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## The Confluence of Heroism, Sissyhood, and Camp in *The Rawhide Kid: Slap Leather*

By Frank Bramlett

1

Based on a character from the 1950s, *The Rawhide Kid: Slap Leather* appeared in 2003 as a five-part serial in which Johnny Bart was reconceived as a gay gunslinger known as the Rawhide Kid.<sup>[1]</sup> Over the course of the five installments, the narrative arc of *Slap Leather* establishes the legitimacy of a gay man as both sissy and hero and also creates a safe space for other queers. Even the Sheriff — a straight man with a suspect masculinity — is viable in the Kid's Wild West. As the main character, the Rawhide Kid celebrates a combination of sissy and hero, defends queer masculinity, and punishes those who commit anti-sissy crime. Readers see the exploits of the Rawhide Kid, his unbelievable skill, and his fabulous taste. Not only is he a gunslinger but he also frequently plays at being a gunslinger. He is always aware of the possibilities of masquerade — of camp — and he cannot bear to be one of those men who "take it all so serious," as he points out to his enemy, Cisco Pike. Even though he has unsurpassed gun fighting skills, or perhaps because of that, he sometimes produces verbal commentary on the nature of gun fighting and just how good he is at it. He celebrates gunfighter culture: the clothes, the weapons, the fighting, but he also critiques it: men who for whatever reason fail to meet the Kid's standards for behavior are subject to being taught lessons the hard way. This celebration and critique of the gunfighter as a character serves as a foundation of the campiness in this comic.

2 Many reviews of *Slap Leather* see little value in the series and look at it more as a throw-away comic or a misguided attempt at invigorating comic book sales. Regarding the character of the Rawhide Kid, one reviewer states that the comic book:

has a *Will-&-Grace* type humor that plays into gay stereotypes rather than trying to actually craft a three-dimensional character [...]. Sure, [the author] Zimmerman casts aside the homophobic hatred or fear that's still a concern in the 21st century, but [the outcome of the comic] allow[s] us to point and laugh. (MacPherson).

Most of the reviews agree with this one, but I would posit that there is in fact at least *some* depth and at least *some* measure of value in this comic. After all, MacPherson concedes that Zimmerman avoids "homophobic hatred," and in the greater scheme of a heteronormative matrix in which many mainstream comics exist, this seems like a major step forward.

- 3 Lendrum (2005) draws on the sentiment behind many of the *Slap Leather* reviews, although he does concede that the volume helps complicate issues of audience membership and ideologies: "While the Rawhide Kid does little to offer an alternative to the dominant models of superhero masculinity, his mere presence in the public eye challenges the assumed hetero–normative 'ownership' of cultural iconography" (287). He further complains — with good reason — that Marvel Comics used *Rawhide Kid: Slap Leather* as "an attempt to test the waters for a new audience" (294), meaning that Marvel wanted to tap a gay male audience in an overt way. However, Lendrum's claim that the Kid is not "a politically motivated challenge to the dominant hetero–normative standard of superhero comic books" misses an opportunity to analyze the character of the Rawhide Kid, particularly his use of verbal camp and his unapologetic status as sissy–hero, both of which help challenge heteronormativity by incorporating variability into the mode of superhero masculinity.
- 4 Thus, instead of a reproduction of a dominant model of superhero masculinity, I would contend that the Rawhide Kid is a complex and rich character who expresses same–sex sexual attraction and who also inverts and counteracts heteronormative ideologies and instantiates a celebration of queerness through camp and sissiness. In the first section of this paper, I will explore the character of the Rawhide Kid, particularly how he is constituted through a nexus of heroism, sissiness, and camp. Then, the paper will explore the Kid's use of verbal camp as a means of both protecting and preserving other characters in the story yet simultaneously overturning heteromasculinist ideologies. This discussion points to the conclusion that camp is the element that blends the sissy and the hero together in this Western comic.

### Some Definitions Used in This Study

- 5 Theoretical explorations of camp are manifold, and accounts of the historical evolution of our understanding of camp can be found elsewhere (Booth 1983; Meyer 1994; and especially Cleto 1999). While some theorists follow Sontag (1966) and take camp to be located squarely in the realm of (gay/homosexual) aesthetics, others see it as encompassing taste but specify that camp arises from people who engage in camp. The analysis in this essay depends on the notion that as a discourse practice, camp exists because agents/speakers/writers produce it and agents/hearers/readers consume it.
- 6 On the surface, camp looks to be devoted to trivial matters — Booth (1983) claims that being "*camp is to present oneself as being committed to the marginal with a commitment greater than the marginal merits*" (16, Booth's italics). When Ross (1988) delineates schlock and kitsch from camp, he explains that camp "involves a celebration on the part of the cognoscenti of the alienation, distance, and incongruity reflected in the very process by which [camp itself] locates hitherto unexpected value in a popular or obscure text" (316). If Booth is correct, that camp "is a self–mocking abdication of any pretensions to power" (30), then reconciling the two extremes of heroic gunfighter on the one hand with a nineteenth century dandy on the other hand needs further explanation. The Rawhide Kid is a sissy — he does not cleave rigidly to common heteronormative masculinist practices (Bergling 2001; Green 1987). Simultaneously, the Kid is a hero: he saves the townsfolk, protects family relationships, and promotes (heterosexual) marriage. This seeming contradiction in terms, that a character can be both a sissy and a hero, is reconciled in the camp–oriented word choice, clothing, behaviors, and ideologies of the Rawhide Kid.
- 7 Camp is a masquerade in which an agent adopts a *Voice* in order to celebrate and critique the topic or situation at hand.<sup>[2]</sup> This definition takes masquerade as a "social practice which unsettles and disrupts the fantasy of coherent, unitary, stable, and mutually exclusive divisions" (Tseelon, 2001, 3). Further, masquerade "replaces clarity with ambiguity, certainty with reflexivity, and phantasmic

constructions of containment and closure with constructions that in reality are more messy, diverse, impure, and imperfect" (3). *Voice* may be any tool or prop or utterance that the agent uses to express camp meaning, like a well-loved quotation from a play, novel, or movie ("Fasten your seatbelts! It's going to be a bumpy night!" — Bette Davis/Margo Channing in *All About Eve*). It may be the difference between wearing a feather boa and wearing a boa constrictor (Booth, 1983, 16). And it may be as grandiose as traveling across the Australian continent, practicing a drag number on top of a large rickety bus named Priscilla while ensconced in a giant high-heeled shoe. The reason I choose *Voice* as my term is that camp is expression — it is communication — and *Voice* seems to me a simple yet elegant term for this discussion.

- 8 The term *Voice* specifically connotes the use of language, and language, particularly conversation and pragmatics, is the focus of this essay. My intention here is to abstract relevant moments of speech from the comic book so that the focus of the analysis may proceed relatively unblurred by the context of the drawings. This is similar to what conversation analysts aim for in their transcription of recorded talk; conversation analysis "is involved in the study of the orders of talk-in-interaction, whatever its character or setting" (ten Have 2007, 4). Alternatively, we may think of conversation analysis as an approach to studying how people use everyday conversation to create their social identities and social relationships with the people they come in contact with. That is to say, conversation analysis looks at human interaction as "*organizational* and *procedural*: when people talk with each other this is not seen as a series of individual acts, but rather as an emergent collectively organized event" (ten Have 2007, 9).
- 9 The format of the *Slap Leather* quotations in this essay differs to some degree from the format in the comic book. I have represented speech here like a transcript of a conversation, but this has been abstracted from speech balloons and the distribution of turns over various frames. My intent is to demonstrate through the transcription the importance of the language as language and as social practice. Since camp is a social practice, and a great deal of camp is linguistic, the extraction of conversations from the social context allows a greater emphasis on the language than may otherwise be possible. This is not to say that social context is irrelevant; I believe that knowing the social context is crucial in understanding the forms, functions, and uses of conversation. Thus I have included a small number of images from *Rawhide Kid: Slap Leather* to help readers contextualize the language under scrutiny.

## **The Character of the Rawhide Kid and his Origin Story**

- 10 The masquerade of camp forges the connection between the Rawhide Kid's two extremes: his unrivaled gun fighting and fist fighting skills and his unabashed sissiness (not to mention his largely implied sexual orientation). Most characters in *Rawhide Kid: Slap Leather* seem blind both to the Kid's camp discourse and to his sexual orientation. They read him solely as a hero, a really well-dressed hero. It is Laura Ingalls (the Sheriff's girlfriend) and the *Slap Leather* audience who sees the presence — and perhaps even the value — of the Rawhide Kid's camp and sissiness.
- 11 Before proceeding to a discussion of the Kid's use of camp, it is important to establish a sense of who he is as a character. Our understanding of the Rawhide Kid's character rests on the way he interacts with other characters in his gunslinger universe — through a level of sophistication noted by all in the Wild West. The Kid is John-Wayne-rugged, Rudolph-Valentino-refined, and Paul-Lynde-lite, all rolled into one. Most of the other characters do not read the Kid as gay, nor even as a sissy. Instead, they see him as highly skilled in fist fighting, unsurpassed as a gunfighter, and remarkably well-dressed. The Rawhide Kid blends the masculine and the feminine, sometimes wearing his sissy identity quietly, like a silky undershirt to the rough-and-tumble overcoat of Wild

West masculinity.

- 12 This blending of characteristics is evident in the opening scenes of Issue One, just after the Sheriff and his deputy have been shot and tossed out of the saloon and into the street. Rather than shooting people right away and asking questions later, the Kid carefully weighs the situation and uses his gaze, facial expression, and gesture to gain control of the scene, squelching the violence and initiating medical care of the recently shot law man and the subsequent burial of the deceased deputy. His approach is clearly unorthodox, and the members of the Cisco Pike gang, the ones who caused the ruckus in the saloon, say as much to each other.<sup>[3]</sup>

The Kid: Now you thugs go on and get back in that saloon or I'm going to get *good* and upset.

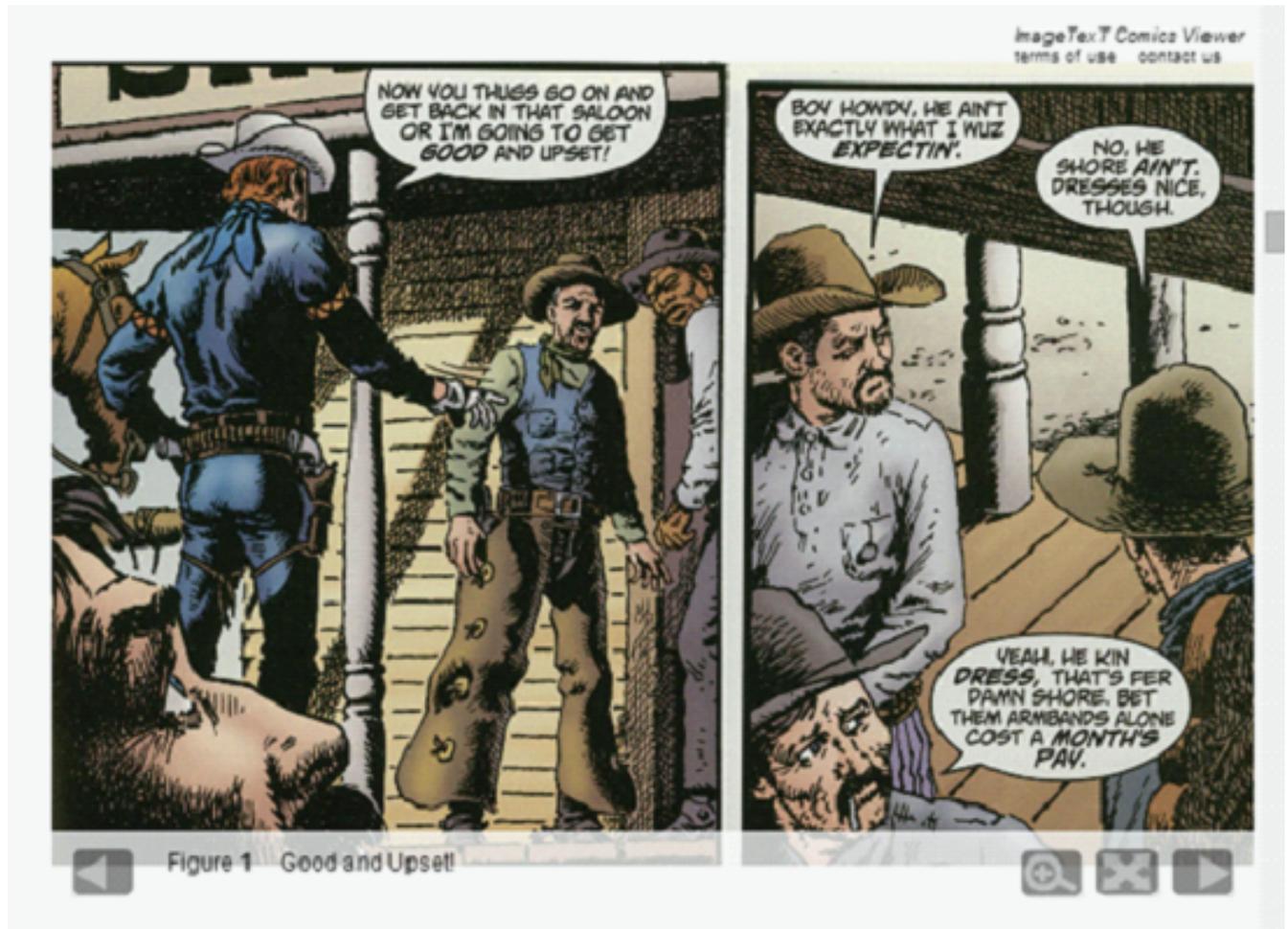
Thug 1: Boy howdy, he ain't exactly what I wuz *expectin'*.

Thug 2: No, he shore *ain't*. Dresses nice, though.

Thug 3: Yeah, he kin *dress*, that's for damn shore. Bet them armbands alone cost a *month's pay*.

The Rawhide Kid's directive ("get back in that saloon") and commissive ("I'm going to get *good* and upset") meet our expectations that the good guy will take control of the situation and be able to handle the bad guys.<sup>[4]</sup> In contrast, though, the disconnect between the Rawhide Kid's intended outcome (that the thugs cease and desist) and the verbal style/register he uses to achieve that outcome calls attention to itself. In fact it seems that the Kid employs an unexpected combination of codes to achieve his purpose: he uses the term thugs to refer to the members of Cisco Pike's gang, yet he also uses a nurturing caretaker strategy ("I'm going to get *good* and upset"), sounding more like a parent or guardian trying to convince a child to follow a prescribed (or at least preferred) course of action. The use of language to teach social skills is called language socialization (de Geer 2004). In this way, parents or caregivers "point out either lack of adherence to a norm, e.g., turn-taking rules, politeness phrases, etc., or it may be used as an explicit directive to encourage proper or desired [verbal or non-verbal] behavior" (1706). Blum-Kulka (1990) further identifies discourse strategies used by parents toward their children; e.g., parents used "mitigated directness" by, among other things, "giving reasons and justifications that assume cooperation and lead the hearer to see the reasonableness of the act" (271).

- 13 In using this language socialization strategy, the Kid demonstrates that he is both serious about breaking up the fight and also reluctant to engage in violence himself. After all, the Kid could have shot all the thugs rather than simply have broken up the fight. In this way, he acts as a parent removing children from a violent scene or a teacher sending some misbehaving students back into the classroom to cool off. In effect, he sets himself apart as a peacemaker first and foremost but does not erase the potential for gunslinger violence. This juxtaposition of gentle linguistic code and violent gunfighter scene exemplifies the use of camp in this comic, and it is the use of camp that, among other things, establishes the character of the Rawhide Kid.



- 14 While this smooth, understated verbal style suits the Kid well, there are other times when the difference between what is said and the expectations of the social context is a little jarring. In these instances, the Kid is much more open about his sissynood. In Issue Two, he rides out to the camp of Cisco Pike to introduce himself and get to know the criminals. Cisco Pike invites him to join the gang, presumably to rob an establishment of some kind. But not all of the outlaws are willing to accept the Kid without some kind of evidence that he is worthy to join the gang:

Red Duck: How do we *really* know he's so fast? And he sure don't *look* too tough.

Cisco Pike: Now that's a *fact*. I never *have* really seen you shoot or fight. Just *heard* 'bout ya.

[...]

The Kid: Oh no. Is this going to be one of those *macho tough guy test things*?

Cisco Pike: Looks that way.

The Kid: Uch. These are *sooooo* boring.

Red Duck: I'm telling ya, Cisco, this guy acts like some kinda damn *daisyboy*.

This exchange continues for a few frames, and the Kid proceeds to dispatch the entire gang in fist fighting and shooting accuracy. The outcome of the *Macho Tough Guy Test* is that the Kid leaves in

a huff and swears he will never be a part of the gang. As he rides off, several members of the gang remark on his fighting ability as well as his refined taste in clothes. Again, the Rawhide Kid uses language that indicates his status as a sissy ("These are *sooooo* boring"), and even though not everyone recognizes him as a sissy (like Cisco Pike), at least one key character, Red Duck, does see him as such, and this is an essential part of the story's conflict.

- 15 While a majority of scenes demonstrates the Rawhide Kid's blend of sissy identity and gunfighter identity (a curious blend of hyperfeminine and hypermasculine), his very *raison d'être* is revealed to the reader in a one-page origin story, found in Issue Four. During this scene, a very young Johnny Bart is being verbally harassed and physically abused by neighborhood boys. Even though Johnny's dad is within earshot of the commotion, he fails to intervene on Johnny's behalf. The dad approaches the group of boys and punches his own son square in the face:

Mr. Bart: *Shut the hell up, you damn sissyboy!* You make me sick! Bad enough I gotta be the  
laughin' stock 'a town, but now I got *you* prancin' 'round not even able to fight yer  
own  
ya with  
me. [next frame] Well, what in the hell are ya *lookin'* at, *sissy?*

Johnny: *You*, Papa. I'm finally looking at *you*.

As a result of this scene, the reader infers that little Johnny Bart became the Rawhide Kid at least in part as a reaction to his violent, oppressive childhood. As an adult, the Kid defeats injustice and especially bullying wherever he goes. The conspicuous absence of verbal camp here suggests that camp is a discursive practice learned later on in life, or at least in this case, that young Johnny Bart grew into manhood while also learning about his sexual orientation, learning how to be the best gunfighter in the west, and learning how to make it all look both flawless and effortless.

- 16 As a collection, *Slap Leather* tells the story of how the Rawhide Kid works to undo bullying and anti-sissy ideologies and behaviors. This aspect of his character underpins a great deal of his interactions in the comic and in fact triggers several decisions that the Kid makes throughout the story: he offers to be the deputy sheriff, he defends the townsfolk, he prevents the rape of the Sheriff's girlfriend, and he teaches the Sheriff's son, Toby, that anti-sissy behaviors and attitudes are wrong. However, his anti-bully stance is not the sole aspect of his character important to the story. Equally important, the Rawhide Kid is himself both gay and a sissy, and it is the nexus of these two characteristics — hero and sissy — that constitute his attitudes toward life, love, family bonds, and handsome cowboys.

## Verbal Camp

- 17 Camp is a social practice, a masquerade in which an agent borrows a *Voice* to celebrate and critique a topic or situation at hand. Frequently there is a disconnect between the social expectations of the situation and the linguistic code (register) used in the situation. For instance, in the film *Jeffrey*, when Darius, Sterling, and Jeffrey attend the memorial of a friend of theirs who has died of AIDS complications, Steven Weber/Jeffrey is upset because he finds himself flirting with one of the memorial attendees. Patrick Stewart/Sterling puts things into a gay man's perspective by producing a camp utterance: "It isn't that we're not sad. It's just that there are all these guys here." Sterling recognizes the dissonance that arises when the social expectations of a memorial service and the social practice of flirting intersect; this is both a celebration and a critique of the realities of being a

gay man during the height of the AIDS crisis. The disconnect between social expectation and discursive practice is a complex phenomenon, one that very often happens at the utterance level. Keith Harvey (2000) has developed a framework to describe the verbal properties of camp; these include paradox, inversion, ludicrism and parody (243). He later adds that camp is "motivated by a playful and subversive take on sign-making that relies on citationality as a metaproperty" (2002, 1149). The Rawhide Kid uses verbal camp in the majority of exchanges throughout the five issues. Arguably, camp is a way of always celebrating queerness. Furthermore, the Rawhide Kid uses camp to celebrate sissyness, condemn sissyphobia, protect marriage and family, and neutralize heteronormativity.

- 18 Revisiting the *Macho Tough Guy Test* scene provides an entree into the nature of the Kid's verbal camp. He uses playful, subversive language in order to celebrate his own prowess as a gunfighter and critique the normative social practices of male gunfighters having to continually prove their masculinity:

The Kid: Oh no. Is this going to be one of those *macho tough guy test things*?

Cisco Pike: Looks that way.

The Kid: Uch. These are *sooooo* boring.

Red Duck: I'm telling ya, Cisco, this guy acts like some kinda damn *daisyboy*.

The Kid: I'm *rubber*, you're *glue*, Red Duck. It *is* Red Duck, right? That couldn't have been easy growing up with. You might want to save some of that rage for your parents.

Red Duck questions the Rawhide Kid's credentials and creates a simile to describe his misgivings to Cisco Pike: "this guy acts like some kinda damn daisyboy." We see the Kid react in a moment of inversion, specifically by using a reversal of expected rhetorical routines (Harvey 2000, 247). Rather than violently neutralize Red Duck's participation in the conversation with a punch to his nose, the Kid instead follows with an utterance (rubber/glue) usually associated with children's playground teasing rituals. Then, the Kid abruptly switches register from childhood name-calling to adult psychotherapy. He in fact seems to sympathize/empathize with Red Duck and even gives him advice on managing his anger issues. In a single conversational turn, the Kid has used a discourse strategy of reversing rhetorical routines (Harvey 2000, 247) as a way of engaging in the social practice of camp.



19 This verbal exchange precipitates the physical challenge of the Rawhide Kid dispatching all the outlaws, with Cisco Pike standing on the sidelines observing the ass-whipping his gang members are getting. As the dust settles, Cisco and the Kid reflect on the nature of the fight and how well the Kid performed:

Cisco Pike: Well, you ain't too shabby, I'll give ya that.

The Kid: Not too shabby? *Puh-leeze*. If you need to act unimpressed so you don't lose face, I understand, but don't insult me. I'm *magnificent* and you *know* it. My hat didn't even come off — which, by the way, is *imported Canadian beaver* and probably cost more than your horse.

Cisco Pike: It is a nice hat.

The Kid: *Nice?* "Hi, I don't think we've met. I'm the Rawhide Kid and you must be the *King of Understatement*."

Cisco Pike: What the hell are you carryin' on about now? You wanna *ride* with us or not?

The Kid: Absolutely not. You've gotten me *filthy* before lunch and been rude at every turn. I have no *intention* of riding with you. I find your entire club to be crude, tactless louts, and I want nothing more to do with any of you!

Cisco Pike: Okay, okay. Lord, you carry on like a *woman*.

Two elements of Harvey's verbal camp framework are readily apparent in this brief exchange. The first is *ludicrism*, specified in this case as a motivated naming practice. By calling Cisco Pike "The King of Understatement," the Kid critiques Cisco's unwillingness to acknowledge his overall fabulousness. The Kid expects Cisco to praise him for his skills, and perhaps even for his fashion sense (an imported Canadian beaver hat). After all, the Kid *is* a hero, and he *is* the nicest dresser in the book, and he *is* accustomed to hearing all this praise heaped upon him. (My first inclination was to read *Canadian beaver* as an ironic sexual innuendo referring to female anatomy, but then I learned that cowboy hats can be made of beaver, and some of them are quite expensive.)

- 20 The second important camp element of this exchange is found in what Harvey (2000) calls citing femininity (252). Cisco Pike's yes/no question (You wanna *ride* with us or not?) gets a negative response from the Kid but also earns an explication. The Kid complains about the impolite behavior that the gang engages in, and he uses language (word choice) to indicate his displeasure. Cisco Pike's rejoinder indexes the Kid's utterances as citing femininity: "Okay, okay. Lord, you carry on like a *woman*." For whatever reason, Cisco has not yet begun to read the Kid as a sissy, as anything but an accomplished gunfighter.
- 21 While the camp elements of this exchange are readily identifiable, the playful tone of it is not. Sontag writes that, at its best, camp is sweet. Harvey describes camp as playful, but I argue that in cases like this, camp does not play. Indeed, camp can be excoriating and makes its point in a sharp, incisive way. This conversational exchange between the Rawhide Kid and Cisco Pike is on a par with that moment in the 1995 movie *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar*, when Patrick Swayze/Vida Bohemme tears up John Leguizamo/ChiChi Rodriguez's princess points while Wesley Snipes/Noxeema Jackson looks on in a kind of resigned disappointment. But it certainly stops far short of the violence in the scene in the 1992 film *Single White Female*, when Jennifer Jason Leigh/Hedy kills Steven Weber/Sam — who is the boyfriend of Bridget Fonda/Allie — by shoving the heel of a pump into his eye socket. This physical action qualifies as a kind of eerie celebration in the choice of murder weapon (of the value of feminine beauty? of a reliable pair of pumps?), but the critique is serious and asks to be taken as such. Although the Rawhide Kid does kill many of the bad guys, he does not do so in a camp way; the slayings are serious, are unironic, and resonate with readers as belonging to a typical Wild West narrative. On the other hand, when the Kid chastises the Cisco Pike gang for their bad manners, he accesses discourse features often associated with caretaker speech as well as upper-class or academic vocabulary; after all, we do not expect a gunfighter to refer to other gunfighters as "crude, tactless louts." The Kid does, though, and his utterance seems to be the verbal equivalent of a parent's shaking a finger at a child for misbehaving. This is more on the serious side than on the sweet, playful side.
- 22 Regardless of whether camp is sweet, citing femininity is a prominent feature of much of the Kid's camp utterances. Throughout his visit to Cisco Pike's campsite, the Kid relies on politeness strategies and hyperbolic adjectives to create his utterances.<sup>[5]</sup> For instance, he uses an on-record politeness strategy of asking permission ("May I move to the shooting demonstration now, please?"), which seems out of place in a macho tough guy test. Then, in his next utterance, the Kid engages in hyperbole regarding his gun fighting skills ("don't blink. This is just *fantastic*, but it's

very fast."). On the one hand, this hyperbole can be considered bragging. After all, how fantastic can a gunslinger be? On the other hand, the Kid is that good — he is simply stating the obvious, so how much hyperbole is it, really? I think it serves a dual purpose: to celebrate and to critique. A non-camp gunfighter might have no need to give an introduction and running commentary to the fighting and shooting he is about to engage in. The Kid's social practice of camp celebrates the excellence of his skill set and critiques the socially inept and morally inferior behaviors of the Pike gang.

Although Booth (30) argues that camp is a self-mocking abdication of any pretensions of power, the Kid's brand of camp abdicates nothing and in fact succeeds in the struggle for power in the social interaction.

- 23 Another way to see the camp value in the Rawhide Kid's talk is to contrast it with non-camp talk produced by the other characters. If a non-camp gunfighter *does* make commentary, it is not to critique the situation but to support it, to emphasize it. When Red Duck utters a commissive in the macho tough guy test ("Gonna cut your heart out"), this seems to be an honest, sincere threat, not a camp critique. It is an unvarnished, unironic claim that narrates the events that are about to unfold. In other words, non-camp talk from Red Duck narrates and predicts while camp talk from the Rawhide Kid narrates, predicts, and makes commentary through a discordant blend of codes, all at the same time.

## How Verbal Camp Functions in Creating a Multiplicity of Meanings

- 24 Ledrum (2005) points out that *Slap Leather* "is filled with tongue and [sic] cheek humor and sexual innuendo, but at no point does the Kid explicitly state he is homosexual. Nor does anyone in the book every figure it out" (293). It is true that the Kid never explicitly comes out (i.e., he never says, "I'm gay"), but at least one of the characters (Laura Ingalls) does know, and other characters, we might argue, are able to figure it out. It is, in fact, possible that the Kid intentionally uses camp to test the proverbial waters, to see who "gets it," as far as his sexual orientation goes. This is made clear in Issue Two, when the Kid is sitting in the Sheriff's living room, volunteering to be deputy in order to help defeat the Cisco Pike gang. The Kid produces camp utterances which the Sheriff does not read as camp. Finally, when he cannot resist it any longer, the Kid says, "I wish I could be you when you finally start getting me." The Kid is playing a game with the other characters, and the name of his game is camp.
- 25 One section in particular, the fight scene near the end of the volume, demonstrates how the Rawhide Kid uses camp to celebrate and critique outlaw culture in the West. The culminating fight scene in Issue Five reveals a nearly empty town, one whose inhabitants have fled at the behest of the Rawhide Kid. There seem to be only five people in town on this night when Cisco Pike's gang invades: the Rawhide Kid, Laura Ingalls, Sheriff Matt Morgan, the Sheriff's son, Toby, and Red Duck, who is behind bars in the city jail. When the gang rides in, Cisco Pike sends three thugs to rob the bank, where The Kid fights them and kills them. While the action is occurring at the bank, another thug, Le' Sabre, sneaks into the jailhouse to break Red Duck out of jail. Laura is left in charge of the prisoner, and the following exchange takes place when Le' Sabre decides he wants to rape Laura before he sets Red Duck free.

Le' Sabre: <sup>[6]</sup> *Excuse me, mon amie!* I 'ave come to take you out of this *Bastille!*

Red Duck: 'Bout *time* too, Frenchy. The *key's* over yonder on that nail.

Le' Sabre: Perhaps Le' Sabre vil just 'ave a *little private moment* with the mademoiselle first....

[blows out candle in the next frame]

Laura struggles against Le' Sabre, and when he fails to comply with her request to be left alone, she scratches his face, to which Le' Sabre responds verbally:

Le' Sabre: I like a kitty that plays — 'ow you zay it? — ***"Ruff."***

Two frames later, Le' Sabre finds himself lying on the floor, looking up at The Kid, who is relighting the candle.

The Kid: Good news: *I* like to play *"ruff."*

Le' Sabre: OOOOOOOOO, Monsieur Rawhide Keed. You and I are not going to ***"play"*** at all.

Perhaps it is impossible for us to determine for certain whether Le' Sabre knows of the Kid's sexual orientation, but their brief conversational exchange strongly suggests that he does. The use of type face and punctuation helps the reader get at the meaning of character utterances. Le' Sabre's word ***"Ruff"*** is bolded, italicized, and surrounded by quotation marks. The Kid's response is to italicize *"ruff"* and put quotations around it, but not to bold it. (Bold and italics are used frequently in this comic, but quotation marks are rare.) The quotation marks invite multiple readings — the authors here choose to highlight multivalent semantic value. Clearly, Le' Sabre uses ***"Ruff"*** to express his sexual desire for Laura and to foreshadow the roughness of the act, which if successful would be rape. He expects Laura to put up a fight (her way of playing/doing "being ruff") and he plans to be rough with her in order to achieve the rape. The Rawhide Kid interrupts Le' Sabre's plans and uses verbal camp as a way of setting the stage for their physical confrontation. He borrows Le' Sabre's terminology and expands its meaning: the idea of sexual roughness is still there, although it is only an echo of Le' Sabre's intent to rape. The primary meaning is that the Kid will physically defeat Le' Sabre thereby preventing the rape.<sup>[7]</sup>



- 26 In response to the Rawhide Kid's invitation to play ruff, Le' Sabre shifts emphasis from "ruff" to "play," eliminating both the semantic multivalence and the banter. In this utterance, "play" is bolded, italicized, and surrounded by quotation marks, indicating that Le' Sabre understands the possibility of multiple meanings conveyed by the Rawhide Kid yet rejects all of them; he wants no sexual play, no play fighting, and probably even no more language play. Le' Sabre frees Red Duck from his cell and there commences a fight among Red Duck, Le' Sabre, the Kid, and the Sheriff, who has just recently and coincidentally entered the jailhouse at that moment.
- 27 In this scene, the Kid demonstrates his heroic side in preventing sexual violence while also engaging in camp language. In borrowing Le' Sabre's words, the Kid has borrowed a *Voice*, specifically Le' Sabre's lexeme *ruff*, to celebrate both his own sexuality and his status as unbeatable gunfighter, with the added twist of celebrating his sexual prowess. At the same time, he critiques a component of Le' Sabre's actions, thereby condemning the outlaw for his indefensible behavior toward Laura, attempting to engage in a horrendous sexual crime. Camp's primary function — to celebrate and critique — often involves the use of lexical ambiguity, allowing for a multiplicity of readings. The social practice of camp as a masquerade insists that readers/hearers delve into the wide-ranging possibility of meanings created in the moment of camp. This multiplicity is a hallmark of camp and is meant to disrupt and destabilize discourse coherence, as the Kid achieves in his disruption of the attempted rape.

### The Rawhide Kid Defends Family Values and Promotes Heterosexual Marriage

- 28 In the character of the Rawhide Kid, we see that hero and sissy intersect. Part of his *modus operandi*

is that he feels free to engage in stereotypically gay behaviors. His clothes, his hat, his pistols, and his horse signify his participation in gunslinger culture as well as his self-aware commentary on it. He also easily steps outside his gunfighter bounds; he takes piano lessons, he carries wine and wine glasses, he wears white gloves and sometimes sunglasses, and he flirts with cowboys whom he finds attractive — especially the rich Cartrite brothers. (*Cartrite* has at least two spellings in *Slap Leather*; the other spelling is *Cartright*. This is a playful reference to the television show *Bonanza* and two of the Cartwright brothers Hoss and Little Joe.) The hero-sissy Rawhide Kid uses all these social practices and resources in order to preserve family and (heterosexual) marriage more than any other character in the comic book.

- 29 One of the Kid's most profound hero behaviors is his willingness to serve as a role-model to children, especially the Sheriff's son, Toby. Shortly after the Kid arrives in town, some of the boys are apparently dying of curiosity to meet him, so after dark, they sneak up on him at his campsite outside town. They discover the Kid doing sit-ups by the campfire, where he wears only black briefs and cowboy boots. Once the Kid figures out he is in no danger, he and the children establish a friendly repartee about famous Wild West figures. Over the course of the story, Toby begins to identify with the Kid very strongly, much more so than with the Sheriff. After all, he sees how talented the Kid is, and he sees how talent-less his father is. It is this very strong connection between Toby and the Kid that I believe allows Toby to be reunited with his father, the Sheriff. Toby is mortified that his father is such an ineffective law man, and he calls his father names like *yellow belly* and *coward*, and he says his dad "might as well be a dressmaker... or... or... or a *girl!*" (Issue Four). In order to save the relationship between father and son, the Kid stages an elaborate gunfight where the Sheriff appears to successfully kill Cisco Pike.<sup>[8]</sup>
- 30 *Slap Leather* produces and reproduces the heteronormative ideology of the straight man winning the battle, but in an ironic sense. It is the sissy/gay/queer Rawhide Kid who saves the bumbling sheriff who subsequently succeeds in throwing off the yoke of cowardice. This redeems the Sheriff in the eyes of his love interest Laura, his son Toby, and the townsfolk in general. The Sheriff's masculinity, however, is not uninterrogated Wild West masculinity. The Sheriff is queer-straight, what Heasley (2005) might call a "male living in the Shadow of Masculinity" (122). Indeed, the Sheriff has his own brand of manhood — of what he calls *law mannin'* — which is, in fact, the reason he is marked as a sissy by all the characters in the comic except for the Rawhide Kid. The Sheriff follows the law, not the rules of the Wild West, and he teaches his son, unsuccessful though the attempts may be, that killing is wrong. For the Sheriff, the first and best course of action is to follow the procedures as set out in the legal system, including arrest and a trial (fair if possible). The moral for Toby, then, is that he learns that killing is a dispreferred choice, that it is better to try not to kill than to kill upon first provocation. This lesson is difficult for Toby to learn. He refuses to heed his father's advice, and at first he fails to understand the same advice from the Kid. It is the showdown in the street between Cisco Pike's gang on the one hand and the Sheriff and the Kid on the other where Toby finally understands.
- 31 Regardless of the lesson that Toby learns, there remains the ideological gap between the Sheriff's queer masculinity and the expectations of masculinity held by the rest of the characters in the comic. At the beginning of Issue Two, after the deputy has been killed and the Sheriff wounded, the Sheriff has to face the townsfolk, who do not have words of kindness and understanding for him:

Clem: Hey, Jasper, you seen muh *cat*?

Jasper: No I ain't, Clem. Maybe we oughta call him.

Clem: **PUSSY! HERRRE PUSSY!**

Jasper: Puss, Puss, Puss...Come on out, you cute little puss.

[the two cowboys laugh]

Sheriff: Funny. *Very* funny.

Although Clem and Jasper do not overtly call into question the Sheriff's heterosexuality, they do call into question his masculinity. On the other hand, at the end of the story, the Sheriff is credited with the death of a terrifying outlaw, but the future doubtless holds another showdown between the Sheriff and some criminal, a showdown that he will certainly lose without expert assistance like he received from the Rawhide Kid. Thus, the Sheriff goes a step further and reinforces his heterosexual masculinity by marrying Laura. One of the final scenes in the comic depicts Toby as ring bearer while the Kid stands near the couple dabbing his eyes with a lacy white handkerchief. Zimmerman and Severin devote a full page to this scene, thereby using iconic imagery to showcase the ideological importance of this particular marital event. It should be further noted that Toby participates in the heterosexual rite of marriage while wearing a replica of the Kid's gunfighter uniform: big buttons, red scarf, and all.

- 32 That the Kid risks even his own life to make the father/son relationship between the Sheriff and Toby work attests his dedication in promoting family values. Nevertheless, even this act of self-sacrifice has camp elements. In the final showdown, Cisco Pike says things (e.g., "Slap leather") that the Kid camps on ("Another great expression"). But the Kid pretends to take the fall so Toby can read his father as a hero. The ideology of violence (killing is a normal aspect of life) wins out, but Toby learns the lesson anyway: a man should not kill another man unless he has no other choice.

### **The Confluence of Heroism, Sissyhood, and Camp**

- 33 As defined earlier, camp is a masquerade in which an agent adopts a Voice in order to celebrate and critique the topic or situation at hand. This definition takes masquerade as a "social practice which unsettles and disrupts the fantasy of coherent, unitary, stable, and mutually exclusive divisions" (Tseñlon, 2001, 3). The Rawhide Kid is a sissy, a man who violates expectations of masculine gender roles. In short, the Kid fights against anti-sissy masculinist bullies by celebrating his own sissyhood and the sissyhood of others; he achieves this celebration in part through the use of camp.
- 34 As has been noted elsewhere, critics often "evaluate comics purely for the extent to which they support or criticize dominant ideology [and] presume that ideological analysis means only determining whether a work expresses a 'dominant' or 'subversive' ideology and then visiting it with the appropriate condemnation or praise" (Singer, 2003, 393). In fact, the text shows a conflicted stance toward the roles of "gays" and "sissies." We may even identify in the Rawhide Kid's character an element of gay machismo which does not involve:

parodic repudiation of straight machismo, but a profound respect for it. [...] if gay males threaten male heterosexual identity, it is not because they offer a detached parody of that identity, but rather because "from within their nearly mad identification with it, *they never cease to feel the appeal of its being violated.*" (Bersani, 1987, 208–209 qtd. in Dollimore, 1999, 233)

After all, The Kid is at first mean to Laura ("Sweetie, why don't you run down to the dress shop and see if they have anything in a color that will flatter instead of insult?"), although by the end of the story they are fast friends. Also, the Kid shuts down any use of the term *sissy* or its equivalent; this

could represent some lingering (misogynistic, antigay) self-hate wherein the Kid may feel comfortable acting in certain (sissy) ways but remain uncomfortable when confronted with the linguistic label. Likewise, Severin and Zimmerman include a presumably lesbian character (Catastrophe Jen) who embodies several destructive stereotypes. The Kid refers to her as "the horribly butch Catastrophe Jen," signaling misogynistic anti-lesbian bias on the Kid's part. Overall, I sense in the character of the Rawhide Kid a deep tension between hypermasculine hero, gay man in a heterosexual cowboy culture, and sissy in an anti-sissy cowboy culture. Camp is a way for the Rawhide Kid to negotiate the conflicting demands of these roles, though he does not always succeed fully in this endeavor.

- 35 Like many comics, this Western manages to re-establish a sense of justice and rightness in the world. In this instance, however, an added, unexpected layer of justice is that the Rawhide Kid strives to overturn anti-sissy ideologies. Not only is the sissy okay in and of himself, but the sissy is also celebrated. The queerness and campiness of the Rawhide Kid does not damage straight people — heterosexual marriage is not destroyed; rather, it is celebrated, protected, and expanded. Young boys are not molested by a creepy pedophile; instead, they are taught valuable life lessons by a heroic gay man. The Rawhide Kid helps heal the heterosexual world by — at least momentarily — ridding it of sissyphobia. *Slap Leather* blends camp and sissiness to celebrate the sissy, to condemn anti-sissy social practices both verbal and physical, and to help shore up the importance of human relationships, especially the family.
- 36 In this essay I am not attempting to suggest that camp is always an adhesive for conflicting identities. As a character, the Rawhide Kid performs his dual status as sissy and as hero in a variety of scenes, each aspect of his character rising and falling, ebbing and flowing as the narrative requires and as he chooses in his interactions with other characters. In this instance, both the sissy and the hero are inflected by camp — both camp sensibility and camp performance — yet the presence of camp creates something that is neither traditional sissy nor traditional hero. The interrogation of status quo heteronormative categories is a hallmark definition of what it means to be/act/perform queer; the Rawhide Kid is a queer character, but he does not exist solely to invert, subvert, and/or transgress heteronormative ideologies. Sometimes, he just wants a little cowboy love.
- 37 The Rawhide Kid performs his heroism on multiple levels using multiple tools, and he melds his hero status with sissiness by using camp. The Rawhide Kid is an agent of good, an agent of change. His sissiness and his gun fighting and fist fighting skills are tools he uses to bring about a positive change in the world he lives in. He engages in camp to celebrate sissiness, to condemn sissyphobia, and to help shore up the importance of human relationships, especially the family. Camp is his way of having a little fun while he rides into the sunset.

## Notes

[1]An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2007 International Comic Arts Forum in Washington, DC. I would like to thank my colleagues Lisabeth Buchelt and Kathy Radosta for valuable comments on the manuscript. I also appreciate the comments of the anonymous *InterText* reviewers. All errors remain mine alone.

[2]My notion of "big-V" Voice is adapted from James Gee's (2005) distinction between "little-d" discourse and "big-D" Discourse. Meyer (1994) also makes a distinction between little-c "camp" (arising from queer appropriations) and big-C "Camp" (really, truly, authentically queer).

[3]I have attempted to maintain the use of speaker turns, typeface, and punctuation in the transcript form, but there are several possible variations that I cannot represent graphically because they are normally indeterminate in the comic book medium. (These include both the measurement of silence and the amount of simultaneous talk between speakers). For instance, there is probably at least a short pause between the end of the Kid's turn ("I'm going to get **good** and upset") and the first thug's utterance ("Boy howdy, he ain't exactly what I wuz *expectin'*") that I did not represent explicitly and that is not represented in the drawings. Further, because of the change of frame and change of viewer/reader perspective, it is probable (but not definite) that the Kid was not supposed to overhear these remarks, suggesting that the thugs are using a lower volume in order to have this conversation take place among themselves. Finally, the simultaneous use of **bold** and *italics* to represent **words** is very frequent in this comic. Presumably, this use of typeface expresses changes in volume, intonation contour (alternations in pitch), or some combination.

[4]*Directive* and *commissive* are two types of utterances known as speech acts. In speech act theory, utterances function not just as speech but also as social action. A *directive* is an utterance that signals a command, imperative or request from the speaker to the hearer. A *commissive* is an utterance through which the speaker indicates that s/he will engage in a future course of action. When an utterance carries meaning that is not an entailment, hearers have to do work to unpack the implied meaning. This might also be expressed as the difference between literal meaning and conventional meaning (Grundy, 2000, 62 – 69). The Rawhide Kid's commissive ("I'm going to get **good** and upset") does two kinds of work here: the direct/explicit meaning is that he will get upset, but the indirect or implied meaning is that he will do something about this situation, i.e., engage in whatever means necessary to stop the gang members from doing anything else to harm the Sheriff.

[5]A politeness strategy is a communicative act that a speaker uses to protect the social face of interlocutors in a social interaction (Brown and Levinson, 1999, 321–335). Ordinarily, a politeness strategy is used to mitigate a face threatening act (FTA). When the Rawhide Kid asks permission of Cisco Pike, he is acknowledging Pike's positive social face, his need to be acknowledged and appreciated. Ironically, the Kid does not need to use politeness strategies because he has nothing to fear — the Kid does not expect any retribution for his behavior. This makes his use of politeness strategies all the more remarkable.

[6]If we read *mon amie* as a typographical error, then Le' Sabre has accidentally referred to Red Duck as his "female friend" rather than *mon ami*, which indicates "male friend." However, if this is not an error, then Le' Sabre may have some explaining to do.

[7]This verbal play between Le' Sabre and the Rawhide Kid echoes Meyer's distinction between little-c camp and big-C Camp. According to Meyer, "big-c" Camp is queer only, while "little-c" camp is appropriated from outside of queer circles (1994, 1). Arguably, Le' Sabre has a camp orientation, but he does not meet Meyer's criteria for big-C (i.e., queer) Camp.

[8]This case of mistaken identity is similar to an incident in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence*, starring John Wayne and Jimmy Stewart. John Wayne/Tom Doniphon kills the outlaw Lee Marvin/Liberty Valence but Jimmy Stewart/Rance Stoddard gets (and keeps) the credit for it. My thanks to Michael Rhode (personal communication) for pointing out this parallelism.

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