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Film Review: The Harder They Fall, Directed by Jeymes Samuel

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By Candice Lyons

In one of the final scenes of Jeymes Samuel's gripping 2021 Black Western *The Harder They Fall*, androgynous outlaw Cuffee (played by Danielle Deadwyler) says a teary goodbye to her comrade "Stagecoach" Mary Fields (Zazie Beetz). The two share a long, not-quite-chaste kiss goodbye as Nat Love, Mary's main romantic interest in the film, shifts uncomfortably in his saddle. Mary responds with a coy "What you looking at?" before mounting her horse a final time and literally riding off into the sunset with Love, leaving Cuffee behind. The film, which follows Nat Love and his gang of outlaws on an epic revenge quest across the American southwest, encompasses a litany of historical elisions and inaccuracies culminating in this moment between Mary and Cuffee. It cements the movie's final and most glaring while *The Harder They Fall's* vision of the Old West is brazen, bold, and Black, its queer notes and

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Stagecoach Mary Fields. Source: Unknown author

Born in captivity around 1832, Mary Fields spent the early part of her life enslaved by a Judge Edmund Dunne of Tennessee. During this time, she reportedly grew very close to Dunne's sister Sarah, who later became a nun and went by the name Mother Amadeus. After being freed at the end of the Civil War, Fields worked a series of odd jobs before eventually relocating to Toledo to rejoin Mother Amadeus at the Convent of the Sacred Heart, where she worked as a groundskeeper. When Mother Amadeus moved to the Montana Territory in the early 1880s to establish a mission and a small "Indian School," Fields followed soon after, braving a harsh Montana winter in order to nurse Amadeus through a life-threatening case of pneumonia.

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supplies to the nuns and even personally building Amadeus a hennerly, all the while refusing to accept pay for her work. After getting into a shoot-out with a fellow employee who objected to taking orders from a Black woman, Mary was expelled from the mission in 1894, nearly a decade after her arrival. The incident prompted the mission's male leadership, who already disapproved of Fields' hard drinking, "gun-toting"^[iii] ways, to directly order Mother Amadeus to send Mary away. Instead, Amadeus helped Fields set up a business – a short-lived restaurant that is mentioned briefly in *The Harder They Fall* – in the nearby town of Cascade. Later, Amadeus helped Fields secure a star route contract, a position that propelled Mary to fame as the first Black woman mail carrier in the United States.^[iv]



Cathay Williams. Source: U.S. Army

For all their closeness, however, the two women's relationship existed in a social and racial context no amount of loyalty or affection could negate. In tying Mary's potential queerness to another Black woman (Cuffee) rather than the sister of the man who enslaved her, *The Harder They Fall* offers a glimpse of Black queerness uncomplicated by these same questions of power. Unfortunately, though, it is *only* a glimpse. The charged moment between Mary and Cuffee, a character based on Cathay Williams, who famously disguised herself as a man to enlist in the U.S. Army, passes as quickly as it begins, a loose end to be tied up before Mary can have her happy ending with Nat.^[v] Though *The Harder They Fall's* director Jeymes

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ingenu to Nat Love's swaggering anti-hero was a choice. How much richer could this reimagining have been if different choices had been made—if queerness existed as more than a hint, a shared look, or a fleeting scene of unrealized potential? Samuel's deeply compelling, cinematically stunning take on the classic Western works in large part because it treats Blackness as something complex and unambiguous. What if it treated queerness the same way?

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[i] Ineye Komonibo, "Colorism Clouds The Rich Imagination Of The Harder They Fall," *Refinery 29*, November 5, 2021, <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2021/11/10701439/netflix-the-harder-they-fall-stagecoach-mary-casting-controversy>.

[ii] Miantae Metcalf McConnell, "Mary Fields' Road to Freedom," *Black Cowboys in the American West: On the Range, on the Stage, Behind the Badge*, edited by Bruce A. Glasrud, Michael N. Searles, and Albert S. Broussard (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016).

[iii] Gary Cooper, "Stagecoach Mary: A Gun-Toting Black Woman Delivered the U.S. Mail in Montana," *Ebony* (1977).

[iv] McConnell, "Mary Fields' Road to Freedom."

[v] DeAnne Blanton, "Cathay Williams: Black Woman Soldier 1866-1868," *Buffalo Soldier*, Originally Published 1992, <https://www.buffalosoldier.net/CathayWilliamsFemaleBuffaloSoldierWithDocuments.htm>.

[vi] Andrew R. Chow, "The Real Black Cowboys That Inspired Netflix's The Harder They Fall," *Time*, November 3, 2021, <https://time.com/6111612/the-harder-they-fall-true-story/>.

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