklahoma, Colorado Cowboy Camp Meeting in Kiowa, Colorado, and Hill Country Cowboy Campmeeting in Mountain Home, Texas. These campmeetings, begun in the 1930s and 1940s, attest to the continuing need to evangelize and minister to cowboy culture.⁴³ In the 1970s, cowboy fellowship groups began to emerge. These Christian groups, such as the Fellowship of Christian Cowboys, which formed in Canon City, Colorado in 1973, and Cowboys For Christ, which was created in Ft. Worth, Texas in 1970, are community fellowship groups that do not have their own churches. Cowboys for Christ claims that they are “not a substitute for the local Church or Assembly, nor is it in competition with any denominational group. It seeks, rather, through God's enabling grace, to be a helper to all local churches, denominations and groups to the extent that they are in harmony with the will of the Almighty God.”⁴⁴ Similarly, Fellowship of Christian Cowboys is made up of chapters rather than churches. Although they do claim to help put on cowboy church services, they do not exist as churches in their own right.⁴⁵

⁴³“History,” Ranchman’s Campmeeting in the Southwest. Accessed October 7, 2012. <http://www.kathrynsweb.com/ranchmen/history.htm> and “History,” Hill Country Cowboy Campmeeting. Accessed October 7, 2012. http://cowboycampmeeting.net/index_files/Page330.html.

⁴⁴“Statement of Position,” Cowboys for Christ. Accessed October 7, 2012. http://www.cowboysforchrist.net/Statement_of_Position.htm.

⁴⁵“FCC Chapters,” Fellowship of Christian Cowboys. Accessed October 7, 2012. http://www.christiancowboys.com/?page_id=49.

Cowboy Churches Today

While it is difficult to determine exactly when and where the first contemporary cowboy churches began, news of their existence started to emerge in the 1980s. In 1987, the New York Times reported on one such church that, at the time, held its services at Billy Bob's Texas Honky-Tonk in Ft. Worth, Texas. It was lead by Rev. Jeff Copenhaver, a "former world champion calf roper" who "began preaching on the rodeo circuit around the time he quit full-time rodeo competition in 1979" and felt compelled to start a full-time church in 1986.⁴⁶ Denomination is not mentioned in the article. The focus is more on how the church differs from traditional churches, including its lack of dress code or "pews, vestments or other signs of traditional worship."⁴⁷

In another article, published in the Ft. Worth Star Telegram in 1998, Rev. Copenhaver says that he knows "of 25 or 30 cowboy churches in Texas alone" and mentions another that was started in Nashville.⁴⁸ Unfortunately, he does not provide names, locations, or denominations of any of these churches. One of many articles written by the *Associated Baptist Press* on cowboy churches claims that the movement "has its roots in Pentecostal ministries from the middle of the 20th century, but has spread significantly among evangelicals -- and especially Southern Baptists in rural areas -- in the last 10 years," but offers no evidence to substantiate this claim⁴⁹.

⁴⁶ Peter Applebome, "Church Just Like Home to Cowboys," *New York Times*, April 27, 1987, accessed October 7, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/1987/04/27/us/church-just-like-home-to-cowboys.html?src=pm>.

⁴⁷ Ibid.. pp. 2.

⁴⁸ Jim Jones, "Cowboy Churches Hold a Unique Appeal," *Ft. Worth Star Telegram*, May 2, 1998, accessed October 7, 2012, <http://www.texnews.com/1998/religion/jones0502.html>.

⁴⁹ Unknown, "Cowboy Churches Lassoing America," *Associated Baptist Press*, July 31, 2008, accessed October 7, 2012, <http://www.abpnews.com/archives/item/3445-cowboy-churches-lassoing-america#.UHHeS6ncobl>.

Regardless of the origins of the modern cowboy church, the religious history I have traced demonstrates that there are ongoing efforts among Protestants to minister to individuals who consider themselves to be cowboys or part of the western heritage. Adams and Luchetti draw attention to the role religion played in the early American West and in the lives of historical cowboys. The Bloys Cowboy Campmeeting offers the earliest example of a cowboy campmeeting, but the establishment of other cowboy campmeetings and ministries demonstrates the continued belief among Protestant groups that cowboys need to be reached in a manner beyond that of the traditional church. Ultimately, this resulted in the development of cowboy churches intended to encourage regular church. By looking at an early example of a cowboy church, I point to another shift in the idea of evangelizing to cowboys that emphasizes regular church attendance and the formation of a congregational community.

Ron Nolan and the American Fellowship of Cowboy Churches

Whereas the previous section focused on non and interdenominational efforts to evangelize cowboys, this section looks explicitly at Baptist efforts to reach the cowboy. The American Fellowship of Cowboy Churches is an expansion of previous efforts to reach this group in the western region of Texas. Although focused evangelism of cowboys goes back to at least 1890 and typically had a non or interdenominational orientation, denominational efforts by the Southern Baptists to reach cowboys did exist. While Bloys represents an interdenominational effort to evangelize to the unchurched cowboys of the Big Bend, Paisano Baptist Encampment professes a distinctively Southern Baptist message. Established in 1916 west of Alpine, Texas on Highway 67,

the Paisano was not intended to undermine or devalue the work being done at Bloys.⁵⁰

Indeed, the two most influential religious founders of the Paisano, Reverend L. R. Millican and Reverend George W. Truett, were both veteran preachers at Bloys.⁵¹ In 2000, when Ron Nolen, started the first cowboy church that would later become part of a formal, American Fellowship of Cowboy Churches (AFCC), he was, whether intentionally or not, expanding on the work of other Baptists. This section explores what the AFCC is, and how its loose Southern Baptist affiliation sets it apart from other earlier cowboy fellowship organizations.

The American Fellowship of Cowboy Churches is, according its mission statement, an organization intended to create a network of cowboy churches that subscribe to Baptist theology and associational affiliations in order to reach the unchurched members of the western heritage.⁵² It is affiliated with the Baptist General Convention of Texas (BGCT), which is, in turn, affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). Prior to the creation of the AFCC, some Baptist cowboy churches affiliated with and received funding from the Cooperative Program Missions branch of the SBC. While it seems that the AFCC is not directly affiliated with the SBC today, the

⁵⁰ Harry Leon McBeth, *Texas Baptists: A Sesquicentennial History* (Dallas: Baptistway Press, 1998), pp. 176 and W.D. Smithers, "Circuit Riders of the Big Bend," *Southwestern Studies Monograph No. 64* (1981): 20-21.

⁵¹ Op. Cit. Miller 202.

⁵² Their precise intention is "to resource and develop Cowboy Churches through enhanced training, assessment, coaching, communication and connectedness through the movement of God's Spirit within the Western Culture; to establish a forum or platform for the "Baptist Way" Cowboy Churches to speak to one another; to enable "Baptist Way" Cowboy Churches to speak with a united voice; and to encourage the Cowboy Churches to remain voluntarily related to those Baptist entities that are supportive of and cooperating with the Fellowship." "Mission Statement," American Fellowship of Cowboy Churches. Accessed October 7, 2012, <http://www.americanfcc.org/content.cfm?id=2002>.

financial and social affiliations of AFCC churches with established Southern Baptist organizations creates an indirect link between the groups.⁵³

Ron Nolen, founding pastor of the Cowboy Church of Ellis County, Texas had considerable influence on the contemporary cowboy church movement. His church, founded in 2000, is considered to be the first associated with what would become a wide-reaching Baptist movement.⁵⁴ Nolen found the inspiration to start a cowboy church "from attending team roping events with his son." At these events, he felt as if there was significant misunderstanding of the role religion played in culture. To Nolen, there was a significant overlap between the values of the western heritage and Christian living. This belief prompted Nolen to "figure out what are the barriers to get the gospel a hearing amongst these Old West Culture people."⁵⁵ His solution to lowering these perceived social barriers was to start a cowboy church that combined the material and cultural aspects of the western heritage within a Baptist theological message.

Prior to founding the Cowboy Church of Ellis County, Nolen, a graduate of East Texas Baptist University and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, had served on the staffs at several Baptist churches.⁵⁶ As an employee of the BGCT, he was able to create an outreach ministry specifically dedicated to planting and growing cowboy churches in the state. In 2006, Nolen left the BGCT to head the newly formed Texas

⁵³ Karen L. Willoughby "Old West Church Saddles Up with boost from CP Missions" *Baptist Press*, May 1, 2002, Accessed October 7, 2012, <http://www.bpnnews.net/bpnnews.asp?id=13283>.

⁵⁴ Unknown. "Western Heritage/Cowboy Churches Currently Affiliated with the Baptist General Convention of Texas" (Unpublished Excel Document, Baptist General Convention of Texas, 2011).

⁵⁵ Opt Cit. Willoughby

⁵⁶ Lori Scott Fogleman, "Baylor, Baptist Standard Present Texas Baptist Ministry Awards," Baylor University Media Communications, November 12, 2004, Accessed October 10, 2012, <http://www.baylor.edu/mediacommunications/news.php?action=story&story=21349>.

Fellowship of Cowboy Churches (TFCC). Although the TFCC, the predecessor to the nationally focused AFCC, was still affiliated with the BGCT, the new organization was intended “to resource this western heritage church-planting movement and to help unify the BGCT cowboy churches and harness the resources for kingdom expansion.”⁵⁷ These resources were so effectively harnessed that cowboy churches were planted outside of Texas, prompting a parallel organization dedicated to out-of-state churches, known as the American Fellowship of Cowboy Churches, to be established in 2007.⁵⁸

As of August 2, 2012, the AFCC reports that there are 208 churches affiliated with their organization. While most of these churches are in Texas, 49 are in other states, including Florida, Alabama, Tennessee, Oklahoma, Kansas, and New Mexico.⁵⁹ Since the TFCC was formed in 2006, other major changes have taken place. Ron Nolen was removed from his leadership position in 2010 for undisclosed reasons. Around this same time, the TFCC and AFCC were incorporated into one body, the American Fellowship of Cowboy Churches.⁶⁰ Despite changes in leadership and organizational consolidation, cowboy churches continue to be planted by the AFCC in rural areas of the United States.

⁵⁷ Unknown, “Nolen to Coordinate Cowboy Fellowship,” *The Baptist Standard*, August 8, 2006, Accessed October 7, 2012,
http://www.baptiststandard.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=5428.

⁵⁸ Staff, “Cowboy Church Removes Nolen from Leadership Post” *The Baptist Standard*, October 7, 2010, Accessed October 7, 2012,
http://www.baptiststandard.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=11727&Itemid=53.

⁵⁹ Unknown, “AFCC Church Directory” (Excel Document, American Fellowship of Cowboy Churches, 2012).

⁶⁰ Op. Cit. Staff

Purpose of the American Fellowship of Cowboy Churches

In order to fulfill its mission statement, the AFCC offers support for individuals interested in planting cowboy churches by providing them with an approach for developing their church, continuing education for pastors and leaders of established churches, and financial support for affiliated churches.⁶¹ Those who are interested in starting a cowboy church are encouraged to follow the “5-Steps to Starting an AFCC Cowboy Church in America” which are “are taken directly from the tried and proven model of AFCC Cowboy Churches that have taken this God-driven journey before you.”⁶² Individuals attempting to start a cowboy church are aided through the five-step process by the AFCC. This process includes completing a western heritage assessment tool which is a form intended for the pastor that asks questions about the church's faith and connection to the western heritage, and gives guidance on entering into a covenant with the AFCC, forming ministry teams, doing pre-launch publicity, and completing a three month review.⁶³

The continuing education programs offered by the AFCC are known as Ranchhouse School Trainings. These take place throughout the year at varying locations, and videos from previous trainings are available on the AFCC website. A wide variety of topics are covered at ranchhouse trainings that typically last one or two days. Subjects covered include sessions on Discipleship Western Style, Cowboy Church

⁶¹ Unknown, “Steps for Starting a Texas Baptist/American Fellowship of Cowboy Churches New Cowboy Church.” (Word Document, American Fellowship of Cowboy Churches, October 27, 2011).

⁶² “Saddle Up,” American Fellowship of Cowboy Churches. Accessed October 7, 2012. <http://www.americanfcc.org/content.cfm?id=236>.

⁶³ Op. Cit. “Steps for Starting...” “Assessment,” American Fellowship of Cowboy Churches, Accessed October 11, 2012. <http://www.americanfcc.org/content.cfm?id=2056>.

Finances, Buying Land/Building Buildings, Arena Team Ministry, the Role of Women in the Cowboy Church, and the Functional Structures of a Cowboy Church, just to name a few.⁶⁴ By offering ranchhouse school trainings, the AFCC can reinvigorate the leadership of existing cowboy churches by reminding them of their mission and goals, and by inspiring new churches to form.

Besides planting churches and providing educational opportunities, the AFCC offers numerous western heritage based fellowship and outreach activities throughout the year. These include marriage retreats, teen and pre-teen camps, the Little George Havens Camp Meeting, ranch cuttings, chuckwagon cook-offs, the annual Cowboy Gathering in Alabama, and AFCC Ranch Rodeo Finals. Regular pastors' meetings, cowgirl events for women, and rodeos for seniors are also held by region.⁶⁵ These events create opportunities for individuals already involved in cowboy churches to engage in western heritage events with a Christian message, while they also create opportunities to minister to individuals who do not attend church. By hosting outreach and fellowship events, the AFCC attempts to fulfill their mission statement and bring more people into western heritage churches.

What is the Role of Local AFCC Churches?

In its mission statement, the AFCC makes it clear that they are trying to spread a Baptist message among western heritage individuals. In order to accomplish this, the AFCC helps establish cowboy churches that host weekly church services and regular western heritage oriented outreach activities in order to bring individuals, who otherwise

⁶⁴ “Ranchhouse School Training,” American Fellowship of Cowboy Churches, Accessed October 7, 2012. <http://www.americanfcc.org/content.cfm?id=2074>.

⁶⁵ “Events,” American Fellowship of Cowboy Churches, Accessed October 7, 2012. <http://www.americanfcc.org/content.cfm?id=2053>.

would not attend church, into the fold. This section draws on information made available both in ranchhouse school videos posted by the AFCC and in other documents to clarify the expectations the AFCC has of member churches and their role within the larger Christian world.

The best summary of the goals of the AFCC affiliated cowboy church is found in a document provided to me by Charles Higgs, the current director of the Western Heritage Ministry at the Baptist General Convention of Texas. The document is “an overview of the Cowboy church model used by the American Fellowship of Cowboy Churches.”⁶⁶ In it, western heritage individuals are classified as “working cowboys, professional rodeo cowboy, arena cowboys & cowgirls, cattle people, horse people, cowboys at heart, and cowboy mentality people.” Although this is clearly a broad definition of western heritage, the assumption made is that “if you focus at the top of the list and (sic) you won’t leave anyone behind” because “the working cowboy may be the hardest to reach but if you can do church in a way that he will come, then you will reach everyone else on the list.”⁶⁷ Additionally, the document summarizes the entirety of the cowboy church project in one paragraph:

The goal of cowboy church is to do church in such a way that a lost cowboy can be comfortable enough to sit there long enough to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ while those around him are worshiping God. It is a non-judgmental approach that does not beat people down for what they have done or what they are, but provides hope and forgiveness, accepting people just as they are, in their sin, just as Jesus did. This means that you may have to rub elbows with people who do not believe like you or have the same values as you. That is why this church will not suit everyone.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Op. Cit. “The Nuts and Bolts...” 1.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 2.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 2.

This document outlines the basic approach of the ministry for individual churches. They are to create a welcoming church environment with the intention of attracting individuals who are assumed to have little interest in attending a traditional church.

The video entitled “New Century, New Strategy, Western Heritage Background” featuring Greg Horn, an AFCC employee, echos similar sentiments to the AFCC document, but in a theological context. In it, he discusses the two different models for New Testament churches, the Petrine and the Paulian. Peter's church model was, according to Horn, a “church for the churched” to “reach people who already knew God” and historically included Jewish people. However, Paul's model, as discussed in Acts chapter 10, reflected a new way of doing things to “reach more people” who were “unchurched people. People who did not know God, who had no concept of one God.” Horn then elaborates to say that traditional churches are Petrine. Those who are already saved attend them to grow their faith. On the other hand, cowboy churches are Paulian in that, like Paul, leaders of cowboy churches try to understand the culture of the individuals they want to attract to the church.⁶⁹

Mike Marrow, the pastor of Cross Brand Cowboy Church in Tyler, Texas, elaborated further on the goal of reaching the unchurched. He points out, “existing church culture has created barriers which prevent the western heritage people from being reached.” These barriers can be external or internal. External barriers take the form of the material construction of the traditional, formal church while internal barriers include theological and doctrinal barriers that may focus too much on judgment and

⁶⁹ “New Strategy, New Century, Western Heritage Background.” Vimeo Video, 59:33, posted by the American Fellowship of Cowboy Churches, April 20, 2012. http://www.americanfcc.org/content.cfm?id=2074&content_id=372#attached_content.

damnation rather than redemption through Jesus. In order to build effective cowboy churches, according to Marrow, it is crucial to “stay or be culturally relevant.” This means that churches must be able to connect “to the culture you are trying to reach” by having culturally relevant leadership, programing (activities), and sermons. By following these steps, Marrow teaches that the upstart cowboy church will be successful in reaching the western heritage individuals in their area.⁷⁰

Cowboy churches focus their energies predominantly on getting men into church. Theologically and culturally, this relegates women to the role of helpers rather than leaders. According to the lecture titled “The Role of Women in the Cowboy Church” delivered by Robin Harvey of Circle J Cowboy Church in Texarkana, Texas, this is because the western heritage culture “is mostly (a) male dominated culture.” Harvey attests that, beyond the biblical constraints on women laid out in Genesis and Ephesians, unchurched men will not be as open to a church if they perceive it is run by women. Despite this, women are still encouraged to be involved in the church in non-leadership roles and are especially encouraged to start women’s ministries with “culturally relevant women” from the church in order to reach unchurched cowgirls. Although all unchurched people of western heritage are the target of the AFCC, men are the central demographic, while women are peripherally targeted.⁷¹

The ranchhouse school training videos produced by the AFCC show how the denomination believes individual churches should function in order that they might reach the greatest number of western heritage individuals. While I have not discussed

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ “The Role of Women in the Cowboy Church.” Vimeo Video, 20:50, posted by the American Fellowship of Cowboy Churches, April 20, 2012. http://www.americanfcc.org/content.cfm?id=2074&content_id=376#attached_content.

all available videos, the above analysis calls attention to both the importance of having a culturally relevant atmosphere, leadership, and messages as well as how to avoid the types of barriers that have historically hindered church attendance.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I addressed issues of definition including that of the West and the cowboy. In doing so, I demonstrated the complexities surrounding these two concepts both academically and in the popular imagination. Additionally, I described the religious background of the historical cowboy. Next, I looked at historical efforts to evangelize to individuals who identified as cowboys during the 19th and 20th centuries. I began by examining annual campmeetings, such as Bloys Cowboy Campmeeting, before I proceeded to define more current Christian organizations such as the Fellowship of Christian Cowboys and Cowboys for Christ. The goal of all of these groups is to encourage regular church attendance. Following this discussion, I analyzed the beginnings of contemporary cowboy churches and linked the birth of the AFCC to earlier Baptist efforts to evangelize to cowboys at the Paisano Baptist Encampment. Finally, I revealed the history of the Baptists' American Fellowship of Cowboy Churches, its purpose, and the organization's expectations for member churches. In the next chapter, I will present the findings of my ethnographic work, while focusing specifically on the role myth, masculinity, and identity play in these churches.

CHAPTER 3

FIELDWORK AND ETHNOGRAPHY

Having presented the history of the modern cowboy church, here I want to focus on the similarities and differences between Cowboy Fellowship and Big Bend Cowboy Church. The following discussion is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted during the summer of 2012. I present the histories of both churches as well as the communities in which they are embedded. After this, I will look at similarities that are central to the identity and purpose of the contemporary cowboy church including material culture, masculinity, myth, and the interplay among these concepts. These concepts are intertwined, so discussions overlap each other. Lastly, I look at differences between the churches related to their size, geography, and community needs. In the next chapter, I will address the theoretical implications of these themes and situate them in relationship with the relevant literature. Through this analysis, I hope to capture the essences of both these churches as well as how they fit into the larger contemporary cowboy church movement despite the miles that separate them.

The Story of Cowboy Fellowship

Prior to the founding of Cowboy Fellowship, Atascosa County was already home to a variety of churches. Today, the tri-city area which includes Pleasanton, Jourdanton, and Poteet, has, according to the worship directory available from the *Pleasanton Express*, at least twenty-one churches.¹ Why, was it necessary to form a congregation specifically for cowboys? In the late 1990s, the leadership of the First Baptist Church in Pleasanton, Texas felt that individuals affiliated with the western heritage were not

¹ Unknown, "Worship Directory," *Pleasanton Express*, accessed October 20, 2012 <http://www.pleasantonexpress.com/ROP/large/WorshipDirectory.htm>.

being reached by the established churches. The pastor of the church approached a man who attended the church regularly and had been raised in the Southern Baptist tradition in order to encourage him to start a roping ministry at his private arena.

These roping events eventually led to the formation of Cowboy Fellowship, one of the largest and most established cowboy churches in the modern movement.² After two years of bimonthly arena ropings that featured “good music, a short sermon, fajita tacos, and fellowship” the core group of men involved felt that they had outgrown their initial calling and that they should establish a formal cowboy church.³ The newly formed church hired a young Baptist pastor who had grown up in the area, Pete Pawelek, and held its first service on May 3, 2003 at the Atascosa County Show barn with 172 people in attendance.

Unlike many contemporary cowboy churches that were planted by Ron Nolen and the AFCC, Cowboy Fellowship formed in a vacuum. Those who ran the bimonthly ropings were unaware that a cowboy church had formed nearly 300 miles away in Waxahatchie, Texas. They were simply men who attended their local Baptist church and were trying to reach out to western heritage folks willing to listen to a short Christian message before roping. The church that formed from their roping events evolved from the desire to get more members of the community involved. The ideas and concepts that manifested in the early days of Cowboy Fellowship are now standard components of the contemporary cowboy church. For example, the roping events were funded by the group of thirteen core men who helped organize the events. They did not pass a

² Interview by Author, Jourdanton, TX, digital recording. August 5, 2012 12:24 p.m.

³ Unknown, “2012CFHistory” Word Document, Cowboy Fellowship, 2012, 1.

collection plate, but they accepted donations from anyone who felt inclined to give. Similarly, when the formal church was organized, the leadership decided it should meet at the showbarn because people were “comfortable going in there, because a lot of them were there the night before” at parties, dances, and other events held in the space. According to a founding member I interviewed they recognized that their target demographic needed “a place where they felt comfortable.” and the showbarn “was a place where they didn’t feel like they were in church.”⁴

After three years in the showbarn, the church moved to its current home off Texas FM 3350, which although officially located in Jourdanton, sits between the three cities of Jourdanton, Pleasanton, and Poteet. Today, the church continues to grow with weekly attendance anywhere between 800 and 1000 people. The congregation has an equal number of men and women. Many young men in their 20's and 30's attend the church alone, while most unaccompanied women are in their 60's and 70's. The large, air-conditioned church is a departure from the arena where the idea for the church took shape, yet the community still aims to attract the type of individual who would have attended these initial roping events by utilizing the large, covered roping arena built in 2012.⁵

The roping arena is not the only rustic, feature on the church’s large property. The parking lot is made of crushed limestone, and to the left of the sanctuary and church offices is a deer-proof garden run by members of the church that provides free produce to those in need. The church building is a large, two-story structure made out of

⁴ Interview by Author, Jourdanton, TX, digital recording, August 5, 2012 12:24 p.m.

⁵ Op. Cit., “2012CFHistory” 1.

corrugated metal. The church offices, although carpeted, are decorated in dark tones, with leather chairs and desks made out of worn, repurposed wood. A taxidermy buck graces Pastor Pete's office alongside crosses made out of metal. The foyer of the church is painted rust, and on the walls are skins of cows. Inside the doors of the sanctuary, there's a metal statue of a cowboy on a horse as well as the church's shop where people can buy hats and shirts with the Cowboy Fellowship logo, cd's of previous sermons, books, and bibles. There's also an information table where people find reminders and sign up sheets for upcoming events. On the walls are paintings of rodeo scenes, hat racks made out of deer antlers, and a cross made out of horseshoes.

The sanctuary is a large, open room with concrete floors and large docking doors so that the sanctuary can be opened to the outside world. At the front of the sanctuary, there is a large wooden cross above the stage. Around this area, there is a wooden "fence" with cow skins that hides the backstage of the front of the church. The band sets up on the upper level, and the lower area is where sermons are delivered. There is no podium. On the sides of the front area there are fake prickly pear bushes that add to the rustic nature of the interior. To the far right and far left of the front, there are flags. To the left is the American flag, and to the right is a flag known as the Christian Flag. Rather than pews, congregants sit in rows of white folding chairs that can be moved when other events take place in the church. Near each of the exits to the church, there is a table with free bibles, other free Christian literature, and large unmarked milk cans where individuals can leave their tithes and donations if they feel so inclined.

In the back left corner of the church sits a large industrial kitchen. On Sunday mornings, the women involved with the kitchen ministry serve coffee, tea, and water in

addition to donuts and kolaches (Polish sausage breakfast pastries) that are donated by a member of the church. To the left of this, there is a digital milk bucket where the technologically savvy can manage their donations using credit card. To the left of this is the audiovisual booth, which is decorated with a large map of the world that emphasizes the church's global mission work by locating the cities, states, and countries in which the church has done missionary work. A red, digital clock is above the AV booth to help ensure that services run on time, which they always do. The idea behind this is that the church should be respectful of people's busy schedules, and should offer punctual, short messages.

Services at Cowboy Fellowship follow a predictable pattern. Congregants begin to arrive for fellowship as early as 9:00 a.m., although the service starts at 10:45 a.m. After being greeted at the door and handed a bulletin, most people go to the kitchen area and enjoy the complementary food while they chat with other members. The band warms up and runs through the songs they will play that week. About five minutes before the service starts, the lights are dimmed and worshipers take their seats. A number of men choose to stand in the back where they are more comfortable and have access to coffee refills. The cowboy band plays one introductory song, such as "I Saw the Light," and is followed by the pastor's general announcements about upcoming events, fundraising goals, and an opening prayer. A few minutes are dedicated to greeting and introducing oneself to those nearby.

Next is praise and worship. The band plays three to four songs, two of which are sing-alongs for the entire congregation, and lyrics are projected on the front wall on either side of the cross. The last song usually features one singer and is succeeded by

the sermon which customarily lasts thirty to forty five minutes. The sermon ends with the preacher telling those who want to give their lives to Jesus to pray the sinners' prayer, and, if they wish to be contacted by a staff member, to fill out their information on the form in the bulletin and put it in one of the milk jugs by the doors. A final, general prayer follows, led by one of the elders or lay pastors of the church, bringing the service to a close. The band plays one more song as people begin to leave, and the entire service is over by noon.

Cowboy Fellowship is made up of people from diverse backgrounds and age ranges, but is not very ethnically diverse. The congregation is predominantly white; although I estimate that approximately fifteen to twenty percent of the congregation is Hispanic and about five percent African-American. Congregants range in age from young children to the elderly. However, the church is primarily made up of young families, couples under sixty, and men. Of the 800 to 1000 weekly attendants, I estimate that 15% are children, 50% are over fifty, 25% are in their 30's and 40's, and the remaining 10% are in their late teens and twenties. The congregation seems to have more male parishioners than female, but not by a meaningful amount. However, it is significant that males make up a large percentage of the church population since it defies the stereotype that men don't attend church.

Despite the church's name, history, and target demographic, most members of the congregation are not cowboys. Pastor Pete put it thusly:

I would say at least 60, 65 percent of our church has nothing directly to do with anything cowboy on any a (sic) consistent basis" while there are "probably 30 percent maybe that ride and rope as a hobby, or have a small herd of cattle, they retired and they bought a piece of land and do it in their retirement to make a little extra money. Then you maybe have, say, 10

percent that actively get up every morning and go out and plow the soil or feed the herds, that's all they do for a living.⁶

The church keeps no official membership list, so it is difficult to gauge how many attendees are official church members. Although there is no pressure to join the church or even to get baptized, there are certain expectations tied to formal membership. To join, individuals must attend a Saddle Up Seminar, an hour-long class that outlines the history, beliefs, and doctrine of the church. They must also get baptized if they have not made that commitment as an adult. After becoming a member, individuals are expected to join at least one of the thirty-two ministries available and to become involved in congregational life.⁷ Some ministries, such as the play day team, roping, and arena ministries, focus on cowboy culture, while others, such as children's ministry and greeter's team, help the overall function of the church. As in most churches, the idea is that everyone should be able to find a place where their unique skills, regardless of affiliation with the western heritage, can be utilized for the good of the church community.

Cowboy Fellowship is one of the longest running and largest contemporary cowboy churches. Now a member of the AFCC, the idea for the church came from the perceived community need and the evangelizing efforts by members of the Baptist community. While the church originally was oriented to attract members with an active connection to the western heritage, as the church has grown, less emphasis has been placed on connection to the culture.

⁶ Interview by Author, Jourdanton, TX, digital recording, May 30, 2012.

⁷ Pete Pawelek, *Saddle Up Seminar* (Jourdanton, TX: Cowboy Fellowship), 15.

The Story of Big Bend Cowboy Church

Located in far West Texas, Alpine is a small city with a population hovering around 6000.⁸ Like Atascosa County, Alpine was already home to a variety of churches.⁹ Despite the number of established churches, the Big Bend Cowboy Church carved out a niche for itself and brought a number of unchurched members of the community into the fold. Average attendance at a BBCC Sunday morning service is between 100-125 people, many of who travel from distant, isolated ranches.

Unlike Cowboy Fellowship, Big Bend Cowboy Church was planted by a representative of the AFCC who came to Alpine because of the area's ranching culture. It began in 2006 in the form of a prayer group and Bible study, and the church held its first official event, a roping and play day at Sul Ross University, on March 4th, 2007. Soon after, the church began to hold weekly services in the Wool and Mohair building in downtown Alpine, which was hot in the summer, cold in the winter, and services had to regularly pause because of the noise created by passing trains.¹⁰ In 2009, the founding pastor was called upon by the denomination to plant cowboy churches elsewhere and the current pastor, Wendell Elliott, was hired.¹¹ In May 2011, the Wool and Mohair building the church rented was sold, and so the church purchased a warehouse on East Highway 90, a few miles outside of Alpine.¹²

⁸ "Alpine (city) QuickFacts," United States Census Bureau, accessed July 30, 2012, <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/48/4802104.html>.

⁹ As of August 2012, Alpine has twenty churches. All are Christian, and, with the exception of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches, are Protestant Directory of Churches: Alpine, Texas August 2012

¹⁰ Interview by Author, Alpine, TX, digital recording. June 11, 2012 6:57 p.m.

¹¹ Interview by Author, Alpine, TX, digital recording. June 14, 2012 5:30 p.m.

¹² Unknown, "Elliott Couldn't be Happier than Being Pastor at Big Bend," *Cowboy Times*, December 2011, pp. 5.

Like at Cowboy Fellowship, at Big Bend Cowboy Church the building and grounds are intentionally rustic. Visitors drive up a crushed limestone driveway and park in the grass or on the rocks outside of the church. On Sundays, the American and Texas flags fly on the flagpole to the right of the church, which looks like a partially finished warehouse. The front of the building, including the foyer, kitchen, bathrooms, and what will become classrooms are decorated and air-conditioned. The right wall of the foyer features a bulletin board with upcoming events, a large 6' by 10' piece of wood with the brands of the families who attend the church, and an area with an American flag placed to remind attendees to pray for members of the community who are serving in the armed forces. On the left side of the foyer is a large mural of a desert landscape painted by one of the congregants. Under this mural is the table that holds the refreshments. The front wall has a large piece of wood with the word 'Welcome' and a picture of two people on horseback with a cross between them. Under this is a table with literature of various forms and a miniature wooden church where people can donate money. To the right of this table is another table with three small crosses on it, and a larger cross made out of horseshoes above it. The kitchen, although large, is residential in style rather than commercial. It is to the left of the foyer, and past it, is a hallway with bathrooms and classrooms. To the right of the foyer is a hallway with classrooms. Both hallways end in doors that lead to the sanctuary. These doors have signs requesting that they be kept shut since the sanctuary is not air-conditioned.

The sanctuary is large and relatively unadorned. The walls are uninsulated corrugated metal, and there are large industrial dock doors on three of the sides. This allows for a breeze to flow through the church and also provides a scenic view of the

mountains behind the church. The floor is made of polished concrete. At the front is a small stage where the cowboy band plays traditional country western tunes with a Christian message. In front of that, there is a semi-circle of hay bales around a wooden and rustic looking podium with a small cross on the front. There are no pews, rather, there are plush, comfortable individual chairs. In the back left corner, there is a Crossfit gym which is unaffiliated with the church, but whose owners make regular donations. Behind the chairs, there is a large open space with a tall wooden table where many people congregate. The back wall of the sanctuary is lined with tables and another half dozen picnic tables sit in front of those along the wall. Some congregants, mainly men who attend unaccompanied by women, opt to sit at these tables rather than in the chairs during the service, and community meals are eaten at these tables.

Sunday services at Big Bend Cowboy Church follow an order similar to that of Cowboy Fellowship. The service officially starts at 11 a.m., though at 10:30 the community is invited to come engage in fellowship. After being greeted at the door, you are immediately invited to partake in the coffee and snacks provided in the foyer. Congregants walk around all parts of the building and speak to old friends and greet visitors. The band striking up a song is the cue for everyone to find a seat or stand in the back if they so choose. In this congregation, men outnumber women by a small margin, after this song, the pastor steps up front to offer an opening prayer, make announcements, take prayer requests, and inform the community of upcoming events. The atmosphere is more relaxed and informal than Cowboy Fellowship, and there is banter between the pastor and the congregants. Next, the cowboy band plays three to four country Christian songs. Congregants are not encouraged to sing, the logic behind

this is that requiring singing could potentially make men unaccustomed to attending church feel self-conscious, so people listen respectfully to prepare for the sermon. After the songs, Pastor Elliott comes back to the front to begin his sermon. All sermons start with a joke that then leads into the point he is trying to make. At the end of the sermon, all are invited to pray, and anyone who feels inclined is invited to give their life to Christ by saying the sinner's prayer. The band plays one final song and the service is over.

Big Bend Cowboy Church does not have a formal list of members, nor does it require that individuals interested in joining the church take any classes. Individuals who are interested in joining simply speak with the pastor, who asks questions about their faith and religious background. Usually, the only requirement is that people get baptized if they haven't done that as an adult. BBCC does not have the range of ministries of Cowboy Fellowship. There are only six ministry teams in this church: arena, children's, college, music, fellowship, and audit. Not all individuals are on teams, but most contribute in some way to the church, even if it is something as simple as helping to maintain the church grounds once a month.

The demographics at Big Bend Cowboy Fellowship are similar to Cowboy Fellowship, although on a smaller scale. The ethnic makeup of the church is predominantly white, with only about ten percent Hispanic. I visited the church during the summer, so the majority of the congregation's college students were not available to interview because they had left the region during the break. However, the demographics were similar to Cowboy Fellowship. Those who were present were mostly young families (about 20%), couples under the age of sixty (about 60%), and unaccompanied men (about 15%). Unlike Cowboy Fellowship, most individuals have some connection to

the western heritage. When asked to identify what percentage of the congregation were engaged with that culture, Pastor Elliot responded "looking at our congregation, I would say 60-70%. The majority of them do. If it's not current, it's long term, either in their past or their childhood."¹³ The AFCC views BBCC as unique in that "the percentage of people" in the congregation "with a direct connection to the cowboy lifestyle and western heritage culture may be the highest" of all affiliated churches.¹⁴ This accounts for some of the differences between the congregations that I will address later in this chapter.

Big Bend Cowboy Church is a newer church, but its close proximity to many individuals with direct connections to the western heritage causes it to focus the majority of its missionary emphasis on ministering to western heritage people in the community.

Similarities among Cowboy Churches

Although these two churches vary in age and size, and are in different regions, similarities between the two congregations became apparent as I conducted my fieldwork. In this section, I will look at similarities that are central to the identity and purpose of the contemporary cowboy church including material culture, masculinity and myth and the interaction among these concepts. These concepts are intertwined, so discussions of each overlap. Later, I will address the theoretical implications of these themes and locate them in relationship with the relevant literature.

Material Culture

The material culture of cowboy churches is the most visible indicator that sets them apart from their more traditional counterparts. As discussed above, Cowboy Fellowship and Big Bend Cowboy Church are intentionally rustic churches. Both have

¹³ Interview by Author, Alpine, TX, digital recording, June 14, 2012 5:30 p.m.

¹⁴ Op. Cit. "Elliott Couldn't be Happier than Being Pastor at Big Bend"

gravel parking lots and concrete floors, no formal dress code, and allow individuals to wear their hats except during prayer. The western physical culture creates an atmosphere in which myth and masculinity are embodied.

Dress

Of all the topics that came up in my interviews, perhaps none was more pervasive than that of dress. Individuals who attend cowboy churches attribute part of the success of the movement to the freedom to wear cowboy and other casual clothing to church. Similar to other new, casual churches, cowboy church members feel dress codes are economic barriers that keep willing individuals out of churches. One man I spoke with, who had been raised in the Baptist Church, described his upbringing and how that led him to reject traditional barriers to attendance saying:

Now I was raised that two weeks before Easter Sunday you always had to go to town to get a new sport coat or shirt or tie, slacks. Hell, you wore a tie every Sunday when you went to church. Well, that wasn't wrong, but if I couldn't afford a tie, couldn't afford a sports coat, and whatever. I probably would have felt out of place in Sunday school with all those other little kids sitting around there lookin' at me wondering why you're not dressed up like you're supposed to be.¹⁵

One young woman told me a story about an economically disadvantaged family at a church she attended prior to her becoming involved with cowboy church. The family in question “actually left their church because they were frowned upon.” In her opinion, this was a travesty because it undermined the most foundational teachings of the church. In her view, “if you can take that time, that hour and a half-two hours, just to be at church, you’re doing something right.”¹⁶ At one church, the associate pastor shared with me that the church “has been able to get into the lower economical area of our community, and

¹⁵ Interview by Author, Alpine, TX, digital recording, June 7, 2012 9:58 a.m.

¹⁶ Interview by Author, Jourdanton, TX, digital recording, August 6, 2012 10:55 a.m.

people appreciate that. That's why a lot of people come; because it doesn't matter if you drive your Hog up here or if you're in flip flops and shorts."¹⁷ Many individuals involved in cowboy churches feel that the willingness to attend church far outweighs how a congregant is dressed.

Beyond the encouragement of causal dress, a specific appeal of cowboy churches is the freedom to wear cowboy clothes, including hats, to services. For those actively engaged in a ranching lifestyle, the open dress code makes allowances for their demanding work schedule, which is unpredictable and generally a seven day a week job. One man who is an active rancher told me that part of his attraction to the church is that if he needs to work around church, he is able to do so. He told me:

We can saddle our horses and take them to church and dress the way we're dressed right now and go work cattle that afternoon if we feel the need. We're not at all self-conscious about the way we're dressed or the way anybody else is dressed.¹⁸

Another woman elaborated that attendance, by and large, depends on the informality. Based on her experiences with western heritage, as an outsider she feels that

A lot of the ranchers out there wouldn't be comfortable going to any other church because of the expectations that are sometimes unjustly tied to churches or tied to faith. You have to dress a certain way, you have to talk a certain way, and that Cowboy Church dispels all those myths and you can just be anyone. And it's welcoming but, yet, still doesn't in any way waiver on the Word of God.¹⁹

In addition to their understanding of economic constraints, congregants at cowboy churches also emphasize that making it easier for people to attend services in their work attire lowers the barriers that prohibit many western heritage individuals from

¹⁷ Interview by Author, Jourdanton, TX, digital recording, July 19, 2012 9:05 a.m.

¹⁸ Interview by Author, Alpine, TX, digital recording, June 15, 2012 6:01 p.m.

¹⁹ Interview by Author, Alpine, TX, digital recording, June 15, 2012 12:50 p.m.

attending traditional church. Indeed, regardless of their participation in the western heritage, the freedom to be physically comfortable and authentic is perceived to be a major factor in the success of cowboy churches.

Church Building and Decoration

While congregants are encouraged to come as they are, the material features of the churches themselves are also intended to help western heritage individuals feel welcome. The church buildings and decorations create a specific atmosphere that is intended to be different from that of traditional churches. Creating rustic environments for spiritual purposes helps individuals feel as if the space is an extension of their cultural environment. They have space to spread out, and do not need to be concerned about what they may track in on their shoes. Presenting the churches and their facilities as rustic intends to appeal to the western heritage.

Decisions to include certain features, such as a gravel parking lot, are deliberate. A self-described greenhorn shared a story about an exchange he had with his pastor about possibly paving their parking lot because of the unevenness of the surface. The pastor responded to his suggestion by saying:

“Oh no, this is a cowboy church. We drive on dirt roads and we're not putting down any blacktop.” So I took a pick out there and I dug up eight layers of concrete so the road would be flat. . . .But I was really surprised at his reaction, “Oh no, we drive on dirt roads. We don't need no blacktop around the church.” (laughs) That's against our religion: we don't believe in blacktop.²⁰

Churches also typically don't have any carpet. One woman shared with me that the reason for this is “so when cowboys come in off the range they can walk in and not have

²⁰ Interview by Author, Alpine, TX, digital recording, June 6, 2012 12:37 p.m.

to worry about . . . manure or whatever they bring in with them."²¹ Practicality, as much as culture, influences the material components in the cowboy church.

Other choices about church layout are tied to masculine culture. The rustic decorations, use of common cowboy objects such as bales of hay, and open spaces appeal to the sensibility of men who spend significant amounts of time working outside. Both churches I studied had chairs instead of traditional pews. One woman offered an unprompted explanation for this decision by saying that chairs allowed for "elbowroom. You can move around a little bit." Her husband elaborated: "A man will sit next to another man, or a woman, in a chair, and not feel uncomfortable. In the pew, it's not that way. It's like (makes a uncomfortable sound) 'I don't want to get too close.'"²² It's not surprising, then, that many men, especially those who attend church on their own, opt to stand in the open spaces in the back of sanctuaries rather than to sit. When I spoke with Pastor Pete, he tied male comfort to the way churches were decorated, saying:

It's the building. The building's not brick and mortar and carpet and cushioned pews. The building is steel and tin and plastic chairs, you know? I mean, what guy doesn't like that? . . . There's barn wood for the stage instead of \$400,000 pulpit that somebody's great-grandfather donated 1400 years ago to that little church that is made out of some special wood they dug out of a hole in Africa or something crazy, you know? It's just barn wood and plywood and it...I think just the atmosphere of it is manly and makes men feel comfortable.

He continued by saying, that, in his opinion, this separates cowboy churches from other churches because:

Most other churches are women oriented. They're decorated in the ways women like them because women are usually the ones that did the decorating. They're painted colors that women like, because women are

²¹ Interview by Author, Alpine, TX, digital recording, June 6, 2012 12:37 p.m.

²² Interview by Author, Charlotte, TX, digital recording, July 19, 2012 4:33 p.m.

probably the ones that were up there painting. A lot of preachers are pretty soft and stuff because they're trying to please the old ladies, because that's primarily who's in their congregations.²³

Cowboy churches must be decorated in such a way that they are distinctly different from traditional houses of worship in order to appeal to western heritage individuals, especially men.

Myth and Culture

As I have just discussed, creating an environment in which western heritage men are comfortable is paramount for attracting individuals to the church. While many men at cowboy churches are connected to the western heritage, a significant number are not. Why, then, do such a broad variety of individuals attend cowboy church? My research uncovered that church events such as ropings and playdays bring in people who make their living as cowboys in addition to those who want to play cowboy on the weekend. I also found that individuals without a connection to the heritage are enamored with the concept of the cowboy or western music. This blending of cultures makes it difficult to separate authentic culture from the pop culture. In more than a century, western lifestyle has changed, partially because of changing ranching technology, but also because individuals who are interested in the culture depend on the mass media's presentation of the culture. However, since evangelism is the main goal of these churches, it does not matter that people negotiate their identities from different sources. There does not appear to be visible tension or judgment between the different types of cowboy, and the commercialization of their culture is taken in stride by those who do engage in the more traditional aspects of western culture. In other words, churches are less concerned

²³ Interview by Author, Jourdanton, TX, digital recording, May 30, 2012.

about where people draw their inspiration for cowboy culture, and instead are concerned with Christian identity.

Like material culture, myth was frequently discussed in interviews when I asked why cowboy churches have become so popular and why such a variety of people choose to attend them. Many congregants believe there is a certain allure to cowboy life, which is partially facilitated by the popularity of the western genre. Although this is certainly not the only reason why people are drawn to the church, it does explain the initial and ongoing attendance of some members of the congregation. One man summarized why many people in his generation attended the churches by saying “not so much the younger kids, but I think anybody 40 years old, up, grew up watching Westerns. It was more of a part of life back then, and something that you just always loved and liked being around. . . . Once they get there, they just like it.”²⁴ Pastor Pete drew upon the popularity of the western by saying “Everybody's heard of John Wayne. Westerns are big, and they're still popular today. Those old westerns get great ratings, even on TV today because people just like that.”²⁵ One younger man was slightly broader in his frame of reference, including not only media, but also “maybe an individual that they might've known. You've seen the Marlboro man commercials.”²⁶

As I've already discussed, the popular culture cowboy is not reflective of the historical cowboy, however, in contemporary culture, it is difficult to separate myth from reality. Despite this, the opportunity to become a cowboy hero and temporarily escape the monotony of normal life is a natural draw for individuals and can be seen throughout

²⁴ Interview by Author, Charlotte, TX, digital recording, July 19, 2012 4:33 p.m.

²⁵ Interview by Author, Jourdanton, TX, digital recording, May 30, 2012.

²⁶ Interview by Author, Jourdanton, TX, digital recording, August 2, 2012 7:11 p.m.

history in dichotomous play between something that is perceived to represent good and something that represents alterity. In addition to cowboys and Indians, other examples include knights versus dragons and spacemen versus aliens. The mythic dimensions discussed by individuals ascribe a sense of liminality- a periodic break with reality- that brings some people into the churches. The mythic aspect of the churches allows individuals to experience what Victor Turner describes as “periodical reclassifications of reality and man's relationship to society, nature, and culture.”²⁷ Cowboy churches, as Pastor Pete explained, are an expression of the fact that:

There's something inside of humanity that likes the romantic side of western culture, especially in Texas. I've always said, I think a cowboy church would work in New York City, because a lot of those guys working on Wall Street, there's something inside of them that would love to be a cowboy. Even if being a cowboy to them is just putting on a pair of boots and hat and going to church on Sunday, they would love that, to get out of where they're at.²⁸

Another woman echoed that, for many adults, attending a cowboy church can be a way of realizing childhood dreams. She told me that for someone like her husband, there is an attraction to “the romance of western life. People are curious about what a cowboy really is and they have a first hand chance (to find out)-now that may sound real shallow, but it may be a draw for some people.”²⁹ Because of this, as an adult, her husband learned how to ride horses and participate in cowboy activities. In her opinion, attending the cowboy church was an extension of his interest in cowboys that fit in with their lifelong Christianity.

²⁷ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New Brunswick, NJ: Aldine Transaction, 2008), 128-129

²⁸ Interview by Author, Jourdanton, TX, digital recording, May 30, 2012.

²⁹ Interview by Author, Alpine, TX, digital recording, June 15, 2012 12:50 p.m.

It's not just adults who are drawn to the cowboy lifestyle. Children, too, are aware of the mythic West, and this can influence decisions to visit a cowboy church. A mother woman shared with me that, on their frequent trips to Wal-Mart, her boys watched the new Cowboy Fellowship building be constructed. Since they were already a churchgoing family, her young sons would ask to attend the church once it opened. She and her husband agreed. "We really liked it and so we tried it a few times and it was just. . . .It just seemed perfect. . . .It's just Cowboy Church, you know, it was just the idea of it at first but they really did like it."³⁰ The romantic, mythic nature of the cowboy affects both adults and children alike. As I will later discuss, the image of the cowboy is pervasive enough in American culture to serve as an orienting trope and a cultural cue for individuals who are looking to adopt a western heritage mindset. The connection to the cowboy as a way to enter into a liminal state becomes complicated because many individuals who identify as members of the western heritage do not see their livelihoods as mythic in the least, although their culture is informed by the hybridity between ranching and popular culture.

While myth was often discussed, so was the need to help preserve and minister to members of the western heritage. One man felt that western heritage churches were important:

Because there's rural, Christian cowboys and the cowgirls who were aware their culture and their friends weren't being ministered to in a fashion that was comfortable to them where they felt accepted and where they felt understood and they felt welcome. I think they felt that "we've accepted Christ our savior, we've got a right to fellowship with our own kind and with

³⁰ Interview by Author, Jourdanton, TX, digital recording, July 6, 2012 10:13 a.m.

those that accept us and understand us."...I think God's put us right here where he wants us and intends us to be.³¹

Another woman echoed similar sentiments, saying that the church created a religious space for the local ranchers and cowboys who:

Wouldn't be comfortable going to any other church because of the expectations that are sometimes unjustly tied to churches or tied to faith. . . Cowboy church dispels all those myths and you can just be anyone. And it's welcoming but yet still doesn't in any way waiver on the Word of God.³²

Those who discussed working cowboys focused predominantly on how cowboy churches fill a religious void caused by geographical distance and work schedules of those who are firmly a part of the western heritage.

Occasionally, an interviewee would attribute the draw of cowboy churches to the hybridity- or mixing- of the mythic and the real. One man, who is affiliated with the western heritage, spelled out his views concerning why people enjoy cowboy church as such: "It gives them the chance to wear the cowboy hats and boots. And they enjoy that; they enjoy that lifestyle or that mentality. The culture. And I think here that's what we have. We have your 100%ers, your part times, but we're in a rural community anyway so there's just a lot of that there. Everyone has their own story of why they're there."³³ In his opinion, people's reasons for attending cowboy churches could not be broken down into the authentic versus the inauthentic. Rather, the church attracts a range of individuals with varying degrees of involvement with western heritage and differing views of what that heritage entails.

³¹ Interview by Author, Alpine, TX, digital recording, June 13, 2012 9:55 a.m.

³² Interview by Author, Alpine, TX, digital recording, June 15, 2012 6:01 p.m.

³³ Interview by Author, Alpine, TX, digital recording, June 11, 2012 6:57 p.m.

Music, Arenas, and More

Beyond these mythic dimensions, the culture of the church facilitates a connection to cowboy culture. The music itself is a powerful connection to the western culture. Both churches I visited had small bands that played a mixture of old spirituals, popular songs that had been adapted to have a Christian message, and popular songs that already had a Christian message. These songs were done in country and western styles, reminiscent of the music played by Hank Williams Sr. or the early recordings of Johnny Cash. One young man explained that he liked the music because it is "the more-the older gospel stuff and I like that a lot. It's what I grew up with."³⁴ For some, the music itself is a deciding factor in attending the church. One older woman told me that, upon moving to the area, she and her husband visited the cowboy church once and "liked the music. Then we went to the Baptist church just thinking we'd see if we wanted a traditional church or not." However, her husband had made up his mind and told her "'if you need this kind of stuff you can go but I'm going back.' (laughs) So we went back and have been back ever since."³⁵

The music ministries in cowboy churches not only share the message of the church through song, they also connect with a cultural component of the western heritage. For some, the musicians in these bands serve as a cultural connection between the sacred space of the church and the profane outside world.³⁶ The local

³⁴ Interview by Author, Jourdanton, TX, digital recording, August 2, 2012 7:11 p.m.

³⁵ Interview by Author, Alpine, TX, digital recording, June 6, 2012 12:37 p.m.

³⁶ One woman shared, "the guys that are in the band, they grew up with those playing in the Honky Tonks, but those guys they have changed and they've done things differently, and they're great musicians, and they've spent plenty of time in the bars. They identify with those people, because they grew up with them." Interview by Author, Jourdanton, TX, digital recording, July 18, 2012 4:14 p.m.

musicians in cowboy churches serve as an example to visitors that it is possible to change and repent from sinful ways. Many of the men who are members of cowboy church bands are also active in their respective local country music scenes, but live in a manner that reflects their Christianity.

Perhaps even more important than the music ministry is the arena ministry. At both churches, the arena ministry is seen as a key area of outreach that is used to evangelize to members of the community. At both churches, rodeo-derived events are preceded with prayer and a sermon. It is required for participants to listen to the message in order to participate. Events also are intended to be family friendly and have a Christian environment.

Those who lead arena ministries are aware of the importance of their outreach and how it can be the only exposure to religion that some rural cowboys and their families get. One woman told me their goal is to:

Reach the cowboys and farmers that live two hours off a dirt road, who do not come to town but maybe once a month. And, about 80% of the people who show up at our events don't come into town very much. . . . Our focus are the families stuck down somewhere who don't make it to town, who don't get to listen to God's word in a formal church setting, and to keep our events as family as possible so that it doesn't exclude the wife and the kids from coming out.³⁷

Another man explained that arena events were the most effective way to get the unchurched people to come because "there's an opportunity to compete." However, not all people are open to being preached to. Although "they may be respectful and listen" however, "they may have no regard for the Lord." Despite this, exposure is important

³⁷ Interview by Author, Alpine, TX, digital recording, June 8, 2012 2:08 p.m.

because he felt that “hearing the word, anything, is worth it.”³⁸ Another woman joked about the early days of her church by saying that:

Some people you could get to come to a roping. And they'd sit through a service just so they could rope. You know? A little coercion there, maybe, but it works. [laughs] Yeah, no one was forced to come. And like I say, nobody was ever tricked into it. They always knew ahead of time what they were getting into. And most liked it.³⁹

While people attracted to the mythic aspect of cowboy culture may choose to visit the church on those grounds alone, arena ministries are important for reaching those with even minimal ties to the culture.

Beyond just reaching the unchurched, arena and rodeo events are ways to present an ideal, mythic cowboy culture. One man, who has lifelong ties to rodeo, told me cowboy churches “have activities that those folks enjoy.” Without these activities,

They'll have to go some place else where some of those different events and things aren't necessarily held in some of the best environments and best situations. So this gives those folks an opportunity to participate in recreational things they enjoy and not have to go and be in an environment that tests their judgment and their responsibility. So, it's really grown.⁴⁰

Even individuals who do not participate in arena events because they do not ride horses understood that supporting and growing the arena ministries is central to the growth of the church community. Holding arena events is important for reaching the unchurched as well as for creating a fellowship event for current congregants. One man told me “I enjoy going to this church, and roping with the people. I'm a fellowship person, and I guess I've been rambling that I can talk to anybody, almost.”⁴¹ Another

³⁸ Interview by Author, Jourdanton, TX, digital recording, August 2, 2012 3:49 p.m.

³⁹ Interview by Author, Charlotte, TX, digital recording, July 19, 2012 4:33 p.m.

⁴⁰ Interview by Author, Alpine, TX, digital recording, June 7, 2012 9:58 a.m.

⁴¹ Interview by Author, Jourdanton, TX, digital recording, July 14, 2012 8:00 a.m.

woman sheepishly admitted the reason she decided to stay at her cowboy church was not exactly pious. "It should have been the religion, but it was the people," she told me. Fellowship events are not just for members of the church: "when you get that arena, you get more people. Hooves on the ground mean seats in church."⁴²

So far, I have discussed how myth and western culture are mixed to create the culture of cowboy churches as well as the role that music and rodeo events play in this theme. Where then, does Christianity fit in? I asked Pastor Elliot how Christian cowboy culture is created. He explained to me that a better question to ask would be "How is the cowboy lifestyle reconciled to the Christian lifestyle?" From his point of view, cowboy Christianity is:

The same with any way of life, because the life we live outside the umbrella of Christianity would be all wet. Obviously that would be through faith in Jesus Christ. Even though we are using where the cowboy is at to reach him for Christ that doesn't mean we are to raise his way of life above Christianity. That is the ultimate goal to have that cowboy be reconciled to Christ.⁴³

Similarly, he shared that he thought that even popular culture cowboys had Christian roots. "I think the values come straight from the Bible and are expressed through teachings from cowboy heroes of the Silver Screen. For example, Roy Rogers and his Rider's Rules. There were ten rules in Roger's list that resembled the Ten Commandments. They included prescriptions to "love God and go to Sunday school regularly" and "always obey your parents."⁴⁴ In Pastor Elliot's view, the idealized cowboy

⁴² Interview by Author, Alpine, TX, digital recording, June 25, 2012 9:12 a.m.

⁴³ Interview by Author, Alpine, Texas, email correspondence. August 11, 2012.

⁴⁴ "Roy Rogers' Rider's Rules," The Cowboy Way, accessed October 22, 2012. <http://www.cowboyway.com/RoyRogers.htm>. And Interview by Author, Alpine, Texas, email correspondence, August 11, 2012.

of the movies seems to shape cowboy culture as much as authentic cowboy culture shapes the myth.

This is similar to Clifford Geertz's sentiment that religion served both as a model of and a model for cultural systems.⁴⁵ What this means is that the pop culture cowboy both informs what cowboy culture is and how it should look in the lives of people interested in the culture. This is an example of why it is difficult to determine what aspects of cowboy culture are authentic, as I discussed in the previous chapter. I asked Pastor Pete a similar question, and he appealed to history rather than popular culture by saying:

There has always been circuit-riding preachers who went from town to town. Those were cowboy churches. As long as there have been cowboys, they have gathered around a campfire and prayed and sang hymns together and opened the Bible together. Technically that's a cowboy church. Probably not going to get much more cowboy than that.⁴⁶

The responses from both pastors reflect the two cultural influences, pop culture and history, which are constantly mixed with both each other and with Christianity in the contemporary cowboy church.

Masculinity

While unchurched western heritage individuals are the demographic cowboy churches seek to reach, men are their central target. These churches focus on men because they believe that, by getting the head of the family into church, it is likely that the rest of the family will follow. The central role that men play in the lives of their families is important to evangelical communities affiliated with masculine movements,

⁴⁵ Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," In *Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp. 93

⁴⁶ Interview by Author, Jourdanton, TX, digital recording. May 30, 2012.

such as Promise Keepers.⁴⁷ Regardless of the origin of this idea, cowboy churches strive to bring men into the church. Reaching men necessitates that churches, in addition to being decorated in a way that appeals to men, provide messages and events intended to capture the attention of men without alienating women of the community. Beyond material and mythic appeals, they seek to send messages to men through sermons and outreach activities. From a leadership perspective, the pastors at cowboy churches acknowledge that men are their targets, and they place this within a larger societal framework. Pastor Scotty told me that at Cowboy Fellowship, they “specifically do things that are not feminine. We specifically don't tell people, 'Hey, let's get in a circle. Let's hold hands.' We're conscious of that, and we specifically try to reach men. That's our target audience.”⁴⁸ Similarly, Pastor Pete stated that cowboy churches are:

Really trying to work on the men's role in the family because I think the men in our society have really dropped the ball. I think they're really working on getting the men to be strong in the home again, and getting men to take responsibility in our society.⁴⁹

From an institutional perspective, the masculinity cultivated within cowboy churches is intended to reach unchurched men.

Both pastors direct messages to the men of the congregation. When I asked Pastor Wendell why men were willing to come to his church, he told me that it was “because they don't feel like some pasty white emasculated guy is up there trying to tell

⁴⁷ One Baptist website states the following: “Men are Strategic! A classic Promise Keepers survey shows that if a child is the first person in the family to accept Christ and join the church, the rest of the family will do the same only 3.5% of the time. If the mother is the first, that percentage goes to 17%. But if the father is the first to accept Christ and join the church, the rest of his family will follow 93% of the time! An intentional ministry designed to reach men for Christ will help a church not only reach men, but also reach and strengthen their family.” “Baptist Men and Women on Mission,” Baptists on a Mission, accessed October 22, 2012, <http://www.baptistsonmission.org/Missions-Education/Adult/Mens-Ministries>.

⁴⁸ Interview by Author, Jourdanton, TX, digital recording, July 19, 2012 9:05 a.m.

⁴⁹ Interview by Author, Jourdanton, TX, digital recording, August 2, 2012 3:49 p.m.

him how to live his life.”⁵⁰ Indeed, Pastor Wendell’s sermons are rife with references to ranching and cowboy culture, and sometimes concern the role of men as head of the family. Although Pastor Pete is less likely to draw his sermon topics from western subjects, he deliberately and specifically addresses men in his services. He broke down how he talks to men in the congregation by saying:

I talk to men. I say, “Men I want to talk to you. Raise your hand if you’re a man. This part right here, this is for you.” We don’t beat around the bush. And we don’t water things down. It’s like, “OK, I’m going to hit you between the eyes...This part right here, this is for you. Here’s what you’ve got to do if you’re going to be a man and follow God.” Men don’t like that. But then they also go, “You know what? At least he was man enough to tell me.” And they respect that. They say, “OK, yeah, he told me and now I can do whatever I want with it.”⁵¹

Cowboy church ministry requires pastors offer a masculine biblical message in their sermons.

Congregants echoed similar sentiments about men in the church by citing factors that lead to their attendance including the variety of activities available for them, the way the message is preached, and the overall culture of the church. One younger man shared that he felt that cowboy churches have succeeded in getting men to return to church “by giving them a different avenue to go and to get into that. That’s what I think is one of the greatest things about cowboy church is the way that it has gotten grown men back into going to church.”⁵² At Cowboy Fellowship, a young woman told me that men’s ministry programs seemed to be successful and well attended. As someone who was raised in traditional churches, she was impressed that they “do different things.” In lieu

⁵⁰ Interview by Author, Alpine, Texas, email correspondence, August 11, 2012.

⁵¹ Interview by Author, Jourdanton, TX, digital recording. August 2, 2012 3:49 p.m.

⁵² Interview by Author, Alpine, TX, digital recording, June 26, 2012 10:36 a.m.

of traditional men's retreats, "instead they go to a ranch and they go dove hunting and they somehow-I've never been to a men's retreat obviously-but somehow they work that into their ministry and it's just really attracted people."⁵³

It is important to note that the men who attend cowboy churches are not just family men. Rather, these communities are full of single men who attend church on their own. One woman captured the essence of why unattached men attend cowboy churches by pointing out that, ultimately "It's easier for a man to say, "Oh, I go to a Cowboy Church." Than to say, "Oh, I go to (trails off)" whatever church in San Antonio. You know the one with the big blue tower."⁵⁴ By engraining masculinity in all aspects of the church community, the church captures the attention of unchurched men.

With such an intense focus on attracting men, where do women fit within the cowboy church? Here, the Baptist roots of the modern cowboy church movement become apparent. Between the late 1970s and the mid-1990s a theologically conservative faction within the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) took over the convention and used their newly consolidated power to make the official positions of the Convention reflect their social and theological goals.⁵⁵ As Seth Dowland points out, they "articulated a theological defense of manhood that made male leadership normative and assigned women to submissive roles."⁵⁶ As part of this takeover, women were not

⁵³ Interview by Author, Jourdanton, TX, digital recording, August 6, 2012 10:55 a.m.

⁵⁴ Interview by Author, Jourdanton, TX, digital recording, July 6, 2012 10:13 a.m.

⁵⁵ David T. Morgan, *The New Crusades, The New Holy Land: Conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention 1969-1991* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1996), 37.

⁵⁶ Seth Dowland, "A New Kind of Patriarchy: Inerrancy and Masculinity in the Southern Baptist Convention, 1979-2000," in *Southern Masculinity: Perspectives on Manhood in the South since Reconstruction*, edited by Craig Thompson Friend (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 2009,) 247.

allowed to hold positions of power over men. This becomes apparent in the dialectic between official AFCC doctrine and the needs of individual congregations that causes them to deviate from this official Baptist position.

Although cowboy churches shy away from the Southern Baptist label, the official AFCC doctrine echoes that of the SBC. According to the AFCC, women are not allowed to be pastors, elders, or lay pastors. The AFCC also takes the position that, in general, all leadership positions, including team leaderships, should be left to men. In a ranchhouse school session for women, a pastor's wife explained that this position is biblical as well as cultural. Cowboy churches are "mostly a male dominated culture" and because of this, the AFCC "would like for the men to take the leadership roles." Citing Ephesians 5, she emphasized, "What we're trying to do is encourage our husbands and encourage the men to be the spiritual leaders and to step into the role God designed for them in the first place."⁵⁷

Despite the AFCC's intentions, both churches where I worked in deviated from this aspect of the model because the demands of the community required they depart from it. Pastor Pete explained to me that, although the AFCC has a particular stance, it is not necessarily practical for their church. Because of the diversity of their mission programs, men are not necessarily suited to lead certain ministries.

We try to, but our leadership team is about 50:50. . . . Obviously, we want men to lead. But men aren't going to lead certain groups in our church. There are men who can lead children's ministries but not very many. That's something that women are typically going to be better at.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Ibid., "The Role of Women in The Cowboy Church"

⁵⁸ Interview by Author, Jourdanton, TX, digital recording, August 2, 2012 3:49 p.m.

Women generally lead ministries that have to do with children or the home, although many are involved with the arena team and other western culture ministries.

On the other hand, Big Bend Cowboy Church breaks the model further by allowing a woman to lead the arena ministry. Quite simply, she was considered to be the best qualified person to lead, and the community recognizes that if she were to step down, not many men would be able or willing to fill her place. As she put it:

I'm a fighter and I have certain gifts. And since I've come back to Christ as an adult I really want to use my gifts to help bring people to Christ or at least to fellowship. I'm not a Bible thumper, I'm not one to pray at every little thing, I have a long walk to go, but if I do have a gift I'd like to use it and I got really upset I was told I shouldn't do it because of my gender.⁵⁹

In this case, Pastor Wendell's decision to break with AFCC doctrine better served the community's long-term evangelical aspirations.

The emphasis on men does not seem to bother most congregants, who understand that the goal of the church is to reach out to unchurched men. One woman told me that she felt welcome as a woman because "women are equally encouraged to take the classes." She framed the focus on men on the overarching failure of the dominant culture saying:

The men in our society have really dropped the ball. I think they're really working on getting the men to be strong in the home again, and getting men to take responsibility in our society. They're trying to work on the men on becoming strong role models again and being strong in their families, because so many men have dropped the ball.⁶⁰

One young man slightly disagreed with my question about emphasizing men, and pointed out that women are encouraged to participate in all non-gender specific events. He called my attention to the arena events and a "a clinic for the women" which, to him,

⁵⁹ Interview by Author, Alpine, TX, digital recording, June 8, 2012 2:08 p.m.

⁶⁰ Interview by Author, Jourdanton, TX, digital recording, July 18, 2012 1:34 p.m.

signaled that the church's focus is "pretty even. We have a lot of stuff for both sexes."⁶¹ Indeed, both churches do minister to women. For example, early each November, Big Bend Cowboy Church hosts a Christian cowgirl weekend for parishioners and women in the community. Ultimately, however, women are not the focus of the cowboy church movement.

Although the AFCC believes that women should allow men to hold positions of leadership, the reality is that women are able to find opportunities for involvement and, sometimes, leadership within cowboy churches. In this way, even though they are not the target demographic, most women appear to feel that their spiritual needs are being met by the church.

Differences

Thus far, this chapter has looked at key thematic similarities between the two churches I studied. Issues of materiality, the hybridity of contemporary cowboy culture, and masculinity are central to the cowboy church movement. Despite these commonalities, the two congregations I studied had certain undeniable differences. Variations in staff, congregation size, and community needs, perceptions of what is included under the umbrella of the western heritage, and other factors account for some of the differences I will now discuss.

Size

For all their similarities, Cowboy Fellowship and Big Bend Cowboy Church are very different congregations. The former is within the vicinity of three small cities and only an hour away from the San Antonio, one of the largest cities in South Texas.

⁶¹ Interview by Author, Alpine, TX, digital recording, June 24, 2012 2:52 p.m.

Atascosa County has recently benefited financially because oil and natural gas companies have moved into the region. The latter is relatively isolated in Alpine, Texas, a small town that, despite being home to a state university, has a population of under 6000 people. The dissimilarities in location account for the noticeable difference in the sizes of the church congregations. Cowboy Fellowship, which has an average weekly attendance of around 900 people, has a larger and more concentrated population to draw on. Big Bend Cowboy Church, on the other hand, averages around 125 congregants per week, some of whom travel nearly four hours round trip to attend services and may only be able to come in to town on a biweekly or monthly basis.

Staff

The size of the communities means that the two churches have very different staffs in order to reach the needs of the community. Cowboy Fellowship has seven staff members, and is presently looking to hire a grounds keeper. Currently, they have a head pastor, an associate pastor, both children's and youth pastors, a financial secretary, a secretary, and a ministry assistant. Additionally, this summer they had a college intern to help with their summer children's programs. Pastor Pete has a Master of Divinity and, prior to becoming pastor at Cowboy Fellowship, had served as an interim pastor at several Baptist churches and had held positions as youth pastor and collegiate minister.⁶² Although he grew up on a ranch near Jourdanton, today, most of his cowboy activities are limited to recreational events during his days off.

In contrast, Big Bend Cowboy Church has only one staff member, Pastor Wendell, who is bi-vocational. This means that, in addition to spending between 25-40

⁶² Interview by Author, Jourdanton, TX, digital recording, May 30, 2012.

hours a week doing church related work, he is also the manager of a ranch near Alpine. The ranch management position entails “daily ranch work of tending to livestock (cattle, horses), range management, basic maintenance, and livestock production practices.”⁶³ He explained that ranch work gives him the chance to “stay directly connected to the western heritage lifestyle.”⁶⁴ Unlike Pastor Pete, Pastor Wendell does not have a seminary degree. Prior to coming to Big Bend Cowboy Church, he had worked as a youth minister at a cowboy church in Eastland, Texas, and before that, he was a youth minister at a Methodist church in Ft. Stockton, Texas. Pastor Wendell was drawn to the cowboy church movement because of his connection to the heritage and his goal of bringing western heritage people to the church.

Ministries

Most cowboy churches focus only on reaching out to western heritage individuals, which is their role as self-described Paulian churches. Cowboy Fellowship, unlike Big Bend Cowboy Church, breaks with the AFCC model of limiting the focus of ministries to key outreach areas. In doing so, Cowboy Fellowship has expanded the focus of their ministry to include people who do not identify as members of the western heritage. Pastor Pete explained to me that:

When we first started, we were definitely very focused on one specific person, one specific type of person. In doing that, a lot of other people started coming. Then, all of the sudden, we had people who were not that specific person anymore. They wanted to reach their friends. They wanted to reach their families. They wanted to start ministries that weren't arena related or cowboy related. So we did.⁶⁵

⁶³ Interview by Author, Alpine, Texas, email correspondence. August 11, 2012.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Interview by Author, Jourdanton, TX, digital recording, August 2, 2012 3:49 p.m.

Pastor Scotty elaborated on this by pointing out that strict adherence to the western heritage model was where Cowboy Fellowship breaks with the AFCC model, whereas it is upheld by Big Bend Cowboy Church. He told me that Cowboy Fellowship's calling is beyond that of most cowboy churches and shared that their philosophy is:

Sure, God made us cowboy, our western heritage, but how can we use that to reach our community?" For the longest time TFCC was like, "How are you reaching the cowboy and not reaching the community?" They just wanted to focus on one specific people group. That's the difference in our church and the rest of the cowboy churches, is that we just don't say, "Hey, we're just going to focus on ropers" or "We're just going to focus on bull riders" or "We're just going to focus on arena events.⁶⁶

This philosophy leads Cowboy Fellowship to engage in ministry events locally, in other parts of the state, and internationally. Cowboy Fellowship regularly sends mission teams of both children and adults to parts of Africa and Latin America to do humanitarian work and ministry.⁶⁷ Unlike most cowboy churches, Cowboy Fellowship's outreach and ministry extends beyond the western heritage groups.

In an attempt to reach a broader group of people, the Children's and Youth ministries at Cowboy Fellowship are not focused on western heritage. There are plenty of roping events and cowboy play days for children that do embrace this culture, but these events lie outside the programming duties of the Children's and Youth ministers. Based on the AFCC video about children's ministries, I'm inclined to believe other cowboy churches include some references to cowboy culture in their children's programming, especially by making their children's camps cowboy themed, but this is

⁶⁶ Interview by Author, Jourdanton, TX, digital recording, July 19, 2012 9:05 a.m.

⁶⁷ "Missions," Cowboy Fellowship Website, Accessed October 28, 2012, <http://cowboyfellowship.org/cowboyfellowship/missions>.

not the case at Cowboy Fellowship.⁶⁸ When I spoke to the Youth Pastor, he explained that, although many of the youth in his ministry come from a western heritage background because they grew up in a rural part of Texas, most aren't actively engaged in the culture. He shared with me that "I mean, of my 50 students, I have maybe two that consistently do something that you would really consider western heritage which is like roping, or barrel racing, or something like that."⁶⁹ The Children's Pastor echoed his sentiments. Because of the size of the congregation and the diversity of attendees at Cowboy Fellowship, the church presents traditional children's programming such as Vacation Bible School.

On the other hand, Big Bend Cowboy Church does not have the diversity of ministries. Given the demographics of their church, they focus heavily on ministering to cowboys. Pastor Wendell shared with me that he does not feel that his church should focus on external ministry efforts. He also shared that while he understands that external ministry efforts can be a place where discipleship can grow saying:

To jerk some cowboy off his horse and send him to an African nation to do mission work may not work out too good. (He probably wouldn't get past airport security with his spurs on, anyways.)⁷⁰

Because of this, Big Bend Cowboy Church focuses on core ministries including the arena team, music ministry, and children's ministry as well as having regular Bible studies based on curriculum chosen by the Pastor. However, both the children's ministry and the Bible study were on hiatus during the time I spent in their community, so I

⁶⁸ "Children's Ministry," American Fellowship of Cowboy Churches, accessed October 28, 2012, http://www.americanfcc.org/content.cfm?id=2074&content_id=386#attached_content.

⁶⁹ Interview by Author, Jourdanton, TX, digital recording. July 6, 2012 1:41 p.m.

⁷⁰ Interview by Author, Alpine, Texas, email correspondence. August 11, 2012.

cannot compare them to those at Cowboy Fellowship. Both of these ministries are for existing church members, and it is worth pointing out that the ministries intended to reach new members, such as roping and arena events, were scheduled throughout the entire summer. Big Bend Cowboy Church treats discipleship as an important component of their church community, but it is secondary to reaching out to new members during the summer when many people travel or are on vacation.

Definition of Western Heritage

Cowboy churches are open to all. However, determining what is included in definitions of this heritage is contested and complicated by issues such as regionalism and popular culture. Differences in definition are evident between Big Bend Cowboy Church and Cowboy Fellowship. The former has a more traditional definition of the heritage, while the latter has a more open definition that reflects the diversity of rural jobs available in the area.

Big Bend Cowboy Church has a more conventional definition of western heritage. One woman I spoke with told me that their church is trying to reach people in “ag (agriculture), farming, ranching, cattle, anything like that.⁷¹ Although she offered a broad listing of subcultures, all are typically associated with cowboy and western heritage culture. When discussing the target audience of the church with another woman, I made the mistake of mentioning farming, to which she jokingly responded “don’t say farming in this area, those are fighting words.”⁷² In the Big Bend area, western heritage is tied explicitly to ranching and closely affiliated jobs and hobbies.

⁷¹ Interview by Author, Alpine, TX, digital recording, June 19, 2012 9:57 a.m.

⁷² Interview by Author, Alpine, TX, digital recording, June 6, 2012 12:37 p.m.

At Cowboy Fellowship, the umbrella of jobs and identities that make up western heritage is far wider and includes rural people and even individuals who work at the nearby oil fields. In Atascosa County, fewer people support themselves entirely by ranching, which has lead the definition of western heritage to be more inclusive than in the Big Bend region. One woman told me that “we’re encouraged to bring people and just to visit and with the oil fields going around so strong now we’re getting a lot of that.”⁷³ A young man who works in the oil fields echoed a similar sentiment about being welcomed by the community. He told me “when you get down to it, oil field guys and cowboys are all the same. It’s all the same thing. They just do different stuff and wear different clothes.”⁷⁴ In his opinion, the underlying culture of potentially dangerous manual labor in the outdoors creates a cultural bond between oil field workers and western culture. At this time, the booming oil industry has brought many single men into the area; a demographic Cowboy Fellowship is already accustomed to targeting for evangelism.

In this section, I have discussed some of the differences between Cowboy Fellowship and Big Bend Cowboy Church. In doing so, I have highlighted how the congregation size and surrounding culture can influence how cowboy churches attempt to reach members of the larger community. Additionally, by looking at staff size and vocation, I show how cowboy churches adapt to serve the needs of congregants. For all the similarities between the two churches, looking at the differences between them shows the diversity and flexibility of the movement.

⁷³ Interview by Author, Jourdanton, TX, digital recording, August 1, 2012 2:04 p.m.

⁷⁴ Interview by Author, Jourdanton, TX, digital recording, August 2, 2012 8:06 a.m.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have presented the ethnographic data from my time spent at Big Bend Cowboy Church and Cowboy Fellowship. My fieldwork is indicative of trends only within these two churches, but I believe the similarities between them speak to larger trends within the contemporary cowboy church movement, especially regional differences in definitions of western heritage and outreach techniques. The similarities and differences between the two congregations capture the heart of the cowboy church movement and how these churches evangelize to individuals affiliated with the western heritage. I began by describing the history and appearances of both churches in order to locate them spatially and temporally within their larger communities. Next, I explored the similarities between material cultures of the churches, how myth is negotiated within them, and the role masculinity plays in the communities. In the next chapter, I will return to these three subjects in order to situate them theoretically inside the larger literature of the study of cultural hybridity, myth, and masculinity within religious studies. Lastly, I looked at some of the cultural differences between the churches that are tied to size and geographical location. I chose to do this to demonstrate that, although cowboy churches theoretically share the same goal of reaching out to unchurched cowboys, internal and external community factors influence how individual congregations minister, in distinct ways, to these individuals and to the broader community.

CHAPTER 4

THEORIZING COWBOY CHURCH CULTURE

Thus far, I have situated my cowboy church research within contemporary scholarship on the American West, reviewed a history of attempts to minister to western heritage individuals by Protestant groups, explored the origins of the contemporary cowboy church, and offered my own ethnographic data that looks at common themes in cowboy churches. Myth and popular culture have transformed the cowboy into a legendary figure bearing little resemblance to his historical precursors. In this chapter, I will apply theory from the fields of religious, gender, and cultural studies to discuss how cowboy churches negotiate myth, gender, and identity. I will begin with a discussion of myth by drawing on the work of Mircea Eliade, J.Z. Smith, Bruce Lincoln, and Thomas Tweed in order to show how the cowboy becomes a mythic trope within cowboy churches. Next, I will look at the work of Michael Kimmel, Clifford Putney, and others to situate the cowboy and the cowboy church movement within a larger discussion of American masculinity and masculine-focused Christianity. Doing so will help explain why cowboy churches place such emphasis on reaching out to men. Lastly, I will explore how cowboy identity is developed within the church. To do this, I will use the work of Clifford Geertz, Jan Nederveen Pieterse, Jean Baudrillard, and Néstor García Canclini to look at how identity is shaped by those outside and inside the church. Together, their body of work sheds light on how media and culture influence the construction of identity.

Myth

During my time spent at these cowboy churches, congregants as well as church leadership frequently mentioned the role of myth. The field of religion has spent

decades theorizing about the role myth plays in culture. In Mircea Eliade's work on cosmogonic myth and sacred history, he claims that myth creates a "longing to recover the primordial epoch that began immediately *after* the creation."¹ Cowboy churches, I argue, do not see the cowboy as a sacred figure. However, the figure of the cowboy and the perceived simplicity of his lifestyle, although not quite primordial, is seen as a lifestyle worth preserving. The myth surrounding the cowboy is tied to a particular rural cultural identity. Some individuals I spoke with expressed concern that western heritage had the potential to die out because advances in communication technology allow images of contemporary culture to reach rural areas in a more direct manner. By creating religious communities that embrace the cowboy myth, this Elideian return to beginnings can be viewed as an attempt to preserve their culture.

The cowboy image is emphasized in different manners in order to reflect the needs of the church community. J. Z. Smith elaborated on Eliade's statements about myth by looking at not only myths themselves, but also at how they are reshaped and altered by the societies in which they exist.² In his opinion, myths are "best conceived not as a primordial, but rather as a limited collection of elements with a fixed range of cultural meanings which are applied, thought with, worked with, experimented with in particular situations."³ According to Smith, freeing myth from the confines of serving as a static, purely historical concept, as Eliade views it, allows scholars to

¹ Op. Cit. Eliade "Cosmogonic Myth..." 171-183.

² "I would not propose that there is no pristine myth; there is only application. That this requires that we not excise myth from its interpretive context of existential situation. That application and situation is not just a matter of belief or repetition but that it is as much play, skepticism, rebellion." J.Z. Smith. "No News Is Good News: The Gospel as Enigma," in *Secrecy in Religions*. ed. Kees W. Bolle. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1989. pp. 77.

³ Op. Cit. J.Z. Smith "The Map is Not Territory" 308.

consider how myth fits into social narratives. For rural communities with strong historical and contemporary ties to ranching culture, the cowboy is already a component of their social narrative. This also accounts for the differences between the two churches I studied. Each community reflects the culture in which it is embedded. Big Bend Cowboy Church, the more rural and cattle-focused of the two churches, places a greater emphasis on connecting to cowboy culture because of the large number of people who work as ranchers in the area. Whereas Cowboy Fellowship, which is located in a larger community closer to a major metropolitan area, seeks to cast a wider net and attract individuals with backgrounds more diverse than simply western heritage. In this instance, community and church image are explicitly linked.

The pervasiveness of the cowboy myth does not mean the cowboy is a one-dimensional figure. Each individual has a different idea of what the cowboy is, ranging from the working cowboy to popular culture cowboys like Roy Rogers and John Wayne. Expanding upon Eliade and Smith, Bruce Lincoln explores the practical applications of myth. He accomplishes this by treating myth as a component of culture that informs identity and religious belief. In his discussion of narrative diversity, he defines myth as the “stories through which groups accomplish the task of sociocultural reproduction by inscribing their values and sense of shared identity.” Myth, according to Lincoln, is one of the many avenues through which culture is propagated.⁴

Lincoln echoes the sentiment that cowboy mythic figures are portrayed in diverse ways. There is no universal definition of what constitutes a cowboy. This is due, in part, to the many incarnations throughout history, some of which have been shaped by

⁴ Op. Cit. Lincoln “Mythic Narrative and Cultural Diversity in American Society,” 168.

popular culture. Not only does Lincoln reject the “universality” of myths,” he also points out that, as signifiers, myths “are subject to multiple interpretations by different actors within the same social field and can become sites of tension and struggle where those actors contest their rival interest, values, desires, and ambitions.”⁵ While I agree with Lincoln that the cowboy can be interpreted in a variety of ways, in cowboy churches, these varying interpretations are not a source of tension. Rather, church leadership and congregants alike view the multiple forms of cowboy culture as a way to reach a wide variety of individuals who have differing levels of interest and involvement in western heritage culture. Not everyone who attends these churches rides horses, raises cattle, or even dresses in western clothing. Although individuals with a lesser involvement in the culture are not the target demographic of cowboy churches, all are welcome in these churches provided they do not try to steer the church's focus away from western heritage individuals.

What then, is the role of myth in cowboy churches? Thomas Tweed's work offers an explanation of the role which myth plays in shaping religious identities. He argues that it is an integral component of religious and community identity. He expands upon Lincoln's treatment of the sociocultural attributes of myth by situating myth in the context of forming and sustaining religion and religious communities. Tweed states that religions are comprised of flows that are simultaneously organic and cultural. A component of cultural flows includes what he calls “orienting tropes” which are “metaphors, similes, myths, allegories, personifications, and symbols- that function as figurative tools for

⁵ Ibid., pp. 166 and 175

making and remaking imagined worlds.⁶ In cowboy churches, the myth of the cowboy is an orienting trope that serves as a signifier of what the church culture appears to be to outsiders and potential congregants. As I have touched upon and will expand on later, the cowboy embodies a wide variety of cultural associations, from working to pop cultural, which are perceived differently from person to person. Despite the variety of perceptions of the cowboy, the word itself evokes strong cultural associations that resonate with people and pique their interest in the church. As with the “greenhorn” couple who decided to visit the church based on curiosity, the word “cowboy” and the associated material culture of the churches are often enough to sway people to visit the church.

Beyond serving as an orienting trope that shapes the church's material and cultural identity, the cowboy is transformed into a figure that is used to demonstrate moral, Christian living. Since pastors use examples of the cowboy and western life in their sermons to reach congregants, the cowboy becomes more than just a cultural figure to which congregants can relate.⁷ By using the cowboy as a moral exemplar, pastors forge a link between myth and Christianity. In sermons and prayers offered during church actives, church leadership reinforces the idea that, regardless of an individual's past, they, too, can live a Christian life and are welcome in the church. In cowboy churches, the positive, law-abiding aspects of the historical and mythic cowboy are highlighted in order to demonstrate how Christianity and western heritage are compatible lifestyles. However, to fully understand the role of myth, it is critical to

⁶ He also discusses that tropes are not just found in religions, but in this context they are useful as “analogical utterances” that allow a way of thinking about the “suprahuman forces and ultimate horizons” that are “defining features of religion” Op. Cit. Tweed *Crossing and Dwelling*, 68.

⁷Although how frequently pastors make reference to the cowboy varies from church to church.

discuss how cowboy identity is constructed and the manner in which it is linked to masculinity.

Masculinity

The cowboy, as a historical and mythic figure, has a strong connection to the concept of masculinity in the United States. Part of the mythical transformation of the cowboy involves shaping cowboys into heroes of the West and icons of masculine, American independence in the face of modernizing/feminizing forces. This section will look at the cowboy as a masculine figure and how cowboy churches, by focusing on masculinity, are put into conversation with the historically masculine muscular Christianity and Promise Keepers movements.

In his book *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, Michael Kimmel seeks to put “manhood in historical context.” Doing so, he argues, allows it to be viewed “as a constantly changing collection of meanings that we construct through our relationships with ourselves, with each other, and with our world.”⁸ The cowboy fits prominently into this discussion as an example of a historical figure whose identity gets appropriated by the larger culture and is transformed into a hyper masculine figure. According to Kimmel, American masculinity, especially notions of freedom and independence, have long been tied to the West. He states that “the West was a safety valve, siphoning off excess population, providing an outlet for both the ambitious and the unsuccessful” in what can be viewed as a gendered reading of Turner's Frontier Thesis.⁹ Like Richard Slotkin, Kimmel focuses on the role that fictional accounts of the frontier played in

⁸ Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York City, The Free Press, 1996), 5.

⁹ Ibid., 60.

shaping the lives of men who were able to “escape through fantasies of identification.”¹⁰

Throughout his book, both the West and cowboys repeatedly appear, and represent attempts to regain masculinity in order to counter forces that were once seen as domesticating and feminizing, including Victorian values and the closing of the West. During his discussion of the late 19th century, he points out that men had to “rediscover masculinity” and many accomplish this by visiting “western dude ranches to take in the masculinizing freshness of the out of doors.” Going to dude ranches transformed the West “into a gigantic theme park, safely unthreatening.”¹¹

Kimmel claims that during periods when men were attempting to reclaim and assert their masculinity, the cowboy served as the ultimate example of “rugged outdoor masculinity.”¹² Focusing on the cowboy’s mythic development and the role it served in shaping masculinity, he hints at aspects of cowboy culture that these modern churches attempt to undermine.

As a genre the western represented the apotheosis of masculinist fantasy, a revolt not against women but against feminization. The vast prairie is the domain of male liberation from work-place humiliation, cultural feminization, and domestic emasculation. The saloon replaces the church, the campfire replaces the Victorian parlor, the range replaces the factory floor. The western is a purified, pristine male domain.¹³

By bringing religion to the forefront, cowboy churches assert that the church can be part of the male domain.

¹⁰ Kimmel references Slotkin’s work within his discussion on the cowboy. Ibid., 63.

¹¹ Ibid., 135-136.

¹² He states: “But nowhere could American men find a better exemplar of rugged outdoor masculinity than out west with the cowboy, that noble denizen of the untamed frontier.” Ibid., 148.

¹³ Ibid., 150.

Today, cowboy churches strive to capture the role the West plays in the lives of men, with one central exception: the saloon has been abandoned and the role of the church as a masculine institution has been established.¹⁴ By catering explicitly to men via doctrine, myth, material culture, and church ministries, cowboy churches, like other masculine Christian movements, portray “the Christian life as the manly life, a heroic quest for spiritual manhood.”¹⁵ Kimmel’s work calls attention to why the cowboy serves as a trope for American masculinity. Given this discussion, it makes sense that churches attempting to reach unchurched males would utilize this trope.

However, beyond the cowboy, there is a history of Christian attempts to evangelize specifically to men. Cowboy churches fit into this history, and for this reason, should be juxtaposed with both the muscular Christianity movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries and the Promise Keepers movement that became active in the 1990s. All three entities seek to transform the lives of unchurched men by bringing them to know and accept Christ. These groups embrace a version of theology that emphasizes the ties between masculinity and Christian identity. The reason for this hybrid concept is twofold. First, it dispels the notion that religion is a woman’s domain and, second, it brings men to the church.¹⁶

¹⁴ Although some members of cowboy churches drink, by many avoid alcohol and all condemn drunkenness.

¹⁵ Ibid., 313.

¹⁶ Many scholars comment on the relationship between women and religion in the United States. Michael Kimmel states that muscular Christianity developed as the response to the Victorian feminized. “In paintings and drawings (of Jesus) of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Jesus was imagined as a thin, reedy man, with long bony fingers, and soft doelike eyes, a man who could easily counsel you to turn the other cheek and love your enemies.” Michael Kimmel, *The Gendered Society 4th Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 240.

Muscular Christianity, according to Clifford Putney, was a predominantly male movement and “can be defined simply as a Christian commitment to health and manliness” which was popularized in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by “droves of Protestant ministries in England and America” who “concluded that men were not truly Christians unless they were healthy and 'manly.’”¹⁷ In this case, manliness was tied to fitness and strength. Spearheaded by Progressives, supporters of muscular Christianity stood in opposition to Victorian values, which downplayed these particular traits and, instead, “proposed a new model for manhood, one that stressed action rather than reflection and aggression rather than gentility.”¹⁸ Supporters of muscular Christianity, including supporters of the Social Gospel, “fashioned a call to worship” that attempted to appeal to men “through their sense of discipline, through their sense of the practical, through their youthful passions, and through their desire for the heroic.”¹⁹ To encourage male attendance, churches built gyms and hosted sports events to cultivate male interest in church culture. They also created men's organizations that resembled military organizations within established churches that painted men as protectors of the faith and family. One Methodist event, the Columbus Exhibition at the 1919 Ohio State Fair, even included a “bucking bronco contest.”²⁰ Although the movement eventually declined in popularity “in mainline Protestant circles,” it remained popular in more conservative

¹⁷ Clifford Putney, *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2001), Kindle Edition, loc. 147.

¹⁸ Ibid., loc. 84.

¹⁹ Ibid., loc 992.

²⁰ Ibid., loc 2567.

churches.²¹ Its survival became apparent during the conservative resurgence of the 1970s, and paved the way for the Promise Keepers movement.

While muscular Christianity focused on the physical and spiritual sides of male religiosity, Promise Keepers, founded in 1990 by Bill McCartney, a University of Colorado Football coach focuses solely on “Christian discipleship” and male fellowship.²² Promise Keepers is a nondenominational group that is best known for its large rallies and gatherings including the Stand the Gap rally held on the Washington Mall in October of 1997.²³ The organization seeks to “return men to God and the teachings of Jesus as they relate to the family” while also encouraging men to cultivate supportive, spiritual relationships with one another. In addition to large events, Promise Keepers host regional conferences emphasizing the importance of interacting with local accountability groups, usually based in churches, where men can meet to deepen their faith with other men.²⁴ Although the strength and membership declined following financial problems in the late 1990s, they continue to operate a website. Their online presence offers paying members access videos, a tool to help memorize scripture, and an accountability system for monitoring internet usage in order to avoid temptation and unchristian content online.²⁵ Ultimately, Promise Keepers hopes to restore “traditional

²¹ Ibid., loc 2675.

²² Randy Balmer, “Introduction,” in *The Promise Keepers: Essays on Masculinity and Christianity*, ed. Dane S. Claussen (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2000), 3-4.

²³ Ibid., 4.

²⁴ Robert A. Cole, “Promising to Be a Man: Promise Keepers and the Organizational Construction of Masculinity,” in *The Promise Keepers: Essays on Masculinity and Christianity*, ed. Dane S. Claussen (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2000), 115-116.

²⁵ “Premium Content,” Promise Keepers, accessed January 12, 2013, <http://www.promisekeepers.org/premium-content>.

nuclear family values" that it perceives as being under attack by liberal social and political forces.²⁶

In some ways, cowboy churches share the perspectives of Promise Keepers and muscular Christianity. These similarities are most clearly reflected by the goals of all three groups as they relate to cultivating male religiosity. Similar to muscular Christianity, cowboy churches attempt to attract men by creating events and physical spaces that will appeal directly to them. As discussed in the ethnography chapter, these churches host events, related to western heritage, including ropings, in order to pique male interest by allowing them to participate in events related to their culture. Inside the churches themselves, the material culture of the churches, including open spaces, concrete floors, and rustic decorations, has been developed in such a way as to make men comfortable in church. However, cowboy churches do not operate under the assumption that all members are interested in participating in cowboy activities. Because of this, they also offer other community activities such as monthly potlucks and Bible study for individuals who can't or don't participate in physically demanding western heritage events. Like Promise Keepers, cowboy churches offer spiritual development for men separately from that offered to women. Big Bend Cowboy Church offers separate men's and women's Bible studies, where the men's classes include a course based on the Christian messages that can be found in John Wayne films. Cowboy Fellowship, on the other hand, has mixed fellowship classes in lieu of Bible study, but offers men's retreats and a monthly fellowship breakfast for men. At both churches, these gendered

²⁶ Op. Cit. Cole 117.

events allow men in the community to engage in fellowship with one another in a Christian setting.

Despite these similarities, there are a few significant differences between cowboy churches and other masculine Christian movements. Unlike Promise Keepers and muscular Christianity, cowboy churches have attempted to create permanent, physical church communities. Cowboy churches are tied to one location and emphasize ministering to the people who live in or near their specific community. One way to think of the distinction between the two groups is the prevalence of masculinity. Within cowboy churches, masculinity is a major element of the church culture, and the concept permeates the church spatially, materially, and culturally. However, membership at cowboy churches is open to men, women, and children, which necessitates that they also develop ways to minister to different groups. On the other hand, muscular Christianity and Promise Keepers exist as minor elements within established churches. These groups supplement other church activities in order to provide men with their own group within the larger church community. Should the masculine element of these churches be suddenly removed, the church would still continue to function. However, if a cowboy church were to remove the masculine element, it would fundamentally change the atmosphere of the entire church and its community. The centrality of the masculine element in cowboy churches differentiates it from other masculine Christian organizations.

The association with masculinity makes the cowboy a trope a powerful social cue for a church's identity. Kimmel's work emphasizes how the cowboy has shaped the idea of masculinity in America by focusing on how the cowboy was transformed via popular

culture to represent individualism in the face of domesticating forces. By emphasizing the masculine aspects of the cowboy and earthly affiliations, cowboy churches attempt, like Promise Keepers and muscular Christianity, to bring unchurched men into the church. The similarities between the goals of the groups necessitate that cowboy churches be included in the larger discussion of masculine Christianity. Next, I will discuss how the different forms of the cowboy- historical, contemporary, and pop cultural- all shape the identity trope of the cowboy in these churches.

Identity Construction and the Contemporary Cowboy

The cowboy church movement depends heavily on cultivating an aura of cowboy culture in order to reach unchurched individuals who relate to the western heritage. In light of my discussion of myth and masculinity, it is necessary to look at how western identity is constructed and negotiated within contemporary cowboy churches. Within cowboy churches, the trope of the cowboy is a fluid entity that both shapes the church culture and is shaped by it. The cowboy is a hybrid entity: the product of continual mixing, in which history and popular culture simultaneously influence and are influenced. The contemporary cowboy is the product of decades of cultural development. In this section, I will consider how Geertz's discussion of how symbols shape reality is seen in the contemporary cowboy church. Next, I will look to Nederveen Pieterse in order to situate the cowboy, as an example of assimilationist hybridity, within a globalized culture. Then, using the work of Baudrillard, I will explore how media combines with history to shape identity in the cowboy church. Lastly, I will utilize Canclini to discuss how hybridity and the media influence how the cowboy is presented in cowboy churches and why this makes the cowboy a hyperreal entity whose origins cannot be determined because of decades of continuously mixing reality and symbol.

Taken together, this discussion will shed light on how identity is constructed around the trope of the cowboy.

Model Of and Model For

In the contemporary cowboy church, cowboy culture serves both as a model of and model for the symbol systems embraced by the church. In Geertz's discussion of symbols, he elaborates on how they serve as model of and model for reality by saying that "cultural patterns have an intrinsic double aspect: they give meaning, that is, objective conceptual form, to social and psychological reality both by shaping themselves to it and by shaping it to themselves."²⁷ However, as I have stated previously, western culture is not monolithic. In these churches, westerns and the mythic cowboy, as well as ranching culture, serve as models of and for how western identity is shaped, and each has both an active and a passive role in culture.

While conducting interviews with individuals who attended a cowboy church, I asked what inspired them to visit. Answers encompassed both the mythic/pop cultural and the historical/contemporary aspects of cowboy and western heritage culture. For example, the woman whose two young sons pestered her to attend the church after seeing it being constructed on their regular trips to Walmart acknowledged that her children had ideas about cowboy culture both from living in the area and from watching westerns.²⁸ Other attendees who are involved in ranching and rodeo culture told me that word of mouth from friends who attended the church let them know that the outreach events, which are rodeo heavy, would be in keeping with cowboy culture. Before

²⁷ Op. Cit Geertz 93.

²⁸ Interview by Author, Jourdanton, TX, digital recording. July 6, 2012 10:13 a.m.

attending the church, individuals' opinions of what the word "cowboy" implies helped shape their idea of what the culture of the church would be like. This perception includes cultural cues concerning what was expected of them materially. For example, even though a pasture roping may be held by a church, participants know that they are welcome to wear cowboy clothing rather than what is considered to be traditional Sunday dress. For Geertz, the "model of" reflects a representation of the cosmos, a map of reality, and a system of symbols that reflect the culture in which it exists. In relation to cowboy churches, the trope of the cowboy in popular culture and his relationship to contemporary ranching culture shape people's expectations of what they might experience in a cowboy church. These expectations and beliefs about the cowboy as a symbol serve as a model of what they envisage from the church culture. And, in these churches, the image of the cowboy they expect to encounter is one that encourages moral, Christian behavior.

Although churches focus intently on attracting those who have the strongest direct connection to the culture, pastors at cowboy churches acknowledge the variety of conceptions of the cowboy that individuals bring with them to the church. Geertz argues that symbols serve as models for reality in the sense that they play an active role in the culture. This occurs when people take the concept of the symbol and produce it culturally. In cowboy churches, symbols associated with historical, contemporary, and mythic aspects shape how the church presents cowboy culture.

When interviewing the pastors of both churches I studied, each acknowledged how the symbol of the cowboy shaped the culture of their church. In other words, the symbol served as a model for developing cowboy church culture. Pastor Elliot of Big

Bend Cowboy Church shared a story in which he stated his belief that the popular culture cowboy has Christian roots. In his opinion, mythic cowboy culture becomes a model for the contemporary cowboy church. He believes that “the values come straight from the Bible and are expressed through teachings from cowboy heroes of the Silver Screen. For example, Roy Rogers and his Rider’s Rules.” There are ten rules in Roger’s list, which resemble the Ten Commandments. They include prescriptions to “love God and go to Sunday school regularly” and “always obey your parents.”²⁹ In Pastor Elliot’s view, the idealized cowboy of the movies shapes cowboy culture as much as authentic cowboy culture shapes the myth. Both members of cowboy churches and those outside of it draw their idea of what the cowboy is and how he should act from how the cowboy is portrayed in the media. For this reason, pastors should be prepared to welcome individuals with varied symbolic associations.

In contrast to Pastor Elliot’s mythic example, Pastor Pete of Cowboy Fellowship provided a story that demonstrates how the historical cowboy becomes the model for the contemporary church. He shared that:

There has (sic) always been circuit riding preachers who went from town to town. Those were cowboy churches. As long as there have been cowboys, they have gathered around a campfire and prayed and sang hymns together and opened the Bible together. Technically that’s a cowboy church. Probably not going to get much more cowboy than that.³⁰

In this case, the symbol system is much more rustic and, in theory, historical. However, in both instances, church leaders demonstrate their awareness of the different aspects of culture that contribute to cowboy culture. From these symbols, both pastors

²⁹ “Roy Rogers’ Rider’s Rules,” The Cowboy Way, accessed October 22, 2012. <http://www.cowboyway.com/RoyRogers.htm>. And Interview by Author, Alpine, Texas, email correspondence, August 11, 2012.

³⁰ Interview by Author, Jourdanton, TX, digital recording. May 30, 2012.

shape the culture of their churches. Cowboy culture, authentic and mythic, becomes a model for how cowboy churches present themselves in order to attract new members and reach out to the unsaved. The trope of the cowboy serves as both a model of and a model for culture in cowboy churches. Nonetheless, the cowboy is not a static figure. In the next section, I will discuss how cowboy churches represent hybrid spaces and mixed times within an assimilationist hybridity that reaffirms aspects of Turner's Frontier Thesis.

Hybrid Spaces

Nederveen Pieterse's book, *Globalization and Culture: Global Mélange* serves as an introduction to the theory of hybridity and how it relates to globalization. For the purposes of this thesis, I'm more interested in hybridity than globalization. Hybridity, as well as the variety of sources that influence cultures, is central to my discussion of identity construction. Nederveen Pieterse's theoretical position is rooted in the idea that hybridity is not a homogenous concept and that other theories of globalization are rooted in "the social proclivity of boundary fetishism" which hybridity, in his opinion, destabilizes.³¹ Hybridity represents continual mixing in which cultures simultaneously influence and are influenced. He discusses how hybridity is destabilizing because it undermines "doctrines of racial purity and cultural integrism" and "subverts nationalism because it privileges border-crossings."³² He concludes that "each paradigm represents a different politics of multiculturalism" which resonates with different perspectives of the world.³³ In cowboy churches, hybridity is mediated by the meeting of the historical

³¹ Op. Cit. Nederveen Pieterse 4.

³² Ibid., 54-55.

³³ Ibid., 58.

cowboy, contemporary ranching culture, and how the cowboy is portrayed in the media and popular culture. The different conceptions of the cowboy as a symbol influence the models of and for the church, and attest to the hybridity within these churches.

After making a general case for hybridity, Nederveen Pieterse delves into its specifics, particularly, how it contributes to the creation of a “global mélange.”³⁴ Reiterating the multidirectional and multidimensional nature of globalization, he discusses structural hybridization or “the ways in which forms become separated from existing practices and recombine with new forms in new practices.”³⁵ As previously discussed, Protestant groups have demonstrated historical interest in evangelizing to cowboys, but by creating churches that cater to their interests culturally, they form new practices and structures that diversify both Christianity and cowboy culture. After this introduction to cultural hybridity, Nederveen Pieterse focuses on how “globalization can mean the reinforcement of both supranational and subnational regionalism” including religious groups and local groups. The exchanges between different networks are key to structural hybridization. According to Nederveen Pieterse, these manifest in both “hybrid spaces”, including borderlands, and “mixed times” in which the pre-modern, modern, and post-modern “coexist.”³⁶ Cowboy churches reinforce subnational regionalism by creating spaces intended to appeal to a particular cultural identity. They create hybrid spaces because of the mixing of myth and history, and a mixed time in which the 19th century comes into contact with the 21st century.

³⁴ Ibid., 65.

³⁵ He borrows this definition from Rowe and Schelling's 1991 book *Popular Culture in Latin America* Ibid., 70.

³⁶ He also uses overseas military facilities as an example of hybrid spaces, and Latin America as an example of mixed times. Ibid., 71-73.

To elaborate a bit on the sentiments held by both pastors about the mixing of the mythic cowboy with the historical and contemporary, I want to call attention to the broad definition of western heritage utilized by the cowboy church outreach wing of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, with whom the AFCC is affiliated. This document demonstrates that cowboy churches expect to bring in a variety of people including individuals who are “working cowboys, professional rodeo cowboys, arena cowboys & cowgirls, cattle people, horse people, cowboys at heart, and cowboy mentality people.” Although this is clearly a broad definition of western heritage, the assumption made is that “if you focus at the top of the list and you won’t leave anyone behind” because “the working cowboy may be the hardest to reach but if you can do church in a way that he will come, then you will reach everyone else on the list.”³⁷ Like the sentiments of the pastors about the influence of both myth and history, the broad definition offered by the BGCT demonstrates the hope that their hybrid spaces will appeal to both contemporary working cowboys as well as those who identify with the mythic dimensions of the culture. The goal of appealing to working cowboys causes the cultural and material aspects of the church to be rugged and cowboy focused, but they are hybrid spaces that are still comfortable enough that individuals with attraction to the myth feel welcome.

To further theorize hybridity, Neederveen Pieterse discusses “assimilationist hybridity” in order to take into account power and hegemony as well as how groups utilize established symbols.³⁸ Cowboy churches are planted in rural areas where strong

³⁷ Unknown, “Cowboy Church Function and Structure,” (Word Document, Baptist General Convention of Texas), 2.

³⁸ Op. Cit. Nederveen Pieterse 79.

cowboy culture (mythic and historical) is already prevalent. Therefore, I find it useful to consider these churches as being representative of assimilationist hybridity due to the fact that they adopt both the culture of Protestant Christianity, which reifies the idea of Christian hegemony within the United States, and the culture of rural areas, which is embodied in the trope of the cowboy. In these churches, the dominant historical form of American religious belief is reshaped to be in conversation with the cowboy, who is one of the dominant tropes of American individualism. The mixing of these cultures asserts a particular view of the West, Christianity, and American identity that privileges the dominant social narrative. By blending these cultures, cowboy churches reflect “the reorganization of social spaces.”³⁹ In these hybrid structures, new practices are created that reflect the religious needs of this particular community. At the same time, the culture in these churches represents a domesticated hybridity that reproduces notions of the cowboy and his role in the history of the United States, both factually and mythically. Cowboy churches reproduce the culture in a manner reminiscent of the ideas found in Turner's Frontier Thesis by emphasizing independence, ruggedness, and the freedom that can be found within Christianity.

Hybridity, as discussed by Nederveen Pieterse, offers a theoretical model that scholars might utilize to investigate the formation of new cultures and religious identities. In cowboy churches, hybridity is seen in the mixing of the historical, contemporary, and mythic conceptions of the cowboy and in the culture that emerges when all of these aspects of culture are further mixed with Protestant Christian theology. In seeking to cast a narrow net, cowboy churches are able to attract people from a

³⁹ Op. Cit. Nederveen Pieterse 88.

variety of backgrounds, each with different ideas about cowboy symbolism. However, Neederveen Pieterse's theory only scratches the surface of hybridity. To delve deeper into the role hybridity plays in contemporary cowboy churches, I will look at how the material culture and church activities are mediated by the hybridity of the cowboy as a symbol.

Simulacra and the Hyperreal

To begin this discussion, I look to Baudrillard, who, despite my critique that he overemphasizes media, is useful when looking at how media combines with history to create the hybrid cowboy church. As does Neederveen Pieterse, Baudrillard critiques the idea of cultural purity by offering the notions of simulacra, the reproduced representations of an original concept, and the hyperreal, the product of continuous mixing of different symbols and simulacra. It was mentioned earlier that hyperreal space is “produced from a radiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere,” and it is the continuous change and renegotiating of hyperreal symbols that leads to the creation of cultural simulations and simulacra.⁴⁰ Hyperreality is hybrid because it is the product of synthesis and presents a constant onslaught of images and symbols. By synthesizing these elements, one becomes unable to separate what is real from what is constructed. The images seem more real than the origins because the effort that goes into their construction erases the boundaries between reality and virtual reality. As Baudrillard states, “it is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real.”⁴¹ He

⁴⁰Op. Cit. Baudrillard 2.

⁴¹Ibid., 2.

further elaborates that “whereas representation attempts to absorb simulation by interpreting it as a false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation itself as a simulacrum” or, a thoroughly mediatized world.

Cowboy culture, as presented in cowboy churches, according to Baudrillard, “has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum.”⁴² Once again, I reference the two conversations about the role of history and pop culture in cowboy churches. Myth, history, and contemporary ranching/rodeo culture are all privileged within the cowboy church. At this point, it is impossible to differentiate between what is derived from each of these entities, and, attempting to do so serves no religious purpose. Furthermore, both the material church culture and the overarching church culture reflect the hyperreal aspect of the contemporary cowboy church. For example, both churches I visited had small bands that played a mixture of old spirituals, popular songs that had been adapted to have a Christian message, and popular songs that already had Christian message. During the presentation of these songs, no effort was made to differentiate among the origins of the music, but all three types of songs were used in the church service.

Perhaps even more important than the music ministry is the arena ministry. At both churches, the arena ministry is seen as a key area of outreach that is used to evangelize to members of the community. Rodeo-derived events are preceded with prayer and a sermon, and it is required that participants listen to the message in order to participate in the cowboy event. Arena ministries seek to combine rodeo culture with

⁴² I would argue this is seen in all cowboy culture, not just churches, and is not intended to be a critique of their religious efforts. For example, I would argue that the commercialization of rodeo and the fact that many ranchers move to more mechanized forms of ranch management also attest to this shift to hyperreality. *Ibid.*, 6.

Christianity to bring people into the church. However, as previously discussed, rodeo emerged from both historical cowboy play and Wild West show culture. In cowboy churches, rodeo culture becomes imbued with Christianity, but no attention is paid to the origins of arena and rodeo culture itself. At this junction, the culture exists and, as such, can be molded to contain a Christian message.

Baudrillard discusses that “when the real is no longer what it was, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. . . . This is how simulation appears in the phase that concerns us—a strategy of the real, of the neoreal, and the hyperreal that everywhere is the double of a strategy of deterrence.”⁴³ Nostalgia for the past ties into the mythic aspect of the cowboy church and how it can serve as a model of the culture by influencing people to attend. The material culture of the cowboy church is the most visible indicator of hybridity and simulacra, and creates an atmosphere in which myth and history are simultaneously represented and from which the culture of contemporary cowboy Christianity emerges. Materialism in these churches is on display in the form of crosses made from old horseshoes and Bibles containing introductions directed at those involved in the western heritage lifestyle. Cowboy churches are intentionally rustic churches. They typically have gravel parking lots and concrete floors so that individuals don't have to be concerned with tracking dirt or manure into the church. Rustic decorations, the use of common cowboy objects such as bales of hay, and open spaces appeal to the sensibility of men who spend significant amounts of time working outside or to those who associate cowboy culture with activities that use these objects.

⁴³ Ibid., 6-7.

Casual dress is an important component of cowboy churches. Churches have no formal dress code, and individuals are allowed to wear their hats throughout the entire service, with the exception of during the brief prayers at the beginning and conclusion of each service. Boots and hats are both present and prevalent at church services and related activities. For some, this reflects their daily work wardrobe, while, for others, it is a chance to dress like a cowboy and express their attraction to the aesthetics of the culture. However, as an outside participant observer, I generally could not determine where individuals fit on this continuum without asking them directly. Through both their own decoration and the wardrobe choices of congregants, cowboy churches represent this hybridity of cultures. Baudrillard touches upon the manner in which popular culture and media become reality by saying that “such is the watershed of a hyperreal sociality, in which the real is confused with the model, as in the statistical operation, or with the medium.”⁴⁴ In the cowboy church, myth, history, and rural culture are intermixed to the point that it is difficult to separate the individual aspects or to validate where customs and culture originate. However, it is precisely this hybridity and openness to the mixing of different aspects of culture that allow them to reach such a wide audience.

Baudrillard begins a useful discussion of hyperreality and simulacra which is elaborated upon by Canclini, who is predominantly concerned with identity construction, transnationalism, and media. Canclini seeks to understand “intercultural hybridization” by looking at “three key processes for explaining hybridization:” the “breakup and mixing of the collections that are used to organize cultural systems, the territorialization of

⁴⁴ Ibid., 29.

symbolic processes, and the expansion of impure genres.”⁴⁵ To conclude this discussion of hybridity and cowboy churches, I am interested specifically in his ideas concerning the territorialization and expansion of impure genres. Canclini’s work is primarily concerned with the city. This focus, I argue, is where modernist impulses still cloud his work. As a theorist, he makes dichotomous assumptions about technology and the city while dismissing the rural as being unaffected by hybridity. However, as I have explained in this paper, cowboy churches demonstrate that hybridization and media also affect culture in rural areas. The rural cannot be separated from the urban because the rural is constructed and nostalgic, as exemplified by the cowboy being a pervasive cultural figure that emerged from film studios in suburban Hollywood. These films create a feedback mechanism, and the cowboy church is constructed not only to include the mythic, but also to include rural individuals who set themselves apart from how they perceive the city. Therefore, I suggest that it is necessary to apply Canclini’s theory to rural environments.

Hybridity and Media

How do hybridity and media affect cowboy churches? Canclini points out that there is an “integrating and disintegrating” effect to television that shapes how communities view themselves and interact.⁴⁶ He goes on to explain that,

More than an absolute substitution of urban life by the audiovisual media, I perceive a game of echoes. The commercial advertising and political slogans we see on television are those that we reencounter in the streets, and vice versa: the ones are echoed in the others. To this circularity of the

⁴⁵ Op. Cit. Canclini 207.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 211.

communicational and the urban are subordinated the testimonies of their history and the public meaning constructed in longtime experience.⁴⁷

This quote makes evident both the idea of the hyperreal and the symbolic models of/for culture. Canclini criticizes Geertz for linking cultural systems with territory, which hybridity rejects. However, this doesn't mean that Canclini doesn't portray the possibility for symbols to serve as models of/for in hybrid cultures.⁴⁸ The hermeneutic circle of symbols suggested by Geertz, in which symbols represent the object itself, is similar to the game of echoes, although the latter is deterritorialized. It is for this reason that I feel that Canclini contributes valuable concepts to this discussion.

In cowboy churches, there are no localized symbols. Once again, I refer to the conversations I had with the two pastors. Although they focus on different dimensions of cowboy culture- one looks at the pop cultural and the other at an idyllic history- both treat the cowboy as a an American figure. The examples they provide do not touch upon their local culture, but, instead, speak to generalizations about the cowboy. In generalizing him, he is presented as a deterritorialized figure who exists somewhere in the greater American West.⁴⁹ By being mythic, historical, and contemporary, the cowboy is a figure so hybrid that symbols of him typically refer to other symbols.

As I've mentioned earlier, I question the possibility of ever stabilizing these cowboy symbols by separating the mythic from the historical. However, I do not believe this matters in cowboy churches, which are religious games of echoes for rural

⁴⁷ Ibid., 212.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 223.

⁴⁹ Once again, this is reminiscent of Frederick Jackson Turner however in this instance the American West is deterritorialized in that it is mythic, and is difficult to map. Also, since cowboy culture exists in other countries, including Mexico, Canada, and Australia, I would argue that he's even further deterritorialized. However, the pastors I interviewed treated him as American, so I will refer to him as such even though I believe the international aspect merits further study.

communities. Rural culture encounters the culture of the western genre and the historical cowboy after it is filtered through the theology of conservative Protestantism. What emerges is a Christian community that blurs history, reality, and myth. These churches then utilize material and cultural aspects of this hybridity to reach individuals who are not receptive to traditional church outreach. In cowboy churches, “commercial interests are crossed with historical, aesthetic, and communicational ones” and this hybridity “drowns out historical identity and dissolves memory” in order to attract people to worship.⁵⁰

Conclusion

The broad scope of topics associated with cowboy churches can be analyzed from multiple angles and a range of theoretical perspectives. This is just one reading of my ethnographic work. During the time I spent in these church communities, myth, masculinity, and the negotiation of identity construction were the most prevalent themes. By incorporating my ethnography into the larger theoretical conversation on these topics, I call attention to how these themes shape the identity of this newly developed and rapidly growing Protestant movement and its role in the greater scholarly realm. Presented in this manner, it becomes apparent that the contemporary cowboy church movement is a cultural religious movement shaped by different versions of the trope of the cowboy, and which is mediated by both masculinity and popular culture. In the next chapter, I will offer a summary of my work, ideas for further avenues for research on this subject, and why studying cowboy churches matters for the field of religious studies.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 222.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Introduction and Summary

In this thesis I have argued that the success of contemporary cowboy churches can be explained through how they create a hybrid culture using historical conceptions of the cowboy, popular culture, and evangelical Protestantism. Within this larger discussion, I have looked at how churches address material culture, masculinity and myth, and the interplay between these concepts by offering ethnographic findings from my time spent in two Texas cowboy churches. In this chapter, I will review the central components of each chapter and will suggest future directions for cowboy church research, and discuss how my work contributes to the fields of religious and cultural studies.

In the introduction, I set out to define what cowboy churches are while laying out the direction of my project and the questions I intended to answer. My literature review highlighted the shortcomings of the work of western historians, who have largely ignored the role religion played in the West. In doing this, I situated my work as one of many studies necessary to close this gap in knowledge. I also alluded to the gendered aspects of cowboy churches. Next, I briefly discussed my theoretical orientation by focusing on the social function of myth, hybridity, as well as lived religion, which guided my approach to fieldwork. Then I explained my methodology for choosing Big Bend Cowboy Church and Cowboy Fellowship from among the hundreds of existent cowboy churches before I provided a succinct history of the two congregations. After offering a bit of autobiographical context, I presented my thesis and an outline of my argument.

In the first chapter, I addressed how the cowboy has become entrenched in the historical narrative of the United States. To accomplish this, I focused on the difficulty scholars face when attempting to geographically and define the American West. After having defined which states constitute the American West, I looked at the history of working cowboys in this region before I addressed how the popular perception of that lifestyle changed with the emergence of Buffalo Bill's Wild West Rodeo and popular culture representations of the cowboy. Next, I reviewed at the lives of modern day cowboys whose culture has been shaped by myth and popular culture as well as by history. I discussed the gaps in contemporary literature that result in a nebulous definition of the contemporary cowboy culture and that also inadequately broaches how it is shaped by both myth and regionalism. I went on to address the religious history of cowboys as well as historical groups dedicated to evangelizing to this demographic. Lastly, I focused on the history and goals of the American Fellowship of Cowboy Churches because both churches I studied are affiliated with this particular group.

In the second chapter, I offered my ethnographic work. There, I reviewed congregational histories and analyzed data compiled during my study of two AFCC cowboy churches in Texas. In this comparison, I painted a picture of the similarities and differences between the two churches before I concluded that the similarities far outweigh the differences. To accomplish this comparison, I employed my fieldwork, in the form of interviews and observations conducted in Summer 2012, to discuss the major themes of cowboy churches. Prevailing themes included material culture, how myth is negotiated within the churches, and the role masculinity plays within the communities. When discussing Big Bend Cowboy Church and Cowboy Fellowship, I

focused on the material construction of the church, how congregants dressed, the ministries offered by the church, the music used during services, and church sponsored events. On the more individual level, I delved into how congregants view themselves and their church community by paying attention to issues of gender and self-understanding of western heritage in order to determine the role religion plays in congregant's lives and how they orient themselves within the world. In approaching the cowboy church at both the institutional and personal level, I highlighted the complexity of the movement and the individuals who are active in it. Lastly, I addressed congregational differences in order to emphasize the diversity of the movement and how each church adapted the doctrines and culture to fit the needs of their communities. In doing so, I confronted issues such as congregation size, geographical location, and the goals of the leadership of these churches, all of which create distinct differences in the communities.

In the third chapter, I analyzed my fieldwork using theories from religious and cultural studies in order to discuss how the myth of the cowboy creates a trope used to inform religious and social culture, how cowboy churches fit into the larger literature of masculine Christian movements in the United States, and how identity is constructed in these churches through hybrid means. I began with a discussion of myth by drawing on the work of Mircea Eliade, J.Z. Smith, Bruce Lincoln, and Thomas Tweed. Through this discussion, I determined that the cowboy is a culturally orienting trope that serves as a signifier of what the church culture is to outsiders and potential congregants. Next, using the work of Michael Kimmel, I addressed how the myth of the cowboy transforms him into a masculine figure within the American consciousness. Having done this, I briefly

discussed the history of other masculine focused Christian movements including muscular Christianity and the Promise Keepers. My reason for doing so was to explain why cowboy churches place such emphasis on reaching out to men. Lastly, I engaged in a discussion that draws upon the work of cultural studies scholars including Clifford Geertz, Jan Nederveen Pieterse, Jean Baudrillard, and Néstor García Canclini because, together, their body of work sheds light on how media and culture influence the construction of identity. This discussion of identity and hybridity highlighted the multiple roles played by the cowboy as a mythic, historical, and contemporary figure. The multifaceted nature of this figure, especially in conversation with an emphasis on masculinity, explains why these churches are successful in creating a niche among other churches in rural areas. Having provided an overview of this thesis, I will now discuss other potential avenues for studying cowboy churches.

Shaping the Field

Although my discussion of cowboy churches only begins to explore their complex existence and history, it fills important gaps in the history of the American West, as well as in the fields of cultural studies and religion. As I've previously discussed, New Western Historians have understudied both religion and the cowboy. By addressing both topics, I've reintroduced the cowboy to western historians and acknowledged that his historical and contemporary role goes beyond that of a working and pop cultural figure.

In turn, my contribution to cultural studies is to challenge scholars of hybridity and postmodernism to end their dichotomous assumptions about the metropolitan and the rural. For too long, scholars have dismissed the rural as being unaffected by hybridity. This privileging of the urban ignores crucial aspects of the interplay between the two

concepts, especially in an era marked by advances in technology and cultural exchange. As I've demonstrated, cowboy churches embody hybrid concepts including the mixing of pop culture and history within sacred space that simultaneously is influenced by and resists the urban. To dismiss the rural as untouched by hybridity causes scholars to miss a crucial dimension of sociocultural interactions. It is my hope that my work helps scholars to abandon the modernist, dichotomous approach to both the city and rural areas in order to construct a more nuanced cultural theory.

I view my largest contribution to be in the field of religious studies. My conversation on cowboy churches contributes to the growing discussion of religion in the West as well as American masculine Christianity. By presenting cowboy churches in relation to the culture they are trying to simultaneously preserve and emulate, I situate my work in the discussion of western religion, which destabilizes the traditionally New England and Southern centric narratives of religion in the United States. By looking to better understand the role religion plays in the American West, both historically and in the contemporary era, scholars can develop a better understanding concerning how regional culture and identity shape religious life. Finally, my work on the cowboy church and masculine culture contributes to the ongoing discussion of the role gender plays in religious life. By comparing and contrasting cowboy churches with other masculine Christian movements, I've shed light on how and why Protestant groups, historically and in the present day, place such importance on male church involvement. Adding cowboy churches to this discussion highlights how rural churches are able to reach out to this particular demographic while building church communities that are not exclusively male. There is still much to learn about cowboy churches.

Future Directions

In undertaking this thesis on cowboy churches, I knew that I would not be able to address every angle of cowboy church culture. There are still many aspects of cowboy church culture that deserve attention including churches that are affiliated with other cowboy ministry organizations/denominations, Spanish language cowboy churches in the United States, and cowboy churches in other parts of the world including Canada, Mexico, and Australia. Simply put, the scope of this project can easily be expanded to gain a more complete picture of the wider cowboy church movement.

Perhaps the most obvious path to take is to incorporate other cowboy church groups besides the American Fellowship of Cowboy Churches into the conversation. Groups and churches affiliated with Save the Cowboy, Cowboy Ministers Network (CMN), International Cowboy Church Alliance Network (ICCAN), Fellowship of Christian Cowboys (FCC), Cowboys for Christ, and the Cowboy Church Network of North America (CCNNA) are just a few of the growing number of Christian cowboy ministries and church organizations. Including other groups in this discussion will allow scholars to be exposed to a wider cross section of cowboy culture encompassing different regional identities. Doing so will also shed more light concerning whether or not denominational affiliation is as inconsequential as the two churches I visited claim it to be.

One of the components of the spread of cowboy churches is Spanish language cowboy churches, or iglesias vaqueras, in the United States. These churches share the same goal as their English-speaking counterparts, but attempt to reach an even broader audience by ministering to vaqueros in their native tongue. In a recent interview, Charles Higgs of the Baptist General Convention of Texas states that the BGCT's goal

is to have “100 Vaquero or Hispanic churches by the end of 2018.”¹ At this time, there are two churches with the vaquero name affiliated with the AFCC, and potentially numerous others that are either independent or associated with other organizations. I believe that studying these churches will not only shed light on another side of cowboy culture, but will also explore how predominantly Anglo organizations evangelize to people from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

In addition to the growing number of cowboy ministries and churches in the Western and Southern United States, there are also cowboy churches in Canada, Mexico, Australia, and other countries. My interest in these churches is similar to my interest in Spanish language churches. That is, I would like to explore how cowboy culture differs in other regions and countries, and the effect this has on church culture and outreach tactics. This direction of study will also be an opportunity to further explore the process of identity construction and how it relates to the blending of history and popular culture. Additionally, focusing on international cowboy churches presents the opportunity to explore how transnational networks, if they exist, function in cowboy churches, and the cultures of spiritual and economic exchange that exist between these transnational church organizations. Simply stated, my work on the cowboy church is far from over.

In this chapter, I have briefly summarized how my thesis explored the contemporary cowboy church movement while arguing that the success of these churches can be explained through how they create a hybrid culture using historical conceptions of the cowboy, popular culture, and evangelical Protestantism. After

¹ Gail Bennison, “Boots on Hallowed Ground,” *Fort Worth, Texas: The City's Magazine*, March 5, 2012, Accessed January 29, 2013. <http://fwtx.com/articles/boots-hallowed-ground>.

summarizing, I elaborated on the ways in which my study contributes to scholarship in religious and cultural studies as well as gender studies. Additionally, I've provided a few brief examples of future directions for expanding this project on cowboy churches both nationally and internationally. It is my hope to continue studying cowboy churches in an attempt to chronicle this fascinating contemporary religious and cultural movement.

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