

*Boots, Chaps, Glitz, and Glam:
Rodeo Queens' Identity Struggle in the Contradictory Rodeo Kingdom*

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Characters such as John Wayne and Buffalo Bill captivated Americans of their generations with their rough, adventurous, and independent cowboy life style. Fueling the Westward expansion, this notion of the iconic ‘American’ cowboy persists in the ideologies of individuals who prescribe to the contemporary Western lifestyle. However, there are gendered differences in the representation of rodeo competitors. Regardless of women’s horsemanship abilities, rodeo women have been marginalized and confined to perform the contradictory role of Rodeo Queen that undermines their skills. As past Rodeo Royalty myself, and one of John Wayne’s biggest fans, I struggled with forming my identity, as I grew up a young, fearless, gun slinging cowgirl who transitioned into the feminine role of a poised, well-mannered Rodeo Queen. I will use my own, auto-ethnographical experience, paired with interviews with current Rodeo Queen title holders, to look deeply into the subculture of the Rodeo Queen. Through observation and personal experience, I will analyze the process and preparation Rodeo Queens participate in prior to competitions and events, and their role during the rodeo performance, to answer why rodeo women settle for a restrictive role, masked with a title suggesting power. By studying Rodeo Queen Culture specifically, in the context of cowboy folklore and western culture, I hope to uncover what function a Rodeo Queen performs in the context of contemporary western culture to understand how gender complicates the mythic historical narrative of the West and obscure women’s ability to form an identity in the contradictions of the Rodeo Kingdom.

The contemporary sport of Rodeo draws heavily on the frontier narratives that helped promote and propel westward expansion, which emphasized the individualist nature and meritocracy of the American Dream. Today, rodeo remains a sport that is emblematic of all things “Western,” and is a phenomenon that has since transcended into popular culture, and has grown into a profitable, commercialized, and corporatized pastime. Since its humble start, rodeo

has been portrayed as a man's sport; the roughness and danger of the events described as unfit for women, making the Professional Rodeo Cowboy Association, a male dominated industry, with the exception female of barrel racers, performance riders, and Rodeo Queens. Despite women's skills and abilities that enable them to perform the same events as men do, women continue to be marginalized in the sport of rodeo due to the existing heteronormative values that function in the sport of rodeo. I argue that this contradiction can be seen in the instillation of the role of Rodeo Queen, which is a sexualized, objectified, and restrictive position that was designed under the thumb of patriarchy for the purposed of promotion, advertising, and consuming.

Although there has been much scholarship published on the function of the Rodeo Queen, I offer my analysis of the motivational factors that compel present-day women to participate in the outdated, seemingly irrational, and objectified role. Placed in a historical context, Rodeo Queens may have made sense during the 1950s, but in a Post-Feminist society, the role of Rodeo Queen seems to represent all the sexist restrictions and oppressive ideologies that feminists fought against. So why perform the role of Rodeo Queen in a society where Anne Oakley and Superwoman are role models for American females today? As Vickie Rutledge Shields and Colleen Coughlin describe in their article *Performing Rodeo Queen Culture: Competition, Athleticism and Excessive Feminine Masquerade*, similar to a beauty queen, a Rodeo Queen "must embody patriarchal prescriptions of beauty and femininity...and the perception of a Rodeo Queen is generally locked within a representation which signifies femininity at its highest level. However, to become a rodeo queen, the contestant must also be an accomplished equestrian athlete and performer. She must be articulate and knowledgeable of professional and amateur rodeo, veterinary science and current events. She is most likely college-educated or bound, with

defined career goals. She must possess qualities which, at least "traditionally," suggest contradictory roles" (183). There is a disjuncture here, as once crowned; a Rodeo Queen's duty is to be the ambassador for her rodeo and to act as part of the publicity machine that works to bring both competitors and spectators to the show. However, to obtain the title, a woman must demonstrate her abilities and intellect, all of which are not recognized in her promotional capacity. Although the competition to become a Rodeo Queen has evolved since its start in the early 1920s, when it closely resembled a beauty pageant, the actual performance of the role, once crowned has not progressed. Today, the competition requires rigorous horsemanship skills, public speaking abilities, and veterinarian and rodeo knowledge, yet none of that is utilized in the function of the promotional role of Rodeo Queen. The regressive role reverts back to the objectified, oppressed, and limited capacities of a pre-feminist society, posing the question; why has the function of Rodeo Queen within rodeo not changed, and why do women continue to participate in rodeo as a Rodeo Queen? Throughout this paper, I analyze this perplexing paradox in hopes of discovering why rodeo women participate in the role of Rodeo Queen today, and how oppositional expectations affect rodeo women's ability to form their identity and situate themselves in the world of Rodeo.

In her book, "Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media", Susan Douglas discusses the contradictions and difficulty that women in America were faced with when growing up with an overwhelming mass media influence. She explains how the shift in advertising methods, caused women live a life of contradiction, due to the mixed messages the media promoted about what women could and could not do, and what they should and should not be. Claiming that such advertising methods paired with the prevailing American Dream ideology are designed to erase any unified self, and instead pin not only contradictory expectations against

one other, she also asserts that these methods alienate women from themselves. The national mythology, which is also intertwined with the historical narrative of the West, teaches that Americans are supposed to be independent, rugged, individuals, who are goal oriented, yet simultaneously, women are expected to be dependent, passive, uninterested in competition or success, and should conform to the wishes of the men in their lives (Douglas). Learning how to be a girl and creating an identity becomes difficult for women, especially in the sport of rodeo. As rodeo women are working through the dichotomized categories of male and female and the mutually exclusive role expectations, they have found refuge in the contradictory position of Rodeo Queen that seems to be able to combine the competing characteristics of both categories.

The maintenance of the heteronormative ideologies functioning in rode can be contributed to George Lipsitz's theory of the possessive investment in whiteness. However, by altering the notion that rather than through systematic efforts that create disadvantages based on race, the Rodeo industry implements structures of control that encourages patriarchy and oppresses and devalues women. The Rodeo Industry's possessive investment in the dichotomized gender roles of the binary categories that marginalize and objectify women is enacted through the creation of the contradictory position of Rodeo Queen. Why do women settle for a role that requires femininity, but also involves concealed traits categorized as masculine? Despite feminist movements and equality on the horsemanship level, the rationale that motivates Rodeo women to participate in the severely limited and highly objectified role of Rodeo Queen, that functions under ideologies that promote White masculinity and devalue women, consequently ignoring their skills and abilities, is questionable. In the sport of Rodeo, women are searching for an identity and struggle for a place in the sport they love, yet they are forced to occupy a position that does not reflect their horsemanship abilities, but rather is a

mechanism designed by the patriarchal influences that dominate the Rodeo Industry to control women's upward mobility and success.

To understand the contradictions women face when forming an identity, we must look at their representation within the sport of rodeo. The book "Gender, Whiteness, and Power in Rodeo: Breaking Away from the Ties of Sexism and Racism", by Tracey Owens Patton and Sally M. Schedlock, takes a close look at the relationship between how a cowgirl perceives herself, and how the world perceives her, stating that "cowgirls are real, but nevertheless, the voyeuristic gaze and the objectification of her looks reinforce the myth of the cowgirl rather than the historic reality" (104). This contradiction exists in the role of Rodeo Queen, because as a Rodeo Queen, women are expected to look perfect, act gracefully, and ride effortlessly. In the male dominated world of rodeo, Rodeo Queens become an object; sexualized, yet innocently virginal; a tool used to appeal to the male competitors, masculine sponsors, and advertisements directed at male consumers, because sex sells, and innocence is a virtue. An example of the conflicted and commercialized identity of the Rodeo Queen can be seen in the required regalia and appearance of the Rodeo Queen. To understand the importance of appearance and representation, I joined two Rodeo Queens throughout their preparation rituals for a rodeo performance. In the interviews with these current Rodeo Queens, both Queens divulged that although it is an unspoken rule, most rodeo are thin, have pretty faces, and they are well kept. Rodeo Queens are expected to stay healthy, fit, and thin, as most of their outfits are form fitting and flashy. They further explained that it is important, for a Rodeo Queen to be attractive because it is her duty to promote and represent rodeo.

"Most queens are not over weight and must appear healthy and desirable," Faye explained. "After all, they are selling a product: Rodeo. By being attractive and

desirable, people are more willing to be attracted to you, and by they I mean lonely cowboys, rodeo wannabes, and girls that want to be you. You attract them to attending the rodeo, but also to sell the idea of Rodeo. Some exceptions do apply, and those Queens are not generally well liked.”

As Faye pointed out, a Rodeo Queen’s role is to “sell the idea of Rodeo”, but also to represent what Rodeo is. However, the image that Rodeo Queen’s promote of themselves is a misleading image, as it suggests that rodeo women are beautiful, dainty, desirable, and glamorous, yet in reality, these women are performing physically demanding tasks similar to male competitors, but those efforts are not acknowledged. They must train, care for, and ride a horse, yet they are subjected to do so while wearing tight fitting, restrictive clothing, and heavy, glamorous hair and make-up. This perfect appearance is not easily obtained as Queens portray to the public. In fact, this flawless appearance that Rodeo Queens are expected to maintain is both unrealistic and has limited functionality. For example, the iconic Rodeo Queen hair that is described as voluminous, large curls, with the trademark way the hair hangs in front of a Queen’s face has become the hall mark of the Rodeo Queen. It takes approximately 2 hours to curl and tease for each event, using almost an entire can of hairspray to maintain the appropriate shape, and the hair is nearly ruined by the end of the competition and reign.

“Hair is the most hated part of the rodeo world,” Faye explained. “To be quite honest, I have no idea why the rodeo queen hair is what it is. I understand that it is important to the Rodeo Queen world, so it’s a tradition that I follow blindly without understanding the purpose. If a rodeo queen is spotted when she is “on duty” without queen hair, there is hell to pay.”

Faye explained that the hair is unanimously hated by Rodeo Queens, as it is painful, time

consuming, and serves no utilitarian purposes, yet they follow these strict traditions and rules. Another example is the make-up, which Queens must be aware of the different make-up styles that depend on what type of appearance a Queen is making. At night, under intense lights, Queens must use make-up that will stand out, which translates to thick, heavy, bold stage make up. During the day, especially during speaking engagements, less make up is required, as to seem effortlessly naturally beautiful. These rules apply to Queens of all ages, ranging from teens of 14 to women in their early 20s. I spoke to Austin, the younger of the two Queens I interviewed, as she was getting her hair and make-up done before an evening rodeo performance. At fourteen years old, she sat in front of a three sided mirror, her coach, Faye, who is also a current Rodeo Queen whom I interviewed, wound hot rollers into Austin's blonde hair. Austin sat under the harsh lights of the beauty station applying concealer and foundation to her already youthful and porcelain-like face. I asked her why she needed so much make up, considering she was going to be sitting on the back of a horse during a rodeo performance.

"That's what we do, we need to look gorgeous. They take pictures too, and I never want to look ugly," she said. "Besides, its like...umm stage make up...right Faye?"

Faye nodded, "that's right sugar, the bigger, the bolder, the better."

Faye removed a roller from her hair and Austin winced momentarily, before shrugging it off and smiling into the mirror as she applied powdered foundation. Faye finished Austin's hair, a style that is a combination between Texas-big-curls and Farrah Fawcett-waves. Faye also applied heavy pink eye shadow, blush, eyeliner, and fake eye lashes to Austin's face, making the fourteen year old look like a woman in her twenties. Austin did look beautiful, but it struck me as odd as I listened to her rationale. This young woman in her formative years was subjected to the contradicting sexualized, yet innocent traits of the rodeo world, and she had internalized the

ideologies that require women to appear beautiful at all times, regardless of occasion, situation, or practicality.

Combining all those requirements, a Queen must always look put-together, with her make-up always coordinating with outfit, hat, and boots. For daily appearances, the attire must adhere to the western look, and all clothing should be made from rodeo sponsors such as Wrangler Jeans, Justin Boots, Stetson Hats, as a form of branding as a promotion strategy. As it is a Rodeo Queen's job to promote the Professional Rodeo Cowboy's Association's sponsors, and she must also wear a western style shirt with long sleeves, because short sleeves are inappropriate, demonstrating the conservative values promoted by Western ideologies, and the incorporation of Western traditions. However, one of the traditions that seem to have no necessary utility is the requirement of the leather dress during the Rodeo Queen pageant. The leather dress is a tradition that most competitors follow blindly, but also a component that sets a Rodeo Queen pageant apart from a "normal" pageant. The leather dress is said to symbolize Western culture, but can cost up to 4,000 dollars apiece. The all leather dress is custom made, and follows the many requirements, regarding the length, amount, and placement of fringe, as too much fringe detracts from the person. The length of the dress is critical, as it must not touch the boot, yet must hang below the top of the boot. Legs and skin can never show, and the dress must be tight fitting, to show off ones physical appearance. Although the body is completely covered, following conservative western traditions, the fabric is skin tight, clinging to the contours of the body, which is yet again, an example of the conflicting characteristics that women are expected to embody in the position of Rodeo Queen.

As described, a Rodeo Queens appearance is of great importance. She straddles a line between being appealing and desirable, yet innocent and conservative. The mutually exclusive

expectations create both a restricted and contradictory position, and make it difficult for women of Rodeo to form an identity. Austin and Faye's attitude about their appearance is common among Rodeo Queens. Rodeo Queens are expected to look perfect, maintain poise, and ride effortlessly. Yet in the male dominated and male driven world of rodeo, Rodeo Queens become an object of promotion. According to Vickie Rutledge Shields and Colleen, "there is no denying that a Rodeo Queen's duties after she is crowned are mostly decorative. She *is* ornamental to the Rodeo. Decorative, yes, but in a much different way from the beauty Queen, whose body is the object of desire and the spectacle to be consumed...The spectacle is always larger than the Rodeo Queen's body; it includes the woman, her horse, her fashion, flowers, flags, her own personal style of adornment—in combination" (189). Functioning in a contradictory role, expected to appeal to the male competitors, sponsors, and advertisements directed at male consumers, yet to maintain the Western Narrative of innocence and dignity, Rodeo Queens struggles to create a place and play a part within their bifurcated role expectations.

Although appearance and representation are crucial to identity formation, we must also consider involvement in rodeo, because as Vickie Rutledge stated, the spectacle of the Rodeo Queen is larger than her body. The notion of the American character and the American Dream are guiding ideologies practiced in the Rodeo Industry, that are in direct opposition with the reality of a Rodeo Queen's experience due to the function of the Rodeo Queen script. Susan J. Douglas looks at the "post-Feminist" society, and how the media advertises that equality has been achieved, although evidence of patriarchal structures of inequality persist. This false representation of power is masked in the form of the role of Rodeo Queen, as throughout my interviews, the women I spoke to seemed to feel that their position as a Rodeo Queen was one that commanded respect, created opportunities, and aided in their growth as an individual. Both

individuals I interviewed stressed the rigorous and extensive training they underwent to achieve their titles. They emphasized the importance of horsemanship skill, as the horsemanship aspect of a rodeo queen pageant is generally the most coveted to win the title. This portion of the competition generally consists of a riding pattern, which is essentially in the discipline of reining, consisting of sliding stops, transitional pace circles, lead changes, and reining spins. To reach the competitive level of perfection that winning the competition requires, much time is spent perfecting their horsemanship pattern. As one interview revealed, horsemanship requires not only time and energy, but money. The average horse cost about 5,000.00 dollars at the initial purchase, and 500 dollars a month in training, feed, health care, and maintenance expenses. Some Rodeo Queen contestants invest in a variety of trainers, not only for technique, but specific skills such as working cattle, running barrels, and riding presentation.

During an interview, Austin described her training experience, "I worked with coaches to develop my skills with working cattle while riding my horses. Every day, I would begin the day riding my horse and then studying horse and rodeo knowledge, current events, rodeo standings-the works-throughout the day. Additionally, each evening, I would participate in one of the prep sessions or clinics."

The interviews demonstrated that being a Rodeo Queen indicates that you will attend rodeos, in which sufficient riding ability is a requirement. During an interview, Faye explained that,

"Rodeos do not tolerate Queens that cannot ride. In fact, they will flat out tell you to leave. Their reputation is at stake, and I have been to rodeos where Queens were asked to leave. One time...oh God I apologize for laughing, but I was a Queen that was asked to ride at the Bulls Only Rodeo in Lakeside, California. This is a roughstock only rodeo, so

it consists of bull riding, bronc riding (bareback and saddle bronc), and the wild horse race. This rodeo is very rowdy, and they like to pump up the crowd during the opening ceremony. So, they had the 6 of us Queens enter the arena at full speed, circle a fire truck that had its lights and sirens on, and had a black hawk helicopter fly over the arena while everyone was in the stands cheering and the music blaring. Needless to say, it was interesting experience. We all had to handle ourselves and our horses to the best of our ability.”

Faye sheds light on the importance of Rodeo Queens’ horsemanship abilities, yet also describes the lack of recognition Queens receive, as they serves a promotional purpose. When I asked Austin what her duties were during the Rodeo, she explained that she performs the grand entry with an array of competitors, then she is announced and introduced to the audience, which at this point she makes her Queen’s Run, which involves galloping her horse at full speed around the arena, simultaneously smiling and saluting the crowd. After the Queen’s run, she exits the arena, only to return to run sponsor flags in between events and for the Grand Finale. I asked her if that seemed fair, after all the training she did and all the money she had spent. Her horse, Peyton, was a top notch reining horse, and she had spent months, hours, and dollars working with him, tuning him up for the competition.

“Well, I don’t really know,” she said, “to be honest, I never really questioned it. I thought doing what I do is cool. I would like to herd cattle, or maybe, you know, do a little more, because you make a good point, the stuff I do is pretty lame for a rodeo.”

Despite all the time, effort, and money that Rodeo Queen’s put into their role as Queen, there is little return. As Austin demonstrated, her duties were promotional, with no real skill required, regardless of the steps taken to achieve that title. Austin is a skilled horsewoman, yet

her position as Rodeo Queen does not allow for her to utilize or demonstrate her abilities. The binary categories of male and female, with the dichotomized gender roles in the sport of rodeo, restrict women from performing and acting to their full capacity, while valuing and privileging men. The contradictory position of Rodeo Queen is one of the only avenues women have to be a part of Rodeo. Marginalized and objectified, women settle for a role that expects excessive and illogical femininity, but also requires disguised traits categorized as masculine, such as horsemanship, rodeo knowledge, and business sense. Austin, like most Rodeo Queens, would rather participate in the limited capacity as Rodeo Queen, than forgo being a part of the traditional and sentimental sport of Rodeo.

So why settle? In a post-feminist society, surely there must be other ways. If so, why do these women blindly follow tradition, ruin their hair, or spend thousands of dollars without compensation or profit? Why do they allow themselves to be confined to a promotional position? Some women said that the motivating factor was the five minutes of fame and the networks that came from being known because of the title. Other women said that they saw it as a coming of age ritual, a maturing process from girl to lady that taught them how to act in the public eye. Personally, I am on the fence about my reasons and rationale. As not only a Rodeo Queen, but a High School and Junior High School Rodeo competitor, I found that as I held the title of Queen, no power or authority was granted to me, and I was limited by all the feminine expectations that prevented me from performing athletic equestrian activities. As Shields and Coughlin argue “riding is freedom, skill, risk. It is knowing you are controlling an animal 20 times your size and 100 times your strength. Having a horse, training it and taking care of it is a large responsibility and a source of immense pride. Within this context, rodeo queening provides a young woman, within the constraints of a patriarchal culture, the opportunity to challenge the restrictions placed

upon her by gender roles” (189). I would describe myself as a cowgirl rather than a Rodeo Queen, as no crown is necessary for me to gain confidence, respect, and recognition. I do not regret my experience as a Rodeo Queen, as I learned how to behave in the public eye, how to interview well, and how to dress, do my hair, and wear my make up in ways that are both occasion and age appropriate, and are flattering. I also gained a different perspective. As a young cowgirl, I admired the Queens for their beauty, grace, and involvement in Rodeo, and that admiration was one of the factors that prompted my participation of the rodeo world that I’d always been immersed in. However, once crowned, I learned and experienced first hand the negative biases towards Queens, the unnecessary and irrational rules, and the strict and limiting expectations. Looking back, I would rather be a competitor in a Rodeo than the beautiful, promotional, spectacle of the Queen.

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