Sartorial Representations of Trans Men in the Post-Frontier West: A Case Study in Gender, Class, and Concepts of Societal Degeneration

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Sartorial Representations of Trans Men in the Post-Frontier West:

A Case Study in Gender, Class, and Concepts of Societal Degeneration

by

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Introduction

Popular American mythology about the Western frontier actively produces a narrative of gender in the West that distorts reality. This is to say, the popular understanding of dress history in the late 19th and early 20th century is exclusively that of gender normativity, a vision that does not match with the evidence of real experiences in this period. The American West is indeed a region that has long been falsely painted with ubiquitous normative forms of masculinity. In fact, our ideas of normative sartorial gender expression in Western civilization more broadly originates from just before the period we will investigate. However, as we will see, the vision of gender normativity as the universal experience does not hold up when one looks more closely at actual clothing practices.

Before the 19th century, many men’s styles were in forms that we see today as inherently feminine: like hose, skirts, and heavy embellishments. During the 19th century, however, the idea of men’s clothing as trousers and women’s clothing as skirts crystallized into popular Western culture. Just before the turn of the 18th century to the 19th, the wearing of trousers became a masculine political choice. During the French revolution, a group of middle-class men, called the Sans-culotte or “without culottes/breeches”, began wearing trousers to identify themselves with the working class and therefore against the aristocracy.\(^1\) As the 19th century progressed, the wearing of trousers was adopted by the aristocracy as changing understandings of high-class masculinity began to embody reservation and self control, which was oppositional to the wearing of lace, frills, and breeches. This is perhaps most easily found in the very famous figure of the dandy Beau Brummel, to whom some contribute the popularization of the modern, sober three-piece suit into masculine fashion.\(^2\) This style emphasized fit, cut, and simplicity which was directly compared to the highly decorative and incredibly detailed feminine styles of the day. With the fomentation of male and female dress

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into more and more strictly rigid categories, the trouser and the skirt, we have come to expect that gender nonconformity was also less and less common. In reality, this could not be further from the truth. Gender nonconformity through cross-dressing not only happened during this time but actually flourished in the context of the American frontier.

In fact, despite the anti-queer and anti-trans talking points of the last few years, gender nonconformity and cross-dressing has a long and rich history in the United States. It is popular for conservative politicians today to claim that, in particular, trans people are a modern and therefore fake invention brought on by a degenerative, changing society.\(^3\) Ironically, these arguments are nearly-plagiarized reproductions of fear-mongering theories of societal degeneration found in hetero- and cis-normative society from over 100 years ago. Not only is there ample evidence that trans people have existed for at least over a century, but laws which have attempted to eradicate them have existed for just as long. This clearly indicates that anti-cross-dressing law has been supremely ineffective at suppressing trans gender experiences and expressions. Additionally, this phenomenon implies that the social construct of gender is inherently malleable and subject to a multitude of variations of expression which are not contingent upon gender-essentialist, genital-based conceptualizations of gender. In short, as long as the gender binary has existed, so too have those who transgress it.

This essay seeks to understand the fears that were projected onto trans individuals in the post-frontier American West. In particular, we will consider how the clothing and bodies of two famous trans men in criminal news published imagery between 1895 and 1922 might have been interpreted within the context of the period. This will include discussions of gender, sexuality, criminality, class, race, and the contemporary boogy-man: degeneration. The men in question are Harry Allen and Milton Matson.

Allen was arrested a staggering number of times in the Pacific Northwest for a myriad of alleged and real crimes between about 1900 and 1922, at the time of his death. As with so many people arrested for or while cross-dressing, he wasouted by the police and thus became nationally infamous. His connection to the working class and racial minorities, crimes, reputation as a lethal womanizer, and his steadfast refusal to adopt feminine clothing or identify with womanhood positioned him well within contemporary views of degenerative society. Milton Matson, on the other hand, was arrested only once in 1895 for a crime not related to his clothing. However, while in jail he was outed by a telegram and rocketed into the spotlight. From his jail cell, he was recruited into a lucrative career as a performer in dime museums, i.e. freak show and circus performance museums with historical roots in the anatomical museum.\textsuperscript{4} His connection to high-class presentation, relationship with a woman, status as a British immigrant, and sustained identification with manhood and masculinity also helped to categorize him as an over-civilized, swindling European immigrant/degenerate.

Through these men, we will see how clothing both reflects personal gender formation as well as the wider social understandings of those gender expressions through pervasive fears of power structure disruption. Harry Allen, Milton Matson, and the clothing they wore represented to the public the embodiment of two sources of societal degeneration: contact with queered racial minorities in the working-class and invasive immigration from over-civilized and queered high-class Europeans.

\textbf{Definitions}

Before we begin in earnest, let us consider terminology. The task of choosing and defining terms for discussing the topic of historic gender expression and experience is one that should be taken seriously. This essay will cover both gender and sexuality in a time that did not see sexuality as identity, nor understood gender through a modern queer lens. For this reason, I intend to consider personal expression and experience over identity. For example, I may say

\textsuperscript{4} Sears, \textit{Arresting Dress}, 102.
that someone displays signs that they identify with a certain gender instead of saying it is their
gender identity. This is different because identifying with something is subjective and
changeable whereas an identity implies a fixed vision of inherent personhood, which is a
distinctly modern way of seeing gender and sexuality. However, I do not believe it is always
problematic to assign modern terms to the past when historic experiences match closely with
modern ones.

Although “female-to-male” is a term nearly ubiquitously used to discuss AFAB
cross-dressing, I will avoid this term as I find it to be far too binary. Additionally, when
considering the trans masculine experience, I do not believe it is appropriate to designate even
their pre-transition selves as female. A trans man may have been raised as a girl, but this does
not inherently mean that he ever identified with woman- or girlhood, therefore rendering
“female-to-male” unsuitable. Instead, I will use the phrase “AFAB cross-dressing” to indicate the
same concept without the strictly binary language of “female-to-male”. Quite honestly, even the
term “cross-dressing” is somewhat problematic in our context as it also implies a movement
from one end of the binary to the other. However, while “female-to-male” can be avoided, in the
context of dress-specific history “cross-dressing” cannot.

With this in mind, it is important to define the term AFAB. This is an acronym which
means Assigned Female at Birth. Anyone who is born with a body that prompts their family and
social circle to raise them as a girl fits within this category, regardless of their personal gender
experience or expression. This is different from the category of “woman” or “female” because it
includes cis women, trans men, and people who experience gender outside the binary. AMAB is
the male-assigned equivalent. I will also be using the term “Lady” to denote a very specific
social construct of the time. In this period, a Lady is not just a cis woman. She was also middle
to high class, fashionable, well behaved, and, perhaps most importantly, white. In short, the
“Lady” was the ideal of womanhood in this period that every AFAB person was expected to
aspire to. Cis and trans are adjectives which indicate whether or not a person identifies with the
gender they were assigned at birth. Cis women are AFAB people who identify with being a woman while trans men are AFAB people who identify with being a man. Further, I will sometimes be utilizing the term non-binary. I do not mean to insinuate a modern identity with this word. Instead it will be used as an umbrella term to discuss experiences or expressions of gender outside the male/female binary.

Few historical figures can be positively identified as trans men, as there were many reasons that AFAB people wore masculine dress or lived as men in the late 19th and early 20th century. More than this, most contemporary press did not often respect nor follow these men’s wishes to be seen and referred to as men. However, I will use the term trans men when it applies to AFAB people who left records of their sustained personal identification as men. For example, when they are directly quoted as saying they wore masculine clothing for decades because they are men in conjunction with clear evidence that they were also AFAB. As we will see, this very obviously applies to both Harry Allen and Milton Matson. It is also important to make clear which pronouns I will use under which circumstances: she/her for those who clearly identify as women, he/him for those who clearly identify as men. I may also use they/them in cases where gender experience and expression is non-binary, though this will likely be rare as this study focuses on trans men. In this essay, I will also refer to Harry Allen and Milton Matson by the names they used for themselves and not the names assigned to them at birth. This decision, of course, relies on clues and direct quotes from the men themselves and by their close friends and family, not necessarily on the pronouns or names used in contemporary press.

On the topic of sexuality, I will continue to try to avoid binary identity terms such as lesbian, gay, or straight. This is not because it was impossible that historical people experienced the exclusive attraction that these terms imply. In fact, it is quite likely many did. It is pertinent to note that we are more often than not quite happy to project straightness on historic people who exclusively participated in male & female romantic pairings far before the term for such a preference existed. Queer historians are also often happy to categorize historical figures as gay
or lesbian if there is any evidence of same-gender sexual and romantic pairings. However, with scant evidence of exclusive sexual preferences, I find it is irresponsible to attach such binary sexual identities to people who more likely understood sexuality as an action rather than an identity. More than that, this practice ignores the possibility of multi-gender attraction. The reality is that neither same-gender nor male/female relationships can prove a modern exclusive sexual identity without explicit first-person evidence of exclusive sexual preference that informs personal identity, something that is incredibly rare in this period. Indeed one person may engage in both queer and normative sexual and romantic pairings, one or the other, or neither. These experiences are not inherently indicative of that person’s sexuality in the modern sense. This is especially likely when one considers the intense double pressures in this period of financial need and social expectations on AFAB people to get married to cis men, thus engaging in normative relationships whether or not it was their preference. With this in mind, we will consider sexuality in two terms: queer and normative. Queer is here used as an umbrella term that covers a wide variety of non-normative sexual preferences and activities. Normative sexuality, on the other hand, is the socially expected sexual preferences and activities that might today be considered “straight”. I prefer this terminology because avoiding exclusivist terms allows for thinking of sexuality as an expansive scale of experiences and preferences rather than as a fixed or exclusive identity.

**Gender and Class**

To begin, we will investigate what normative expectations of gender in both behavior and dress existed at this time, especially in conjunction with class. Indeed, in the nineteenth-century Eastern United States, womanhood was carefully defined and delineated by gender roles, class, clothing, and expected behaviors. As one strayed further towards the frontier, these definitions grew hazier as AFAB people were free to and often had little choice but to step into more masculine roles. As we will see, this often also meant stepping into more masculine clothing. In the East, womanhood was defined by the cult of domesticity, a valorization of the nuclear family
and the domestic sphere that permeated Western society to its core. Cis women and other AFAB people alike, as caretakers of the home and children, were raised with certain expectations as to the role they would play in their families and, thus, society as a whole. As the cult of domesticity was applied to a wider and wider sphere of influence into the mid-late 19th century, the idea of the woman as the “Angel of the Home” also took root. This idea fed into expectations of behavior. The Angel of the Home took care of the children, managed the servants and housework, and looked after her own appearance.\(^5\) She did not tarnish herself with hard labor, smoking, sexual impropriety, or masculine clothing. This definition, of course, inherently excluded the working class and racial minorities, most of whom had neither the time nor the luxury of these sorts of home-based activities. Thus, the ideal of womanhood, the Angel of the Home or the Lady, was intrinsically upper to middle class and white.

When one looks more closely at the expectations of feminine dress in the whole of the 19th century, it becomes clear that while colors, decorations, and fashionable silhouettes changed gradually throughout the century, the basic garments themselves did not. Regardless of silhouette, cis women and other AFAB people conforming to gender expectations would have worn a chemise, stockings, a corset or stays, any number of petticoats and/or crinolines, an over skirt or two and bodice, or a single-piece over gown.\(^6\) For the fashionable Lady, the skirts brushed or dragged on the ground. In the later half of the century a small waist, or at least the illusion of one, was an incredibly important part of the silhouette. This was achieved through a combination of reduction and augmentation. A corset was used to reduce the waist, smooth the torso, and support the bust. Pads, petticoats and crinolines, and ruffles at the hips, bust, and shoulders were utilized to augment the proportions immediately around the waist and, thus, create the illusion of an hourglass.\(^7\) It is also important to note that it was remarkably common that photography from this period was manually edited to achieve a desired look: from removing

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\(^5\) "THE ANGEL OF THE HOME."


blemishes to snatching waists. Subjects would stand in front of a solid background, then photo editors would use a combination of pencils and an etching knife to literally scrape away the waist to make it appear smaller than it really was. For this reason, one must regard fashion photography from this period critically so as to not be tricked into thinking the average person tight-laced their corsets with any sort of regularity.

The small-waisted silhouette was certainly still popular by the 1890’s, when our study begins. The ultra-tailored look of the 1890’s, with its voluminous leg of mutton sleeves, impeccably smooth waistcoats, and sinuous bustle skirts, relied on many layers of supports to maintain the silhouette (figure 1). This could become rather heavy and burdensome, forcing the people wearing these fashionable styles into less physically active roles. This played into the conspicuous consumption of the leisure class, whose Ladies had no need to participate in physical activity. The wearing of restrictive garments was a visual cue of their overt consumption of expensive fabrics and time. Of course, this did not mean that working AFAB people did not also wear petticoats and corsets. Instead, it meant that in general

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8 For more information on early photo editing see: Johnson, A Complete Treatise on the Art of Retouching Photographic Negatives; Fineman, “Faking It.”
9 Schriever and American School of Art and Photography, Complete Self-Instructing Library of Practical Photography.
10 Phyllis G. Tortora and Sara B Marcketti, Survey of Historic Costume, 297–98.
many people from the working class wore shorter skirts, fewer petticoats, and more flexible, lighter boned or corded corsets.

As early as the 1850’s, these norms in women’s fashion were challenged as early feminists began calling for dress reform. The most famous early version of this in the West is easily Turkish Trousers, or the Bloomer Costume (figure 2). This short-lived style, made up of highly gathered and ballooned trousers and knee-length skirts and jackets, was made famous by Elizabeth Smith Miller, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and most especially by Emilia Bloomer, the costume’s namesake. The look was indeed a consciously practical and political choice, as Elizabeth Cady Stanton would recall years later, “The object of those who donned the new attire [the Bloomer] was primarily health and freedom. It was supposed to be an inherent element in the demand for political equality.” Perhaps unsurprisingly, this unusual feminist costume was incredibly controversial because it included a traditionally masculine garment: the trouser. As feminist dress scholar Einav Rabinovitch-Fox writes, “Since the Bloomer included trousers, which were visible, most observers understood it as an attack on male status and as a threat to gender hierarchy, and

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11 Rabinovitch-Fox, “This Is What A Feminist Looks Like,” 1.
12 Rabinovitch-Fox, 1.
derided the women who wore it as ugly, masculine-looking, dangerous women.”¹³ Largely because of how vehemently the Bloomer Costume was lambasted in the press, it was never truly popular among AFAB people and quickly fell out of favor in feminist circles.¹⁴ Indeed, it was too shocking at the time to be taken seriously and respected. However, as feminists moved on to new versions of dress reform such as menswear-inspired looks like the shirtwaist (figure 3) and the rejection of the corset, the popular vision of feminists as absurd, ugly, manish, and most importantly dangerous never faded.¹⁵ This vision, unfortunately applied as much to early Bloomer feminists as it did to the fabled “Bra-Burners” of the 60’s and 70’s and to the “blue-haired feminist” of modern incel-fueled infamy.

This brings us to the concept of the New Woman, a term whose definitional ambiguity allowed it to be applied to many different styles of dress and brands of feminism throughout the late 19th and early 20th century. Generally, the “New Woman” referred to an AFAB person, most often a cis woman, whose vying for political power, independence, education, and participation in masculine past-times such as drinking, smoking, and athletics was as important to her image as her rejection of gender norms in dress.¹⁶ It’s important also to note that by definition, those who participated in women’s dress reform were not actually attempting to socially transition to

¹³ Rabinovitch-Fox, 3.
¹⁴ Rabinovitch-Fox, 3.
¹⁵ Rabinovitch-Fox, 3.
¹⁶ Rabinovitch-Fox, 7–8.
being perceived as male. Instead, they were attempting to redefine womanhood. From the adopter of the Bloomer Costume, to the Gibson Girl, and to the Flapper, the New Woman’s gleeful participation in un-lady-like behaviors and clothing styles was seen as threatening to gender hierarchy and to the domestic family unit to which these hierarchies were foundational. Thus, to some the New Woman was a symbol of freedom, to others she was a symbol of degeneracy.

Quite fascinatingly, feminist reform seems to have found more fertile ground in the West than in the East. Indeed, in some places in the West such as Washington State, women were granted the right to vote regionally a nearly a full decade before it became federal law.\(^{17}\) By 1914, 10 separate states in the West as well as the territory of Alaska granted women’s suffrage.\(^{18}\) More important for our study, however, it was also far easier and more common for AFAB people to participate in masculine roles and dress in the West. This was especially true in the early days of the frontier, when normative Western society, or at least the enforcement of it, had not yet taken full root. This is perhaps best exemplified by how incredibly common AFAB cross-dressing truly was in the early days of Westward colonization. According to noted gender and dress historian Clare Sears, between 1848 and 1900, 34 cities in 24 states passed anti-cross dressing laws.\(^{19}\) Before the passing of these laws, cross-dressing was not a marginal practice, but rather a “central component of 19th century urban life” in the West.\(^{20}\) Though these laws were far from national, the cities in which they were passed spanned from coast to coast.\(^{21}\) The reasons for passing them were intrinsically moralistic as well as class, race, and gender conscious, as we will see later.

Regardless, AFAB people wore men’s clothing before and after the passing of anti-cross-dressing laws for a multitude of reasons: including but not limited to feminist dress

\(^{17}\) Schulz and Herkert, “Chronicling Women’s History at the Oregon State Archives,” 495.
\(^{18}\) Putman, “The Emergence of a New West,” 6.
\(^{19}\) Sears, Arresting Dress, 4.
\(^{20}\) Sears, 3.
\(^{21}\) Eskridge, Gaylaw, 338–41.
reform, finding work, safer travel and border crossing, participating in slumming tourism, committing crimes, advertising sex-worker status, personal preference, and even gender affirmation. Several women who were arrested in the late 19th century for cross-dressing in San Francisco specifically claimed to have done so for feminist dress reform reasons. Despite the marginalization their arrests would suggest, the practice was regular enough in the 1860’s and 70’s that “the weekly California Police Gazette described it as an ‘epidemic’ and warned women to resist.” Seeking men’s work was another extremely common reason for AFAB cross-dressing. As Peter Boag writes in his book *Re-Dressing America’s Frontier Past*, this is evidenced by an incident in which a job ad for the *San Diego Herald* specified that,

> “no young woman in disguise need apply.’ Western observer Albert Richardson, who reported this incident, elaborated that such a warning was ‘needful in mining country. I encountered in the diggings several women dressed in masculine apparel, and each telling some romantic story of her past life. One averred that she had twice crossed the plains to California with droves of cattle.’”

Securing men’s jobs meant higher pay and the possibility of avoiding sex work for AFAB people. Somewhat ironically, it was also the practice of AFAB sex workers to wear men's clothing in order to advertise their trade.

Class and race are also integral to our history of cross-dressing law. In fact, as the West urbanized, class stratification became a much larger concern. Though class differences had always been there, the increasing numbers of wealthy capitalists and “respectable” Ladies that flooded the West at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century brought along with them normative ideas of class comportment and presentation. These ideas deeply impacted the morality crusades that anti-cross-dressing law was built upon. Middle and high class white cis women were seen as moralizing forces on Western civilization due to the impact of the cult of domesticity. Their notable absence from the early days of the frontier was seen to have allowed

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25 Boag, 35.
the spread of immoral behaviors in the burgeoning cities. In response to these concerns, there was a concerted effort by church leaders to bring more middle to high class white women to the West and therefore bring morality with them. However, just as these women moralized the West, so too did middle to high class white men feel responsible for ensuring these “Ladies,” a term steeped in racial and class hierarchy, were protected from immorality, or at least its visibility. Since the wearing of mens clothing was way AFAB sex workers could visibly advertise their services, cross-dressing law was implemented at first to specifically shield the visibility of sex work from the eyes of delicate white ladies. Thus the Lady’s supposed fragility and impressionable sensibilities made her child-like and in need of protection. These kinds of arguments fall directly in line with the concept of reproductive futurity. Conceptualized by Lee Edelman in his work, No Future, reproductive futurity refers to the figuring of an imaginary Child to critique and oppress those who transgress domestic norms, such as queer people and those who receive abortions. Likely familiar to most modern people, the argument goes more or less like this: “Think of the Children!” Here, the Child is not necessarily a literal child, but rather a strawman argument that attempts to villainize queerness as threatening to whatever seemingly vulnerable population the arguer wishes. Under the cult of domesticity, women’s subordinate role worked as infantilization, making them into the Child in need of protection. Sears further argues that it was actually the laws themselves that worked to produce new and more pervasive definitions of gender normativity that “haunt us today.” As we will see, it is not only the definitions of gender normativity that haunt us today, but also the use of the amorphous, imagined victim of the Child in arguments for the legal regulation of cross-dressing.

Class stratification also deeply impacted ideals of masculinity. As Jaqueline M. Moore wrote in her book Cow Boys and Cattle Men: Class and Masculinities on the Texas Frontier, 1865-1900, what was considered the ideal of masculinity changed drastically depending on

26 Deutscher, Foucault’s Futures, 40–41.
27 Sears, Arresting Dress, 3.
class context. As she argues, the cattleman, usually a ranch owner, were among the leisure class and therefore defined masculinity based not on their physical strength but on their “strength of character.” This meant the valorization of self restraint, refined tastes, and the ability to create a safe and moral environment for respectable Ladies to live in. The emphasis on restraint and morality for the benefit of cis women is important in our study, as these are two qualities that are seen to be perverted by high class European immigrants, whose over-civilization had supposedly led them to become over-indulgent and immoral. To complicate this vision of masculinity even more, Gail Bederman argues that, "The growth of a consumer culture encouraged many middle-class men, faced with lowered career expectations, to find identity in leisure instead of in work. Yet codes of manliness dictated they must work hard and become economically independent. The consumer culture’s ethos of pleasure and frivolity clashed with ideals of manly self-restraint, further undermining the potency of middle-class manliness." 28 The phenomenon of male impersonation, AFAB cross-dressing comedy musical performance, in the 19th century also gives us an excellent insight into the ways in which this clash of ideals was displayed. These performances, which were largely done for working-class male audiences, served to reinforce middle class masculinities and critique the perceived shortcomings of the upper and middle class versions of masculinity. 29 As we will see, Milton Matson is an excellent example of how the ideal form of leisure class masculinity could be seen to be betrayed. The perception of his indulgence and overspending were directly linked to taking advantage of respectable women, something that was seen as especially heinous given his gender “masquerade.” To the public eye, he was an over civilized immigrant who should have been a respectable Lady himself but was instead a poser and a swindler of respectable Ladies.

The cowboys, on the other hand, were hired hands and inherently seen as working-class. Their ideas of manliness were thus predicated upon physical strength, the ability

29 Rodgers, Gillian, Just One of the Boys: Female-To-Male Cross-Dressing on the American Variety Stage, 11.
to do their jobs, and public male rituals such as drinking, gambling and smoking. Until the 20th century in the West, cowboys were considered vagrants and hooligans. Outside the West, however, they gained a heroic reputation based on their proximity to nature and perceived status as noble savages. This likely was a direct result of Eastern male fears of their own over-civilization, as can be seen in the pervasive anxieties over degeneration. However, by about 1920, the heroic stature of the working-class, rough and tumble cowboy had suffused into Western culture as well. Harry Allen, whose notoriety spanned from about 1902-1922, was also seen as a perversion of these ideals. While he partook in drinking, smoking, gambling, brawling, and hard physical labor, he did so while being AFAB and “posing” as a man. In this case, someone who was seen to be a woman was engaged in scandalously working-class masculine prerogatives: thus usurping and perverting them. His reputation for tricking respectable Ladies into falling in love with him and then driving them to suicide when they found out about his “masquerade” further cast him as a degenerate, as he not only was taking advantage of these middle to high class white women but doing so under the guise of a working-class man.

It is important also to note the age-infused language of cowboys and cattlemen. Under the colonialist cult of domesticity, age and evolution were linked to racial and gender hierarchies. This theory justified the subjugation of both non-whites and women as they were seen as less evolved and “child-like”. It is not a coincidence that we find this age-based language in class identifying terms like cowboys and cattlemen. Cattlemen were high class and had therefore reached evolved manhood while cowboys were stuck in an adolescent working-class phase of life and evolution. Since the time of slavery, black men have been derogatorily called “boy” as a way to indicate that they were seen as under-evolved and child-like. This practice continues to this very day. It is particularly notable here that the American West was incredibly diverse, with people of many races (and sometimes cross-dressed people of different genders) engaging in cowboy and other forms of working-class labor. Though there was evidence that people of different races worked together and became close friends in the West, it is also very clear that
race was an automatic indicator of a lowered class status. As working-class white people were more likely to be in close contact with non-whites than the leisure class, especially in the urbanizing cities of the West after the turn of the century, this degenerative status was also conferred onto them through association. In this way, class and race were inextricably linked. As we will see, this strongly impacted ideas of degeneration in this period.

**Degeneration**

The concept of degeneration was widespread throughout the Western world in the period we are considering. It is not a fear that was contained to the 19th or even early 20th century, certainly, as anxieties over societal degeneration and collapse still fuel anti-LGBTQ rhetoric through to today. However, the broad idea follows that over-civilized and indulgent moralistic failings within a society lead to degeneration, or de-evolution, and collapse of culture and nation, such as was theorized to have happened with the fall of the Roman Empire in the west. Just as Western society believed in its ability to “civilize” and “improve” the cultures of non-white people through theories such as Manifest Destiny and the White Man’s Burden, so too did it believe in the ability of the degenerate classes, such as non-whites, the Jewish and Irish, and queer people, to infect the culture of the West. Indeed, it was the comparison of these degenerates to normative white society that defined “progress” and normativity. As the scholar Anne McClintock writes, “The degenerate classes, defined as departures from the normal human type, were as necessary to the self-definition of the middle class as the idea of degeneration was to the idea of progress, for the distance along the path of progress traveled by some portions of humanity could be measured only by the distance others lagged behind.”

Somewhat paradoxically, the American frontier was generally considered immune to degeneration due to American exceptionalism and the cleansing power of its so-called “wilderness” despite the fact that this supposedly wild land was the home of the same

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indigenous people that white colonists conceptualized as societal and sexual degenerates.\textsuperscript{32} However, when evidence of queer behaviors in Western cities became incontestable, sources of growing “degeneration” in the frontier had to be justified. American sexologist Federick Jackson Turner declared the closing of the frontier in 1890: “And now four centuries from the discovery of America, at the end of a hundred years of life under the constitution, the frontier has gone, and with its going has closed the first period of American history.”\textsuperscript{33} By delineating the periods as before and after the closing of the frontier, the idea of a degenerative force in the West became logistically possible. This is, of course, despite the clear commonality of cross-dressing and queer sexual behaviors in the West before this arbitrary date. The West could then be seen as susceptible to over-civilization from European immigration and de-evolutionary infection from queered racial minorities. This allowed for both American exceptionalist thought, attributed to an idealized but lost past, and fear mongering over the perceived threats to white American power and identity, attributed to a simultaneously over- and under-civilized anachronistic present.

Sexologists in Europe and America theorized that queer behaviors, such as same-sex sexual/romantic relationships and gender nonconformity or “effeminization”, constituted both a form and a source of degeneration.\textsuperscript{34} This likely was deeply influenced by the perceived threat that these behaviors posed to the normative family structure. As McClintock theorizes, the nuclear family structure was an intrinsic part of the imperial, colonizing force of Europeans and Americans. As uncolonized land was so often figured as female and virginal, the white colonial man was seen as a natural dominating and penetrating force, as a husband would dominate and deflower his virginal wife. Further, since indigenous communities across the world were considered under-evolved and child-like, so too did the white colonial man, as the father, seem a natural controlling and civilizing force. “The adults of inferior groups must be like the children of superior groups, for the child represents a primitive adult ancestor. If adult blacks and women

\textsuperscript{32} Boag, \textit{Re-Dressing America’s Frontier Past}, 171.
\textsuperscript{33} Boag, 183–84.
\textsuperscript{34} Boag, 173.
are like white male children, then they are living representatives of an ancestral stage in the evolution of white males. An anatomical theory for ranking races - based on entire bodies - had been found.\textsuperscript{35} The figuration of both non-whites and Ladies as child-like further contributed to anti-cross dressing law through reproductive futurity arguments, the white woman being a Child in need of protection and the non-white subjects being the Child in need of fatherly discipline and civilization.

James Kiernan, perhaps the most influential American sexologist of the age, spread a linked theory that the original form of humanity before evolutionary progress was hermaphroditic, both male and female.\textsuperscript{36} Thus, as 19th century Kentucky physician James Weir described it, viraginity (or the feminization of men and the masculinization of women) was “due directly to the influence of that strange law... reversion to ancestral types. It is an effort of nature to return man to the old hermaphroditic form from which he was evolved.”\textsuperscript{37} This is the fear of degeneration at its core: the regression of Western civilization from its progressive and evolved present to an anachronistic de-evolved form similar to that was seen as endemic to non-whites. In this way, the nuclear family was enforced socially and legally not just to control sexuality but also as a form of internal justification for the atrocities committed against the colonized. If degenerate classes were not only child-like and under-evolved but could also infect the healthy, evolved white normative society; it was imperative to civilize and control these classes. Thus, Manifest Destiny and the colonization of the Western United States could not be justified without this foundational assumption that familial governance of the white colonial father over all else was a natural state. It is perhaps no coincidence that the first governmental leaders of the American colony are still called “Founding Fathers.”

In addition to the idea that contact with non-whites, whose cultures were consistently categorized as feminized, anachronistic, and under-evolved, could contribute to societal

\textsuperscript{35} McClintock, \textit{Ebook of Imperial Leather}, 50–51.
\textsuperscript{36} Boag, \textit{Re-Dressing America's Frontier Past}, 174.
\textsuperscript{37} Boag, 174.
degeneration, so too could certain types of white people. While there are several white cultures that are applicable to this category, such as the Jews and the Irish, it’s the influx of effeminized European immigrants that is most pertinent to our topic. Though the most popular theory was that the effeminate and weak people of Europe stayed in the east and festered in the cities there while the most virile and strong ventured out west to the frontier, the “closure” of the frontier in 1890 allowed for the breakdown of this theory.\(^\text{38}\) Now that the frontier and its cleansing wilderness was no longer, over-civilized and over-indulgent European immigrants began to infiltrate the West. As previously hinted, the fall of the Roman Empire was directly seen as a result of this sort of over-indulgent society leading to sexual perversion and finally total societal collapse.\(^\text{39}\)

Fears over the New Woman’s usurpation of masculine roles in behavior and dress contributed to the flourishing of this concept’s relationship to cross-dressing. The cult of domesticity also has special relevance to this issue, as the Victorian ideal of the woman as the Angel of the Home was directly challenged by trans men who not only rejected traditional domestic roles but also rejected the very basis of sartorial and genital gender distinctions. Gender scholar Gail Bederman defines manhood as “the process which creates ‘men’ by linking male genital anatomy to a male identity, and linking both anatomy and identity to particular arrangements of authority and power.”\(^\text{40}\) She uses the example of the early 20th century boxing champion Jack Johnson wrapping his penis in gauze to augment its visual size in order to reassert his masculinity against racist ideas of the femininity of black men.\(^\text{41}\) Trans men, such as Allen and Matson, divorced male genitalia from manhood and masculine power just by living as and asserting themselves as men despite being born AFAB. As they gained access to male privilege, they were seen to be destroying the gender hierarchy upon which the entirety of

\(^{38}\) Boag, 180.
\(^{39}\) Boag, 173.
\(^{40}\) Bederman, \textit{Manliness & Civilization}, 7–8.
\(^{41}\) Bederman, 8.
colonial Western civilization was based. When they engaged in romantic and sexual relationships with cis women, they appropriated the cis white male’s sexual role as the seducer of women. When they married women as men, they took the “natural” role of cis men as husband, a role steeped in colonialist, white supremacist, and racist scientific thought. AFAB cross-dressers in relationships with women were seen as predatory not just because of the act itself but because their birth-assigned gender was not considered natural in the role of sexual predator.

Allen and Matson: Crimes and Sexuality

Far underrepresented in academia, evidence of trans masculine experience is relatively abundant in the American West. In reality, it is not nearly as difficult to find news coverage of cross-dressing AFAB people who self-identified as men as one might think. Trans men that were outed in their lifetimes were most often associated with criminality and immorality, especially at the end of the 19th and into the 20th century. In fact, outing trans men and other AFAB cross-dressers became a staple in crime news entertainment, making them nationally famous (or infamous), which sometimes forced them into careers as dime museum freak show performers. As previously discussed, this essay will focus on two such famous cases: Harry Allen and Milton Matson.

42 Boag, Re-Dressing America’s Frontier Past, 41.
43 Sears, Arresting Dress, 99.
Harry Allen, née Nell Pickerell, was a “fighter, bootlegger, and ‘bad man’” according to a 1912 edition of the Tacoma Times (figure 4). His public notoriety began around 1900 when his birth assigned name and identity began being published in newspaper articles that positioned his trans masculine gender expression alongside tales of his crimes and sexual immorality. These salacious stories fit neatly within crime reporting of the era, which was often written more for entertainment than with concerns for verifiable fact. Regardless, with no other primary sources to consider, we must cautiously use contemporary newspaper reports on Harry Allen to understand his life and experiences.

Though most sources tell us that Allen chose to wear men’s clothing in order to find work, which is likely not untrue, I posit that gender affirmation was likely an equally or more important reason for him. Gender affirmation here means the wearing of gendered clothing in order to more closely visually align to personal gender experience. There is evidence that Allen identified with masculinity and manhood from an early age, and that this was deeply connected to gendered clothing. In 1908, the Birmingham Age-Herald quotes Allen as having said,

"I always played with the boys, and wanted to be one of them...I did not look like a girl; did not feel like a girl. I seemed to have nothing in common with my own sex... it seemed impossible to make myself a girl and, sick at heart over the thought that I would be an outcast of the feminine gender, I conceived the idea of making myself a man, and mingling with men as one of them. I put on men's clothing, and have not discarded it since, though now I am almost 24 years old. I

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44 “Fighter, Bootlegger and ‘Bad Man’ Is Miss Pickrell For Love of Whom Three Women Have Killed Themselves.”
45 Boag, *Re-Dressing America’s Frontier Past*, 41.
46 Boag, 27.
will never go back to the conventional style of dress; that would make my life so unbearable that I could not stand it. Better anything than that.”

If this quote truly does come from Harry Allen, it is clear evidence of trans masculine experience. It shows that he never identified with womanhood and that wearing women’s clothing would be unbearable, the worst possible thing. Not only this, he desired to live as a man from childhood. This deeply supports the likelihood that wearing masculine clothing served as a means to that end. The Morning Oregonian supports this quote with another of its own after a Portland arrest in 1912. Allen is quoted, “I have been posing as a man for more than 12 years. I can’t wear women’s clothes. I have worn these so long and walked and talked like a man for so many years it would be impossible for me to make another change of sex.” This is a particularly interesting quote as it implies that Allen viewed his clothing not as a disguise but as part of a larger gender transition, one that he steadfastly refused to reverse.

Though the vast majority of these articles lack any imagery, Allen is often described with great care as did the Minneapolis journal on December 30, 1901:

“she wore a derby hat, a neat fitting suit of black, a raglan coat with a carnation in the buttonhole, and well polished shoes. From head to foot she was fastidiously clothed. Her rather long black hair parted in the middle and her slight features, not too feminine in cast, gave her the appearance of a fine-looking boy. In the guise of such she seems to have won the hearts of susceptible girls”

This description categorizes Allen in more feminine terms, highlighting his slight features and long black hair. In this period, AFAB people were considered women by the vast majority of people when their birth-assigned gender was known, regardless of their personal gender experience or presentation. As such, feminized descriptions of trans men were by no means uncommon. In fact, when Allen was jailed for vagrancy in Portland in 1912, an anthropologist by the name of Miriam Van Waters published a shockingly sympathetic, though misgendering, study of Allen in which she categorized him under distinctly normative version of the New

47 “Girl’s Strange Career.”
48 “Police Get Woman Posing as Husband.”
Woman: contributing his cross-dressing to an understandable need to find gainful employment and thus linking him to the ongoing women’s dress-reform movement.\textsuperscript{49}

Closer to the 1910’s, however, AFAB cross-dressers were more often described in hyper-masculine terms, both in physique and comportment.\textsuperscript{50} Despite Van Water’s feminized perspective, Allen was no exception to this masculinization. One example of many can be found in the East Oregonian, which admitted in November of 1911 that he had, "a physique that would do credit to a longshoreman."\textsuperscript{51} Indeed, the vast majority of newspapers in this time contribute to Allen a masculine face and frame even while asserting their perception of his womanhood through she/her pronouns and his birth name. More than this, Allen fell well within the contemporary society’s expected realm of manliness as he worked male dominated labor jobs, spoke with a deep voice (and perhaps most importantly) brawled, drank, smoked, and gambled.\textsuperscript{52} These behavioral markers of working-class masculinity may have actively helped to contribute to what several newspapers described as his ease of passing as a man.\textsuperscript{53}

Unfortunately for Allen, his widespread familiarity with the police of the Pacific Northwest, or rather their familiarity with \textit{him}, made passing unnoticed seemingly impossible. If the papers can be believed, each time he arrived in a new city he found himself under suspicion of the police. In 1909 Allen was ordered to leave Yakima, WA only 3 hours after his arrival.\textsuperscript{54} Another time, he was arrested and jailed for cross-dressing in Tacoma simply because a police officer personally recognized him on the street due to prior arrests in the town.\textsuperscript{55} Even in a story about a near fatal incident in which Allen was stabbed by his father during an argument in their home, the Tacoma times described him as, “associating with thieves pick-pockets and thugs,” and

\textsuperscript{49} Boag, \textit{Re-Dressing America’s Frontier Past}, 27–29.
\textsuperscript{50} Boag, 44.
\textsuperscript{51} “East Oregonian.”
\textsuperscript{52} “‘Harry Allen’ Was a Girl”; “Nell Pickerell Is Again in Spotlight”; “Nell Pickerell in Town Again.”
\textsuperscript{53} “Nell Pickerell in Town Again.”
\textsuperscript{54} “Nell Canned Again.”
\textsuperscript{55} “Tacoma Police Arrest Nell Pickerell.”
further added that he “was arrest at least three times by the Tacoma police for masquerading in men's clothes.”

However, it appears not everyone had a problem with Harry’s preference for masculine clothing. Despite an apparently fraught relationship with his father, it seems as though Allen’s mother accepted his gender transition. Several newspapers note this, with one in particular making a point to say that when his mother called the police station, she had asked to see “Harry” and not Nell.56 Further evidence in the same Seattle Star article points to Allen’s friends’ acceptance, much to the journalist’s bafflement: “Offering no explanation for the girl’s strange behavior in masquerading as in male apparel, her friends appear to accept the fad without protest.”57

More to this point, a large percentage of articles about Allen make at least some small comment on his ability to “make love to women”, which as historian Peter Boag points out was scandalous despite having a less explicitly sexual connotation than we give it today.58 His strong ability to woo women, or at least the public’s perception of his ability, is well documented from vague comments about how attractive a man he was to stories of his romantic trysts. Indeed, by far the most common story about Allen in the papers is the allegation that he caused three women to commit suicide over their love for him. The dominant narrative for the exact reason of these suicides was the shock and horror these women felt upon the discovery that their lover’s biological sex was different from his gender presentation.59 As one Seattle journalist, in a scathing article, put it: “upon finding out... that their love could not be reciprocated in the Heaven ordained way... [they] ended their disappointment by taking their lives.”60 There are also two examples of an intriguing variant of this story in which one of Allen’s lovers, Dolly

56 “Police Are Puzzled Over Nell Pickrell”; “Girl's Strange Career.”
57 “Police Are Puzzled Over Nell Pickrell.”
58 Boag, Re-Dressing America’s Frontier Past, 26.
60 “The Seattle Republican. [Volume] (Seattle, Wash.) 1?”
Quahpe/Quappe, took her life because of her unrequited love for him. The papers alleged Allen was cheating on her with another woman, Mabel Lacke.61 One journalist published Allen’s side of the story, supposedly quoting him as saying, “That Seattle story is a palpable fake... No woman has ever committed suicide over me.”62 This comparatively sympathetic stance was, however, by far the exception. Varying from tacit implication of his guilt in their deaths to outright condemnation, the vast majority of newspapers expressed outrage at their perception of Allen’s predatory immorality. This is perhaps best typified by the Seattle Republican’s article which concluded:

“Whether Nell Pickering [Nell Pickerell], as Harry Livingstone [another of his names], deliberately deceived these girls at to her sex, and courted their affection, or whether through an unexplained weakness they allowed themselves to become attached because of the trousers, knowing full well the true situation, makes no difference; the result and responsibility are the same, and Nell Pickering, while probably not guilty of murder, is at least responsible in a sense for the lives of these two young women, and it is quite time there was some steps taken to suppress this seemingly concionsless (sic) individual, with perverted ideas.”63

This view falls neatly within narratives of passing women and predatory female husbands who, as far back as the 18th century, graced the pages of salacious fiction stories. According to Theresa Braunschneider, author and professor of 18th Century literature, these stories served to vilify sapphic desire, showing this desire as the impetus for cross-dressing, or as the stories would have it: deceiving and defiling unsuspecting ladies and in so doing usurping the penetrative role of men.64 As Allen was consistently depicted as a woman “masquerading” in men’s clothes in nation-wide newspaper articles, the understanding of him as a predatory passing woman was nearly ubiquitous, if not explicitly stated. Further, this categorization created fertile ground for developing understanding of the “sexual invert” whose clinicalized homosexuality was as much connected to sexual desire as gender-queer presentation.65 These

61 “Girl Loved a Girl”; “State News.”
62 “Notorious Nell Pickerell Lands in Yakima Jail.”
63 “The Seattle Republican. [Volume] (Seattle, Wash.) 1?”
64 Braunschneider, “Acting the Lover,” 219.
65 Boag, Re-Dressing America’s Frontier Past, 29.
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narratives laid the groundwork for modern trans-masculine erasure and recategorization of trans men as butch lesbians. This also helped lead to pervasive narratives of predatory lesbianism in film and other forms of entertainment media.

Perhaps more important for our purposes, however, is the issue of perceptions of AFAB cross-dressing as a queer usurpation of cis masculine roles and identities. Descriptions of Allen’s clothing preferences were directly situated alongside stories of his masculine coded behavior, criminal activities and arrests, and alleged sexual predation. This closely associated AFAB cross-dressing and participation in working-class masculine coded behavior, such as physical labor, smoking, drinking, and “making love to women”, with criminality and social immorality. Indeed, growing fears of “female” usurpation of male roles and therefore control by the “New Woman” even came to be known in the modern world in explicitly sartorial terms: who wears the pants? Boag recounts a news story that perfectly reflects this concern in the same period that Allen was most infamous. He writes about a San Francisco man’s 1912 divorce petition:

“He claimed that his wife’s ‘mania to pose as a man’ inflicted cruelty on him. Or, as the newspaper explained it, the wife’s wearing of her husband’s coats, pants, and hard hat in the end served to demonstrate clearly that she ‘wore [the] trousers’ in the relationship, something entirely unacceptable as it usurped the (reputedly natural) male role.”

The reversal of expected gender roles, viewed through the lens of the changing definitions of womanhood, deeply impacted how trans men were also viewed since they were almost always represented in media as some variation of a woman masquerading or posing as a man. Indeed, changes in gendered dress and behavior fed into contemporary fears of societal degeneration and collapse. However, it is also important to note that the descriptions of Allen’s masculinity fell distinctly within the confines of Western working-class masculinity: such as physical labor and saloon brawling. So too do representations of Allen’s clothing in photographs, which we will consider at length later. It is precisely this proximity to working-class masculinity from a white

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66 Boag, 46.
AFAB person that is such a concern in the context of degeneration. Allen’s queer working-class masculinity constituted a threat to hegemonic masculinity and therefore to white society as a whole. While there are significant class differences in their representations, when compared to newspaper reports of Milton B. Matson, another infamous trans man from a few years earlier, there is significant cross-over in the obvious anxieties over queer gender presentation and perceived predatory sexuality that are projected on them both.

The Bogus Man

Milton B. Matson was rocketed into newspaper notoriety after the discovery of his birth-assigned gender in a San Jose jail in 1895. In fact, he had been there for two weeks before the discovery was made. It was then that the jailers received a telegram addressed to Miss Luisa Matson, identifying Milton as a woman.67 However, like Allen, Milton Matson was also regularly shown to have a sustained personal identification with masculinity and manhood. Matson was reported to have worn mens clothes for at least 26 years at the time of his arrest.68 In this same article, there is a long quote reportedly from Matson himself that is worth quoting at length. He said the realization to wear men’s clothing came to him as a teenager at boarding school. After deciding to make this social transition he claimed that,

“I used no arguments, my relatives approved of my course, and, in fact, it seemed the only really natural thing for me to do - my tastes were all so masculine, my looks enough so to warrant the change and my bent of mind more like a man’s than a woman’s. There my family nickname of ‘Happy Jack’ came in in real earnest and I became once and for all what I am to-day.”69

This is an enlightening quote because it shows us not only that Matson experienced desires to be a man in his youth but also that those desires were understood and supported by his family. If this quotation can be believed, there was clearly something that Matson’s family saw in him that made them happy to call him “Jack” and to let him wear men’s clothes without backlash. In this, we see how both Matson and his family saw him aligned with masculinity and manhood.

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67 Sears, Arresting Dress, 103.
68 “She Has Been a Man of the World for Over Twenty-Six Years.”
69 “She Has Been a Man of the World for Over Twenty-Six Years.”
from a young age despite his birth assigned gender. Further, this alignment with masculinity made his clothing transformation “natural”. Matson’s look was indeed convincingly masculine enough to make him a very successful freak show performer after his arrest.

Newspapers across the country covered the incident of his birth-assigned gender reveal with apparent glee. Interestingly, the white-collar crime of counterfeiting checks, charges that were eventually dropped, was often not mentioned at all beyond the fact of his being in jail when the discovery was made. In these instances the articles were incredibly short and nearly identical to each other, only serving to expose Matson’s 16 year gender “masquerade” to a public eager for salacious news stories. Somewhat noteworthy is the fact that most of these short articles only use Matson’s preferred name of Milton, though this was almost certainly done for the dramatic effect of the reveal rather than any concern for his wishes. Regardless, this alone differs dramatically to coverage of Harry Allen, who was almost always called by his birth name in the papers. This shortened article was by far the most common, insinuating the wider public may have only known Matson by his chosen name, at least at the time of his arrest.

In another article that was reprinted identically in many papers, once even in Dutch, a fuller version of the story was told. The article begins, “A sensation was created in the county jail last evening when the discovery was made that a prisoner booked as Milton B Matson was discovered to be a woman.” This version, however, also includes a description of the alleged crimes and the hotel where he had worked at one time, at which he was supposed to have left several debts. While this article still seems to mostly focus on the spectacle of Matson’s

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70 Sears, Arresting Dress, 103.
72 “Sixteen Years A Man.”
73 “Forklaedt som Mand.”; “Masqueraded as a Horrid Man”; “Masquerading as a Man,” January 28, 1895; “Masquerading as a Man,” January 30, 1895; “A Woman’s Way”; “Sixteen Years A Man”; “Woman Plays Man Sixteen Years.”
gender difference, it also links him more strongly with criminality, despite an inclusion of his plea of innocence.

In two much longer articles published by the San Francisco paper *The Morning Call* on the 28th and the 29th of January 1895, Matson’s romantic relationship with one Miss Helen Fairweather is considered at great length. The first is from Matson’s point of view, the second from Fairweather’s. Again we see conflict over whether or not the female partner was duped into believing their lover was a “real” man. Matson claims she knew, Fairweather not only claims she didn’t but that they were never engaged at all. The assertion that they were never engaged is likely baseless, as third parties also confirmed their engagement. It is possible she did not know about Matson’s birth-assigned gender. However, with clear concern about how the news reports could affect her career, there is also obvious motivation on her part to deny the whole business. This would be unsurprising, as the wives of female husbands were regularly figured as victims of deception and more than this, they are known to have claimed surprise if the husband was outing. Either way, papers tended to sympathize with Fairweather, as Clare Sears writes, “framing him [Matson] as a fast-talking swindler who nonetheless ‘truly makes a fine-looking man.’” Further, the accusations, denied by both Matson and Fairweather, of Matson using Fairweather for her money makes his intentions within the relationship seem criminal.

Likely, the repeated insistence of his good looks helped to justify Fairweather’s “mistake” of falling for him. In this, we can see a direct comparison to Harry Allen, who like Matson was described as a good-looking man. Even more, Matson was quoted as saying,

“Yes, I like the ladies and in my earlier days was quite a beau. I was a good dancer and I guess I pretty thoroughly understand all about the female

74 “Louisa Has Her Say”; “Acted as Watchman.”
75 “Louisa Has Her Say.”
76 “Acted as Watchman.”
77 Jen Manion, *Female Husbands*, 3.
79 “Acted as Watchman.”
weaknesses. I have been made a confidante by the fair ones more than once and have had some interesting experiences. It was lots of fun carrying on flirtations with the ladies and a real joy to make love to them."

This is nearly a mirror image of the many later claims of Allen’s skill at “making love to women,” which we discussed earlier. This seeming anomaly may have added to the spectacle of these men who broke normative boundaries in both expected gender and sexual expression and behavior. Not only did they pass as men, but they did it so successfully as to be attractive and skilled in wooing women. Again we see how trans masculinity could have been viewed as threatening the gender hierarchy. The insidious nature of cross-dressing when framed as a disguise sets any romantic or sexual relationship in the lens of predatory sexuality and a usurpation of male sexual prerogatives. The regularity with which Matson and Allen’s romantic and sexual affairs were recounted, and the predatory nature that the journalists imbued them with, underscores this point. This in of itself becomes a spectacle in crime news entertainment. However, unlike Allen, the spectacle of Matson’s gender and “predatory” sexuality far surpassed newspaper crime entertainment.

Milton Matson was recruited to work as a freak show performer in dime museums directly from his jail cell.80 This was a relatively common career choice for people who dressed in clothing not associated with their birth-assigned gender after being outed in the press. This sort of news coverage made it particularly difficult to obtain other types of employment. In reality, these positions paid relatively well if one was infamous enough. As Matson is reported as saying, “it pays to be notorious.” This seems to have been absolutely true, as Matson’s career inspired imitators in other dime museums in the San Francisco area.81 One newspaper tells the story that upon release from jail Matson immediately resumed male dress and got “hilariously” and publicly drunk.82 Somewhat surprisingly, this incident did not result in another jail-house stint. For Matson, however, a career in dime museums also meant that the spectacle of his

80 Sears, *Arresting Dress*, 104.
81 Sears, 104.
82 “Miss Matson Is Hilarious.”
gender cemented his reputation as a criminal in the public imagination despite no evidence of further arrests. Having begun this career from a jail cell, his high-class smooth talking criminality, as opposed to Allen’s working-class crimes of horse theft and public brawling, was an intrinsic part of the draw for dime museum patrons.83

The understanding of Matson and Allen through the lens of societal degeneration complicates even more when one considers the imagery of them printed alongside these articles in the newspapers. In these, we see additional intersections of changing concerns in white American society over class, race, and national identity.

**Image Analysis**

Though few images of Harry Allen and Milton Matson exist, the ones that remain hold a significant amount of information. We will focus on the ways in which their clothing is represented and the meanings that these representations of clothing carried. As these images were the only way the public had visual access to these men, they communicated sartorial meaning directly to the public. The understanding of their clothing and bodies were then filtered through their associated texts. Through an examination of this intersection, of text and image, we will see that Harry Allen and Milton Matson represented two sources of the same fear: societal degeneration.

This image of Harry Allen, (figure 5) is particularly helpful in considering how his clothing might have been understood by the public. While the image’s quality does obscure some of the finer details of the outfit, we can still tell he is wearing a medium-width flat brim hat, a white shirt and a high collar, some sort of jacket, fringed trousers or chaps, and leather shoes or boots. It is likely he is also wearing a waistcoat based on the neckline of the garment covering his shirt and the norms of the period. His jacket does not appear to be highly tailored, instead it has a rumpled, lived-in look. His squatting pose and direct stare give off an air of rakish confidence. This plays into the article’s claims of his fighting nature. He almost dares the viewer to challenge

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him with this look. His gaze could also be read through the lens of his reputation as a seducer of women, which the article’s title does far more than insinuate. Likely, it is a mixture of both these things, criminal and ladies’ man, that the pose and gaze may have been read to suggest.

The caption of this photograph reads, “Nell Pickerell in cowboy outfit, which she wears a great deal.” Indeed even without this caption it is clear Allen is wearing the working-class clothing of the American West. While the exact style is impossible to tell, his hat looks to be similar to the styles created by Stetson. They were sold unformed so the consumer could alter the shape to their preferences.

Men’s hats in this period were highly indicative of social status and occupation. As Stetson’s were made to be, this hat is an entirely practical hat for work in the so-called “Wild West.” The wide brim would have kept rain and sun alike out of his eyes as he did any number of the labor jobs he was reported to have worked, such as a longshoreman or a field hand. However, it is not so wide as to impede his sight either. This hat, even with only the suggestion of its form, visually places Allen firmly in the Western working-class. The conjunction of the hat’s silhouette with the

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84 Clark, Hats, 43.
85 “Nell Pickerell Is Again in Spotlight”; “East Oregonian.”
caption’s “cowboy” identifier makes it very likely this interpretation would also have been legible to the contemporary audience.

The clearest portion of Allen’s outfit is by far the fringed trousers or chaps. Again, whether these are trousers or chaps is impossible to know. Regardless, the fringe is a dead giveaway to his working Western sensibilities. Indeed, fringed items of clothing have come to be a shorthand for Western “cowboy” identity in the modern eye, where it is often used in fanciful Western costume. Fringe styles were suffused into early Western cowboy aesthetics through contact with Native Americans and made available by French fur traders. The connection of fringed garments to Native American styles is deeply important for our purposes, as we will shortly see. Garments such as this one had been worn on the frontier since at least the early 19th century, evidenced in both extant garments and artist renderings.

Were this worn on a cis man or even if Allen had not been outed, it would have been a symbol of traditional Western working class masculinity, the idea of which was beginning to become heroic in the post-frontier period. However, on a known cross-dressing body, the meaning of this garment is changed. In this article, his cowboy clothing is directly situated against the outing of his gender difference, his criminal record, and his allegedly lethal sexual conquests. This effectively repaints the way his clothing communicates occupation, class, and morality from a likely upstanding rugged man of the West to a “female” Western outlaw who runs with a dangerous crowd. With this understanding, the concept of Allen as a part of the Western working-class is colored by long held associations between poverty and criminality as well as post-frontier anxieties about gender, race, and social mixing among working class communities.

Scholars Sears and Boag both address race and gender in their books. They argue that Chinese immigrants were linked in the popular imagination to gender ambiguity. Between the

86 George-Warren and Freedman, How the West Was Worn, 52–53.
87 Gibson, “How Clothing Design and Cultural Industries Refashioned Frontier Masculinities.”
88 George-Warren and Freedman, How the West Was Worn, 14.
feminization of Chinese men, the common occurrence of Chinese AFAB cross-dressers who utilized men’s clothing to cross the border, and the drag performances put on for slum tourism in Chinatown, this racial minority was only one of the many that were linked to gender nonconformity.\(^89\) Additionally, it was the promise of seeing the criminal activity attributed to Chinese immigrants that made these Chinatown slumming tours so popular in the first place.\(^90\) Mexican men as a whole were feminized through the cross-dressers within their communities. As Boag notes, newspapers commonly wrote descriptions like the following which describes one Mexican AMAB (Assigned Male at Birth) cross-dresser in terms “along the lines of the period stereotype of the Mexican senorita: ... ‘in a rich costume, and carrying a fan in the most approved fashion. He certainly made a very handsome looking woman and made himself in a most ravishing style.”\(^91\)

However, perhaps most important for our purposes is the racist white reaction to Native Americans who might now be referred to as Two-Spirit, an umbrella term for a variety of culturally and spiritually charged trans and non-binary gender identities. Indeed, as long as there have been records of Native North American cultures, there has been bountiful evidence of Two-Spirit identities and experiences for both AFAB and AMAB people. Further, the vast majority of these people were and are seen within their own communities as spiritually sensitive and even sacred.\(^92\) However, at contact, Europeans bigotedly misconstrued these sacred Native gender practices as deeply immoral. In 1844 artist George Catlin published a popular text in which he condemned the practices he observed in the Sioux, Sacs, and Fox nations, describing a ritual in which cross-dressing and queer sexual behavior was central as “one of the most unaccountable and disgusting customs I have ever met in the Indian country.”\(^93\) Though accounts of these so-called “berdache”, a deeply offensive French term for these Native AMAB


\(^{90}\) Sears, *Arresting Dress*, 112.

\(^{91}\) Boag, *Re-Dressing America’s Frontier Past*, 148.


\(^{93}\) Reed, 25.
cross-dressers, were no longer common as the 19th century waned, the link between Native Americans and gender/sexual nonconformity proved lasting.\(^\text{94}\)

Considering the context of this racialization of gender difference, it is pertinent to return to one of the concepts that early 20th-century sexologists widely discussed. As we have already seen, it was believed that the close contact among the races found especially in the working class and impoverished inner-city communities constituted a source of the “degeneration” of Western civilization.\(^\text{95}\) It is this concept which brings us back to Allen’s reputation as a “Bad Man.” As a part of the working class, Allen’s infamy is in no small part affected by his criminal contact with racial minorities. In particular, there is a popular news story in which Allen was arrested for, but not convicted of, “selling liquor to an Indian.”\(^\text{96}\) This story is even published inside *The Tacoma Times* article which includes the image of him in his “cowboy outfit”, pictured above. Considering the strong connection between fringed Western garments and contact between white and Native Americans, the image of Allen in fringed chaps/trousers next to this article further serves to underline the perception of criminal white working class contact with racial minorities. Further, the article’s content altered the understanding of this garment, which was not inherently seen as criminal or immoral. On Allen, a known AFAB crossdresser, and situated next to this article, about his criminal contact with Native Americans, these chaps/trousers become a symbol of criminally queer forms of dress resulting from working class interracial contact. Along with the other Western working-class crimes for which he was arrested and accused, this explicitly racialized crime and sartorial representation can be used to easily argue that Allen represents this particular form of Western civilization’s “degeneration.”

His alleged and real crimes, especially cross-dressing and bootlegging to Indigenous people, fed

\(^{94}\) Boag, *Re-Dressing America’s Frontier Past*, 151.

\(^{95}\) Boag, 178.

directly into the fears that the close contact of whites with racial minorities among the working-class and the criminalized poor was leading to gender dissolution and thus social collapse. While his clothing in and of itself could be read in a number of moralistic ways, it is the conjunction of these clothes on Allen’s body and his criminal contact with a race deeply associated with queerness that creates the full sartorial meaning of his cowboy outfit.

The imagery published of Milton Matson, on the other hand, represents an alternative source of so-called degeneration in the post-frontier West: that of the morally tainted high class European immigrant. The images themselves also differ from those of Allen in that only illustrations exist. This means we cannot be absolutely certain whether this is an accurate representation of his clothing or if it is a fantasy image of Milton created by newspaper artists. The consistency of how he is pictured and how he is described, however, may indicate that these images are at least partially accurate. Nevertheless, the question of what he actually wore is not really of much importance for our study. Rather, what is important is how Matson and his clothing were represented to the public.

Let us begin by taking stock of the garments shown in the illustrations. In all the images here provided, Matson is shown in full. This choice places his whole body and outfit at the forefront of each image. Invariably, he is wearing a three piece suit. In figures 6 and 7, we can see Matson in what is likely the same outfit (figure 7, image in the foreground). In both images, he wears a shining black “chimney pot” top hat. This hat can be classified as a “chimney pot” because it is
of medium to tall height with slightly convex sides. For comparison, a “stovepipe” top hat is one with absolutely straight sides.\textsuperscript{97} If the several articles that describe it can be believed, this is a silk top hat.\textsuperscript{98} The fabric itself is partially responsible for the lustrous surface, which came to be a symbol of “the respect in which it [the top hat] was held”.\textsuperscript{99} However, it is also notable that such a luster requires care and attention to maintain. The number of times this hat is described certainly is significant in showing Matson as a man concerned with style and image.\textsuperscript{100}

In both illustrations, he is in a light colored outfit consisting of a suit jacket, a waistcoat with lapels and a watch chain, a shirt front, a collar, a cane, gloves, and shoes that look to be oxfords. There are also minor differences between the two, namely the tie, collar, and overcoat. In figure 6, his suit jacket is almost entirely covered by his overcoat. His shirt front is much more exposed, in part because he is wearing a bowtie and in part because the waistcoat sits lower on his chest. The wing collar, which would have been a separate piece

\textsuperscript{97} Clark, \textit{Hats}, 40.
\textsuperscript{98} “Her Betrothed Is a Woman”; “Will Again Don Women’s Garb.”
\textsuperscript{99} Clark, \textit{Hats}, 40.
\textsuperscript{100} “Her Betrothed Is a Woman”; “Will Again Don Women’s Garb.”
Man of the World for Over Twenty-Six Years.”

100 “Louisa Has Her Say” ; “Her Betrothed Is a Woman” ; “Will Again Don Women’s Garb” ; “She Has Been a Man of the World for Over Twenty-Six Years.”


102 Newcomer, 11–12.

attached to the shirt front, is of medium height and turned over just at the top to create the wings. This style of collar was up to date for the upstanding gentleman in both the United States and Europe. The same outfit in figure 7 shows a lower folded collar with a four-in-hand tie. Also in figure 7, we get a full view of the jacket, which is in the cutaway style.

The final illustration, in the background of figure 7, shows Matson seated and smoking a cigar. Though this looks more like a cigarette, Matson is quoted in figure 7’s article as saying, “I smoke... but never cigarettes.” As we’ve seen before with Harry Allen, smoking was seen as a deeply masculine activity and would have worked to frame Matson within a markedly masculine range of behaviors. This time, the trousers and coat are in a dark color, presumably black. His shirt front, collar, and tie are not visibly identifiable. Again, he is wearing oxfords, trousers, a shirt, and a cutaway coat.

His wearing of the cutaway coat is significant. This is not only evidenced in the image but also in that it is described in the associated texts over and over again. The cutaway coat, more equivalent to a modern suit jacket rather than a modern coat, is characterized by the lower center front which opens at a slope above the waistline to reveal the trousers and waistcoat. This particular garment has a long history in Western menswear: worn in Europe as early as the 18th century. It is particularly important for our purposes that this style of jacket was most likely developed at least in part for the landed aristocracy of the English countryside, as its lack of fabric at the front facilitated horse riding. As we will see, the categorization of Matson as an English country gentleman was extremely prevalent in newspaper descriptions of his identity. As Jimmy Alan Newcomer writes, by the early 1890’s this style was mostly reserved for “the dress of the elder statesman, the conservative, and the stuffy banker.” However, in England it
continued to be relatively fashionable because of its association with Edward VII, Prince of Wales.\textsuperscript{107} In 1897, two years after Matson’s arrest, one Mrs Humphrey wrote in her book \textit{Manners for Men}, “In the country, a young man should don his cutaway coat after lunch unless he had invitations to breakfast. Should a garden party be in question, the cutaway must be finished off with a silk top hat.”\textsuperscript{108} Though this was written after the publication of our images of Matson, one can easily argue that this indicated that the coat had continued to be associated with higher class activities from the 18th century through to Matson’s time. Garden parties being inherently something lower classes could not participate in, this also places the combination of Matson’s silk hat with his cutaway coat in a higher class English context. Indeed, as the century turned, the cutaway coat would become a strictly formal garment which was even worn by the eminently fashionable Edward VIII, Duke of Windsor, in the 1920’s.\textsuperscript{109}

His frame, once described as “pudgy” by his ex-landlord, is replicated in each illustration with a full belly and round face (figure 6, 7).\textsuperscript{110} This is significant because it is in direct opposition to the idealized small waist silhouette for Ladies of this period. Additionally, this heavy body type has distinct high class connotations, which can be found in Western culture up to the advent of the mass production of cheap and unhealthy food. Representing Matson as having a full figure communicates his consumption of rich food and drink, such as “the best whiskey obtainable”.\textsuperscript{111} This sort of consumption certainly worked to create the image of an upper class man. It also underscored the perception of a white collar criminal for whose debts and alleged crime of passing fake checks served as further proof of foolish overconsumption. It is important also to note that in this time wealth and class were not necessarily the same thing, as titles and prestige were passed down generationally even when wealth could be squandered and lost. Thus, Matson’s high class roots and legendary debts might not necessarily have been seen as

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{107} Newcomer, 97–99.
\textsuperscript{108} Newcomer, 102.
\textsuperscript{109} Dawson, “‘Comfort and Freedom,’” 201.
\textsuperscript{110} “Drank Her Samples.”
\textsuperscript{111} “Will Again Don Women’s Garb.”
\end{flushleft}
incongruous. Instead, they bolstered the image of Matson as being used to the finer things in life, to the point of irresponsible excess. This is further supported by Matson’s own, supposedly, recollection: “Being possessed of an income from property left in trust I was in a position to travel and amuse myself... At Monaco, of course, I gambled every night”.

Matson is most often described in the articles as stylish in a high class way. While there is some evidence that the elegance of his clothing was exaggerated, namely in an article that described his outfit as “an ordinary suit... of a strictly conventional cut”, it is actually this very exaggeration that proves that there was a vested interest in presenting Matson as classy and stylish.112 One article reads, “She came to the jail attired in a neat cutaway coat, silk hat, and patent-leather boots, and the sheriff was averse to compelling this ‘dandy gentleman’ to occupy a cell in the tank.”113 This implies the sheriff saw Matson as too refined because of his clothing to be placed among the common prisoners. Matson himself attested to his upper class status by saying, “My people are of the best class, although not allied to the nobility.”114 He is regularly called a “natty” and “stylish” dresser, implying he spends a great deal of time and money keeping up to date with fashion.115 One quote is particularly illustrative on this point, “Glib of tongue and natty in dress, Miss Matson worked her cards on many a tradesman in town who would not for the world, now that the denouement has come, acknowledge that he was tricked by the shining hat and aristocratic bearing of the pretender.”116 (Emphasis added)

This quote also highlights how Matson’s clothing and comportment fed into the allegations of forgery and his long term classification as a swindler. The very act of cross-dressing was placed within the realm of trickery by these papers and the law. Indeed, many of the laws that were used to prosecute cross-dressing were actually much more broad in

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112 “Louisa Has Her Say.”
113 “Her Betrothed Is a Woman.”
114 “Miss Matson Goes Cityward.”
115 “Miss Matson Goes Cityward”; “She Has Been a Man of the World for Over Twenty-Six Years”; “Her Betrothed Is a Woman”; “The Woman in Man’s Clothes”; “Will Again Don Women’s Garb”; “Drank Her Samples.”
116 “Will Again Don Women’s Garb.”
language, outlawing the wearing of “disguises”. As Sears remarks, while these laws did not prohibit cross-dressing on paper, they did so in practice.\textsuperscript{117} Despite the fact that the forgery charges were dropped, his reputation as a “swindler” persisted. The papers commonly reported on cross-dressing as a “masquerade”, as we have seen with Allen. Matson, too, was represented over and over again by the papers as having “masqueraded” as a man, a term that implies deceit.\textsuperscript{118} His subsequent career in dime museums as a freak show performer also proliferated this label, as Matson’s criminal reputation was marketed to an audience eager for the thrill of crime entertainment and the enticing curiosity of inspecting gender difference.\textsuperscript{119} Interestingly, Matson’s forgery is also sometimes mentioned in the same sentence as his high-class, fashionable, British identity. This might have served to link his criminality with being a European immigrant. In the January 28, 1895 issue of the San Francisco Examiner a journalist wrote, “the prisoners in the county jail of that city had been astonished by the discovery that one of their cell mates, who wore a silk hat, stylish clothes, and \textit{posed as an English swell}, is a woman.”\textsuperscript{120} (Emphasis added)

In fact, the majority of articles that speak on Matson in any depth show a great interest in conveying his non-American identity. From casual mentions that his bail was posted through the British Bank of North America\textsuperscript{121}, being called an Englishman by his ex-landlord\textsuperscript{122}, and in specific descriptions of his accent and upbringing like “I was born in the shires of England (her accent, which is not cockney, would alone attest that fact)”\textsuperscript{123} Matson is repeatedly shown to be an English immigrant. As an aside, this last quote is also an intriguing hint at Matson’s class associations, as cockney accents come from the low income neighborhoods of London.

\textsuperscript{117} Sears, \textit{Arresting Dress}, 3.
\textsuperscript{118} “Somforklædt som Mand.”; “Masqueraded as a Horrid Man”; “Masqueraded as a Man”; “Sixteen Years A Man”; “Masquerading as a Man,” January 28, 1895; “Masquerading as a Man,” January 30, 1895; “Woman Plays Man Sixteen Years”; “Just a Woman.”
\textsuperscript{119} Sears, \textit{Arresting Dress}, 105.
\textsuperscript{120} “Her Betrothed Is a Woman.”
\textsuperscript{121} “The Woman in Man’s Clothes.”
\textsuperscript{122} “She Has Been a Man of the World for Over Twenty-Six Years.”
\textsuperscript{123} “She Has Been a Man of the World for Over Twenty-Six Years.”
However, even more interesting is the fact that his Englishness was also viewed through his clothing specifically. Despite the fact that this is not pictured in any images of him, the *Morning Call* described Matson’s clothing, “Her light-colored trousers were turned up at the bottom in true English style.” Perhaps apocryphal, the story goes that the style of turning up the hem of one’s trousers came directly from Edward VII, who wanted to avoid getting the hem of his trousers dirty with mud. In another article, after describing Matson’s outfit and general appearance the journalist writes, “In short, she looks nothing so much as a solid, old English squire from one of the ‘shire’s.”

As we have seen, Milton Matson is consistently represented as a high class criminal European immigrant. From how his body and clothing are drawn to how they are described in text, there is a continual thread of class, criminality, and non-American status. This is in direct keeping with the view of sexologists who theorized that one source of America’s “degeneration” was the rot coming from European immigrants. One year before Matson’s arrest, James Weir wrote, “The Old World has gotten rid of [its degenerate] people as rapidly as possible by unloading them on our shores.” While Weir also saw many of these degenerates as those from lower classes, it was a concept that was built on top of early claims of the people of Europe being “over-civilized” and “effete” caused the downfall of Rome. Although sexologists such as Eugene S. Talbot contended that the East experienced this at a much higher rate, the West also experienced European immigration. Milton Matson serves as an example of this perceived degeneration coming from Europe and filtering into a Western America that was no longer protected by its frontier quality.

126 Boag, 180.
127 Boag, 177.
128 Boag, 180.
In this way, Matson and Allen may have been seen as two sources of the same problem. On the one hand, Allen's working class clothing was seen through the distortive lens of his gender difference and alleged crimes. Pictured wearing a Stetson-like hat and fringed chaps/trousers, Allen's clothing communicated his Western working-class status. However, situated next to articles listing his alleged crimes, allegedly predatory sexuality, and revealing his gender difference, the outfit's meaning is altered to reflect queer criminality. This all culminates with Allen's direct criminal contact with Native Americans, which underscored white American anxieties over the mixing of working class whites with racial minorities. Matson, on the other hand, was represented as a smooth talking swindler, whose clothing, class, and immigrant status were wrapped up together in newspaper images and articles. His silk top hat, cutaway coat, and cuffed trousers worked together to project a high class British identity. This combined with the knowledge of his birth-assigned gender, alleged crimes, and career as a freak show performer all lended the clothing an air of deceit. All these components come together to communicate his perceived identity as a corrupting force coming from effeminate high class European immigrants. While their transgender identities were never accepted by the press, their common insistence on being viewed as men contributed to the allegations of criminality and perversion thrown against them. While neither Allen nor Matson were never specifically identified as the source of degeneration by contemporary sexologists, through the representation of them and their clothing in crime reporting one can see they each represent two sides of the same public anxieties: the criminal poor white Americans tainted by queer minorities and the effeminized rich Europeans both leading to the downfall of civilization.

CONCLUSION

The question of gender expression in the late 19th and early 20th-century American West is far more complex than it may seem at first glance. Indeed, while gender normative expectations on clothing and behavior were widespread, the transgressing of these norms was also pervasive. AFAB people were expected to wear highly feminized silhouettes such as long
skirts and small waists. In spite of this, many AFAB people wore traditional men's clothing for many different reasons. Behavioral norms were also transgressed as AFAB people cross-dressed, drank, smoked, worked masculine jobs, and engaged in romantic relationships with women. Of course, as we have seen, perceptions of ideal femininity and masculinity were informed by class and race bias. The Lady and the Cattleman alike were inherently coded as middle to upper class and white. On top of this, non-white people were deeply associated with queerness, which was demonized and equated with under-evolution and perverse anachronism. Thus, the justification of colonial westward expansion could be conceived of as the white colonial father helping the subjugated non-white child to achieve evolved civility. Within this familial structure of power, Ladies were seen as a moralizing force that could bring evolved, moral civilization to the West while also seen as being in need of protection from immorality. As Western migration of middle to high class white women increased due to efforts from church leaders, anti-cross-dressing laws began to be put in place in order to curb the visibility of perceived immorality. Within this context, fears over the collapse of modern civilization ran rampant throughout normative white society. As the frontier closed, sexologists believed that the protecting nature of "wilderness" also was lost, leaving the American West vulnerable to degenerative forces.

These fears were ultimately projected on those who transgressed norms. Harry Allen and Milton Matson’s refusal to accept the gender they were assigned at birth symbolized the ultimate rejection of the hegemonic power structure. Not only were they able to gain access to male privilege in the job market, but their roles as seducers of women usurped cis men’s so-called natural right to sexual conquest. Therefore, these men were both perceived as perverted and dangerous to women and society alike, as they seemed to disrupt the familial structure that the entire colonial society was built upon. When their photographs and images were published in the crime news reporting, their clothing and bodies became curiosity and outrage based entertainment. The illegality of their clothing in conjunction with their other
alleged crimes painted them both as criminals and perverted the normative reading of their
dress. Where Allen and Matson differ is in their class and national associations. Allen’s
working-class masculine dress and comportment combined with stories of his criminal contact
with Native Americans showed a verifiable example of the anxieties of infection of white society
from working-class contact with queered racial minorities. Milton was instead an example of
infectious whites, the over-civilized and queered high classes immigrating to the United States
from Europe. His British identity and class are repeated over and over again in conjunction with
both his transgressive clothing and his criminal record. Thus, he represented a threat to
gender-normative national identity.

Unfortunately, the identification of trans individuals as threats to national order and
security plague us to this day. From January to May of 2023 alone, 49 states out of 50 in the US
have introduced a staggering 543 bills intended to restrict the rights and access to care for trans
people, including laws specifically against cross-dressing. This is up from the 174 anti-trans bills
proposed in the whole of 2022. In Tennessee this year, a bill was passed to make drag
performances illegal. While this bill purports to only target “adult cabaret,” it is worded vaguely
enough to be applied to any person dressing in clothing not associated with their birth-assigned
gender, much like 19th century anti-disguise and masquerade laws. The reported reasoning
for the banning of drag performance is the protection of children. State Representative Chris
Todd went as far to claim that, "They’re [drag performances] clearly meant to groom and recruit
children to this lifestyle, and folks in this community said we are not going to have that. That is
child abuse and we will not have that here," despite having never seen a drag performance in
his life. As a direct result of this kind of rhetoric, a child-friendly event at a New York City
library at which drag queens read books to children was met with a “wall” of angry protesters.

129 “2023 Anti-Trans Bills.”
130 Restrepo, “The Anti-Drag Bills Sweeping the U.S. Are Straight from History’s Playbook.”
132 “Protesters Swarm NYC Library Hosting Drag Story Hour for Kids.”
It is important here to note that the same moralistic excuse is being used to justify this law as was used to justify anti-cross-dressing law in the past: reproductive futurity. This strawman argument works to cast queer people and others who do not conform to white American normative expectations in a threatening light. In the context of cross-dressing law of the past and present, reproductive futurist arguments call for protecting the figure of the Child from immorality. In the past, this Child was the Lady, whose female gender in the cult of domesticity demoted her to a lessened, child-like maturity status. Her eyes needed to be protected from those who trangressed gender clothing and behavioral norms and thus cross-dressing was made illegal. More to this point, Ladies were seen to be sexual victims of trans men and other cross-dressing AFAB people. While today’s strawman has become the literal child rather than the figurative Child of the past, the reasons given for restricting trans rights are the same: to protect the Child from the visibility and perceived predatory sexuality of gender nonconforming people. This can be seen in the modern framing of queer gender experience and drag performance as a fetish, positing that trans people and drag queens represent a threat to both women in restrooms and children as a whole despite a glaring lack of evidence to support the theory.\(^{133}\) However, solid evidence is not actually important in these arguments. It is clear when one scrutinizes reproductive futurity that it is about protecting a colonial, domestic system of power rather than any figurative or literal Child. Thus, whether any children are actually being harmed is of no import as long as the fear of a harmed Child is proliferated and weaponized against queer subjects.

Today, the figure of trans men are all but invisible, likely due to the sexism that leaves AFAB people out of the narrative, the reframing of trans men as butch lesbians, and the higher normativity of AFAB people wearing masculine clothing. Trans men are as much the victims of

\(^{133}\) “No Link between Trans-Inclusive Policies and Bathroom Safety, Study Finds”; Waiton, “Transgender Fetish Is a Truly Shameful Modern Invention.”
these bills as are drag performers, trans women, non-binary, and genderqueer people. Yet, they are far less represented in discourses surrounding queerness.¹³⁴

To conclude, the lives of Harry Allen and Milton Matson can teach us many things about the ways in which clothing is seen to disrupt power structures. The ways Harry Allen and Milton Matson’s clothing was viewed shows us how they were viewed as a whole. While their contemporary societies vilified and castigated them for wearing gender affirming clothing, the evidence of their existence as well as their friends and family’s acceptance of their choice to transition through clothing helps to prove that not only is clothing foundational to the construction of gender but that the need for trans gender affirmation is longstanding and timeless. In an era where trans rights to gender affirmative clothing and medical care are being debated, these men serve as reminders that trans people are nowhere near a modern invention, even if the terminology is. The way they were perceived through the theory of degeneration, impacted significantly by class and race, has also unfortunately followed us to the modern age.

List of Figures


Figure 2: "Journal de Demoiselles." Genealogy Lady. 1897. https://genealogylady.net/2015/07/12/fashion-moments-leg-o-mutton-sleeves/1895-1898-1897-fashion-plate-no-151/.


Figure 4: "Fighter, Bootlegger and ‘Bad Man’ Is Miss Pickrell For Love of Whom Three Women Have Killed Themselves." The Tacoma Times. April 8, 1912. National Endowment for the Humanities.

Figure 5: “Nell Pickerell in cowboy outfit, which she wears a great deal.” The Tacoma Times. April 8, 1912. National Endowment for the Humanities.

Figure 6: “Luisa E. B. Metson [sic] who was betrothed to Miss Fairweather and is now in jail (from a sketch made recently in Los Gatos)." The San Francisco Examiner. January 30, 1895. Newspapers.com. https://sfexaminer.newspapers.com/image/458041766/.


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Caughie 52


