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Decentering the Gendered Whiteness of the Iconic American Cowboy: Media, Performance, and Race in the Rodeo World

Louise Blair

Introduction and Positionality:

Growing up, I was constantly immersed in images of cowboys and cowgirls riding horses and working cattle. The walls of my bedroom were packed with photographs, paintings, and other works of art depicting Western riders. Most of the images were nearly the exact same, there was a wild looking horse galloping across some arid landscape, with a white cowgirl or cowboy (looking nearly as wild as the horse) swinging a rope and wearing a cowboy hat. These images are indicative of how many Americans picture cowboys and cowgirls, and at the center of this perception is one key element: the figure's whiteness. Through my own white privilege, the seemingly inherent whiteness of these icons did not fully occur to me until I was a teenager, but then the racial exclusivity was glaringly obvious. It was in every type of image of cowboys and cowgirls: photographs, paintings, storybooks, western riding social media platforms, the big national rodeos, and the list went on.

In this essay, I venture to assert that many Americans primarily engage with cowboy imagery through the media. By this I mean that most of the American public is more likely to watch an old Western film than go ride on a ranch alongside men and women that ride and tend to cattle for a living. Given this assertion, the importance of representation in media is great, and largely influential considering the lived experience of many. When considering the general demographics of cowboy figures in Western films and media, it is apparent that they

are nearly all white and hypermasculinized. For instance, the Marlboro man (who was the subject of countless Marlboro ad campaigns) quickly became a symbol of a specific brand of American masculinity. In the obituary of one of the men who played the Marlboro man, the *Economist* reflected, "No family tied the Marlboro Man down. He had no home, though he was once in a ramshackle shed, holding his tin cup out roughly for coffee... He epitomised resilience, self-sufficiency, independence and free enterprise."¹ The Marlboro man is representative of a whole cast of popular cowboy figures that are readily present in films, advertisements, popular images, and other forms of media. This persistent presence, coupled with the lack of representation of cowboys who are not white or masculine, has led to the common misconception that cowboys are exclusively white characters. I intend to problematize this common perception.

These figures are grossly misrepresentative, and give the completely false impression that rodeos, riding, and ranching are only activities and occupations held by white hypermasculine participants. Given the inaccuracy of the perceived demographics of cowboys through images, why is the iconic American cowboy represented as an exclusively white and masculine character? What cultural forms have protected this whiteness? What cultural forms have promoted this version of masculinity? In this project I will explore these questions using both historical and contemporary images and accounts, while closely interrogating white supremacist ideologies that privilege white masculine figures

¹ "The Man of Make-Believe." *The Economist*. The Economist Newspaper. Accessed December 2, 2021.

<https://www.economist.com/obituary/2015/01/22/the-man-of-make-believe>.

and oppressive media systems that have led to the whiteness of the American cowboy figure.

*Central Tenants for the Theoretical
Framework of this Project: Media,
Performance, and Race:*

This project touches on a few important terms and themes central to American Studies and Media and Cultural Studies. *Media*, *performance*, and *race* are all integral to understanding and deconstructing whiteness in regards to the iconic image of the American cowboy. First of all, it is crucial to have a basic understanding of media systems and hierarchies that in turn dictate what gets represented (and by who) through media systems. Lisa Nakamura explains postcolonial ideology in regards to media:

...unequal access to media power and the tools of media production results in exclusion of specific populations from the nation on both a symbolic and a very real level. People of color, women, sexual minorities, and other subaltern individuals possess less power within the media system, which has often represented them in stereotyped, limited ways.²

This foundational (and often oppressive) entity is a large contributor to how the American cowboy has been portrayed as only a white and masculine character, as many people's only interaction with cowboys is through media. In a similar vein, *performance* is a central tenet of this project, as rodeo is a cultural venue that is

widely regarded as a performance. Performances are often regarded as an in-person experience, which presents the audience with a more intimate interaction with the performers. For instance, I argue that going to a rodeo is a more intimate experience with cowboys than watching a Western movie. In this essay, I will analyze rodeos (performances) in conjunction with media surrounding the image of the American cowboy. It is worth noting that as Susan Manning discusses in her essay about *performance*, that contemporary performance has been in many ways overshadowed by the rise of media as a dominant cultural form.³ Because of this, it is imperative to study not just rodeos when analyzing the cultural presence of cowboys, but deeply interrogate the media's depictions of cowboys as well.

Race is a central determinant of who is included (or seen to belong) in cowboy culture. Historically, white supremacist laws, practices, and ideologies in the United States set the groundwork for the historical and contemporary presence of non-white cowboys to be overlooked and forgotten. Roderick A. Ferguson asserts in his *Keywords* essay about race that "...race is more than a way of identifying and organizing political coalitions against forms of state repression and capitalist exploitation; it is also a category that sets the terms of belonging and exclusion within modern institutions."⁴ In this essay I will postulate that race is a category that determines who is excluded from the image of the cowboy, through oppressive institutions (for example the media systems).

² Nakamura, Lisa. "Media." In *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, Second Edition, edited by Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler, 2nd ed., 165–68. NYU Press, 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1287j69.46>.

³ Manning, Susan. "Performance." In *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, Second Edition, edited by Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler, 2nd ed., 190–93. NYU

Press, 2014.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1287j69.53>.

⁴ Ferguson, Roderick A. "Race." In *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, Second Edition, edited by Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler, 2nd ed., 207–11. NYU Press, 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1287j69.58>.

*Establishing the Presence of Black
Cowboys in America and the Historical
Framework for this Project:*

First, in order to systematically decenter - whiteness in regards to the iconic American cowboy, it is critical to establish the historical presence of cowboys of color. Non-white cowboys have a profound history in America, though this history is rarely discussed in mainstream discourses. *Writing/Righting Images of the West: A Brief Auto/Historiography of the Black Cowboy (Or "I Want to Be a (Black) Cowboy" . . . Still)*, a journal article by Bryant Keith Alexander, presents a personal reflection of the profound impact the image of the black cowboy had on him during childhood.⁵ This offers a first hand account of both how prevalent the image of the American cowboy is, and how this image can often be an exclusive character. Alexander's work differs greatly from a lot of the other literature about the history and impact of black cowboy imagery, as it provides first hand accounts and personal considerations from someone who was simultaneously inside and outside of the presence of black cowboys in America. He describes wanting to dress and be like a cowboy, but understanding that he would be a *black cowboy*, and the internal reflections that come with that experience. Giving context to this poetic personal account, *The Lesser-Known History of African-American Cowboys* by Katie Nodjimbadem from the Smithsonian Magazine dives into a deeper history of black cowboys in America dating back to the 1800's. Nodjimbadem roots her research for this piece in colonialism and slavery in the United States (paying most attention to Texas). The author then dives into the immense historical presence of black cowboys, and includes many instances

of popular characters and images challenging the notion of American cowboys being an exclusively white character.

When put in conversation together, *Writing/Righting Images of the West: A Brief Auto/Historiography of the Black Cowboy (Or "I Want to Be a (Black) Cowboy" . . . Still)* and *The Lesser-Known History of African-American Cowboys* provide a sort of "who" and "what" to the historical discourse of an alternative image of the American cowboy. The former displaying who is and can be impacted by a more inclusive image of a cowboy, and the latter shedding light on the little known but abundant history of black cowboys in America. Both of these sources are crucial in validating the historical context and audience for this project, as well as laying the foundation for more contemporary analysis.

To provide more information about why cowboys are nearly only ever perceived and represented as white characters, *LET'S GO, LET'S SHOW, LET'S RODEO: AFRICAN AMERICANS AND THE HISTORY OF RODEO* by Tracy Owens Patton and Sally M. Schedlock builds off of the historical foundation and personal insights of the previously mentioned sources and points to visual histories and racist laws and practices to explain the image of the white American cowboy.⁶ The piece mostly focuses on the Jim Crow era, when rodeos were completely segregated and cowboys of color were prohibited from competing in rodeos with white cowboys. Media portrayals of course reflected this exclusively white space, which fuelled the characterization of cowboys as only white. This had a large impact on both the general public's perspective of rodeos as well as incited a dangerous tone for cowboys of color who wished to compete in rodeos. This later led to the popularity of rodeos for only black riders

⁵ Alexander BK. *Writing/Righting Images of the West: A Brief Auto/Historiography of the Black Cowboy (Or "I Want to Be a (Black) Cowboy" . . . Still)*. *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies*. 2014;14(3):227-231. doi:10.1177/1532708614527554.

⁶ Tracy Owens Patton, and Sally M. Schedlock. "LET'S GO, LET'S SHOW, LET'S RODEO: AFRICAN AMERICANS AND THE HISTORY OF RODEO." *The Journal of African American History* 96, no. 4 (2011): 503–21. <https://doi.org/10.5323/jafriamerhist.96.4.0503>.

such as the Bill Pickett Rodeo (which will be explored later in this project), which celebrates and promotes black cowboys to this day.

When placed in conversation together, the works of Bryant Keith Alexander, Katie Nodjimbadem, Tracy Owens Patton, and Sally M. Schedlock provide multifaceted perspectives characterizing the history of black cowboys in America, while providing the groundwork to decenter whiteness in regards to the iconic American cowboy.

*The Bill Pickett Rodeo Circuit: Black
Cowboys and Cowgirls Simultaneously
Existing in Historical and
Contemporary Spaces:*

One major media event that has challenged the overall narrative of the historical racial make-up of the American cowboy is the Bill Pickett Rodeo circuit. The rodeo is the country's biggest rodeo for only black participants, and has an emphasis on promoting black cowgirls. The rodeo's namesake, Bill Pickett, was an extremely influential figure and his legacy is very prevalent to this day. His most notable legacy was the invention of "bulldogging" which continues to be a National Finals Rodeo event to this day. Also known as steer wrestling, the gut-wrenching event requires a cowboy to dive off of his horse at a dead gallop onto a steer, and wrestle it to the ground. The Bill Pickett Rodeo constantly engages with this history, and is very forthright with its mission of challenging the notion of the exclusively white American cowboy. It's mission states:

The Bill Pickett Invitational Rodeo celebrates and honor Black Cowboys and Cowgirls and their contributions to

building the west. We highlight the irrefutable global appeal of Black Cowboys and Cowgirls in the West and the stories behind a sub-culture that is still strong today. BPIR also serves as a cultural event and opportunity for families to enjoy and embrace the cowboy culture, while being educated and entertained with reenactments, history highlights, and western adventure.⁷

This mission draws on the history of black cowboys while bringing their importance and presence into a contemporary setting. The event itself attracts a wide range of spectators and engages its audience both through the rodeos itself and the various social media platforms it holds. The Bill Pickett Rodeo uses its platforms to promote the history of black cowboys, while simultaneously performing the contemporary reality that many cowboys in America are not white. Outside of the images of black cowboys that have been popularized in mainstream culture in recent years, the rodeo displays how traditional horsemanship and stockmanship skills are still practiced and perfected by black communities in America. In other words, the abilities that many attribute to the stereotypical white American cowboy are (and historically have been) possessed by black cowboys and cowgirls, often to an even more perfected extent.

The rodeo circuit has more events for women than many other rodeos hold. Women can compete in breakaway roping, steer undecorating, and barrel racing, at the Bill Pickett Rodeo while most rodeos only permit women to compete in barrel racing. These additional two events provide more opportunities for women to advance in rodeos, and refine their skills at multiple events. Furthermore, the rodeo itself is run primarily by a woman, as Valeria Howard Cunningham is the Chief Executive Officer and Producer of the rodeo. I propose that having more women

⁷ Bill Pickett Rodeo, <https://www.billpickettrodeo.com>.

present during performances of horsemanship (in this case rodeos) contributes to a shift away from the hypermasculine stereotype of rodeo participants. Especially while performing utilitarian skills, women are ascending beyond the traditional gender roles. The Bill Pickett Rodeo facilitates this transition away from rodeo being a display of hypermasculinity through their promotion of black cowgirls in the sport.

Images of the Black Cowboy Re-Emerging in the 21st Century Popular Culture:

In recent years, the racialization of the popular image of the American cowboy has started to shift. There is a re-emergence of the image of the black cowboy (and cowgirl) in popular culture through figures such as Lil Nas X, Solange, and Lizzo. Possibly the most prominent mainstream cowboy figure of the last few years was Lil Nas X after his release of *Old Town Road*. The song first gained popularity on SoundCloud and then TikTok, and then really took off once celebrity Billy Ray Cyrus added his voice to the track. Later, the music video really added to the imagery of the song, and depicted many scenes of Lil Nas X in full cowboy gear. The official movie immediately brings race to the center stage in regards to the traditional cowboy image, as before the song even starts Chris Rock (who is riding behind Lil Nas X) exclaims, “When you see a black man on a horse going that fast, you just gotta let him fly!”⁸ The whole composition of the first scene echoes scenes from old westerns, which almost exclusively depict white cowboys. This directly encourages the viewer to consider the image of an old-timely western cowboy that they commonly interact

with, and might picture in their head. The music video shifts from historical imagery to contemporary after Lil Nas X runs into a cave-like wormhole and ends up in Compton in 2019. The rest of the music video depicts Lil Nas X interacting with the neighborhood he was dropped in, echoing scenes from newspapers depicting the Compton Cowboys and Adam Hollingsworth. As a cultural figure, Lil Nas X also challenges the conventional hypermasculinity and heteronormativity that is often associated with traditional cowboy figures. As an openly gay artist, he is shifting the notion of who belongs and does not belong as a cowboy.

After the release of *Old Town Road* in 2019, there was a flow of cowboy culture trending in fashion and general popular culture. One example of this is Lizzo’s *Tempo* music video with Missy Elliot.⁹ Lizzo makes her appearance in a red cowgirl hat and general red, white, and blue Western costume. When Vogue reported on her performance, they noted the following:

The country-western trend has officially taken over this summer. You can thank Lil Nas X for that, the rapper who propelled that yeehaw-fashion look forward when he released his smash hit, “Old Town Road.” Today, another musical act shared her take on the aesthetic: Lizzo released her new music video for “Tempo,” featuring Missy Elliott, and she took American cowgirl style to a whole other level—an even more extra level, if you can believe it.¹⁰

While the costume of an artist in a mainstream music video might not appear to be exactly a profound gesture to a forgotten American history, it continued a dialogue about

⁸ Lil Nas X. “Old Town Road (Official Movie) ft. Billy Ray Cyrus.” YouTube video, 5:08. May 17, 2019. <https://youtu.be/w2Ov5jzm3j8>.

⁹ “Lizzo - Tempo (Feat. Missy Elliott) [Official Video] - YouTube.” Accessed November 6, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Srq1FqFPwj0>.

¹⁰ Allaire, Christian. “Lizzo’s ‘Tempo’ Music Video Takes American Cowgirl Style to the Extreme.” Vogue. Vogue, July 26, 2019. <https://www.vogue.com/article/lizzo-tempo-music-video-missy-elliott-cowgirl-style>.

who is kept in and outside of “Western” culture. *Old Town Road* started a trend that many black artists engaged with, celebrating the image of the black cowboy and interrogating the traditional stereotypes surrounding gender and race within this iconic American image.

Another 21st century artist that has interlaced the history and contemporary presence of black cowboys into her work is Solange, especially with her *When I Get Home* album.¹¹ The album was created as a sort of love letter to Houston, Texas (her hometown). Throughout the visual album there are many shots of black Southern cowboys, riding both in urban and rural settings. Engaging with the image of the black cowboy was not accidental in her work, but rather purposely woven into her artistry. In an interview with Refinery 29, Solange explains, “I think what people are responding to is the fact that the Black cowboys and cowgirls have been erased from the pop imagination. This has kind-of been in the culture for a long time, but now people are celebrating it. It had been something had been purposefully erased from African-American culture.”¹² Celebrities such as Solange and Lil Nas X have opened the gates for the celebration of black Western identities re-emerging in popular culture. This coupled with the history being brought up through works such as Flemons’ album, the Bill Pickett Rodeo circuit, and Scofield’s book, helps the historical and contemporary presence of black cowboys in America re-emerge in the general public’s eye.

Contemporary Cowboys in American Protests:

There has been a re-emergence of black riders and cowboys not only in mainstream culture, but in activism and protest as well. Brianna Noble, the Compton Cowboys, and Adam Hollingsworth (aka the Dreadhead Cowboy) all utilized their abilities and passions for horses during the uprisings in the wake of George Floyd’s murder. During the uprisings in Oakland, California, Noble rode her horse into the protest with a Black Lives Matter sign and immediately became a viral sensation. The image of her and her horse at the protest was viewed internationally, and prompted her to gain thousands of followers on social media. When asked about this image in an interview with Highsnobiety, Brianna Noble remarked, “People are not used to seeing an image like that. When you think about the textbooks that we saw as kids, where was the horse? It was at the front of a war battalion with some white man leading the charge.”¹³ This historical interpretation of who is usually on the horse speaks to how powerful and radical her image was during the uprisings. Not only did it empower those who were protesting police brutality, but it also challenged the conventional notion about who rides horses. In many instances in American history (and contemporarily) horses have been tools of the oppressors. Texas rangers used horses to colonize, slave catchers rode them as a regular part of slave patrols, police horses still help mounted patrol carry out systemic violence in cities today, and border patrol is often mounted to inflict violence upon migrants. To extrapolate upon this, recent images of border patrol using

¹¹ Solange. *When I Get Home*. Columbia, 2019, compact disc.

¹² Hargrove, Channing. “How Black Cowboys & a Calvin Klein Campaign Inspired the Visuals for Solange’s *When I Get Home*.” *Solange On When I Get Home*, Black Cowboys, Yeehaw Chic. Accessed November 6, 2021. [https://www.refinery29.com/en-](https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2019/03/226209/solange-knowles-when-i-get-home-black-cowboys)

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¹³ Mack, Jeffery, and Words by Jeffery Mack. “Kyle Ng and Brianna Noble on Nature, Creativity, and Activism.” *Highsnobiety*, March 31, 2021.

[https://www.highsnobiety.com/p/woolrich-kyle-ng-brianna-noble-interview/.](https://www.highsnobiety.com/p/woolrich-kyle-ng-brianna-noble-interview/)

horses to chase down and capture Haitian migrants became a spectacle of horsepower. These horrifying pictures echo the history of Texas rangers, as the horse becomes emblematic of a militarized border and a technology of state power.¹⁴ The images from the border make having the horse as a symbol of peace even more crucial, and in some ways difficult. In this vein though, Noble is using her horse as a platform for meaningful change and to protest police violence, which offers a different image of the horse. This historic knowledge coupled with the popularization of images of white hyper-masculine cowboys has made Noble's viral image extremely radical.

Another example of horses being used in activist spaces is through the Compton Cowboys. A New York Times article by Walter Thompson-Hernandez was released on the Compton Cowboys in 2018 (he then went on to publish a book on them in 2020), and it immediately went viral throughout the horse community. There was a certain degree of shock and awe, as many people who had been around horses their entire lives had never engaged with cowboys outside of the stereotypical white American cowboy. Furthermore, the concept of horses being used as a tactic against police brutality was very radical. In Thompson-Hernandez's article, he interviews Anthony Harris (a member of the Compton Cowboys) about using horses to prevent getting harassed by the police. Harris explains, "They don't pull us over or search us when we're on the horses...They would have thought we were gangbangers and had guns or dope on us if we weren't riding, but these horses protect us from all of that."¹⁵ Similar to how

Brianna Noble talked about horses in her interview with Highs Nobiety, the Compton Cowboys point out how they are using horses in a manner contrary to how historical accounts display them being used. This contributes greatly to how the image of the American cowboy is changing now in the 21st century, as the parameters for how horses are being used (and by who) are being drastically changed in the public's eye.

The New York Times recently shed light on one more cowboy using his horses for activist purposes in Ximena Larkin's article "*You Can't Just Get Up and Steal a Police Horse.*" Adam Hollingsworth (known in Chicago as the Dreadhead Cowboy) went viral when a video of him riding into the Chicago uprisings was released, and people believed that he had stolen a police horse. This was completely inaccurate, and displayed how stereotypical beliefs about who rides and does not ride horses can be dangerous. In reality, Hollingsworth was riding his own horse, and had to vehemently deny to the public that his horse was not a stolen police horse. The New York Times article remarks that "The experience hammered home for him that his reason for riding — to expand people's ideas about Black masculinity and to promote a message of unity in some of Chicago's most racially segregated neighborhoods — remains urgent."¹⁶ Hollingsworth's presence in Chicago is directly contributing to the re-emergence of the figure of the black cowboy in the 21st century. On both a local and national level, he is transforming stereotypes and encouraging a different image

¹⁴"Border Agents Controversial Photos Horseback Questioned." ABC News. ABC News Network. Accessed December 7, 2021. <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/border-agents-controversial-photos-horseback-questioned-source/story?id=80801383>.

¹⁵ Thompson-hernández, Walter. "For the Compton Cowboys, Horseback Riding Is a Legacy, and Protection." The New York Times. The New York Times, March 31,

2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/31/us/compton-cowboys-horseback-riding-african-americans.html>.

¹⁶ Larkin, Ximena. "'You Can't Just Get up and Steal a Police Horse'." The New York Times. The New York Times, July 1, 2020.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/01/style/dreadhead-cowboy-chicago.html>.

to emerge of what we consider to be an American cowboy.

Analyzing Historical and Contemporary Presences of Black Cowboys and Concluding Remarks:

Growing up around riding horses and working cattle, many of the values universally held by cowboys and cowgirls revolved around strength and resiliency. These traits are also portrayed by many many cowboys in Old Westerns, and other cowboys in the media. Rodeos are the definition of performed toughness, and many activist campaigns within rodeos utilize this in their marketing. For example, one of the longest running instances of activism in the rodeo world is the campaign against breast cancer called *Tough Enough to Wear Pink*.¹⁷ Cowboy toughness is what is called in to fight breast cancer, further defining toughness and strength as a central cowboy trait. Products that are marketed for cowboys even possess these traits, such as the *Built Ford Tough* campaign for Ford trucks.¹⁸ This toughness and strength is what has made cowboys such a prominent character in American culture. Individualistic strength is a central tenet of the myth of the American dream, as it is preached that with hard work and determination anyone can achieve their dreams in America. Cowboys symbolize this idealized hard work and determination, with toughness at their core. I assert that figures such as Bill Pickett, Lil Nas X, Solange, Adam Hollingsworth, Brianna Noble, and the Compton Cowboys are the epitome of these cornerstone values, especially considering the history and

contemporary reality of the oppressive laws and practices that both cowboys of color and cowgirls have had to endure in this country. With this in mind, they simultaneously represent traditional cowboy values, while offering a more inclusive image.

Both historically and contemporarily cowboys of color have been excluded from what American cultural forms have created as the American cowboy. From a historical standpoint, it is clear white cowboys were not the only people tending to cattle and performing in rodeos. Due to oppressive practices and laws however, black cowboys were prohibited from competing in the large rodeos that were mostly widely portrayed in the media. Furthermore, as media became the dominant cultural form, those who dictated the imagery disseminated for the public only chose to showcase the white figure as a symbol for American masculinity. On the other side of that, the same oppressive ideologies ensured that the white representation of the cowboy would be the most consumable. As time went on, the history of black cowboys in the United States was systematically omitted from books, performances, and media as the general public false perception that there are only white cowboys.

Because of racist institutions, non-white cowboys had to form their own performances of their horsemanship and stockmanship skills, through rodeos such as the Bill Pickett Rodeo. While still not on the same uber popular media platforms such as the National Finals Rodeo, rodeos like the Bill Pickett Rodeo prove that black cowboys in America are contemporarily present and thriving, as well as historically relevant. Not only does the rodeo continue the legacy of its namesake, but it honors the historical traditions and values of black cowboys

as even corporations have used this steadfast identity to increase their profits. The fact that this ad campaign has lasted 35 years displays how consumable toughness is for a cowboy audience/consumer. <https://corporate.ford.com/about/culture/built-ford-tough.html>

¹⁷ "Homepage - Tough Enough to Wear Pink." Accessed December 7, 2021. <https://www.toughenoughtowearpink.com/>.

¹⁸ The Built Ford Tough campaign has lasted over 35 years, surpassing virtually other marketing campaigns of similar products. This displays how integral toughness is,

and cowgirls while giving a platform for those cowboys and cowgirls to succeed in today's extremely competitive rodeo events. Furthermore, the Bill Pickett Rodeo promotes black women in rodeo, pushing the performance of horsemanship away from its roots in hypermasculine displays. When popular images re-emerging in the 21st century prompt viewers to engage in the historical and contemporary presence of black cowboys in America, the Bill Pickett Rodeo gives proof of a thriving community with roots dating back centuries.

The shock and often visceral reaction that came with popular images such as Lil Nas X in *Old Town Road* proves the disturbing reach of how widely spread racist notions of exclusively white cowboys are in the American consciousness. While Lil Nas X was embraced by some communities, he was explicitly told he did not belong in others. The Billboard country music charts famously proclaimed that his song wasn't "country enough," and his Wrangler clothing line was frowned upon as followers of the brand proclaimed that Wrangler no longer cared about *real* working ranchers and cowboys. This is a prime example of race as a central category to determine who does and does not belong in a given community or institution. As dominant cultural forms have shifted from performances to more broadly what we consider to be the media, the exclusion of black cowboys has shifted from segregated rodeos to the omission from popular image. Of course, these oppressive practices go hand in hand, but the roots in historical systemic racism are the same. Another instance of resistance to the inclusion of black cowboys in Western institutions is the rumors and popular belief that Adam Hollingsworth (also known as the Dreadhead Cowboy) had stolen the horse that he rode into the uprisings in Chicago. As mentioned before, a video of him went viral that prompted everyone to believe that he had stolen a police horse. Not only does this instance shed light on the criminalization of black and brown bodies in America, but it also displays the extent

to which black bodies are excluded from the perception of who can be a cowboy. When Hollingsworth rode his horse into the uprisings, white supremacists ideologies deemed a black man on a horse so inconceivable that the only logical conclusion was that he stole a police horse.

Through all of these examples, it is evident that the whiteness and hypermasculinity of the American cowboy is yet another display of how oppressive systems and ideologies can overwrite historical and contemporary presences of black and brown bodies. Race and the performance of gender are continually used as categories to determine who does and does not belong in American culture, and the image of the American cowboy is not at all exempt from this. Media systems are a central pillar in the promotion of Western whiteness, yet have recently offered up representations of cowboys that are outside of the white and masculine stereotype. New cowboy figures are emerging, opening the door for younger generations of all backgrounds to develop passions for horsemanship and stockmanship, slowly continuing the work to decenter the whiteness and masculinity of the American cowboy.

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