

# PERSPECTIVES ON COWGIRLS, HUMOUR AND IMAGES OF THE AMERICAN WEST

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In the summers of 1992 and 1994, I collected oral narratives from cowgirls or horsewomen living in Winthrop, Washington, a Western theme town. Winthrop is located in the northeast corner of Washington State in the North Cascade Mountains in the Methow Valley. In tourist brochures, this area is often referred to as “the American Alps”. I was looking for work-related humorous stories from women who made their livings primarily working with horses. These women worked physically as hard as any cowboy I met in addition to maintaining their traditional domestic roles as wives and mothers.

While this presentation manifests from a larger project, I want to focus on one anecdote, which I have entitled “League of the legless”. My purpose is twofold. First, I would like to show how gender issues affect the work-related storytelling of one particular horsewoman, Kir McLean, and secondly to propose how humour displaces a diverse audience through simultaneous inclusion and exclusion utilizing a variety of narrative strategies.

Kit McLean is a 35 year old horsewoman with a Methow Valley pioneer heritage. She is a single parent of a six year old daughter. She works for a local outfitting company as head wrangler at Sun Mountain Lodge, a popular resort. She organizes horse rides and cowboy cookouts for tourists visiting Sun Mountain. She also chases cows from the mountains down to the valley and sometimes she functions as head packer and cook for pack trips into the wilderness. In 1994, I spent eight weeks cowgirling with Kit and her staff. The following story was Kit’s response to my request for a humorous work-related story. She related this anecdote on a bench from where she can see potential riders hiking down the steep gravel path from the hotel to the corral.

## LEAGUE OF THE LEGLESS

The only way to be in this job is with humour. People come down here to have a good time – now I’m talking about the majority – not every individual – there are exceptions for everything and reasons for being here that I’ll never know – to please a wife or partner – or something like that.

In a part of everybody, there’s a small little corner in their heart that, I think, hangs on to the cowboy image and legend. I think it represents something that’s very heroic and

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simple. And the more complicated lives get in Seattle, in computers, in the cities, and all that kind of stuff, I think people look for that harder and when they go on vacation, for some reason a little corner of them is just hanging on to the cowboy dream and I think that they come down here and part of the cowboy life is the camaraderie that they share with the people they're working with which involves teasing and practical jokes and laughing.

You know, there's a good bunch of people that come down here that I just harass unmercifully. "O my god, Kathy, we've got another woman here from the League of the legless." They think it's funny! I mean, what an insulting thing to say – you've got no legs! I've never, I don't think, I've ever irritated anybody by that. I hate to call it a smart ass thing. I like to call it just teasing in a way and teasing in a fun way. If someone doesn't immediately grin, I instantly quit cause maybe it's not their thing. You've got to feel your way around these people.

But God, those people I can tease and make them laugh, you know, I've got people whose horses are stumbling, kind of shakes them loose or something, and I say, "Now what are ya doing with my good horse!" You know, I go pick on them. Really, you know technically, I'm probably supposed to say, "Are you all right? Oh, Geez are you okay?" Instead I kind of wade in and start picking on them. Course, I make sure they're okay – up and movin' and not just laying there. But ya know, humour has just gotta be here everyday.

Each year, tourists from around the world visit Western theme towns like Winthrop in order to "drink in its meaning, to be restored by its atmosphere" (Butler, 1994: 776). Celebrated in songs, stories, and festivals which commemorate the myths and legends of cowboy heroes and villains, to many people the American West embodies attractive national values and virtues.

Since 1972, winthrop has been mandated Western theme town. Winthrop has a population of approximately 350 people. All business within the city limits of Winthrop must adhere to guidelines which control everything from a structure's architectural style to the lettering and color of the paint on the display sign out front. Winthrop's cowboy iconography provides the community with a seasonal economy based in tourism. Assuming this Western façade has not simply led to Winthrop's sacralization as a tourist attraction, but has set the town off on an institutionalized course of perpetually restoring itself as an image of the American West. Winthrop folky façades and friendly, or sometimes authentically unfriendly, businesses have become alluring tourist traps, staying busy during spring break, summer, and the Christmas holidays when the main street (which is about a quarter of a mile long) is choked with visitors. As a consequence of its growing popularity, gratified outsiders are investing more of their money and desires in the area, profoundly changing the community in the process. Longtime residents are generally horrified by the growth of the community – they consider it a "yuppie" invasion. More affluent tourists have built relatively expensive homes in the valley making them available for nightly rentals which brings in more tourists and more change. Many of these houses in the valley stand vacant throughout most

of the year which is generally resented by local residents as the rental market is extremely limited and expensive.

In Western theme towns across the United States, cowboy culture carries on a tradition of catering to the tourist fantasy through a process which apparently authenticates the experience by integrating the tourist into this culture, but which also fiercely defends the community's integrity by actually keeping the tourist at an often invisible arm's length.

A classic example of this dual orientation is the deployment of the familiar but rather nebulous term "wrangling". When I met my first horsewoman at Sun Mountain Lodge, she called herself a "head wrangler", which seemed to me a surprising and exciting occupation for a woman. At the time, I thought that wrangling had something vaguely to do with rounding up cattle, but while I later learned that originally a wrangler was someone who rounds up horses, it soon became clear that in 1992, "head wrangler" is the title any person, female or male, assumes when they take charge of the trail rides at the Lodge. Nor was it exactly a term of pride. None of the horsewomen I interviewed wanted to be identified this way. Generally they disapproved of horse wranglers, as immature, unnecessarily rough males who were often cruel to their animals. More intriguingly, the horsewoman explained to me that modern wranglers thought of tourism as their work site and tourists as their stock. According to Babe Montgomery,

Wrangling used to be the wrangler in the first sense of the word. It was the guy that used to run the herd of horses for the cattle company. He was the horse wrangler because he run'em in. He did all the work on 'em. But, we have put the new term on it. They use the same term for taking people out; and you are referring to wrangling people. (Montgomery, July 1992)

Thus the horsewomen work with horses, but wrangle people, which requires not only a facility with horses, but a penchant for organizing, entertaining, and persuading.

The traditions of the American West would lead us to expect that no matter how dependent winthrop may be on tourism for economic survival, true cowboy culture remains uncontaminated. But as Richard Bauman notes (1986), although "the representation of cultural objectification is a complex ideological and political process", critics interested in the relationship of fantasies about true encounters with the "real west". Not surprisingly, the horsewoman often turns to jokes as a way of sustaining herself in this demanding profession. The relationship between verbal expression and cultural terminology is one of the strongest indicators of how occupations literally shape the cultural perspectives of their practitioners. Humour is one way to resist or rebel against the cultural assumption of community identity – making fun of tourists is a way of life in winthrop. Many critics have noted that humour can function as a socially sanctioned outlet for expressing

prohibited subjects. But when the we / they tension felt in any community gets heightened through an economic dependence on a tourist trade, the sense of constant opposition never really weakens. Humour of this kind is for many reasons an important tool of the horsewoman's trade.

In the "League of the Legless" Kit uses two common folkloric strategies to women's storytelling such as indirection and hedging. Kit quite directly greens the greenhorn, a convention found in the Western tall tale tradition, but by expressing sympathy and understanding for the tourist's complicated emotional state she redirects the message of the tourist's behavior which is not inappropriate or unacceptable – only typical of the privileged outsider searching for some nebulous cowboy friend. The greenhorn, a traditional comic figure in cowboy culture, is certainly here but Kit's explanation for the greenhorn's demeanor leads the audience away from simple mockery or scapegoating.

In this way, Kit exposes how the tourist's cowboy dream is actually at odds with cowboy culture. Joan Radner (1993) suggests that hedging of Kit's kind is a common strategy for "equivocating about or weakening" the message of the text (p.19). In the story, the tourist plays the role of victim but because of Kit's expression of empathy for the desperate, weakened mental and physical nature of the greenhorn, she's suggesting that despite its own Western separateness, the community has a responsibility of sorts to maintain the fiction the tourist desires. This obligation may be largely economic but it also is a call to the community to live up to the fictions of the cowboy culture it values. Kit also allows for mixed motives within her target. Since she doesn't assume to know everything about people who visit the Methow Valley, Kit can entertain the possibility that perhaps a visit might actually make someone else happy – hardly the stereotypic tourist's desire. Finally, Kit's own complicated status as a woman in cowboy culture not only makes her more self conscious of the way she represents that culture to the tourist but allows her to appropriate a part of the cowboy dream while maintaining a gendered difference.

Most important for this discussion, however, are Kit's remarks on how her humor mediates cowboy I tourist relations. On one level joking and laughter are proof of the Western dream: the tourist has acquired a cowboy or horsewoman for a friend, but on another level "the league of the legless" teasing maintains a distance, even as tourist and horsewoman share a laugh, which doesn't necessarily imply friendship. A bit more explanation of the joke might be helpful here. Being "legless" is obviously a disadvantage when horseback riding. More than one horsewoman impressed upon me the importance of a proper leg length. If your legs are too long, the horse might buck; if they're too short, you won't be able to control the horse, etc.

Traditionally, such criteria for competence have formed part of the Western code's trivializing of women, due to their supposed overall incompetence and physical limitations when attempting real cowboy labor. And yet, there is an

equally strong tradition of seeing such maladepts, whether females or tenderfoots, as harmless, and even endearing clowns, parts of the larger social order.

I see myself as a member of the league. As a stubby-legged woman, slipping on the gravel down the path to the corral and as a relatively inexperienced horsewoman, who needed her stirrups adjusted high, I soon had personal knowledge of how the clown functions in cowboy culture. During the time I was trying to learn more about horsewoman's work from Kit, she had me lead a group of tourist riders on a two mile trail ride. Like the other wranglers, I assumed the stoic and distant demeanor which distinguished me from the tourists. Kit was talking with a man riding behind me, and I overheard him asking who I was. Kit laughed and said, "Oh, Kristin, well, she's my wranglerette". At the time, I was thrilled that Kit considered me to be that close to being a wrangler. Now I understand that I was more like a pet – or a clown. For example, I found out later that it's a comic tradition in the West to put the least experience employee on an untried horse – presumably because of the entertainment it provides the real cowboys. For me, that meant riding Buddy, the Butthead. In the arena, Buddy loved turning circles and jumping over small barriers, but he hated the trail ride business – bawking, bucking, slipping and sliding down hills. Kit and her wranglers often looked amused as I tried to control Buddy down the trails while he reared, nipped and snorted.

The tourist presents at least as good a source for laughter but the transient and unexamined nature of the horsewoman's relationship to this visiting employer adds further considerations to the role of humor. In one sense, tourists are objects of sympathy. As Kit sees it these visitors, damaged by the complexities of city life and computers and further fractured by their desire for a "cowboy image," arrive looking for that Western dream of manly independence and rootlessness which frees the tourist from responsibilities from work and home. As a result the "league of the legless" represents for Kit, and others, a group of physically and presumably emotionally disabled people. In another sense though, tourists represent all the threats inherent to the providers of services in an economy based on professional friendship. Tourists are economically well off, while the horsewoman's work is grueling, low paying, and seasonal, but paradoxically, part of this work is to embody the institutionalized and romanticized fantasy of the cowboy lifestyle. Tourists pay for a companion in the image of the cowboy dream – someone who'll teach them about life in the American West make jokes with them, and spend a little time with them.

Given these circumstances, one possible explanation for Kit's humor could be simply as a form of veiled aggression – a laughing chastisement for the tourist's "insincerity, pomposity, stupidity" (Douglas, 1975: 93). The "League of the Legless" jibe, for instance, suggests that a large number of tourists, and in this case women, specifically share as a group a deformity from which Kit obviously does not suffer. A second operating force, and one I've already mentioned, is the

humorous tradition in cowboy culture of needling, the inexperienced rider, as a form of general entertainment. The third, and the most intriguing function of Kit's humour, however, is a coping mechanism for dealing with the stress arising from the responsibility of representing such intrinsic features of the American dream – the tourist's stress, and Kit's own. Though Kit indicates that she would stop the teasing if the tourists / women obviously didn't like it, she explicitly states that her "legless" targets "think it's funny!" The payoff comes when a customer is bucked off a horse – an incredibly unpleasant experience. Kit's female tourist was probably already intimidated by the idea of riding a horse, but because the teasing relationship was already in place, Kit can use it to dissipate the guest's stress and fear after falling from the horse. Humour clears the air.

But in an important sense, the air can never be cleared. Because she works with tourists almost all day, every day, Kit is necessarily an excellent performer, and for a number of audiences. She carries out a challenging balancing act inside and outside the public and private realms of cowboy and contemporary culture. Economics demand such a performance. Though an authentic horseperson might stand apart and mock an outsider, a representation of friendliness is institutionally required not only by Kit's employer, Claude Miller, who expects his employees to be experts in the field and to act professionally when talking to and riding with clientele, but also by Winthrop itself, which legally requires cowboy / western motifs. But Kit also performs for an audience of her peers, Kathy and "other people" who also must conform to tourist expectations of acting the cowboy dream, and who are also entertained by Kit's complex but enjoyable teasing of "the league of the legless".

And then there's me. As my analysis to this point should make clear, in "The League of the Legless", I see myself both as an audience and the object of the joke – the tourist. With me, as with her other audiences, Kit tells her stories well. She uses language with facility. And yet, although I'm able to comprehend some additional aspects or narrative dimensions of Kit's explanation of humor on the job because of my personal relationship with her as a student and unpaid employee, and also because of my education in poetry and literature, a silence still hides at least some of her attitudes. As an outsider, I represent a technologically-centered culture, which to Kit is unrealistic, confused, and decadent – so much so that its citizens value the imaginary rather than reality, and come to Winthrop willing to pay for a friend who's an image. As a student of cowboy culture, I'm thus included in the joke but excluded from it as well. The interview process itself sets me up as a stand in for a variety of audiences, shifting positions in the narrative except when Kit explains or justifies her words and behavior to me as the inquiring academic outsider. In this community, I am sometimes jokingly referred to as a post-hole-digger or someone with a Ph.D. As far as productive work is concerned, my doctorate isn't worth much in Winthrop.

Still, though much of Kit's behavior remains inaccessible to me, its general

mediating force can, I think, be recognized. Except to me, her perceptions of her clientele as somehow pathetic are not revealed to other outsiders. And yet, her own awareness of that rigid, cowboy sociological structure which demeans tourists and women leads Kit to feel sympathy towards her guests. Thus, Kit's teasing makes fun of tourists, but also of the cowboy culture she functions within, especially as it relates to greening the greenhorn if newcomers are victimized either verbally or physically. To maintain her status as a serious participant in cowboy culture, Kit sustains her authenticity by teasing the tourist. And yet her sympathy subverts it, for at times humor becomes a method of dispelling those tourist insecurities which arise from their inexperience and mistakes. Since this function actually smoothes over the tourist's rough edges, which cowboy culture finds so funny, Kit's humor therefore speaks to her own vulnerability, emotionally and economically, as a funny horsewoman.

And within this understanding, I recognize the privileged though alienated position I myself – part-scholar, part student, part tourist part cowgirl wanna be – occupy as the horsewoman's interviewer and audience.

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## ABSTRACT

My presentation focuses on the role of humor especially as it displaces, through simultaneous inclusion / exclusion, audience in a contemporary narrative collected from Kit McLean, a horsewoman or cowgirl, who primarily works with horses for a living. I will examine the way in which this folk narrative reflects humor and what this humor reveals about issues of gender in regards to images of the American West. I concentrate on one community Winthrop, Washington, a legally mandated Western theme town. The narrative emerges from a traditional community which aggrandizes, through tourism, images of the American West – especially the image of the cowboy. While telling her story, Kit McLean employs traditional male narrative techniques, but stretches or undermines these strategies by introducing non-traditional images and themes. The nature of these gender dynamics can be glimpsed by examining how the narrative relates to the conventions of tall tales associated with the American West, and more specifically with this small Washington community. This is a non-traditional tale told within the framework of a very traditional but tourist-based community. My intention is to seek to understand how humor functions when gender, tourism and predominant notions of the America West predictably twist, knocking an outsider audience off-balance.

## ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Mein Vortrag konzentriert sich auf die Rolle eines Humors, der durch simultane Einbeziehung/Ausgrenzung der Zuhörer einer zeitgenössischen Erzählung stammt von Kit McLean, einer "Pferdefrau" bzw. eines Cowgirls, die ihren Lebensunterhalt vorwiegend durch die Arbeit mit Pferden verdient. Untersucht wird, in welcher Weise diese Volkserzählung Humor widerspiegelt und was diese Humor über geschlechtsspezifische Fragen in Zusammenhang mit dem Image des amerikanischen Westens enthüllt. Ich konzentriere mich dabei auf den offiziell zur Westernstadt ernannten Ort Winthrop im Staat Washington. Die Erzählung stammt aus einer traditionellen Gemeinde, die durch den Tourismus das Image des amerikanischen Westens, insbesondere das des Cowboys, verherrlicht. Wenn Kit McLean ihre Geschichte erzählt, verwendet sie traditionelle männliche Erzähltechniken, überspannt oder unterläuft jedoch diese Strategien, indem sie nichttraditionelle Bilder und Themen einführt. Die Art dieser Geschlechtsdynamik kann verständlich werden, wenn man das Verhältnis der Erzählung zu den Konventionen der *tall tales* untersucht, die mit dem amerikanischen Westen und speziell mit dieser kleinen Gemeinde in Washington verbunden sind. Bei Kit

McLeans Geschichte handelt es sich um eine nicht traditionelle Erzählung, die im Rahmen einer äußerst traditionellen, aber tourismusabhängigen Gemeinde erzählt wird. Ich möchte versuchen zu verstehen, wie Humor funktioniert, wenn Geschlecht, Tourismus und vorherrschende Auffassungen über den amerikanischen Westen sich vorhersehbarer Weise miteinander verknüpfen und ein Außenseiterpublikum aus der Fassung bringen.

## RESUMO

O meu artigo foca o papel do humor, particularmente na medida em que, através dos fenómenos simultâneos de inclusão / exclusão, despista a audiência, através duma narrativa contemporânea coligida de Kit McLean, uma tratadora de cavalos ou *cowgirl*, cujo principal emprego é lidar com cavalos. Examino o modo como esta narrativa popular reflecte o humor e o que é que esse humor revela sobre a identidade sexual no que respeita à imagem do Oeste Americano. Debruço-me sobre a comunidade de Winthrop, no estado de Washington, cidade legalmente endossada para promover o tema do Oeste. A narrativa emerge duma comunidade tradicional que engrandece, através do turismo, imagens do Oeste Americano – em particular a imagem do *cowboy*. Ao contar a sua história, Kit McLean emprega técnicas tradicionais da narrativa masculina, mas alarga ou mina estas estratégias, introduzindo imagens e temas que não são tradicionais. Podemos ter uma ideia da natureza destas dinâmicas da diferença sexual ao examinarmos como a narrativa se relaciona com convenções de patranhas *tall tales* associadas ao Oeste Americano, e mais especificamente a esta pequena comunidade de Washington. Trata-se de um conto não tradicional contado dentro da moldura duma comunidade muito tradicional mas baseada no turismo. É meu objectivo tentar compreender o funcionamento do humor quando a identidade sexual, o turismo e as noções predominantes do Oeste Americano necessariamente se entrecruzam, despistando uma audiência de turistas estranhos a esta conjuntura.