

**Bucking Nationalism:
Masculinity, Patriotism and the Political Rodeo**

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Abstract

The rodeo has long been a tool for America to understand nationalism and the American West. The space has been traditionally geared towards masculinity, telling the story of how the men conquered the West and tamed wild beasts. While rodeo remains an essential political tool of American nationalism, it has also served as a space for groups to challenge dominant narratives. Through non-traditional spaces, Black, gay, and other diverse rodeo spaces have created an environment that challenges normative American nationalism. This work studies these spaces and the people associated with the rodeo to understand the political space of rodeos. Looking at rodeos as a contact zones, this paper researches Buffalo Bill's Wild West and the creation of mythology in the West, explores nationalism, and defines political space. Finally, the study of a diversity of rodeos concludes with a new understanding of the power of the Rodeo in American culture.

Bucking Nationalism: Masculinity, Patriotism and the Political Rodeo

From John Wayne to the Apollo Astronauts, the Texas Prison Rodeo linked America's celebrities to prisoners in the "Wildest Show Behind Bars." From 1931 to 1986, hundreds of thousands flocked to Huntsville, TX, to witness the danger and freedom of Rodeo (Roth, 2016). With events deemed too dangerous for regular rodeo, the Texas Prison Rodeo mashed America's growing fascination with Western culture with the horrors of Jim Crow America. The intersection of race and rodeo in Texas indicates the broader challenges in defining identity through the context of Western culture. While Rodeo and Western culture is predominantly linked to whiteness and John Wayne stereotypes, Black, Latino, and queer culture have heavily contributed to the political and cultural space of rodeo.

The pageantry and practices of the performers and the audience shape the modern rodeo. Prayer at the beginning of the night, competition, and the rodeo clown shape the experience. These ritual rodeo events highlight the flow and operation of power (Stoetje, 1993). To argue that rodeos exist in a political and cultural space, focusing on the defining ritual is essential. Victor Turner states that ritual is a "quintessential custom in that it represents a distillate or condensation of many secular customs and natural regularities" (Turner, 1967). The shared and differing practices of rodeo make up the ritual that shapes the concept of political space. The ritual of rodeo is a study of American culture, politics, and power. Thus, the rodeo operates as a contact zone, "social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they lived out in many parts of the world today" (Pratt, 1991, p.34). Rodeo's deep-rooted traditions conflict with the many cultures and identities that the participants hold.

The professional rodeo circuits' current grounding in white and masculine practices has left many excluded from a sport that is quintessentially American. Furthermore, the diversity of participants leads Americans from all backgrounds to interact at the event and explore their intersectionality. Kimberly Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality finds that people's social and political identities correlate with the privileges and disadvantages they face (Crenshaw, 1991, p.1242). Combining the ideas of political space, contact zones, and intersectionality, I argue that the rodeo provides a forum for understanding nationalism, race, and gender in the American West through rodeo.

However, before further exploring the power dynamics of rodeo, careful consideration must be made of the political space. The rodeo is more than the grandstands, lights, and arena. Instead, it is the product of decades of cultural interaction and American western expansion. First, America's fascination with the manifest destiny, our god-given right to seize and conquer the West, and the rodeo "immediately evokes the romance of the West, complete with thundering cattle stampedes and gun-toting outlaws" (Stoeltje, 1989, p.244). Yet, movies and shows have long presented America with an idealized and mythical version of the West (Ford, 2012, p. 1). In reality, rodeo developed from a conglomeration of European and Mexican ranching skills that formed into competition in the late nineteenth century (LeCompte, 1985, p. 21). Since then, rodeo has spread nationwide and found homes in many International venues. Professionalization has spread in the rodeo's linkage with the American West, transcending the boundaries of sport. Elyssa Ford argues that because rodeo connects to identity in so many ways, it finds many ways for people to state that they belong.

Therefore, I argue that rodeo is a political space, referring to Julie-Anne Boudreau's conceptualization of a new political space. Three hallmarks of new political spaces are that they "create allegiance and legitimacy with inhabitants", "instrumentalize the political culture," and are, "strategically utilize spatial tools in a flexible manner"(Boudreau, 2007, p. 2594). This conceptualization of political spaces shifts the focus to the communities and individuals rather than governments or nation-states to understand political culture. Just as rodeo has become a pathway for nationalism and masculinity, diverse groups have used rodeo for community organizing, responding to crises, and creating agency. Rodeo invites contact between outsiders and people with rodeo in their veins, inviting them to grapple with the legacy of the Wild West and the future of the United States.

Before further examining the rodeo, I would like to turn to understanding the political and cultural space of the American West. While rural America is mainly conservative and religious, it is not a monolith. There remain significant differences among communities, especially Black communities in the South and Indigenous communities in the West. Moreover, the changes to Rural America's economy and an influx of immigrants of color are challenging spaces and the identity of communities. (Leitner, 2012) Leitner argues that global economic changes and restructuring have "catalyzed tensions and conflicts between long-term residents and new immigrants" (Leitner, 2012). These changes confront the question of what it means to be American and who is included in rural spaces. These growing cultural and racial differences closely map to the issue of inclusion in the Rodeo. Leitner finds that the bodies of black and brown immigrants are perceived to be out of place and in conflict with the stereotypes and norms of white American spaces. This narrative pushes for black and brown bodies to fit into "Anglo

conformity.” Therefore, fear and prejudice are built on the history of American nationalism rather than individual interactions (Leitner, 2012). Rodeo has faced these same challenges of belonging with the White heterosexual nature of the rodeo circuit. (Scofield, 2019)

Buffalo Bill and the Beginnings

Buffalo Bill Cody was a man of many talents. While debate persists around the integrity of many of his life's stories, Cody was born in 1846 and would soon find himself in the Great Plains as a buffalo hunter. Cody’s life coincides with the era of manifest destiny and American Expansion westward. In the 1860s and 70s, Cody served as an Army scout during the Indian wars. His escapades during this time would begin to gain him notoriety and national attention. In 1872, Cody received a medal of honor, marking him as one of the few civilians ever to receive this award. Cody began his career in Wild West shows in 1872, putting on vaudeville performances of the battles won and heroics of the American Cowboy. However, 1883 would mark the beginning of Cody’s show and its rise as the most popular attraction of the American West. By 1893, the show had found its stride: "Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders of the World” featured cowboys, Indians, and riders from other international horse cultures.

Buffalo Bill Cody’s show emerged at an opportune time to help explain and shape American culture. The United States had recently emerged from the Civil War, and Western expansion had left the country with new territory to understand. The violence, ruggedness, and potential of the American West captured the hearts and minds of the nation seeking to redefine itself after the Civil War. The show both created and featured staples of American Westward

expansion: using sharp shooting, stories of the Pony Express, stagecoach robberies, roping, and bull riding; the show mixed authentic and highly theatricalized elements of America West.

William ‘Buffalo Bill’ Cody actively uses narrative and story to craft the idea of the Wild West. The title was “Buffalo Bill’s Wild West,” and Cody declared it improper to call it a show, “From its inception in 1882 it was called ‘The Wild West’, a name that identified it as a ‘place’ rather than a mere display or entertainment” (Slotkin, 1992, p. 67). With 500 performers, Buffalo Bill walked the audience through different epochs of American History. The program began in the Primeval Forest, and the natives greeted the pilgrims. Then, cut to the settlement of the Great Plains and the heroics of settlers and native attacks. Cody situated his program as a statement of historical fact, “Leading figures of American military history, from the Civil War through the Plains Indian Wars, testified in print to the Wild West’s accuracy and its value as an inculcator of patriotism”(Slotkin, 1992, p. 68). The “Wild West” intentionally told the story of Native savages and American heroes taming the West as both a profitable venture and an interpretation of American history.

One of the most controversial elements of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West was the inclusion and treatment of Native Americans. However, Wild West shows provided one of the only venues for cross-cultural interaction: “For many white Americans, their only contact with Indian people was through the medium of performance, and for many American Indians, their only way of representing themselves to white Americans was through performance” (Maddox, 2002, p. 9). The Wild West shows were contact zones that explored the “savagery” but also gave natives the ability to craft their meaning from the performances. (Bruner and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2002). One of the creations of the Wild West Show was its authenticity: “The presence of a few

representative individuals who had been there confirmed that these reproductions were based on firsthand knowledge and experience” (McNenly, 2012, p. 73). From famous Native American chiefs such as Sitting Bull and Kicking Bear to veteran cavalry scouts, Wild West shows pushed the idea that the stories were genuine reenactments of the process of settling the West. However, despite their inclusion, Native Americans were still the subject of stories that painted them as savages, as shows “privileged the knowledge and experience of frontiersmen and cowboys, that is, of dominant white society” (McNenly, 2012, p. 73). This positioning often led natives to be portrayed as “Noble Savages,” children of Eden connected to nature, uncivilized and backward.

One of the most popular performances was the “Last Ride of General Custer,” depicting the battle of Little Bighorn and the subsequent heroics of Buffalo Bill. As an advert for an international show states:

The central figure in these pictures is that of THE HON. W. F. CODY (Buffalo Bill), to whose sagacity, skill, energy, and courage, as a Scout, Guide, Frontiersman, and Indian Fighter, the settlers of the West owe so much for the reclamation of the prairie from the savage Indian and wild animals, who so long opposed the march of civilization” (William Cody Archive, 1887).

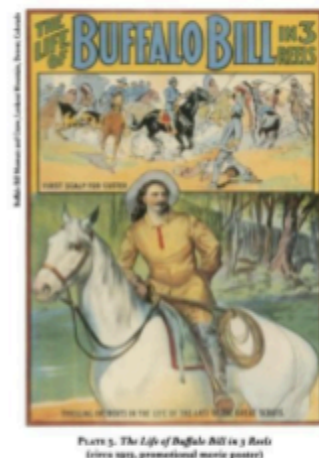
To achieve these aims, Buffalo Bill acted as the hero who avenged the savage death of General Custer at The Battle of Little Bighorn. In June of 1876, 3000 native Sioux and Cheyenne warriors defeated General Custer and his 200 men who were trying to move them to a reservation. The defeat caught the nation's attention, and the government used the event to portray natives as savages. Weeks later, during a minor skirmish between cavalry scouts and Cheyenne, Cody took a long-range shot, killing Yellow Hair. He then scalped his head, raising it

above his head, and declared it the “first scalp for Custer.” This action would become central to America's response and vision of the West through the show’s portrayal of the event.

Images of this event were used to promote the show and build the celebrity of Buffalo Bill at the expense of Native Americans.²⁰ This segment relied on America's racialized fears of natives as a defense of American imperialism and westward expansion. As Warren puts it, “The Custer reenactment did speak to American fears of race war and class strife, and it did express a public yearning for the American empire and the restoration of an endangered masculinity” (Warren, 2009, p. 52).

Figure 1

Custer and Buffalo Bill Plates



Note. Adapted from *Native Performers in Wild West Shows: From Buffalo Bill to Euro Disney*, by William McNenly, 2012.

One of the most popular productions at Buffalo Bill's Wild West was the attack on a settlers' cabin. In nearly every production this spectacle featured a band of natives on horseback attacking a log cabin and Buffalo Bill and a band of cowboys heroically driving them off. This scene explored the intersection of gender and white Americans' anxieties about settling the West and Natives. The cabin or homestead represented a gendered space; in the show, a wife and family occasionally appeared as needing saving. As Warren puts it, "they were attacking more than a building with some white people in it. In the minds of many in the audience, the piece resonated of an attack on whiteness, on family, and domesticity itself" (Warren, 2009, p.55). The performance showed natives as hostile actors who could no longer live in the West. It also reinforced masculinity, presenting the cowboy as a noble hero taming the West and defending his family from savagery.

While Native Americans were heavily stereotyped bodies during this era, McNenly pushes back against Wild West shows solely being a place of "colonial mimicry," arguing that through the "modification of warrior songs, the experience of dance, and the expression of identity through dress," Native Americans were able to reclaim agency in their performance (McNenly, 2012). While many songs and dances were outlawed, the Wild West show allowed these performances to continue developing despite the hardships of discrimination and reservations. The songs adapted for the Wild West performances would become Lakota soldiers' victory songs during World War I, honoring the Lakota people's heritage as warriors (Young Bear and Theisz, 1994). This allowed Native American traditions to be practiced in plain sight at a time when they were broadly outlawed (McNenly, 2012). Despite some arenas for advancement, Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West still relied on the death and murder of Native Americans.

As the United States emerged from a costly civil war, Buffalo Bill Cody introduced the world to new ideas about American nationalism and westward expansion through the rodeo. The first foray into internationalism came in 1883 during the Chicago World's Fair. While not an official participant, Cody and his entourage set up right outside the main event in what the *Chicago Tribune* labeled “the greatest equestrian exhibition of the century” (Johnson, 2017). Buffalo Bill used this event alongside international touring to situate the American cowboy and culture as products of nationalism and masculinity. The first tool of the show was the “Congress of Rough Riders of the World,” a mixture of American Cowboys, Mexican Vaqueros, American Indians, Cossacks, Riffian Arabs, and the Argentine Gaucho. Representing members of the great horse-riding cultures of the world, the Congress elevated the position of the American cowboy. Moreover, the Congress also included soldiers from the armies of the United States, England, France, Germany, and Russia. While the Congress of Rough Riders showcased international cultures, it was also used as a competitive space to highlight the seniority of the American man.

Using promotional materials, Cody crafted the image of the American cowboy as elegant and superior. As the Buffalo Bill Project states, “Each group of men held certain traits or talents that set them apart as oddities and often described as peculiar, strange, or savage. Other men did not match up to the practical skill and intelligence of the American cowboy or U.S. cavalry rider” (The Buffalo Bill Project, n.d.). In the posters this is reflected with the riders of other cultures shown riding in circus-style poses compared to Buffalo Bill and his outfit shown winning battles or in regalia. This portrayal of the American cowboy and West soon gained immense international attention as the Buffalo Bill traveled to Europe in 1887. At the time, the War of 1812 and concerns of Britain supporting the confederacy still shaped the relationship

between both nations (Griffin and Dixon, 2010). However, Buffalo Bill proved extraordinarily popular among the crowds and royalty of Europe, “the kings of Belgium, Greece, Saxony, and Denmark, as well as an assortment of Europe’s princes and princesses, including the future German kaiser William II, joined England’s royal family to take in the Wild West performance” (Rydell and Kroes, 2005).

The sold-out shows thus exported American nationalism and exceptionalism to the world. For many in the European audience, there was an infatuation with Native Americans, with German critics praising their “good” nature and connection to the land. At the same time, there was a tragedy to the native portrayal, “Here on display, reenacting their historical defeat at the hands of whites, were literally the last of the Mohicans, the representatives of a vanishing race. Such, white Europeans and Americans agreed, was the course of history” (Rydell and Kroes, 2005). While the portrayal of natives subjugated them to history, the show served as an advertisement for America's future of manufacturing. For the European audience, the Colt revolver and Winchester rifle showcased the new inventions coming out of America and their link to taming the West, “The heart of the show was a display of shooting which ritualized the practical and symbolic role of guns in American culture” (Rydell and Kroes, 2005). The heroics and mythic creation of the cowboy was supported by the leap in manufacturing that made the show possible. Centering guns as part of the West reinforces masculinity and the violent nationalistic project to tame the West.

Buffalo Bill’s Rough Riders of the World directly coincided with Theodore Roosevelt’s Rough Riders of the Spanish-American War. The co-development of Cody’s rough riders and the 1st United States Volunteer Cavalry exploits in the War closely linked the Buffalo Bill creation

of western mythology to Roosevelt's exploits of American imperialism. Cody saved the life of Roosevelt's son Quintin in 1908, or at least that's what the Buffalo Bill's Wild West would have you believe. The son of the "Great White Father" was traveling in the stagecoach one night when he was attacked by Red Eagle and his band of Indians, luckily the HON. Buffalo Bill Cody was there to save the day. While a natural tension existed between the performer and Roosevelt, both men relied on the West. Cody and Roosevelt's masculinity centered around their development in the rugged west, both having built their character through the trials and tribulations of exploring the untamed (Johnston, 2017). As veterans returned from the Spanish-American War, many from Roosevelt's rough riders joined the show as part of its congress (Rodgers and Seefeldt, n.d). Joining the show offered legitimacy to Cody; it provided him with the heroes of the war and the stamp of authenticity when reenacting their battles. Cody was quick to defend that he had coined the term rough riders; as Roosevelt and his men gained notoriety, it proved the validity of Cody's congress of rough riders and the supremacy of American cowboys.

Nationalism and the Rodeo

For Bill Feddersen, an accomplished saddle-bronc rider, he knew he wanted to ride horses from a young age. When he got his first horse, a stick horse, he rode it to school and thought it could "walk, and the trot, to back up just like a big horse." When it was stolen outside school one day, the most upsetting part was that he had to walk home. While Feddersen's tale may be a bit of a wisecrack, the oral histories recorded by the Rodeo Historical Society emphasize how many of the rodeo greats were brought up in the business (Rodeo Historical Society, 2009). Outside of the luster and glamor of Buffalo Bill's Wild West, generations of

cowboys and cowgirls have come from the farms and ranches of the American West, making their name in the small-town rodeos.

Today, rodeos are found in hundreds of small towns and the marquee events of the Professional Bull Riders (PBR). The PBR rodeo circuit represents one end of the market with million-dollar productions. Featuring championship bulls traced back six generations and bred to buck, kick, and leap higher, and million dollar purses, the PBR traces its lineage to the showmanship of Buffalo Bill (Hicks and Dockins, 2022). On the other hand, hundreds of small town rodeos feature prize purses in the hundreds with local cowboys and animals. Despite this variance, the rodeo features many of the same events across disciplines with roping, bull and bronc riding, and steer wrestling being the main features of each event.

These traditions culminate on the biggest week of the year, Cowboy Christmas. Over the Fourth of July, cowboys blitz across the country, seeking to make thousands of dollars for seconds of riding. In this practice, Rodeo culture has become synonymous with American nationalism. Cementing rodeo, as closely linked to the holiday associated with the birth of the nation, leads to displays such as the national anthem and presentation of the American flag (Lohof, 2021). At this moment, the “professional” or “mainstream” rodeo is “a rodeo context primarily populated and patronized by a constructed majority of individuals that most often fall within the identity categories of white, straight, masculine, and U.S. American” (Vanderlinden, 2022). While nationalism can create positive bonds among members it can also foster exclusionary behavior and intolerance (Li and Brewer, 2004). While rodeo drives connection and identity among some, the overt celebration of American nationalism and intentional exclusion of groups indicate nationalism at rodeos. Nationalism in the United States is tied to the masculinity

of the West and its people. “Masculinity and nationalism articulate well with one another, and the modern form of western masculinity emerged at about the same time and place as modern nationalism” (Nagel, 1989). That development occurred at the same time that rodeo became the sphere to express these connections publicly as Buffalo Bill hosted shows and Theodore Roosevelt led the Nation. As Nagel further explains, “In the United States, masculinity was tightly woven into two nationalist, imperialist projects: manifest destiny, which justified and advocated westward expansion, and the Monroe Doctrine, which justified and extended the US sphere of influence to include the entire western hemisphere” (Nagel, 1998). While Roosevelt represented the legal and political side of shaping nationalism, the Rodeo was the performance art that helped Americans visualize and understand it.

Amidst the spectacle, the rodeo becomes a stage where the nation's values are showcased, embodying the masculinity and strenuous life that define the American ethos. However, the rodeo has also become a contact zone for nationalism to become a political identity. Benedict Anderson's “Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism” is a seminal work on forming nationalism in the Western world in the 18th and 19th centuries. In this book, Anderson introduces the concept of an “imagined community,” describing nations as socially constructed entities. He argues that nations are not merely products of objective realities but are imagined by their members who perceive themselves as part of a larger, shared community despite never meeting most of their fellow members (Anderson, 1991). Rodeo creates an imagined community in the American nationalism experiment. Across the country, Rodeo's shared practices and culture form strong bonds in the communities in which it exists. Forming the flexible political space that Boudreau calls “instrumentalizing political culture.”

While nationalism is intertwined with the rodeo, the rodeo can also positively celebrate town culture and history. In Steamboat, Colorado, skijoring celebrates the town's past of ski jumping and ranching in a competitive race to pick up rings at the winter carnival (Chambers, 2009). Similarly, across small town South Dakota, the rodeo has served as an economic engine, increasing tourism and providing community (Fosness, 2018). Currently, Montanans are coming together for a ballot initiative to make the rodeo the state sport in the next election. As a lifelong rancher and Montanain, Tony Hudson puts it, "I understand the social and cultural importance of the American Rodeo. For many Montana towns, the rodeo is the community event of the year. This is because it brings together a showcase of the Montana way of life, while preserving family traditions and western values" (Flint, 2023). In this moment, rodeo becomes part of the political culture by creating allegiance and legitimacy and defining what it means to be Montanain. As celebrations of the small towns, the rodeo is also a contact zone where family traditions and western values interact with tourism.

Gene Autry, the "Singing Cowboy" and legendary promoter of Rodeo events following World War II, listed the Ten Cowboy Commandments, number 10 was the Cowboy must be a patriot. Autry was influential in shaping the rodeo following the end of World War II, bringing popularity and authenticity to rodeo through his established past in Hollywood as the singing cowboy (Vanderlinden, 2022). Under Autry and during this period, the rodeo committed to the military and American nationalism as a response to the crisis of WWII. Similarly, rodeo has been used to respond and understand the September 11th attacks. Rodeo has thus become associated with a love of the country and the nationalist project rather than abstract concepts such as manifest destiny. The rodeo catered to the military, offering nights such as the Houston Rodeo

Armed Forces appreciation night or the National Patriot Night at the National Finals rodeo. Tributes, memorials, and recognition of service members all became part of a rodeo night. Rodeo's corporate partners, such as the iconic Wrangler jeans, have partnered with the professional circuits to support military families and institutions through the Wrangler National Patriot Tours. Through the program, artists, cowboys, and representatives have toured nearly every American theater of war, bringing music and western culture to the troops. In one video, Wrangler athletes are seen competing to put together a JDAM or guided bomb; in another, the program director states, "That's what this memorial tour has always been about: honoring the fallen and saluting those who have served" (Wrangler Network, 2019). These moments connect freedom to the rodeo to a nationalistic definition of freedom. Nostalgia and manifest destiny link to its white and militaristic history.

One of the most recognizable avenues for nationalism in the rodeo is the Country music that dominates the atmosphere. Country music has reflected trends in the rodeo and responded by becoming nationalistic and catering to white, working-class, conservative Americans. As Olivia Vanderlinden states, "Whiteness has become integral to the project of rodeo because of the way the sport's roots and country's history combine to craft a narrative of struggle, hard work, and patriotism that are deeply connected to the working class white experience in rural and semi-rural America" (Vanderlinden, 2022). Events such as the September 11th terrorist attacks were directly reflected in country music. Notable pieces such as Toby Kieth's "Courtesy of the Red White and Blue" express the jingoistic tendencies of the music and the country music scene. The song serves as a violent threat to those who attacked the United States on 9/11 and a celebration of the military and American Values. The crisis of 9/11 drew the rodeo and country

community into a shared identity where the rodeo became the forum to respond. As Ted Cruz stated in an interview, “My music taste changed on 9/11... I intellectually find this very curious, but on 9/11 I didn’t like how rock music responded. And country music collectively, the way they responded, it resonated with me. And I have to say, it just is a gut level. I had an emotional reaction that says ‘these are my people.’ And so ever since 2001 I listen to country music” (CBS News, 2015).

After the attack rodeo became a place where shared identity helped many understand the trauma associated with the terrorist attack. Through celebrating freedom, the military white, working-class, conservative Americans got agency in an unthinkable moment. The rodeo became a political space where they could respond. Audie Murphy, one of the most decorated soldiers of WWII, reflected on America's true meaning shortly after the war: "It's in a Texas rodeo, in a policeman's badge, in the sound of laughing children, in a political rally, in a newspaper... In all these things, and many more, you'll find America. In all these things, you'll find freedom. And freedom is what America means to the world. And to me.”After WWII and 9/11, people turned to the rodeo to help understand these events. The rodeo became symbolic of what it means to be American and freedom.

Buffalo Bill Cody centered his Wild West on the premise that manifest destiny and the white conquering of the Native Americans was part of the national project. This original sin would lead to a rodeo founded on nationalism and the exclusion of others. While Buffalo Bill needed Natives to make his show authentic, their subjugation was necessary to promote manifest destiny. Deceit and omission were needed to take a sport founded by Mexican and European ranchers to a symbol of nationalism and conservative white America. First, through outright bans

and unfair practices, the rodeo became whiter. For Black cowboys, “because Jim Crow laws relegated African Americans to second-class citizenship, few blacks were permitted to participate in white-promoted rodeos” (Pearson, 2004, p.192). Black and Indigenous riders were also given lower scores and faced discrimination from rodeo judges (Patton and Schedlock, 2011, p. 511). Similarly, under Gene Autry, the Rodeo Association of America removed women from competitive events, relegating them to the “safer” roles of rodeo queen and trick riding (George-Warren, 2009, p. 203). At the same time, the ever-popular Hollywood westerns “depicted the cowboy as a white American figure while relegating Mexicans, African Americans, and indigenous characters to limited and stereotypical roles” (Barraclough, 2019, p. 13).

Creating Agency

As the professional rodeo circuit and American culture solidified around nationalism and became more white, various groups were left out of the rodeo. This closure created a contact zone where the rodeo became the object of focus. For minority groups, women and LGBTQ individuals participating and drawing on the legacy of rodeo became a vital tool to build community, assert agency, and exist as an “American.” Rodeo’s centrality in our culture and the multicultural diverse backgrounds that have always been a part of it led to many groups creating their own rodeos and political spaces. While they were written out of one chapter of rodeo, the emergence of diverse rodeos suggests that rodeos carry significant cultural significance to many Americans.

Black Rodeos have provided a venue for Black cowboys and cowgirls to explore their relation to the West. While American history has erased black ranch labor, black rodeo has remained a venue to counteract this narrative. Situated in the crossroads of the South and West, Boley, Oklahoma was a refuge for Black Americans leaving the South in the early 1900's. (Scofield, 2019). Situated along the railroad, Boley promised economic uplift and self-governance for Black Americans. On Juneteenth 1905, Boley hosted a significant community event and rodeo to stimulate the economy and drive population growth. Boley quickly became the largest Black run town in America; however, by the 1960's Jim Crow, disenfranchisement, and violence had left the city in despair. In 1964, The New York Times opined, "Boley is a dream of the past which has faded in the brighter morning of the present" (Geis and Bittle, 1964).

Despite this, Boley retained a strong sense of pride and turned to the rodeo to foster a sense of identity and heritage. In the 1960s Boley turned to the rodeo to argue "that these performances served not just to celebrate black westerners' pioneer ancestors but also to recognize the collective participation of African Americans in building the United States" (Scofield, p. 111). The rodeo also combated Jim Crow and ideas about black inferiority. The people of Boley "embodied the rodeo as a way to improve their future." Thus, Black rodeo was a way for the individual and the community to have agency in their lives. At a time when the professional circuit excluded black cowboys, the formation of black rodeos was a direct response and "demonstrated how a sense of collective 'western heritage' operated as a pathway to national inclusion." The professional rodeos served as a contact zone where it became abundantly clear that Black cowboys were excluded from the nationalist myth created. Despite exclusion from the

professional circuit, Black Americans turned to the rodeo to develop agency and situate themselves in American culture. Black rodeos rely on this tension; as rodeo organizer Ivan McClellan put it, the cowboy is “a shorthand for independence and grit and all of these things about America, But then you combine it with Black culture, and it just wiggles your brain” (Lewis and Medina, 2019). McClellan’s Eight Seconds Rodeo, hosted on Juneteenth, celebrates Black culture and demands that black cowboys and cowgirls be included.

When Gene Autry banned women from rodeo events, it did not take long for them to respond. In 1948, the Girls Rodeo Association, now the Women's Professional Rodeo Association (WPRA), was formed to host women's rodeos. On the professional circuit, women rarely compete in roughstock, bull, and bronc riding, and are predominantly barrel race and feature as Rodeo Queens. In this setting, women are often hyper-feminized, and men hyper-masculinized in a way that does not mirror the history of the American West (Ford, 2012, p. 149). However, the history of women in rodeo paints a more complex picture. Scofield explains how women such as Tillie Baldwin used the rodeo circuit to craft their image. As an immigrant, Baldwin carefully created an image as a pioneer and woman in the early 1900’s. Forced to justify her place in the western canon, Baldwin used her physical grit and a “western” husband to justify her place as a “cowgirl.” While Baldwin benefited from being a white and Norwegian, western authenticity constantly challenged her place. However, Scofield writes of the early 1900s, “Unlike today’s fairly limited offerings of rodeo queening and barrel racing for women in rodeo, women of this golden era created and performed all manner of exciting stunts and shows for their audiences”(Scofield, 2019, p. 52). Since 1974, WPRA has crowned a champion in breakaway roping, a predominantly women's event. However, it was not until 2020

that the PRCA and National Finals Rodeo began hosting and supporting prize money for the event. As Jackie Crawford, a champion in the event, puts it, “People always think that breakaway has just come about, but the thing is if you go back and look at the numbers, the breakaway has been around for a very long time, It’s the opportunity to win that hasn’t been there.”(Riley, 2012). The expansion of women's events at the biggest rodeos indicates a sport grappling with who is included. While the rodeo remains centered around men this reckoning changes decades of exclusion. These gains would not be possible without the formation of women's rodeos and organizations such as the WPRA that kept these traditions alive and fought for inclusion.

Gay rodeos emerged as a space for LGBTQ individuals to share and explore western culture (Ford, 2012, p. 153). The first Gay rodeos started in the 1970s and have since been a frequent object of the intersectionality of rodeo. The founder stated that the event was formed to combat the narrative that gay men have limp wrists. Challenging the complex relationship between masculinity and sexuality, the gay rodeos have featured community elements and aligned themselves with the fight against AIDS. Just as with many other groups, when traditional rodeo and nationalistic spaces focused on excluding gay athletes, the gay rodeo became a place of response. In 1988, “concerned citizens” forced a town to shut down a gay rodeo over fears about AIDS and general homophobia. Threatening to arrest anyone who showed up to the event fostered greater bonding within the community (Ford, 2012, p. 162). From the 1984 National Gay Rodeo Program, founder Phil Ragsdale’s opening letter recognizes that the event is being held under protest from Christian advocacy groups; however, he concludes, “WE ARE GLAD YOU ARE HERE.” Vice President Joseph Sedlak concurs, “They cannot stop the rodeo, as it is our Constitutional right.” Sedlak also confirms that all the profits from the event will go towards

AIDS foundations. More importantly, the rodeo program served as a guide to the safe clubs, hotels, and services that were inclusive. It also highlighted the events ranging from the traditional to the camp events that promoted inclusion—from offer steer dogging for both men and women to camp events such as goat dressing, putting clothes on a goat, or wild cow milking. Gay rodeo events focused on inclusivity and creating community. Gay rodeos blended the traditional gendered lines, creating space for political action and community bonding through rodeo. (Schofield, 2019, p.165). The gay rodeo was a response to the crisis of AIDS and the exclusion from the traditional space; in that moment, “the community rallied in crisis. And they rallied in love. But they absolutely rallied in crisis” (Zender, 2019).

Charros and Mexican rodeos are deeply rooted in both nations' masculinity and nationalism. Charros, or Mexican cowboys, are extraordinarily popular figures who have come to symbolize Mexico and are recognised as part of the national sport. In the American southwest, “struggle has taken shape through contests over the meanings of the American cowboy and the Mexican charro—two iconic forms of masculinity derived from the multicultural ranching societies of the Americas but now firmly associated with the nationalist projects of their respective states” (Barracough, 2019, p.1). Answering what it means to be a charro as a Mexican-American highlights how charros have shaped their identity and communities through the rodeo. Laura R. Barracough's Book *Charros: How Mexican Cowboys Are Remapping Race and American Identity* is the seminal work of Mexican and Hispanic-Americans turning to the charro and rodeo to shape their community and define their space in the United States. In Los Angeles, San Antonio, and Colorado, they turned to the “charro” as a vehicle for forging a shared racial identity, to build a more inclusive and responsive urban public sphere” (Barracough, 2019,

p. 100). Across the country charro organizations fought for political power and spaces for rodeos in an effort to “claim belonging and membership in U.S. society.” In Los Angeles, charros protected Mexican Americans from the state violence of the police; in San Antonio, they rebuilt the city's post-war economy through the use of the charro; in Denver charro movements mirrored Chicano activism and saw school curriculums change and the formation of *lienzos*, rodeo grounds. As outsiders in a land they had inhabited for generations, the reclamation of charro culture allowed Mexicans and Hispanic-Americans to push back against growing white hegemony in the southwest.

While rodeo is associated with the American West, Elyssa Ford explores how rodeo in Hawaii intersects with gender and history to create a unique event. Hawaii's isolation from the mainland led to rodeo events that were more inclusive regardless of gender (Ford, 2012, p. 62). Moreover, the islands' unique practice of pa'u riding. This practice developed from women traveling the islands in the late 1880s. These days, riders decorate their horses and wear elaborate ribbons and skirts. Through this, the practice has evolved into a celebration of heritage and identity. Pa'u riding has created a space for Hawaiians to reclaim and explore their traditions while also grappling with the issues faced by the community. The parades associated with Pa'u riding developed when the United States annexed the land and removed the monarchy. The instability of this period was connected to the growth of Pa'u rides as a way to reclaim identity and agency, as the parades “provided native Hawaiians a way to undermine that power through the promotion of their own history, identity, and culture” (Ford, 2012, p. 71).

Conclusion

Predominant narratives of race, gender, and identity shape the rodeo but also have allowed it to be a space for individuals to build community and organize. Rodeo's unique ties to American nationalism and diverse groups provide two contrasting venues to understand people's connections with the West. Diverse rodeo groups have found companionship and empowerment but also run into the friction created by cross-cultural interactions.

While Buffalo Bill Cody shaped the rodeo, its strong draw to every American has allowed it to become an essential space for many to push back and challenge the spaces of masculinity and nationalism. Black, Gay, and other rodeos are powerful reminders that the rodeo transcends these values, connecting with Americans of many backgrounds. While rodeo is often an imagined community, it is also actively chosen to be a part of. New black and gay rodeos, and the inclusion of breakaway roping are indicative of the power that reclaiming a white and masculine space can have for individuals. These are not imagined spaces but instead carefully crafted political communities that have responded and forced western cultures and rodeos to take them seriously.

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