

Who is the 21st century cowboy?

As America has changed, so have our heroes. By the 1960s, as social revolutions forced conversations about gender, race, politics, and morality, the western genre was wrestling with the meaning of heroism and villainy –and how and to whom both personae were ascribed¹. The outlaws, bank robbers, and ruffians² who used to be 5 the villains became the protagonists in films like *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance kid* and the *Wild Bunch*. Suddenly, audiences were cheering for the man in the black hat as he kicked open the saloon doors –his motives had become as relatable³ as the sheriff's.

While these “revisionist westerns” flipped the tables on the Hollywood heroes and 10 villains, the new anti-heroes were still almost exclusively straight white men. Americans of any other identity didn't see themselves reflected in the wide-open spaces of the western plains. But both American Society and the Western kept evolving and expanding our notions of who gets to be a worthy⁴ hero. In the past couple decades, Westerns have told the stories of gay men (*Brokeback Mountain*), 15 Black men (*The Hateful Eight*), Women (*Meek's Cutoff*), and young girls (*True Grit*), among others.

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¹ attributed

² Violent people

³ reconnaissable

⁴ digne