

## Closeted Country: Popular Understandings and Political Discourse of Queer History in the American West

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### Abstract

Gay cowboys, trans wagondrivers, and rural queer communities—while not pinnacles of the Wild West, their presence is far more ubiquitous than the mythic history of the region suggests. A new wave of scholarship, commonly denoted as “New Western” scholarship, has investigated the West as a queer space to unsettle distorted understandings of the American West. This paper undertakes an analysis of the discourse surrounding three depictions of queer Western history to evaluate how and to what extent these histories are being received in the national conversation. By dissecting newspaper articles, social media pages, and other forums of public discussion, this paper reveals that publics discretize Western history from its queerness, belittling the contributions of LGBTQ+ people to history. Queer Western history and progressive politics, however, are found to have a mutually beneficial relationship with each other, where developments in one lead to the promotion of the other. Taken together, the importance of understanding queer contributions to history as foundational to the West presents a pathway to protect queer people and enrich the political conversation.

### Introduction

In a 2015 *New York Times* exposé by museum critic Ed Rothstein titled “At the Buffalo Bill Museum, a Showdown Between History and Myth,” Rothstein puts his finger on a unique dynamic in the American West: that tourists and locals are constantly confronted with sifting out historical truth and myth about the region.<sup>1</sup> He notes that many museums in Cody, Wyoming, an iconic town described by Rothstein as true cowboy country, present historical truth alongside a “fair amount of distortion.”<sup>2</sup> The museums frequently highlight imagery that plays into the myth-making of the West, from the vilification of Native Americans to heroism of masculine cowboys, and from docile women working in homesteads to rugged buffalo hunters. When Ang Lee’s movie *Brokeback*

*Mountain* that follows the love story of two male cowboys in 1963 Wyoming hit American theaters and televisions, widespread shock at a different, queer view of the West dominated conversation. Queerness in the West, though is not new, as many scholars, historians, and even common queer people in the West can attest to. The fictionalized *Brokeback Mountain* is not the first time that the LGBTQ+ presence in the West has been shown either, begging the interesting question as to how queerness in the West is understood among the public.

The American West has long been mythologized and studied, and it holds a distinct role in the story of the United States. Here, the American West—with varying shorthands like “the West”—encapsulates a two-fold definition, both as the *historical* region of the North American continent that had yet to be settled by Europeans and the *contemporary* region of states that lay west of the 100th meridian west. Scholarship on the history of the American West traces its roots back to Frederick Jackson Turner’s ‘frontier thesis’ that presented American character and nation-building as defined by Westward expansion; his ideas served as ground zero for all scholarship on the West.<sup>3</sup> By the late 1980s, academic discourse on the West had begun to criticize Turnerian visions of Western history as resting on narrow, problematic notions regarding race, gender, and sexuality.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Edward Rothstein, “At the Buffalo Bill Museum, a Showdown Between History and Myth,” *The New York Times*, August 3, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/04/arts/design/buffalo-bill-museum-in-wyoming.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Rothstein, “At the Buffalo Bill Museum, a Showdown Between History and Myth.”

<sup>3</sup> Karen Jones and John Wills, *American West: Competing Visions*, (Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 40.

<sup>4</sup> Kim Warren, “Gender, Race, Culture, and the Mythic American Frontier,” *Journal of Women’s History* 19, no. 1 (2007): 237; Jones and Wills, *American West: Competing Visions*, 55.

Led most principally by scholars like Patricia Nelson Limerick with her book *The Legacy of Conquest* and Richard White with his book *“It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own”*: *A New History of the American West*, ‘New Western’ history, as it is so called, emerged as an approach to the region’s history that sees it as one defined by complexity, conquest, and ambiguity.<sup>5</sup> Out of New Western history, academic approaches to the West as a queer space proliferated.

Studies on queerness in the West actually date as far back as 1948, when Alfred Kinsey in his book *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* found that the homosexual behavior was occurring most frequently in the rural parts of the United States, particularly the American West.<sup>6</sup> However, not until New Western scholarship caught on did queer studies of the West truly take off. Scholars of women, gender, and sexuality studies were among the first to complicate Old Western understandings of the West, uncovering that previous interpretations erased contributions of women and queer people. Works such as Albert Hurtado’s *Intimate Frontiers: Sex, Gender, and Culture in Old California and Quintard Taylor* and Shirley Ann Wilson Moore’s *African American Women Confront the West, 1600–2000* take a multicultural approach to the West and are among the most notable, arguing for the importance of understanding race, gender, and sexuality in the making of the Western Frontier.<sup>7</sup> Additional examples that build off of these earlier, foundational works include Peter Boag’s *Re-Dressing America’s Frontier Past* which examines the ubiquity of gender nonconforming people throughout the West’s history, and Rebecca Scolfield’s

*Outriders: Rodeo at the fringes of the American West* which analyzes how queer rodeo-ers used rodeo performance to claim space in the West and assert new definitions of masculinity.<sup>8</sup> Indigenous scholarship has also played a foundational role in documenting the presence of queerness out West, with scholars like Craig Womack and Lisa Tatonetti.<sup>9</sup>

Great attention has also been given to uncovering the ways that historically, the politics of the West have functioned to suppress queerness. Michael Park’s investigation into the emasculation of Asian American men immigrating primarily to the West reveals how xenophobic policies in the era of the 1850s-1940s served to form “queer enclaves” of Asian men and an overall feminized perception of Asian men.<sup>10</sup> Rebecca Scofield has analyzed how President Ronald Regan used an urban cowboy aesthetic to assert a “mythic authority” over the nation, benefitting from and perpetuating a view of the West where masculinity entails success and power. These are just two examples among many.<sup>11</sup>

Despite the impressive literature documenting queer history and countering long-standing perceptions of the West, there has yet to be substantial efforts to evaluate popular uptake of these histories and their impacts on political discourse of the American West. This paper represents the first effort to document the popular and political reception of queer Western history, answering the question: *how and to what extent have depictions of queer Western history infiltrated the public consciousness and LGBTQ+ politics of the American West?* To approach this question, I take on a comparative case study of three public-facing presentations of queer Western history: (1) the

<sup>5</sup> Natasha Mayne, “As Far as the Eye Could See: Cormac McCarthy, Myth, and Masculine Visions in the ‘New’ American West,” *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 20, no. 2 (2001).; Patricia Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West*, (New York: W W. Norton & Company, 1988); Richard White, *“It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own”*: *A New History of the American West*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

<sup>6</sup> Alfred Kinsey, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, (Philadelphia :W. B. Saunders Co., 1948).

<sup>7</sup> Warren, “Gender, Race, Culture, and the Mythic American Frontier,” 240; Albert Hurtado, *Intimate Frontiers: Sex, Gender, and Culture in Old California*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999); Quintard Taylor and Shirley Ann Wilson Moore, *African American Women Confront the West, 1600–2000*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> Peter Boag, *Re-Dressing America’s Frontier Past*, (University of California Press, 2011); Rebecca Scofield, *Outriders: Rodeo at the Fringes of the American West*, (University of Washington Press, 2019).

<sup>9</sup> Craig Womack, *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism*, (University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Lisa Tatonetti, *Teaching Western American Literature*, ed. Brady Harrison and Randi Lynn Tanglen (University of Nebraska Press, 2020).

<sup>10</sup> Michael Park, “Asian American Masculinity Eclipsed: A Legal and Historical Perspective of Emasculation Through U.S. Immigration Practices,” *The Modern American* 8, no. 1 (2013): 5-17.

<sup>11</sup> Scofield, Rebecca, “‘Chaps and Scowls’: Play, Violence, and the Post-1970s Urban Cowboy,” *The Journal of American Culture* 40, no. 4 (2017): 326.

‘Out West’ series by Gregory Hinton; (2) The International Gay Rodeo Association; and (3) the Charley Parkhurst story; and subsequently analyze how each are received and discussed, dissecting newspaper publications, social media platforms, magazines, and other forums of public discourse. It is important to note a couple key limitations in the uptake of these histories. First, these case studies mostly interact with audiences in the American West as they have more resonance in the region. Scholars have discussed how the history of the West and its mythology became a national narrative, so popular uptake of these histories outside of the West is also important. There has been some national discussion relating to all three cases, however. Additionally, I encountered many instances where cultures of homophobia meant some audiences refused to even entertain the idea of history that uplifts queer people. While this limits the audience of who is interacting with this history, it also becomes an interesting point of analysis.

In light of these limitations, I find that public understandings of queer Western history discretize queerness from the history of the West. What I identify as discretization means that publics understand queer contributions to history either as not foundational to the history of the West or as separate from their queer elements, highlighting a belittled understanding of LGBTQ+ contributions to history and an upholding of dominant, Turnerian-style myths. As it relates to how these depictions of history have influenced political discourse, I find evidence of a mutually-beneficial relationship between queer Western history and progressive politics. These histories are often invoked to support and propel the progressive agenda, and in the reverse, developments in the political landscape often lead to progressive policies, actors, and advancements promoting, validating, or uplifting queer history. These findings, derived from the three cases, have intellectually-stimulating and important implications for further realizing the logic of mythological understandings of the American West and the political conversation of LGBTQ+ issues.

### ‘Out West’ by Gregory Hinton

Growing up in rural Cody, Wyoming in the shadow of the Absaroka Mountain range, author and historian Gregory Hinton has always been intimately a part of Western lifestyle and the history of the American West. Upon coming out as gay while in college in Boulder, Colorado, Hinton faced immense homophobia in his

small hometown. Through his studies and experiences in the film industry, Hinton became keenly aware of the history of LGBTQ+ people in the West and drew upon his own experiences growing up gay to write novels about the queer experience in the West. In 2009, he kicked off his series ‘Out West’ with a move to display two shirts worn by actors in the movie *Brokeback Mountain* at the Autry Museum of the American West. From there, ‘Out West’ has evolved into a traveling national museum program that combines lectures, plays, exhibitions, and films that amplify queer history and culture in the American West.

The main installments of the series include programs titled “Beyond Brokeback,” “Hidden Histories,” and “Out West with Buffalo Bill,” which thoroughly explore a variety of queer figures, communities, and activity throughout the West’s history.<sup>12</sup> In his own words, Hinton comments on the importance of his work: “Now is the time... for displaced gays and lesbians from the West to come home.”<sup>13</sup> His series has been discussed in many newspaper journals, magazines, and social media platforms, ranging from some national publications like the Los Angeles Times to many local publications like Salt Lake Magazine and The Sheridan Press. Analysis of the discourse around ‘Out West’ reveals that Hinton presented shocking, unknown information, as press coverage around the event highlighted epiphanic reactions to learning about this history in communities. In asserting the belonging of queer people in Western history, however, his depictions of LGBTQ+ contributions to the West have not been uniformly accepted as a historical facet of the region. Some discussion situates the history presented in ‘Out West’ as just that—history, while others see it as a lifestyle brought to the West and more refuse to even entertain viewing the series. Politically, ‘Out West’ has been invoked in service of both pushing progressive politics forward and highlighting it as an outlier in a conservative climate.

In October 2011, a headline in the *Bozeman Daily Chronicle* read “Bozeman library hosting controversial play about ‘Brokeback Mountain.’” As a part of its travels,

<sup>12</sup> Gregory Hinton, “Out West,” at the Autry Museum of the American West, 2009-2022.

<sup>13</sup> Craig Womack, *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism*, (University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Lisa Tatonetti, *Teaching Western American Literature*, ed. Brady Harrison and Randi Lynn Tanglen (University of Nebraska Press, 2020).

Hinton's 'Out West' series was presenting a program titled "Beyond Brokeback" at the Bozeman Public Library. While many other communities in Montana denied hosting 'Out West,' Library Foundation Director Paula Beswick said that it was something that she would not envision herself saying no to, noting how important the community conversation was.<sup>14</sup> That conversation was indeed opened, with many discussing how shocking depictions of gay people in the West were to them, how it changed their views on marriage,<sup>15</sup> and how it even prompted a son to come out to his parents following the program.<sup>16</sup> This sort of epiphanic language around the history that Hinton presented was not only found in Bozeman and small rural communities but also in national publications. A contributor to the *Huffington Post* wrote, when discussing the first installation of 'Out West' at the Autry Museum of the American West, that he "witnessed The Autry making history in the trail-blazing style of America's boldest pioneers... by their trailblazing move, The Autry has branded the United States free to everyone."<sup>17</sup> Invoking the courageous imagery of pioneers of the West, this writer speaks to the novel history that 'Out West' presents. He highlights, too, that this sort of history can have profound impacts nationally.

While 'Out West' certainly elicited enthusiastic and positive reactions, its influence on public memory of the American West does not show a complete acceptance that the West has historically always had a queer presence. Hinton's motivations for curating this program were to highlight the history of LGBTQ+ people in the American West and, in agreement with most scholars of the American

West and, in agreement with most scholars of the American West, assert that queerness in the West has always existed.<sup>18</sup> Many venues that Hinton reached out to soliciting interest in hosting 'Out West' refused to even entertain the idea of queer history of the West. He found people ignoring him, claiming that the program would be vetoed by governing boards, and even mentioning that they would be fired for promoting the idea.<sup>19</sup> Other articles discussing Hinton's 'Out West' can be read without even understanding that the primary objective of the exhibit is to present the queer *history* of the West. For example, *The Sheridan Press* describes the program as "an ongoing documentation and celebration of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender life in the American West" and labels Hinton as an "accidental historian" twice.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, it discusses the content presented in the program as "stories" and "anecdotes," not using the word "history" once. This language simultaneously delegitimizes Hinton as a historian but also communicates that 'Out West' is about celebrating an LGBTQ+ *lifestyle* in the American West.

Political discourse around the 'Out West' series also is pervasive in public dialogue, some of which comes from Hinton himself. Speaking on one of 'Out West's' many programs "Beyond Brokeback," Hinton describes the play as an oral history of the rural western gay experience, and situates it as similar to that of other oral histories like Dustin Lance Black's play '8' which tells the story of the 2010 Proposition 8 same-sex marriage trial in San Francisco.<sup>21</sup> Black's play depicts an important milestone in liberatory queer politics and has been used as historical evidence to advance pro-LGBTQ+ issues. Black has even said that he hopes one day he will see his play in "the trashcan," meaning that civil liberties for queer people should not need

<sup>14</sup> Rachel Hergett, "Bozeman library hosting controversial play about 'Brokeback Mountain,'" Bozeman Daily Chronicle, October 1, 2011,

[https://www.bozemandailychronicle.com/news/dailyfeatures/bozeman-library-hosting-controversial-play-about-brokeback-mountain/article\\_7ecb3d44-ebe3-11e0-80fd-001cc4c002e0.html](https://www.bozemandailychronicle.com/news/dailyfeatures/bozeman-library-hosting-controversial-play-about-brokeback-mountain/article_7ecb3d44-ebe3-11e0-80fd-001cc4c002e0.html)

<sup>15</sup> Hergett, "Bozeman library hosting controversial play about 'Brokeback Mountain.'"

<sup>16</sup> "Hinton brings stories of gay Westerners to small towns," *The Sheridan Press*, October 22, 2015, [https://www.thesheridanpress.com/news/local/hinton-brings-stories-of-gay-westerners-to-small-towns/article\\_2b951242-9af5-5369-ae62-327c5eef0324.html](https://www.thesheridanpress.com/news/local/hinton-brings-stories-of-gay-westerners-to-small-towns/article_2b951242-9af5-5369-ae62-327c5eef0324.html).

<sup>17</sup> Tom Gregory, "Brokeback Mountain Reclaims the American West," *HuffPost*, March 18, 2010, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/embrokeback-mountainem-re\\_b\\_393662](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/embrokeback-mountainem-re_b_393662).

<sup>18</sup> Kathleen Roberts, "Collection about gay rodeos," *Albuquerque Journal*, August 2, 2013, <https://www.abqjournal.com/240235/collection-about-gay-rodeos.html>.

<sup>19</sup> "Hinton brings stories of gay Westerners to small towns."

<sup>20</sup> "Hinton brings stories of gay Westerners to small towns."

<sup>21</sup> Gregory Hinton, "VIEWPOINTS: Staging LGBT oral history: 'Laramie,' *Beyond Brokeback and 8*," *Windy City Times*, November 9, 2011, <https://www.windycitytimes.com/lgbt/VIEWPOINTS-Staging-LGBT-oral-history-Laramie-Beyond-Brokeback-and-8/34680.html>

evidence.<sup>22</sup> In discussing the power of oral histories, Hinton invokes Black's own words regarding "8", saying that "it's important that people know the arguments on both sides as this case makes its way to the Supreme Court."<sup>23</sup> In asserting likeness of the two plays' importance, Hinton emphasizes his historical work as necessary to informing queer politics.

Outside of Hinton, political discussion around 'Out West' has spoken of its contributions as both a push to advance progressive politics and as an outlier among increasingly conservative LGBTQ+ politics. For example, curator at the Buffalo Bill Center of the West Jeremy Johnston discussed in the *Los Angeles Times* his process for getting approval from the museum board to allow Hinton to do research for 'Out West' at the museum. While he himself was excited by the project, he associated Hinton's research with a progressive political agenda that would not sit well with the community, noting that "outsiders are always coming here with their ideas about water, gay rights and reintroducing wolves."<sup>24</sup> He does note, however, that Hinton's work was more palatable as Hinton is not an outsider but a Westerner from Cody himself. In tandem with seeing 'Out West' as advancing a progressive agenda, the program is highlighted as claiming space among widespread conservatism on LGBTQ+ issues. This is exemplified in a post from the popular progressive political blog *Down with Tyranny*. Blogger Howie Klein chose to highlight the exhibit in light of a 2009 vote in New York that decided against marriage equality. He posited that it "seemed timely to support the strides that have been made with the Autry's unprecedented programming— remarkable for a conservative institution, especially given what is transpiring in the political arena— and to point out the importance of engaging in such

<sup>22</sup> Ng, David, "Gay marriage rulings: Prop. 8 playwright Dustin Lance Black reflects," *Los Angeles Times*, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/culture/la-et-cm-dustin-lance-black-prop-8-20130626-story.html>.

<sup>23</sup> Hinton, "VIEWPOINTS: Staging LGBT oral history: 'Laramie,' Beyond Brokeback and 8."

<sup>24</sup> Glionna, "Scholar reclaims hometown of Cody, Wyo., and gays' and lesbians' place in the West."

discussions."<sup>25</sup> The blog highlights the series as a way to console the backsliding of progressive political goals and to spur hope that ingrained conservatism can come around on LGBTQ+ issues, seen here in explicitly noting that the Autry Museum is a right-leaning institution.

### The International Gay Rodeo Association

Turning towards the International Gay Rodeo Association (IGRA), the history of gay rodeo paints a second story of the reception of queer history. Rodeo is a heavily imagined aspect of the American West, embodying the courage and bravery of Western individuals taming wild animals and celebrating the ruggedness of the West. The gay rodeo emerged to celebrate rodeo in a way that uplifted queer people. It has its beginnings in 1976 with the first taking the form of the National Reno Gay Rodeo in Nevada. In the years following, gay rodeos quickly began forming in many other Western states. These existing local gay rodeo organizations merged to create the IGRA in 1985 as a more permanent way to practice Western culture while fostering an inclusive space for all.

The history of gay rodeo is often communicated by the IGRA and its members themselves, however other public-facing venues have communicated this history as well, including the IGRA archives at the Autry Museum, scholar Rebecca Scofield's oral history project "Voices of Gay Rodeo," and Luke Gilford's photography composition *National Anthem*.<sup>26</sup> Similarly to 'Out West', discourse around the history of gay rodeo has entered public conversation in a variety of places, ranging from national publications to local publications and from Youtube to Twitter threads. Public interpretations of this history, however, belittle the contributions of queer people to rodeo. One manifestation of this is people understanding queer people in rodeo as recent instead of having always been present, conflating the founding of gay rodeo associations like the IGRA with the first moment queer people contributed to rodeo.

<sup>25</sup> Howie Klein, "What Ever Happened to Ennis Del Mar? The Contributions of Gays to the Olde American West," *Down with Tyranny*, December 5, 2019, <https://downwithtyranny.blogspot.com/2009/12/what-ever-happened-to-ennis-del-mar.html>.

<sup>26</sup> Rebecca Scofield, *Voices of Gay Rodeo*, <https://www.voicesofgayrodeo.com/>; Luke Gilford, *National Anthem: America's Queer Rodeo*, (Damiani, 2020).

Extending off of this finding, popular discourses have also depicted the IGRA as invasive to Western tradition. The history of gay rodeo has also been invoked in much political conversation. While the IGRA does not outwardly affiliate itself with political claims, the history is often used in discussion of progressive politics, keenly with the issue of marriage equality.

Authoring an article in *The Conversation*, scholar of gay rodeo Rebecca Scofield makes a point to note that “we know that queer people have always belonged in rural places and have always participated in rural traditions.”<sup>27</sup> Members of the IGRA are also acutely aware that their history and place in rodeo is as old as its creation, many making an effort to learn more about queer rodeo activity that existed before regional associations and the IGRA were even founded.<sup>28</sup> Among the public, the reality of this history is not discussed in the context of gay rodeo; in fact, discourse in public domains tend to generalize the recent timeframe of the IGRA’s existence to queer people in rodeo generally. For example, in a news article by *Al Dia*, the reporter notes that “a few decades before the debut of the colossal film [*Brokeback Mountain* of 2005], LGBTQ people were already riding bulls, roping heifers, and organizing queer rodeos,” when discussing the IGRA’s history.<sup>29</sup> By using general language of LGBTQ+ people here instead of specifying members of the IGRA throughout the article, queer people in rodeo in general are reduced to a post-1970s timeframe. This distorts the reality of the history. Similar to seeing queer rodeoers as new to rodeo, discussion around the IGRA has painted IGRA participants as threats to the West. Seen most potently in a YouTube comment on a PBS video about the gay rodeo, one user posted “All we want is gay marriages we swear. Now we have gay

rodeos.”<sup>30</sup> This comment takes on a threatening tone, seeing the IGRA as intrusive of rodeo. It also represents a lack of understanding that gay rodeoers’ contributions to rodeo date back long before the IGRA’s establishment, especially by the commenter situating gay rodeo as temporally after the contemporary marriage equality debate.

In terms of the political dimensions of IGRA discourse, it is important to note that the IGRA itself does not affiliate much with politics directly. Outside of putting on rodeo events, the organization mostly pursues charity work for the LGBTQ+ community, raising money for researching cures for HIV and other social and health needs of queer people.<sup>31</sup> Outside of these claims the IGRA itself only comments on politics in the most inconsequential of ways, such as an IGRA event in Colorado including a message of support from then-Colorado Governor John Hickenlooper (that makes no substantial political claims) in its event program or a rodeo in Texas including an advertisement for “Equality Vodka” which supports “advancing LGBTQ+ equality” in its program.<sup>32</sup> Some of the IGRA’s subsidiary gay rodeo associations have been known to sell equal marriage merchandise, however.<sup>33</sup>

Despite this, the IGRA’s history has been enlisted in supporting certain political debates, specifically the marriage question. For example, in a 2015 *Reuters* article, the IGRA was used anecdotally to uplift the progressive stance on the marriage equality debate in Arkansas. The article invokes the IGRA’s history in confronting homophobic politics in the West, while also quoting queer rodeoers themselves delivering provocative lines such as “we just want what’s

<sup>27</sup> Rebecca Scofield and Elyssa Ford, “How gay rodeos upend assumptions about life in rural America,” *Salon.com*, August 28, 2022,

[https://www.salon.com/2022/08/28/how-gay-rodeos-upend-assumptions-about-life-in-rural-america\\_partner/](https://www.salon.com/2022/08/28/how-gay-rodeos-upend-assumptions-about-life-in-rural-america_partner/)

<sup>28</sup> Patrick Terry, “Voices of Gay Rodeo,” October 21, 2017, <https://www.voicesofgayrodeo.com/interviews/terrypatrick>.

<sup>29</sup> Beatriz Garcia, “Queer Rodeo: Cowboys riding towards diversity,” *Al Dia*, October 16, 2020, <https://aldianews.com/en/culture/heritage-and-history/rural-diverse-america>.

[https://www.salon.com/2022/08/28/how-gay-rodeos-upend-assumptions-about-life-in-rural-america\\_partner/](https://www.salon.com/2022/08/28/how-gay-rodeos-upend-assumptions-about-life-in-rural-america_partner/)

<sup>30</sup> David Spicer, July 2022, Comment on PBS Voices, “How is the Gay Rodeo Different?” *Youtube*, February 24, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n3e5zpW4PWI>.

<sup>31</sup> IGRA, “The Mission of IGRA,” 2015, <http://igra.com/mission.htm>.

<sup>32</sup> “Rocky Mountain Regional Rodeo 33,” *IGRA Archives*, Event Program, July 10, 2015, <http://gayrodeohistory.org/2015/ProgramCgra.htm>; “Texas Tradition Rodeo: 2015 TGRA Rodeo, Music Festival & Fair,” *IGRA Archives*, Event Program, May 1, 2013, <http://gayrodeohistory.org/2015/ProgramTgra.htm>.

<sup>33</sup> Ema O’Connor, “These Gorgeous Photos From A Gay Rodeo Will Trigger Your Inner Cowboy,” *Buzzfeed News*, May 20, 2015,

evidence.<sup>22</sup> In discussing the power of oral histories, Hinton invokes Black's own words regarding "8", saying that "it's important that people know the arguments on both sides as this case makes its way to the Supreme Court."<sup>23</sup> In asserting likeness of the two plays' importance, Hinton emphasizes his historical work as necessary to informing queer politics.

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<sup>23</sup> Hinton, "VIEWPOINTS: Staging LGBT oral history: 'Laramie,' Beyond Brokeback and 8."

<sup>24</sup> Glionna, "Scholar reclaims hometown of Cody, Wyo., and gays' and lesbians' place in the West."

<sup>25</sup> Howie Klein, "What Ever Happened to Ennis Del Mar? The Contributions of Gays to the Olde American West," *Down with Tyranny*, December 5, 2019, <https://downwithtyranny.blogspot.com/2009/12/what-ever-happened-to-ennis-del-mar.html>.

<sup>26</sup> Rebecca Scofield, *Voices of Gay Rodeo*, <https://www.voicesofgayrodeo.com/>; Luke Gilford, *National Anthem: America's Queer Rodeo*, (Damiani, 2020).

Extending off of this finding, popular discourses have also depicted the IGRA as invasive to Western tradition. The history of gay rodeo has also been invoked in much political conversation. While the IGRA does not outwardly affiliate itself with political claims, the history is often used in discussion of progressive politics, keenly with the issue of marriage equality.

Authoring an article in *The Conversation*, scholar of gay rodeo Rebecca Scofield makes a point to note that “we know that queer people have always belonged in rural places and have always participated in rural traditions.”<sup>27</sup> Members of the IGRA are also acutely aware that their history and place in rodeo is as old as its creation, many making an effort to learn more about queer rodeo activity that existed before regional associations and the IGRA were even founded.<sup>28</sup> Among the public, the reality of this history is not discussed in the context of gay rodeo; in fact, discourse in public domains tend to generalize the recent timeframe of the IGRA’s existence to queer people in rodeo generally. For example, in a news article by *Al Dia*, the reporter notes that “a few decades before the debut of the colossal film [*Brokeback Mountain* of 2005], LGBTQ people were already riding bulls, roping heifers, and organizing queer rodeos,” when discussing the IGRA’s history.<sup>29</sup> By using general language of LGBTQ+ people here instead of specifying members of the IGRA throughout the article, queer people in rodeo in general are reduced to a post-1970s timeframe. This distorts the reality of the history. Similar to seeing queer rodeoers as new to rodeo, discussion around the IGRA has painted IGRA participants as threats to the West. Seen most potently in a YouTube comment on a PBS video about the gay rodeo, one user posted “All we want is gay marriages we swear. Now we have gay

rodeos.”<sup>30</sup> This comment takes on a threatening tone, seeing the IGRA as intrusive of rodeo. It also represents a lack of understanding that gay rodeoers’ contributions to rodeo date back long before the IGRA’s establishment, especially by the commenter situating gay rodeo as temporally after the contemporary marriage equality debate.

In terms of the political dimensions of IGRA discourse, it is important to note that the IGRA itself does not affiliate much with politics directly. Outside of putting on rodeo events, the organization mostly pursues charity work for the LGBTQ+ community, raising money for researching cures for HIV and other social and health needs of queer people.<sup>31</sup> Outside of these claims the IGRA itself only comments on politics in the most inconsequential of ways, such as an IGRA event in Colorado including a message of support from then-Colorado Governor John Hickenlooper (that makes no substantial political claims) in its event program or a rodeo in Texas including an advertisement for “Equality Vodka” which supports “advancing LGBTQ+ equality” in its program.<sup>32</sup> Some of the IGRA’s subsidiary gay rodeo associations have been known to sell equal marriage merchandise, however.<sup>33</sup>

Despite this, the IGRA’s history has been enlisted in supporting certain political debates, specifically the marriage question. For example, in a 2015 *Reuters* article, the IGRA was used anecdotally to uplift the progressive stance on the marriage equality debate in Arkansas. The article invokes the IGRA’s history in confronting homophobic politics in the West, while also quoting queer rodeoers themselves delivering provocative lines such as “we just want what’s

<sup>27</sup> Rebecca Scofield and Elyssa Ford, “How gay rodeos upend assumptions about life in rural America,” *Salon.com*, August 28, 2022,

[https://www.salon.com/2022/08/28/how-gay-rodeos-upend-assumptions-about-life-in-rural-america\\_partner/](https://www.salon.com/2022/08/28/how-gay-rodeos-upend-assumptions-about-life-in-rural-america_partner/)

<sup>28</sup> Patrick Terry, “Voices of Gay Rodeo,” October 21, 2017, <https://www.voicesofgayrodeo.com/interviews/terrypatrick>.

<sup>29</sup> Beatriz Garcia, “Queer Rodeo: Cowboys riding towards diversity,” *Al Dia*, October 16, 2020, <https://aldianews.com/en/culture/heritage-and-history/rural-diverse-america>.

[https://www.salon.com/2022/08/28/how-gay-rodeos-upend-assumptions-about-life-in-rural-america\\_partner/](https://www.salon.com/2022/08/28/how-gay-rodeos-upend-assumptions-about-life-in-rural-america_partner/)

<sup>30</sup> David Spicer, July 2022, Comment on PBS Voices, “How is the Gay Rodeo Different?” *Youtube*, February 24, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n3e5zpW4PWI>.

<sup>31</sup> IGRA, “The Mission of IGRA,” 2015, <http://igra.com/mission.htm>.

<sup>32</sup> “Rocky Mountain Regional Rodeo 33,” *IGRA Archives*, Event Program, July 10, 2015, <http://gayrodeohistory.org/2015/ProgramCgra.htm>; “Texas Tradition Rodeo: 2015 TGRA Rodeo, Music Festival & Fair,” *IGRA Archives*, Event Program, May 1, 2013, <http://gayrodeohistory.org/2015/ProgramTgra.htm>.

<sup>33</sup> Ema O’Connor, “These Gorgeous Photos From A Gay Rodeo Will Trigger Your Inner Cowboy,” *Buzzfeed News*, May 20, 2015,

right”<sup>34</sup> The article highlights Arkansas as, at the time, the next battleground state in legalizing same-sex marriage. In both invoking the IGRA’s history in the state and using queer rodeoers for provocative lines, the article attempts to assert the importance of equal marriage within the state. Here, the IGRA becomes a tool for the political strategy of progressives. In addition to being used to advance progressive aims, the IGRA was also uplifted following the Obergefell decision in 2015 that ruled in favor of the right to marry for same-sex couples. In an article in the *Dallas Voice* advertising the upcoming 2018 World Gay Rodeo being held in Texas, it discusses how one of the features of that year’s rodeo was to be the display of the Panel 93 pride flag. Panel 93 was “flown over the Obama White House and was hanging outside the U.S. Supreme Court the day of the Obergefell marriage equality decision in 2015.”<sup>35</sup> Throughout the article, like most articles relating to the IGRA, discussion of the event is in the context of the gay rodeo’s history. The presentation of the Panel 93 flag being used as a feature for the event shows the relationship between the IGRA and the political scene, as the progressive advancement on marriage equality embodied in the flag is used to build popularity for the event and celebrate the IGRA’s history.

### The Charley Parkhurst Story

The final case study surrounds one of the most iconic queer figures of the West: Charley Parkhurst. From the 1850s to the 1870s, One-Eyed Charley Parkhurst held a place in the company of Old West legends such as Buffalo Bill Cody and Wild Bill Hickock as a fearless California stagecoach driver.<sup>36</sup> Stagecoach driving was a career for the rugged and daring,

as driving gold, people, and mail across the West meant contending with harsh conditions, robbery, and physical exertion. Upon his death in late 1879, doctors discovered that Parkhurst was of the female sex. People who frequented Parkhurst in California were so unsuspecting that many refused to believe this was the case until the doctors who had made the initial discovery noted that at some point in Parkhurst’s life, he had given birth.<sup>37</sup> The shock value of this story has carried Parkhurst to be one of the most discussed queer icons of the American West, as his story complicates the masculine, cisgender, and heterosexual assumptions of Western history and life.

Written, historical material on Parkhurst is limited and on the whole unsatisfying, yet depictions of the Parkhurst story have proliferated nonetheless, largely defined by small biographies, fictionalized books of Parkhurst that loosely track historical events, and a few monuments in his honor. The history of Parkhurst has been discussed in the greater public conversation somewhat extensively, with discussion of this history finding its way into popular, national news publications, local news sources, and many social media accounts. Despite the impressive extent of discussion of Parkhurst’s history, public understandings of Parkhurst that emerge from analyzing these sources show a persistence in upholding mythologized versions of Western history as hyper-masculinized, cisgendered, and heteronormative. Parkhurst’s history is not being understood as a trans story and is perpetuating the Turnerian myth that men are made on the Western frontier. As it relates to how the Parkhurst story has made an impact on the politics of the West, this history is also being used to advance a progressive political agenda, particularly as it relates to education.

When author of *The Whip*— a novel of historical fiction based on the life of Charley Parkhurst— Karen Kondazian was asked if Parkhurst would have identified as a transgender man, she determinedly replies, “Yes, absolutely.”<sup>38</sup> Other depictions of Parkhurst similarly affirm his transness, with “The Fearless Character of One Eyed Charley” biography on *OutHistory.org*, being

<sup>34</sup> Steve Barnes, “Gay rodeo tests tolerance in Arkansas, hotbed of rights fight,” *Reuters*, May 20, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-gayrodeo/gay-rodeo-tests-tolerance-in-arkansas-hotbed-of-rights-fight-idUSKBN0051KJ20150520>.

<sup>35</sup> David Taffet, “For the love of rodeo: Competitors from around the world coming to Mesquite for World Gay Rodeo Finals,” *Dallas Voice*, October 19, 2018, <https://dallasvoice.com/for-the-love-of-rodeo/>.

<sup>36</sup> Bryan Kennedy, “The Fearless Character of One Eyed Charlie,” *OutHistory*, <https://outhistory.org/exhibits/show/tgibios/charley-parkhurst>; Boag, *Re-Dressing America’s Frontier Past*, 106.

<sup>37</sup> Boag, *Re-Dressing America’s Frontier Past*, 106.

<sup>38</sup> Nick Pachelli, “Was Legendary Stagecoach Driver Charlie Parkhurst Gay or Trans?” *The Advocate*, March 8, 2013, <https://www.advocate.com/arts-entertainment/books/2013/03/08/was-legendary-stagecoach-driver-charlie-parkhurst-gay-or-trans>.

featured as part of a trans biography project titled “Challenging Gender Boundaries”. Despite depictions of Parkhurst asserting this history as a piece of trans Western history, there is a divergence in public understandings of whether or not Parkhurst is recognized as transgender. Venues of public discourse that have an LGBTQ+ orientation, such as queer organizations, newspapers, magazines, etc., frequently deem Parkhurst as having a transgender identity while most other venues do not. For example, *Seattle’s LGBTQIA+ News and Entertainment Weekly* in a piece highlighting Parkhurst’s history presents his death in the following way:

“Charley died at the age of 67 after a battle with tongue cancer. It wasn’t until after his death that his friends realized Charley had been Transgender. Still, they used he/him pronouns when memorializing Charley, as did his obituary, which was republished by the New York Times.”<sup>39</sup>

Here, there is specificity in highlighting the queer identity that Parkhurst embodied. This is contrasted against language like that of a *Sparks Tribune* article, a local newspaper in Sparks, Nevada near where Parkhurst would have driven his stagecoach:

“Charlie Parkhurst died in December, 1879 at the age of 67, from throat cancer and rheumatism. When neighbors came to her cabin to lay the body out for burial, they discovered the renowned stagecoach driver was actually a woman.”<sup>40</sup>

This example reflects an understanding of Parkhurst as someone who was not queer but instead had always been a cisgender woman. This article, in the company of many others, purports an understanding of Parkhurst as wearing a disguise to hide his womanhood instead of one that challenges the gender binary. While the Parkhurst history is broadly discussed, this divergence in whether Parkhurst is understood as transgender or not highlights that the collective memory does not wholly attribute queerness to Parkhurst and his contributions to the American West.

<sup>39</sup> Lindsey Anderson, “The Trans history lesson your teachers never taught you,” *SGN*, November 18, 2022, <https://www.sgn.org/story.php?320706>.

<sup>40</sup> Dennis Cassinelli, “The Remarkable Story of Charlie Parkhurst,” *Sparks Tribune*, August 19, 2017, <https://sparkstrib.com/2017/08/19/the-remarkable-story-of-charlie-parkhurst/>.

In a similar vein, public discussion of Parkhurst’s history does not only deny Parkhurst’s transgender identity, but also replicates the antiquated, Turnerian, Western mythology that men are made in the West. A *Valley News* article, for example, notes that the public imagination clung to Parkhurst not only because “she had fooled the world into thinking she was a man, but because she became a man among men.”<sup>41</sup> The messaging here is in line with Turner’s problematic ideas of the frontier, where the frontier is a place where men are made. While Parkhurst troubles the Western myth in not being a docile woman nor a cisgender male, his story does not truly erode this mythology. Instead, he is asserted as a unique case where a “woman” could be recognized as a “man” through rugged Western activities. Similar messaging in more discreet terms can be found in a 2018 *New York Times* article, which invokes a 1969 *New York Times* article that reads “the state lines of CA in the post-Gold Rush period were certainly no place for a lady, and nobody ever accused Charley of being one.”<sup>42</sup> In using this messaging to communicate Parkhurst’s history, it perpetuates the idea that Parkhurst was seen as a man because of his ability to surmount the obstacles of the West, something that non-cisgender men could not do. The Parkhurst biography on *OutHistory.org* counters this invocation of Parkhurst, concluding by noting “regardless of his gender expression, Charley is, in every sense, a true Old West Legend.”<sup>43</sup> This claims that success and legendary status in the American West should not be attained via masculinization. Despite attempts to depict the Parkhurst history in this way, public understandings of Parkhurst display anti-queer and problematic Western mythologies that have been historically dominant.

Politically, the Parkhurst history has confronted political debate across many issue areas, with one example here being education. In a long battle between

<sup>41</sup> Matt Hongoltz-Hetling, “How a Girl From Sharon Became an Icon Out West,” *Valley News*, May 13, 2016, <https://www.vnews.com/Charley-Parkhurst-from-the-Upper-Valley-to-the-Old-West-1806268>.

<sup>42</sup> Tim Arango, “Overlooked No More: Charley Parkhurst, Gold Rush Legend With a Hidden Identity,” *The New York Times*, December 5, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/05/obituaries/charley-parkhurst-overlooked.html>.

<sup>43</sup> Kennedy, “The Fearless Character of One Eyed Charlie.”

progressive and conservative lawmakers in California, the FAIR Education Act was passed in 2011, requiring that public schools teach fair, accurate, inclusive, and respectful (FAIR) representations of marginalized racial, ethnic, and LGBTQ+ histories in grade school social studies and history curricula. Professor of Women's and Gender Studies at Sonoma State University Dom Romesburg who was a part of an advisory group called the FAIR Education Implementation Coalition, invokes Parkhurst's life as a reason for why policy like the FAIR Education Act is so important:

"It's important that we see LGBT lives in the past so that we understand that queerness and transness is not something that simply appears after Stonewall, for example. But it's something that's been around in some form everywhere for always."<sup>44</sup>

Additionally, discourse around the Parkhurst history's relevance to this political debate addresses the issue of understanding this history as a transgender story. The FAIR Education Implementation Coalition, recommended that histories like Parkhurst use precise language for queer history. They highlight the importance of Parkhurst being referred to as he and not she and of using the word transgender, as the word "transgender" is a rare site in history textbooks.<sup>45</sup> In doing so, the Committee reconciles the diverging understandings of Parkhurst as a transgender versus a cisgender person wearing men's clothes, noting that some people in history would likely have lived a more gender-diverse life if not for the confines that society asserts on the basis of gender.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Jessica Placzek, "Meet Charley Parkhurst: the Gold Rush's Fearless, Gender Nonconforming Stagecoach Driver," KQED, April 25, 2019,

<https://www.kqed.org/news/11742467/meet-charley-parkhurst-the-gold-rushs-fearless-gender-nonconforming-stagecoach-driver>.

<sup>45</sup> Katy Steinmetz, "California Is Adopting LGBT-Inclusive History Textbooks. It's the Latest Chapter in a Centuries-Long Fight," Time, November 14, 2017,

<https://time.com/5022698/california-history-lgbt-textbooks-curriculum/>.

<sup>46</sup> Steinmetz, "California Is Adopting LGBT-Inclusive History Textbooks. It's the Latest Chapter in a Centuries-Long Fight."

## Synthesis and Conclusion

Taken together, these three case studies represent two primary influences that depictions of queer Western history have on public consciousness of the West and its political landscape: (1) discretization of queerness from Western history and (2) a mutually beneficial relationship between queer Western history and progressive politics. Discretizing queerness from Western history here materializes as the history from each case study is accepted as history insofar as it is placed on a recent timeline with regard to Western history or its queerness has been stripped from it. Relating to the first case study of Hinton's 'Out West' program, there was great discrepancy among the public conversation of how the history that the exhibit presented was being digested. Some spoke of 'Out West' as indeed highlighting LGBTQ+ history, while others understood 'Out West' as a comment on present queer lifestyle in the West, and more refused to entertain the idea of the program. While not absolute, these alternative understandings of 'Out West' represent upholding a version of Western history with no queer presence, perpetuating problematic Western mythologies. Public understandings of the history of gay rodeo presented a similar theme, seeing queer people as entering rodeo at the founding of the IGRA. While scholars, historians, and rodeoers themselves have communicated the existence of queer people in rodeo long before the organization's establishment, popular uptake of this history does not understand queerness in rodeo before the 1970s. Finally, with the Charley Parkhurst story, primarily venues of public discourse with LGBTQ+ orientations will identify Parkhurst as transgender, while others interpret Parkhurst as a woman in disguise. This rids Parkhurst's history of its queerness and situates Parkhurst within a gender binary.

While the literature on the American West highlights that queer erasure and an oversaturation of hypermasculinized, heteronormative, and cisgendered imagery and motifs of the West have served to uphold mythological understandings of Western history, the synthesis of these cases challenges simplistic remediation. As examples of filling in historical gaps and contesting dominant understandings of history, the presentation of queer history on its own does not wholly rewrite how publics remember the American West. This suggests that history may have a non-foundational role as the base of long-standing, Turnerian Western myths, but possibly rather social values and fictions.

What is clear are the possible implications of these understandings for queer people in the West. As seen with the IGRA, discretization of the queer history from that of the history of rodeo was paired with explicit, threatening language. Seeing queer people solely as contributors to the present and not to the past feeds into seeing queer people as invasive to the status quo, opening them up to violence.

In analyzing the ways in which these depictions of queer history have confronted political discourse, there exists a mutually beneficial relationship between queer Western history and progressive politics. All three of these depictions of queer Western history are used to advance progressive political agendas, however developments in politics also led the progressive side of political debate to validate and promote queer history. This is seen most viscerally with the Charley Parkhurst story, where the interplay between the history and the political push for the FAIR Education act present clear reciprocity. The Parkhurst story was used to support the importance and passage of the progressive FAIR Education Act, but the Act itself also affirmed and codified, in a way, this piece of queer history. An article by *KQED* public radio in Northern California put this succinctly, noting that Parkhurst's story has really only been told in "more obscure historical texts," but now will assume a more "permanent place in California history books."<sup>47</sup> Here, the issue of gaps in depictions of queer Western history was presented as a problem and political change was found as a solution, where in the other direction, in being used to advance the Act, progressives portray the lack of comprehensive education as an issue and the Parkhurst story is used to amplify its importance.

While more obscure in the other two cases, especially given that the nature of the FAIR Education Act was more outwardly supporting the telling of queer history, the mutually beneficial relationship still rears its head. With respect to the 'Out West' political discussion, Hinton himself positions his program as doing work to support rights for queer people, particularly related to marriage equality. Public interpretations of Hinton's work see the program as advancing a progressive agenda as well. As seen with Howie Klein's blog post, however, increasing conservatism in the LGBTQ+ political landscape directed

attention back to queer history. Klein himself noted the timeliness of the effort. Coming from a progressive blog, Klein's post embodies that as marriage politics evolved, the progressive agenda came back to uplift 'Out West,' even though the development constituted a swing to the right. Findings from the IGRA display the mutualism between the leftist political scene and the history of gay rodeo in the context of the marriage equality debate of the 2010s. In the example out of Arkansas, the history of the organization was used to support the progressive side of the marriage question in light of the increasingly contentious rights fight there. Following the Obergefell Supreme Court decision, politics turned back to positively benefit the IGRA, giving new importance to and spurring popularity for their events and history with the presentation of the Panel 93 flag.

As it stands, in both cowboy country and broader national discourse, queer history is not being received and understood as a facet of the American West's history. This mutualism between progressive politics and queer Western history, though, presents possible change. Should queer Western history be received in more complete ways, in ways that reject discretization and promote understanding of queerness having always been a part of the West, the progressive political conversation could be enriched, to the benefit of both erased histories and leftist values. For now, queer histories remain belittled in the public consciousness of the West.

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