



# Riding Bareback: Rodeo Communities and the Construction of American Gender, Sexuality, and Race in the Twentieth Century

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Riding Bareback:  
Rodeo Communities and the Construction of American Gender, Sexuality, and Race  
in the Twentieth Century

A dissertation presented

by

Rebecca Elena Scofield

to

The Committee on Higher Degrees in American Studies

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

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in the subject of

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Riding Bareback:  
Rodeo Communities and the Construction of American Gender, Sexuality, and Race  
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Abstract

“Riding Bareback” uses rodeo as a site of analysis to investigate the continual expansion and contraction of the supposedly authentic West in the twentieth century. For over a century, rodeo has been a vibrant and multifaceted stage on which diverse groups of people, both within and beyond the geographical West, have embodied the plethora of cultural meanings attached to westernness. Rodeo is an epistemology of the West, meaning it is a way of knowing and expressing what it means to people to be western. Rather than offering a history of gender *in* rodeo, this is a history of gender *through* rodeo, showing how the West was written onto individual bodies with national and international ramifications. “Riding Bareback” critically investigates marginalized rodeo communities across the twentieth century, specifically professional rodeo cowgirls from the 1900s until the 1930s, the Texas State Prison Rodeo from the 1930s until the 1980s, and the International Gay Rodeo Association in the 1980s and 1990s. These rodeoers have performed westernness in order to claim legitimacy as Americans, even as they often marginalized themselves and others even further.

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## Introduction

### Get On, Get Drunk, Get Laid

#### Authentic Fictions

From Theodore Roosevelt to Sarah Palin, gendered fictions of the West have had a significant impact on twentieth- and twenty-first-century American politics and culture. By the end of the nineteenth century, historians like Frederick Jackson Turner and entertainers like William F. “Buffalo Bill” Cody produced the “West” as an imagined space with racialized, sexualized, and gendered meanings.<sup>1</sup> Through the everyday consumption of clothes, music, fiction, and movies, ordinary Americans have woven these fictions into the fabric of their lives. People living in the West often dress in western wear, proclaiming their identity with embossed leather boots, large cowboy hats, and tight fitting jeans, despite the fact that these styles were created and popularized by twentieth century rodeo and movie cowboys.<sup>2</sup> In this process of bodily imagining over the twentieth century, cultural producers have helped limit the roles available in the imagined West to many groups of people, such as women and people of color. Many people have doggedly challenged these masculine, homophobic, and racist constructions of the West, attempting to rework its meanings even as they often reasserted new hierarchies.

Historians of gender and sexuality in the American West are therefore faced with persistent questions about how to trace the deep connections between American authenticity and

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<sup>1</sup> Richard White’s “Frederick Jackson Turner and Buffalo Bill,” in *The Frontier in American Culture*, edited by James Grossman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994) describes the simultaneous creation of the frontier myth in both popular culture and academia by Buffalo Bill, who imagined a violent west, and Frederick Jackson Turner, who imagined a peaceful, agrarian west.

<sup>2</sup> For a chronicle of changing western fashion see Holly George-Warren and Michelle Freedman’s *How the West was Worn* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2001). For a discussion of how people in the West increasingly implemented cowboyism as equivalent to westerness in a western town, see Bonnie Christensen’s *Red Lodge and the Mythic West* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002).



the imagined West in terms of gender, as it intersects with race and sexuality. In order to answer these questions, we must find a way to access both the imagined and lived West, grounding our assertions in a source base that can provide both information about the reality of conditions and the popular definition of westernness. We must further attend to the diversity of the peoples participating in these historical processes in order to trace the ways in which people pushed to the margins also helped create constructions of westernness, even as they challenged older versions.

In “Riding Bareback,” rodeo serves as a site of analysis to investigate the continual expansion and contraction of the supposedly authentic West in the twentieth century. For over a century, rodeo has been a vibrant and multifaceted stage on which diverse groups of people, both within and beyond the geographical West, have embodied the plethora of cultural meanings attached to westernness. Rodeo is an epistemology of the West, meaning it is a way of knowing and expressing what it means to people to be western. Rich and numerous archives are dedicated to preserving the history of rodeo. This material evidence of rodeo lives demonstrates how rodeoers simultaneously constructed and de-constructed westernness in terms of racialized and sexualized gender in changing ways over the twentieth century. Rather than offering another history of gender *in* rodeo, I’m writing a history of gender *through* rodeo, showing how the West was written onto individual bodies with national and international ramifications. “Riding Bareback” critically investigates marginalized rodeo communities across the twentieth century, specifically professional rodeo cowgirls from the 1900s until the 1930s, the Texas State Prison Rodeo from the 1930s until the 1980s, and the International Gay Rodeo Association in the 1980s and 1990s. These rodeoers have performed westernness in order to claim legitimacy as Americans, even as they often marginalized themselves and others even further.

## The Phenomenon of Rodeo

Rodeo is a performance of the West with the highest stakes: life and death. Unlike mass-produced fiction and film, rodeo mandates the enactment of cowboyism by real people, from the chewing tobacco rings permanently imprinted on their jeans pockets to the staggering yearly hospital bills that can bankrupt a family. Unlike other forms of theater or sport, people die in rodeo every year.<sup>3</sup> One study from *International SportMed Journal* found that rodeo's injury rates are ten times greater than professional football and thirteen times greater than ice hockey.<sup>4</sup> Yet, despite the risks, people continue to participate in this unique cultural formation that has brought together popular performance, a modern sport, and an imagined regional history. Over the twentieth century, large communities have emerged around particular rodeo circuits, such as the gay rodeo circuit, collegiate rodeo circuit, or the professional rodeo circuit. These

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<sup>3</sup> These deaths are at times high profile, such as that of pro-bull rider Lane Frost in 1989 whose ribs were broken by a bull and punctured his heart during the Cheyenne Frontier Days, but usually they do not receive much national attention. See Skip Myslenski, "Cowboy had a perfect ride . . . until it ended in death," *Chicago Tribune*, August 6, 1989. At times these deaths occur off the circuit, for instance Gene Larson's death at a honky-tonk bull riding exhibition in Texas, "Rider Thrown by Bull Dies of His Injuries," *New York Times*, May 23, 1997. Collegiate and amateur rodeos experience rider deaths as well, though these numbers are not well tracked. In 2009, a twelve-year-old boy was killed in a Little Britches rodeo, a youth rodeo organization, when the bull he was riding stepped on his chest and ruptured his heart. "Boy Trampled by Bull in Longmont Dies," *The Denver Post*, June 29, 2009. There are, of course, also animal deaths yearly in rodeo. These deaths do not deter people from joining rodeo, as one rodeoer once told me, "the best way to create a hundred new bull riders is to kill one." Personal conversation, December 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Mark A. Brandenburg, Dale J. Butterwick, Laurie A. Hiemstra, Robert Nebergall, and Justin Laird, "Comparison of Injury Rates in Organised Sports, with Special Emphasis on American Bull Riding," *International SportMed Journal* 8, no. 2 (2007). One 2010 report noted that men did not want to wear protective gear because it was "not cowboy," embedding masculinity into the performance of danger and risk at professional rodeo, see DS Ross, A. Ferguson, P. Boshia, and K. Cassas, "Factors that Prevent Roughstock Rodeo Athletes from Wearing Protective Equipment," *Current Sports Medicine Report* 9, no. 6 (November-December 2010): 342-346. For more information on rodeo injuries and prevention see: D.J. Downey, "Rodeo Injuries and Prevention," *Current Sports Medicine Report* 6, no. 6 (October 2007): 328-332; M.C. Meyers and C.M. Laurent Jr. "The Rodeo Athlete: Sport Science: Part I," *Sports Medicine* 40, no. 1 (May 1, 2010); MC Meyers and CM Laurent Jr, "The Rodeo Athlete: Injuries: Part II," *Sports Medicine* 40, no. 10 (October 1, 2010); Renée Crichlow, Steve Williamson, Mike Geurin, Heather Heggem, "Self-Reported Injury Rate in Native American Professional Rodeo Competitors," *Clinical Journal of Sport Medicine* 16, no. 4 (July 2006): 352-354.

communities, made up of bull riders, prison wardens, and housewives, have staged multiple wests in different places over time.

From its inception in the late nineteenth century, rodeo was a performance of a diverse American West designed for public consumption. Rodeo grew out of the combination of unorganized ranch-hand competitions and Wild West show-business, and therefore reflected some degree of the diversity of rural working-class life in the West: women could bronc-ride, the rare African American performer could headline a show, and an Indian cowboy could be crowned champion.<sup>5</sup> An average rodeo in the early twentieth century would have taken place at an outdoor arena with wooden grandstands set far away from the action, no stock chutes to hold and release animals, and usually a large racing track. The program might have included bronc-riding for both women and men, a buffalo-riding exhibition, and a chuck-wagon race. The company organizing the rodeo could have been a fly-by-night outfit that raised local money to host the rodeo and then stole away with all the proceeds, leaving both participants and local contractors without their pay. Between 1900 and the 1930s, rodeos struggled to distinguish

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<sup>5</sup> Men of color also found a limited amount of acceptance in early rodeo. The famous African American cowboy Bill Pickett, for instance, toured with the 101 Ranch Wild West Show in order to perform his bulldogging technique, which included him bringing down a steer by biting its lip. Native American cowboys also competed and won championship titles. Cecil Johnson, *Guts: Legendary Black Rodeo Cowboy Bill Pickett* (Fort Worth, TX: Summit Group, 1994). For analysis of Native Americans' roles in rodeos see Jan Penrose, "When All the Cowboys are Indians: The Nature of Race in All-Indian Rodeo," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 93, no. 3 (September 2003): 687-705; Allison Fuss Mellis, *Riding Buffaloes and Broncos*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003); and Mary-Ellen Klem, *A Wilder West: Rodeo in Western Canada* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2011). The window of inclusion was closing even as it opened, however, as rodeos and cowboy performances by the 1910s became exhibitions of Americans' growing concerns over racial segregation, eugenics, imperialism, and immigration restriction. At the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair, one Wild West outfit staged a widely publicized "Contest for World Supremacy," which consisted of a roping competition between "America Cowboys, Indian riders, Patagonian plainsmen of South America, and Mexican vaqueros." Newspapers assured audiences that it was to be both "entertaining" and of "historical value." "Big Roping Contest," and "Contest for World Supremacy at Mulhall's Show Sunday," Unidentified Clippings, St. Louis, 1904, Transcription from Georgia Mulhall's scrapbook, Lucille Mulhall File, NCHF. Buffalo Bill's famous Congress of Rough Riders of the World similarly linked American cowboys to other horse-centric cultures while asserting superiority. Louis Warren notes how the racial frontiers of Eurasia and America were continually paired in late nineteenth century popular culture, see *Buffalo Bill's America: William Cody and the Wild West Show* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 332.

themselves from other forms of popular entertainment, like Wild West shows, sports exhibitions, circuses, and vaudeville. Rodeo cowgirls dove their horses from platforms at Coney Island and participated in wrestling matches for dimes at county fairs. In the winter months, when the rodeo circuit ground to a halt, many rodeoers, both male and female, turned up in Hollywood, hoping to be cast as stunt doubles in western films. During the first several decades of the twentieth century, as the rehearsed Wild West, the silent western film, and the competitive rodeo were still bound together, some measure of gender and racial fluidity still existed in American rodeo.

These early western extravaganzas were popular with crowds in both western and eastern cities. The 1936 Chicago Rodeo provided both afternoon and evening shows, seating ten-thousand people at each performance for several weeks.<sup>6</sup> In 1943, during World War II, over half a million people watched the Madison Square Garden Rodeo in New York City, with sixteen thousand people attending the thirty-six performances.<sup>7</sup> As much a performance of the West for the West as the West for the East, large western rodeos created their own unique festivals. By 1907, Cheyenne, Wyoming, averaged twenty-five thousand people at its Frontier Days performances.<sup>8</sup> These locally-organized rodeos often competed against touring rodeo shows, such as California Frank's or Gene Autry's rodeo companies, to hire the best riders for an exciting performance. Due to the variety of rodeo venues, unregulated pay structures, and unsteady travel conditions, early rodeoers travelled as far as Europe to participate in large rodeos

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<sup>6</sup> "Attendance at Rodeo Passes 100,000 Mark," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 26, 1936

<sup>7</sup> "600,000 Saw Rodeo; Set Crowd Record," *New York Times*, November 1, 1943.

<sup>8</sup> "Real Wild West Show: An Annual Celebration at Cheyenne, Wyo., that Attracts Thousands," *The Washington Post*, July 11, 1907.

with the possibility of being left behind broke and broken when the rodeo moved on without them.<sup>9</sup>

As rodeo cowboys organized and increasingly regulated rodeos by the 1940s, however, the image of the rodeo cowboy became increasingly white, male, and heterosexual. With the advent of the Rodeo Association of America in 1929, the Rodeo Cowboys Association in 1936, and rodeo's growth into a multimillion-dollar entertainment industry, fewer women and people of color found a place in professional rodeo.<sup>10</sup> Events like women's Roman-racing, an event featuring a single rider standing with one foot on two running horses, and exhibitions of Native American performers, such as dances or Indian races, slowly disappeared from many professional rodeos. While mainstream rodeos became increasingly homogenized, niche rodeo circuits proliferated. The Girl's Rodeo Association organized in 1948 and all-black rodeos continue today. My project traces this contraction and re-expansion of rodeo participation, noting how niche rodeos in the 1970s and 80s provided the diversity that mainstream rodeos used to afford, though to a limited degree. As civil rights, feminism, and gay rights movements wrought incalculable changes in the late twentieth century, many people protested their absence from the imagined West by joining new rodeo associations.

Today, rodeo in the United States is a professionalized and profitable industry. These rodeos take place in both outdoor and indoor arenas, rarely include a race track, and have a tight rodeo program that includes numerous chutes being loaded with riders on animals to ensure a

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<sup>9</sup> For descriptions of life on the early rodeo road for women see memoirs like Vera McGinnis's *Rodeo Road: My Life as a Pioneer Cowgirl* (New York: Hastings House, 1974) or biographies like Kim Turnbaugh's biography on professional cowgirl Goldie Griffith, *The Last of the Wild West Cowgirls* (Perigo Press, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> Kristine Fredrikson's *American Rodeo: From Buffalo Bill to Big Business* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1985) provides a narrative on the professionalization of the rodeo associations. For a discussion of how organizers, especially men like Gene Autry, increasingly designed rodeos that excluded women and men of color see Mary Lou LeCompte's *Cowgirls of the Rodeo: Pioneer Professional Athletes* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 1993).

quick release of the next contestant. All rodeos sanctioned by the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association must include standard events: bareback- and saddle-bronc riding, bull riding, team roping, calf roping, steer wrestling, and barrel racing, the only sanctioned female event. Between 2000 and 2004, *Sports Business Daily* reported that over ninety-five million people in North America attended professional rodeo events, outselling both golf and tennis. Roughly thirty million people watch the six-hundred professional rodeo events held in thirty-seven states each year. Millions more attend the local, amateur, and single-event rodeos held world-wide. In 1980, the National Reno Gay Rodeo pulled in a crowd of ten-thousand in one weekend and the annual Angola Prison Rodeo still sells out its eleven-thousand seat stadium. In 2013, the Houston Rodeo drew two million people over its month-long run.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, rodeo is an important sport to a growing number of international viewers in countries like Australia, Brazil, and China. Non-US rodeo fans are especially vital to the international circuits, like the Professional Bull Riding Association, which crown world-champion cowboys.<sup>12</sup> Rodeo, usually associated with America, has increasing global appeal. Complete with corporate sponsorships and sports news coverage, rodeo successfully transformed over the twentieth century from local pastime to international sport.

For over a century, people have invested their lives and identities in being rodeo cowboys and cowgirls. Rodeo has been enthusiastically embraced by people from all walks of life, from

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<sup>11</sup> “Turnstile Tracker,” *Sports Business Daily*, December 6, 2001; “Turnstile Tracker,” *Sports Business Daily*, October 30, 2002; “Turnstile Tracker,” *Sports Business Daily*, December 11, 2003; “Turnstile Tracker,” *Sports Business Daily*, December 22, 2004; *2012 PRCA Media Guide* (PRCA: 2012); “Morning Buzz,” *Sports Business Daily*, February 22, 2013.

<sup>12</sup> Klayman, Ben, “Another kind of bull market,” *The Globe and Mail*, January 4, 2008. The Professional Bull Riding Association in particular tours in Brazil, Mexico, Canada, and Australia. There is also increasing scholarly attention to some of the gender dynamics of rodeo outside of the US. For instance see Deborah Butler, “Tradition and Transgression: Women Who Ride the Rodeo in Southern Brazil,” in *Gender and Equestrian Sport: Riding around the World*, edited by Miriam Adelman and Jorge Knijnik (New York: Springer, 2013).

wealthy Norwegians to poor Texans, constituting a global site in which people have constructed and consumed an image of the American West. From the youth rodeo organization Little Britches, to the National Intercollegiate Rodeo Association, to the professional circuit, a person can start his or her rodeo career in elementary school and ride until the body no longer allows him or her to climb over the fence and into the chutes. Gay rodeos, urban rodeos, and prison rodeos each illustrate rodeo's position at the nexus of the real and the imagined, the rural and the urban, and the regional and the national in everyday life.

Investing their money, time, and emotions into rodeo, people have flourished and withered based on the travails of the rodeo road. Even amateur rodeos, like gay rodeo, take place on a year-round circuit which demands extensive travel to dozens of events. An average participant on the gay rodeo circuit in 1990 spent six-hundred dollars to travel to a single rodeo, where he or she might win nothing.<sup>13</sup> Representing the classed dreams and nightmares of many rural westerns over the twentieth century, a single rodeoer could have a streak of luck and live large on the proceeds for a long time. Many famous rodeoers, however, ended their lives in grinding poverty.

Due to the financial, physical, and emotional stresses of the rodeo circuit, rodeoers often construct a "rodeo family." These kinship networks include parents, spouses, friends, groupies, fans, fellow cowboys or cowgirls, and many others. Their invisible labor, such as shared rides, free beds, or home-cooked meals, allows rodeoers the ability to travel the country and the world. With no guarantee of a paycheck and high risk for expensive injuries, rodeo participants are dependent on these networks, even as the national imagination still sees them as rugged

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<sup>13</sup>*International Gay Rodeo Association Institutional Archives*, 1982-2009, Autry National Center, Los Angeles; MSA.26; Box 4, Questionnaires, 1990.

individualists.<sup>14</sup> Rodeo shapes not only the identities of people who actually ride, but also influences the lives of the considerable number of people who hold supporting roles.

As a consistently widespread facet of American culture, rodeo demonstrates how people understood and expressed new ideas about gender at moments throughout the twentieth century. Even as participants, organizers, and audiences have contested the meaning of cowboyness through every new form of rodeo, however, they have failed to communicate the diverse reality of the lived West into a re-working of the increasingly accepted image of the straight, white, male cowboy. This very failure articulates rodeo's capacity to simultaneously encapsulate both flesh and blood cowboys and culturally produced ideals of cowboyness, as individual actors negotiated these complex confluences of reality and popular fiction. Rodeo reveals the variety of lived Wests as they have intersected and diverged from an often more homogeneous imagined West.

### **Rodeo and the Authentic West**

The performance of the imagined West has in many ways become a performance of American authenticity. The cowboy has been an identity available for adoption and performance by most Americans. A New Yorker could assume the swagger of the cowboy by wearing his clothes or singing his songs, but a working cowboy could not as easily perform being an urban New Yorker. The character of the cowboy has been available for consumption and performance without the necessity of engaging in the problems or the lives of people in the regional West. As one Texan ranch-hand told *U.S. News and World Report* during the urban cowboy fashion boom on the 1980s, "I'd rather see folks be city cowboys than dope-headed hippies." He conjectured that western wear became popular because, "People are looking for something from the past.

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<sup>14</sup> See Craig J. Forsyth and Carol Y. Thompson, "Helpmates of the Rodeo: Fans, Wives, and Groupies," *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 31, no. 4 (November 2007): 394-416.



[...] Seems like they're looking for some kind of hero. [...] And cowboys were pretty good people."<sup>15</sup> In the early 1980s, playing cowboy, through fashion, meant relocating a more authentic, more heroic, and better America.<sup>16</sup>

The performance of the West has actually been multivalent, fractured, and contested, despite its persistent association with straight, white masculinity. In order to delve into a range of these Wests that were constructed over the twentieth century, I use a case study model. I have selected three communities with atypical experiences of the lived West: rodeo cowgirls in the 1910s through 1920s, the Texas State Prison Rodeo from the 1930s through the 1980s, and the

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<sup>15</sup> Sarah Peterson, "Cowboy Fever Rises: And Merchants Cash In," *U.S. News and World Report*, February 16, 1981, 62.

<sup>16</sup> The historiography on the development of the frontier myth is extensive. The search for America's defining mythology first gained prominence in American Studies scholars' Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950) and Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), both of these works draw on "high" culture and emphasize a vision of peaceful settlement of the continent. Robert Athearn's *The Mythic West in Twentieth-Century America* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986) and Richard Slotkin's *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (United States: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992) stand as authoritative texts on the myth of the frontier in the twentieth century US. Slotkin focuses in on western films in particular, maintaining that savage warfare became a crucial metaphor in popular culture for America's place on the world stage in the age of imperialism and the Cold War. Will Wright, in *The Wild West: The Mythical Cowboy and Social Theory* (London: Sage, 2001) and Louis Warren in "Cody's Last Stand: Masculine Anxiety, the Custer Myth, and the Frontier of Domesticity in Buffalo Bill's Wild West," *Western Historical Quarterly* 34, no.1 (Spring 2003) also look at the social importance of narrating a mythological past. For other works on the popular portrayal of the west see: Christine Bold's *Selling the Wild West: Popular Western Fiction, 1860-1960* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); Patricia Nelson Limerick, "The Adventures of the Frontier in the Twentieth Century," in *The Frontier in American Culture*, edited by James Grossman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Marilyn Burgess' *Indian Princesses and Cowgirls: Stereotypes of the Frontier* (USA: Oboro, 1995); Peter Rollins and John O'Connor eds, *Hollywood's Indian: The Portrayal of the Native American in Film* (USA: The University Press of Kentucky, 1998); Rollins, Peter and John O'Connor eds, *Hollywood's West: The American Frontier in Film, Television, & History* (USA: The University Press of Kentucky, 2005). For a discussion of the racialized aspects of these performances, especially regarding Native American participants in Wild West shows, see L.G. Moses, *Wild West Shows and the Images of American Indians, 1883-1933* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1996) and Philip Deloria's *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998) and *Indians in Unexpected Places* (KS: University Press of Kansas, 2004). Also, marketing researcher Lisa Penalosa's work on the marketing techniques in the selling of the western myth helps to illuminate how this western myth was created with profit in mind, "The Commodification of the American West: Marketers' Production of Cultural Meanings at the Trade Show," *Journal of Marketing* 64, no. 4 (October 2000): 82-109 and "Consuming the American West: Animating Cultural Meaning and Memory at a Stock Show and Rodeo," *The Journal of Consumer Research* 28, no. 3 (December 2001): 369-398. For the authoritative text on the shifting meaning of Wild West shows in American and Europe from 1860-1915, see Warren's *Buffalo Bill's America*.

International Gay Rodeo Association in the 1980s and 1990s. Often overlooked in the popular memory of rodeos, these communities fought to expand the public's perception of the West and rodeo. They sought individual forms of liberation while also reinforcing the prevailing, highly gendered and sexualized, conceptions of westernness in ways that had profound consequences for American history as a whole.

Critical to the centrality of western performance in American popular culture has been the cowboy's connection with a gendered and racialized hypersexuality. Rodeo lives have often centered on sex and sexuality. Rodeos offer places to find potential partners and even spaces to potentially conduct public sex. The leather accoutrements of the cowboy are highly sexualized, from chaps to lassos. Even the acts of riding bucking animals has been associated with sexual acts.<sup>17</sup> As one cowboy once told me, the driving impetus of rodeo is to “get on, get drunk, and get laid.” Rurality holds a dual position in American society, especially in terms of sexuality. The ruggedly sexual cowboy is mirrored in the backwater, inbred hick. The popular performance of rodeo makes a spectacle of both the admiration for rural individualism and disdain for rural backwardness. Crucial to my assertions of the centrality of the performed West in the construction of American gender and sexuality is the notion that the West travels, circulating both nationally and internationally.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> For instance, at the center of the mainstream rodeo circuit are the relationships forged between heterosexual couples which range from marriage to one-night stands—these relationships provide male rodeoers with both necessary female labor and social status through sexual conquest. See D. K. Gauthier and C.J. Forsyth, “Buckle Bunnies: Groupies of the Rodeo Circuit,” *Deviant Behavior* 21 (2000): 349-365 and Craig J. Forsyth and Carol Y. Thompson, “Helpmates of the Rodeo: Fans, Wives, and Groupies,” *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 31 no. 4 (November 2007): 394-416. Elizabeth Atwood Lawrence, in *Rodeo: An Anthropologist Looks at the Wild and the Tame* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982), also notes the sexualized aspects of rodeo culture.

<sup>18</sup> Buffalo Bill's Wild West show toured through Europe and many rodeo cowboys and cowgirls traveled the world on the rodeo circuit. See for instance, Julia Stetler, “Buffalo Bill's Wild West in Germany: a Transnational History,” (PhD Dissertation, University of Nevada, Los Vegas, 2012). Since the 1970s, western wear has become globalized and the Professional Bull Riders circuit includes international rodeos. The transnational flow of gendered rodeo culture, particularly with regards to the hypermasculine bull riding phenomenon, would be an exciting avenue for future study.

Indeed, the relationship between sex and the cowboy has become so profound that intentionally unprotected, risky sex was dubbed “riding bareback” by people who self-consciously resisted the regime of safe sex in the age of AIDS.<sup>19</sup> This phrase demonstrates the eroticization of danger in American culture, and its connections to the cowboy, while also acknowledging the potential deviance of overly dangerous sexualities. Early rodeo cowgirls put their own reputations at risk by performing masculine feats in public. Incarcerated cowboys and gay cowboys grappled with the sexual meaning of the imagined West as panic about homosexuality spread in the mid- and late-twentieth century. Through these forms of rodeo, we can better understand the intersections between the uneasy eroticization of the cowboy, ideals of American authenticity, and performances of gender.

### **Methodology and Evidence**

Methodologically, I use two main approaches to illuminate the complexities encapsulated in rodeo: archival research and oral history. The newly donated International Gay Rodeo Association archives at the Autry National Center in Los Angeles provided an extensive trove of documentation on the history of gay rodeo. Homemade t-shirts, board of directors’ meeting minutes, and hate mail rendered the experiences of western gay men and women visible. In addition to these new sources, I also delved into the archival collections of the National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame, rodeo organizer Tex Austin’s scrapbook collection at the Museum of New Mexico, and the Texas Prison Rodeo archive at the Texas Department of Criminal Justice.

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<sup>19</sup> This term emerged in the early to mid-1990s, and was originally used to connote intentional, unprotected sex with high potential for infection of STDs; now the term is used commonly for all forms of sex without a condom, premeditated or not. For a discussion on the subculture of barebacking see Tim Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking* (Chicago: University of Chicago press, 2009); Perry N. Halkitis, Leo Wilton, Jack Drescher, eds, *Barebacking: Psychosocial and Public Health Approaches* (New York: Haworth Medical Press, 2005); and Michael Shernoff, *Without Condoms: Unprotected Sex, Gay Men, and Barebacking* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

I also attended rodeos, both gay and straight, in order to conduct public observation research. These rodeo communities provided a wealth of information on the day-to-day life of rodeoers through informal and unstructured interviews. As many people on the gay rodeo circuit are not openly gay, I did not collect personal, identifying information at these rodeos for this project. As gay rodeo is approaching its fortieth year of existence, however, these histories must be collected and preserved before more members pass away or leave the association. I hope to continue this work as I transform this dissertation into a book project. Both oral and written sources illuminated the various idealized images of the cowboy in programs, posters, and belt buckles, and the lived reality of the rodeo in letters, day sheets, and personal anecdotes.

### **Historiographical Intervention**

My treatment of rodeo as an epistemological performance of multiple wests binds together two crucial bodies of literature, namely the history of gender and sexuality in the West and the history of the popular performance of region. While celebratory rodeo histories have abounded throughout the twentieth century, only in the 1970s did feminist scholars begin to narrate the history of rodeo from the perspective of women, both cowgirls and rodeo queens.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Joyce Gibson Roach's foundational *The Cowgirls*, published in 1977, is a narrative history of women in rodeo which offers fascinating anecdotes of female performers, their evolving fashion sense, and their place in the realm of early twentieth century spectacle. Roach, *The Cowgirls*, (USA: University of North Texas Press, 1977). Teresa Jordan's 1982 *Cowgirls: Women of the American West* (New York: Anchor Press, 1982) is a richly detailed collection of oral histories from women who grew up working on ranches and rodeoing. In 1993, Mary Lou LeCompte published *Cowgirls of the Rodeo: Pioneer Professional Athletes* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 1993), which was the first work to draw on extensive archival work instead of oral histories. In this work LeCompte, argues that while women faced immense difficulty in becoming legitimized athletes, cowgirls fared much better than other female athletes in part because western women were exempt from Victorian middle-class standards of virtue. Fredrick Errington argues that many men actually define themselves against the recklessness of rodeo cowboys, stressing their responsibilities to family and work as markers of their masculinity. "The Rock Creek Rodeo: Excess and Constraint in Men's Lives," *American Ethnologist* 17, no. 4 (November 1990): 628-645. Renee Laegreid, *Riding Pretty: Rodeo Royalty in the American West* (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 2006) offers a compelling narrative of the shift from rodeo cowgirls to rodeo queens in the Pendleton Roundup. Using media analysis, Tracey Owens Patton and Sally Schedlick argue in *Gender, Whiteness, and Power in Rodeo: Breaking Away from the Ties of Sexism and Racism*. (New York: Lexington Press, 2011) that rodeo has become increasingly sexist and racist over the twentieth century. Celebratory histories of rodeo began with works like Clifford Westermeier's *Man, Beast, Dust: The Story of Rodeo* (USA: World Press, 1947). There has been very little historical work done on prison rodeos. Daniel Bergner's *God of the Rodeo: The Search for Hope, Faith, and a Six-Second*

While these rodeo historians detailed the shifts in gender dynamics within rodeo, my study uses rodeo to demonstrate the crafting and challenging of multiple gendered, sexualized, and racialized Wests. The larger history of gender and sexuality in the regional West has become increasingly complex in the past decade as historians have pushed beyond simple white women's history.<sup>21</sup> In the last ten years, works like Chris Packard's *Queer Cowboys: and Other Erotic Male Friendships in Nineteenth-Century America* have questioned the heteronormative assumptions about the American cowboy, emphasizing the necessity of queer readings of the imagined West.<sup>22</sup> A trans-historical perspective, provided in Peter Boag's *Redressing America's Frontier Past*, analyzed the vital link between the performance of gender and sexuality in the late nineteenth-century. Sexuality scholars have also worked to illuminate the life experiences of gay men and women in rural America during the twentieth century. These works, however, have

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*Ride in the Louisiana's Angola Prison* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1998) is a journalistic exploration of the rodeo within the greater power dynamics of the Louisiana State Penitentiary.

<sup>21</sup> Scholars have focused more attention for instance on masculinity studies, for instance, Matthew Basso, Laura McCall, and Dee Garceau, eds., (*Across the Great Divide: Cultures of Manhood in the American West*. New York: Routledge, 2001). Also, foundational texts in the study of gender dynamics across the racially diverse West have gained more attention, such as Susan Lee Johnson's *Roaring Camp: The Social World of the California Gold Rush* (New York: WW Norton, 2000) and Virginia Scharff's *Twenty Thousand Roads: Women, Movement, and the West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

<sup>22</sup> Chris Packard, *Queer Cowboys: and Other Erotic Male Friendships in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Palgrave, 2006). These types of works demonstrate the emotional, physical, and psychological violence which can be perpetrated on the "other" in rural communities, with religious shame, public humiliation, rarely-broken isolation, substance abuse, and suicide fantasies haunting people's life stories. But, the authors reassert, these horrors are balanced with limited acceptance, the willingness to become politically involved, and the determination to live in places that feel like home. Will Fellows, *Farms Boys: Lives of Gay Men from the Rural Midwest* (USA: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996); Michael Riordan, *Out Our Way: Gay and Lesbian Life in the Country* (Canada: Between the Lines, 1996). Also see Jerry Lee Kramer's "Bachelor Farmers and Spinsters: gay and lesbian identities and communities in rural North Dakota," in *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities*, edited by David Bell and Gill Valentine (Great Britain: Routledge, 1995) for a look at early ethnographic research which also emphasizes isolation and substance abuse. For a media-focused study of gay visibility in rural areas see Mary Gray, *Out in the Country* (New York: New York University Press, 2009). Scott Herring's *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism* (New York: NYU Press, 2010) looks at rural faerie utopias and anti-urban trends artwork. See also Karen Tongson, *Relocations: Queer Suburban Imaginaries* (New York: NYU Press, 2011) for a discussion on gay lives in between the rural and urban. Colin Johnson's *Just Queer Folks: Gender and Sexuality in Rural America* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press: 2013) offers a challenge to the notion that rural life was harsher for gay people than urban life.

continued to limit their scope to the nineteenth-century “historical West” or have persisted in the binary of urban liberation and rural isolation.

My study uses rodeo to tell more fluid stories in the history of gender and sexuality of the West. By focusing on white cowgirls, convict cowboys, and gay rodeoers, I illustrate the diversity of peoples invested in constructing and embodying westernness. Unlike previous studies of rodeos, I juxtapose the stories of marginalized rodeo communities in order to illuminate the complexities of the intersection of the real and the imagined. Moving beyond discussions of women’s role in the lived West or the changing cultural image of the hypermasculine cowboy, I demonstrate the everyday battles of the diverse groups of people who attempted to embody the West even as they sought to expand its meanings.

By analyzing the staging of various forms of gendered, sexualized, and racialized westernness, my work also contributes to a growing body of literature on the popular performance of place. Works like Philip Deloria’s *Playing Indian* and Adria Imada’s *Aloha America* have demonstrated how seemingly marginal popular performances reveal central questions about American identity, colonialism, and place, on both the local and national levels. Playing cowboy, like “playing Indian,” has been deeply connected to shifting definitions of Americanness.<sup>23</sup> My case studies ground the international phenomenon of rodeo in local, accessible communities as they play out larger narratives of national inclusion and exclusion. In various forms of rodeo, the rural has been performed for the urban, the West for the East, the

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<sup>23</sup> Philip Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998). In *Playing Indian*, Deloria demonstrates how, from the Boston Tea Party to the Boy Scouts, Indian heritage, dress, and ritual were continually defined as interior to the American experience, while Native Americans were understood as outside American identity. In *Aloha America*, Imada analyzes how, through the consumption of eroticized “hula girls,” “luau,” and “aloha,” Hawaii became familiar and culturally assimilable into mainstream American culture, creating an “imagined intimacy between colony and colonizer.” Adria Imada, *Aloha America: Hula Circuits through the US Empire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 6.

imprisoned for the free, the gay for the straight. Rodeoers have therefore constructed and policed the narrative boundaries of Americanness within their own communities.

### **Chapter Overview**

My first chapter addresses the role of rodeo cowgirls in the early twentieth century in the construction of a white domesticity which prized the resolute protection of the home. Coming from all walks of life, women at the turn of the century entered both large and small rodeos as either contract exhibition riders or contestants competing for prize money. These women were most often native-born white women, although Mexican American, Native American, and European immigrant women rodeoed as well. The number of women rodeoing on the professional circuit rose from roughly forty before 1912 to over two-hundred throughout the 1920s. Ultimately, women did not compete in equal competition with men, but instead participated in “ladies” events, which had different rules and lower payouts. Drawing on archival material from the National Cowgirl Hall of Fame, I analyze cowgirls’ narratives of life on the rodeo road and their own place in modern celebration of the antimodern West. The ability of professional cowgirls to transgress standards of white womanhood was grounded in their audiences’ belief that they were raised on a rugged frontier, allowing western women to be both paragons of tradition and practitioners of political and economic autonomy in defense of the home. In their everyday lives, these women used their access to the supposedly authentic West to travel beyond the boundaries of femininity that their performances were helping to construct.

My second chapter analyzes the narrative of rehabilitation in the Texas State Prison Rodeo during the mid-twentieth century. The Texas State Prison Rodeo, which ran from 1931 until 1986, became a beacon of hope for many imprisoned men and women, even as it meant an often exploitative and dangerous performance in front of crowds possibly baying for their blood.

For many convict cowboys, prison officials, and audience members, through performing heroic acts of cowboy dexterity, and thereby raising money for the prisoner rehabilitation fund, outlaw cowboys saved not only themselves from their individual sins but society from the menace of criminals. Prison rodeo brought together violent masculinity and social salvation, articulating the postwar American belief that only through violent and self-sacrificing labor, could the convict, the prison system, and the nation be rejuvenated.

My final chapter scrutinizes the International Gay Rodeo Association to investigate how gay men and women imagined themselves as part of the nation by engaging in debates about gender and the meaning of the cowboy in post-1970s America. Holding their first rodeo in Reno, Nevada, in 1976, gay rodeoers rapidly built a multi-state association with sanctioned rodeos and standardized rules. By the early 1990s, eight thousand people were active members in IGRA. The four original state associations, California, Colorado, Arizona, and Texas, were joined in the 1990s by associations in Canada, Washington DC, and Chicago, and a dozen others in its heyday. As gay rodeo shifted from a novelty event held in a single city to a full-blown rodeo circuit, tense debates about the meaning of gay rodeo erupted among participants. These internal disputes keenly articulated Americans' growing sense of unease about authentic manhood in the late twentieth century. Ultimately, IGRA members pushed cowboy masculinity to the edge of drag, threatening to unmask all cowboy masculinities as a performance.

### **Saddle Up**

Rodeo performers, organizers, and audiences have helped contest and contribute to the larger gendered fictions about westernness that shape our political and cultural landscape today. In 2013, a conservative blogger posted two images side-by-side under a caption that read: "Palin On A Horse At Reagan Ranch/Obama On A Bicycle. One Is A Picture Of A Leader, One A



Metrosexual.” The picture of Barrack Obama shows him on a bicycle in traffic wearing jeans, tennis shoes, and a bicycle helmet. The photo of Sarah Palin, taken on Ronald Reagan’s ranch in 2011, displays her smiling on horseback in cowboy boots, a black vest, and jeans.<sup>24</sup> In this gendering of transportation and landscape, a woman on horseback is portrayed as more competent than a man on a bicycle. Cowboyism, or the ability to ride a horse on a ranch one does not own, demonstrates Palin’s authenticity as a rural American and her place in political lineage of tough, plain-spoken conservatives. In contrast, bicycling, especially with a helmet, conflates an assumed effeminate metrosexuality, a term denoting a man’s interest in physical appearance, urbanity, and political incompetence. The blogger explains that a metrosexual is someone who “doesn’t have the skills to survive outside an urban neighborhood.” Obama does not play masculine cowboy and therefore exposes his lack of qualifications to be a leader, let alone president. By the late twentieth century, westernness demonstrates masculine independence, even when performed by a woman.

The diverse people who have participated in rodeo over the twentieth century, from bronc-riding cowgirls to convict cowboys, fueled the precise cultural processes that sewed together Americanness and westernness in the performance of authenticity. Each of the three chapters in “Riding Bareback” addresses a community that exposed the imagined West’s elasticity, as it both stretched and constricted over the twentieth century. A group of women working in a difficult profession, a rodeo located in a particular state and institution, and a rodeo association whose membership was linked through a specific social identity each illustrate the changing dynamics between national narratives of inclusion and the gendered performance of the US West.

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<sup>24</sup> “Palin On A Horse At Reagan Ranch/Obama On A Bicycle. One Is A Picture Of A Leader, One A Metrosexual,” palin4president2016.blogspot.com, February 3, 2013.

## Chapter 1

### Beloved Freaks: Early Rodeo Cowgirls and the “Western Woman” as Spectacle

I had a cowgirl mother  
And I learned to rope and ride  
I had a cowboy sweetheart  
And also became his bride

We followed the rodeo circuit  
(after circuses for a bit)  
It lasted 20 years or more  
Until I up and quit.

Poem by cowgirl Juanita Hackett Howell, 1994<sup>1</sup>

#### Delicious Sensations

Mamie Francis Hafley pressed her knees together, nudging her white Arabian horse forward to the edge of a platform looming fifty feet above a water tank. Performing in front of large crowds at Coney Island with California Frank’s Wild West Show, Mamie felt a “delicious sensation” lick over her as she and her steed prepared to plummet. “I can feel him pulsating with emotion as I sit astride him. I know that he is enjoying the same thrill that I do, and when he jumps, oh the glory of it all, I just close my eyes, take a deep breath and await the splash.”<sup>2</sup> This undated news story from as early as 1908 emphasized Mamie’s sensual experience of her flight, highlighting both the danger and the beauty of her act. While Hafley insisted that she was a normal western girl, thoroughly prepared for her act by having “busted bronchos [sic] along with the men,” a news reporter for the *Pittsburg Gazette Times* commented on her apparent

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<sup>1</sup> Juanita Hackett Howell, Poem, 1994, Juniata Hackett Howell File, from the Collections of the National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame, Fort Worth, Texas, hereafter NCHF.

<sup>2</sup> “Miss Francis Thrills People in the Park,” undated, Mamie Francis Hafley File, NCHF.

strangeness, noting the reader would “consider her somewhat abnormal, wouldn’t you?”<sup>3</sup> As the author went on to assure the readers of her ordinariness, he invited the larger public to celebrate Hafley as a quintessential American girl but simultaneously note her extraordinariness.

As spectacular embodiments of a new version of the “western woman,” performers like Hafley straddled a gendered, racialized, and sexualized line between beloved heroines of a bygone age and scandalous oddities of the American West. Rodeo cowgirls, as a group of white women who were both widely popular and persistently marginal, demonstrated how the American public could adore women for their performance of daring acts even as they were at times wary of the actors. Professional cowgirls were always on the verge of rejection for transgressing the lines of sexual and gender propriety they helped craft.

Rodeo, as a form of western equestrian performance and sport, became increasingly popular in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Growing out of community-based forms of play that followed large roundups of cattle and horses, rodeos were first staged as full-fledged spectacles in western towns and cities at the turn of the twentieth century. Some of the biggest of these contests, including Cheyenne’s Frontier Days (first held in 1897) and the Pendleton Roundup (started in 1910), became multi-day affairs accompanied by parades and agricultural fairs. Throughout the early twentieth century, Wild West shows, which re-enacted western tableaux, and rodeos, which staged competitions in riding and roping, overlapped significantly. Cowboy and cowgirl demonstrations were often a piece of the larger production of a Wild West show. World War I and Buffalo Bill Cody’s death in 1917 generally mark the moment when rodeos overcame the Wild West show as the predominant form of cowboy

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<sup>3</sup> “Wonderful Diving Horses,” *The Pittsburgh Gazette Times*, July 25, 1909.

performance, though rodeo cowgirls continued to work as Wild West entertainers, vaudevillians, and circus performers through the 1930s.<sup>4</sup>

As rodeos shifted from a practical aspect of ranch life to a performative spectacle, early rodeos still allowed for the contested participation of women in a variety of events, like bronc-riding, trick-riding, and horse races. The women who became professional rodeo cowgirls hailed from diverse backgrounds, though they were mostly promoted as authentic specimens of ranching childhoods. The fluidity between rodeos and other forms of performance meant these women were both athletes in the emerging competitive sport of rodeo and actresses in a broad range of turn-of-the-century entertainments. A rodeo cowgirl could potentially display her trick-riding expertise at a rodeo during the summer months and then perform similar routines for a film camera or a circus audience during the slow winter months.<sup>5</sup>

Women working and living on the early professional rodeo circuit performed a specific form of female masculinity. Lacerated skin, shattered bones, and excruciating deaths often resulted from riding broncos, wrestling steers, and racing horses. The media continually reiterated the “heroic” and “brave” natures of rodeo women. Show programs proclaimed, “And then the cowgirls! [...] the kind of girls who never hesitate to join the cowpunchers in the great cattle drives and who brave the lonely prairie rides with all the attendant dangers of outlaws and

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<sup>4</sup> Richard White, “Frederick Jackson Turner and Buffalo Bill,” and Patricia Nelson Limerick, “The Adventures of the Frontier in the Twentieth Century,” in *The Frontier in American Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> Rodeo cowgirls have received a good amount of scholarly interest in the past thirty years. In particular, Joyce Gibson Roach’s *The Cowgirls* (USA: University of North Texas Press, 1977) and Mary Lou LeCompte’s *Cowgirls of the Rodeo: Pioneer Professional Athletes* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 1993) offered foundational information histories of the rodeo cowgirl through archival research and oral histories. As a body of literature, this work has revealed a great deal about women’s experiences of sexism in rodeo, but has dedicated much of its efforts to celebrating cowgirls as extraordinary athletes. My work builds on these efforts by demonstrating that these women were also female performers in a broader sense who were contributing in problematic ways to the gender norms of average American women.

renegades, with never a thought of danger.”<sup>6</sup> The paying public embraced these forms of female masculinity under the exceptionalist premise that these women were ostensibly bred in the unforgiving environs of the West.

Nonetheless, cowgirls’ willingness to make a spectacle of their western-style female masculinity also put their own respectability into question. In an era of liberalizing ideas and mores concerning sex and marriage, cowgirls performed in a space rife with gendered and sexualized meanings. Their performances were scrutinized for potential improprieties, whether sexual or professional.<sup>7</sup> As rodeo historians have noted, the performers’ dedication to preserving their own femininity often motivated efforts to mitigate overtly masculine aspects of their labor.<sup>8</sup> Statements like, “I can’t tolerate the mannish woman any more than I can stand the womanish man,” from famous cowgirl Mabel Strickland, reassured audiences that these women were not “gender inverters.”<sup>9</sup> Gender inversion was a term sexologists, notably Richard von Krafft-Ebing, used to denote a people whose gender performance did not match their biological sex. Wanting to avoid suspicions, cowgirls performed their respectability in an arena marked by sexual anxiety. Many famous cowgirls of the early twentieth century were willing to use their own

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<sup>6</sup> Buffalo Bill Program, 1917, Wild West Show Collection (bMS Thr 586) Box 1, Harvard Theater Collection.

<sup>7</sup> “Oil of Mustard Spices Up New York Rodeo,” 1927.

<sup>8</sup> Richard von Krafft-Ebing wrote about this theory of inversion in his foundation work *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886), which presented a set of case studies concerning supposed sexual ailments. Mary Lou LeCompte, in *Cowgirls*, argues that many cowgirls attempted to mitigate the masculine aspects of their careers through their appearance.

<sup>9</sup> “A 98-Pound Heroine who Trembles Only for Others.” *Literary Digest* 86, August 1, 1925. The complex gender performances of rodeo cowgirls demonstrated a form of female masculinity used by both rodeo cowgirls themselves and a larger public in service to an idealized domesticity. J. Halberstam has argued, “by reading [female masculinity] as proto-lesbianism awaiting a coming community, we continue to hold female masculinity apart from the making of modern masculinity itself.” J. Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 46.

brand of female masculinity to re-entrench gender norms, bolster white supremacy, and construct heteronormativity.<sup>10</sup>

In this chapter, I argue that as representatives of a particular narratively constructed “western woman,” early twentieth century cowgirls served as “beloved freaks,” both central to a national narrative of triumph and exoticized by the press and the public in terms of gender and sexuality. By walking this tight-rope, cowgirls existed as both a valuable asset to the wider public, as their performances helped shore up the lines of gender propriety, and a vulnerable community, as their performances transgressed these very boundaries. Audiences’ reception of rodeo cowgirls revealed the simultaneous desire for hardy white domesticity and anxiety about femininity based in masculine skill. Drawing from memoirs, published oral histories, and archives from the National Cowgirl Hall of Fame, this chapter demonstrates the centrality of the cowgirl image to a celebration of the pioneer past that bolstered the modern, eugenic, and home-economic demand for healthy domestic women, even as these female entertainers lived at the edges of respectability. Ultimately, the public image of cowgirls and their experiences on the road illustrated the competing impulses to make the West accessible to all Americans as essentially American while also maintaining an emphasis on its lack of civilization. This process constructed the West as a space I call a peripheral center, meaning that the West was both familiar and central to narratives of Americanness and also external to the imagined community of the American nation.<sup>11</sup> Through an intersection of region and gender, cowgirlness offered a

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<sup>10</sup> For examples of other communities of women performing antimodern roles in a modern world, see Adria Imada, *Aloha America: Hula Circuits through the US Empire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012) and Jayna Brown, *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> I am drawing on Benedict Anderson’s classic theory of imagined communities, in which national boundaries are only erected through the communal understanding of inclusion and exclusion, see *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983). My notion of the peripheral center is grounded in work by cultural historians of the American West who seek to understand the place of the imagined frontier in American culture at large. In my understanding, the West is not necessarily the primary mythology of

narrative that allowed white women to both transgress and re-inscribe the boundaries of deviance surrounding spectacle, gender, and sexuality.

I begin this chapter by demonstrating the range of western femininities in the early twentieth century through both political and cultural lenses. I then analyze the travails of the rodeo road and the construction of familial rodeo networks which supported women and allowed them to enter the world of western equestrian entertainment. Next, I argue that the press, rodeo organizers, and female rodeo performers themselves promoted cowgirls as cultural heroines who embraced hardy domesticity in the name of the heterosexual family unit. I then demonstrate that this celebratory image was countered by a suspicion of cowgirls' indecency and their potential relegation to the position of sideshow entertainment. Lastly, I argue that cowgirl performers served as icons for a female masculinity that was both embraced for the betterment of the race and nation and also rebuffed in the name of sexual respectability. This process exposes the more general phenomenon of the construction of the imagined West as both essentially American and irretrievably different—and the dependence of this construction on gendered and sexualized cultural work of cowgirls.

### **The Romance of the West: Broader Cultural Images of the “Western Woman”**

At the turn of the twentieth century, a variety of idealized tropes of western womanhood proliferated in American popular culture. The performances of rodeo cowgirls emerged in the context of broader discussions of western femininities, many of which allowed women to be physically and mentally robust, but only so much as these qualities were used in defense of the

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America, but instead functions as one of a number of peripheral centers in American culture. My work demonstrates how western people, particularly women, occupied the imagined space of the United States, even as they were also always at risk of being marginalized in their everyday lives. In this way, I am building on more masculine-centered studies, such as Richard Slotkin's *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (United States: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992) and Richard White's descriptions of the interdependence of western reality and western mythology in "The Imagined West," *It's My Misfortune and None of Your Own* (USA: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

home. Reaching into a fictionalized past and into a semi-civilized region allowed individuals from a variety of political standpoints the ability to claim the “western woman” as everything from a symbol of traditionalism to a model independent woman.

Many Americans at the turn of the twentieth century were concerned about the hardiness of native-stock, white Americans. As waves of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe poured into the country and the United States spread its imperialist influence around the globe, elites began to craft a discourse of over-civilization. Anglo-Saxon stock was weakening due to the lack of vigor in urban life. Adherents to the theory of race suicide, which postulated that falling birthrates were a harbinger of inevitable racial extinction, urged women to remember their primary duty to the nation in bearing healthy children who would become fit citizens. “Better Baby” and “Fitter Family” competitions were popular at state fairs and encouraged the use of eugenics, or self-conscious breeding selection, to produce improved generations of white Americans.<sup>12</sup>

Simultaneously, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries women were agitating for more political and social rights. The explosion of urban entertainments, including amusement parks, theaters, and department stores, and the increasing number of women in the

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<sup>12</sup> As Gail Bederman has demonstrated in *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) gender and race worked in tandem in this period as white men were supposedly weakened through over-civilization. Masculine pursuits were thought to return white, Anglo-Saxon American men to their rightful places as the master race. For instance, Teddy Roosevelt famously stated in his 1899 speech, “I wish to preach, not the doctrine of ignoble ease, but the doctrine of the strenuous life, the life of toil and effort, of labor and strife,” linking strenuous activity with imperialistic foreign policy, see “The Strenuous Life,” Speech to the Hamilton Club, Chicago, Illinois, April 10, 1899, printed in *Theodore Roosevelt: Letters and Speeches*, edited by Louis Auchincloss (USA: Penguin, 2004), 755-766. Teddy Roosevelt also adamantly encouraged women to undertake their own strenuous life, through childbirth. In a speech before congress in 1905, he stated, “if the average family in which there are children contained but two children the nation as a whole would decrease in population so rapidly that in two or three generations it would very deservedly be on the point of extinction, so that the people who had acted on this base and selfish doctrine would be giving place to others with braver and more robust ideals. Nor would such a result be in any way regrettable; for a race that practised such doctrine—that is, a race that practised race suicide—would thereby conclusively show that it was unfit to exist.” Theodore Roosevelt, “On American Motherhood,” National Congress of Mothers, March 13, 1905, printed in *Population and Development Review* 13, no. 1 (March 1987): 141-147.



labor force shaped the debates about gender in the modern age.<sup>13</sup> The suffrage movement drove together otherwise conflicting factions of women, some who believed in the moral superiority of women above men and others who believed in the complete equality between the sexes.<sup>14</sup> For many Americans it was a debate between women having equality of right or equality of function. As numerous iterations of the “New Woman” emerged in the media, ranging from dedicated suffragettes to vapid, self-absorbed girls, the cowgirl became embroiled in the debate over white womanhood and political autonomy.<sup>15</sup>

At this time of uncertainty regarding gender and race, the cultural movement of antimodernism fueled the participation in an optimized modern world. Expressing fear and disgust of the many iterations of the “New Woman,” a growing group of politicians, psychologists, and capitalists encouraged a return to “antimodern” authenticity, namely through manly interactions with nature and sport, as pathways to recapture the supremacy of white American males. “Antimodernism” in the early twentieth century was defined by an anxiety that the modern would create racial and gender weakness. Through physical fitness, outdoor excursions, and traditional crafts, otherwise urbanized and unfit men and women could regain their mental and physical well-being, allowing them to be more productive, efficient, and fit citizens. As Philip Deloria has explained, the antimodern and the modern were two sides of the

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<sup>13</sup> For works on the interconnection between labor and entertainment, see Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986) and Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Women of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

<sup>14</sup> Nancy Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

<sup>15</sup> See Kim Marra, *Strange Duets: Impresarios and Actresses in the American Theatre, 1865-1914* (Iowa City: University of Iowa, 2006) for a discussion on how the New Woman image could be enjoyed by male audiences through female performers without allowing the full autonomy of the New Woman promise.

same coin; “Primitivism and progress defined the dialectic of the modern.”<sup>16</sup> “Antimodern modernism,” the use of this antimodern nostalgia to produce an optimized modernity, used the imagined West as one place to journey in order to discover one’s natural strength and vitality. As historian Frederick Jackson Turner and showman William “Buffalo Bill” Cody barked to crowds about the end of the frontier-era, the West imaginatively functioned as a place that, in its harsh wildness, could create better Americans through the consumption and performance of its tenants by modern Americans.<sup>17</sup>

Women of the imagined frontier played a crucial role in this gendered antimodern modernism. Western cultural producers seized on antimodernism and the “post-frontier” crisis in order to craft the image of the western woman, drawing on a celebration of America’s pioneer past. Daughters of the American West, the popular story went, were the mothers of hardy sons and the protectors of the home, gritty yet feminine. Young women could draw on the moral strength of America’s imagined frontier past to defend themselves and the nation from the selfish pleasures of the modern age. In 1914, the Girl Pioneers of America’s official manual exhorted, “The pioneer women were strong. You can be strong. The pioneer women were upright. You can

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<sup>16</sup> Deloria continues: “and they both reflected the intuition that America had experienced a radical break in its history.” Philip Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 100. Also see TJ Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1890-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) for a discussion of the ways in which antimodernism bolstered the economic and cultural structures of modernism. Svetlana Boym in *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 22 notes the co-dependence of “modern ideas of progress and newness and antimodern claims of rediscovery of national community and the stable past,” which arose from a modern anxiety about a vanishing past.

<sup>17</sup> The mythology of frontier was both shaped by both entertainment and academia; see Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” (1983) in which Turner argues that the exceptionalism of American democracy was created through a constant process of pioneering on the frontier line. The significance of Turner’s thesis and its influence on the imagined West have been analyzed by western historians in the past several decades. See Richard W. Etulain, “Historians and the Turner Thesis,” in *Does the Frontier Make America Exceptional?* (New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1999); Richard White, “Frederick Jackson Turner and Buffalo Bill,” in *The Frontier in American Culture*, ed James Grossman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Richard Slotkin’s *Gunfighter Nation*; Christine Bold’s *Selling the Wild West: Popular Western Fiction, 1860-1960* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); Louis Warren’s *Buffalo Bill’s America: William Cody and the Wild West Show* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005).

be upright. The pioneer women were unselfish and self-sacrificing. You can be unselfish too.”<sup>18</sup> New youth organizations drew on nostalgia in order to “develop a girl mentally, morally and physically,” preparing them to be strong in their commitment to the home.<sup>19</sup> Youth organizations, politicians, and women’s rights advocates crafted these cultural images of the western woman’s dedication to the home in order to encourage them to reclaim their moral strength and subsume their hedonistic desires for the good of society.<sup>20</sup>

The Camp Fire Girls, in particular, brought together “the great American tradition of pioneering and the great American inheritance of Indian lore.”<sup>21</sup> In 1912, Dr. Luther H. Gulick and his wife Charlotte founded the organization. Gulick, a physician, was an early proponent of physical education for children and both worked to introduce children to the outdoors through summer camps. By the 1920s the organization flourished with 8,000 camps and 125,000 members worldwide.<sup>22</sup> Inspired by groups like the Boy Scouts of America, the organizers of Camp Fire Girls and the Girl Pioneers of America asserted that girls needed specialized programming that would prepare them for lives as modern women. J.G. Crabbe, of the Colorado State Teachers’ College praised this specialization saying, “The Camp Fire Girls organization does not imitate the organization for boys; it does not copy boys’ activities. If it did, it would necessarily fall short of its modes on the one hand, and what is more serious, neglect the vital

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<sup>18</sup> Lina Beard and Adelia Beard, *Girl Pioneers of America/Official Manual* (New York: National Americana Society, 1914), 7.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>20</sup> Susan Miller, *Growing Girls: The Natural Origins of Girls’ Organizations in America* (NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 9.

<sup>21</sup> Helen Buckler, Mary Fielder, and Martha Allen, *Wo-he-lo: The Camp Fire History* (Camp Fire, Inc., 1980).

<sup>22</sup> “Camp Fire Girls,” Pamphlet (New York: The Camp Fire Girls, c.1922). Widener Library, Harvard University.

development to be gained by seeking out the girls' own principles of activities."<sup>23</sup> Girls needed to be taught *as* girls to *be* girls.

Based around playing Indian with ceremonies, dress, and symbols, Camp Fire Girls taught young white women to be fearless in their pursuit of feminine accomplishments in a modern world that sought to weaken them through idol pursuits.<sup>24</sup> The organizers of the Camp Fire Girls, urged young women to use camping, exercising, and dieting to "become sturdy and rugged" like their pioneer foremothers and also to resist modern entertainments and distractions, which were thought to corrupt young women into a life of childless immorality, in order to "re-establish the old-fashioned womanhood by making homes smile...by being real home makers and hostesses."<sup>25</sup> The periodical *The Continent* noted that the girls, "bear in their faces the rich color that is evidence of sodas and candy foregone, and of nights spent in healthful sleep out of doors. Their hands are scarred with wounds where the darning needle slipped, or a hot kettle slid off the holder."<sup>26</sup>

In rejecting empty and corrupting consumerism and performing their domestic duties with fearless sacrifice, young women of the modern age could overcome their era's failings and live up to their foremothers. As Dr. Gulick suggested in 1911, the camp fire itself was taken as a symbol of domesticity, "the domestic fire—not the wild fire."<sup>27</sup> Tending the home fire "is a

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<sup>23</sup> J.G. Crabbe, quoted in "Camp Fire Girls," Pamphlet (New York: The Camp Fire Girls, c.1922). Widener Library, Harvard University.

<sup>24</sup> The motto of Camp Fire Girls was "Wohelo"—meant to sound Native American yet actually a shortening of the words Work, Health, Love. "The Law" of the organization included: "Seek Beauty; Give Service; Pursue Knowledge; Be Trustworthy; Hold on to Health; Glorify Work; Be Happy." And the Seven Crafts which were taught were Home Craft, Health Craft, Camp Craft, Hand craft, Nature Lore, Business, and Patriotism. Americanizing foreign friends was an explicit goal of Camp Fire Girls by "teaching them American songs, games, customs; by reading American history with them [...]".

<sup>25</sup> "Camp Fire Girls," Pamphlet (New York: The Camp Fire Girls, c.1922). Widener Library, Harvard University.

<sup>26</sup> Cited in Buckler, *Wo-He-Lo*, 66.

feminine activity. Fire symbolized the home, the place of comfort, and cheer. And the fire centers the home and its activities.”<sup>28</sup> Indeed, as Phillip Deloria has observed about summer camps, “Antimodern campers played the primitive authentic against modernity’s inauthenticity in order to devise a better modern.”<sup>29</sup> For young women, playing Indian and playing pioneer taught them how to be more efficient and effective white wives and mothers.

The image of women working on the frontier became important for advocates for women’s professionalization in labor outside the home. The image of the woman laboring on the cattle frontier provided a virtuous example of women’s ability to adapt and undertake any necessary task. In 1903, the *New York Times* ran an article entitled, “Women in the Territories: Some of their Achievements in Fields of Energy Generally Filled by Men—typical examples, including a mining speculator and a cowboy.”<sup>30</sup> In this piece, the *Times* praised the tough women of the frontier. “There are several thousands of women on the plains and among the mountains and cañons in the Far West who deserve to be well up toward the top of the catalogue of those who are prominent for achievements in those fields of human energy which for years have been occupied exclusively by the sturdiest of men.” While women of the East were making progress in the professions, women of the West were “in every part of the raw, new West [...] not only adapting themselves to a crude and strange environment but are winning fortune and fame.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Buckler, *Wo-He-Lo*, 22.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 26

<sup>29</sup> Deloria, *Playing Indian*, 102.

<sup>30</sup> *New York Times*, May 10, 1903, printed in Martha Patterson, *The American New Woman Revisited: A Reader* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008).

<sup>31</sup> In particular, the article highlights Dunn’s labor: “The young woman’s duties as vaquero and proprietor of some 4,000 cattle often take her 150 and 200 miles from home across sandy wastes and among foothills and mountains, as the cattle must be kept moving to feed well. Frequently some of the cattle become mired in the mud along creeks where they graze, or where they wade in to drink. Then comes the hardest part of the work. With true cowboy skill she throws the lariat over the slender branching horns, while the other end of the long but phenomenally strong

Amelia Dunn, for instance, took over her family's ranch when her father died. For the author, by rising to the occasion western women proved that females could work in any occupation, even the grueling, backbreaking labor involved in taming the western landscape if it was for the sake of her family.

Yet western women, the *Times* assured its readers, did not cast aside femininity for masculinity. "While on the range Miss Dunn dresses in true cowboy fashion—wide-brimmed white felt hat, long gauntlet gloves, a lariat coiled about the saddle horn, and a revolver at her belt—and rides the wildest bronco with thorough ease. When off duty she is a quiet, unassuming young lady, the last one that would be suspected of such masculine accomplishments." Indeed, the *Times* reported that her only regret was "that I have never had an opportunity to gain any of the womanly accomplishments in the way of study, literature, and music. I fear I would be laughed at by the young women in the East if I should go among them." Womanliness was an aspiration, anchored here in the performance of the cultural arts and not childbearing. The harshness of life in the West did not dampen women's supposed desire for genteel femininity in the midst of necessary masculinity.

Theodore Roosevelt also drew on the success of the western woman to argue for women's equality of rights but difference of function. For Roosevelt, writing for *Outlook* magazine in 1912, "The service of the good mother to society is the most valuable economic asset that the entire commonwealth can show," and that form of cost-free labor needed to be protected at all costs. Anything that threatened the home threatened the nation and civilization as

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rawhide rope is fastened to the saddle. Then a steady pull on the part of the pony draws the imprisoned animal to a place of safety on dry ground. She has a large herd for one person to handle, but with the assistance of two well-trained cattle dogs she does it." In this story, the woman sacrifices her own desires for a genteel life for the survival of her family. She does not undertake masculine activities on a self-motivated whim. "Women in the Territories: Some of their Achievements in Fields of Energy Generally Filled by Men—typical examples, including a mining speculator and a cowboy," *New York Times*, May 10, 1903.

a whole. Roosevelt believed, however, that allowing women the national vote would not necessarily endanger the home, and might in fact serve the home by allowing women to help pass stricter labor laws and enforce harsher penalties on absent fathers. Roosevelt's stance was based on the idea that women would not forget their places once given the vote. His evidence was the numerous women in the US West who could already vote in state and local elections. He explained, "In those Western States it is a real pleasure to meet women, thoroughly womanly women, who do every duty that any woman can do, and who also are not only in fact but in theory on a level of full equality with men. I fail to see that these women are any less efficient in their households, or show any falling off in the sense of duty; I think the contrary is the case; and so far as their influence has affected political life at all it has affected it for good."<sup>32</sup> In the context of suffrage, everyday western women, not just cowgirls, could simultaneously be paragons of masculine industry and paragons of the home.

Pioneering and the conquest of the West by women as well as men provided eastern audiences with a cultural touchstone for a hardy domesticity that could revitalize modern women's commitment to the home. While women voting in Wyoming seemed distant from a trick riding cowgirl in the rodeo arena, their images were at times conflated because of the often inaccurate belief, encouraged by most cowgirls, that they were in fact raised in the West. In an age of rapid industrialization and urbanization, performing cowgirls were looked to as living artifacts of a dying age in which women could balance both their essential feminine natures with the necessary tasks of masculine political and labor pursuits. Through the controlled deployment of their western brand of female masculinity, American women and girls could shore up the white nuclear family.

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<sup>32</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, "Women's Rights: and the Duties of Both Men and Women," *Outlook*, Feb. 3, 1912, 262–266.

## **Heroines of Hardy Domesticity: Cowgirls, Female Masculinity, and the Domestic West**

Cowgirls created their own version of the sturdy western woman within this larger context of emerging western femininities. With debates about the social, economic, and political place of women influencing the rise of eugenics, alongside the expansion of Jim Crow and the desire for immigration restriction, a cultural demand for sturdy, domestic white women exploded among the white middle-class and elites. Cowgirls sought to promote an image of hardy domesticity which branded the western woman as strong through necessity, healthier than her eastern sister, and fiercely dedicated to serving the home.

Even within the imagined frontier, women could not appear to be overly masculine in the early decades of the twentieth century. Medical journals, childrearing books, and psychological studies all suggested that a masculine mother, a monstrosity in herself, could only produce weak and effeminate children. As the *New York Medical Journal* published in 1900, “The female with masculine ambition is always amusing and often pitiable; but the attenuated, weak-voiced neuter, the effeminate male: pity him, but blame his mother for the false training, and give scorn to the father for his indifference.”<sup>33</sup> As working women performing daring feats for the public, cowgirl performers embodied the contradictions of a masculine hardiness which sustained forms of feminine domesticity. Through their association with the West and as antimodern heroines, cowgirls performed a specific kind of female masculinity that paradoxically walked the line of gender impropriety in order to reinforce the idealized family unit.

Throughout the 1910s and 20s, cowgirls were promoted by the press as strapping lasses of pioneer stock. A 1917 Buffalo Bill program read, “And then the cowgirls! What a fine

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<sup>33</sup> William Lee Howard, “Effeminate Men and Masculine Women,” *New York Medical Journal* (May 5, 1900): 686–687.



healthy, sun-browned, robust lot they are.”<sup>34</sup> Yet, despite this bravery and roughness, the cowgirl was not tastelessly imitating men with a supposedly mannish independence by seeking her own fulfillment. “She is a development of the stock-raising West comparing with the bachelor girl and the independent woman of the East. She is not of the new woman class—not of the sort that discards her feminine attributes and tries to ape the man, simply a lively, athletic young woman with a superfluity of nerve and animal spirits, with a realization that in affairs where skill is the chief qualification she has an equal chance with her brothers.”<sup>35</sup> The “bachelor girl” and the “independent woman” were self-centered creatures of the modern age. They frolicked while cowgirls worked and used their skills in service to family survival. Wild West shows and rodeos promoted their female performers in a way that celebrated their verve without overstating their political or social liberation.

In this way organizers, the press, and female performers were able to depict cowgirls as classic American girls, quintessential in their values and their hopes, while also being exceptions to standard gendered behavior because of cowgirls’ upbringing in a harsh frontier environment. Even runaways learned about the West the hard way, as they were re-educated to be authentic products of the frontier. As a 1940 Madison Square Garden program noted, “To see these young girls in chic street dress one would have difficulty in distinguishing them from the average American woman whose chief interests are home and social life. But when one of these Western cowgirls goes into the arena to ride a bad bronk [sic] why it’s different.”<sup>36</sup> Their skills,

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<sup>34</sup> Wild West Program, 1917, Wild West Show Collection (bMS Thr 586), Harvard University, Box 1, folder 18.

<sup>35</sup> Ranch 101 program, Wild West Show Collection (bMS Thr 586), Harvard University, Box 1, folder 24.

<sup>36</sup> 1940 Madison Square Garden Rodeo Program, *Harmon Pritchard Papers*, 1933-1940, MSA.6.2.3, Autry Library, Autry National Center, Los Angeles, CA. Interestingly, Tad herself was born in Nebraska and not the cattle ranches of the intermountain-west or southwest.

supposedly inherited from their pioneer ancestors, set these women apart as admirable even as they performed un-feminine feats. Cowgirls also described themselves in these terms, as trick-rider Tad Lucas stated in the *Boston Evening Post*: “[We are] normal girls who fell victim of their environment—rugged daughters of a rugged frontier. In fact...any eastern ‘perty’ lass of the lipstick and fluffy female type might have taken to bronc busting if born in the leathery surroundings of a daddy-owned stock ranch, cradled in the saddle, teathed on a cinch buckle, and nourished on cooked cow.”<sup>37</sup> Supposedly no different at heart from any other American girl, cowgirls deflected attention away from the unconventional realities of their current profession and instead advertised themselves as western women born and bred on the frontier.

Western female masculinity was deeply linked to a specific place and experience, and therefore, female rodeo performers claimed an authenticity that others entertainers could not. As one newspaper claimed, “The best practical quickest handiest cowpuncher her daddy had. That’s where she learned the business. She’s not a vaudeville performer, just struck onto a novelty. She didn’t go to a riding professor and get taught. She learned to rope steers and lasso wild horses like a bird learns to fly, she just tried.”<sup>38</sup> Indeed, the distasteful business of show business wasn’t quite befitting a person with such real-life experience. “Some vaudevillians are born to grease paint—they have no personality outside of it; others attain grease paint and like most ready-made things, it never exactly fits; but Lucille Mulhall, the Oklahoma girl at the Temple this week is a shining example of those who have grease paint thrust upon them—and in her particular case it is safe to prophesy—it isn’t going to stick.”<sup>39</sup> Cowgirls were allowed to perform this female

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<sup>37</sup> Tracey Owens Patton and Sally Schedlck, *Gender, Whiteness, and Power in Rodeo: Breaking Away from the Ties of Sexism and Racism* (New York: Lexington Press, 2011), 35.

<sup>38</sup> “Girl Cow Puncher Drives Nails with Gun, Ropes Steer in 30 Seconds,” *Evening Post*, Cincinnati, Ohio, August 29, 1907, Georgia’s scrapbook, Mulhall File, NCHF.

masculinity due to the demands of the West and assumption of authenticity in their actions.<sup>40</sup>

Even popular postcards of cowgirls often showed them in action, throwing a lasso or jumping vehicles astride a horse, while postcards for famous actresses tended to be still beauty shots of their faces.<sup>41</sup> This set cowgirls apart from other, supposedly more frivolous, female performers.

Cowgirls and their promoters argued that the necessity of being tough produced healthy citizens and happy women. Cowgirls particularly stressed the healthful aspects of their lifestyle, emphasizing that over-civilization was as harmful to women as it was to men. Mildred Mulhall, a 1910s Wild West performer, asserted, “It is the most healthful form of exercise for women, more vigorous and wholesome than golfing or yachting. [...] I’m glad I’ve never have had to call upon the services of a doctor since I began to throw the lariat and I hope to be able to ride a horse as long as I live.”<sup>42</sup> Similarly, Mamie Francis Hafley assured her audience,

In the west where I was raised, women are by no means the weaker vessel. Inured by lives of hardship, inconvenience, and sometimes privation, the western girl has learned to take her place in the saddle and often behind the trenches with her brothers. [...] When necessary, she has shouldered a gun and, side by side with her brother and father, fought the Indians or the desperados. She has ridden wild horses and enjoyed the excitement of the round-up. She knows nothing of broken down nerves and neurasthenia.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> “Oklahoma Girl at the Temple Theater Yearns to See Western Plains,” Unidentified Clipping, Mulhall file, NCHF.

<sup>40</sup> According to historian Renee Laegreid, cowgirls were not totally considered New Women and therefore got much better press than actresses and other public women mostly because they were considered to be doing things important to their heritage as pioneers; see *Riding Pretty: Rodeo Royalty in the American West* (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 2006): 52-53. Also, the question of authenticity has always haunted western cultural history, “The Western has so little to do with an actual West that it might better be thought of as its own epitaph, written by an exuberant East encroaching on possibilities already foreclosed because represented in terms of a West that ‘no longer exists,’ never did, never could.” Lee Clark Mitchell, *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 6. Interestingly, rodeoes began to traffic in the language of authenticity in the 1920s as they sought to distinguish themselves from Wild West Shows. By the 1920, audiences demanded authentic contests between man and beast rather than staged battles between cowboys and Indians.

<sup>41</sup> See for examples, “Ninety-one images of cowgirls, the rodeo, and the American west,” Elizabeth West Postcard Collection, 1887-1955. Folder: Cowgirls and rodeo. Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Radcliffe Institute.

<sup>42</sup> “Convent Girl the Star of Wild West Show,” Unidentified Clipping, May 15, 1910, Lucille Mulhall File, NCHF.

<sup>43</sup> “Mamie Francis: Girl who Rides Diving Horse,” Unidentified Clipping, Mamie Francis Hafley File, NCHF.

Over-civilization had created a gambit of maladies that were thought to run rampant in the early twentieth century, complete with lethargy, irritability, and de-centralized aches. These disorders were seen as signs of weakness in an endangered population. Purportedly hardened and made fit by the weather, the enemies, and the loneliness of the West, cowgirls presented an image of the western woman as physically and mentally capable and robust.

Furthermore western women achieved personal happiness through this healthfulness. As bronc-rider Alice Greenough explained, “Western women are happier, I believe, because they have to be tough—and that means strict rules of physical and mental health. [...] A cow-woman takes no coddling and gets no martyr complex just because she is going to have a baby.” Indeed, western women had hard bodies from physical toil, which meant they did not wear “binding clothing,” because they had no flab to wrangle into submission.<sup>44</sup> This fitness could be transmitted through performance, as cowgirls urged city-dwellers to toughen themselves. Hafley’s diving performances were significant, she assured readers, because acts of bravery executed in front of an audience emboldened viewers to be daring in their own lives. The physical demands of the performed antimodern frontier allowed cowgirls to inhabit idealized modernity, with fit bodies and minds.

Most importantly, these fit bodies and minds were used in service to the family unit. Alice Greenough asserted, “Asking city women what they want from life is not generally the opening to a pleasant conversation because in their anxiety to rope in their desires they have become hysterical and frustrated. (Words cowgirls seldom ever hear). They are too eager to *get* and too ignorant of *giving*.” Western women, by contrast, were healthy because they worked hard to provide for others, with little time to work themselves into hysterics. Defense of the

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<sup>44</sup> Alice Greenough, “What a Cowgirl Wants from Life,” Unidentified Clipping, Alice Greenough File, NCHF.

home and the need to toil for prosperity made cowgirls antimodern heroines and allowed them access to a masculinity otherwise still prohibited for many modern women. Even the staunchest defenders of femininity among cowgirls admitted that she was tough businesswoman, but in the name of her daughter. Mabel Strickland, well known for her insistence on lady-like behavior, explained that when signing any contract, there better not be “anything cute above the signatures that will keep the money from our little April.”<sup>45</sup> In this way, cowgirls could be cast as both traditionally dedicated to the home and exotic specimens of a particular land which allowed them to be harder than most, simultaneously quintessential and exemplary. In the West, women could revert to their essential natures, which were civilized, without the contrived artificiality that led to over-civilization in the East. Unconventionality was rewritten as traditionalism.

From the early 1900s until the 1930s, women in professional rodeo created public personas that encouraged women’s participation in the arena instead of their relegation the sidelines, promoting robust health over vapid over-civilization. Their connection to the West and its harsh environmental demands allowed this otherwise overly masculine performance to be converted into a defense of the white, heterosexual home. Using this language of authenticity and necessity, cowgirls and their promoters created an acceptable form of female masculinity that placed cowgirls firmly in a domestic vision of the American polity.

### **“A deep bass rhythm against our very souls”: Rodeo Roads & Rodeo Families**

Family and community were at the center of early rodeos. In order to survive life on the arduous rodeo road from the early 1900s through the 1930s, cowgirls created a space for themselves as performers and sewed vast networks of familial ties. As the thirty-year “golden age” of female participation in rodeo contests, from roughly 1900 until 1930, coincided with

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<sup>45</sup> *The Literary Digest*, August 1, 1925.

rapid political and social change for women in America, life on the rodeo circuits in particular allowed female performers both new forms of independence and new vulnerabilities.<sup>46</sup>

As poster girls for a version of the “western woman” that emphasized both female competence and the importance of the home, cowgirls entered contemporaneous political debates in complex ways. While some scholars have emphasized cowgirls’ reluctance to be associated with the suffrage movement because of their need to maintain traditional respectability, other scholars have claimed that cowgirls were working-class, hard-drinking, hard-living women who had no desire to be associated with church-going, temperance-supporting, middle-class suffragettes.<sup>47</sup> In reality, cowgirls came from many different backgrounds, social classes, and nations, resulting in a variety of opinions on women’s rights, though usually even supporters of suffrage tempered their language when speaking with the press. Lulu Bell Parr, for instance, was described in 1913 as “a suffragette in every sense of the word, although she abhors the English way women have of trying to obtain the right to vote, and militant suffragettes find no symposhizer [sic] in her.”<sup>48</sup> Parr was careful to position herself as a supporter of women’s right to vote, without aligning herself with radical political tactics. Other cowgirls were ardently against women’s involvement with politics. Mable Strickland asserted, “I don’t care for these high-faluting ideas for women. I don’t care about mixing in the dirty mess called politics. I don’t

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<sup>46</sup> Joyce Gibson Roach claims that cowgirls were proto-feminists in their claiming of equality with men. Unlike eastern women who marched in parades and demanded their equality through political channels, Roach argues that western women simply lived like they were equals and therefore were equals. This overlooks the ways in which organized movements won rights for other women and the openly expressed opinions of some cowgirls who acknowledged their husband’s power over them. *The Cowgirls*, xvii.

<sup>47</sup> Candace Savage, in *Cowgirls* (Vancouver, Canada: Greystone, 1996), especially emphasizes the working-class image of cowgirls who did not cling to respectability.

<sup>48</sup> “Native Hanover Girl a Feature with Wild West Show at York last Saturday,” *The Hanover Herald*, May 24, 1913, Lulu Bell Parr File, NCHF.

want to learn how to be half a man.”<sup>49</sup> As *Life* and other periodicals lampooned the New Woman, particularly suffragettes, as mannish gender inverts bordering on sideshow novelties, cowgirls made efforts to disassociate themselves from that particular form of female masculinity while still at times maintaining an interest in women’s rights.<sup>50</sup>

The participation of women in rodeos of all kinds rose steadily between 1900 and 1930. Women entered both large and small rodeos as either contract exhibition riders or contestants competing for prize money. These women were most often native-born white women, although Mexican American, Native American, and European immigrant women rodeoed as well.<sup>51</sup> Annie Oakley, who joined with Buffalo Bill’s Wild West in 1885, was one of about a dozen other white female performers to help establish white women as part of the western tableau. In 1896, Annie Schaffer became one of the first woman bronc riders to be recorded competing at a local rodeo in Fort Smith, Arkansas.<sup>52</sup> By 1901, Prairie Rose Henderson petitioned the judges at the Cheyenne Frontier Days to compete in bronc riding. The committee was forced to let her ride because the rules did not explicitly ban women.<sup>53</sup> The number of women rodeoing the circuit rose from roughly forty before 1912 to over two hundred in the 1920s.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> “A 98-Pound Heroine who Trembles Only for Others,” *Literary Digest* 86 August 1, 1925.

<sup>50</sup> See cartoon by Augustus Smith Daggy, “Suffragette [to the Bearded Lady]: How Do You Manage It?” *Life*, Feb. 9, 1911, 315, reprinted in Patterson, *The American New Woman Revisited: A Reader*.

<sup>51</sup> For instance, Mrs. Sherry was an African American trick rider in the early 1920s. Little documentation exists on Mrs. Sherry’s life, with few photographs or news stories. See Tracey Owens Patton and Sally Schedlck’s *Gender, Whiteness, and Power in Rodeo* 155 for a brief discussion of her career.

<sup>52</sup> Patton, *Gender, Whiteness, ad Power*, 23.

<sup>53</sup> Biography, Prairie Rose Henderson File, NCHF.

<sup>54</sup> See Lecompte’s *Cowgirls of the Rodeo* appendixes, tables A.2-A.4 for “Women’s Participation in Professional Rodeos,” 199-200.

The result of this incursion of women riders into rodeo was not equal competition between men and women, but the creation of “ladies” events, which had different rules and lower payouts. After Bertha Blancett almost claimed the all-around champion title at the Pendleton Roundup ahead of any male participants in 1914, the rodeo committee changed the rules to prohibit male and female points being tallied in the same categories.<sup>55</sup> Both eastern and western rodeos often featured ladies bronc riding, ladies trick riding, relay races, and roman races, with riders standing on horseback, as paying competitions. Additionally, organizers allowed women to present trick riding and trick roping as both contract exhibitions and prize contests, while ladies bulldogging remained exhibition-only. As fewer women entered competitions, the payouts for ladies events were far lower.

While the competitions they entered and the people against whom they competed changed between 1900 and 1930, the one constant of their daily lives was the danger and difficulty of the road. As Vera McGinnis, a successful cowgirl of the 1920s, explained in her memoir, trepidation followed women on the road; “Rodeoing isn’t a lark for a lone woman, yet I had a career to keep alive.”<sup>56</sup> Traveling first by wagons and trains, and later with cars and trucks, the rodeo season was a grueling nine-month trek from one rodeo to the next. During this period, female performers were at times signed as contract riders for a particular show, traveling with the entire cast and crew, while at other times they were simply contestants, responsible for their own transportation, food, and accommodation. Wrecks, both in the arena and on the road, could lay women up for weeks as they tried to catch back up with the circuit, nursing broken bones, black

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<sup>55</sup> “Old-time Cowgirls,” *Inland Northwest Magazine*, May-June, 2011, 73-84.

<sup>56</sup> Vera McGinnis, *Rodeo Road: My Life as a Pioneer Cowgirl* (New York: Hastings House, 1974), 154. These difficulties were experienced by many traveling shows, especially circuses and sideshows, see famous circus organizer C.W. Coup’s *Sawdust and Spangles: Stories and Secrets of the Circus* (Chicago: HS Stone and Company, 1901).



eyes, collapsed lungs, and concussions. On the road, rodeoers lived out of tents, trucks, and even horse stalls for months, and women were expected to keep up with the cooking and cleaning for their male family members in addition to practicing tricks, exercising their animals, and finding paying jobs.<sup>57</sup> Performing was often seen as a way to earn money for a future ranch or business, yet due to the demands of travel, those goals were hard to achieve. As trick rider Juanita Hackett Howell explained, “It was a hard life. We went the hard way. We had to earn our money to keep afloat. We managed to save enough to buy our 40 acre farm. The rest of our money was spent on the road with flat tires and gas and traveling was expensive. It was a hard life.”<sup>58</sup>

At the same time, the dangers of the road along with the liberties it provided fed many women’s addiction for the glamour of rodeo life. No matter how difficult the road was, McGinnis and her husband found a way back to the arena. “We told each other we wanted to stay in one place and become ‘solid citizens,’ but secretly the pageantry and excitement of the arena throbbed with a deep bass rhythm against our very souls.”<sup>59</sup> Lucille Mulhall, a famous Wild West roper, rider, and vaudevillian performer, told the press that despite her intentions of staying home in Oklahoma, “I always return to the road after a short interval at home. I suppose I always will, too. At least as long as I am able to do it and the public enjoys my ‘stunts.’”<sup>60</sup> Women rodeo riders were willing to do whatever was necessary to stay in the public eye, whether riding injured or taking off-season work with circuses, movies, or vaudeville.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> McGinnis, *Rodeo Road*, 155-6.

<sup>58</sup> Interview with Juanita Hackett Howell by Kim Moslander, 1994, Juanita Hackett Howell File, NCHF.

<sup>59</sup> McGinnis, *Rodeo Road*, 91. These experiences were very similar to circus performers’ feelings about performance, see Josephine DeMott Robinson’s *The Circus Lady* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1927).

<sup>60</sup> “Miss Mulhall to Amend an Adage.” *Sheridan Post*, August 15, 1915.

Some of these women ran away from home in order to join the rodeo, splintering their own nuclear families to achieve fame and fortune. Mitzi Lucas, a 1940s trick rider explained, “If you wanted to run away from home and join the rodeo, just like people did the circus, you just did it.”<sup>62</sup> Eleanor McClintock, daughter of wealthy Pittsburg artists, attended the Madison Square Garden Rodeo in 1928, meeting and marrying Walter Heacock.<sup>63</sup> McClintock left her society life to go on the rodeo road with her husband. Even after divorcing two rodeo husbands, she continued to perform in rodeos and circuses, becoming a champion trick rider.<sup>64</sup>

Yet this life was not exactly what some women envisioned for their children. McClintock left her daughter with her wealthy parents to be brought up properly, commenting, “We’re out on the road so much, it would be hard for us to look after her ... And I wouldn’t want her trailing around with the circus—not my little girl.”<sup>65</sup> Despite having run away with a cowboy to join the rodeo herself, McClintock imagined a more socially appropriate, and perhaps easier, life for her daughter. The road and its travails made up the daily life for female rodeo performers, and it defined both the freedom and the dependence of living a rodeo life.

Surviving, let alone thriving, on the road necessitated the construction of a “rodeo family.” These networks of friendships and dependencies were created through both blood and

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<sup>61</sup> Lucille Mulhall, whose father Col J. Mulhall ran the 101 Ranch Wild West Show, also created her own vaudeville which featured an indoor performance of her with her horse as the “girl ranger.”

<sup>62</sup> Transcript of Interview of Mitzi Riley by Kim Moslander, Tad Lucas File, NCHF.

<sup>63</sup> “Eleanor Williams, A rebel in the West.” *New Mexico Magazine*, Oct 1984, Eleanor McClintock Williams File NCHF. Many other rodeo women went on the road with their husbands, for example one woman bet Tex Austin that she could accompany her husband on the rodeo train dressed as a man. “She Wins,” Unidentified clipping, Aug 3, 1927; “Blakemore’s Bride Home as Cowgirl,” Unidentified clipping; and “Society Bride Rides Train as Cowboy on Bet,” *Chicago Herald and Examiner*, April 23, 1927, Box 2, Album #5, Tex Austin Scrapbook Collection, Museum of New Mexico, Fray Angelico Chavez History Library, Santa Fe, New Mexico, USA.

<sup>64</sup> She was inducted into the National Cowgirl Hall of Fame in 1986.

<sup>65</sup> “Society Rides Under ‘Big Top,’” Unidentified clipping, Eleanor McClintock Williams File, NCHF.

affective ties. Marriage, of course, was the most prominent way in which women hitched themselves to a rodeo circuit. As rodeo historian Mary Lou LeCompte has noted, young, single women were not always welcomed into the rodeo family and “most cowgirls married rodeo cowboys within a year or two of joining the circuit.”<sup>66</sup> Indeed, famous cowgirls who failed to marry or married outside of the rodeo often left the business. Divorce often followed these hasty unions, as many as a third of cowgirls divorced at least once and many had multiple divorces, which brought about new anxieties.<sup>67</sup> Marriage offered women protection that could easily be stripped away if they were left alone again. As McGinnis reminisced, “Even though Earl had not been on the road with me all the time, I had still been a married woman—married to a cowboy in the profession. As such I rated help and protection from the other cowboys, even if they didn’t like me personally—or if they like me too much. To rodeo alone was a challenge I had to prime myself to meet.”<sup>68</sup>

Marriage was used as proof of respectability and helped build a public image of white western womanhood as virtuous. Rodeo organizers put cowgirls on display as consummate American brides, bringing civilization to an otherwise uncivil West.<sup>69</sup> The rodeo event dubbed “The Chase for a Bride” rendered the celebration of matrimony into a contest, especially the uniting of the civilized feminine bride with the uncivil masculine groom. Popular at early rodeos and Wild West Shows, this event invited cowboys to gallop after a woman on horseback. “The fastest rider of the band overtakes the fair equestrienne and, while both horses are going at full

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<sup>66</sup> LeCompte, *Cowgirls*, 28.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>68</sup> McGinnis, *Rodeo Road*, 170.

<sup>69</sup> Marriage as civilization in the Wild West has been a popular trope over the past century, see William Handley, *Marriage, Violence, and the Nation in the American literary West* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

speed, lifts her to his saddle thus winning a bride.”<sup>70</sup> This contest enacted the idealized notion of the outwardly reticent woman being pursued until she is happily captured, celebrating the removal of the woman from her autonomous perch astride her own horse. The bride was “won” as a prize. In being won, she drew out the man’s innate impulse to participate in the civilizing process, instead of imposing civilization on him. Simultaneously, however, in the mere repetition of this performance, with presumably different male victors at each different rodeo, this competition also enacted real women’s experiences with multiple partners in matrimony and rodeo.

Perhaps the greatest spectacle of heterosexual matrimony, however, came in the form of public, and highly publicized, horseback weddings. Horseback rodeo weddings happened across America, with rodeo producers cashing in on the “feature attraction” of matrimony. In 1936, in Centralia Washington rodeo producer Monte Montana promoted the marriage of Juanita Hackett and Chet Howell by presenting the couple to local merchants and asking for monetary donations as wedding gifts.<sup>71</sup>

For all the lighthearted theatrics of these weddings, however, they also demonstrated the vulnerability of women on the rodeo circuit, even as they were meant to celebrate the protection of women and children in the home. The case of Goldie Griffith shows how exploitative these ceremonies could be for women. In 1913, Buffalo Bill Cody gave Goldie Griffith away in marriage in front of 8,000 spectators at Madison Square Garden. Dressed in a red leather riding outfit made by Sioux women, with beads and fringe covering her gauntlets, hat, and scarf,

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<sup>70</sup> Mulhall’s Wild West Show, Wild West Show Collection (bMS Thr 586), Harvard Univeristy, Box 1, folder 30.

<sup>71</sup> NCHF Biography and “Skilled Rodeo Performers to Ride in Show,” Guthrie Oklahoma, April 20, 1941, Juanita Hackett Howell File, NCFH. Other couples getting married on horseback also received some news coverage, for instance, “Wedding on Horseback Unites Rodeo Couple,” *Daily Boston Globe*, November 11, 1932 and “Wedding Rites on Horseback Mark Rodeo,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 23, 1931.

Griffith stayed mounted on horseback next to her groom. Yet Griffith's fiancé had not even proposed himself, leaving that task to the business-minded Cody. The wedding was meant to sell tickets, to be a public ode to the traditional western family. Indeed, after Griffith had been injured badly in a horse crash during the previous night's show, doctors provided her with the mind-altering drug Ludlum for her pain. Her fiancé, however, insisted the wedding move forward. Through the haze of pain and drugs she remembered little about her wedding day. She told a reporter years later that the injury and anxiety over potentially missing the well-advertised wedding was a "nightmare." Within three years, Griffith was reportedly coerced into having an abortion, learned her husband was a bigamist, and attempted to shoot him.<sup>72</sup>

The mobile and career-oriented lives that cowgirls lived often conflicted with the traditional ideals of house and hearth they were expected to promote as idealized figures of the American West. Yet public marriages helped sanitize and sterilize the image of the Wild West and promote a harmonious society. By the 1920s, reporters asserted, "cowboys and cowgirls know more about matrimony than other people. Cowboys and cowgirls know that to be truly happy they must marry within their own set."<sup>73</sup> Marriage provided social stability in the world of rodeo and the world at large; like married like, except in terms of gender and sex.

Many women, such as Mamie Francis Hafely, created multi-generational households of rodeo performers. Mamie reportedly married Herbert Skepper as a fifteen-year-old girl, bearing her daughter Elba Reine Skepper in 1902. After divorcing Skepper, Mamie made her way through equestrian vaudeville to Frank Hafley's Wild West show, where she performed her horse

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<sup>72</sup> The story of Goldie Griffith is told at length in Kim Turnbaugh's biography on Griffith, *The Last of the Wild West Cowgirls* (Perigo Press, 2009), 14-15.

<sup>73</sup> Wallie Moore, "'It's the Life,' Cowgirls Say of Rodeo Business," Unidentified clipping, 1929, NCHF, Margie Greenough Orr File. In this era of concern with eugenics, cowboyhood was framed as a type of mental trait that carries meaning in terms of mate selection.

diving act. Hafley was in a relationship with Lillian Smith, a sharpshooter who had performed alongside Annie Oakley and who traveled with Frank as the fictionalized Indian Princess Wenona. Frank left Smith in favor for Mamie, adopting Reine as his daughter in 1909.

Reine, or Reno as she was called, started her show business career as a three-year-old in her mother's vaudeville shooting act. By twenty, she had done almost every task necessary to make a Wild West show successful: "Stock care, setting tents, costume making, cleaning and packing tack, bally-hooing, performing in several acts, working the arena, leading broncs to the next town when trains were not available, working guns for Mamie's shooting act, grooming and exercising the specialty horses in off-season."<sup>74</sup> She also rode elephants and performed as a flamenco dancer. In 1925, Reno eloped with bulldogger Dick Shelton, supposedly breaking her engagement with a wealthy factory-owner.<sup>75</sup>

Hafley's family extended well beyond ties of blood and matrimony, however, as she also constructed an affective rodeo family. While raising Reno, Mamie also looked after a young woman named Tad Lucas, who would become a rodeo champion in the later 1920s. Tad, whose real name was Barbara Barnes, was born in 1902 in Nebraska as the twenty-second child of her natal family. In her late teens she ran away from home to join Frank Hafley's show. Reno and Tad were close friends, paying for each other's hospital bills and caring for each other's families. Reno and Tad each had children of their own who became famous trick riders and rodeo stars.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Biography, Reine Shelton File, NCHF.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Mitzi Lucas, Tad's daughter, started helping her mother by riding runs at the rodeo for her mother while she was hurt, see British Broadcasting Corporation's *Cowgirls*, Unedited Transcripts, BBC, 1985. Tad Lucas File. NCHF. Women actively helped each other out by babysitting for each other as they rode their broncs, for instance see Letter from Juanita Hackett Howell to HOF, September 27, 1998, Juanita Hackett Howell File, NCHF.

Mamie, like other rodeo matrons, exerted influence on at least three generations of rodeo performers.

These familial ties were crucial to rodeo life and influenced cowgirls' image of domesticity alongside their toughness and showmanship. The rodeo road was a difficult life for women at the turn of the century. Traveling from local corrals of ranch owners to the royal courts of Asia and Europe, transportation, protection, health, and finances were all undependable and a woman could easily find herself broke, hurt, or alone. Rodeo families, however, helped keep people moving down the road.

### **Spectacles of the Exotic West: Female Masculinity as Sideshow**

Even as cowgirls' public personas helped to craft boundaries of gender and sexual propriety, their lives were also imagined to often be beyond these boundaries. While cowgirl performers exemplified the idealization of health and hardy domesticity, cowgirls were also cast as characters from an exotic place not entirely inside the imagined boundaries of the United States. Traveling the rodeo road and constructing rodeo families created spaces in which cowgirl sexuality and respectability became open to public consideration. The overtly masculine feats these women performed in the arena threatened gender norms and the sexual connotations of women working in show business meant that women in rodeo ran the risk of being cast as promiscuous. The ways in which cowgirls publically performed westernness through female masculinity earned them suspicion as well as praise.

For all its familiarity, the West was at times deeply wild and exotic. Promotions for cowgirls' performances emphasized their West to East trajectory. Headlines like, "Beautiful but

Brave These Cowgirls Here from the West,” and “Cowgirls Arrive from Prairies.”<sup>77</sup> For many Americans, like Theodore Roosevelt, the West was a place to visit, explore, and test one’s mettle. As Tex Austin, a popular rodeo organizer, promoted rodeos in places like Chicago and New York, people noted how “his country has little in common with the East and the East seems so very far away.” The West was “something separate and apart from the rest of the United States.”<sup>78</sup> Austin cultivated this exoticness in order to draw in crowds to his rodeos, as “New York lovers of thrills and novelties” were invited to Austin’s Madison Square Garden Rodeo.<sup>79</sup>

Dude ranches exploded in popularity around the country in the early decades of the twentieth century, allowing inexperienced people the ability to play cowboy and cowgirl for a weekend, a month, or a summer.<sup>80</sup> Aching to see the West before the “calamity” of settlement, girls like Loraine Hornaday Fielding, a young white woman from a wealthy eastern family, wrote about their trips, emphasizing the authenticity of their experiences. Fielding described her summer in Montana in her memoir *French Heels to Spurs*, “Here was a real ranch—not a summer resort, but an honest-to-goodness cattle-ranch—equipped with the finest ranch buildings

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<sup>77</sup> *Chicago Daily News*, August 15, Box 1, Album #3 Chicago Scrapbook and *New York Eve Telegram*, October 30, 1922, Box 8, Album #16, the 1922 Madison Square Garden rodeo, Tex Austin Scrapbook Collection, Museum of New Mexico, Fray Angelico Chavez History Library, Santa Fe, New Mexico USA.

<sup>78</sup> “Tex Austen Discusses Rodeos and Their Origin,” *New York Sun*, November 9, 1922, Box 8, Album #16, the 1922 Madison Square Garden rodeo, Tex Austin Scrapbook Collection, Museum of New Mexico, Fray Angelico Chavez History Library, Santa Fe, New Mexico USA.

<sup>79</sup> “Thrills Aplenty in Cowboy Show,” *New York Eve Telegram*, October 29, 1922, Box 8, Album #16, the 1922 Madison Square Garden rodeo, Tex Austin Scrapbook Collection, Museum of New Mexico, Fray Angelico Chavez History Library, Santa Fe, New Mexico USA.

<sup>80</sup> Dude ranches and rodeos were intimately entwined as both venues attempted to sell westernness to Eastern tourists. These tourist industries also helped created a universal imagined West, in which the cowboy, instead of the miner or shepherd or military scout, became the occupation of all westerners. These spaces conditioned real westerners to perform westernness in particular ways. For a discussion of how these processes operated on a local level, see Bonnie Christensen’s *Red Lodge and the Mythic West* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002). Hal Rothman’s *Devil’s Bargains: Tourism in the Twentieth century American West* argues that many of these tourist industries were increasingly controlled by Eastern corporate interests (USA: University Press of Kansas, 1998). For more historical information on the dude ranching industry in particular, see Lawrence Borne *Dude Ranching: A Complete History* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1983).



possible, situated in a truly ideal place.”<sup>81</sup> The idealized West, however, was to be enacted at all costs, even if it did not match up with the everyday lives of westerners, “Most of the girls, as I found out later [after having purchased western gear], wore overalls, but where was the romance of the West if you couldn’t wear chaps and everything that goes with them?”<sup>82</sup> In order to embody the popular image of westernness, one had to be extraordinary and not mundane. The exotic West was crafted for Fielding in part by bronc-riding cowgirls in leather chaps and silk bandanas.<sup>83</sup>

Cowgirls often publically marked their difference through dress. In the 1900s and 1910s, cowgirls dressed in heavy split skirts, often leather with fringe up the side. The 1920s saw the rapid rise of trousers among cowgirls, first jodhpurs and then flared and flashy pants. Wanting to draw the eye of the audience in large arenas, bright colors and shiny fabrics were often favored. Some women emphasized their femininity, with the use of large bows in their hair and attention to their makeup.<sup>84</sup> These outfits were in every way a costume, what one rodeo queen called “a novelty.”<sup>85</sup> Many cowgirls even took advantage of being in large trendy, eastern cities to buy delicate fabrics, like silk, for less expensive prices and make their costumes by hand.

The media and even individual hosts often demanded that cowgirls continue wearing their western togs outside the arena. Vera McGinnis liked to call dressing in her costumes being

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<sup>81</sup> Loraine Hornaday Fielding, *French Heels to Spurs* (New York: The Century Company, 1930), 32.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 35

<sup>83</sup> Rodeos drew young men, especially, into the US west. At the Chicago Rodeo an annual roping contest was held for young boy scouts to win a trip to rodeo organizer Tex Austin’s New Mexican ranch for one week. “Boy Winners off for Rodeo Ranch,” *South Bend (IND) News-Times*, September 6, 1927 Box 2 Album #4, Tex Austin Scrapbook Collection, Museum of New Mexico, Fray Angelico Chavez History Library, Santa Fe, New Mexico US.

<sup>84</sup> Joyce Gibson Roach provides an excellent overview of changing cowgirl fashion trends, see *The Cowgirls*, 121-124. Ruth Scantlin Roach, in particular, became known for competing with giant bows in her hair.

<sup>85</sup> Joan Burbick, *Rodeo Queens and the American Dream* (New York: Public Affairs, 2002), 14.

“Westerned up” in her “loud rags.” After an all-night party on the ship in London—celebrating the lack of prohibition in England—the rodeo participants were asked to dress up “western-style for our debarkation, which we gladly did. Being inherent hams we wanted to make our London landing a spectacular event.” At parties and balls hosts would request cowgirls dress in their supposedly authentic garb, “boots, hats, spurs, and all. We were not individuals, but the colorful west.”<sup>86</sup> One photographer in New York capitalized on the notion of inherent difference as he captured three cowgirls backstage at Madison Square Garden primly sipping tea in the western regalia. He wrote, “This picture is designed to destroy illusions. What’s all this talk about the wild and woolly West and the effete East?”<sup>87</sup> As the extraordinary products of a harsh western upbringing, cowgirls were not supposed to behave like average Eastern women. Cowgirls playacted a spectacular version of westernness that helped set them apart from other American women.

The differences between western and eastern women were often marked through their potentially deviant sexuality. As modern entertainers, cowgirls were participating in the vast changes sweeping the sexual mores of Americans in the early twentieth century. As historian Nancy Cott explains, “Women’s behavior especially attracted commentary. Sex became political—that is, it was emblematic of changing dynamics between women and men.”<sup>88</sup>

Within the sexual culture of rodeo, cowgirls alienated themselves further from their audience through the construction of a discourse which cast rodeo women as untrustworthy and prone to use their sexuality for gain. The world of rodeo put women on display in a forthright

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<sup>86</sup> McGinnis, *Rodeo Road*, 23, 182, 186.

<sup>87</sup> “S-A-Y, What’s this? West...Tea,” Unidentified clipping, Lucyle Richards file, NCHF.

<sup>88</sup> Nancy Cott, *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 159.

way and involved men publically touching women during performances.<sup>89</sup> During bronc-riding, for instance, riders must depend on a “pickup” man, who is on horseback, to assist them in disengaging from the bucking horse. The pickup man has to edge his horse as close as possible to the bucking animal and grab the rider in any way possible in order to free them, creating close contact between men and women who worked the arena together.<sup>90</sup>

The rodeo circuit also provided situations for forming sexual bonds between women and men. Industrialization and urbanization transformed cultural practices surrounding courtship and marriage. The American West produced far higher divorce rates than any other region, especially with liberal state divorce laws in places like Nevada.<sup>91</sup> Many women, like Vera McGinnis, were lured to the rodeo life because of romantic ties. “I was in love with a black-eyed cowboy who had a cleft in his chin and made his living rodeoing, a cowboy who surely looked as though at least one of his ancestors had swung a tomahawk. [...] Rodeo had me hooked, too, but so did Earl.”<sup>92</sup> But as these bonds were formed, fidelity was never guaranteed, and travel to new places often strained relationships. While the rodeo was visiting Japan, McGinnis also reminisced about jealous wives looking for their husbands’ boots set outside brothel doors, “with blood in their

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<sup>89</sup> As historian Joyce Gibson Roach has noted, “Ever since the early days of Wild West shows and rodeos, crowds have been doing just that—appreciatively watching a woman on horseback.” Roach, *The Cowgirls*, 78.

<sup>90</sup> Roach, *The Cowgirls*, 114. Journalists recognized that cowgirls had sexual appeal, even as they framed this appeal as intimidating or aggressive, “judging from the expressions on the faces I see hanging around the Garden exits, that the eastern boys are kind of afraid of cowgirls.” John Proctor, “Lady Unafraid,” Unidentified clipping, NCHF.

<sup>91</sup> Glenda Riley, *Building and Breaking Families in the American West* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996).

<sup>92</sup> McGinnis, *Rodeo Road*, 49.

eyes.”<sup>93</sup> Bigamy was not unheard in the rodeo world, and women at times found out their husbands were already married.<sup>94</sup>

As previously mentioned, divorce was a simple fact of life on the rodeo circuit, as much as marriage was. Women often had numerous failed marriages, ending their lives alone. In the early 1910s, Lulu Bell Parr first married George Barrett, a union that failed quickly. Lulu then married Charlie Mulhall, lasting only three days. In 1917, she married Orth B. Barcus, a member of the US Navy. The war and the military in general were unkind to cowgirl marriages, much like the rodeo circuit, and by 1920 Orth had filed for divorce.<sup>95</sup> While most of these divorces remained private and not widely publicized, some cowgirl performers eventually became renowned for their numerous marriages. Lucyle Richards, with her Cherokee-Irish good looks, reportedly married seventeen different men. In 1941, she was also brought up on murder charges for the slaying of Frank Dew of Texas in a fit of jealousy. She was eventually acquitted.<sup>96</sup> Even the highly respected Lucille Mulhall, one of the first and most prolific cowgirls on the Wild West

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<sup>93</sup> McGinnis, *Rodeo Road*, 195. Part of cowgirls' potential deviancy was their relationships with cowboys, who the public readily acknowledged for their appeal to women on the road, one 1920s cowboys remembered, "I had a lot of gals I lived with... Hell, when you're a champion rodeo hand, boy, they'll all go with you." "Arcadian Inducted into Cowboy Hall of Fame," Unidentified Clipping, NCHF. Indeed, the rodeo circuit encouraged marriage, as young men and women were thrown together in new and interesting places. The public often perceived elopements as the inevitable consequence of putting impressionable young women near daring and heroic men. City women were seen as particularly vulnerable to the charms of cowboys because of their rugged masculinity which outstripped the male urbanite's performance of manhood. When the rodeo traveled to London in 1924, Miss Robertson of Fulham went to a dance at Richmond Castle with all the cowboys. Five days later she was Mrs. O'Grote of Texas. Charles Simpson, *El Rodeo: One Hundred Sketches Made in the Arena During the great International Contest* (London: John Lane, 1924). Simpson specifically wrote about "The Romance of Miss Robertson of Fulham," 168.

<sup>94</sup> For instance, Goldie Griffith eventually discovered her husband was already legally married. See Turnbaugh, *The Last of the Wild West Cowgirls*.

<sup>95</sup> Nomination biography by Scott Suther, Medway Area Historical Society, May 20, 2003, Lulu Bell Parr File, NCHF.

<sup>96</sup> "Rodeo Cowgirl Shoots Ft. Bend Rancher Dead Here," *The Houston Post*, April 28, 1941.

and rodeo circuits was well-known for her improper marriages and eventual divorces.<sup>97</sup> Scandal and public spectacle were never far away from early professional cowgirls.

Cowgirls at times slung accusations of sexual impropriety at each other, impugning the respectability of their competitors. McGinnis punched another woman for calling her a “chippie.”<sup>98</sup> The term chippie denoted women accused of rodeoing for the sole purpose of socializing with the cowboys and granting sexual favors to the judges in order to win titles.<sup>99</sup> In a 1980s oral history, cowgirl Pearl Mason said, “Some of the girls only rodeoed so they could be around the men. [...] I was nice to the judges...but I never slept with them.” Using this supposed moral laxity as causation for the disappearance of female competitions, Mason continued, “You know what happened to put the girls out of the rodeo? Well, the girls did it themselves. A few of them did. A few of them, if they didn’t win, they’d get out there in front of the grandstand, with a bullhorn, and start yelling the dirtiest, filthiest, rankest language at the judges. They were whores, chippies, nothing but dirty little sluts, that’s what they were.”<sup>100</sup>

Early cowgirls often referred to the supposedly “natural” differences between men and women to explain the inability to keep women well-behaved on a rodeo circuit. Margie Greenough stated, “Girls are naturally ornery. It got to where they got to fussin’ among themselves and that was it. They just quit havin’ ‘em. [...] If they’d had the sense enough to try to get along, why, we woulda had contests at all the official rodeos.”<sup>101</sup> In 1982, Ella Granger, a

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<sup>97</sup> In 1908, Lucille Mulhall defied her infamously controlling father in order to obtain a secret marriage to a vaudeville actor and singer. She went to court over a broken engagement to a Mr. Price Taylor of Kentucky, whose diamond ring she had kept. Her marriage did not last long, however, as all of Mulhall’s marriages ended in divorce. “Lucille Mulhall Married,” Special Dispatch to the *Globe-Democrat*, Topeka, KS, Oct 21, 1908.

<sup>98</sup> McGinnis, *Rodeo Road*, 43.

<sup>99</sup> LeCompte, *Cowgirls*, 13.

<sup>100</sup> Teresa Jordan, *Cowgirls: Women of the American West* (New York: Anchor Press, 1982), 198.

rodeo queen from Pendleton, Oregon suggested that the cowgirls who came to town weren't quite "proper women," they "would play cards and maybe drink and associated with men all the way around more so than we did...We didn't know that kind of life."<sup>102</sup> A cowgirl from 1930s and 40s explained, "I'd heard of quite a few fights before I came around. That was a pretty tough bunch there to start with. I don't think they hesitated to use a knife, or anything, from what I hear. I think there was probably a lot of jealousy."<sup>103</sup> Professional cowgirls operated in a competitive world that assumed their willingness to use their assertive—and therefore masculine—sexuality to gain titles, fame, and make living on the road easier.

Cowgirls had to protect themselves from sexual attacks, at times from audience members who perceived them to be sexually available. A drunken crowd once attempted to pull McGinnis from her horse. One man "put his big hand up the leg of my leather skirt, and said: 'Little cowgirl let daddy feel.' My reaction came before my thought; I grabbed my bottle of beer by its neck and walloped him across the head."<sup>104</sup> As their travels took them all over the world, cowgirl performers faced sexualized forms of exploitation and danger.<sup>105</sup>

In many ways, cowgirls were as exotic in the West as they were in the East. As performers contracted with a particular rodeo show or circuit, lived much of their year on the road, and came from a variety of backgrounds these women were not "of" the community. They were not young

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<sup>101</sup> Margie Greenough, Unidentified Source, Margie Greenough Orr File, NCHF.

<sup>102</sup> Laegreid, *Riding Pretty*, 14.

<sup>103</sup> Margie Greenough, Unidentified Source, Margie Greenough File, NCHF.

<sup>104</sup> McGinnis, *Rodeo Road*, 152.

<sup>105</sup> These stories had racial overtones as well, as Mamie Francis Hafley supposedly stared down a "black man" who had a knife on a train with her pistol. This story, related in an oral history, was reminiscent of a racialized image used in flyer for Hafley's show in which three white women, including a young girl, take aim with guns at a man in blackface. Mamie Francis Hafley File, NCHF.

local girls with family roots, but instead part of a rough and potentially dangerous crowd of outsiders. As rodeo historian Renee Laegreid explains, like gypsies and carnival people, cowgirls “rode into town in a blaze of fanfare, wowed the crowd with their stunts, then galloped off in search of another town, another performance, another chance to win the prize-money.”<sup>106</sup>

In contrast, local rodeo queens, a phenomenon which started in the early 1910s, were increasingly selected by the community to represent the community’s values. Most of these young girls had prominent parents or deeply rooted grandparents who could help young women in their bids for votes. During the 1910s in Pendleton, Oregon, the rodeo queen was not even required to participate in the rodeo itself, but instead simply ride in the parade with her court. The queen set herself apart from the brash business of the rodeo. The emergence of the local rodeo queen was not smooth, however, and for a time Pendleton awarded the queen title to a prominent visiting rodeo cowgirl.<sup>107</sup> By the 1930s, communities once again began electing local girls but these women were increasingly asked to perform basic horsemanship skills. These women, at times called sponsor girls, often traveled to large rodeos in order to represent their home communities. Unlike community sponsor girls or queens, early rodeo cowgirls were not always imaged as part of the community in which they were performing.

Further alienating them from local western communities, many cowgirls in fact did not hail from working ranches at all, but instead came prepared with acting or athletic backgrounds. Goldie Griffith, for instance, grew up in show business and before rodeoing she worked as a female wrestler with Blanche Whitney’s Lady Athletes. Offered at carnivals and amusement parks, customers could pay ten cents to watch Griffith wrestle other women and occasionally

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<sup>106</sup> Laegreid, *Riding Pretty*, 18.

<sup>107</sup> See Renee Laegreid, “Rodeo Queens at the Pendleton Round-up: The First Go-Round, 1910–1917,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 104, no.1 (Spring 2003): 6–23.

men. Griffith eventually became a member of the 101 Ranch Wild West and performed with Lucille Mulhall on her “Girl Scout” vaudeville tour.<sup>108</sup> Other cowgirl performers were immigrant hairdressers or high-society daughters who had run off with the circus.<sup>109</sup> These women often felt more at home at the big eastern rodeos than ones performed for supposedly authentic western audiences. As quasi-outsiders in the West, cowgirls at times skirted the boundaries of respectability.

As cowgirls attempted to balance the exotic and the homegrown, racialization played an important role in their success. Cowgirls felt free to play Indian in Wild West Shows. For instance, Lillian Frances Smith captured the fluidity of race in her performance of Indianness. After years of performing as a white cowgirl, Smith changed her stage persona to perform as an “Indian Princess” named Wenona. Billings for her performances stated:

Wenona was taken east to Carlisle and there educated in all the ways of the white woman. She learned French and the higher mathematics. She wore American clothes and did her hair like a real New York girl. She was to all intents and purposes tamed. But deep down in Wenona's heart was still the old desire. She wanted to be back with her own people.<sup>110</sup>

At the same time, Wenona “appreciated the education and refinement of the east.” Smith, who competed alongside Annie Oakley in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West and performed for the 101 Ranch Wild West, capitalized on the exoticism of the West by inventing a backstory to sell to the audience. In the 1890s through 1910s, playing Indian allowed female performers the ability to perform masculine skills while still maintaining femininity.

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<sup>108</sup> See Turnbaugh, *The Last of the Wild West Cowgirls*.

<sup>109</sup> For instance, Tillie Baldwin was a woman who emigrated from Norway and worked as a hairdresser on Staten Island before becoming a champion bronc rider: “The Champion Rough-Rider Who Never Saw a Ranch,” *The World Magazine*, September 3, 1916, Tillie Baldwin File, HCHF.

<sup>110</sup> “Princess Wenona and Other Hibbodrome Indian Celebrities,” *The Commercial Tribune*, May 26, 1910, Mamie Francis Hafley File, NCHF.



Women with native heritage also became a part of the cowgirl allure. By the 1930s, having Indian blood became a marker of a deep connection with the US West. Lucyle Roberts, also known as Lucyle Richards, was often called the “prettiest” of all the cowgirls in the 1930s by newspapers, at times credit for this attractiveness was given to her race. “Remarkable first of all because she is a true American beauty, for through her veins courses the blood of the Choctaw Indian nation. Her mother was a Choctaw girl. Her father was of Irish descent.” Roberts was the product of racial mixing, and she was bodily marked by both races. “Her raven black hair indicates the Indian blood, but the mischievous sparkle in her lustrous dark eyes could have originated nowhere but in Erin’s Isle.”<sup>111</sup> Roberts could have easily been disregarded as un-American, yet her Indianness connected her to the West in particular. Both innately American and inherently exotic, Indianness became a tradable good for cowgirls. It asserted their authentic connection to the West and explained their beauty and skill in terms of blood instead of necessity.<sup>112</sup>

The lived reality of cowgirls’ lives, which made them vulnerable to hardship and public scrutiny, demanded that many cowgirls cross the line of acceptable behavior for white women. The precarious natures of their livelihoods, as performers of a West that was not wholly accepted even in the West, created tension in both their masculine performances and their everyday lives.

### **The Peripheral Center and the Decline of the Rodeo Cowgirl**

For many Americans, cowgirls in the early twentieth century symbolized a West that was both internal and external to the national community. Ultimately, women working as cowgirls

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<sup>111</sup> “Lucyle Roberts, ‘Queen of Saddle,’ Rides Here.” Boston Release of the *New York Times*, 1934, Lucyle Richards File, NCHF.

<sup>112</sup> Indianness also influenced these women’s lack of respectability in contrast with the paragon of American Victorian virtue—Annie Oakley. As Louis Warren has stated, “The title and the story of Indian adoption suggested that she was an American native, tied to the soil and the continent’s first peoples without any sexual implications of captivity or blood mixing,” Warren, *Buffalo Bill’s America*, 253.

lived in a peripheral center. They struggled against poverty, obscurity, and ostracism while also being lauded as great American heroines. The press, politicians, entertainers, and psychologists all freely appropriated frontier women in order to construct idealized gender configurations, even as cowgirl performers simultaneously transgressed these ideals and therefore faced potential social expulsion. In this way they embodied the contradictions of the larger imagined frontier. The cowgirl icon demonstrated the power of the imagined West as a cultural space that imbued its inhabitants with an unquestionable American centrality while also reaffirming its place at the exotic periphery.

Cowgirls and their performances helped function as a mechanism of change in promoting a major cultural shift around hardy, white domesticity.<sup>113</sup> Cowgirls both bolstered antimodern modernism and drew it into question if they allowed their masculine abilities to serve their own interests instead of the interests of the nuclear family. Female masculinity was acceptable as a result of birth and blood, but simply performing masculinity in the name of frontier could threaten the respectability of the iconic western woman and instead rendering them as sideshow spectacles.

For women and girls playing cowgirl, the costumes were shed immediately upon returning home, whether this lay in the East or the West. The temporally bounded journey having been completed. The press actively differentiated between the home and the arena: “To the Rodeo Crowd she is Fox Hastings, cowgirl extraordinary. To neighbors, she is Mrs. Mike

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<sup>113</sup> Interestingly, in some ways Indianness initially proved more popular than cowgirlness in providing an antimodern modern identity for women, even as nativeness was passed over in favor for militarism for boys in organizations like the Boy Scouts. Camp Fire Girls still used the language of the frontier, but did not directly confront the female masculinity presented by cowgirls. The Girl Pioneers of America, who did undertake a cowgirl-esque masculinity at times, rapidly gave way to the Camp Fire Girls. The reluctance of American girls to fully embrace playing cowgirl in the early twentieth century demonstrated the tenuous cultural position of these performers.

Hastings, a good cook and tidy housekeeper.”<sup>114</sup> Full-blown western masculine femininity was perfectly acceptable in certain spaces, such as the dude ranch, the campground, or the rodeo circuit. Outside those limits, particularly back home after a long journey, hardy domesticity was to resume more appropriate terms. Thus cowgirl performers served as mascots for a female masculinity that was both embraced for the betterment of the race and nation but also rebuffed in the name of sexual respectability.

As the 1920s came to a close, female competitions in rodeos began to suffer. Young white women began to shift their involvement in rodeos after the mid-1920s away from becoming rodeo cowgirls and towards being awarded positions as community queens and sponsor girls. These queens were often elected through fundraising or ticket-selling competitions, and were expected to personify the respectable values of their small Western towns. Eventually, this neo-Victorian version of the western woman came to replace the rodeo cowgirl as the main form of female rodeo participation.<sup>115</sup> Fears of over-civilization lessened and cowgirls no longer needed to inspire hardy domesticity. By the late 1920s, Americans were losing fervor for a domestically-centered female masculinity. In 1929, a famous Idaho bronc-rider, Bonnie McCarroll, died from injuries she received during the saddle bronc contest at the Pendleton Roundup. She was trampled severely by her mount when her leg got tangled in her stirrups, which were tied together, or hobbled, under the horse’s belly. Hobbling was thought to make the mount easier for women to ride because their legs would not be flail about in all directions. This safety measure actually resulted in many injuries because women could not untangle their legs from the tied stirrups when they were thrown.<sup>116</sup> McCarroll’s tragic death

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<sup>114</sup> Unidentified clipping, quoted in LeCompte, *Cowgirls*, 102.

<sup>115</sup> See Laegreid, *Riding Pretty*, 54.

marked the moment when mainstream western rodeos began eliminating women's rough stock events. Indeed, this incident demonstrated the tenuous position of female riders not only in the eyes of an "outsider" eastern public, but for western audiences as well. While western rodeo committees no longer desired to see women thrash about on a horse, eastern rodeos continued to hold ladies' events as the spectacle still held sway.

In the 1940s, however, World War II changed women's place in mainstream rodeos. Ladies rodeo events were expensive to maintain at big city rodeos, particularly because of the need to have separate strings of stock for both men and women to able to ride fresh mounts that would buck more enthusiastically. As Americans once again became interested in rodeo after the war, rodeo organizers like Gene Autry refused to reintroduce ladies rough stock events in part because of the cost and the desire to streamline rodeos for eastern, indoor rodeos.<sup>117</sup> Additionally, the Rodeo Association of America, organized in 1929 by rodeo managers and producers, and the Turtles Association, started in 1936 by cowboys and later renamed the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association, refused to list ladies bronc riding as one of their sanctioned events that rodeos were required to hold. The associations did not outright ban women's rough stock events, like many rodeos in the West, they simply refused to support them.

The end of the war consolidated the new world order for rodeo, with women's place often being decorative and supportive. Cowgirls were increasingly absent from events like bronc riding or horse racing, leaving them space in the arena only as potential brides to cowboys. In 1940, *The New Yorker* wrote, "The cowgirls, though they do not compete in the more strenuous

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<sup>116</sup> Roach, *The Cowgirls*, 112.

<sup>117</sup> LeCompte argues that Gene Autry in particular helped marginalize women in both film and rodeo by featuring women in decorative instead of active roles as neo-Victorian gender norms resurfaced in the 1940s' emphasis on the home. Due to Autry's increasing influence in the rodeo business after World War II, women's chances to ride broncs dwindled in mainstream rodeos.

events, are on terms of affectionate equality with the cowboys, and there is almost no prosperous bachelor cowboy who does not dream of marrying a cowgirl someday and raising kids and a herd of white-faced steers.”<sup>118</sup> Indeed, even in women-only rodeo, rodeo organizers desired to enforce proper behavior. The Girls Rodeo Association, which formed in 1948, listed “rowdyism” in 1949 as one of the reasons a woman could be barred from participating.<sup>119</sup> Rough and tumble cowgirls no longer provided valuable antimodern lessons of fortitude and strength to modern women and girls. By mid-century, the mainstream rodeo cowgirl had become appropriately feminine and programs were more likely to list her bust and hip measurements than her skills on a bronco or exploits with a gun.

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<sup>118</sup> Eugene Kinkead, “The Cowboy Business,” *The New Yorker*, Oct 26, 1940, Wild West Show Collection (bMS Thr 586), Harvard University, Box 1, folder 34.

<sup>119</sup> Girl’s Rodeo Association Handbook (1949), 12, Tad Lucas File, NCHF.

## Chapter 2

### In the Shadow of the Walls: Masculinity and Social Salvation at the Texas State Prison Rodeo

#### The Salvation of Humanity

In 1959, Don Reid, Jr., editor of the Huntsville *Item*, praised the Texas State Prison Rodeo as an uplifting, life-altering event for incarcerated men. Reid recounted a story, only one of many he assured readers, of a “rough and tough inmate” with an extensive criminal record leaving the rodeo arena with “tears in his eyes.” The inmate “blabbered” to him, “Until today I thought no one cared if I lived or died.” The applause, however, made him feel like, “things are going to get better for me in the days ahead.” Sure enough, after a conditional pardon, this man was “making good” in the free world. The rodeo not only provided convict cowboys with a path to rehabilitation for themselves, Reid gushed, but through their selfless cowboy performances these imprisoned men ultimately delivered the “salvation of humanity.”<sup>1</sup> This deliverance was found in the form of ticket receipts, which were donated to the Educational and Recreational Fund to pay for all the educational, religious, and recreational activities for the incarcerated population of Texas.<sup>2</sup> From the late 1930s until the late 1960s, the Texas State Prison Rodeo reworked the meaning of the cowboy as the purveyor of redemption as it brought together violent masculinity, particularly black masculinity, and social salvation. Prison rodeo articulated the postwar American belief that only through violent and self-sacrificing labor, could the convict, the prison system, and the nation be rejuvenated.

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<sup>1</sup> “Item Editor to Cover 88th Prison Rodeo Performance,” *The Echo*, 1959.

<sup>2</sup> Prior to the Educational and Recreational Fund’s creation in the 1940s, all receipts went to the Prisoner Welfare Fund. For a detailed description of the origins and development of this fund see Charlotte A. Teagle, *History of Welfare Activities of the Texas Prison Board* (Huntsville, Texas: Texas Prison Board, 1941).

In American culture, the violence of the imagined West was a critical part of the United States' ability to maintain strength in times of abundance and ensure that success only occurred through individual efforts. As Richard Slotkin has argued, American frontier mythology hinged on a belief that through entering the wilderness and committing violence, men and the nation could be regenerated. In the Cold War era, Slotkin explains, western films allowed for a venting of the "continual conflict between the claims of democratic procedure and Cold War policies that required the use of armed force."<sup>3</sup> The gunslinger, who made his living through violence and was innately set apart from society, became the hallmark of western films in this era. Like the lone gunslinger, the imprisoned man could redeem himself by sacrificing his own safety for the sake of others.

Unlike frontier mythology, however, the violence of the real-life outlaw had to be properly directed and marketed. The Texas State Prison Rodeo, which ran from 1931 until 1986, became a hub of socially acceptable violence that was believed to produce positive effects in wider society. The 1950 Chair of the Rodeo Committee greeted guests, "do not be surprised or shocked at the viciousness of the untamed stock or the amazing lightheartedness of the untamed performers as they laugh at death in utter abandon."<sup>4</sup> The equation of animals and imprisoned men expressed the need to break spirits, of both man and beast, in order to achieve a better society. While the animals viciously fought their taming, and death, the cowboys simply laughed. Violence in rodeo was sanctioned even as it was supposed to lead to the eventual transformation of the criminal into a worthy, and non-violent, citizen. The intersection of Texas

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 350.

<sup>4</sup> The Original Texas Prison Rodeo Program, 1950. Box 1998/038-404. Programs and related materials, Texas Prison Rodeo records, Texas Department of Criminal Justice. Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission. Hereafter, Texas Prison Rodeo records.

rebel culture, which glorified resistance to outside forces, American frontier culture, which honored the West's history of conquest, and prison culture, which operated on the assumption of prisoner resistance and the need for control, created a rodeo which both celebrated and censured violence.

The everyday lives of imprisoned people were marked by violence, even as new waves of prison reforms emerged at mid-century in Texas. Throughout the late nineteenth century, prisons leased prisoners to private companies for unpaid labor.<sup>5</sup> This system was horrendously abusive to inmates, as they received inadequate food, clothing, and shelter, and were not protected in any way by the state. By the twentieth century, prison reformers in Texas had succeeded in ending leasing, instead putting imprisoned men to work on state owned farms. Life on these farms was brutal. Guards patrolled on horseback and punished men and women who failed to produce enough.<sup>6</sup> In Texas, at the cross-roads of the Old South and the Old West, the prison system welded together two highly racialized forms of labor, cattle wrangling, increasingly imagined as white, and cotton picking, persistently imagined as black or Mexican.<sup>7</sup> Heat exhaustion, whippings, long hours, and unlivable conditions marked daily life on the farms. Many men chose to mutilate themselves, often by "heel-stringing" or cutting their heel tendons with smuggled razors, in order to obtain work release for short periods of time.<sup>8</sup> By the early 1940s, white men

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<sup>5</sup> See Donald Walker, *Penology for Profit: A History of the Texas Prison System, 1867-1912* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1988). Also see Martha Myers, *Race, Labor and Punishment in the New South* (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 1998).

<sup>6</sup> The production quotas for inmates were extremely difficult to meet. Under the leasing system a man who picked three-hundred pounds of cotton still received twenty-seven lashes for low production. Walker, *Penology*, 129-130.

<sup>7</sup> Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> The whip was an important instrument in the disciplinary regime of the prison system, it was banned for a third time in 1941. The use of the dark cell, into which more than a dozen men would be crowded, replaced the whip for several years during the reform efforts of the 1910s, but after eight men suffocated in a dark cell, the whip was



received increasing opportunities to work in various mechanical industries, while men of color were sent out to the farms because of the belief that “most of the negroes and mexicans [sic] are satisfied to do agricultural work.”<sup>9</sup> In Texas, violence knit the law, the prison farm, and cowboy labor together in a multi-racial regime defined by racial injustice.

In this chapter, I argue that the Texas State Prison Rodeo reimagined the cowboy as a mode of salvation that could be performed in order to rehabilitate the self and the social community. In mid-twentieth century, the prison system and media praised individual convict cowboys for using their own labor in service to others. Drawing from evidence found in the Texas Prison Rodeo archives in Austin, Texas, and the extensive coverage of the event in the prisoners’ newspaper *The Echo*, I show that the Texas State Prison Rodeo exposed how, for many mid-century Americans, self-redemption could be found through heroic violence and that self-improvement could be wrought through destructive labor.<sup>10</sup> By focusing on three moments of articulation, the 1944 Victory Rodeo, the post-1948 reform plans, and the 1963 introduction of a new rodeo event, I will demonstrate the historical trajectory of an increasingly nationalized

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reintroduced. Robert Perkinson, *Texas Tough: the Rise of America’s Prison Empire* (New York: Picador, 2010), 174, 226.

<sup>9</sup> Rodeo Program, 1941. Box 1998/038-404. Texas Prison Rodeo records. As early as the 1870s reformers were urging the complete separation of white and black prison populations with black inmates being immediately sent to the fields while legislatures and committees argued over whether to have the white population focus on manufacturing or field work, while one maintained the dignity of skilled labor, cash crops were more profitable, see Perkinson, *Texas Tough*, 171. Until the post-war era, the Texas economy was largely agricultural, depending heavily on both cotton and cattle. The Texas-to-Kansas cattle trails were the genesis of the working cowboy in the United States. As a slave state, many of the working cowboys of the nineteenth century were African American, Mexican-American, and Native American. The traditional “cattle country” of West Texas was moving to East by the 1950s. For shifting patterns in prison farming see Special Rodeo Edition, *The Echo*, 1953 and *The Echo*, October 1942, which includes a profile of the system’s most notorious farm, Eastham.

<sup>10</sup> *The Echo* was established in the late 1920s as part of the Prison Welfare League, which emphasized the Progressive ideals of recreation and education in contrast to punishment. The League worked to create the atmosphere that would spawn the rodeo as a tool of fundraising for the betterment of inmates. The newspaper, still in print today, is written and printed by inmates, though not without censoring. The paper is therefore a vital source of information on how certain men and a few women felt about the rodeo, though also limits these to the opinions felt appropriate by prison staff.

narrative of rehabilitation through socially-aware individualism in the postwar era. With the advent of Hard Money in the early 1960s, a racial spectacle of inmate desperation replaced its narrative commitment to social-welfare for prisoners, marking the limits of prison's own self-transformation.

I begin this chapter by analyzing the racialized and sexualized gaze of the prison rodeo, as the audience sought to see inside the walls and the inmates desired to look beyond the arena. Next I use the 1944 Victory Rodeo to illuminate the ways in which prison officials increasingly connected the rodeo to the nation at large. Then I demonstrate how the reform efforts of the Ellis plan become rhetorically linked to the salvation of the cowboy through a commitment to violent labor. Lastly, I investigate the perceptible change in the Texas State Prison Rodeo in the 1960s as social concerns gave way to new forms of rodeo spectacle and audience amusement.

### **Gazing at the Unseen: Criminal and Crowd in Prison Rodeo**

The dynamics between the audience and the participant was dramatically different in prison rodeo from mainstream rodeos. While it was unquestioned that audiences cheered for the cowboys at rodeos outside the prison walls, inmate riders understood the possibility that the audience had come to jeer at them instead of to applaud them. The gaze of the crowd and the gaze of the cowboy were further altered because prisoners, who were usually withheld from public view, were suddenly visible, albeit in a tightly controlled space. The exchanged glances between imprisoned participants and what prisoners referred to as "free-world" crowds created racialized and sexualized assumptions which underpinned the discursive construction of a rodeo that was believed to save lives even as it risked them.

The prison rodeo developed in leaps and bounds from 1931 until the mid-1950s. Initially using the prison's baseball diamond as an arena, the first and almost all subsequent rodeos took

place within the system's main unit at Huntsville, Texas, referred to simply as "the Walls." Originally designed by prison general manager Lee Simmons for the pleasure of the employees, the rodeo attracted around 300 local townspeople.<sup>11</sup> Within a decade, the event had become an annual event, was stretched over four Sundays each October, and drew upwards of 50,000 spectators, with thousands of people being turned away at the gate for lack of seating.<sup>12</sup> By the 1950s, 100,000 people trekked to the penitentiary every year to sit in the inmate-built stadium, be served by inmate concession-sellers, and watch the spectacle of outlaw man against outlaw beast alongside properly engaged prisoners.<sup>13</sup>

A rodeo routine rapidly developed in which imprisoned men worked hard to join the rodeo in many capacities. Men were recruited to participate from all over the far-flung prison farm system. At first only a couple dozen men were allowed to participate. By the 1950s hundreds of inmates entered competitions, many of the men seeking to place in as many as three events and be crowned Top Hand by accumulating the most money over all four Sundays. After applying for a chance to tryout, inmates could be selected to perform at a number of smaller rodeos held at prison farms in the 1930s and 1940s in order to demonstrate their abilities or hone their skills. By the postwar era, however, these had disappeared in favor of a multi-day tryout at the Walls held every September, just before the big rodeo. These were seen as talent scouting

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<sup>11</sup> "Prison to Start Rodeo," *Huntsville Humdinger*, September 7, 1931. Clippings about the rodeo, 1931-1986-1. Box 1998/038-404. Texas Prison Rodeo records.

<sup>12</sup> "Here's How they 'Stack Up' during Prison Rodeo," *The Echo*, September 1938. In 1940 numbers reportedly spiked with as many as 30,000 people at the first Sunday's rodeo, "30,000 Fan Present at Frist Show," *The Echo*, October 1940.

<sup>13</sup> The popularity of the rodeo was apparent in the fan mail received by the prison's radio show: "The mail bag of the Prison Radio Broadcast Staff has been filled to overflowing the past several weeks as fans from all parts of the United States and Canada have written in requesting the Rodeo Edition for the Texas Prison Echo and the Rodeo Windshield Stickers for their automobiles," "Prison Broadcast Receives Unusually Large Fan Mail," *The Echo*, October 1940.

opportunities and not as practices or dress rehearsals.<sup>14</sup> Men named as cowboys would be bussed in to the Walls on the weekends, but were usually still expected to continue their normal workload during the weeks. For the rodeo, the prison issued uniforms and equipment, but many prisoners sent home for their own horse tack, spurs, and lariats. Other inmates borrowed equipment from friends and people they worked with.<sup>15</sup> Individual departments and farms often published encouragements to the men selected to represent them in the rodeo. Men who were not selected to rope or ride might still have an opportunity to interact with the crowd through concessions and program vending, showing distinguished guests their seats, and many other jobs.

Men who volunteered as cowboys, clowns, or workers in the stands did so in part to be seen by the outside world. Travis Brumbeau, a prison shoe shop worker who spent countless hours hand-stitching the leather equipment used in the rodeo, explained that “in the absence of old friends and dear ones,” imprisoned men’s emotions were “keyed up so strongly with the urge to give their very best.”<sup>16</sup> The loneliness and despair of the system induced men to work exceedingly hard in order to have a chance to perform in front of or even work among the crowds, which often included their loved ones. In a short story, one inmate described the joy of a successful ride on a particularly fierce bronc named Apache, “He felt the freedom he had not experienced since his youth. Walking around the arena on shaky legs, he was a winning cowboy, not a robber, a thief, a murderer, or a convict. He was a man, a cowboy who had taken all

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<sup>14</sup> “This will not be a rehearsal for the rodeo, only a tryout for alleged talent,” in “Tryouts will be Held September 20th,” *The Echo*, Special Rodeo Edition, 1953.

<sup>15</sup> For instance, Harry Southerland wanted to participate in the rodeo but did not have any gear. Fellow employees of the Diagnostic Unit lent him what they could, though it is unclear whether these were imprisoned or free-world employees, “Southerland Wins Rodeo Title,” *The Echo*, November 1971.

<sup>16</sup> Travis Brumbeau, “Shoe Shop Findings,” *The Echo*, September 1940.

Apache could give!”<sup>17</sup> For some men, performing in or working for the rodeo made them feel redeemable and gave them purpose throughout the year.

The financial reality of prison life also encouraged participation. If selected to perform, an inmate was guaranteed a small paycheck called “day money,” which increased from roughly two dollars in the 1930s, to five dollars in the 1950s, and finally reached ten dollars at the end of the rodeo’s existence.<sup>18</sup> In the mid-century, a cowboy finishing in the top ten, however, could hope to take home several hundred dollars in prize money. The money was deposited into the inmate’s commissary account to be used towards “luxuries” like snacks, coffee, stamps, and cigarettes.<sup>19</sup> The only other way for prisoners to receive money was through family or friends.

Anyone who did not participate in the rodeo also faced distinct disadvantages. In the 1950s, programs like vocational training shut down during the month of October because the paid employees were occupied with the organization of the rodeo, preventing them from seeing to their regular duties.<sup>20</sup> The very programs the rodeo was supposed to fund were often prevented from occurring due to its demands. The cotton harvest also coincided with the rodeo and required additional men to be sent into the fields for the backbreaking labor, especially to replace men ushered to the Walls to compete in the rodeo.<sup>21</sup> As the head of rodeo advertising, C.C.

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<sup>17</sup> “Rodeo Days in October,” Rodeo Program, 1965. Box 1998/038-404. Texas Prison Rodeo records. This explanation of participation was a common one: “Surely he wants to finish in the money. But above all, he wants the applause of the fans, the heart-warming cheers that tell him that he’s not just a convict, but a man, a man whose efforts are lauded and appreciated.” Rodeo Program, 1965. Box 1998/038-404. Texas Prison Rodeo records. Also, “Rider Applications Now Being Accepted,” *The Echo*, Rodeo Special Edition, 1959.

<sup>18</sup> Initially, rodeo organizers intended to divide the money raised equally among the performers. Reportedly they were hoping for \$1000 in order to give, “each cowboy a nice amount for the risk he will be taking in riding the bulls and horses.” From “Prison to Start Rodeo,” *Huntsville Humdinger*, September 7, 1931.

<sup>19</sup> “45 Annual Texas Prison Rodeo Aim to Advantage Inmates’ Rehabilitation,” *The Echo*, September 1976.

<sup>20</sup> “Voc Ed. To Remain Active During Rodeo,” *The Echo*, Special Rodeo Edition, 1959.

<sup>21</sup> In 1951, *The Echo* announced the transfer of all able-bodied men to the farms to pick cotton, which shut down the shoe shop, tag plant, and textile mill for next 30 days. “Million Dollar Cotton Crop Shuts Down Walls Industries,”

Springfield, explained, “If he can’t stick to the saddle [in tryouts] then he is tossed back to the cotton patch.”<sup>22</sup> Visitors were even banned during the entire month of October because, as the management explained, a loved one might arrive only to find the inmate had been allowed to go watch the rodeo.<sup>23</sup> The staff and guards were busy patrolling the rodeo grounds, showing around important visitors, riding in the grand entries, and helping run the various profit producing aspects of the rodeo. This meant that there were few employees available for overseeing visiting hours. The rodeo demanded everyone’s involvement, in the name of prison uplift, and those who failed to participate dealt with the consequences.

Incarcerated women were largely restricted to participating in the rodeo as spectators. In 1938 and again in 1952, two women imprisoned at the only women’s facility, the Goree State Farm, petitioned to be allowed to ride in the rodeo because of free-world experience as cowgirl performers.<sup>24</sup> Rodeo manager Albert Moore denied both of these requests. Rodeo officials allowed female prisoners to watch the rodeo from racially and gender segregated stands and they spent many hours sewing the uniforms worn by male rodeoers. From the mid-1930s, the Goree Girls, an all-white string band, performed at the rodeo and became a well-loved feature.<sup>25</sup> The band portrayed a whitened vision of female propriety and happiness at the Goree farm, which did not reflect the reality of the farm’s primarily African American population or the horrific

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*The Echo*, Special Rodeo Edition, 1951. In 1952, *The Echo* ran dual headlines about records being broken for both the rodeo and the cotton harvest. “21st Rodeo Tops all Former Records,” and “Another new record: Prison’s 1952 Cotton Crop worth 2.3 Million,” *The Echo*, Nov 1952.

<sup>22</sup> Springfield, “Underworld Rodeo.”

<sup>23</sup> “Notice,” *The Echo*, Special Rodeo Edition, 1953.

<sup>24</sup> “Woman Inmate May Take Part in 1938 Rodeo,” *The Echo*, August 1938.

<sup>25</sup> “Goree’s All-Girl String Band,” *The Echo*, September 1940. Rodeo Program, 1939, Box 1998/038-404. Texas Prison Rodeo Records.

conditions to which they were subjected there. Black women, especially, faced a stark life at Goree as their facilities were segregated and they were forced to work in the fields while Mexican and white women worked in a garment factory. Beginning in the early twentieth century, a string of sexual scandals emerged from Goree as white male guards raped the incarcerated women.<sup>26</sup> The black women who experienced some of the most isolating and intolerable injustices of the Texas Prison System were the people most unlikely to benefit from the rodeo in any way.

Free-world white women were much more welcomed participants in the rodeo. Professional trick riders, like Tad and Mitzi Lucas, entertained the crowds between cowboy events during the 1940s and 1950s. In the 1960s, girls' barrel racing was introduced and featured free-world female riders, often in their early teens. This was seen as a "pleasant break in our rough and rugged rodeo."<sup>27</sup> In 1968 the first Miss Prison Rodeo contest was held, though some inmates expressed displeasure that they had no vote in the outcome.<sup>28</sup> Famous musical guests, including popular female artists such as Dolly Parton and Anita Bryant, performed annually. Imprisoned men enthusiastically cheered as Anita Bryant kissed an inmate on the cheek after her performance in 1962.<sup>29</sup> The excitement felt about the presence of women, and often free-world women, was often palpable.

Women, though primarily sidelined from the rodeo performance, were at the heart of men's rodeo experiences. When asked why they wanted to rodeo, men throughout the rodeo's

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<sup>26</sup> See Perkinson, *Texas Tough*, 171. Men were required to be married to work at Goree, which was little deterrent for men taking advantage of imprisoned me.

<sup>27</sup> Rodeo Program, 1968. Box 1998/038-405. Texas Prison Rodeo records.

<sup>28</sup> "Browning Upsets Abbott, Miller to Take 'Top Hand' Rodeo Title," *The Echo*, November 1968.

<sup>29</sup> "'62 Rodeo Draws 81,000," *The Echo*, November 1962.

history stated they enjoyed seeing women so they “wouldn’t be so shocked” when they go out.<sup>30</sup> Convict cowboys were not alone in their pleasure of the visual consumption of female bodies, as one inmate poet wrote from the grandstands: “You boys may itch/to toss and pitch/on the back of a buckaroo/but give me a seat/out of the heat/with the Goree gals in view.”<sup>31</sup> While the inmate crowd surely enjoyed the entertainment of the rodeo, *The Echo* reported in 1941 that the imprisoned men cheered the loudest when attractive blonds and brunettes walked by.<sup>32</sup>

These public performances of heterosexual desire at the rodeo helped ease the anxieties surrounding prisoners and homosexuality in the mid-twentieth century. In May 1945, the Texas Board of Criminal Justice listed prison rape as the third greatest concern created by crowded housing. Stabbings were listed as the second most pressing issue. The prison board correlated violence and deviant sexuality were correlated as they expressed panic over the increase in “cases of homosexuality (often the cause of knifings).”<sup>33</sup> Prisoners joked at times about sexuality

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<sup>30</sup> Mark Zienman, “At the Prison Rodeo, Texas Outlaws Earn Loot the Hard Way,” *The Wall Street Journal*, Oct 21, 1985. The rodeo was a release from monotony in “the crowds passing, the swirl of gay and colorful clothes, happy smiles and carefree laughter and in the shouts of children,” Letters of Appreciation, *The Echo*, Sept 1958. Men often mentioned children, as well as women, as a joy to see, for example see “Cowboys at Rodeo all Belong in Prison, and That’s Where They Are,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 20, 1975.

<sup>31</sup> *The Echo*, November 1941. Candy Barr, for instance, became a beloved figure of the rodeo. A popular striptease artist and burlesque dancer who was arrested on drug charges, Barr became of member of the Goree Girls band and even came back to perform at the rodeo after her release. Inmates adored the self-consciously sexual Barr and in interviews inmate journalists were sure to ask her about her waist and bust sizes, which prison officials had failed to mention. See Candy Barr Interview in *The Echo*, August 1966. For more information on her time and performances at the rodeo see “Texas Prison Rodeo,” *The Echo*, Special Edition, Undated. Clippings about the rodeo, 1931-1986-2. Box 1998/038-404. Texas Prison Rodeo records; “Grueling Work, Sweat, Blood Makes 1960 Prison Rodeo Most Thrilling,” *The Echo*, November 1960. Barr also appeared during the same rodeo as Anita Bryant in 1962, stating that she hoped this would be her final rodeo performance as an inmate. “‘62 Rodeo Draws 81,000,” *The Echo*, November 1962.

<sup>32</sup> “Rodeo Highlights,” *The Echo*, October 1941.

<sup>33</sup> Other concerns were related to labor and violence, including the spike in the practice of self-maiming in order to gain work release and stabbings in the large dormitories. Department of Corrections Administrative Correspondence Board of Criminal Justice Minutes and Meeting, Minutes, March 1944-July, 1945. Box 1998/038-8. Texas Department of Criminal Justice. Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission. For a discussion of sexuality and prisons see Regina Kunzel, *Criminal Intimacy: Prison and the Uneven History of American Sexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).



at the Texas State Prison Rodeo. In 1966, two inmates paraded a sign through the arena reading, “Would you believe we like girls?”<sup>34</sup> The rodeo granted imprisoned men the legitimacy of masculine spectatorship and sport and worked to reassert heterosexual order by allowing prisoners to gaze at female performers, prisoners, and audience members through wire fences and under the supervision of armed guards.

Texas’s prison rodeo also staged the racial anxieties of a mid-twentieth century Jim Crow state. In the rodeo, the multi-faceted apparatuses of racial construction and the potential for racial deconstruction existed side-by-side. Black crowds could cheer on black cowboys in the same stadium as white crowds. While the prison baseball team and free-world rodeos were segregated, prison rodeo allowed for the possibility of black cowboys, if not for their equality or dignity.<sup>35</sup> The rodeo was highly racialized in every facet. Throughout the 1930s the participants were most often white. Men of color who did well were marked as the natural adversaries of the white cowboys. For instance, in the late 1930s, Sim and Will Hodge, two African American brothers, won most of the roping competitions several years running. When they were given unexpected clemency in 1941, the prison newspaper called the event a “godsend” for other ropers.<sup>36</sup> Exceptionally talented men of color could break the ranks of cowboys, but usually the cowboy image remained white. The 1939 program includes two photos showing white men and black men conducting rodeo labor. The image at the top of the page shows several white men with

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<sup>34</sup> Interestingly, the rodeo helped pay for “female impersonators” alongside blackface performers, see *The Echo*, September 1940. Therefore, while the rodeo reasserted proper sexual and gender roles it also funded the subversion of these roles through other entertainments.

<sup>35</sup> Boxing and baseball remained segregated, for instance *The Echo* reported on “the Negro baseball team” in the 1930s. See “The Black Cyclones,” *The Echo*, October 1935.

<sup>36</sup> “My Sunday Shot,” *The Echo*, Sept 1941. John “Snake” Parker, for instance, was also marked as a particularly good black cowboy in the 1940s in “Lynching,” *The Echo*, September 1946, a column that capitalizes on the racialized violence of the author’s name.

cowboy hats watching the rodeo action. These men are captioned as “wranglers.” In a photo directly below the first, a group of black men are holding a group of brood mares for the camera. These men, who were actually wrangling stock, were not captioned at all, serving instead as the unacknowledged entities presenting the system’s prize stock for admiration and deserving none themselves.<sup>37</sup>

The rodeo helped bind together the racial performance of the South and the West by providing the funds and space to perpetuate notions of racialized difference. Rodeo receipts went to pay for racialized entertainment, allowing minstrel shows to visit the prison units throughout the 1930s and early 1940s. A popular white cowboy of the prison rodeo even performed in blackface for his fellow inmates.<sup>38</sup> At the rodeo itself, racial performance abounded as minstrelsy pervaded performance culture. Rodeo officials named a steer “Rocking Chair” after “an old Darkyland song” reading “Ol’ rockin’ chair’s got me!”<sup>39</sup> In the early years of the rodeo, Lee Simmons, general manager of the prison system, organized the Cotton Pickers Glee Club, an all-black group of singers.<sup>40</sup> This singing group became a mainstay of the rodeo. For many people, an oxen-pulled wagon with a “half-a-hundred singing Negro prisoners” served as happy “reminders of yesteryear.”<sup>41</sup> White audiences could relish the intersection of race and crime as well. Mainstream journalists remarked on the experience of being served by a deferential black

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<sup>37</sup> Rodeo Program, 1939. Box 1998/038-404. Texas Prison Rodeo records.

<sup>38</sup> Mexico Brown, “The Stringsters,” *The Echo*, October 1942.

<sup>39</sup> “Texas Prisoners Eagerly Await Opening of Greater Eighth Annual Prison Rodeo,” *The Echo*, Aug 1938.

<sup>40</sup> The Cotton Pickers Glee Club also provided a lot of entertainment for other imprisoned black men. Articles in the prison newspaper directed at African-American inmates often tied together the racialized idea of cotton picking and the rodeo. Milton Tom Harris, “Spicy Dark Town Jumpin’ Jive,” *The Echo*, September 1940; “Line O’ Jibe,” *The Echo*, October 1935.

<sup>41</sup> Photo captions from *The Echo*, August 1938.

man who was capable of great violence, “The grinning, toothless Negro selling snow-white pillows is serving life for killing his wife.”<sup>42</sup> Interactions with imprisoned black men, portrayed as combinations of Sambo and the black criminal, were sold as a tourist attraction and an enjoyable brush with danger. Nostalgia for the racialized order of the old South was integral to the rodeo.

As the racial makeup of the rodeo shifted in the postwar period, however, men of color became increasingly dominant in the rodeo. Over the fifty-five year span of the rodeo, men of color increasingly won the top-hand champion title. In many ways, prison rodeo allowed for the participation of black men in a cowboy culture that they were persistently excluded from outside the walls. As 1976 champion Willie Craig stated, “I was riding before I got here. But it was always hard for a colored man to break into rodeo in those days. The white boys didn’t want me.”<sup>43</sup> In the post-war era, as Texas urbanized, industrialized, and rapidly expanded its prison population, the incarceration rate of black men accelerated to more than four times the rate of white men.<sup>44</sup> The black outlaw cowboy was readily recognized, if not embraced, by prison rodeo crowds.

The prison rodeo, which brought together a heroic cultural icon and supposedly pitiless criminals, allowed Texans to express their shifting concerns over the meanings of whiteness as good and blackness as bad. A central joke of the prison rodeo centered on the equating of the

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<sup>42</sup> “Convicts Ride Em,” *The Sun*, November 2, 1947.

<sup>43</sup> “Wildest Rodeo is Behind Bars,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 15, 1979. This is not to overstate the opportunities of black men as cowboys. Even as black men were accepted as bona fide competitors and men of color like O’Neal Browning would be the all-time winningest cowboy, the imagery of the black cowboy remained deeply racist. For instance, amid cartoons of top hand cowboys, Browning’s photo appears snuggled up to a drawing of a minstrel-style black woman, with racialized facial features.

<sup>44</sup> It would gain even more after the passage of the Civil Rights Act and the creation of the war on crime and the war on drugs. It is now roughly seven times higher. See Perkinson, *Texas Tough*, 2-3 and Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2010).

color white with good and the color black with bad in western popular culture. Cowboys were supposed to be inherently good, yet here were apparently bad men acting as the heroes. One rodeo cartoon read, “I can’t help it if I’m one of the *bad guys* ... I’m still gonna wear m’ *white hat*.”<sup>45</sup> This was further confounded by the fact that Texas prisoners wore white uniforms, a fact highly visible as all incarcerated individuals were lumped together in their encaged bleachers. Another cartoon featured in the 1969 program showed a woman asking a guard, “But if you’re the good guys, how come they’re wearing white.”<sup>46</sup> Like cowboyism by the 1950s, whiteness was supposed to denote virtue and morality, but that notion was turned inside out by the prison system’s all-white cotton attire. While the imprisoned audiences wore white, however, the imprisoned cowboys increasingly wore stripes.

These prison stripes, which juxtaposed white and black, became highly symbolic of the good-but-bad anxieties surrounding convict cowboys. Striped uniforms were introduced in the Texas Prison System in nineteenth century. In September 1943, the prison board voted to only use the striped uniform to punish a prisoner who had committed mutiny in their labor unit or attempted to escape.<sup>47</sup> Stripes were thereafter used to humiliate the man who fought for his personhood within the de-humanizing system. By the 1960s, however, these uniforms were used to mark an inmate as a rodeo cowboy and were worn “proudly” by the inmates selected to participate.<sup>48</sup> Through cowboyism, combined blackness and whiteness could be markers of accomplishment instead of shame. Yet, this acceptance of the black alongside the white was

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<sup>45</sup> Rodeo Program, 1966. Box 1998/038-404. Texas Prison Rodeo records.

<sup>46</sup> Rodeo Program, 1969. Box 1998/038-405. Texas Prison Rodeo records.

<sup>47</sup> Meeting Minutes, September 6, 1943. Department of Corrections Administrative Correspondence Board of Criminal Justice Minutes and Meeting, Minutes, January 1943-January 1944. Box 1998/038-8. Texas Department of Criminal Justice. Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

<sup>48</sup> Rodeo Program, 1963. Box 1998/038-404. Texas Prison Rodeo records.

predicated upon the knowledge that these cowboys were somehow bad, even as they played the good in the arena. Similarly, black cowboy masculinity could be seen as a legitimate form of cowboyhood within the walls of a prison because black men were readily accepted as outlaws. They could playact the good because they were already seen to have fulfilled the bad.

The racialized and sexualized gaze ultimately complicated the intentions of the audience. Unlike in other rodeos, it was not self-evident that crowds were cheering for the inmates rather than for the animals. Free-world newspapers wrote that while audiences attended other rodeos to see top notch riding, they attended the prison rodeo to see “the convicts get kicked, and thrown and everything else.”<sup>49</sup> Unlike the prison newspaper, which highlighted cowboys’ hard work and triumphs, free-world newspapers often passed along salacious tidbits and framed the experience as slightly humorous.<sup>50</sup> Critics of the rodeo, especially during its later years, focused attention on the audience’s desire to see inmates get hurt.<sup>51</sup>

From the perspective of the participants, however, the rodeo also provided an opportunity for encouragement and praise. In the 1930s and 1940s, when free-world seating was segregated, the various sections would cheer on “their” cowboys. For instance, a group from Mexico City was apparently disappointed in 1939 when the sole Mexican-American competitor was thrown quickly.<sup>52</sup> The rodeo helped bring together black prisoners in support of each other. As Milton

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<sup>49</sup> “Cowboys at Rodeo all Belong in Prison, and That’s Where They Are,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 20, 1975.

<sup>50</sup> See for instance, “Within Prison Walls Texas’ Wildest Rodeo,” *The Sun*, October 5, 1941, in which men’s crimes are reported alongside their accomplishments in the rodeo.

<sup>51</sup> Mark Zienman, “At the Prison Rodeo, Texas Outlaws Earn Loot the Hard Way,” *The Wall Street Journal*, October 21, 1985. One report that inmates were actually asked to make it look even more violent with exploding blood packets in early years. Daniel Bergner also discusses the exploitative nature of the prison rodeo in *God of the Rodeo: the Search for Hope, Faith, and a Six-Second Ride in Louisiana’s Angola Prison* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1998), which focuses on the role of Warden Burl Cain in the development of Angola’s prison rodeo since the 1990s.

<sup>52</sup> “Largest Rodeo Crowd in History Sees First Show,” *The Echo*, Oct 1939. Someone in the audience stole one of these cans of money, drawing questions on who were the real criminals: the participants or the free-world crowds.

Tom Harris profiled the top African American cowboys in 1940, he encouraged readers of the *The Echo*, “Hope we get to see all you boys off the colored farms. In the meantime, Hold Tight, till the Big Rodeo. We’ll be looking for all of you.”<sup>53</sup> One “diminutive, bespectacled” cowboy of color “rode everything he mounted to the howling delight of the many Negro inmates and spectators in the colored free world stands.”<sup>54</sup>

Lastly, the rodeo gave people the opportunity to come watch their loved ones perform, often year after year. For seven years Leroy Rideaux, 1970 top-hand champion, was able to see his mother sitting in the stands. The rodeo program congratulated his mother, “You have a real champion there, Mrs. Rideaux.”<sup>55</sup> The crowds were at times over-enthusiastic in their desire to “help” the prisoners. The crowd had to be told to not throw objects, like cigarettes and money, into the caged-off bleachers to the incarcerated spectators. The gifts were appreciated but much of the largesse was being lost in the dirt under the bleachers.<sup>56</sup>

In the everyday labors of crafting and executing the Texas State Prison Rodeo, organizers, participants, and the audience created a racialized and sexualized space that allowed imprisoned men to see and be seen once a year by both adoring and mocking crowds. Throughout the mid-twentieth century, the convict cowboy was increasingly associated with black, often urban and potentially sexually deviant, men. As the prison rodeo community sought to sew their rodeo into a larger, national endeavor, these racialized and sexualized aspects

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The practice of throwing objects and being asked to refrain from doing so is also reminiscent of people’s view of generosity at zoos. “Convict Exposed to Super-Thief,” *The Echo*, Oct 30, 1948.

<sup>53</sup> Milton Tom Harris, “Spicy Dark Town Jumpin’ Jive,” *The Echo*, September 1940.

<sup>54</sup> “Largest Rodeo Crowd in History Sees First Show,” *The Echo*, October 1939.

<sup>55</sup> Rodeo Program, 1970. Box 1998/038-405. Also see, “Mr. Redshirt,” Rodeo Program, 1973. Box 1998/038-405.

<sup>56</sup> “Convict Exposed to Super-Thief,” *The Echo*, October 30, 1948.

underpinned their discursive decisions. Even as aberrations of Americanism, imprisoned rodeoers could also redeem themselves through their labor in the arena.

### **Riding to War: Nationalism, Region, and the Self**

World War II marked a moment of significant change in the rhetoric of the prison rodeo. By 1941 the prison rodeo was an annual event that drew in tens of thousands of spectators wildly cheering for the redemptive ability of their region's particular sport—rodeo. In another three years, prison rodeo officials had shifted from speaking of rodeo in terms of Texas to the nation at large. Before WWII, rodeo, while being viewed as unquestionably American, was still primarily a theatricalization of region, both southern and western. The desire to participate in the war effort irrevocably altered that perception, as the ties between the nation, the performance of region, and the individual were tightened. During World War II, prison officials moved beyond their emphasis on rodeo as a regional phenomenon to increasingly frame rodeo as part of a national culture of independence and masculinity.

In the 1930s, many prisoners already perceived cowboyism to be a performance of the West for the East. As the prison population contained many rural Texans, stories of life as cowpunchers were fairly common. In 1934, however, one prisoner lamented his summer working on a dude ranch. He complained about having to cater to effete easterner gentlemen and fat eastern ladies. The dude wrangler, he asserted, overplayed his part by dressing outrageously in western togs, doling out entirely inaccurate information with authority, and offering ridiculous answers to ridiculous questions.<sup>57</sup> He assured readers that he would be sticking to cattle ranching in the future and forgo the pleasure of playing cowboy for an audience. While being a working

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<sup>57</sup> "The Dang Dude," *The Echo*, March 1934.

cowboy might be authentically Texan, stylized westernness was an exaggerated performance of region for tourists.

Prior to World War II, officials in the Texas prison system touted rodeo, like cattle ranching, as a piece of Texas heritage that demonstrated its unique history and culture. Readily acknowledging the Spanish roots of rodeo, the sport was celebrated as a tribute to Texas's multi-racial history of ranching. Rodeo was both "as much a part of our red-blooded American Civilization as the Star Spangled Banner," and also harkened back to a time when "Hacienda owners gathered their Vaqueros and staged big celebrations [...] for the beautiful dark-eyed senoras and señoritas."<sup>58</sup> In 1936, prison officials decided to use the rodeo to mark the centennial anniversary of Texas's War of Independence from Mexico. Cowboys were emblematic of Texas, "written into its history and will never be displaced." Therefore the rodeo was the ideal event to celebrate "one hundred years of freedom."<sup>59</sup> Through rodeo, Texans celebrated their distinctive multi-cultural history. More importantly, they celebrated the conquest of that multi-culturalism as Texas cowboys freed themselves and their land from their Mexican overseers and became the "iron men" who built America into a "mighty nation."<sup>60</sup> While central to the nation-building project, cowboyism was primarily a performance of the southwest's trajectory from Hispanic to Anglo-Saxon.

As war approached, the nation loomed ever larger in the view of the Texas prison system, threatening the existence of the rodeo. Men being discharged from the prisoner were required to register for the draft.<sup>61</sup> *The Echo* assured readers that prisoners were ready and willing to fight

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<sup>58</sup> "Goree's All-Girl String Band," *The Echo*, September 1940.

<sup>59</sup> *The Rodeoian*, 1936.

<sup>60</sup> "Courage," *The Echo*, March 1934.



for their country. Rodeo crowds were steeped in worry over the war as they listened to addresses from military personnel. One prisoner remarked that the rodeo was the “only glamour these grey walls experience in a year’s time,” while the incessant talk of war only made their lives gloomier.<sup>62</sup> When the war struck, the prison board voted to cancel the annual rodeo for the only time in its fifty-five year history. The prison system threw itself whole heartedly into the war effort, amputating the rodeo as an unnecessary appendage.

In 1944, however, the prison board reversed its decision and instead utilized the rodeo in service to the war effort, defining rodeo as a symbol of their commitment to the nation. The Victory Rodeo would rope in tangible aid in the form of war bonds, while trampling Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan beneath its hooves. “It’s now or never, America” exclaimed one advertisement for the rodeo in the prison newspaper.<sup>63</sup> Another article suggested the “vast army of plain everyday Americans” should take a reprieve from the “tragedy of war,” to “watch the society’s step-children fight it out in competition—the American way!”<sup>64</sup> Rodeo was entirely American, and inmate cowboys were part of the American family, if only as unwanted stepchildren forced to earn love through competition.

Indeed, the success of the rodeo and the success of the nation were further melded together through financial investments. The prison board promised that, as soon as the war was

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<sup>61</sup> “Discharged Men Must Register Before Leaving,” and “Stadium Crowd Hears Address on Navy Day,” *The Echo*, Nov 1940. An article highlighting inmates’ willingness to fight in the war, James Barker, “We are Ready,” appeared directly above an article on the rehabilitative abilities of the rodeo, entitled “The Hidden Value of Rodeo,” *The Echo*, Nov 1941.

<sup>62</sup> J Willard Thompson, “Sports Round-up,” *The Echo*, November 1940.

<sup>63</sup> “It’s now or never America,” *The Echo*, October 1944.

<sup>64</sup> “Rodeo Edition,” *The Echo*, October 1944. Another article in this edition linked service in war to manhood, “Thank God We Don’t Need Your Kid.” Much like the rodeo, labor in war could redeem sinners and make them into productive men.

won, the prison would redeem the bonds in order to build a modern, 25,000 seat rodeo stadium. The bonds would pay for materials and the inmates would do the required labor. The prosperity of the individual, the prison system, and the nation were interwoven, by helping one, the other would be saved.

After the war, rodeo was more than just a piece of Texan heritage, it epitomized American democracy and equal opportunity. Rodeo had become “truly an American sport.” While the “colorful” rodeo was enjoyable, it was important to remember that “it’s REAL.”<sup>65</sup> To attack the authenticity of rodeo performances would be to attack the hard-working ethic that built America. Interestingly, a rodeoer didn’t have to be trained to be authentic. C.C. Springfield, the Rodeo Publicity Director, wrote in 1946 that the prison rodeo exemplified American democracy because convict cowboys were selected purely on their “crowd-pleasing abilities.” “No class barriers are recognized. No matter what your height, weight or age, nor whether you’re white, black or brown-skinned, no matter if they jugged you for stealing chickens or bustin’ banks—you get the job if you can ride the stock.” The rodeo was so democratic that it allowed for the participation of “damnyankees, who did their teething on model ‘T’ steering wheels and learned about hawses while reading pulp westerns.” For Springfield, the appearance and success of black inmates demonstrated that the rodeo was “anybody’s contest.”<sup>66</sup> Like America, anyone who was worthy could ostensibly rise to the top of the authentically American endeavor of rodeo.

In the eyes of the prison officials, World War II created a crisis in which the rodeo could no longer only serve the needs of the state prison system. Increasingly, rodeo officials cast the imagined West as the bedrock of an imagined nation in which hard work and dedication resulted

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<sup>65</sup> “Rodeo is truly an American Sport,” *The Echo*, August 1954.

<sup>66</sup> Springfield, “Underworld Rodeo.”

in the good life. Prison officials' attempts to sell the rodeo as the embodiment of American democracy helped structure an increasingly popular notion of self-rejuvenation through self-conscious and dedicated participation in recreation activities. Through the toil of improving one's self, prison officials hoped that inmates were redeeming the entire prison system and nation.

### **Re-creation through Recreation: Salvation, Violent Labor, and the Cowboy**

The 1952 Texas State Prison Rodeo program defined an "outlaw horse" as an "unbroken man-killer."<sup>67</sup> Throughout the rodeo's fifty-five year history, prison and free-world media alike fed on the clash between incorrigible men and untamable animals.<sup>68</sup> Prison rodeo, reported the prison's newspaper *The Echo*, was as "rough and reckless as the outlaw riders, and as wild and savage as the unbroken, untamed stock they ride."<sup>69</sup> In this way, the imagined violence of prison rodeo cast incarcerated men as the aspiring masters of animals, even as the prison system struggled to master the men. As one rodeo official once joked, at the Texas Prison Rodeo "No holds are barred, but all bars must hold."<sup>70</sup> This triangle of dominance celebrated the supposedly innate violence of the racialized criminal as long as it was performed as cowboyism and in the name of rehabilitation.

In 1948, Oscar Byron Ellis was appointed general manager of the Texas Prison System in an attempt to stem the horrific tide of self-mutilation to receive release from overwork, abuses of

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<sup>67</sup> "Rodeo Lingo," *The Echo*, Special Rodeo Edition, 1952.

<sup>68</sup> See examples in Photo Captions, *The Echo*, August 1938; "Eastham Scribe Relates Action of Trial Rodeo," *The Echo*, Sept 1940; "Seen by Thousands Who Attended the Annual Prison Rodeo," *The Echo*, September 1937; "Convicts Ride Em," *The Sun*, November 2, 1947; "Prison Rodeo Rated with Best, 47 Stiches for Winner," *New York Times*, October 22, 1973.

<sup>69</sup> "Outlaw vs. Outlaw No Mere Figure of Speech," *The Echo*, Prison Rodeo Special Edition, 1956.

<sup>70</sup> Springfield, "The Dang'dest Show on Earth," *The Echo*, September 1947.

prisoners by guards, and brutal acts committed by prisoners. Ellis implemented a vision of a modernized, industrialized, and humane prison system based in discipline but not cruelty. This new system was supposed to overcome Texas's dark past of prison abuse and create a less violent atmosphere. Yet, as prison officials claimed to be voluntarily reforming the penal system, they appropriated the narrative of violence in the rodeo to explain their own forms of social salvation. Rodeo was the needle that stitched together prison reform and violence.

From the genesis of prison rodeo, prison officials framed the rodeo as a redemptive effort. A limited wave of prison reforms during the late 1920s helped birth the rodeo. After decades of scandal about the conditions of the prison system, the public began expressing concern for the wellbeing of inmates. The prison management system restructured itself with the introduction of a nine-person Prison Board.<sup>71</sup> Prison officials, particularly general manager Lee Simmons, perceived the rodeo to be a humanitarian gesture to inmates. Instead of simply being punished for their transgressions, prisoners might also be offered rewards, such as participating in or watching a rodeo, to encourage good behavior. Prison reformers valued recreational activities, including baseball and wrestling, as ways to teach inmates to play by the rules and live within society.<sup>72</sup> Not only could prisoners receive the opportunity to learn team spirit and good sportsmanship, prison officials also noted the importance of healthy bodies for healthy minds. Prison recreation was akin to prison work in that it provided a socially acceptable form of physical activity through which to purge one's transgressions and strengthen the self to face the challenges of the future.

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<sup>71</sup> While 1927 marked a turning point in many people's feelings on the need for rehabilitation alongside punishment, any attempt at reform was underfunded. In 1931, however, old dormitories were replaced. The prison system routinely promoted its early history of reform spirit, if not success, through its rodeo programs. See, for example, Rodeo Program, 1939. Box 1998/038-404. Texas Prison Rodeo records.

<sup>72</sup> Rodeo Program, 1941. Box 1998/038-404. Texas Prison Rodeo records.

Prison officials especially valued the rodeo's ability to raise revenue. Prior to the reforms of 1927 there was no system-wide recreational committee or funding apparatus, undermining these attempts at reform. After the advent of the rodeo and the appointment of Albert Moore as Director of Recreation in 1933, prisoners were able to access a variety of sports and entertainments because of the increasingly well-organized and high-earning rodeo. Financially, however, little support was provided in the interwar years to make the much-desired improvements in prisoners' lives. The rodeo ultimately functioned as a pump that poured resources into other prison reform efforts. As the 1946 rodeo publicity director exclaimed, "Ever since they unveiled their first rodeo to the public, Texas convicts have been lifting themselves by their cowboy bootstraps."<sup>73</sup> The Texas State Prison Rodeo, therefore, functioned as a venue for imprisoned participants to perform the dual tasks of self- and system-rehabilitation in a self-sustaining manner.

Prison reformers argued that only through violently quelling one's personal desires could salvation be achieved, and prisoners used the rodeo as a metaphor to describe this process of self-repression. Throughout the 1930s and early 1940s, the reformation of prisoners was seen as an individual struggle over selfish desires. Society could not offer the inmate more than encouragement.<sup>74</sup> This moral struggle was parallel to the struggle men faced in the arena, society could not aid them but instead only sit and gawk. One incarcerated man even described the process of self-reformation as an internal rodeo, wrestling the beast of "the criminal tendencies

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<sup>73</sup> C.C. Springfield, "Underworld Rodeo," *The Echo*, September 1946.

<sup>74</sup> Kenneth Sawyer, "Prison Reform," *The Echo*, February 1940. Also, see Travis Trumbeau, "Rehabilitation," *The Echo*, August 1940; "Rehabilitation—Self-Administered," *The Echo*, November 1942; "The Nature of Reformation," *The Echo*, July 1944 expresses the idea that men must reform themselves and really the only thing that can drive them to changes is a disgust of incarceration because morality is too shaky, even in the best of men.

which crop up inside of us.”<sup>75</sup> To successfully redeem himself, a convict had to choose to step into the arena.

Starting in 1948, prison officials appropriated this understanding of the rodeo as a space for self-transformation and applied it to their new renewal plan. The rodeo program that year walked the audience through the recently proposed “Ellis Plan.” This plan was the result of “noted penal authority,” Austin McCormick’s critique of the Texas prison system as “the worst” in the nation and other highly publicized voices denouncing the horrors inside the Walls and on the farms. Governor Beauford Jester and the Prison Board created a five-point plan and elected Oscar Byron Ellis as the general manager of the prison system. He had previously run a penal farm outside Memphis, Tennessee, which was ostensibly economically self-sustaining and morally scandal free. His plan called for the comprehensive “rehabilitation of the Texas Prison System,” which could pay dividends in “reclaimed human lives.”<sup>76</sup> Ellis’s plan asked for four million dollars to build new dormitories in order to cut down on escapes, murders, and “abnormal sex practices.”<sup>77</sup> The money was earmarked for mechanized farm equipment and salaries for more qualified staff. Rather than a revolutionary new system, this plan reworked and sought to save the system that was already in place. For over a decade, the rodeo served as a major marketing apparatus for this plan and its expansions, merging the goals of the prison board with that of the rodeo.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> “The Other Rodeo,” *The Echo*, September 1940.

<sup>76</sup> “Board Unanimously Mr. Ellis’ \$4,200,000 Prison Modernization Program,” *The Echo*, February 1948.

<sup>77</sup> Rodeo Program, 1948. Box 1998/038-404. Texas Prison Rodeo records. Ellis was successful in his attempts to raise money for these reforms in part because of the prosperity of postwar Texas and Governor Jester’s willingness to provide financial support. Ellis himself delivered 250 speeches over the course of a year in order to drum up support for the plan. See Perkinson, *Texas Tough*, 226-231.

<sup>78</sup> The ability for prison officials to so fully merge the public image of the rodeo with their own was the private printing of programs, flyers, and placards for advertising the rodeo. In September 1940, *The Echo* reported the print

Labor was at the center of these plans. Unlike California, where prison reform centered on the reduction of force, Ellis espoused the hiring a significantly larger force in order to enforce “Discipline and Respect.”<sup>79</sup> Prisoners were expected to work ten hour days and even self-mutilation could not get prisoners out of their daily labors. He implemented a new form of prisoner segregation which assigned jobs based on race, number of offenses, and sexual crimes, like rape or homosexuality. For instance, black and Mexican men continued to be sent to the farms while white first-offenders were given the opportunity to learn new industries at the Walls.<sup>80</sup> The de-emphasizing of agriculture for white prisoners was predicated upon greater changes in postwar Texas, prison officials argued. While Texas had “turned her economy, principles and moral to twentieth-century concepts,” washing away cotton and cattle with tidal waves of oil, the prison system has stagnated and moldered in its own lack of change, a “ghastly skeleton” in the closet of a “progressive state of the most advanced nation in the world.”<sup>81</sup> As Ellis explained, “Idle men cannot be rehabilitated,” and neither could an idle prison system. The need for renewal took considerable effort and people had to be willing to work for it.

Ellis created a nationally lauded system of prison control that demanded labor and loyalty from inmates and employees alike. The 1950 rodeo program announced that while the system

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shop completed 5,000 programs and a special edition. While officials oversaw the process, inmates labored long hours to design, write, print, and assemble the advertising for such an important venture. During the reform years of the late 1940s and early 1950s, the programs made sure to reiterate the efforts the prison staff was putting forth and stressed the Three R’s of the Ellis plan: “By careful reconstruction a life may be rebuilt. By reorganization of the man’s existing abilities, former liabilities, with practical and efficient management can be turned into his assets. By restoration of a sense of responsibility the inmate’s value of moral turpitude can be retained and bolstered,” Prison Rodeo Special Edition, *The Echo*, 1952.

<sup>79</sup> Perkinson, *Texas Tough*, 229.

<sup>80</sup> Detailed in “Board Unanimously Mr. Ellis’ \$4,200,000 Prison Modernization Program,” *The Echo*, February 1948. New form of segregation was thought to protect “rehabilitative” prisoners by designating individual cells for “worst” prisoners.

<sup>81</sup> Rodeo Program, 1950. Box 1998/038-404. Texas Prison Rodeo records.

had not yet achieved excellence, it was rapidly “*building for a better tomorrow.*”<sup>82</sup> The prison board saw itself as laboring for the good of the society and the rodeo was a key piece of the modernization puzzle. As one news article explained, “With sufficient money in the E & R Fund, the Texas Prison Rodeo may someday take its place among the more enlightened penal institution of the country.”<sup>83</sup>

The need for this arduous and focused work, prison officials argued, was not for the comfort of the criminal, but for the good of society. The new system was “rehabilitating and returning to good citizenship hundreds of men who are now a total loss to the state and to society.”<sup>84</sup> For inmates, this meant being able to reclaim their manhood as they were purportedly given the opportunity to earn their keep and give to the state, instead of a being dependent upon it. In one public service message, a group of citizens personally thanked Ellis for his exertions and urged people to support the prison staff as they worked to build a prison system that will “give new hope to those inmates who deserve an opportunity of remolding their lives to become useful citizens.”<sup>85</sup> The value of prison reform lay in training deserving white men in particular trades and thereby reclaiming their labor for society, especially after release. The rodeo made this process visible, as the prison board invited one to “see for yourself how your money is being spent to save human lives—besides making your Prison System self-supporting in its vast

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<sup>82</sup> “The 18th Annual Prison Rodeo,” *The Huntsville Item*, September 29, 1949. Clippings about the rodeo, 1931-1986-1. Box 1998/038-404. Texas Prison Rodeo records.

<sup>83</sup> “Biggest Prison Show on Earth,” ca 1948. Clippings about the rodeo, 1931-1986-2. Box 1998/038-404. Texas Prison Rodeo.

<sup>84</sup> “Kilgore Jaycees Back Ellis Plan,” *The Echo*, Special Rodeo Edition, 1948. “Prison Reform Battle, Victory,” *The Echo*, March 21, 1949.

<sup>85</sup> “Huntsville is Proud of the Accomplishments of Mr. O.B. Ellis, General Manager, and the Texas Prison Board,” and “The 18th Annual Prison Rodeo,” *The Huntsville Item*, September 29, 1949. Clippings about the rodeo, 1931-1986-1. Box 1998/038-404. Texas Prison Rodeo records.



operations.”<sup>86</sup> Audience members could attend the rodeo to feel a sense of modern progress alongside nostalgia, through their support they not only experienced a taste of Texas’s past but participate in improving it for future generations.

The purpose, therefore, of the prison rodeo was to make “crime pay” for prisoners as they relied on their own labor and not “charity” from the taxpayers or their families.<sup>87</sup> The annual event took an immense amount of unremunerated labor, including program printing in the print shop, tack repair in the leather shop, stadium expansion by the construction crews, and additional cotton-harvesting by men not selected to perform.<sup>88</sup> The 1950 rodeo reportedly netted the Educational and Recreational Fund \$100,403 through ticket and program sales.<sup>89</sup> The fund also received a small portion of proceeds from the sale of inmate crafts. After a ten hour workday, men and women had a brief amount of time to create leather goods, paintings, and metalwork that they could sell at the rodeo. Audience members could voyeuristically touch and feel the prison system and feel generous by purchasing a souvenir to “help an inmate who otherwise could not help himself.”<sup>90</sup> While some prisoners lamented the invisibility of rodeo laborers, many prisoners also deemed the efforts worth it in order to interact with the outside world once a year.

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<sup>86</sup> “The 18th Annual Prison Rodeo,” *The Huntsville Item*, September 29, 1949. Clippings about the rodeo, 1931-1986-1. Box 1998/038-404. Texas Prison Rodeo records.

<sup>87</sup> “Echoing the Penal Press,” *The Echo*, Special Rodeo Edition, 1951.

<sup>88</sup> “Around the Yard,” *The Echo*, September 1940 notes the Walls is a hive of activity as “The various shops and departments are ‘rollin’ for fair in an earnest attempt to get their allotted work out for the Big Annual Prison Rodeo.” While rodeos were traditionally celebrations by cowboys at the end of a successful roundup, and represented in cowboy play instead of cowboy labor, the prison rodeo celebrated labor and its occurrence created even more brutal paces and workloads for the men and women of the prison system. “The Unremembered,” *The Echo*, Special Rodeo Edition, 1952 particularly highlights the work of the backstage stockmen who are doing real cowboy labor while received little or no credit.

<sup>89</sup> “Echoing the Penal Press,” *The Echo*, Special Rodeo Edition, 1951.

<sup>90</sup> Rodeo Program, 1957. Box 1998/038-404. Texas Prison Rodeo records.

It was generally only the labor of the cowboys in the arena which was publically praised. While other labor made the rodeo a reality, the cowboy performances could make or break the profitability of the rodeo. The officials, the audience, and the incarcerated population always expected “great things” from the convict cowboys.<sup>91</sup> Rodeo organizers were consistently concerned with the audience seeing a show “worth the money” rather than the safety or enjoyment of the riders.<sup>92</sup> Through their daring individual performances, convict cowboys could create a new and better society, righting the wrongs of the past. In a description to the free-world audience about the use of “your rodeo dollar,” *The Echo* explained: “Many whose inability to get by in society could be traced to improper education and downright illiteracy are now returning to society, literate, and often with a special trade or skill learned at the school or through correspondence courses made available through the prisoners’ Education and Recreation Fun.”<sup>93</sup> Cowboy labor was deemed more valuable because it saved lives while also endangering them.

The ultimate form of redemptive labor allowed the few to suffer for the many. Injuries occurred frequently at the rodeo.<sup>94</sup> Events like the mad scramble, in which ten chutes released bulls with inmates aboard, reveled in a mayhem that was simply unthinkable at free-world rodeos. While other rodeos banned such events, the media cheered as “Huntsville’s bad men eat

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<sup>91</sup> “Echoing the Penal Press,” *The Echo*, Special Rodeo Edition, 1951. While enumerating all the various jobs that contributed to the rodeo and all the opportunities created by the rodeo, the author states, “Sort of self-sustaining, aren’t we?” A self-sustaining prison system, which cost the taxpayer little, was many Texans’ dream.

<sup>92</sup> For instance see *The Echo*, September 1937.

<sup>93</sup> “Your Rodeo Dollar,” *The Echo*, Special Rodeo Edition, 1953.

<sup>94</sup> In 1946, advertising director CC Springfield bragged that “despite the speed and recklessness of the show, injuries are few and deaths are practically nil,” “Underworld Rodeo.” Practically nil was not zero, however. In “Few Get Bad Hurts In Rodeo Here,” *The Echo*, August 1954 stated, “Only one death is recorded in the rodeo’s 23-year history. In 1932 a Negro contestant got his foot hung in a stirrup and was kicked in the head by a bucking horse.” At least one other man died in 1977 due to injuries sustained at the rodeo, though many more deaths probably occurred, see Peter Applebome, “Last Roundup Feared at Texas Prison Rodeo,” *New York Times*, March 19, 1987. In 1985, 39 of the 100 cowboys were treated for some kind of injury. Mark Zienman, “At the Prison Rodeo, Texas Outlaws Earn Loot the Hard Way,” *The Wall Street Journal*, October 21, 1985

it up,” even in the face of inmate deaths. Descriptions of the rodeo by the media lauded the “bone-crunching” action as men “gamble their bones and necks in order to vary the monotony of prison farm life.”<sup>95</sup> While authors acknowledged that five men being carried out on stretchers in a single day was concerning, “accidents are sure to happen in a show such as that staged at Huntsville prison.”<sup>96</sup> For decades the prison system had advertised the rodeo as “Texas’s Fastest and Wildest Rodeo,” and was assured “without the least bit of faltering over superlatives that the show put on by ‘The Men in White’ is the roughest, toughest, wildest, high falutineest, and most stupendous coliseum of animation that could be wrapped up in three hours of entertainment.”<sup>97</sup> Cowboy labor for imprisoned men could pay the debts incurred by their past recklessness with a new form of sanctioned wildness and danger in the arena.

Through providing such wild entertainment, convict participants found a place within society, if only at the margins. Outlawry and bravery walked hand-in-hand at the prison rodeo, as one man noted, “I have always heard that a criminal is a coward, but it would take a magnanimous prevaricator to say that those fellows who risk their lives out in the arena with that writhing, plummeting, murderous mass of flesh are cowards!”<sup>98</sup> Yet, watching and enjoying such a desperate embrace of danger was the audience’s purchased right over “thieves, murders [sic], and robbers: men who have gambled with the law all their days.”<sup>99</sup> Events like the chariot race,

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<sup>95</sup> Rodeo Program, 1959. Box 1998/038-404. Texas Prison Rodeo records. Participating in the rodeo was promoted as a treat. For instance, a newspaper praised the prison for treating a man “generously” after he, a “vicious incorrigible,” got hurt and was told he couldn’t ride. The general manager took pity and allowed him to ride injured. The ability to injure oneself further was seen as an unexpected gift. “Within Prison Walls Texas’ Wildest Rodeo,” *The Sun*, October 5, 1941.

<sup>96</sup> “Old Engineer,” reprinted in *The Echo*, October 1939.

<sup>97</sup> “Inmates Eagerly Await Opening of Rodeo,” *The Echo*, September 1940.

<sup>98</sup> “Miscellany,” *The Echo*, Oct 1940.

<sup>99</sup> Springfield, “Dang’dest.” Audience members also perpetuated voyeuristic violence through the consumption of inmate information in the form of day sheets. Day sheets list the name and competition number of any competing

in which convict clowns raced each other behind untrained brahma bulls, amused the audience because of the combination of courage and comedy. Clowns both proved their grit by stepping into the chariot and their sense of self-preservation as they scrambled for the fences in order to not be gored to death after their chariots had wrecked. “It’s a corker, folks,” the prison-printed *Rodeoian* cackled.<sup>100</sup> The problematic aspects of watching brave men get injured in rodeo were mitigated by the fact that these men were criminals. Acceptance of them as cowboys could be tempered by deserved and spectacular violence.

Both prisoners and prison officials thought the conflict and competition within the rodeo helped to cathartically rid inmates of their need to be violent elsewhere. By the early 1940s, the concept of “venting,” or a release of passion in a socially appropriate manner, was commonly cited as a service the rodeo provided the overcrowded, overworked inmates. Performers could purge “any kind of action that might be pent up within them.”<sup>101</sup> The venting of such tightly controlled impulses in public also was thought to prove the manhood of these volunteer cowboys, as they were “taking advantage of these rodeos to let off steam and show the others how a man with ‘guts’ goes about doing difficult tricks.”<sup>102</sup> As with prison reform, rejuvenation of individuals required a form of destruction, which was rechanneled away from other inmates and towards animals, in order to be productive.

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cowboy or cowgirl, yet in prison rodeo the hometowns, life sentences, and at times crimes of the convict cowboys, were also listed, such as in 1948. Interestingly, the print shop at times embedded their own private jokes and insults, such as giving a cowboy a different hometown every year as one cowboy complained. One year the print shop listed his hometown as Fire Island, New York, a well-known getaway for gay men, making a public joke about his sexuality. “Well-Traveled Linscomb Calls Nederland His Home,” *The Echo*, August 1968. Also, while the prison press almost never mentioned an inmate’s alleged crime, the free world press gleefully related to their readers the supposed facts about individual cowboys’ crimes.

<sup>100</sup>*The Rodeoian*, 1936.

<sup>101</sup> “Rodeos to be Held on Thursdays,” *The Echo*, September 1942.

<sup>102</sup> “New Rodeo Dates,” *The Echo*, September 1942.

Yet, the rodeo produced scenes of violence beyond the boundaries of Prison Stadium as well. C.C. Springfield, head of rodeo advertising in the 1940s, leapt at the chance to explain to free-world readers the “unexpected spice” the rodeo added to life at the Walls. After a disappointing day at the rodeo, a white cowboy “tried to rob a couple Negro prize-winners in the prison yard. Armed with a knife, he shook one down, then started to the other. But he made a grave error in failing to note that a two-by-four lay nearby. His first victim grabbed it as soon as he was free, and proved that it was more effective than a knife.”<sup>103</sup> Through the raising and shattering of hopes, the rodeo created new tensions and potential for violence in the everyday lives of imprisoned men. As seen in this instance of prize theft, this violence was often racialized as white men were galled at competing side-by-side by black men.<sup>104</sup>

Prison officials increasingly staged domination and control at the rodeo as a form of entertainment during this era of prison reform. Armed guards patrolling prison farms on horseback with rifles made violence omnipresent in the everyday operations of the prison system.<sup>105</sup> Under Ellis, prison staff ruthlessly enforced prison order, producing the highly

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<sup>103</sup> Springfield, “Dang’dest.”

<sup>104</sup> Rodeo also produced new opportunities for escape and the spread of the fear of prison violence into the public’s backyard. Escapes were not frequent but were at times successful because of the rodeo. In the 1930s, several men jumped from their transport vehicle as it was stopped in Houston traffic. The guards could not shoot because of the crowded streets but also could not pursue the men as they still had prisoners in the van. “5 Convicts Escape in Texas, 2 Caught,” *The Washington Post*, October 26, 1936. Another break happened by construction crew members building the rodeo stadium, they used their equipment to tunnel under the walls and forced several local teenagers to drive them to another town. The most famous escape happened at the rodeo itself, when two inmates wore street clothes under their uniforms, dropped beneath the bleachers and were crawling over the fence when a guard saw them. The guard yelled at the two seemingly ignorant visitors, warning them the prisoners’ area was strictly off limits. The guard was later fired. Springfield, “Dang’dest.” All of these reported escapes happened in the early years of the rodeo and the need to crack down brought about stricter control of the rodeo grounds as part of larger reform efforts.

<sup>105</sup> The Texas Prison System particularly celebrated the tradition of the Texas Rangers at the rodeo, with the intersection of the cowboy and law. Lawrence Evans, “Not Questioned—Yet,” *The Echo*, August 1938. The Texas Rangers first formed in the 1820s as a group of gunmen who organized loosely in order to forcefully remove the Indians and the Mexicans from the lands in Texas—they were the armed agents of imperialism and racialized warfare. For early history of the Texas Rangers see Robert Utley’s *Lone Star Justice: The First Century of the Texas Rangers* (USA: Oxford University Press, 2002).

efficient production quotas and low official reports of violence in the reformed system. Older prison guards socialized younger men in a space that encouraged brutal force and Ellis demanded loyalty from his employees.<sup>106</sup> At the rodeo, guards patrolled and oversaw the massive crowds with loaded weapons. Officials reassured the audience of their safety with wire caging around the inmate section and the “steel covered automobiles” that brought in prisoners from the farms. The prison wasn’t “taking any chances.”<sup>107</sup> In the 1940s, the rodeo program included officials bringing out the system’s bloodhounds for demonstrations in the arena as the symbol of the “slow and awkward, but inexorable” law.<sup>108</sup> By the 1960s, this pantomime of capture was conveyed in the rodeo program through an image of an African-American man perched in a tree attempting to escape the hounds prowling below him.<sup>109</sup> The humor of this photo, which reached back to slave tracking, represented the immense power Ellis’s system exercised over prisoners even as it celebrated its own modernization and the supposed decrease in inmates’ desire to attempt escape. This power was visually performed at the rodeo even as prisoners were allowed to enter the arena to test their skills against animals besides hounds.

Paradoxically, participating in the rodeo was a reward for non-violence and diligent work. In 1933, general manager Simmons informed the audience that the rodeo “was a reward to the inmates for meritorious behavior and a strict attention to the tasks to be performed.”<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Guard cohesion resulted from isolated farms and dangerous situations. Younger men were coached in how to be “good” officers from their elders, in particular men had to demonstrate their masculinity through a willingness to deal with inmate resistance with force and to participate in the openly racist degradation of prisoners. For a discussion of guard culture under Ellis see Perkinson, *Texas Tough*, 237

<sup>107</sup> “Old Engineer,” reprinted in *The Echo*, October 1939.

<sup>108</sup> “Rodeo Highlights,” *The Echo*, October 1941; Springfield, “Underworld Rodeo.” At times people worried about the convicts being too near them. For instance in 1985, the current Miss Prison Rodeo told journalist Mark Zienman that she keeps her back to the chutes because while the inmates are “real nice” she didn’t “want them surrounding” her. “At the Prison Rodeo, Texas Outlaws Earn Loot the Hard Way,” *The Wall Street Journal*, October 21, 1985.

<sup>109</sup> Rodeo Program, 1966. Box 1998/038-40. Texas Rodeo records.

<sup>110</sup> “Third Annual Prison Rodeo Opened Saturday, October 7,” *The Echo*, August 1933.

Abstaining from violence in one arena allowed for heroic violence in another.<sup>111</sup> The very flaws that made prisoners problematic citizens made them excellent cowboys, and enabled them to save their fellow man and perhaps themselves.<sup>112</sup> As the prison newspaper noted: “The indefinable ‘something’ that makes some men react, as to a challenge, to the laws and the rules of society, is the same thing that makes them unable to resist the challenge of a snorting horse or bellowing bull that refuses to be ridden.” This need to rebel, so harmful to them in society, through the rodeo, “serves them as an asset in the penitentiary.”<sup>113</sup> The brutal criminal found salvation through the brutality of the rodeo arena.

As the prison system purported to remold itself in the mid-twentieth century, prison officials needed the public to re-engage with the problems of the prison system regularly. Ten years after the initial Ellis Plan changes, rodeo officials encouraged people to stay educated on the “growing pains” of the prison system.<sup>114</sup> By 1957, the imprisoned population of Texas had increased by fifty percent. Rapid urbanization, the changing economy, social unrest, and new drug laws resulted in the massive arrests of Texas citizens. Both the physical infrastructure of the system and the rodeo needed to grow in order to incorporate the ever increasing numbers of incarcerated men and women. The Ellis Plan, which sought to reduce violence through the introduction and rearrangement of space was rendered moot as prison reform once again

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<sup>111</sup> “Rodeos to be Held on Thursdays,” *The Echo*, September 1942.

<sup>112</sup> “The Prison Rodeo... Its Reasons,” *The Echo*, Special Rodeo Edition, 1952.

<sup>113</sup> Rodeo Program, 1950. Box 1998/038-404. Texas Prison Rodeo records.

<sup>114</sup> Articles detailing the rapid rise in the prison population had started within the first five years of the Ellis Plan. “Know your prison system,” *The Echo*, Special Rodeo Edition, 1953; “Four Urgent Needs,” Rodeo Program, 1956. Box 1998/038-404. Texas Prison Rodeo records; Rodeo Program, 1958. Box 1998/038-404. Texas Prison Rodeo records. Interestingly, the renewal of the prison system also demanded a renewal of the narrative of rodeo. Around this time, the rodeo was co-opted into a retelling of prison history. In the late 1950s, the prison system narrated the advent of rodeo as specifically aimed at sparking reform for the failing prison system and alleviating the terrible conditions for prisoners. Instead of making a spectacle of prisoners, it was purely for their benefit. “Tribute to Lee Simmons,” *The Echo*, September 1958.

stuttered to a halt.<sup>115</sup> As overcrowding marked the Texas Prison System, the control over the prison population that Ellis prized began to slip from prison officials hands.

In 1959, O.B. Ellis died and much of the public demand for reform passed with him. For over a decade, prison officials harnessed cowboy labor in the Texas State Prison Rodeo to promote Ellis's often violent drive to modernize and industrialize the Texas Prison System through work that they promoted as tough but necessary. Despite prison officials' attempts to demonstrate the prison system's continued demand for change, many people saw the reform war as won by the early 1960s. While acknowledging the challenges of the ever expanding prison population, the tightly-controlled humanitarian mission of the prison system was seen to have been fulfilled.<sup>116</sup> Rodeo programs increasingly assured the public that prisoners no longer suffered at the hands of an exploitative system but instead were provided with the opportunity to rebuild their lives. In 1959, an inmate published an article in the rodeo edition of *the Echo*, explaining to free-world readers that the prison system was his home and he was grateful for it: "I have ample food, adequate shelter, [...] plentiful, clean clothing. And work, of course [...] productive, organized, and regulated work."<sup>117</sup> Through its own violent labor, the public believed that prison reform had met the essential needs of prisoners and the rodeo ensured any additional needs would be provided for through its proceeds.

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<sup>115</sup> In 1957 the state legislature changed the name of the Texas Prison System to the Texas Department of Corrections and named Ellis its director.

<sup>116</sup> Ellis's reforms in education, though limited in scope, allowed incarcerated men the opportunity to create a prison intelligentsia that would labor tirelessly for a revolution in the prison system in the late twentieth century. See Perkinson, *Texas Tough*, 224.

<sup>117</sup> e.m.m, "This is my home," *The Echo*, Special Rodeo Edition, 1959. One rodeo program featured a fake letter home for a newly incarcerated man. He assured his family that the "wild stories" he'd heard were not true and that he was well looked after and grateful for being given the time to think on his crimes and repent. Rodeo Program, 1963. Box 1998/038-404. Texas Prison Rodeo records.



The Texas State Prison Rodeo took shape in the context of post-war American social and political culture in which there was great debate about individual responsibility and social welfare. From the New Deal through the Great Society, and still today, many Americans acknowledged the damage created by the excess of capitalism, yet questioned who was deserving of aid and who should provide it.<sup>118</sup> Post World War II, this rhetoric was particularly concerned with maintaining the role of the individual in a world threatened by communism. Many Americans felt that people should not be entitled to state aid simply by being citizens, but instead they should earn the right to social welfare.<sup>119</sup> Even as the New Frontier and the Great Society were launched in the name of modern uplift, politicians at times used the nostalgic image of the cowboy as central characters in a balancing act between community commitment and individualistic pursuits. The way to the future was through the past. Lyndon B. Johnson wrote in his presidential forward to a reprinting of a classic history of the Texas Rangers that “As we become a more populous and far more urbanized nation,” it was imperative to “preserve the equality of opportunity, the dignity of the individual, the commitment to justice for all that derive

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<sup>118</sup> The debates surrounding what types of social welfare certain people were entitled too were prolific. Jennifer Klein in *For All These Rights: Business, Labor, and the Shaping of America's Public-Private Welfare State* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003) examines the specific mixture of public and private welfare policy which arose out of the New Deal. While some populations, namely the elderly or long-term disabled people could receive state aid, most white able-bodied men received aid from employers. These debates were also deeply gendered and racialized, as Linda Gordon discusses in “Social Insurance and Public Assistance: The Influence of Gender in Welfare Thought in the U.S., 1890-1935,” *American Historical Review* 97 (Feb. 1992), 19-55. Most scholars trace the continuity of American liberalism through the mid-twentieth century, see for instance Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle, eds., *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989). Margot Canaday demonstrated how sexuality entered this debate in *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth Century America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009). Importantly, Jefferson Cowie and Nick Salvatore mark this time period as an aberration in American thought, noting the continuity in thought between the periods before and after the decline in American liberalism, “The Long Exception: Rethinking the Place of the New Deal in American History,” *International Labor and Working-class History* 74, no. 1 (2008), 3-32.

<sup>119</sup> Race was at the center of these stories of labor for self-salvation. By the late 1960s, black crime galvanized white voters and laid the foundation for a “law and order” campaign which used racially coded terms to urge for the reduction of welfare aid to undeserving individuals, see Mathew Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

from the spirit of the Frontier era. Our affluence, our abundance, our strength and power have not dulled the values experience taught us through the challenge of opening the Frontier.”<sup>120</sup> The mythic frontier of rugged individuals lived on through the values of equality of opportunity and not equality of status or wealth.

Rejuvenation and transformation in postwar America were grounded in a commitment to self-salvation. By the 1950s, many Americans took a major rightward turn on ideas about social welfare. Recipients of social welfare aid were increasingly associated with black mothers, culminating in the image of the grasping welfare queen, in contrast to the image of the desperate white widow of early generations. As governmental aid was increasingly seen as a handout to women choosing a life of poverty, new regulations like “employable-mothers” came to dominate welfare law. These local stipulations to Aid to Dependent Children programs demanded that poor women take suitable employment if proper care could be found for their children. The impulse to purge the ranks of welfare recipients of the “underserving” correlated with the desire to a “deserving” prisoner earn his own way by performing in a rodeo.<sup>121</sup> One had to earn the right to social welfare through proving an ethic of self-help.

The nation, the prison system, and the inmate all benefitted from convict cowboy’s violent acts of renewal as men became rehabilitated and therefore productive citizens. As Lyndon B. Johnson explained to an audience in Detroit in 1964, “Our war on poverty seeks to give the desperate and the downtrodden the skills and the experience that they need to lift

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<sup>120</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson, “Forward,” in Walter Prescott Webb, *The Texas Rangers: A Century of Frontier Defense*, second edition (USA: University of Texas Press, Austin, 1965).

<sup>121</sup> Eileen Boris, “On Cowboys and Welfare Queens: Independence, Dependence, and Interdependence at Home and Abroad,” *Journal of American Studies* 41, no. 3 (December 2007), 614. Also see, Ellen Reese, *Backlash Against Welfare Mothers: Past and Present* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 40.

themselves from poverty.”<sup>122</sup> By the time Kennedy’s New Frontier and Johnson’s Great Society of the 1960s were introduced, the narrative of up-by-your-bootstraps violent self-transformation that would shape the “equality of opportunity” instead of “equality of condition” rhetoric of these political reform packages had been thoroughly implemented through the Texas Prison Rodeo. As the prison system entered a new era of state-enforced reform, the ability of the convict cowboy to save anyone except himself rapidly dissipated. By the end of the 1960s, the rodeo turned from moral imperative to monetized spectacle in order to draw in customers.

### **Decline and Demise: Hard Money and the Spectacle of Financial Desperation**

In 1963, a new prison rodeo event was born. Dubbed “Hard Money,” organizers forwent the pretense that this competition was connected to a ranching past. A Bull Durham loose-leaf tobacco sack, made of cloth with a drawstring, was filled with fifty dollars and tied between “the horns of the meanest, mangiest, orneriest Brahma bull in the System.” Cowboys were then invited to flood the arena and “walk up to the bull, friendly-like, say a few kinds words, and remove the sack from the bull’s horns.” The attempts to snatch the bag of money from the bull induced hilarity. In 1963, it was reported that “when time was called on this event, the big, 2,000-pound monster was still trotting around the arena, observing the fallen heroes, with the sack still dangling securely between those horns!”<sup>123</sup> The advent of Hard Money marked the rodeo’s gradual shift in self-promotion from serving the community to serving the individual, and resulted in new heights of racialized and monetized violence against imprisoned men and women. This shift occurred amidst prison officials’ increasing resistance to new reforms and a

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<sup>122</sup> Lyndon B Johnson, “America Moving: Detroit,” June 26, 1964, reprinted in *The Great Society Reader: The Failure of American Liberalism*, edited by Marvin E. Gettleman and David Mermelstein (New York: Random House, 1967), 21.

<sup>123</sup> Special Rodeo Edition, *The Echo*, 1964.

growing movement by prisoners to change the system. Just as Johnson's Great Society was enshrining personal endeavors to find work and training as central to social uplift, the rodeo floundered amid its inability to truly make life better for incarcerated Texans.

The specter of money always haunted the rodeo. In 1939, the rodeo program assured readers that "the prizes are not held before the prisoners as an inducement to join the rodeo; rather they are given as reward for courageous and cooperative service."<sup>124</sup> In 1941, rodeo organizers included the waiver form prisoners were required to sign in the program, demonstrating to the audience that prisoners were both aware of the risks they took and that the taxpayer would not be held accountable for any significant injuries.<sup>125</sup> The convict cowboy was supposed to be a daredevil inspired by the challenge of unbeatable odds, not a desperate man lured into the arena by the prospect of a small amount of money to make life more bearable.

Yet, despite the assurances of the rodeo staff, imprisoned participants had no choice but to be motivated by the financial opportunities of the rodeo. Glen Gustafson, who would become one of the greatest proponents of the rodeo, was asked his first year participating in the rodeo why a man would risk his life for fifty dollars. A "poor misdirected city boy," Gustafson was cell mates with a well-known rodeoer named Lala, who convinced him to participate in the rodeo.<sup>126</sup> In 1965, Gustafson scrambled for the money saying, "I'm not a hero. [...] But, right now, I'm broke, so I guess I'll be out there again trying my luck for the money."<sup>127</sup> Prison officials too

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<sup>124</sup> "Rodeo Performers," Rodeo Program, 1939. Box 1998/038-404. Texas Prison Rodeo records.

<sup>125</sup> Rodeo Program, 1941. Box 1998/038-404. Texas Prison Rodeo records.

<sup>126</sup> Lala served as a clown for the rodeo after getting hurt while riding. *The Echo* portrayed him as a dedicated friend, a strong leader, and a tough guy. "Leadership comes natural for Lala Markovich," *The Echo*, 1966.

<sup>127</sup> Rodeo Program, 1965. Box 1998/038-404. Texas Prison Rodeo records. Gustafson became one of the largest proponents of the rodeo, urging people to see through the "rough-tough-convict-cowboy" and the "vener of humor" to see "what these men really are and what the rodeo means." In 1973, the winner of Hard Money joked that he had

equated a good cowboy with his ability to earn money, awarding the Top Hand championship to the cowboy with the most winnings over the four Sundays. Hard Money simply exposed imprisoned men's reasons for risking their lives in much starker terms than pride, the thrill of the challenge, or even boredom.

The event also took the rodeo beyond the realm of Texas's imagined ranching past. The Chariot Race or the Mad Scramble, which had once been dubbed a "madman's dream of chilling confusion," had previously served as the prison rodeo's most vicious trials.<sup>128</sup> Rodeo organizers purposefully made these events more dangerous than free-world equivalents. Audiences also viewed these events as sources of humor. There was still a degree of connection between racing or riding animals and ranch life. Organizers deemed roping, which had previously made up a large portion of the rodeo program and had the deepest connection to ranch labor, too technical and uninteresting for audiences and replaced roping events with free-world, female barrel racing in 1961.<sup>129</sup> Hard Money epitomized the rodeo's turn towards new forms of spectacle which only tangentially claimed to be about Texas's cowboy past. By enacting its name, Hard Money bypassed any pretense at revealing the ranching capabilities of winners, and focused the audience's attention on a brutal race for cash.

The purely monetary nature of this event also solidified the racialization of the bumbling, greedy inmate in contrast to the talented convict cowboy. As the rodeo continued to change in the 1960s, Redshirts came to take a greater and greater role in the action. Redshirts were a group of roughly forty men who did not participate in the standard rodeo events, like bull riding or

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never had so much hassle getting money on the streets. Rodeo Program, 1973. Box 1998/038-405. Texas Prison Rodeo records.

<sup>128</sup> "The Mad Scramble: A Madman's Dream of Chilling Confusion," *The Echo*, Special Rodeo Edition, 1957.

<sup>129</sup> Rodeo Program, 1961. Box 1998/038-404. Texas Prison Rodeo records.

bronc riding. Dressed in bright red, which people joked helped anger the bulls, these men participated in the most dangerous events. Unlike the cowboy convicts, still predominately white men, Redshirts were almost exclusively African- or Mexican-American men. Unlike the cowboys who had “earned” their cowboy stripes through individual efforts, news reports portrayed redshirts as an indistinguishable mass who gave pleasure through their “slapstick” antics of chasing and being chased by enraged animals for the sake of money.<sup>130</sup> This spectacle of the desperate inmate was amplified in 1979 when the rules changed to allow the audience to donate money to the tobacco sack.<sup>131</sup> In the 1960s, a certain amount of work would guarantee a certain amount of money; by the 1980s, it was the luck of the draw. One might strike it rich with over a thousand dollars, or one might have risked life and limb only to be left holding ten dollars.<sup>132</sup>

The creation and expansion of the Redshirt performer’s role reintroduced longstanding questions about the authenticity of prison rodeo participants. From the beginning of the rodeo, organizers had emphasized the convict cowboys’ legitimacy in rodeoing. In 1938, convict cowboys were lauded as having free-world experience as “cow-hands, rope-twirlers, trick-riders,” and even as rodeo contestants.<sup>133</sup> Though Albert Moore, who supervised the operation of the rodeo for thirty-five years, was not above having a mix of “tenderfeet” alongside the old-hands, he generally encouraged familiarity with stock. In the yearly call for applications, Moore

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<sup>130</sup> “Prison Rodeo Rated with Best, 47 Stiches for Winner,” *New York Times*, October 22, 1973.

<sup>131</sup> Rodeo Program, 1979. Box 1998/038-405. Texas Prison Rodeo records.

<sup>132</sup> Some men who began as Redshirts eventually became cowboys. Also, Mr. Redshirt was an award given to the top performing Redshirt during the 1970s, see Rodeo Program, 1973. Box 1998/035-405. Texas Prison Rodeo records.

<sup>133</sup> “Roy White to Try for First Place in Rodeo,” *The Echo*, August 1938.

asked men to “stick to the grandstands” if they were entirely inexperienced.<sup>134</sup> “Drugstore cowboy[s]” were warned away from trying out.<sup>135</sup> After Moore’s retirement in the late 1960s, the new rodeo managers embraced the idea of the novice dueling with a bull. The Texas Prison System itself was touting its move away from agrarian labor, focusing more on industrial production at the Walls, and therefore labeling their inmates as experienced stockmen no longer seemed reasonable or even desirable.<sup>136</sup> By serving as expendable fodder for unnecessary injuries, men of color, often hailing from urban areas, became the backbone of the entertainment juggernaut of the Texas State Prison Rodeo in the last stage of its development.

The popularity of Hard Money sparked gendered changes in the rodeo program as well. Twin additions to the rodeo included the free-world competition for Miss Texas State Prison Rodeo, created in 1969, and the incarcerated women’s cowgirl competitions, started in 1972. While organizers reserved the rodeo queen competition for white sorority girls and the daughters of prominent ranches, they designed the cowgirl events for the participation of women from the Goree prison farm. Finally able to make the rodeo their own, Goree inmates enthusiastically joined in the rodeo fun. The women’s events, however, operated as pieces of sexualized humiliation. The women wore tennis skirts and, instead of doing standard rodeo events, they caught pigs, chased calves, and rode donkeys. In contrast to the assumption that untrained men could ride bucking horses, organizers did not allow either experienced or inexperienced women on the backs of running horses. Racialized as well as gendered, idealized images of Goree cowgirls were unrelenting white, while the women who actually participated in the rodeo were

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<sup>134</sup> “Rider Applications Now Being Accepted,” *The Echo*, Special Rodeo Edition, 1959. As of the 1940s, applications were first received in written form. These were sorted and men deemed to have promised would be invited to the Walls to compete in a tryouts for a place in the rodeo program.

<sup>135</sup> “Tryouts will be Held September 20th,” *The Echo*, Special Rodeo Edition, 1953.

<sup>136</sup> “Growth of Prison Industry,” *The Echo*, January 1965.

most often black. Black women in short skirts, caked in mud and manure, stuffing greased pigs into gunny sacks provided novelty to the rodeo.<sup>137</sup>

As the rodeo changed form, so too did the narrative surrounding it. The individual replaced the community in the promotion of the Texas State Prison Rodeo. Prior to the 1960s, the rodeo had been the means to build a “model prison system” that could “rehabilitate its inmates so that they become law-abiding, honest citizens after they are released from prison.”<sup>138</sup> While the competitive spirit of individual cowboys had always been praised, the community had still functioned as a vital aspect of the rodeo’s narrative. By 1978, however, the rodeo program announced, “Individualism seems to be the name of the game—an age old western frontier ethic still prevails. It’s as if the prison rodeo cowboy is saying to himself and the world, ‘I’m an individual; I am what I can show people I can do.’”<sup>139</sup> Hard Money was described by one rodeo press release as, “Every man for himself.”<sup>140</sup> While in the mid-twentieth century, rugged men were thought to be able to save a larger community through their individual efforts, by the late-twentieth century, individualism was increasingly for the sake of the individual.

The shift in rodeo rhetoric was directly linked to the stubborn resistance to inmate-initiated change within the prison system. In 1972, David Resendez Ruiz submitted a handwritten petition stating that the abuses of the Texas Department of Corrections, including

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<sup>137</sup> Female participation was often glossed as a feminist display of equality. The 1973 program detailed how the women “stole the show” and “score[d] one—maybe two—for Women’s Lib.” Rodeo Program, 1973. Box 1998/038-405. Texas Prison Rodeo records. Women’s participation ended in the late 1970s because of the reorganization of the prison system.

<sup>138</sup> “We’re Going Places,” *Huntsville Item*, September 29, 1949.

<sup>139</sup> Fred Burke, “The Cowboys,” Rodeo Program, 1978. Box 1998/038-405. Texas Prison Rodeo records.

<sup>140</sup> “Texas Prison Rodeo,” undated press write up, circa 1975-1979. Clippings about the rodeo, 1931-1986-2. Box 1998/038-404 Texas Prison Rodeo records.



physical assaults by guards, overcrowded housing, lack of medical care, and unsafe labor conditions, violated his constitutional rights.<sup>141</sup> By 1974, Ruiz had gathered enough support from other incarcerated men to file a class action suit against the department. In 1979, the US District Court for the Southern District of Texas ruled that the department indeed practiced cruel and unusual punishment.<sup>142</sup> *Ruiz v. Estelle* would go on to have far-reaching effects for the everyday lives of imprisoned Texans. It mandated the hiring of an expanded guard force, the building of many more housing structures, and the end to the “building tender” system that used some inmates to brutally enforce labor among their peers. Particularly, *Ruiz* threatened to move Texas Prisons away from isolated plantations and towards more urban, industrialized areas with a new focus on treatment instead of work. The social agitation of the 1960s through 1980s made apparent that the self-reformations of the previous era had not ushered in an equal society, in terms of opportunity or status.

Unlike the Ellis Plan, Ruiz-based changes were not prompted by external criticism but instead by internal, prisoner-based activism. These reforms were fought at every stage by prison officials and therefore could not be claimed as self-salvation but instead as coerced conversion by unappreciative inmates and an interfering state. It was the actions of selfish inmates which were thought to ruin other inmates’ potential to save themselves through labor.

The prison rodeo in Texas ended amid criticisms and scandal, seen as a relic of a prison past best forgotten. The rodeo drew in fewer and fewer spectators due to declining interest, a reduction in advertising donations, persistent bad weather, and several energy crises that

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<sup>141</sup> Ruiz’s filing of this suit was an arduous task, having to work in secret on his document in fear of reprisals. Filed in June 1972, this became civil action 2253.

<sup>142</sup> For a full description of *Ruiz* and TDC’s failure to implement the changes imprisoned men fought so hard to achieve see Perkinson, *Texas Tough*, 270-287.

encouraged people to stay closer to home for entertainment.<sup>143</sup> The rodeo also garnered extensive criticism for its exploitative use of prisoners, especially as injury rates were more widely publicized. Correlating with new demands to protect American citizens from unnecessary bodily harm in areas like human research, more and more detractors of the rodeo made their voices heard. Money issues were also central to the rodeo's demise. State legislators who opposed the rodeo as inhumane passed a law that restricted the Department of Corrections' ability to borrow money from the Education and Recreation Fund to initially pay for the rodeo and then replace it with the profits. In years that a deficit existed, which happened in the mid-1980s, the department was no longer legally allowed to make up the difference. These changes to the law were perceived as necessary after it was discovered some of the rodeo profits were actually being used to build new administrative buildings.<sup>144</sup> In 1986, with shrinking profits from dwindling crowds, and its squandering by employees, the Texas Department of Corrections had neither the money nor the unpaid labor force to tear down and rebuild its condemned rodeo stadium.

The disappearance of a moral impetus for the rodeo ultimately rendered the gladiatorial spectacle of the Texas State Prison Rodeo void and the heroics of the convict cowboy impotent. The allure of the rodeo diminished as audiences were no longer asked to support the redemption of society's sinners, but were instead felt implicated in entertainment at the expense of imprisoned people. Audiences and prison officials could no longer cloak themselves in moral motivations by attending the rodeo and looked to other arenas for entertainment. The rugged

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<sup>143</sup> "A Look Back at a Texas Tradition," *Clock Wise*, November 1986. Clippings about the rodeo, 1931-1986-2. Box 1998/038-404. Texas Prison Rodeo records.

<sup>144</sup> Mark Zienman, "At the Prison Rodeo, Texas Outlaws Earn Loot the Hard Way," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 21, 1985.

individualism of the 1980s reasserted the cowboy as the icon of American independence and rendered him incompatible with the dependent nature of incarcerated and aberrant men.

Yet, despite the growing concern for the protection of prisoners and disdain for corruption within the prison system in Texas, prison rodeo did not die out nationally. Other states, mainly in the South and the West, drew inspiration from Texas and have kept the tradition alive by undertaking the performance of the outlaw cowboy.<sup>145</sup> The Angola Prison Rodeo, held at the Louisiana State Penitentiary, began in 1964 and is still held annually.<sup>146</sup> Dubbed the “Wildest Show in the South,” Angola’s rodeo features events similar to Texas’s Hard Money. Convict poker, for instance, invites several men to sit at a table while a bull is released into the arena. The last man sitting at the table wins. This rodeo generates almost half a million dollars from the fifty thousand people who buy inmate art and handicrafts, pose for wanted posters, and cheer at the rodeo every year. The spectacle of prison rodeo, which capitalizes on the financial desperation of incarcerated men and women, has not so much withered and died as relocated to more fertile ground.

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<sup>145</sup> The Oklahoma State Penitentiary Prison Rodeo, which ran from 1940 until 2010, drew inspiration from Texas during its heyday. The Oklahoma prison rodeo closed its doors in 2010 because of low staffing and the disrepair of its stadium.

<sup>146</sup> See Bergner, *God of the Rodeo* and Melissa Schrift, “The Angola Prison Rodeo: Inmate Cowboys and Institutional Tourism,” *Ethnology* 43, no. 4 (Autumn 2004): 331-344.

## Chapter 3

### Too Legit to Quit: Gay Rodeo, Camp, and the Performance of Gender in Reagan's America

#### Slapping Leather

Greg Olson, future seven-year all-around champion of gay rodeo, was disappointed with the first National Reno Gay Rodeo he attended in 1977 because “it wasn’t anything like the normal rodeos we always went to and watched back home.”<sup>1</sup> Raised on a Nebraska farm, Olson was annoyed with the emphasis put on campy fun. Greased-pig chasing and wild cow milking seemed more popular than the serious events, like bull riding and calf roping. Only as the annual National Reno Gay Rodeo gave way to a full-blown circuit with the International Gay Rodeo Association (IGRA) in the 1980s with standardized rules and paying members was gay rodeo in Olson’s opinion “taken more seriously by competitors.” After Olson won five consecutive years of all-around titles from 1987-1993, other members of IGRA complained that gay rodeo was becoming too professional and no longer open for amateurs. “We do take it seriously,” Olson admitted but insisted, “we still make a lot of fun of it.” The interplay between the gay rodeoers’ desire to be joyful and need to be serious exposed much greater debates about the role of play and fantasy in American masculinity and femininity in the late twentieth century. Gay rodeo, from the mid-1970s to the late-1990s, became a space in which America’s growing need for hardline, authentic masculinity was openly debated and rendered visible to an audience.

In the late twentieth century, cowboyness was a popular trend in fashion, politics, and popular culture. By 1976, Ronald Reagan was posing for pre-campaign photo shoots on his California ranch and, during his presidency, sent out cards featuring a pop-up image of himself

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<sup>1</sup> Allen Kalchik, “IGRA Finals All Around Cowboy: Greg Olson,” *Roundup*, Spring 1994, 16-17.

in western wear standing in front of the White House, with the Hollywood hills behind.<sup>2</sup> In 1979, Ralph Lauren made twenty-five million dollars on his first year of a new western wear collection.<sup>3</sup> The television series *Dallas* ran for over a decade, with *Time* reporting in 1981 that over forty million American viewers watched the show every week.<sup>4</sup> This explosion of cowboy masculinity was predicated upon the idea that most white American men had the ability to adopt and discard a cowboy identity at any time, because they were the inheritors of a uniquely American form of masculinity. In 1989, *Esquire* ran a Ralph Lauren western wear ad declaring, “You work in a city. You live in a suburb. [...] But if you’re an American male, buried somewhere deep in your soul is a little bit of cowboy.”<sup>5</sup> Playing cowboy was framed as an expression of true Americanness, and cowboyism was an identity open to most white men.

The reassertion of cowboyism was directly linked to a growing movement to reclaim American masculinity after decades of supposed effeminization. Exemplifying the masculine angst of the era, in 1980, *Esquire* celebrated the death of the “soft-line” days of the 1960s and early 1970s. The cover featured an image of John Wayne with the caption, “Somewhere the

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<sup>2</sup> Mary McGrory, “Reagan Rides High in Saddle at California Ranch,” *Boston Globe*, June 2, 1976. President Ronald Reagan to Tennessee Williams, no date, Tennessee Williams Papers, 1920-1983, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, Box 31, Folder 1. Thanks to Dr. Jacqueline O'Connor for bringing this to my attention.

<sup>3</sup> “High-bred Jeans,” *Women’s Wear Daily*, June 12, 1979.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Corliss, “Season of the Night-soap,” *Time*, February 9, 1981; James Willwerth, “TV’s Dallas: Whodunit?” *Time*, August 11, 1980. *Dallas* was so popular, political candidates used characters as campaign fodder. When the main character J.R. was shot in the 1981 season finale, politicians of both parties attempted to claim a piece of the primetime drama. Jimmy Carter told Texan supporters, “I came to Dallas to find out confidentially who shot J.R. If any of you could let me know that, I could finance the whole campaign this fall.” More directly, Ronald Reagan’s campaign buttons declared that “a Democrat Shot J.R.” James N. Gregory argues in “Southernizing the American Working Class: Post-war Episodes of Regional and Class Transformation,” *Labor History* 39 (May 1998) that western wear was a part of the larger spread of Southern culture, but I would not include Carter as an influential southern/western persona. For a labor perspective on the masculinity crisis in the 1970s, see Joshua Freeman, “Hardhats: Construction Workers, Manliness, and the 1970 Pro-War Demonstrations,” *Journal of Social History* 26, no.4 (Summer 1993), 725.

<sup>5</sup> “Western Standards,” *Esquire*, September 1989, 180-199.

Duke is Smiling: A Guide to the New Hard-line Culture.” The cowboy, symbolized by the cowboy-performer John Wayne, was the definitive mark of American masculinity, independence, and dominance. The “soft-line era” was overly sensitive, “We trembled, we shook, we wore clogs.” But “people didn’t want a president saying that he was having a crisis-of-confidence.” Thus, in rejection of the effeminate years of protest and sensitivity, Reagan was ushering in “Tough-guyism” which held the “hard line.”<sup>6</sup> White male America supposedly needed to man up in the face of feminism, Civil Rights, and the Cold War. While the fantastical quality of the West was widely acknowledged by the 1970s, authenticity was deeply vested in make-believe cowboys in politics, the fashion industry, movies, and mainstream rodeo. In many ways, the performative qualities of masculinity were closed to debate and rendered invisible in these arenas.

This contest over masculinity was prevalent in the gay male community as well. Gay male subcultures celebrating masculinity had developed rapidly after 1945 and from the late 1960s, gay men felt a growing pressure to achieve stereotypical physical markers of masculinity. By 1982, books like *Real Men Don’t Eat Quiche* and *The Butch Manual* gained popularity among gay men, and the term “straight acting” began to gain traction as a desirable trait. Leathermen, bears, and cowboys became sexual icons for gay men fighting against the “assumed effeminacy” stigma of homosexuality.<sup>7</sup> This cult of the masculine operated within gay rodeo, especially as female gay rodeoers were often left out of the cultural image of IGRA.

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<sup>6</sup> Peter W. Kaplan, “The End of the Soft Line,” *Esquire*, April 1980, 44, 41.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Hennen discusses other gay subcultures’ fight against assumed effeminacy, namely leather and bears. See *Faeries, Bears, and Leathermen: Men in Community Queering the Masculine* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2008).

Gay rodeo illuminated the deep anxieties erupting around masculinity and play in the late twentieth century. Playing out the fantasy of being a cowboy was strictly bounded by notions of tradition in terms of race, gender, and sexuality. Gay rodeoers faced considerable homophobia as the public screeched, “they’re making a fiasco of the cowboy [...] They’re making fun of our heritage.”<sup>8</sup> Yet because of their assumed transgressiveness and place at the edge of the country western world, IGRA was uniquely positioned to attempt to stage fun in order to legitimize themselves as gay people and perform tradition in order to legitimate themselves as cowboys. Members of IGRA celebrated hypermasculinity as a way to prove to the larger public that gay rodeo was an authentic, traditional, and professional-style rodeo, even as IGRA actively used “camp” as a way to promote itself as inclusive, caring, and, most importantly, enjoyable. As scholar Sara Warner has demonstrated in her seminal work, *Acts of Gaiety: LGBT Performance and the Politics of Pleasure*, frivolity is “an important but neglected political affect,” which can “create a pleasurable and empowering experience out of an event or situation that is hateful or painful.”<sup>9</sup> Fun, or gaiety, was the venue through which some gay rodeoers marked themselves as gay.

Specifically, three unique camp rodeo events were sanctioned and standardized by IGRA at its founding in 1985. Goat dressing featured two contestants wrestling a pair of jockey-style underwear onto a stubborn goat. Steer decorating, as its name implies, involved one team member holding a steer while another ties a ribbon to its tail without getting kicked or trampled. Lastly, wild drag racing included three team members, one male, one female, and one member in female-style drag. The male and female team members hold the steer as the “drag” mounts and

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<sup>8</sup> “Churchill officials move to block gay rodeo,” *Reno Gazette Journal*, October 20, 1988.

<sup>9</sup> Sara Warner, *Acts of Gaiety: LGBT Performance and the Politics of Pleasure* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 5 and 11.

holds on to the steer until its feet cross the finish line. Performed on foot, with little experience needed, these events were considered to be the most entertaining of the day's events. Camp was consistently linked to why gay rodeo was "funner" and more inclusive than straight rodeo.<sup>10</sup> Seriousness and fun became a gendered spectrum in gay rodeo, with individual rodeoers attempting to navigate and narrate this duality.

Gay rodeo, in its own debates on the performance of hypermasculinity and hyperfemininity, exposed the fuzziness between the fun and the serious, the authentic and the inauthentic, the real and the fantastical, and the masculine and the feminine. Competing desires to be both authentic cowboys and a gaily inclusive community problematized the separation between authenticity and play in the performance of gender and sexuality in the late twentieth century. Based on archival research in the International Gay Rodeo Association's institutional archive, public observation research, and media analysis, this chapter argues that the central tension between the genuine masculine and the artificial feminine seen in gay rodeo uniquely exposed and troubled the assumption of authenticity in American masculinity in the Age of Reagan. While previous studies of 1980s gay rodeos have emphasized its resistance to hegemonic masculinity, I argue that this complicated space both authenticated and threatened established masculinities through the spectacularization of gendered cowboy performance. To men like Ralph Lauren and Ronald Reagan playing masculine was inherently more authentic than playing feminine because it was a recovery of a cowboy birthright instead of a performance of an external other. Gay rodeo, which invited cowboys to play feminine as well as hypermasculine, troubled American masculinity not because it threatened to overthrow serious cowboy tradition with frivolous gay fun, but because it threatened to publically demonstrate the

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<sup>10</sup> *Camp*, the rodeo issue, 2010.



frivolity of seriousness in formations of gender and sexuality for white American men and women. Americans could play cowboy in the political arena and fashion world, yet gay cowboys who wore dresses threatened to expose all cowboyness as a gendered performance.

In this chapter, I will first map out the history and social position of gay rodeo in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s. Next, I will argue that a tension between seriousness and fun characterized gay rodeoers' narratives as they attempted to construct themselves as both cowboys and members of the gay community. I then illuminate the gendered aspects of this tension by analyzing the hypermasculine impulses of gay rodeo and the ways in which it contributed to a larger culture of cowboy fantasy. In contrast, I will then scrutinize how camp, and the debates surrounding it, constructed fun as inherently gay but also as inherently feminine, and therefore external to the West. Lastly, I conclude by arguing that gay rodeo's threat to the gendered order was its unique ability to use hypermasculine seriousness and effeminate fun to undo strict notions of gender categorization and performance.

### **Orgy of Sin/Orgy of Brutality: Forty Years of Gay Rodeo**

Over the forty years of its existence, gay rodeo has had to fight for a safe space to inhabit and expand. First, gay men and women had to establish gay rodeo as a full-fledged organization. Then the association had to build membership through interconnections with other forms of gay organizing. Lastly, gay rodeoers had to protect this space from those who felt they had no place in the cowboy community and those who felt they had no place in the gay community. Born at the dawn of the Age of Reagan, surviving the AIDS epidemic, and persisting into a new century, gay rodeo's birth and expansion were fueled by questions of what it meant to be masculine and gay in America.

Gay rodeo got its start as a fundraiser for local charities. The first gay rodeo was organized in 1976 by a Reno businessman named Phil Ragsdale. At the time, Ragsdale was serving as Emperor I of Reno's Imperial Court System, a philanthropic organization that was first established in San Francisco's drag bars by Jose Sarria in 1965.<sup>11</sup> As Emperor, Ragsdale proposed hosting an amateur gay rodeo in order to raise money for the local senior center and, later, the Muscular Dystrophy Association. He was finally able to secure the country fairgrounds for October 1976 and then proceeded to round up "wild" stock because no one would contract rodeo animals to him. Despite these initial struggles, by 1981, the National Reno Gay Rodeo had become an annual weekend-long festival accompanied by a parade and a plethora of cowboy-themed parties. Over the first five years, donations for the Muscular Dystrophy Association raised at the rodeo surged from a couple hundred dollars to over forty-thousand dollars per year. Attendance reached 10,000 spectators and Joan Rivers grand marshalled the parade.<sup>12</sup> Growing out of a longer tradition of gay civic engagement and coinciding with a major surge in country western trendiness, Reno's early gay rodeos provided participants with a place to line dance, cruise, and raise money for charity.

As the annual western celebration drew together gay men and women wanting to rodeo, pressure to create a new rodeo circuit and standardize rules increased. Slowly, dedicated contingents from Denver, Houston, and Los Angeles added their own gay rodeos. Due to the

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<sup>11</sup> See Michael Robert Gorman, *The Empress Is a Man: Stories from the Life of José Sarria* (New York: Haworth Press, 1998) for a history of the Imperial Court System. The courts spread throughout the country, with annual elections of a city's empress and emperor.

<sup>12</sup> The history of gay rodeo has been laboriously reconstructed in large part through the efforts of Frank Harrell. His website, [gayrodeohistory.org](http://gayrodeohistory.org) is a phenomenal resource for archival material and historical summaries. Also see "Ride 'Em Cowboy: Reno's Gay Rodeo," *In Touch For Men* 38 (1978); John Calendo, "Gay Rodeo: Wild Time in Reno," *In Touch For Men* 51 (1980); "National Reno Gay Rodeo: An Editors View," *Skin* 5 1 (1983); Charles Farber, "National Reno Gay Rodeo and In the Saddle," *The Advocate*, September 16, 1982; "Reno Gay Rodeo Draws Big Crowd," *Reno Gazette Journal*, August 5, 1979.

increasing difficulty and expense of travel to these new rodeos, many rodeoers felt that rules should be fairly applied and should adhere to the standards of “real” rodeo.

Finally, in 1985, the National Reno Gay Rodeo folded, prompting gay rodeo enthusiasts in Colorado, Texas, and California to establish a new umbrella organization, the International Gay Rodeo Association (IGRA). This organization drew together the local associations by managing membership, seeking large sponsorships, sanctioning rodeos, reviewing formal complaints, and standardizing all rodeo rules. The association rapidly grew, gaining 8,000 members by the early 1990s, over four times the size of the Professional Women’s Rodeo Association.<sup>13</sup> At its peak, IGRA hosted over twenty annual rodeos.<sup>14</sup> In the last thirty years, roughly two million dollars has been raised through IGRA for a variety of charities, notably AIDS research and care. The product of a particular historical moment that drew together a crisis in masculinity, a boom in western chic, and the gay equal rights movement, today IGRA is now slowly declining in both the number of participants and rodeos. Importantly, the tone of gay rodeo increasingly emphasized the “serious” business of rodeo as it moved from an offshoot event of the Imperial Court to an association in its own right.

Even as it became a self-sufficient organization, gay rodeo depended on the institution of the gay bar to grow its membership. The ability of gay cowboys to organize, form associations,

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<sup>13</sup> Mary Lou LeCompte, “Women’s Professional Rodeo Association,” Texas Historical Society, *Handbook of Texas*.

<sup>14</sup> The first gay rodeo was held in Reno, Nevada November 3, 1976, by 1981 Utah, California, and Colorado had their own gay rodeo associations. In 1983, Denver hosted their first gay rodeo. In 1986, IGRA hosted its first official royalty competition and in 1987 its first dance competition. In 1990, an All People’s Rodeo held by Tri-State International Gay Rodeo, included events like Stud Decorating, Wild Cowboy Riding, and Fastest Blow Job. No subsequent rodeos held by this association. Between 1991 and 1994, the number of rodeos almost double. This trend ceased in 1996, which was the first year to cancel instead of add rodeos to the circuit. In 2013 there were more defunct associations ones left in operation. Once again I would like give credit to Cowboy Frank Harrell for his tireless work. This timeline was created in part based on dates he provides. Other key dates came from materials in the *International Gay Rodeo Association Institutional Archives*, 1982-2009, Autry National Center, Los Angeles; MSA.26. Hereafter this archive will be referred to a simply *IGRA*, Autry National Center.

and plan rodeos in the early 1980s was due in large part to the growing presence of gay country western bars.<sup>15</sup> Many gay bars in western cities, like Denver, recognized the profitability of cowboy chic and changed over from disco to country western in the early 1980s, especially with the help of IGRA members. For instance, after initially coming out as a gay man, Wayne Jakino both helped found IGRA and helped change a disco-club, Charlie's of Denver, to country western.<sup>16</sup> Likewise, bars like Floyd's, the Barn, the Bunkhouse, and the Rawhide provided the gossip networks, dance floors, and alcohol necessary to bring crowds out to party, if not to rodeo themselves. One reporter claimed, "A first-timer at a gay rodeo will find that the parties surrounding the event may well be his greatest adventure. [...] Whatever your choice, leather Levi disco - piano bar - country/western dance-bar, all will be running full tilt and the tone is total party."<sup>17</sup> Indeed, throughout the rodeo's history, bars that were not primarily country western consistently catered to gay cowboys when the lucrative rodeo was in town. Often these bars used sexualized cowboy imagery in order to temporarily transform their image and draw in rodeo customers. One advertisement from the Venture Bar in Tucson in 1996 shows a stern, muscular, and shirtless cowboy using a lasso as surrogate penis—presumably to "rope in" customers—and the tagline promises a night of "Groovin, Cruisin, and Boozin."<sup>18</sup> Deeply

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<sup>15</sup> Nancy Achilles notes the fundamental role gay bars played in the development of gay subcultures throughout the twentieth century. Bars provided both opportunity and legitimacy to subcultural interactions. This role, however, has been challenged in the past 20 years by the growing presence of the internet. See, Nancy Achilles, "The Development of the Homosexual Bar as an Institution," *Sexual Deviance*, John Gagnon and William Simon, eds. (Harper & Row: New York, 1967).

<sup>16</sup> *Quest*, 7th Annual Rocky Mountain Regional Rodeo program, IGRA, Autry National Center, Box 3, 1989.

<sup>17</sup> John Toss, "Nightlife: Charlie's Denver," *First Hand Events*, souvenir issue of gay rodeo (1989). IGRA incorporated this bar-centricity by encouraging large pub crawls after official rodeo events had ended for the night. For instance, the program for the 1983 inaugural Rocky Mountain Regional Gay Rodeo, held in Denver, included a full page map of the city with each participating gay bar's logo and location displayed. 1st Annual Rocky Mountain Regional Rodeo program, IGRA, Autry National Center, Box 1, 1983.

<sup>18</sup> 1996 Saguaro Regional Rodeo Program. 1982-2009, IGRA, Autry National Center, Box 30, 1996.

connected to other forms of gay organizing and entertaining, gay rodeo actively used bars and the sexual culture surrounding them to build new communities.

Indeed, gay rodeos forged new spaces which brought together varied constellations of gay identified people. The dependence of the rodeo on bars was partly due to the fact that these spaces brought together an assortment of gay groups. Charlie's in Denver provided a meeting space not only for the Colorado Gay Rodeo Association, but also the Denver Country Cloggers and the Mile High Squares. Thus the diverse and intersecting social world of gay rodeo continued to expand through the 1980s and 1990s. By 1987, gay rodeos included an official dance competition, with gay square-dancers, cloggers, and two-steppers becoming ever-more involved. In 1990, the dates of the Rocky Mountain Regional Gay Rodeo were shifted in order to coincide with a week of Pride Fest activities, as were several other local rodeos. This not only gave the rodeo a boost in attendance, but helped assert IGRA's place in an often alienating gay urban culture.

Similarly, by 1990, IGRA was considering participating in the Gay Games in Vancouver, British Columbia. Started in San Francisco in 1982 as a way to promote inclusion and encourage athletic participation among the LGBT community, the Vancouver Gay Games drew thousands of competitors and spectators worldwide.<sup>19</sup> Sporting culture, along with ideals of "western heritage," made up an integral aspect of gay rodeo culture. These junctures of shared interest with other gay organizations, including dance, politics, and athletics, helped draw in both

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<sup>19</sup> Carline Symons notes in her work *The Game Games: A History* (London, Routledge, 2010) that the Vancouver Games marked a turning point as the event nearly tripled in size, though many of the organizers remained fairly conservative in their exclusion of some of the more radical contingents of the LGBTQ community. Judy Davidson, "The Necessity of Queer Shame for Gay Pride," in *Sport, Sexualities and Queer/Theory*, ed Jayne Caudwell (London, Routledge, 2006) also notes that the inability to use the word Olympics, like contestations over "real" rodeo, continues to define the culture of the games. Also see Patricia Nell Warren's *Lavender Locker Room: 3000 Years of Great Athletes Whose Sexual Orientation was Different* (London: Wildcat Press, 2006) for information on gay sports and gay rodeo in sporting culture.

dedicated members and casual attendees and kept widening the space of gay rodeo. To many gay rodeoers, rodeo was the hub of a much larger wheel of gay life and activities.

As gay rodeo grew, however, it also existed as a contested space between both the political right and the political left. Shaping gay rodeoers' desires to be accepted into mainstream cowboy culture and a larger gay community was the rejection of the very notion of "gay cowboys" from all political perspectives. Blatant homophobia was the most recognizable form of exclusion. As one Alberta professional cowboy claimed, "Well, I've rodeo-ed for 25 years and I don't think I've ever come across a queer cowboy at a real rodeo."<sup>20</sup> Hate mail was often sent to IGRA, spewing slurs like, "I can't believe you fudgepackers think you can ride bulls when you can't even ride a woman. [...] Rodeo is a sport for men and now you are bastardizing it with this sick bullshit. BURN IN HELL FAGS."<sup>21</sup> From 1975 to 1985, the National Reno Gay Rodeo was plagued with everything from slurs to refusals to rent stock. For instance, in 1981, Commissioner Belie Williams of Washoe County, Nevada, attempted to stop the Reno Gay Rodeo because he believed that it only encouraged a gay "lifestyle" and gave "unfavorable publicity" for the city. Lieutenant Governor Myron Leavitt of Nevada threw in his support for the commissioner, stating, "I'm strongly opposed to queers using public property."<sup>22</sup> While the 1981 rodeo went on as scheduled, several gay rodeos were cancelled or had to move venues in the late 1980s and early 1990s.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Celeste McGovern, "Homo on the Range," *Alberta Report*, July 18, 1994.

<sup>21</sup> Email received by IGRA, 1998, *IGRA*, Autry National Center, Box 47, 1997-2000.

<sup>22</sup> This is in contrast to many officials who wrote letters of support to the gay rodeo, thanking the organization for bringing business to the city. These officials still refused to attend, however. Rodeny Food, "Commissioner's fight against Gay Rodeo 'dead,'" *Nevada State Journal*, 9 June 1981, *IGRA*, Autry National Center, Box 6, Church Files, 1981.

<sup>23</sup> For instance, in 1988 the IGRA Finals Rodeo, which was scheduled to take place outside Reno at a private arena, was cancelled after the local DA filed an injunction against the rodeo because of supposed public concerns about

Furthermore, the media's attempts to put gay rodeoers on display was often a more insidious form of degradation. During the 1980 National Reno Gay Rodeo, Phil Ragsdale invited a film crew from NBC's reality talk show, "Real People." Known for often treating its subjects as freaks, one gay reporter found the presence of film crews insulting and exploitative, saying, "We had paid to come here, paid to enter and then upon entering were told we had just joined the circus."<sup>24</sup> After the founding of IGRA, members had the choice to remain anonymous by providing an alias. Photos of the rodeoers were allowed only with express permission from the individual and most community advertising was limited to a network of gay bars, allied organizations, and the gay press.<sup>25</sup> Yet, another media crisis arose in 1993 when members were

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public health, traffic, dust, and fire safety. The decision to ban the rodeo was immediately appealed by the ACLU to the Nevada Supreme Court but was upheld due to unexplainable clerical errors. The arena was staked out by police officers the entire weekend to ensure no rodeo was held. All vehicles and individuals seen entering or leaving the private property were photographed and videotaped. See, *Quest*, 7th Annual Rocky Mountain Regional Rodeo program. IGRA, Autry National Center, Box 3, 1989. "County Wants to Stop Gay Rodeo," *Lahontan Valley News*, Oct 20, 1988; "Churchill officials move to block gay rodeo," *Reno Gazette Journal*, October 20, 1988; "Last Minute Appeal Denied," *Lahontan Valley News*, October 22, 1988; "Tense Aftermath to Banned Gay Rodeo," *Reno Gazette Journal*, October 20, 1988.

Similarly, in 1991, the *Wichita Eagle* published a friendly article on plans for the first Kansas gay rodeo. IGRA President Linn Copeland stated that while local support had been necessary only a few years earlier, membership in the organization was strong enough that more conservative, rural areas could host events and members would travel to them. She also mentioned that she wouldn't be surprised if controversy surrounded the rodeo. Unfortunately, Copeland underestimated the need for local support or at least tolerance. This article ultimately incited other organizations, like the American Quarter Horse Association, to pressure the Penny Kaye DeBoer arena into canceling its contract with IGRA or lose their business. The owners offered Linn Copeland money and equipment to help set up another rodeo arena but that aid never materialized.<sup>23</sup> The loss of the arena cost the rodeo an estimated \$16,000, and the last minute changes also resulted in lost ticket money with attendance down by almost 2,000 people. Copeland and the regional rodeo association filed suit against the arena in 1992. Jennifer Comes, "Gay Rodeo to Make First Foray into Kansas," *Wichita Eagle*, July 19, 1991, IGRA, Autry National Center, Box 1, *Wichita Eagle* Article, 1991.

<sup>24</sup> John Calendo, "Gay Rodeo: Wild Time in Reno," *In Touch For Men* 51 (1980).

<sup>25</sup> The Wichita case, for instance, prompted intense scrutiny of who could and should speak to the press on behalf of the organization. In a 1992 Arizona Gay Rodeo Association (AGRA) bid to host the finals, AGRA insisted that IGRA board members comply with the local association's media regulations. Explicitly, this meant that "No I.G.R.A. Board Member or Officer shall grant an interview or discuss the 1992 Rodeo Finals with a regular newspaper, radio station, or TV station without prior approval of the A.G.R.A Board." AGRA Bid for 1992 IGRA Finals Rodeo. IGRA, Autry National Center, Box 8, 1992. The desire to control information also resulted in more professionally styled media packages. The 1992 Bay Area Regional Association produced a three page media sheet which outlined the history, goals, and popularity of gay rodeos, emphasizing the commitment to charitable fundraising and alliance with major sponsors. Fact Sheet for new media, 1992, IGRA, Autry National Center, Box 12, 1992.

invited to appear on the *Jerry Springer Show*. The now-notorious day-time talk show was only two years old and had not gained the nation-wide reputation for vulgarity and outlandishness it would later claim. Unaware of the show's combativeness, several IGRA members appeared on the show hoping to share their experience as rodeo cowboys. Instead of being able to promote their association, the gay cowboys were forced to defend themselves when members of the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association came on stage to denounce gay rodeo as a mockery of the "real" sport and an audience member referred to a rodeo drag queen as "it."<sup>26</sup> The mainstream public had a fascination with gay rodeo as a type of freak show due to the assumption that all gay men were effeminate and therefore could not possibly engage in the masculine performance of rodeo. The desire to be considered real rodeoers by a larger audience often led to a situation of public exploitation and sensationalization.

Rejected by a conservative mainstream, IGRA also had a complicated relationship with gay rights as a political and cultural movement. For some outsiders of the gay rodeo, the country redneck or hick has existed as *external to* and *incompatible with* the gay community because of an association with political conservatism. Taken aback by the solemnity with which gay rodeoers sang the National Anthem and prayed, a reporter lamented the need to prove their

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<sup>26</sup> Humiliated and stunned, the IGRA president still graciously wrote an apology to the PRCA commissioner for having promoted a negative image of rodeo by fighting on TV with other cowboys. The commissioner responded with similar disappointment in the show's portrayal of the rodeo community. Already sensitive to media issues, this incident also galvanized new efforts by the IGRA to institute protective measures against mainstream coverage of gay rodeo life. These measures included more preparation of standard operating procedures by the IGRA Public Relations Committee in regards to the mainstream press, and were most strongly urged by Linn Copeland, who had been involved in the Wichita fiasco. Letter from Roger Bergmann to IGRA BOD, *IGRA*, Autry National Center, Box 12, Correspondence: Roger Bergmann to IGRA Board of Directors, May 5, 1993. Letter Rupprecht to IGRA Officers, Box 6, Rupprecht to IGRA, April 27, 1987. Also, when an obvious conflict with the public arose, gay rodeo organizers often took steps to simply avoid unpleasant situations. In 1987, the Oklahoma association asked that its rodeo be rescheduled because the Assembly of God churches were holding a convention the same weekend. The Branding Iron, November 1992 "Media Notices Finals, Rodeo Ignores Notice," *IGRA*, Autry National Center, Box 6, Branding Iron, 1992. Similarly, in many instances throughout the 1990s, several rodeos stated they simply refused to give interviews or even notice to the mainstream press because experiences had been so negative in the past.



allegiance to a country that had largely rejected them, “here they were—big town, cow town, redneck, white collar, liberal, Baptist—singing their allegiance with their hats over their hearts, the most denied, the most legislated against.”<sup>27</sup> Many people from the larger gay community wondered if rodeo was a place for gay people at all. Gay rodeoers, too, were split on the topic of the rodeo’s place in gay rights activism. An *In Touch for Men* interviewee at the 1980 National Reno Gay Rodeo was asked, “A lot of cowboys are right-wing, but I wonder if this applies to gay cowboys. Are you right-wing?” The contestant responded, “Sometimes I find myself in the middle. But it’s a real world, and we have to start living in it.” He continued, “We have to deal with it and say, I’m gay, I’m bigger and more understanding. Separatism didn’t work for the Jews or the Blacks; it’s not going to work for the Gays.”<sup>28</sup> Many members even saw formal politics as a waste of time in comparison to building their own community, with comments like, “To me it’s better than the Gay Pride march. Don’t misunderstand me, I respect the march. But this isn’t political; this is what gay life is all about. The rodeo draws men closer together.”<sup>29</sup> Gay rodeoers were not unilaterally dedicated to political revolution and liberation; instead many rodeoers were attempting to assimilate into an already established, and largely imaginary, western lifestyle.

Animal rights were a particular source of concern for many people in the gay community and on the political left in general. Rodeoers have always negotiated the line between being

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<sup>27</sup> Calendo, “Gay Rodeo,” *In Touch For Men* (1980), 34-5. Many participants eschew both intellectualism and political and emphasize the social aspects. These findings are supported by Craig McClain’s experiences doing ethnographic research in the early 2000s, see *Gay Rodeo: Carnival, Gender, and Resistance*. MA Thesis, University of New Mexico, 2005. Also see Darrell Yates Rist’s uncomfortable experiences with the patriotism and religious aspects of the gay rodeo, even as he notes how dedicated gay rodeoers were to reclaiming a right to live different lives in comparison to many gay people who abandoned their rural upbringings, *Heartlands: A Gay Man’s Odyssey Across American* (USA: Dutton, 1992), 110.

<sup>28</sup> Calendo, “Gay Rodeo,” *In Touch For Men* (1980).

<sup>29</sup> Charles Farber, “National Reno Gay Rodeo and In the Saddle,” *The Advocate*, September 16, 1982.

animal lovers and animal abusers in the public eye.<sup>30</sup> Gay rodeo suffered from an additional dose of public scrutiny because as an oppressed population they should have “known better.” Tracy Reinman, the head of the Gay and Lesbian Animal Rights Caucus for People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) led the charge against gay rodeo stating, “It glorifies a time when violence against women, ethnic minorities, and gays was accepted. The way I think about it, human domination over animals is the same as human domination over other people,” and “We should know about oppression.”<sup>31</sup> In 1994, a PETA letter-writing campaign delivered dozens of anti-rodeo letters to IGRA headquarters. While a form letter was the most popular correspondence, other rhetorical tactics were taken by animal liberationists. One man related animal cruelty and hatred of gay sex to a larger social fear of the natural, “Sex is in the human mind tied to the primal. [...] Sex is a hated, feared thing that we only allow because it is necessary to continue the species. All nonreproductive sexual practices are seen as an abomination.”<sup>32</sup> Thus gay cowboys must embrace the animal within instead of dominating nature

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<sup>30</sup> Rodeo as a sport has contended with animal rights activists since the early twentieth century. Tex Austin, a noted organizer of rodeos in Chicago, London, and New York City during the 1920s had major publicity problems as the Humane Society agitated against rodeos as an “Orgy of Brutality,” and a “barbarous and cruel form of so-called entertainment.” “Women of Northside Assail Rodeo: Brand Sport Event Orgy of Brutality,” *Northside Citizen*, July 10, 1925. Box 1, Chicago scrapbook, Album #3. “Against the Rodeo,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 12, 1925, Box 1, Chicago scrapbook, Album #3, Tex Austin Collection. Museum of New Mexico, Fray Angelico Chavez History Library, Santa Fe, New Mexico USA. In 1922, in New York City, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty of Animals had twenty cowboys arrested on charges of animal cruelty, only to have them acquitted after the judge watched a rodeo. “The Rodeo in New York and London,” *Chicago Tribune*, Box 1 Chicago scrapbook Album #3. Indeed, in 1925, despite a large amount of agitation against the rodeo by the local Humane Society, it gained sanction from the national Humane Society’s secretary and chairman of the rodeo committee, George A.H. Scott. He expounded to skeptics, “The sport is more dangerous to the man than the animal.” “Humane Society Will not Interfere with Roundup program,” *Chicago Illinois News*, May 13, 1925. Box 1, Chicago scrapbook, Album #3. There was an assumption that anyone who opposed the rodeo had never seen one, which was not strictly true. Eulalia Bourne, author of *Woman in Levi’s* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1967), relates in her memoir concerning life on a remote southwestern ranch during the 1930s-1940s that she found rodeos to be outdated modes of cowboy spectacle which are not reflective of modern ranch work and bring indignity on the animals.

<sup>31</sup> Liz Galst, *The Advocate*, “Sacred Cows,” July 27, 1993, 47-51, *IGRA*, Autry National Center, Box 14, 1993 and “Renaissance Cowboy,” *Roundup*, August 1995, 26.

<sup>32</sup> Correspondence, Adam Weissman to IGRA, September 15, 1994, *IGRA*, Autry National Center, Box 22, Animal Rights Correspondence, 1994.

in the same way they have been dominated and abused by heteronormative society. In contrast, other PETA supporters attempted to shame gay rodeoers into behaving more correctly. Anna Moretto hand wrote at the bottom of her form letter, “Gays are not to be sympathized with, they choose their lifestyle—in my opinion they are an abomination on the earth and have created all too much sickness and disease. Animals cannot choose and are to be treated humanely.”<sup>33</sup> IGRA President Roger Bergmann, like rodeoers before him, responded to accusations of animal cruelty by saying that the events cause only “mild irritation” for the animals, like “grabbing and tickling someone.”<sup>34</sup> Imagined by PETA and other members of the gay community as oppressors, taking advantage of weak and helpless animals, gay rodeoers faced organized protests from both sides of the political spectrum.

In its struggle to establish itself, its interactions with other gay groups, and its need to defend itself on many fronts, gay rodeo crafted a particular membership base and audience which was interested in issues of hypermasculine presentation, the heritage of the American West, and athletic prowess. Leathermen, two-steppers, and equestrians all found a common ground at the gay rodeo. Yet, legitimacy and authenticity were paramount to gay rodeoers in constructing a space that bridged the radical and the reactionary.

### **Telling Tensions: Narrating Seriousness and Fun in Gay Rodeo**

Caught between a political left that accused them of orchestrating an “orgy of brutality,” and a conservative mainstream which believed they were participating in an “orgy of sin,” gay rodeoers ultimately embodied a common yet often unacknowledged tension of the imagined

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<sup>33</sup> Correspondence, Anna Moretto to IGRA, August 2, 1994, *IGRA*, Autry National Center, Box 22, Animal Rights Correspondence, 1994.

<sup>34</sup> “Renaissance Cowboy,” *Roundup*, August 1995, 26. The organization did take these concerns seriously, however, and formed a committee to discuss animal rights issues. The committee created new rules which required a veterinarian be onsite and laid out procedure for removing injured animals. Animal rights discussion at 1994 Annual Convention. *IGRA*, Autry National Center, Box 19, 1994.

West. Namely, gay rodeoers expressed both the desire to be seen as authentic and therefore legitimate participants in cowboy culture, and the desire to be recognized as different, and even better, than the original. Gay rodeo participants used “seriousness” to claim “realness,” both in terms of selfhood and historically belonging to a longer western heritage. Simultaneously, gay rodeoers used “fun” to mark themselves as an improvement on mainstream rodeo.

Throughout gay rodeo’s existence, many hardline contestants openly questioned the rest of the community’s ability to earnestly rodeo, assuming an incompatibility with fun and seriousness. For instance, in 1995, an equine disease outbreak prevented out-of-state contestants from bringing their horses into New Mexico and some rodeoers felt that the rodeo should have been relocated to a different state. One irate contestant wrote to the association asking:

When did we forget why we started IGRA in the first place? Yes it was a time of good clean cowboy fun, a hate free place where gays could compete without the hassle of the straight world. But then we got into the mode of party-time. Now don’t get me wrong I have no problem with that, but when we make that our main reason for putting on a rodeo, I believe we have gone astray.<sup>35</sup>

This member narrated the decline of IGRA from serious rodeo, which only took part in “clean” fun, to “party time.” In contrast, other members, like Greg Olson, narrated the trajectory of gay rodeo as a move away from un-serious play-time to focused and determined competition. When asked if most rodeo attendees felt that the rodeo was a big party, one cowboy noted that “the serious contestants are real serious about rodeo, and that’s what they think about until after the end of the rodeo and the awards are done.”<sup>36</sup> For some people, gay rodeo was a serious matter and dedication to the rodeo, and not the party, marked the line between the weekend wannabes and the committed cowboys.

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<sup>35</sup> Letter from Panda Bear. August 30, 1995, *IGRA*, Autry National Center, Box 29, Correspondence, meeting minutes, folder 2 of 3, 1995.

<sup>36</sup> *In Touch for Men*, 1978.

When IGRA's own members critiqued gay rodeo as less serious than "real" rodeo, these doubts joined the deafening roar of disbelief by the larger population. Joan Rivers, when serving as Grand Marshal for the National Reno Gay Rodeo in 1982, asserted to the gay press, "I take the rodeo seriously because I take gay people seriously. The mainstream press wanted me to make isn't-it-a-hoot disparaging comments. I refused to talk."<sup>37</sup> Gay rodeoers were continually prompted to narrate themselves as authentic cowboys, which ultimately helped police the boundaries of the cowboy even as they attempted to expand it.

In an attempt to sell gay rodeo to the larger public and prove the seriousness of gay rodeo, both journalists and gay rodeoers drew lines between the authentic and inauthentic cowboy, which often hinged on the physical presentation of cowboyness. In 1980, during the National Reno Gay Rodeo, *In Touch for Men* asked one contestant, "You're a real cowboy, huh?" The man responded, "In the realest sense of the word, yes. A cowboy is a man who works with horses and cows." The magazine then asked what his response was to "pretend cowboys." He expressed his frustration at the idea of "tricking" people. He explained, "They're not being themselves. [...] If I see a San Francisco businessman in a cowboy outfit, I think he should dress and act like a business person. [...] I'd like them to appreciate me for who I am, and me to appreciate them for who they are." This gay cowboy saw his identity as grounded in his work with horses and cows, and yet dress and occupation were intimately related. When asked how to spot a faker, he quickly noted, "The way they walk, the way they dress and the way they put their hat down." All of these tell-tale signs privileged bodily presentation over employment, lifestyle, or personality traits. "Fake cowboys just don't move right. They wear Lees, Wranglers or some of those other form fitted jeans that are coming out. Cowboys wear one brand: Levi Strauss. [...]"

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<sup>37</sup> Charles Farber, "National Reno Gay Rodeo and In the Saddle," *The Advocate*, September 16, 1982.

The third thing is the hat they wear. Wearing it back on your head is fake.”<sup>38</sup> For this man, despite his initial definition of a cowboy as a profession, performing cowboyness depended on knowing which clothing brands were “real” cowboy gear. Similarly, in 1987 the *Los Angeles Times* wrote, “Their hands were calloused, their muscles tough, and they wore the sweaty, stained clothes and frayed chaps of people who have spent much of their lives on ranches and farms. [...] No urban cowboys here. No electronic bulls. No designer jeans, satin shirts, shiny new snakeskin boots or fancy suede Stetsons to complete the effect.”<sup>39</sup> Unlike the larger rodeo community, gay rodeoers did not see sexuality as a key aspect of cowboy authenticity; instead they drew the line between “genuine” and “fraud” with the bodily presentation of manly ruralness.

This authentic bodily performance of cowboyness was linked backwards to westernness as heritage, and as a pathway to rediscovered selfhood. Seriousness was proved through an almost spiritual commitment to rodeo as a place to build community and find “realness.” As one rodeoer asserted, “More than anything, gay rodeo is a chance to bring our community together for a celebration of our western heritage, which we all feel a part of.”<sup>40</sup> This western heritage was essentialized and experienced as a discovery of the “true” self. One participant observed, “Your heritage comes back to you, it lets you know this is you. Can’t paint a picture, but I can ride a bull, and I can wrestle a steer.”<sup>41</sup> Migration to cities may have been the only option for gay rural folks to openly express their sexuality in the 1970s and 80s, but rodeo allowed them to reclaim their rural authenticity. Specifically, it was serious competition in the arena which drove

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<sup>38</sup> John Calendo, “Interview,” *In Touch For Men* 51 (1980).

<sup>39</sup> Bella Stumbo, “A Rip-Snorting Rodeo with a Special Brand,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 30, 1987.

<sup>40</sup> “Gay Rodeo Attracts Big Crowd,” *Calgary Herald*, July 2, 1994

<sup>41</sup> Paula Gauthier, *Steers & Queers* (MFA Thesis, University of California, San Diego, 2000).

the recovery of this heritage. “The rodeo brings you into a more real area. Going into that arena to compete gives you the chance to be you-just you. And if you’re lucky enough you come out understanding more of yourself-the real you.”<sup>42</sup> Indeed, as Ralph Lauren’s western wear ads proclaimed, cowboyism was the authentic heritage of all white Americans, especially men, and performing this identity linked people to a more real past and a more real self than suburbia or urbanity could provide.<sup>43</sup>

In the interest of maintaining rodeo tradition, IGRA also focused more attention on gay people’s rights to be a part of a longer history of cowboyism. The rediscovery of the “real” cowboy self which took place in the rodeo arena also became explicitly validated by the recovery of the history of same-sex relationships on the nineteenth century cattle and mining frontiers.<sup>44</sup> Extensive information on homosexuality in the historical West became highly sought after pieces for gay rodeo programs and magazines. This historical recovery project was used to bolster the claim that gay men and women belonged in the western imaginary. For instance, Jim Wilke, a US historian, wrote several articles in *Roundup* and other magazines covering incidents of cross dressing, all male stag dances, and the importance of partners in cowboy culture. These historical perspectives lent respectability to the gay rodeo project. Thus, gay rodeoers invested in history and heritage as pathways to legitimacy.

Yet, alongside this talk of the traditional West and the need to be “genuine” cowboys, many of the same gay rodeoers also defined themselves as uniquely fun and aligned themselves with the larger gay community through “gaiety.” When asked what marked their rodeos as

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<sup>42</sup> Quoted in Gauthier, 2000.

<sup>43</sup> At many points, IGRA encouraged non-rural people to join the rodeo, emphasizing that one did not need a rural background to be a cowboy. See Roger Bergmann, “President’s Corner,” *Roundup* (Spring 1993).

<sup>44</sup> See: “My Lover is a Cowboy: Homosexuality on the Open Range,” *Roundup*, December 1995; “The Lost Partner,” *RoundUp*, February 1996; “Solitary, Singing in the West,” *RoundUp*, December 1995.

different from the mainstream, gay rodeoers have usually provided a similar answer: gay rodeo is more fun. Reasons for this fun have included inclusivity both in terms of sexuality and skill level, the willingness to share equipment and advice, and, as past president Brian Helander asserted, “we’re funner people.”<sup>45</sup> When asked why she became active in her local gay rodeo association an AIDS nurse said, “I want some fun in my life. That’s what the gay rodeo is.”<sup>46</sup> Gay cowboy culture has been seen as inherently more joyful than straight cowboy culture. Particularly, this excitement included sexual play, as gay rodeo was a space for people to “get together, have some fun, and maybe share in a fantasy or two.”<sup>47</sup> When describing his time at a gay rodeo, one reporter asserted that because it was a gay rodeo and “therefore” the event was touched by humor. He went on to joke that during his interview with an elderly lady, she explained that gay meant, “just a bunch of people having fun.”<sup>48</sup> Gayness as a performance of liveliness was inscribed into the rhetorical narrative of the distinctiveness of gay rodeo.

Openly staging joy as an important part of their western experience allowed gay rodeoers the opportunity to create a safe space for a gay western community. As Warner illuminates in *Acts of Gaiety*, the enactment of pleasure by gay people allowed for the creation of new, inclusive spaces that challenged heteronormative values. Many contestants hailed from rural areas of the country, or simply felt out of place on the urban gay scene because of their rural upbringings. As sexuality scholar Colin Johnson has noted, “Metropolitan chauvinism is a normative force to be reckoned with in the lives of lesbians and gay men. Many people do feel

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<sup>45</sup>“The Rodeo Issue,” *Camp*, September 2010. Also see, Newsletter, TSGRA, February 1992, *IGRA*, Autry National Center, Box 12.

<sup>46</sup> And Interview with Nurse Strange, *First Hand Events 2*, souvenir issue of gay rodeo, (1989).

<sup>47</sup> “Flaming Saddles,” *Genre*, *IGRA*, Autry National Center, Box 14.

<sup>48</sup> Stumbo, “Rip-snoiting,” *LA Times*, *IGRA*, Autry National Center, Box 2, *IGRA Minutes*, August, Oklahoma, 1987.



humiliated because they feel that they are not doing homosexuality right, which is to say amid the bright lights of the big city.”<sup>49</sup> Rodeos offered a cultural space that was familiar and safe to rural gay men and women, many of whom had spent years driving hundreds of miles to the nearest city to participate in a gay subculture. Simultaneously, gay rodeoers wished to be viewed as legitimate but also escape the gaze of a homophobic mainstream altogether. When hounded by the mainstream press for not being a “real” rodeo, one Canadian association asked, “why must we justify our right to participate?”<sup>50</sup> The association asserted they had never professed to be a “professional” rodeo, but instead were simply creating a space “to escape the day to day pressures of life and to have some fun without fear of getting hit in the head with a horse shoe by people who don’t approve.” Similarly, another man explained that all the work that went into hosting a rodeo was worth it “to see people have fun in a setting that makes them comfortable.”<sup>51</sup> Thus, gay rodeoers used enjoyment and pleasure to describe the rodeo as gay, and also as a safe haven to perform gayness. Simultaneously, though, funness connoted a degree of anti-seriousness and an amateur level of rodeo.

Gay rodeoers also stressed the fun to be had at the after-hours parties which surrounded the rodeos. Gay rodeos revolved around sex and sexuality in more ways than one, specifically by drawing on the sexual image of the cowboy and by providing an opportunity to engage in casual hookups. In 1978, a reporter for *In Touch for Men* commented that there was as much “greased pork” catching and “wild cow milking” near the darkened tennis courts than there was in the

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<sup>49</sup> Colin Johnson, *Just Queer Folks: Gender and Sexuality in Rural America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013), 196.

<sup>50</sup>“Why a Gay Rodeo? Why Not!,” *QC*, June-July 1995, 5-8, *IGRA*, Autry National Center, Box 8, June-July 1995. Reprinted in *Roundup* magazine August 1995, “Why a Gay Rodeo? Why Not!” *IGRA*, Autry National Center, Box 25, 1995.

<sup>51</sup> “Renaissance Cowboy,” *Roundup*, August 1995, 23.

arena.<sup>52</sup> Tag lines like “Come for the Rodeo. Stay for the Party,” were often used on promotional posters to draw in an enthusiastic audience. For weekend warriors, the party was more important than the rodeo. One man assured his skeptical friend that gay rodeo “has nothing to do with horses. You go to the gay rodeo to look at the stallions. [...] The cowboys. The Studs. The macho guys in their weathered chaps and wornout boots.”<sup>53</sup> For many people, attending rodeo had little to do with attending to the rodeo. Party culture was considered by committed rodeoers as auxiliary to the rodeo, even as sex over substance, yet the parties were the driving force for a larger gay audience who had no particular interest in rodeo, but plenty of interest in meeting cowboys and cowgirls. As one cowgirl explained, “The atmosphere at the gay rodeo is more laid-back than at the straight ones. When it comes time to compete, it’s very serious, but away from the rodeo grounds, it’s fun and relaxed.” Enjoyment was integral to gay rodeo culture, but still external to the rodeo itself.

For many people, the gay rodeo served as one of the only opportunities to both play cowboy and play gay. Drawing from a much larger imagined West and imagined gay community, the performance of cowboyness was fashioned as serious and the enactment of gayness was rendered as fun. Gay rodeo allowed for a recovery of an essentialized “heritage” through the enactment of cowboy competition, while also allowing an exploration of new identity possibilities through the creation of safe spaces and social interactions. Importantly, however, gay rodeoers also uncovered the ways in which play was gendered during the late twentieth century. Building on the tension between the stern cowboy and the joyful homosexual, hypermasculinity came to define seriousness and hyperfemininity denoted fun. Gay cowboys

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<sup>52</sup> “Ride ‘Em Cowboy: Reno’s Gay Rodeo,” *In Touch For Men* 38 (1978).

<sup>53</sup> John Carroll, “Rodeo Rookie or the virgin cowpoke” printed in the Bay Area Regional Rodeo 1993, originally printed in *Frontiers* magazine, April 9, 1993. *IGRA*, Autry National Center, Box 7, May 21-23, 1993.

routinely exposed the performative nature of hypermasculinity alongside effeminate camp, even as they openly debated the relevance of femininity to the West, often re-entrenched gender hierarchies, and policed the boundaries of sexual respectability.

### **Playing Cowboy: Hypermasculinity, Authenticity, and American Fantasy**

Many gay rodeoers embraced cowboy culture because it provided a space to perform hypermasculinity and resist the “pansy” stereotype that haunted gay men in the late twentieth century. While *Esquire* was writing about the need for a hardline, gay cowboys struggled against a long history of “assumed effeminacy.”<sup>54</sup> Adoration of young, sleek, muscle-bound men was a staple among affluent and white gay communities, like those who frequented the high-end vacation destination Fire Island, off Long Island.<sup>55</sup> Thus the advent and expansion of gay rodeo coincided with a crisis in masculinity in both the gay and straight worlds. Gay cowboys, both men who grew up in rural areas and men drawn to cowboy culture, significantly overlapped and interacted with these other forms of hypermasculine gay subcultures.<sup>56</sup> Fantastical trips into the old West were one way for white American men, and women, to participate in an imagined past of masculine American dominance. As a Guess fashion book profiling Texas stated, “Women are treated with great respect [in Texas], but it is assumed they know their place, which is

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<sup>54</sup> Hennen, *Faeries, Bears, and Leathermen*.

<sup>55</sup> As Tom Bianchi writes, Fire Island Pines was a place to be open and free, with parties and cruising areas. However, “For some, the rant went like this: Too many drugs. Too sex obsessed. Too body obsessed. Too fashion obsessed. Too shallow. Too sleazy. Too wild. Too queer.” Tom Bianchi, *Fire Island Pines, Polaroids 1975-1983* (Italy: Damiani, 2013), 16. The body culture of the 1970s and 80s has developed into current forms of gay male self-presentation, for instance the emergence of “Insta-studs.” This term is used for men who photograph their fit and tan bodies routinely in luxurious places, like yachts, and post the photos on Instagram. These men often have substantial followings. See, Mike Albo, “Meet the #Instastuds: Hot Gay Men on Perma-display,” *NYMAG.com*, August 5, 2013.

<sup>56</sup> For instance, advertisements for leather-levi bars in the 1980s often included a “Welcome Cowboys” call out. For instance, an ad for the Triangle Bar in Denver featured pictures of both leathermen and cowboys, in *Out Front* 1 July 1988, *IGRA*, Autry National Center, Box 2, 1988. Also a free cover with rodeo tickets offer from The Buffalo, Advertisement from *IGRA* Finals Rodeo, Reno ‘88, Oct 19-23, *IGRA*, Autry National Center, Box 2, 1988.

supportive, and their function, which is often decorative.”<sup>57</sup> For both gay and straight men, westernness was crafted as essentially masculine. Ultimately, performing masculinity bolstered claims of the cowboys’ authenticity and the rodeo’s legitimacy, even as cowboyhood was also often acknowledged as drag and fantasy.

Gay rodeo contributed to a growing sexual culture around hard masculine homosexuality. By the 1950s and 1960s gay illustrators, like Tom of Finland, had started publishing suggestive images of leather-clad cops, soldiers, and cowboys in magazines like *Physique Pictorial*. These images, which became increasingly pornographic as the Supreme Court struck down anti-obscenity laws, offered “a sharply contrasting image of homosexuality to the one that was considered--even by most gay men--universally valid. He invented a (pretty butch) fairy-tale gay universe in which masculinity was held up as the highest ideal.”<sup>58</sup> Indeed, in the burgeoning soft- and hard-core gay pornography industries of the 1970s and 80s, cowboy-themed plots were highly popular alongside other hypermasculine characters like construction workers, athletes, and cops.<sup>59</sup> For many gay men, leather was both a piece of clothing used for safety while riding motorcycles or horses and a fetishized cloth that implied hardy masculinity. As sexuality scholar Mark Thompson has remarked, “The look, scent, and feel of black leather sexualizes everything it comes in contact with.”<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Quote from *The Panhandle* (Los Angeles: Guess? Inc., undated), cited in Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York: Crown, 1991), 196.

<sup>58</sup> Micha Ramakers, *Dirty Pictures: Tom of Finland, Masculinity, and Homosexuality* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), xi.

<sup>59</sup> John R. Burger, *One-Handed Histories: The Eroto-Politics of Gay Male Video Pornography* (New York: Hawthorn Press, 1995), 38. Edward Buscombe asserted that when western pornographic movies ceased to draw in straight audiences, the genre survived in the gay niche market, “Generic Overspill: A Dirty Western,” in *More Dirty Looks: Gender, Pornography, and Power*, ed. Pamela Church Gibson (London: British Film Institute, 2004), 30.

<sup>60</sup> Mark Thompson, ed. *Leatherfolk: Radical Sex, People, Politics, and Practice* (Boston: Alyson, 1991), xvii.

Arguably, the most visible group with which gay rodeoers overlapped was leathermen. After World War II, men, often physically and psychologically wounded by the war, created a thriving network of leather clubs, biker bars, and S/M relationships. While men were organizing leather sex parties by at least the 1940s, it wasn't until 1954 that the first gay motorcycle club, the Satyrs, was established in Southern California.<sup>61</sup> Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, these hypermasculine gay subcultures overlapped and interlaced at various venues. A 1990 ad for Phoenix's the Bum Steer featured a well-endowed anthropomorphized man-bull, with pierced nipples and snout, a leather harness, and extra-elongated horns. The ad noted that this is "THE place to meet a man's MAN," and asserted leather, Levi, or western attire was required for entrance.<sup>62</sup> In addition to these commercial advertisements, members of the rodeo and leather communities often interacted. From the earliest days of IGRA, Mr. Leatherman and other leather fundraisers gained coverage in local associations' newsletters. In 1995, gay cowboys and a leather club in Minneapolis co-hosted a fundraiser with one man suggesting that the rodeo entertainment committee "beg" Mr. Minnesota Leather 1995 to perform his whip cracking routine at the next rodeo.<sup>63</sup> Exemplifying this growing affiliation between the leatherman and the cowboy, the American Brotherhood competition, a leather competition established in 1989,

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<sup>61</sup> Thompson, *Leatherfolk*, xv.

<sup>62</sup> 1990 IGRA Rodeo Finals, *IGRA*, Autry National Center, Box 3, 1990. Similarly, ads promoting "David's: A Man's Party" and "Polish your rocks and prepare for a party" in the 1st Annual Rocky Mountain Regional Rodeo, program, June 3-5, 1983, *IGRA*, Autry National Center, Box 1, 1983. Charlie's bar promoted as "A Man's Bar," in *First Hand Events*, souvenir issue of gay rodeo, 1989.

<sup>63</sup> "Write in the Saddle," January 1995 North Star GRA newsletter, *IGRA*, Autry National Center, Box 28, 1996. While leathermen and cowboys drew from the same notions of American masculinity and intermingled in a variety of contexts, there was also the need to distinguish between the two subcultures. For instance, in 1995, a man from Norway wrote to the association to ask for more information. He stated, "I am a Norwegian 'open' gay leather-man and cowboy." He goes on to explain that he is "changing between" the two and "everybody knows it." This comment illuminates the tightly bound yet distinct identities between leathermen and cowboys. While both are similarly interested in the performance of hypermasculinity, there are enough differences to warrant comment. Black leather culture and brown leather culture have developed differently over the past several decades. Letter from John Olav Hakegard from Norway. February 22, 1995, *IGRA*, Autry National Center, Box 29, Correspondence, 1995.

added an American Cowboy title in 1994 as a “means of bringing together the leather and Western communities and organization from around the continent.”<sup>64</sup> The materiality of leather and denim stitched these two groups of men together. As one gay horseman asserted, “I like the look, smell and feel of a good man in levis and leather.”<sup>65</sup>

For some men who grew up in rural settings, who identified as both cowboy and gay, urban gay culture often made them uncomfortable. As Will Fellows noted in his oral histories with rural gay men, “Some disapproved of gay pride parades or other highly visible events, and of gay men who are drag queens or who behave in flamboyantly effeminate ways.” Many men felt that men should act like men on farms, as men. One man pondered, “I wonder if there aren’t other people out there who are like me, more quiet and more private, not like the gay mafia that you see so much of—the outgoing, outspoken, socialistic, activist, flamboyant and fast-paced,

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<sup>64</sup> Gary Swartz, “American Brotherhood Contest,” *Roundup*, December 1995.

<sup>65</sup> This man wrote to IGRA in 1994 asking for the information of gay cowboys in the Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota area. Letter from Pat Kaarite to IGRA, May 3, 1994, *IGRA*, Autry National Center, Box 22, Correspondence, Newsletters, faxes, invitations, memos, 1994. Similarly, gay cowboy culture has intersected with the emergence of the bear subculture. Bears developed as a response to hypermasculine leathermen in the 1980s. Wanting to distinguish themselves from both effeminate homosexuality and unemotional hypermasculinity, in the early 1980s men began to place teddy bears in their pockets, resisting the clone hanky code and denoting a desire to cuddle. Combining masculinity with nurturing, bears celebrated large, hairy bodies and encouraged emotional as well as sexual intimacy among manly men. The bear subculture exploded in 1986, with the Lone Star Saloon in San Francisco being the hotly-debated epicenter of the subculture’s new found popularity. By 1987, self-identified bears were organizing private parties and creating community bulletin boards. BEAR magazine began publication in 1987 and slowly formalized bear beauty standards. Bears shared the blue collar “everyman” mentality of cowboys. Before the establishment of beauty hierarchies and exclusive members-only clubs, bear bars drew in an eclectic mix of gay non-conformists. According to scholar Les Wright, both urban and rural blue collar men, including chubbies, bikers, farmers, and cowboys, were welcomed under the banner of “come-as-you-are,” contesting the hyperstylization of leather and clone culture. After the formalization of bear and cowboy subcultures the two groups continued to overlap. See Les Wright, ed. *The Bear Book: Readings in the History and Evolution of a Gay Male Subculture* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1997), 21. IGRA as an organization had fewer official events with bear clubs than with leather clubs, but many members of bears clubs were interested in mingling with cowboys. By 1994, members from the Bears Club UK sent sincere letters to IGRA, asking for opportunities to make personal connections with cowboys because they were quintessential “American guys.” Along with invitations to be “pen pals, friends, and hopefully more,” these men repeatedly invited IGRA members to the United Kingdom for visits. While the idealized image of the gay cowboy tended more towards hard-bodied clones, this did not mean bear-bodied men were not cowboys. And the lack of a bear-body did not preclude cross-pollination between the groups. As one bear said, “I would prefer you to be hairy,” but if not, it didn’t “really matter.” Letter from David Richardson to IGRA November 9, 1994 (Bears Club UK) and Letter from Bernard Bucan, October 25, 1994 (Bears Club UK), *IGRA*, Autry National Center, Box 29, Correspondence, 1994.

dishing, camping-it-up type of people who seem to dominate when gays come together in urban areas.”<sup>66</sup> Men who rose to prominence in IGRA, like 1995 president Roger Bergmann, also expressed fear upon entering a larger gay community. Bergmann stated he was apprehensive going to his first gay bar because he didn’t want to see men in dresses or publically making out.<sup>67</sup> For some gay men, stoic, serious hypermasculinity was viewed as authentically rural, while femininity was linked to an external urban other.

Furthermore, while many women felt ostracized in the world of gay rodeo, masculine females often found acceptance and encouragement. For instance, Jeannine Tuttle, a respected IGRA cowgirl, described how her only option for riding bulls in college was to ride in exhibitions not competitions. She explained, “You see there weren’t many women bull riders around, so they would advertise on the rodeo posters that they were having an exhibition bull ride by a woman, hoping to draw a bigger gate. I was like a freak show, but it was the only way I could ride, so I let them take advantage of my ability.”<sup>68</sup> Women who participated in masculine endeavors, like bull riding, in mainstream rodeos were marked as different, as freaks. At the gay rodeo, in contrast, they were allowed to compete and celebrated for their skills, though still gender segregated.

Simultaneously, the rodeo association and the gay press intentionally crafted an image of the cowboy as inherently hypermasculine and hypersexual. Photo spreads mostly included action shots of the rodeo events or still shots of well-muscled men, often shirtless, with jeans, chaps, and cowboy hats. One member being interviewed by the press described being together as men

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<sup>66</sup> Will Fellows, *Farms Boys: Lives of Gay Men from the Rural Midwest* (USA: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 20-21.

<sup>67</sup> “Renaissance Cowboy,” *Roundup*, August 1995, 23.

<sup>68</sup> Jeannine Tuttle, “A Woman's Point of View,” *Roundup*, Spring 1993.

and “doing manly things, being hypermasculine,” as the most alluring aspect of the gay rodeo.<sup>69</sup> Advertisements for bars featured in the programs went so far as to feature a heavily mustached, pant-less cowboy offering his posterior to the camera, saying, “Come and get it, cowboys.”<sup>70</sup> Promotional materials tended to draw solely from standard western themes, including boots, hats, bucking broncs, and western scenery. The rainbow flag was not regularly featured and the word gay was almost never used. Only rarely were more imaginative illustrations chosen, and these were still often hypermasculine. For instance, Chicago’s 1994 gay rodeo was advertised with the image of a satyr cowboy riding a centaur cowboy with the moon and the city skyline behind. While this publicity image broke the common tropes of Western heritage, it still celebrated a masculine mythology of animalism in gay rodeo.<sup>71</sup>

Building on the inherent masculinity of cowboy imagery, histories printed in IGRA programs often re-narrated the Myth of the Cowboy. Reminiscent of Fredrick Jackson Turner’s “frontier thesis” in which American character was bred through steady conquest of the frontier, gay rodeo histories retold how rodeo evolved from the “hardworking lifestyle of the American cowhand. The hard life of the Old West developed a character and an attitude that would become legendary.” “Independent and bold” people of the American West shared their “spirit of freedom” through rodeo competition.<sup>72</sup> At its foundations, IGRA did not question the place of the cowboy as a masculine hero in American culture, but instead inserted its members into the cult of the cowboy. The 1989 Arizona Roadrunner Regional Rodeo program dedicated the rodeo

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<sup>69</sup> “Flaming Saddles,” *Genre, IGRA*, Autry National Center, Box 14.

<sup>70</sup> Great Plains Regional Rodeo, program, Kansas City, September 1994, *IGRA* Autry National Center, Box 17, 1994.

<sup>71</sup> Windy City’s Illinois Regional Gay Rodeo, 1994 program cover, *IGRA*, Autry National Center, Box 17, 1994.

<sup>72</sup> Pride Guide, 1993 North Star Regional Rodeo program, *IGRA*, Autry National Center, Box 14, 1993.



to all patients struggling with “AIDS, cancer, and other medical problems.” A quote by Teddy Roosevelt, one of the original make-believe cowboys, on the same page stressed western values of masculine determination and endurance: “the credit belong to the man who is actually in the arenas—whose vision is marred by the dust and the sweat and the blood...if he fails, at least he fails while daring greatly so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat.”<sup>73</sup> By embracing and reiterating the glory of a “western heritage,” particularly a daring and bold cowboyness, IGRA reestablished its commitment to a traditionally masculine formulation of rodeo.

Gay rodeoers also referenced the sexual power of cowboy physicality, giving credence to cowboyness as an essential mythology of American manhood. As one rodeoer observed, “A man is referred to as ‘a stud,’ ‘a horse,’ ‘a cowboy.’ The cowboy is the American macho, but I think it’s good. It gets to the origin of America, the pioneer.”<sup>74</sup> Not only did gay rodeoers and journalists mark the cowboy as the primogenitor of American masculinity, they also often framed the cowboy as an origin story of gay male sexual awareness.<sup>75</sup> As a leatherman said about cowboys, “I personally think that a great deal of our hero worship is also erotic.”<sup>76</sup> For instance, in a *4 Front Magazine* interview, a thirty-four-year-old rodeo contestant narrated his first cowboy experience when, as a seven-year-old, his father had taken him to the Houston

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<sup>73</sup> Dedication to Teddy Roosevelt in Roadrunner Regional Rodeo, Jan 13-15, 1989 program. *IGRA*, Autry National Center, Box 3, 1989.

<sup>74</sup> John Calendo, *In Touch For Men* 51, (1980).

<sup>75</sup> For instance, Craig Rouse told *Frontiers* magazine, he “rode his first horse at the age of 6, but later admitted that his fondness of cowboys preceded his love of the rodeo.” T.X. Enoicaras, “Forget Vampires... Interview with a Cowboy,” *Frontiers*, May 23, 1996.

<sup>76</sup> Hennen, *Fairies*, 171. Many theorists, including J. Halberstam, have seen all westerns as inherently homo-erotic, with heroic masculinities, see “Not So Lonesome Cowboys: the Queer Western,” in the *Brokeback Book: From Story to Cultural Phenomenon* (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 2011).

Rodeo.<sup>77</sup> He reminisces, “And the next thing you know, I was surrounded by cowboys [...] Those Stetson Hats. Those beat-up Levis. Those worn boots. Those flannel checkered shirts.” The materiality of cowboy sexuality, like leather and Levi’s, served repeatedly as common links to manliness. An article discussing IGRA President Roger Bergmann explained, “He knew what he liked about rodeo: the excitement, the challenge, the leather, the smell, the outfits, the jeans, the cowboys, the ruggedness, the men.”<sup>78</sup> Gay cowboys routinely reveled in gay rodeo as a space which drew together hypermasculine men in a web of sexual fantasy which had little to do with actual horsemanship or herding, and more to do with the physical presentation of manliness.

Gay rodeoers also continually reasserted that the inherent masculinity of the cowboy negated the assumed effeminacy of gay men, especially to the mainstream press. As one leatherman said, “We don’t have a song of Roland, we don’t have Beowulf, but we do have stories of the cowboys on the cattle drives.”<sup>79</sup> When speaking with the *Albuquerque Tribune*, one gay rodeo celebrated the chance to break the “sissy” stereotype, “Now they know we’re not just a bunch of pansies.”<sup>80</sup> Comments about gay rodeo being “just as dangerous” and proving the “fag” and “limp wrists” stereotypes false, appear repeatedly as participants attempted to sell their sport to a prejudiced nation.<sup>81</sup> One member told the *Reno Evening Gazette* that the rodeo was full

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<sup>77</sup> Waide Aaron Riddle, “A Rodeo Story: Then and Now,” *4 Front Magazine*, April 2, 1997. John Carroll also mentions his deep love of westerns in “Rodeo Rookie or the Virgin Cowpoke,” *Frontiers*.

<sup>78</sup> “Renaissance Cowboy,” *Roundup*, August 1995, 23.

<sup>79</sup> Hennen, *Fairies*, 171.

<sup>80</sup> Hank Stuever, Big Sky Gay Rodeo Association, Newsletter 1 no. 2, Billings, Montana, May 1991, *IGRA*, Autry National Center, Box 6, BSGRA News, May 1991. Originally printed in *Albuquerque Tribune*, April 29, 1991.

<sup>81</sup> See Gordon Jaremko, “Gay Rodeo Attracts Big Crowd,” *Calgary Herald*, July 3, 1994, *IGRA*, Autry National Center, Box 94, 1994. “Reno Gay Rodeo Draws Big Crowd,” *Reno Gazette Journal*, August 5, 1979. Even scholars who have studied gay rodeo use the terms that deride femininity, for instance: “The rodeo deconstructs presumptions about cowboy heterosexuality, while offering the opportunity to embrace homosexuality without being pigeonholed as an Oscar Wilde swish,” Le Cony, Christopher and Zoe Trodd. “Regan’s Rainbow Rodeos: Queer Challenges to the Cowboy Dreams of the 1980s.” *Canadian Review of American Studies* 39 no. 2

of men who you “wouldn’t recognize” as gay on the street because they were “still men,” designating “straight-acting” as a key aspect of the gay rodeo. The battle to prove that gay people were not “flighty, mostly city-dwelling creatures of the night” became a crusade which problematically cast effeminate gay men as the outcasts to this world of gay rodeo.<sup>82</sup>

The cowboy’s relationship to danger was explicitly eroticized and intertwined with hypermasculinity in the age of AIDS. Rodeo has always included a high number of participant deaths, a particularly alluring aspect for many contestants. A rodeo clown once told me the best way to make a hundred new bull riders was to kill one, as seen with the explosion of popularity of rodeo after the high-profile death of professional bull rider Lane Frost in the arena in 1989.<sup>83</sup> The gay rodeo community experienced its own loss in 1994, when a novice bull rider named Gary Gilchrist was thrown at the Atlanta gay rodeo and died of his injuries several weeks later.<sup>84</sup> In gay cowboy culture, the risk of the rodeo and risk of unprotected sex became intertwined. Barebacking, the practice of intentionally unprotected sex, became a tactic of resistance against the regime of safe sex in the late 1980s and 1990s. As sexuality scholar Thomas Linneman noted, “making sex safer, by definition, reduces the risk involved in the sexual activity, thus demasculinizing it. Some gay men engaging in unsafe sex even refer to the act as ‘barebacking’ making an allusion to the days of the risk-taking, masculine frontier cowboy.”<sup>85</sup> Gay cowboy

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(2009): 179. Another popular rhetorical tactic by association members was to emphasize that animals don’t know participations are gay or, alternatively, the animals aren’t gay and therefore, “It’s just as tough as any other rodeo.” See Rick Rielly, “Queer Eye for the Sports Guy,” *Sports Illustrated*, November 10, 2003. Of course, this statement leaves intact the assumption that gayness is inherently effeminate and it is only through interaction with uninformed and apparently straight animals that gay men can prove their masculinity.

<sup>82</sup> *Albuquerque Tribune, IGRA*, Autry National Center, Box 6, 1991.

<sup>83</sup> The release of the movie *8 Seconds* in 1994 also helped promote bull riding across America.

<sup>84</sup> TGRA Newsletter, Saddle Up, June 1994 and the Saddle, the North Star Gay Rodeo Newsletter, June 1994, *IGRA*, Autry National Center, Box 21, 1994.

erotica celebrated this risk-taking mentality in both the arena and the bedroom, “In every town, no matter how big or how small, Justin Longacre always found a good ride. Sometimes it was a horse named Diablo, Crazy Eight, or Snake Eyes, and sometimes it was a man named Brogan, or Charles, or Thad. Justin didn’t care which it was because he always rode bareback. He lived to take risks. It was the cowboy way.”<sup>86</sup> The beauty and sexual potency of risk gave life meaning to many men. One bullrider asserted, “If there is such a thing as risk-free living, it certainly doesn’t sound like much fun.”<sup>87</sup> The hypersexual and hypermasculine image of the cowboy revolted against AIDS era sexual politics. While it is unclear how many gay cowboys actually practiced riding bareback at this time, the tension between proper sexual behavior and the wild fantasies of cowboy enthusiasts were present at the gay rodeo.

The exaggerated and fantastical version of masculinity in gay rodeo figured prominently in both straight and gay cowboy masculinities in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s. Cowboyism was the over-performance of masculinity.<sup>88</sup> As film critic David Thomson noted, the conflation of western myth and reality made towns like Rawhide, Nevada “so fake a name now, so camp, it might be set in neon above a gay bar on the outskirts of some military base.” And range cowboys “hardly know if they’re wearing their own clothes or are dressed in costume.”<sup>89</sup> Yet this costume-based fantasy of the cowboy also improved upon the historical West for many people.

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<sup>85</sup> Thomas J. Linneman, “Risk and Masculinity in the Everyday lives of Gay Men,” *Gay Masculinities*, ed Peter Nardi (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2000), 85.

<sup>86</sup> Richard Labonte, ed, *Country Boys: Wild Gay Erotica* (USA: Cleis, 2007), 104.

<sup>87</sup> Phil Julian, “A Bullrider’s View in Less Than Six Seconds,” *Frontiers*, May 23, 1996.

<sup>88</sup> Alex Hunt, scholar of the American West and ex-bull rider, asserts when considering straight rodeo in the context of *Brokeback Mountain* that, “In their exaggeration of masculinity beyond the bounds of the traditionally masculine, rodeo cowboys seem to be camp,” *Brokeback Book*, 141.

<sup>89</sup> David Thomson, *In Nevada: The Land, the People, God, and Chance*, (New York: Knopf, 1999), 294.

As *Vanity Fair* wrote in 1988, Ralph Lauren’s sprawling 17,000 acre Colorado ranch re-built the West, “The Old Frontier, reverently re-created and even improved upon—in a way it’s a magical experience and an immensely soothing one, like going to an old Walt Disney movie, *Snow White* or *Bambi*, for instance, where you know the images on the screen are *re-creations* of images, and yet even more familiar and real than the original could have been.”<sup>90</sup> Lauren used western wear, and his Colorado ranch, as a fantastical venue for constructing a more authentic version of the American West for himself and his guests. Indeed, playing cowboy was an innate right of all Americans, “Taking off and putting on various personas is part of the Great American Tradition—we believe we’re given not only the right but the ability to play comfortably many different roles in many times and places.” Fantasy, which indulged in nostalgia for both childhood and a manlier America, was integral to masculine cowboy performance during this era. Yet, in the wider culture, masculine performance was never considered less than authentic because in re-discovering cowboy masculinity, white straight men were simply reclaiming their birthright as Americans. In this way, gay rodeoers exposed and contributed to a phenomenon of playing cowboy that was already established in late twentieth century America.

Simultaneously, while gay cowboys celebrated hypermasculinity as the trait which legitimated gay men as cowboys and as men, they also often acknowledged it as performance. “Cowboy drag,” or even “cowgay drag,” quickly became a popular descriptor for Western wear.<sup>91</sup> Cowboyiness as self-conscious masculinity was most thoroughly articulated by John Carroll in his 1993 article, “Rodeo Rookie or the Virgin Cowpoke,” in which he marveled how his costume helped him say words like “howdy,” smoke cigars, and generally made him feel

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<sup>90</sup> Brooke Hayward, “Home on the Range,” *Vanity Fair*, February 1988, 108, 141-144.

<sup>91</sup> Bob Ames, “Rodeo Ramblin’,” *Roundup*, Spring 1993.

“rugged.” Casually critiquing the notion that any cowboy of the modern age is authentic, his friend quips about the rodeo cowboys, “These guys are the real thing. Just like on TV.” Real cowboyhood was a performance and one that could be discarded at will. After the rodeo, his friend demanded, “Hey, Lone Ranger, the rodeo is over. Next week is the Black and Tans Uniform Party. Throw that cowboy drag in the closet. We have to get a police uniform ready 10-4.”<sup>92</sup> In naming cowboyhood as drag, and potentially linking it explicitly to camp and to effeminacy, gay cowboys cracked open larger questions about the meaning of gender and play, as their gender performance so readily mimicked and yet also mocked other masculinities as play.

The desire to be accepted as legitimate, however, often led the association to casually temper the truly campy aspects of hypermasculinity, paired with drag queens, and to draw lines around sexual respectability. For instance, common reassurances in the mainstream press calmed readers by stating, “transvestites, by the way, were few” and “only a handful of drag queens and ass-less leather chaps showed up.”<sup>93</sup> While cowboy drag was appropriate to the rodeo, overly-enthusiastic leathersmen and flamboyant drag queens both were cast as too extreme for the mainstream. Similarly, while the hypersexuality of the cowboy was celebrated throughout American culture, the limits of this sexuality were enforced at the gay rodeo as much as the straight. In an interview with *Genre* magazine, a gay cowboy described his shock at seeing a man at a large stock show, “on his hands and knees, jacking the bull off! [...] Now that doesn’t

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<sup>92</sup> Carroll, “Rodeo Rookie,” *Frontiers*. Cowboy and Indian drag was also popular at rodeo fundraiser events, see “A View from the Mardi Gras Ball,” Dallas-Chapter TGRA newsletter, Saddle-Up, March 1992 *IGRA*, Autry National Center, Box 11, 1992.

<sup>93</sup> Patrick O’Driscoll, “10,000 Hoot, Holler at Gay Rodeo,” *Reno Evening Gazette*, 1982. Bella Stumbo, “A Rip-Snorting Rodeo with a Special Brand,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 30, 1987. This marginalization of the fringe was also experienced by the drag queens at the Gay Games, see Carline Symons, *The Game Games: A History* (London, Routledge, 2010), 109.

happen at our rodeo.”<sup>94</sup> Bestiality was the truly aberrant sexual behavior, which took place among straight people as well as gay people.<sup>95</sup> By designating the outer limits of both gender and sexual behavior, homosexual cowboy masculinity was rendered more palatable and less threatening.

Gay rodeo revealed and reveled in the fantastical nature of masculinity in the Age of Reagan. Playing cowboy was acceptable for most American men and even encouraged as long as it remained within the respectable realm of the imagined West, namely white, heterosexual, and hypermasculine. Camp and drag were integral to the performance of American hypermasculinity, but only at the gay rodeo was cowboyness as drag rendered visible, namable, and debatable. Indeed, these questions of masculinity were hotly debated. After an organizing debacle one member angrily wrote, “this was one chance for gays to show they can do more than just do drag and be hairdressers!!!! I guess rodeo is too masculine a sport for most of the gay community to handle.” The member at the center of the rant responded sarcastically, “Women and less than butch men should be asked to leave. Maybe we could enact a basic membership requirement that you must be as butch as Dave in order to join an IGRA Association.”<sup>96</sup> Furthermore, gay rodeoers invested in some forms of masculinity and sexuality as respectable, while others strayed beyond the pale of true acceptance. As the association attempted to sell gay rodeo to a wider audience, the danger of hypermasculinity lay in its easy association with drag queens as the polar

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<sup>94</sup> “Flaming Saddles,” *Genre*, undated, *IGRA*, Autry National Center, Box 14.

<sup>95</sup> Similarly, one young bi-sexual man was informed by older gay men that he just hadn’t figured out what he really was yet. Bella Stumbo, “A Rip-Snorting Rodeo with a Special Brand,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 30, 1987. Bestiality also figured prominently in hate mail as homosexuality was conflated with other “deviant” sexual practices. For instance, “at what point do you get off [your horse] and hump each other and the calf.” Email received 1999, *IGRA*, Autry National Center, Box 47, 1997-2000.

<sup>96</sup> Email from D Pepper to IGRA, *IGRA*, Autry National Center, Box 37, 1997 and Response from R Washburn to D Pepper, *IGRA*, Autry National Center, Box 38, emails, 1998.

ends of the spectrum. Hypermasculinity bolstered the serious, traditional, and professional claims of gay rodeo, but also threatened all cowboy masculinities if it was rendered too visible as a performance.

### **Playing Gay: Camp, Effeminacy, and Frivolity**

Throughout the 1970s, 80s, and 90s gay rodeo illuminated the assumption that performing cowboy masculinity, cloaked in terms of heritage and professionalism, was inherently a serious endeavor and unquestioningly authentic because it was re-grasping something innately American. Conversely, engaging in public enactments of femininity was frivolous and unprofessional and therefore inauthentic to the West. While rural upbringings and landscapes often curtailed gay men and women's public displays of their sexualities, at the rodeo, they were given the opportunity to engage in "acts of gaiety." Sara Warner notes that acts of gaiety were not necessarily an expression of deep inner happiness as much as a "theatricalization" of joy. She explains, "These acts of gaiety facilitate a respite from the drudgery of daily life, provide escape from untenable situations, and enable the construction of alternate realities governed by values and aspirations obverse to (and despised by) mainstream culture."<sup>97</sup> As gay rodeoers defined themselves against the mainstream through fun, and used fun to keep gay rodeo inclusive, the enactment of pleasure also became both feminized and amateurized. Playing gay for many people at the rodeo was staged as playing feminine.

Specifically, the inherent fun of gay rodeo was feminized through its direct link to three rodeo competitions called camp events.<sup>98</sup> The "camp events" category makes up one of the four types of events at gay rodeos. The other categories include rough stock, speed, and roping

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<sup>97</sup> Warner, *Acts of Gaiety*, 5 and 11.

<sup>98</sup> "Behind the Chutes," *RoundUp*, October 1996.



events. In order to qualify for the “All Around” contest, a contestant must have competed in three of the four categories. This system of awarding significant points for events considered by many rodeoers to be “enjoyable,” but not “serious,” resulted in wide ranging debates about the place and meaning of camp events in gay rodeo. The National Reno Gay Rodeo included events like greased-pig catching and wild cow milking, both of which were standard events at local rodeos throughout the twentieth century. These types of events though were not sanctioned by the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association as one of the seven standard events. As previously mentioned, when IGRA formed, three so-called “camp” events became sanctioned: steer decorating, goat dressing, and wild drag racing.

Camp events were team oriented and were all conducted on foot, so little experience and expense was required. As described above, steer decorating featured one team member holding a steer by a twenty-five foot rope while a second team member attempted to tie a ribbon on its tail. The steer must be pulled across a line marking ten feet from the chute, the rope removed from its horns, and its tail decorated before the timer can be tagged. Goat dressing, also a timed event, required a team of contestants to race towards a small goat, lift up his hind legs, and attempt to get jockey-style underwear onto the stubborn animal before racing back to the starting line. Lastly, wild drag racing involves a team of three people, including a male, a female, and a person dressed in female-style drag. The female holds the lead rope of the wild steer when it is initially released. The male must help catch and direct the steer over the seventy-foot line where the person in drag is waiting. The “drag” must get astride the steer’s back and stay on until all four legs re-cross the seventy-foot line.

The use of the word “camp” in the official event categories and descriptions encouraged the perception that these events were primarily for enjoyment rather than a test of skills. Camp

which is generally marked by a self-conscious and studied performance that exaggerates its gendered, racialized, and sexualized subject, in this context, connotes humor, inclusivity, and pleasure.<sup>99</sup> The ability of camp to bridge the traditional and the playful in rodeo created tensions for members, as gay rodeoers struggled to both gaily engage with cowboy culture, but also worried that camp events were disrespectful and antithetical to the solemn tradition of rodeo.

For both contestants and spectators, camp events were often seen as the highlight of the gay rodeo. The proceedings inevitably include laughter and showmanship and are often considered sheer entertainment rather than contests. Widely regarded as what made gay rodeo gay, *Frontier* magazine wrote in 1996, “Sure, they have the rough stuff events with bulls, broncs, and steers, but like any good bunch of fags and dykes, they also hold what are known as ‘camp events.’”<sup>100</sup> Wild drag racing and goat dressing in particular have been promoted by association members as wonderful ways to build community and encourage novice participation. As an amateur rodeo, IGRA encourages the participation of people with all skill levels. A common narrative of successful contestants includes the admission that they first entered the competitive world of gay rodeo through the act of putting underwear on a goat.<sup>101</sup> Or, as one cowboy loudly lamented, “I can’t barrel ride worth shit, but I can put panties on a goat.”

Yet, despite largely positive commentary to the press, debates have persisted within the association about the necessity or desirability of camp events. These concerns were strong enough to induce many people to voice their displeasure with camp events on a questionnaire

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<sup>99</sup> Fabio Cleto, ed., *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject—a Reader* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999).

<sup>100</sup> T.X. Enoicaras, “Forget Vampires... Interview with a Cowboy,” *Frontiers*, 23 May 1996. The journalist also jokes that, “I still don’t know if he meant ‘camp’ like Camp Fire Girls or ‘camp’ like Joan Crawford.”

<sup>101</sup> For instance, Brian Helander states that even though he didn’t have a back ground in rodeos, they looked like “fun” and he just started goat dressing. “The Rodeo Issue,” *Camp*, September 2010.

disseminated by IGRA in 1990. In the group of fifty-two completed questionnaires, 40% of the participants stated they began their gay rodeo circuit careers in camp events. Yet almost 60% were in favor of de-emphasizing, limiting, or completely eliminating one or more camp events. One person claimed that camp events have “eliminated the real purpose of rodeo.” Another gay rodeoer exclaimed, “Camp events have nothing to do with being a cowboy.”<sup>102</sup> Similarly, in 1996, the Golden State Gay Rodeo Association submitted proposed rule changes to IGRA which suggested the elimination of goat dressing, the implementation of time limits on camp events, and the removal of camp events from consideration for the All-Around title. For members of the California association, “The other 3 events are more traditional rodeo events deserving of an All Around title.”<sup>103</sup> These comments reveal the association of the word “camp” with non-traditional, frivolous fun.

This perception of the frivolity of camp events was problematic in part because camp events were equivalent to “local events” at mainstream rodeos. Communities all over the West stage their own events, from chuck-wagon racing to goat tying. In fact, two of the camp events were based on earlier rodeo events, steer un-decorating and wild cow milking. These events were used throughout the early and mid-twentieth century to demonstrate a cowboy’s dexterity, strength, and ability to herd. Yet, because of a desire to establish distance between the supposed frivolity of effeminate camp and the seriousness of traditional rodeo, some rodeoers used the controversy of camp events to urge for a restricting and reduction of the boundaries of gay rodeo.

The debates about camp were often framed in terms of gay rodeo’s legitimacy. In the early days at the National Reno Gay Rodeo, several “real” rodeo cowboys, meaning men who

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<sup>102</sup> Questionnaires. *IGRA*, Autry National Center, Box 4, Questionnaires, 1990.

<sup>103</sup> GSGRA Proposed Rule Book Changes for IGRA Convention 1996, *IGRA*, Autry National Center, Box 35, 1996.

rode the straight circuits, looked askance at doing wild cow milking and barrel racing, which was considered “a girls’ event.”<sup>104</sup> Like Greg Olson, many men stated they had no desire to participate in the Reno rodeo because of the emphasis placed on camp events instead of rough stock or roping.<sup>105</sup> This notion has persisted, with three-term president of IGRA, Brian Helander, still referring to the “less risky” camp events as appropriate for a “novice” rodeoer in an interview with *Camp* magazine in 2010.<sup>106</sup> The lack of respect for camp events was buttressed by other groups in the gay community. For instance, in negotiations with the 1992 Gay Games committee, IGRA trustees were informed that only “traditional” events would be considered for inclusion.<sup>107</sup> The labeling of camp events as “non-traditional,” “light-hearted” and even “tenderfoot” has consistently lessened the prestige of participants in these events.<sup>108</sup>

Also while the camp events have involved theatrically embellished gender performance, camp has not exclusively denoted drag in the rodeo. In fact, only one of these events included a drag element, and as one gay rodeoer explained, it is not “real” drag, but instead a man “just putting on a dress.”<sup>109</sup> Gay rodeo capitalized on the image of hypermasculine cowboys in hyperfeminine dresses attempting to execute a difficult and dangerous task to bring pleasure to the audience through humor. The impulse behind this use of camp has been inclusive, using the frivolity of camp to make a serious statement about westernness. Simultaneously, however, the

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<sup>104</sup> “Ride ‘Em Cowboy: Reno’s Gay Rodeo,” *In Touch For Men*, 1978.

<sup>105</sup> Allen Kalchik, “IGRA Finals All Around Cowboy: Greg Olson” *Roundup*, Spring 1994, 16-17. See Patricia Nell Warren’s “Rodeo: Real Gay Cowboys and *Brokeback Mountain*,” in *The Lavender Locker Room* for a discussion of Olson’s career.

<sup>106</sup> “The Rodeo Issue,” *Camp*, September 2010.

<sup>107</sup> IGRA Trustees Meeting Minutes, Friday October 2, 1992, *IGRA*, Autry National Center, Box 10, 1992.

<sup>108</sup> The Branding Iron, Christmas 1992 newsletter for AGRA, *IGRA*, Autry National Center, Box 11, 1992.

<sup>109</sup> Personal conversation, Santa Fe, New Mexico, 2014.

sheer hilarity of this event perpetuates the idea that transvestism and femininity are still inherently external to the enactment of rodeo. In fact, even if a female was the “drag” she was required to perform hyperfemininity, not hypermasculinity. The official rule book explicitly stated, “The drag must wear female-type drag clothing and a wig.”<sup>110</sup> In “breaking stereotypes” about effeminate gay men, an explicit IGRA goal, generalizations about femininity and rodeo often persist.

Gay rodeoers at times also directly attacked drag, so readily accepted when hypermasculine, as not compatible with rodeo. Similar to rodeo queens in mainstream rodeos, IGRA royalty members fulfilled important, but largely ancillary, roles in the gay rodeo.<sup>111</sup> In the late 1980s and 1990s, IGRA’s royalty team consisted of a Ms., Miss, and Mr. titles, which went to a lesbian member, a female impersonator, and a gay male member respectively. IGRA utilized its royalty members as fundraisers and promoters, circulating through the crowd during the rodeo and holding shows during the evenings. Seen as spokespeople, instead of contestants, these members are supposed to add “a more glamorous aspect to the sport of rodeo,” and also take “people’s minds off the rough and tumble event in the rodeo arena.”<sup>112</sup> As fundraisers, the royalty members must have bubbly personalities which inspire laughter and gaiety among

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<sup>110</sup> Included in rule books at least as far back as the mid-1990s.

<sup>111</sup> At the Reno Gay Rodeo the titles of Ms., Miss., and Mr. were awarded. Ms. went to a lesbian community member, Mr. to a gay male community member, and Miss to a male in female drag. In 1978 there were no lesbian entrants for the Ms. competition, demonstrating the early lack of female participation. “Ride ‘Em Cowboy: Reno’s Gay Rodeo,” *In Touch For Men*, 1978. In 1986, IGRA adapted Reno’s local royalty competition into an organization-wide pageant, which would be held at the annual convention. Each local association was allowed to send their representatives to the national competition. In 2005, the MsTer title was added for a female to male transgendered person. Interesting that this title is added almost a decade after Drag King shows became popular and that this delay happened in a place that actually valued masculine women, see Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998). The three original scored categories, western wear, horsemanship, and personality, have been expanded to five categories, including western wear, horsemanship, interview, public presentation, and entertainment. This format more closely mimics a beauty pageant.

<sup>112</sup> Ron Neff, “He, She, & ??” *Roundup*, Spring 1993.

spectators. Antics like selling raffle tickets by inseam length allow the royalty court physical access to the crowd and results in playful touching, measuring, and teasing. Many of these entertainers entered the IGRA royalty contest not through involvement with the rodeo, but instead through connections with the Imperial Court System and other charitable organizations.<sup>113</sup> Less integral to rodeo as a masculine sport, rodeo queens, both gay and straight, have been imagined as the feminine counterparts who soften or glamourize rodeo.

Indeed, despite their large contributions to gay rodeo culture, drag queens have often been denigrated or marginalized. In his experience of the gay rodeo in the late 1980s, Darrel Yates Rist described one man's opinion about the rodeo queens: "It makes me *sick* to see somethin' as nelly as that. I haven't got no use for it at all. People sees that kind of thing and they think all the queers are that ways. It's enough to make you stay in a closet. Pro'ly from California anyways."<sup>114</sup> Similarly, another man joked, "I don't know if putting on makeup is really a sport [laughs] [...] I don't think you're really fulfilling the mission of IGRA, which is to promote and preserve the Western lifestyle. Uh, obviously there were gay cowboys [during the nineteenth century], but I don't know how many of them, uh, were drag cowboys [laughs]."<sup>115</sup> Some cowboys complained about drag queens fighting back against homophobic slurs during the rodeo, referring to this behavior as "tacky."<sup>116</sup> Another cowboy wrote to IGRA condemning the organizer of an after-rodeo party for "subjecting" the audience to a "lengthy performance by

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<sup>113</sup> Interview, *First Hand Events*, souvenir issue of gay rodeo, 1989. Evidence for continued connections to the Imperial Court exist in letters sent between the organizations, for instance: Letter from Jaye Sutherland Empress XI to Mr. Wayne Jakino, *IGRA*, Astry National Center, Box 1, Colorado Gay Rodeo Documents, June 1984.

<sup>114</sup> Rist, *Heartlands*, 104.

<sup>115</sup> Heibel, Todd. *An Arena for Belonging?: A Spatial Hinge Point Perspective on Citizenship at the Gay Rodeo*. (PhD Dissertation, Pennsylvania State University, 2005): 179-180.

<sup>116</sup> *In Touch for Men*, 1981.

female impersonators.”<sup>117</sup> In searching for legitimacy as a “real” rodeo, gay cowboys often reiterated old stereotypes that derided effeminate gay men and questioned the authenticity of male-to-female drag.

The impulse to trivialize hyperfemininity in gay rodeo demonstrated how fully the enactment of femininity had been externalized from a larger gendered imagined West. Rodeo queens by the 1980s had embraced a new level of hyperfemininity, especially with big hair, sequins, and copious makeup. At a time when Miss Rodeo USA was first being aired on television, femininity’s place in rodeo was to bring glamour to the arena and aid men in their athletic endeavors. One female interviewee to rodeo anthropologists Craig J. Forsyth and Carol Y. Thompson, stated in the early 2000s,

Let’s face it, women just can’t and shouldn’t ever be allowed to compete in the regular PRCA events. Like I said before, there are many other places where women are more useful in rodeo than in the arena. . . . Look to the production side of things . . . without women secretaries, timers, producers, mothers, wives, and sisters our men wouldn’t be able to rodeo anyways . . . making it happen so our men can go out and compete. Rodeo is about our tradition and our western heritage where a man was a man and a woman was a lady.<sup>118</sup>

Even as the Girl’s Rodeo Association was rebranding itself as the Professional Women’s Rodeo Association in the 1980s, strict dress codes, including a ban on jeans, were implemented to craft a particularly genteel image of women in mainstream rodeo. Campy femininity belonged on the sidelines of rodeo, keeping time and waving to the crowd. Gay rodeo, which invited men to wear dresses and gayly camp-it-up, ultimately tore open raw and festering wounds surrounding the inauthenticity of femininity in the West through open debate.

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<sup>117</sup> Letter from Paul Schaming to IGRA, *IGRA*, Autry National Center, Box 34, Correspondence, 1996.

<sup>118</sup> Craig J. Forsyth and Carol Y. Thompson, “Helpmates of the Rodeo: Fans, Wives, and Groupies,” *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 31, no. 4 (November 2007): 403.

Camp events staged gender-bending as humor, marked the rodeo as gay, and kept gay rodeo amateur. The events also rapidly became associated with effeminacy, frivolity, and flamboyancy, marking the outer limits of gay rodeo's expansiveness. LGBT historian Daniel Harris argued in 1997 that by embracing the "costume dramas of the new machismo [...] we became our own worst enemies, harsh, homophobic critics of the campy demeanor of the typical queen."<sup>119</sup> The shift in gay culture to eschew the "failed male" stereotype by over-performing masculinity interlocked with late twentieth century pretend cowboys' over-performance of westernness and the rejection of hyperfemininity. For white American men, cowboy masculinity depended on camp as exaggerated performance, yet it was never understood as such. Instead, playing cowboy was attached to Americans' ability to delve into the fantastical and recover the authentic. In contrast, camp indulged in the inauthentic feminine. In gay rodeo, the tensions surrounding fun and seriousness, femininity and masculinity, fantasy and camp, and professionalism and amateurism were self-consciously rendered visible and staged for an audience in a way that remained impossible in other arenas.

### **The Seriously Frivolous and the Frivolously Serious: Troubling the Gendered Order**

Gay rodeo not only peeled back the skin of fantasy that surrounded gay and straight masculinities in the late twentieth century, it also posed a threat to the gendered order as its members used play to make all genders and sexualities visible as a performance. By undoing the strict separation between the feminine and masculine, and the authentic and the inauthentic, gay rodeo troubled cowboyhood in new ways. Playing cowboy and playing gay may have existed as gendered sides of a spectrum, but the pendulum swung back and forth for many gay rodeoers as they searched for the meaning of their West. Particularly important to the rodeo has been the use

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<sup>119</sup> Daniel Harris, *The Rise and Fall of Gay Culture* (New York: Hyperion, 1997) quoted in Nardi, *Gay Masculinities*, 5.



of camp to transform “the serious into the frivolous.” As Susan Sontag commented in her foundational “Notes on ‘Camp,’” “The whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious. Camp is playful, anti-serious. More precisely, Camp involves a new, more complex relationship to ‘the serious.’ One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious.”<sup>120</sup> If fun and seriousness could both define gay rodeo, then the hypermasculine West could be converted to frivolous and effeminate camp could be read as serious.

Gay rodeo breached the structural integrity of fun and seriousness as hermetically sealed concepts. In the face of stern debate, camp events survived because IGRA members maintained a desire to stay inclusive. Thus while femininity and campy performance were often seen as unrelated to the cowboy, gay rodeo made space for the possibility of play. Eventually, camp events came to be accepted as serious competitions, as well as good fun. While announcing a 2005 rodeo, the announcer stated, “Even though this is fun and a camp event, people take it so seriously.”<sup>121</sup> The wild drag race rapidly gained a reputation for producing a high number of injuries as people are dragged, stomped, and pitched off the steer’s back. In 1995, the Health and Safety Committee even recommended “the elimination and replacement of the Wild Drag Race or at least look into ways of making this event safer. (This event has the highest injury rate!).”<sup>122</sup> Furthermore, due to their importance to the contestants’ point-tallies, the rules have become increasingly clear and strict as to what “riding” a steer entails or how long a ribbon must stay tied on the steer’s tail. Rule contestations and formal grievances were regular occurrences

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<sup>120</sup> Susan Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” *Parisian Review* 31, no. 4 (Fall 1964), reprinted in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject—a Reader*, ed Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 62. Camp is a practice that has a complex and heterogeneous history, with incredibly diverse forms. Larger debates surround camp include its relationship to homosexuality, sexism, and high and low culture.

<sup>121</sup> 2005 Southern Spurs Rodeo, video 2, Cowboy Frank Harrell.

<sup>122</sup> Convention Report from Health & Safety Committee, *IGRA*, Autry National Center, Box 35, Convention Schedules, Meeting minutes, Reports, 1995.

because such enjoyable events have been deemed integral and important to gay rodeo through the all-around champion points system. The frivolous became serious for many gay rodeoers, contesting the separation.

Gay rodeoers also combined hypermasculinity with effeminacy in a space otherwise reserved for only masculinity. When asked if a transgender woman should participate in the male or female category Bergmann answered, “There’s a lot of mythology surrounding cowboys and it’s funny to see that some of our best cowboys are in reality the nelliest queens.”<sup>123</sup> In this moment, the word “funny” marked the gap between performed femininity and the assumed masculine space of rodeo. This gap was routinely theatricalized in gay rodeo. In particular, IGRA newsletters and internal press coverage embraced gender-bending and flamboyant language in its descriptions of its own rodeos. Phrases like, “Well honey if you can’t stand the heat get out of the kitchen. (Snap)!” were much more likely to appear in internal forms of communication than in interactions with mainstream journalists or even the gay press.<sup>124</sup> Affected effeminacy was perfectly acceptable, as was self-referential criticisms, “It was obvious the gay rodeo was in town the moment we stepped off the plane; witness the memorable sight of a cowboy throwing a ‘hissy-fit.’”<sup>125</sup>

Indeed, gay rodeo heroes, like Greg Olson, were described in terms of both cowboy masculinity and campy effeminacy. As one journalist remarked about Greg Olson’s Arizona ranch house, “The entire place could be the setting for some tough-talking fifties Western, especially the spacious living room with its rough-hewn paneling, lodge-pole furnishing, and

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<sup>123</sup> “Renaissance Cowboy,” *RoundUp*, August 1995, 26.

<sup>124</sup> “The Brassy Cowboy,” *GRA Newsletter*, November 1992, *IGRA*, Autry National Center, Box 8, 1992.

<sup>125</sup> *NMGRA Connection Newsletter* March 1991, *IGRA*, Autry National Center, Box 4, *NMGRA News*, 1991.

trophy mounts and cowhide rungs. There's an unmistakable odor present; horses, leather, and men. You betcha Pardner, this is a real cowboy bunkhouse, just like in the movies." Like Ralph Lauren and Ronald Reagan, Olson built a home that celebrated the performance of western masculinity. Yet, as the magazine notes, "Only in the movies, the cowboys never called each other 'sister' and they didn't share their beds with other cowboys like they do at Greg's."<sup>126</sup> Within the gay rodeo community, the enactment of gender fluidity demonstrated the ways in which all masculinities were performance.

Perhaps the most significant orchestrators of confluence between the seriously hypermasculine and the frivolously effeminate at the gay rodeo were the rodeo clowns. Rodeo clowns, characters who have united fun and seriousness through camp and drag in mainstream rodeo for over a century, uniquely experienced the complexities of rodeo drag as both liberating and constraining in terms of gender and sexuality. One gay rodeo clown noted the change which came over him in his costume, "It requires a lot of energy to play with the crowd, and it brings out a part of me that you don't normally see. I'm a very quiet and retiring person, but under this make-up and in this costume, I can get away with anything I want." Specifically this enjoyment and play was put into terms of anonymous sex as he admitted, "I enjoy molesting pretty men but I'd never talk to them if it weren't for this make-up. [...] Of course they like it. It embarrasses them but they don't take me seriously. I know now what it's like for people who do drag, because when I'm out there playing the audience and having a good time with them and embarrassing them to death, they don't know who I am - they know me as Bullshot, the clown, but not Dwight." Yet, despite the playful enjoyment and sexual potential of the arena-bounded relationship between cowboy and clown, through costuming and antics the clown is also

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<sup>126</sup> Kalchik, "IGRA Finals All Around Cowboy: Greg Olson," *Roundup*.

ultimately emasculated and de-sexualized. When asked if he had a good sex life as a clown, he answered, “No, absolutely not. Would you fuck with someone who looks like this?”<sup>127</sup> Clowns, also known as in rodeo as bull-fighters, play both sides of the spectrum as they use hilarity to steadfastly protect the safety of contestant. In doing so, they are both hypermasculine and effeminate, serious and playful, and sexual and de-sexualized, providing for fluidity in gender and sexual performance rarely seen elsewhere in the imagined West.

For American men who embraced the fantasy of cowboyism in the late twentieth century, gay cowboys were troubling because they made their costumes too obvious and were too willing to publically frolic and play, playing gay infected the authentic impulse to play cowboy with the inauthentic feminine. Gender and sexual fluidity within the gay rodeo community staged a collapse of the boundaries which separated feminine and masculine, urban and rural, gay and straight, and authentic and inauthentic.

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<sup>127</sup> “Send in the Clowns,” *First Hand Events*, souvenir issue of gay rodeo, 1989.

## **Conclusion**

### **Thrust to the Margins: Rodeo Communities and the Construction of Multiple Wests**

#### **Embodiments of the West**

The three forms of rodeo analyzed in “Riding Bareback” demonstrate how real people embodied ideals of westernness, constructing and deconstructing multiple wests over the twentieth century. Through early mainstream rodeos, the Texas State Prison Rodeo, and the International Gay Rodeo Association, cowboys and cowgirls contested, confirmed, and reconfigured meanings of westernness as they sought to find a place for themselves as both westerners and Americans. Unlike previous studies of the imagined West, my study places marginalized groups of people into conversation with each other in order to demonstrate how different populations of men and women used rodeo as an affirmation of their own place in the mythology of the frontier and their own legitimacy as Americans in the twentieth century. Together these rodeo histories render visible the changing debates about westernness over the past century, as each of these rodeos exposed continuity and change in stories of American authenticity, persistent entanglements of gender and sexuality, and the politics of performance and power.

Throughout the twentieth century, diverse groups of people used the performance of westernness in rodeo to prove their authenticity as westerners and Americans. People created and performed a variety of wests both within and beyond the geographical region of the US West, as seen with early cowgirls competing in Europe, mid-century urban rodeos in New York City, and 1990s gay rodeos in Washington DC. In these spaces, westernness was often staged as a consumable cultural good for non-western people. For the rodeoers involved with these events,

however, westernness provided a means to prove their authentic Americanness. From 1920s rodeo cowgirls emphasizing their dedication to the healthy, white American family to 1980s gay rodeoers stressing their serious commitment to rodeo as an American tradition, westernness and particularly cowboyness provided structure to marginalized groups' greater claims to a place in an American narrative of triumph.

For many people in these case studies, much of the anxiety surrounding their potential exclusion from the American polity and their need to defend their legitimacy sprang from the persistent conflation of racialized ideas of gender and sexuality. Sex and sexuality informed both the everyday lives and the cultural image of rodeo cowboys and girls. Cowgirls in the early twentieth century were often drawn to the rodeo because of sexual relationships, anchored to the circuit through marriage and children, and also vulnerable to sexual assault or slander because of their tenuous positions as overly-masculine performers. By the mid-twentieth century, however, women in mainstream rodeo no longer needed to defend their sexuality because their roles in rodeo had been reduced to gender appropriate forms of performance. Rodeo queens rose to prominence and female bronc-riders were pushed to the sidelines.

The equation of gender and sexuality, however, did not die out in the rodeo arena. In the mid- and late-twentieth century, convict cowboys and gay rodeoers both contended with the gendered implications of homosexuality. As the public panic around homosexuality reached new heights after World War II, Texas prison officials used the rodeo to reassert heteronormative structure through the inclusion of free-world women performers and by allowing cowboys, to a limited degree, the ability to interact with free-world women in the crowd. Officials also used the funds from rodeo to build new dormitories that they hoped would reduce the rate of homosexual encounters, both forced and consensual. Gay cowboys, especially, faced homophobia grounded

in their assumed effeminacy and the supposed incompatibility of rodeo and femininity. At times, some gay rodeoers went so far in their rebuff of effeminacy that they helped maintain and create gendered hierarchies within a space meant to be inclusive.

The gendered, sexualized, and racialized dynamics of marginalized rodeoers' lives also exposed the politics of power and humiliation in the performance of the West. In the arena, early cowgirls were often at the mercy of the men who paid their contracts or winnings. They were also subject to the whims of their audiences and the wills of their husbands. Events like the Chase for a Bride, with a cowgirl being happily captured by a man from a horde of whooping cowboys, played out these vulnerabilities to the glee of the crowds. Their precarious positions only increased in the 1930s when white, male rodeo cowboys began organizing in order to ensure their rights to fair pay as performers. Women and people of color were often excluded from these associations, leaving them to fend for themselves in terms of finding contracts and having the terms of those contracts fulfilled.

Coercion was particularly important in the case of prison rodeo, where many people in the crowd found humor in the excruciating pain of an injured inmate cowboy. Women, in particular, were put in hypersexualized events that evoked hilarity at their ineptness instead of respect for their skills. Organizers' attempts to create an atmosphere of humiliation and audiences' desires for blood-sport, however, were often rejected by convict cowboy themselves. Like gay cowboys who reveled in their own gaiety and laughed along with the crowd during difficult and dangerous camp events, many convict cowboys derived great pleasure and pride from their performances. As a negotiation between a promoter's wishes, an audience's

expectations, and an athlete's interpretation, rodeo reveals the competing desires of all those involved with no single actor's vision creating the final cultural product.<sup>1</sup>

While each of these individual stories provides a piece of the puzzle in terms of rodeo as a space where issues of authenticity, gender, and humiliation have been negotiated, told in conjunction with each other, these stories provide a larger image of the fluidity of westernness and how real people lived out shifting cultural ideals. Popular western fiction of the twentieth century often only illustrates the emergence of the white, male, heterosexual cowboy image that grew to prominence in the mid-twentieth century. The lives of rodeoers, in contrast, illuminate the diversity of people participating in the claiming of western identity through the bodily performance of the West, particularly as they struggled to assert their authenticity as Americans. These core concerns of twentieth-century rodeo communities have informed the creation of new forms of rodeo and new points of contact between the rural and the urban, the local and the global, and the real and the imagined.

### **A Look Forward: Rodeo and Westernness in the Twenty-First Century**

As rodeo has entered its third century, the construction of multiple wests, especially global wests, continues today. Throughout the twentieth century, rodeos performed in both small towns and large cities and in both America and abroad. As rodeo performances continue to adapt, however, it is clear that new urban rodeos do not so much perform the rural for the urban, as create new hybrids of rurality and urbanity within an increasingly globalized West. In many ways, rodeo has become polarized over the last several decades, becoming even more local and

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<sup>1</sup> The desire to see cowboys thrown is also somewhat present in mainstream rodeo. While no one wants to see anyone seriously injured, bad wrecks are almost as entertaining as a good ride. In fact, sound managers will often play humorous sound effects or clips from songs that get the crowd laughing at a tossed cowboy. In Professional Bull Riding, animals are even at times cheered more aggressively than cowboys, according to interviews from PBR representatives, bull merchandise even outsells cowboy merchandise. Ed Godfey, "The Real Stars," *The Oklahoman*, February 15, 2007 and Michael Park, "No Bull: Bull Riding Fastest Growing Sport," *Fox News*, February 7, 2006.



more global at the same time. As rodeo has become increasingly detached from the everyday lives of western Americans, western urban audiences now view it as a quaint reminder of their imagined regional past.

In 2013, I attended the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo in Houston, Texas. Climbing the switchbacks of Reliant Stadium and taking my seat perched at an alarmingly vertical angle above the dirt arena, I noted the distinct dissimilarities of watching a hometown rodeo to watching rodeo in a major urban stadium built for a capacity crowd of seventy-thousand. Unlike small local rodeos, where a spectator must depend on the announcer for information about contestants and must keep their own record of scores posted by cowboys, at the Houston Rodeo twenty-foot screens provided advertisements, score rankings, and interview footage. Coming from all over the state, metropolis and hinterland alike, two million people attend this month-long fair, carnival, and rodeo annually. People decked out in their best western wear, primarily groups of Mexican American men, walked side-by-side with teenagers in cargo shorts and flip flops. As the rodeo action picked up, a mixture of pop, rock and roll, and country music blared from the loud speakers. Within this cacophonous space, the Houston rodeo successfully sold spectators an experience that balanced the imagined past with present realities and urban landscapes with rural nostalgia.<sup>2</sup>

As rodeo continues to adapt, it has become in some venues part local carnival and part global sport. Negotiated between an audience, an athlete, and an organizer, rodeos allow the

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<sup>2</sup> That morning I had seen first-hand how the racial regimes of this southwestern state still operated, even in spaces that were meant to contest inequality. Sitting in a mostly white crowd, sipping free alcohol that was served to me by a mostly black wait staff, I watched as prominent and wealthy Houstonites gathered together to bid on champion stock. Their money would go to 4H, a youth farming organization, providing hundreds of scholarships to underprivileged, often rural, kids in Texas. I sat shocked as the grand champion steer was auctioned off for a whopping four hundred thousand dollars. The other spectators roared their approval of this gargantuan contribution to the scholarship fund by banging yardsticks against the wooden bleachers, creating a thunderous endorsement for charity through public spectacle.

multi-faceted complexity of western identities to be fully performed on a variety of stages.

“Riding Bareback” shows that the gender performances in rodeo, as they intersect with race and sexuality, illuminate how people have written region onto their bodies and into their lives.

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