

## Gay Rodeo, Cowboys, and Western Wear in 21<sup>st</sup> Century North America: Disrupting Gender Norms and Campy Genderfuck

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Keywords fashion, dress, queer, rural

The cowboy image has long been associated with the peak image of masculinity. The cowboy lore comes from the colonial notion of being a man of the outdoors who is self-governed and takes matters into his own hands (Gibson, 2016). In addition to being independent, cowboy aesthetics are centered around being male, white, and heterosexual (Ford, 2021). However, in the 1970s, the gay rodeo emerged in North American Midwest culture disrupting these traditional heteronormative, masculine cultural norms in cowboy culture (Ford, 2018). In this research, we critically analyze the intersections of American cowboy manifestations and 21<sup>st</sup> century LGBTQ+ communities in North America. That is, we examine how LGBTQ+ folks have reclaimed and re-imagined the Wild West hero of the late 1800s through style-fashion-dress embodiments. Using the documentary *Queens & Cowboys: A Straight Year on the Gay Rodeo*, we analyzed the modern western wear worn by the competitors of the International Gay Rodeo Association (IGRA) rodeos. Through this research, we aimed to critically analyze cowboy culture representations within the LGBTQ+ community. Given the historically traditional and conservative nature of the rodeo scene, embracing the gay cowboy lifestyle can be isolating for many queer individuals (Moffitt, 2023). Understanding the entanglements of Western wear, cowboy culture, and queer communities is crucial for comprehending one aspect of rural queer experiences and the significance of the IGRA phenomenon.

Formal rodeos began to emerge in the early 20th century, with the first documented event believed to have taken place in 1869 in Deer Trail, Colorado. As the popularity of these competitions grew, they became integral parts of county fairs and celebrations across the West. Rodeo associations such as the Cowboys' Turtle Association, later renamed the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association, were established in 1929 to standardize rules and promote professionalism in the sport. The mid-20th century witnessed the peak of rodeo's popularity, thanks in part to increased media coverage through radio, television, and film. Major arenas and stadiums became the stage for rodeo events, drawing large crowds and corporate sponsorships (Lawrence, 1982; Gatewood, 1995; Wooden, 1996). In the 1970s, gay rodeos created a safer space for the LGBTQ+ community, which propelled their involvement in traditionally rural and rodeo atmospheres. The rodeo comes from cowboy culture and is extremely masculine, hence heterosexual. The IGRA is one of the most well-known gay rodeo groups since the 1980s. The gay rodeo breaks down gender lines as anyone can compete in any event regardless of gender or sexual identity. The gay rodeo embraces transgressive gender performances through incorporating of events such as drag shows (Ford, 2018, 2021).

To achieve our purpose for this research, we drew upon critical discourse analysis (CDA). Initially conceived within the realm of linguistics for analytical purposes, CDA focuses on examining ideology, which encompasses societal norms and cultural beliefs that have been ingrained and accepted as a so-called standard (Fairclough, 2013, p. 26). The primary aim of CDA is to challenge these entrenched ideologies and bring to light the underlying assumptions or expectations. Moreover, CDA investigates how cultural discourses manifest or are contested and

altered through various forms of expression, including style, even when contradictory or inconsistent elements coexist (Fairclough, 2013). This perspective draws parallels with articulation as a form of constructive epistemology, highlighting the shared objective of questioning established beliefs and norms. In practical terms, CDA employs specific methodologies such as meticulous analysis and descriptive categorization of written and visual material. It operates as an iterative process aimed at establishing critical objectives concerning the content under scrutiny (Wodak & Meyer, 2016). In our work, we focused on four main characters of the documentary, Wade Earp, Chris Sherman, Ty Teigen, and Travis Gardner in addition to the other unnamed rodeo participants and those supporting rodeo participants (e.g., officials). In our analyses, we identified two philosophical approaches to fashioning the body: 1) disrupting heteronormative masculinities and gender binaries and 2) campy genderfuck.

Despite the prevailing heteronormative ideals surrounding masculinity (c.f., Connell, 2005) in rodeo culture, the presence of LGBTQ+ individuals prompted a reevaluation of what it means to be a "true cowboy" in the IGRA context. Figures like Wade Earp challenge these stereotypes by embracing mainstream masculine aesthetics, such as denim jeans, button-up shirts, and cowboy hats, while proudly asserting their LGBTQ+ identity. Embracing traditional cowboy attire by LGBTQ+ individuals highlight the complexity of masculinity and the fluidity of gender expression within the rodeo community. Moreover, LGBTQ+ individuals like Ty Teigen and Char Duran defy gender norms by participating in traditionally male-dominated events as women and wearing masculine clothing, such as denim jeans and cowboy hats. Their presence challenges the rigid gender roles historically associated with rodeo culture. In our analysis, we also read elements of campy genderfuck within the IGRA. That is, the emergence of drag within the gay rodeo community challenges traditional notions of masculinity and disrupts gender binaries. In the gay rodeo scene, drag performances serve as a platform for LGBTQ+ individuals to express their pride and solidarity with their communities. Wade Earp, openly identifies as gay and has participated in drag performances to support the IGRA's mission. Drag queen performances, characterized by extravagant costumes and flamboyant makeup, further challenge traditional notions of masculinity and promote a more inclusive and diverse rodeo culture. Additionally, the incorporation of campy aesthetics (Sontag, 1984), such as feathers, ribbons, and colorful accessories, adds a playful and flamboyant element to the gay rodeo scene.

In our research, we unravel the intricate dynamics between American cowboy culture and 21st-century LGBTQ+ communities, particularly within the IGRA. Through a critical analysis of the documentary *Queens & Cowboys* we discern two main philosophical approaches: the disruption of heteronormative masculinities and gender binaries, and the embrace of campy genderfuck aesthetics. Our utilization of CDA highlights the importance of questioning entrenched ideologies and uncovering underlying assumptions within cultural discourses, ultimately contributing to a deeper understanding of rural LGBTQ+ experiences and the transformative impact of LGBTQ+ representation in traditionally conservative spaces. Moving forward, continued exploration of the diverse narratives within cowboy culture is essential for acknowledging evolving identities in the 21st century.

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