Australasian Association of Writing Programs

TEXT SPECIAL ISSUE
Number 67 August 2022

ISSN: 1327-9556 | textjournal.scholasticahq.com

Cardiff Metropolitan University

Christina Thatcher

Cowgirl poetics: Writing women in rodeo

Abstract:
Rodeo is both a sport and a cultural phenomenon in which the myth of the cowboy and the American West are lived out in the arena. And just as long as the sport has been alive, cowboys have been writing poetry about it (Bell, 2020). However, poetry that acknowledges the complex history of women in rodeo is still largely absent. As a poet, rider, and long-time rodeo fan, I have been working on a set of poetic biographies which I hope will help fill this gap. In this self-reflexive article, I explore the process of writing biographical poems which attempt to capture the dual role that female rodeo riders must play as both women and competitive athletes. For context, this article opens with a brief history of women in rodeo before discussing the absence of poetry written by and about them. Two poems I have written about famous female rodeo riders are then used to discuss how poetic biographies – as well as ekphrasis, segmentivity, and metapoetics – can uniquely represent women's experiences in rodeo. At the centre of this article is an attempt to understand what it means to be a female rodeo rider and how poetry might help to document their experiences.

Biographical note:
Dr Christina Thatcher is a Creative Writing Lecturer at Cardiff Metropolitan University. She has published two poetry collections with Parthian Books: *More than you were* (2017) and *How to Carry Fire* (2020). Her third collection-in-progress, *Breaking a Mare*, won a Literature Wales Writer's Bursary in 2018. This work aims to explore the intersections between female strength and vulnerability in the context of farm work, horse rearing, and rodeo riding.

Keywords:
rodeo, poetry, poetic biography, verse biography, ekphrasis

Opening ceremony: A brief history of women in rodeo

Rodeo is one of the fastest growing sports in the United States (Hole, 2019). Across the country, there are more than 650 rodeos sanctioned by the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association (PRCA), with nearly 5,000 registered cowboys and more than 43 million fans (PRCA Sports News, 2021). Professional rodeos include a variety of events such as bareback riding, saddle bronc riding, bull riding, steer wrestling, barrel racing, and team roping. Rides are often completed in 6 or 8 second intervals – the cowboy who can stay on the longest without touching his animal, his equipment or himself with his freehand, wins. It is incredibly dangerous to compete and thrilling to watch.

According to Forsyth and Thompson (2007), the rodeo is a stage "where the image of the American cowboy is created, recreated, and glorified" (p. 394). During the early 1800s, many English-speaking settlers migrated to the American West and adopted the roping, riding, and cattle-driving techniques of Mexican cowboys, often called *vaqueros* or *charros* (TheStoryOfTexas.com, n.d.). During this time, cowboys from all backgrounds – including Native Americans, African Americas, and Mexicans, as well as settlers from the eastern United States and Europe – competed together in informal rodeos (History.com, 2010). However, by the 1930s, organisations such as the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association (PRCA), began promoting the idea that rodeo "was an outgrowth of informal contests among Anglo – and only *Anglo* – cowboys on the Texas open range" (Barraclough, 2018, p. 14). Wild West shows that had once featured *charros* and *vaqueros* became predominately white; Hollywood began to popularise the Anglo cowboy lifestyle with Western films starring actors like John Wayne; and country music increasingly celebrated the white, working-class lifestyle (Barraclough, 2018). Collectively, these organisations and cultural products "mass-produced the idea that the cowboy was a working-class, white, and American male hero, obscuring the historic and ongoing participation of ethnic Mexicans, other Latinos, African Americans, and indigenous people in rodeo and ranching" (Barraclough, 2018, p. 15). Today, rodeo evokes the physical labour of America's pioneers, perpetuates the myth of the frontier, upholds ranching and cow herding traditions, and celebrates the white cowboy – a social construction which "emphasizes both respectable masculinity and physical toughness" (Weninger & Dallaire, 2019, p. 108).

As white cowboys rose to become the centralised character in the American Myth, both ethnic minority cowboys as well as all cowgirls, who are part of the same history, were slowly pushed aside (Patton & Schedlock, 2012). In the nineteenth century, women participated in cattle drives and rodeo events, historically competing as saddle bronc riders, bull riders, and steer ropers alongside their cowboy counterparts (LeCompte, 1990). Rodeo cowgirls were among "America's pioneer professional athletes, achieving financial success and international acclaim prior to the Golden Age of sport, and long before female professional athletes were widely accepted by the public" (LeCompte, 1990, p. 318). In fact, nearly 350 women enjoyed professional rodeo careers from 1890 to 1929 (LeCompte, 1990).

Despite their early success, cowgirls faced a series of challenges when rodeos began to unionise. The Rodeo Association of America (RAA), formed in 1929, banned women from competing in any professional rodeo events (Oliver, 1994). In part, this exclusion stemmed from the death of champion bronco rider, Bonnie McCaroll, who was trampled and killed at the 1929 Pendleton Round-Up Rodeo (Wells, 2013). Despite the fact that many cowboys had been injured and killed in rodeos for decades, event organisers felt women were unable to safely compete in the sport (Wells, 2013). All women were banned from professional competition until a group of female athletes formed the Girls Rodeo Association (GRA) in 1949 (Wells, 2013). Later the GRA became the Women's Professional Rodeo Association (WPRA), which is the oldest women's sports organisation in America (WPRA.com, 2021).

After that, it took more than two decades of lobbying for women to earn the right to participate in a single professional rodeo event: barrel racing (Oliver, 1994). Soon barrel racing, which is less expensive to organise and less violent, became the dominant rodeo sport for women in the United States (Oliver, 1994). According to the 2021 Official Rulebook for the Women's Professional Rodeo Association (WPRA), women are still only invited to compete in the following timed events: barrel racing, team roping, breakaway roping, and tie-down roping (WPRA, 2021).

Despite having more events available to them, contemporary cowgirls still tend to be "funnelled into barrel racing", which is often reserved as a women-only event because it is seen as less dangerous (Weninger & Dallaire, 2019, p. 105). According to Weninger and Dallaire (2019), rodeo's role in "preserving Western heritage and the sharp line between feminine and masculine gender norms could [also] explain why women are excluded, for all practical purposes, from the other competitive events" (p. 105). Shields and Coughlin (2000) also note that bronc and bull-riding, calf roping, and steer wrestling "all provide venues in which 'the best' is measured in terms of strength, speed and agility. Within this extremely patriarchal, traditional, and ritualistic culture of rodeo, women may seem to have few, if any, roles" (p. 182).

Women have fought for the right to compete in rodeo throughout the twenty-first century. However, even after slowly making their way back into the arena, cowgirls still face a variety of challenges. As women participating in a male dominated sport, cowgirls are expected to embody the "contradictory subject positions as both 'woman' and 'athlete' imposed by prevailing gender norms" (Helstein, 2010). A closer examination of rodeo culture reveals that women occupy a variety of nuanced, contested, and often contradictory positions. According to Shields and Coughlin (2000), women in rodeo can at times:

> function as decorative objects subordinate to men, stereotypical gender roles that suggest men are active agents while women are passive participants. At the same time rodeo women are also positioned as equestrian athletes and engage in practices of rugged individualism, independence and athleticism. As such the women participate in activities

> which suggest they are not subordinate to men. And at times, rodeo women simultaneously occupy both positions. These apparently disparate and contradictory impulses suggest widely varying interpretations of the roles which women act out, fill and play within the gendered world of American rodeo. The rodeo performances of both women and men provide fertile ground for examining social re/presentations of gender. (p. 182)

Due to the traditional and patriarchal expectations of the sport, women in rodeo often need to live in two worlds at once: they "must be rough, tough, and ready for action", and yet still "maintain a feminine etiquette" (Patton & Schedlock, 2012, p. 187).

Poetic representations of women in rodeo

Part of rodeo's role is to uphold a set of traditions and myths about the American frontier both in, and outside of, the arena. Cowboys have written poetry since the 1870s or, as folklorist Hal Cannon states, "for as long as there has been a need to herd cattle in the American West" (Bell, 2020, para. 7). In 1985, The National Cowboy Poetry Gathering was established in Nevada, where the tradition of sharing poems, stories, and songs about the cowboy, ranch life, and rodeo can be upheld (NationalCowboyPoetryGathering.org, 2021). While cowboys are often portrayed as a sort of rugged hero, women and cowgirls are not well represented in rodeo poetics.

For instance, cowboy poetry that celebrates women often does this by portraying them as a "helpmate" (Stoeltje, 1975, p. 25). According to Forsyth and Thompson (2007), the ideal wife for a cowboy as portrayed in stories, song, and poetry is:

> a woman who could take care of the home, the ranch, the children, and do whatever was necessary to support her man and family. These images remain salient. Although life on a ranch or farm is less and less common for women steeped in western ideology and traditions, the supporting role endures and is alive and well among rodeo families. (p. 405)

When not represented as a wife, mother or helpmate, women in cowboy poetry are often written about as objects, sometimes being directly compared to a man's horse or his truck. According to Thomas (1995), cowboy poetry provides:

> frequent demonstrations of language choices that combine the human female with the equine. Lucky Whipple describes the Chookaloski Mare as "no virgin in the chute" (1985; 134) and as "Satan's favorite mistress (1985; 135). Howard L. Norskog calls his mare "Black Lady" and refers to her as an "old biddy" (1990: 83) … A cowboy "could ride anything with hair." (p. 220)

Cowboy poetry, in part, upholds the folklore of the American West, perpetuates the image of the masculine and virile cowboy, and regularly includes jokes about rodeo women and their bodies (Thomas, 1995).

Although there have been thousands of cowboy poets – and dozens of poetry collections published of their work – poetry written by women about their role in rodeo is still incredibly rare. There has only been one major cowgirl anthology published on this topic, *Cowgirl Poetry: 100 Years of Ridin' & Rhymin'* (Bennett, 2001). However, even this collection includes very few poems about the women who actually compete in rodeo. Elizabeth Ebert, "the Grand Dame of Cowboy Poetry", published two poetry collections – *Crazy Quilt* (1997) and *Prairie Wife* (2006) – which, similarly focus on ranching, cowboy romances, and married life, with very little about the actual sport of rodeo. In 2018, Lindsey D. Alexander published *Rodeo in Reverse*, which explores married life, prairie history, and Americana. Only one poem, "Homestead Sure", directly explores "the beauty of the rodeo", comparing the speaker to a bronco: "a bronco's no square peg, / and neither am I" (Alexander, 2018, p. 86).

Despite the proliferation of cowboy poetry, cowgirl poetry that acknowledges the history of women in rodeo and represents women's complex role in the arena is largely absent. As a poet, rider, and long-time rodeo fan, I have been working on a set of rodeo poems that I hope will help fill this gap. This article will discuss two poems I have written which attempt to capture the dual role that female rodeo riders must play as both women and competitive athletes. The poems themselves are also playing a dual role, attempting to both celebrate these riders but also raise questions about how women are treated in rodeo.

A foray into poetic biography

In my poetry-collection-in-progress, currently entitled *Breaking a Mare,* I have written several poems about famous female rodeo riders which work together to form a larger sequence representing their challenges and triumphs in the arena. Research for these poems started simply by seeking out women rodeo riders who competed in the United States during the twentieth and twenty-first century. Once a small collection of female riders were identified, I began targeted research for each of them using biographical source material, including interviews, newspaper reports, images, biographies, and essays, as well as exhibition notes from the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum.

This research created a pool of data to wade through. Every time I dove in, two key figures kept rising to the surface: Mabel Strickland Woodward and Tad Lucas. Leon Edel (1984) claims that no one knows why biographers fix their attention "on certain faces and turn away from others" (p. 60) while Smith (2012) suggests that it is the biographer's personality – "their motives, fears, unconscious conflicts, and yearnings" (p. 2) – that guides their choice of subjects. In part, this was true for me – my empathy and awe for these two women inspired my

decision to write about them. This decision was made easier by the fact that Woodward and Lucas remained in the public eye throughout their careers, leading to more source material than any other rider I was researching. Having more images, interviews, newspaper articles, and other source material, made it easier for me to identify repeating themes and important events in their lives. Together, these laid a firm grounding for the content and form of my poems.

When considering the function of each poem, and of "poetic biography" more broadly, I considered the ways in which the pieces could be segmented – from each other but also within the context of each poem. Rachel Blau DuPlessis (1995) claims:

> Poetry is the kind of writing that is articulated in sequenced, gapped lines and whose meanings are created by occurring in bounded units precisely chosen, units operating in relation to chosen pause or silence. Thus a fusion of reading, observing, and listening techniques are required to decode it... In short, all the meanings poetry makes are constructed by segmented units of a variety of sizes... Therefore, I propose that segmentivity – the ability to articulate and make meaning by selecting, deploying, and combining segments – is the underlying characteristic of poetry as a genre. (p. 51)

According to Wilkinson (2016), poetry is characterised by "particular forms of segmentivity, the line break defining each line as a 'segment' of writing, the stanza break making further discrete units, and the sequence of poems itself making a 'segment' of each individual poem" (p. ix). What is included and left out of these segments represent another way of "calling attention to the gaps, the juxtapositions, and the associative leaps and abrupt shifts in perception that can be found not only in individual lyric poems but can be seen to structure the verse biography as a sequence" (Wilkinson, 2016, p. xi). It is precisely this opportunity to juxtapose and leave gaps – something which represents the complexities of the female rodeo rider experience –that called me to poetic biography.

The strong feminine cowgirl

Patton and Schedlock (2012) offer a historical analysis of the representation of the American cowgirl, noting that their role in rodeo is complicated "by dichotomous subject positions between the strong, skilled, independent working cowgirl vs. the feminine and sexy cowgirl" (p. 139). Their analysis of oral stories and images show that contemporary cowgirls, despite their objectification and sexualisation by others, focus on the equality of their role and want to be recognised as "skilled rodeo competitors" first and foremost (Patton & Schedlock, 2012, p. 139). Unfortunately, media representations of women rodeo riders often tend to focus unduly on their "feminine" attributes or beauty.

This can be seen in Robert Remington's *National Post* (2002) article, where Remington writes: "Brave, talented and often drop-dead gorgeous, these women are every bit as tough as the cowboys" (p. 15). He also notes that rodeo women have not "lost their femininity" and that,

instead, “they often insist on being feminine, even though they do these amazing stunts. Almost every woman I met seems to embody and exude this confidence without being cocky about it. It's confidence mixed with modesty” (Remington, 2002, p. 15).

One female rodeo rider received huge attention from the press during her long career: Mabel Strickland Woodward. According to Olson (2015), Mabel was:

> a petite gal of five-feet, four-inches and around one-hundred pounds. Newspaper accounts from the day called Mabel, “The Lovely Lady of Rodeo” and some said she looked more like a “Follies beauty” than a rodeo cowgirl… It has been said that she was the most photographed cowgirl of all time. Photographers loved to take pictures of the lovely little lady as she competed. (para. 3)

Rodeo historian and author, Gail Hughbanks Woerner, once wrote that Mabel’s “features were delicate, her hair was always done in the most attractive style and her western clothing fit perfectly and was always of the most flattering styles” (Olson, 2015, para. 3).

No poetry seems to have been published about Mabel Strickland Woodward’s impressive career, and most representations of her in the press focus primarily on her looks. Alpern et al. (1992) discuss how the role of feminist biographers is not only to “restore ‘invisible’ women to the record but enlarge our perspective of the record” (p. 6). Wilkinson (2016) notes that “poetic biography” (sometimes also called “verse biography”) in particular can offer a unique way for feminist poets to write and document the lives of historical figures, allowing for a more nuanced approach.

My poem, “The Rodeo Paradox”, was written as an attempt to juxtapose Mabel Strickland Woodward’s athletic abilities – which were often left out in the press – against what the reporters were writing about her at the time:

The Rodeo Paradox

for Mabel Strickland Woodward

She could rope a steer in just 18 seconds
throw its calf-body to the ground and pin
its flailing legs. Her own calves squeezed magic
into broncos, her forward fenders pulled *oohs*
from the crowd, her one foot drag dropped jaws.
This *lovely lady of rodeo* could buck any catcall,
mount any animal—ride unnervingly fast, *with grace*.
Her brave was the size of a Dallas arena. And yet,
she was *never brutish*, reporters rallied around her

> *petite frame*. Even on the night she swung under
> her horse's neck, reached up for her saddle
> then slipped—trampled to *near death*—
> the papers prized how pretty she looked,
> even then, *just so darn beautiful*.

This poem is segmented in several ways, perhaps most clearly grouped into italic and non-italic words. Each italic phrase was borrowed from a newspaper report or website feature written about Mabel Strickland Woodward. All except for "near death" speak about her looks and the awe (*oohs)* that she inspired. The final three lines attempt to communicate how even when Mabel nearly died, the reporters still valued her looks, arguably, more than her life. Further segmentation can be seen in the use of enjambment as well em dashes which separate various lines and clauses within the piece.

This self-contained poetic biography is also written as a contemporary sonnet, which is one of the most enduring and recognisable poetic forms. Coming from the Italian word "sonneto" or "little song", traditional sonnets are usually recognised as 14 lines of rhyming iambic pentameter (Richardson, 2013). However, modern writers often loosen this form by discarding some of the "rules" of metre and rhyme, while still retaining its spirit (Richardson, 2013). For me, this loosening was key in order to create movement and pace. To do this, I abandoned traditional end rhymes, which create a rigid structure and predictability, in favour of alliteration ("forward fenders", "drag dropped", "papers prized"), and slant rhymes ("jaws" / "catcall"), which serve to retain the musicality of the sonnet form while still offering surprise. Like most sonnets, this piece also includes a "volta" before the final couplet which begins with the word "Even" in line 10. This represents a climactic turn in the poem where Mabel nearly dies and the reports *still* are focussed on her beauty. Perhaps most importantly, sonnets are a love form, and this one is no different. In keeping with the segmentation and duality of this poem, the love form here speaks to both my personal admiration for Mabel as an athlete as well the "love" she garnered from cowboys, crowds, and reporters.

Perhaps more important than the chosen form or words for this poetic biography are the things which are left off the page. In a 2005 *Guardian* interview, poet Alice Oswald suggests space is as important to poetry as the words themselves: "One of the differences between poetry and prose is that poetry is beyond words. Poetry is only there to frame the silence. There is silence between each verse and silence at the end" (para. 15). Wilkinson (2016) states that both poetic biographers and prose biographers have "become more open about acknowledging the necessary silences in their own accounts of their subjects' lives" (p. vii). She states that:

> As Hermione Lee puts it, "Biographies . . . are full of things that aren't there: absences, gaps, missing evidence" (Virginia Woolf's Nose 5). But even when the absences are observed, the very observation of them becomes part of the interpretation and analysis that fills the silence with prose. In contrast, much of the work of the verse biography is in the unfilled silence, the absence of interpretation. (p. vii)

What is left unsaid in this poem is much bigger than the poem itself. This silence may be interpreted as a celebration of Mabel's incredible career and her bravery as well as a condemnation of the journalists who write only about her appearance. However, this silence may speak more loudly to the paradoxical expectations placed on women in rodeo (as hinted at in the title) as well as the battles women had to fight – emotionally, mentally, socially, and physically – to enter the arena alongside men.

From and towards an image of women in rodeo

In addition to poems like "The Rodeo Paradox", which serve to shine light on the complicated roles women needed to play in the arena, I also wanted to include poems in my sequence which celebrate the female athletes on their own terms. Even as a young girl, I had heard Tad Lucas referred to as the "First Lady of Rodeo". Throughout her long and celebrated career, Tad won thousands of dollars in tournament prizes, was admired for her trick riding, and celebrated for her grit and determination (Lidral, 2019). Tad Lucas is one of the most notable and celebrated cowgirls of all time and was one of the first women to be inducted in to the ProRodeo Hall of Fame in 1979 (Vicroy, 2021).

According to the National Cowboy Museum – the institution that established the Tad Lucas Award to "honour other women with extraordinary characteristics" – "no one, man or woman, rode rough stock or performed more fearlessly than Tad Lucas" (NationalCowboyMuseum.org, 2021). Despite her successes, I have been unable to find any recorded poems or songs celebrating her. However, there is a famous image called "Tad Lucas Riding Hell Cat", which seems to embody Tad's courage as well as the love she had for her sport (Doubleday, 1945).

Using a photograph as inspiration for poetic biography proved more challenging than I initially thought. This process is known as ekphrasis or, broadly, "the imaginative act of narrating and reflecting on the 'action' of a painting, sculpture [or photograph] so that the poet may amplify and expand its meaning" (PoetryFoundation.org, n.d.). Holland-Batt (2017) discusses how the photograph sits at the "uneasy nexus of evidence and art", and that the photograph, like the painting, is "neither a real object nor an imaginary object" (p. 497). Writers may be tempted to simply "describe" or "translate" in order to remain faithful to the subject; however, this raises a question about the value of ekphrasis – why, if only to translate a photograph into words, is the poet responding at all?

Krauth and Bowman (2018) discuss how contemporary writers "have given their own metaphors to the ekphrasis process, whether knowingly or unknowingly, talking about it as 'telepathy', as a 'portal', a means to transport the reader into the subject's presence" (p. 18). They go on to state the ekphrastic act exists not just between the poet and the photographer but also "between the writer and the reader – the transfer of a mental image from one mind into another, collapsing time and distance to bring visual life to the words chosen by the writer" (p.

19). This notion, that the poet might draw the reader closer to the subject of a photograph, appealed to me and so I opened my poem – "Ode to Tad Lucas, the First Lady of Rodeo" – with the pronoun, "You", in an effort to invite the reader in:

Ode to Tad Lucas, the First Lady of Rodeo

You never see the crowd: in photos
their faces blur, so the foreground is just her teeth,
her mouth always open, exalting. She is *so good*
at this and she knows it. Her famous fringed
leather chaps focus her lassoing body, always,

she holds one rein tight, lifts the other hand to wave,
to find rhythm, to ride hard her known animal. *How does she do it?*
How does she beam? Her lipstick never smudged,
her shirt always buttoned, and yet, she can move

quick as a tadpole, slide from the top of her saddle to the belly
of a galloping bronco, then swing back, stand up
as the horse runs and runs, perfectly balanced,
her back arched, arms reaching upward,
her face a reflection of the sun.

The opening stanza attempts to highlight how, not just in the source photo but in many other images, Tad Lucas is always smiling, exuding a sense of confidence and self-assuredness that is rarely seen in other rodeo photography. This consistency is notable – she never looks afraid, even in the most dangerous situations. These characteristic traits are paired with a recognisable garment – her "famous fringed leather chaps" – which are still on display at the National Cowboy Museum.

To continue building an image of Tad Lucas, the final stanza uses verbs – "slide", "galloping", "swing", "runs", "balanced", "arched", and "reaching" – to demonstrate her speed and agility. The receding lines and enjambment keep the poem moving at pace, mirroring the speed seen in the arena. The final line asks readers to consider the ways in which this rider might literally and figuratively reflect the sun. This woman is larger than life.

The second stanza is, in many ways, the heart of this poem. Sitting in the centre, it attempts to extend both the idea of poetic biography as well as ekphrasis. The opening lines, "she holds one rein tight, lifts the other hand to wave, / to find rhythm, to ride hard her known animal", explores something which is often simplified or overlooked in cowgirl poetry: the notion of the "team" in rodeo. Weninger and Dallaire (2019) highlight the fact that the rider is not the only "actor" in a rodeo but is, rather, "part of a situation of rider and horse simultaneously carrying

and being carried by each other and something more – the spirit of riding" (p. 10). Barrel racers, in particular, can refer to their horse as a "team member", which:

> not only alludes to the idea that both horse and rider compete together, as in other equestrian sports (Dashper, 2014; Wipper, 2000), but it also denotes an affective quality that bonds team members together through mutual respect (Dashper, 2014) or interactional trust (Gilbert, 2014). (Weninger & Dallaire, 2019, p. 113)

Even when riding broncs, Gilbert and Gillet (2012) note the importance of recognising the bronco as an "athlete", which supports a mutual respect between rider and horse. This sense of respect seemed particularly striking in the photograph of "Tad Lucas Riding Hell Cat" (Doubleday, 1945) – even when Hell Cat was attempting to buck her off, Tad's body seems to move with his, demonstrating their connectedness. The joy of the ride and the sport seem evident in Tad's face.

Stanza two, then, moves on to include two italicised lines: "*How does she do it? / How does she beam?*" Unlike in "The Rodeo Paradox", these lines were not borrowed from sources but rather represent the admiration I have for Tad Lucas, as an observer and as the author of this poem. Barry (2002) discusses how "metapoetics" can help ekphrastic poets to grapple with their own recognition that there is an "unbridgeable hermeneutic gap between poetry and the real" by allowing the poet to enter the body of the poem itself (p. 157). According to Holland-Batt (2018), metapoeticism can be broadly understood "as reflexive and self-conscious movement within the poem that draws attention to the poem's constructedness and its status as a poem" (p. 474). Holland-Batt (2018) states that:

> The poems accede to the impossibility of their task as they are in the moment of executing it: photographic ekphrasis, they suggest, is simultaneously necessary and beyond the bounds of possibility. The question of how the contemporary poet witnesses abject history in the ekphrastic poem becomes the subject of the ekphrastic poem alongside the photograph itself. Metapoetic ekphrasis casts the encounter between poet and photograph as one that is mediated through an individual subjectivity, and thus piecemeal, idiosyncratic and partial. The metapoetic turn in the ekphrastic poem shatters any illusion of ekphrasis as an act of simple translation, reframing it as an ultimately more vexed and complex enterprise. (p. 474)

It felt impossible for me to write a poem about this image without voicing my own thoughts, wonderment, and admiration for Tad Lucas. I did not feel I could do this photograph – nor the hours of biographical research – justice, purely by describing the image, so instead I tried to include space for my own awe in these italicised questions. After all, how *did* she do it? Ride so well, be so fearless, retain such passion for her sport over decades? I still do not know. It was this sense of admiration that also inspired the form of this poem: the ode.

In a *Lit Hub* interview, poet Kaveh Akbar states that poets should work to maintain "an orientation towards wonder" (Akbar, 2017, para. 9). The ode seems to be a form which is particularly well suited to this, since its role in history was about "celebration and reverence" (Poets.org, n.d.). Like the sonnet, the ode has traditional rules related to the use of quatrain stanzas, rhyme, and iambic pentameter. However, I have chosen to loosen these rules by writing two, five-line stanzas which encase the "heart" of the poem: a quatrain. I opted out of traditional end rhyming and strict meter, choosing instead to write an irregular ode which draws its rhythm from punctuation. During ancient Greek times, odes were often composed to "celebrate athletic victories" (Poets.org, n.d.), which made it the perfect form to share my own wonder, admiration, and celebration of Tad Lucas' rodeo riding prowess.

Finally, stanza two finishes by briefly highlighting a tension faced by so many female rodeo riders: "Her lipstick never smudged, / her shirt always buttoned, and yet, she can move". Although Tad's motivation for wearing lipstick and buttoning up her shirt is unknowable from this photograph, it does speak to a wider notion of "professionalism" and "femininity" that female barrel racers have discussed in interviews with Weninger and Dallaire (2017). In their study:

> each of the women spoke of "clean", "classy", "professional" Western attire to positively promote their sport through their look, which remains feminine. For instance, they would not cut their long hair for fear of looking like a man when wearing their cowboy hat. In this sense, the barrel racers in our study were, like Brazilian rodeo women, conforming to normative ideas of gender to "reassure the general public that although they are athletes, they are also (sufficiently, safely) feminine" (Adelman & Becker 2013, p. 82). While they all rejected the idea of wearing colourful or "flashy" outfits, matching attire or decorations such as "bling" and tassels, they did concede to ironing their shirts or even their jeans and at times, even allowing some concessions to feminine beauty. (p. 1086)

Barrel racers in this study repeatedly "underlined the importance of proper attire; they believe how they dress reflects the sport as a whole: 'Your collared button down shirt, that crisp look, we'll call it, is definitely that professional image that I think goes a long way for the sport, for sure'" (Weninger & Dallaire, 2017, p. 1085). It seemed significant that even while competing in an incredibly dangerous sport, Tad Lucas put on lipstick and buttoned up her shirt in a way that surely restricted her movement. As Wilkinson (2016) points out, the choice to include this detail is not intended to "fill in the 'blanks' that bloom in the wake of the poem but rather offer further juxtapositions pointing to gaps between different facts, details, accounts, voices, and interpretations" (p. viii).

Closing ceremony: Looking ahead

According to Wilkinson (2018), poetic biography, like psychoanalysis, "not only begins with

questions rather than answers, but always turns back towards questions, away from answers" (p. viii). As I continue writing this sequence of poems about rodeo women, I find myself asking questions about what it meant for them to compete in this sport. And not just to compete, but to be a part of this wider sporting culture. I am now beginning to expand my sequence to include other athletes in rodeo such as the Rodeo Queen and the Rodeo Clown, as well as women who "support" the sport in various ways – everyone from the rodeo wives who manage their cowboys' finances to the "buckle bunnies" who offer intimacy and companionship to cowboys on the road (Gauthier & Forsyth, 2000).

Writing this work has also led to considerations about how to position myself, as both a rider and a poet, within and around this work. I believe, like Wilkinson (2018), that the closeness – and distance – between "the writer and the subject affects the verse biography at a more structural level, while giving rise, too, to sometimes startling flourishes" and that is can lead to "new ways of exploring aspects of the self" (p. ix).

These poems also raise questions about the practice of poetic-biography and the function it might play in documenting women's roles in male-dominated sports. Wilkinson (2016) states that poetic biographies are able to demonstrate a more "nuanced feminist agenda" than traditional biography, which often aims only for "a 'recovery' of sorts – bringing female voices to the fore of literary history where once they were marginally or wrongly represented" (p. 19). Swenson (2011) states that poetic biography can also allow us to "reconcile the language of information with the language of art" and can further our relationships with our subjects, "exposing our assumptions about the connection between truth and transparency, or ready accessibility, as well as between truth and origin, urgency, and poetic-ity" (pp. 6-7).

For now, I hope that these poems will add to the canon of literature about rodeo and further the conversation about what it really means to be a woman in the arena. Research for these poems has been drawn from traditional biographical source material including biographies, essays, interviews, newspaper reports, images, and more. According to Wilkinson (2016), it is the collision of "the more-or-less factual content of archival records with non-historiographical, poetic devices (internal and end rhyme, alliteration, heightened use of metaphor, irony, poetic forms, etc) that creates a unique and layered narrative perspective in poetic-historical texts" (p. 8). For me, the aim is that these poems will sit alongside these historical documents, as well as their cowboy poem counterparts, as a means of challenging, complicating, and enriching the narratives told about these rodeo women.

References

Akbar, K. (2017). Bewilderment is at the Core of Every Great Poem [Interview]. Lit Hub. https://lithub.com/kaveh-akbar-bewilderment-is-at-the-core-of-every-great-poem/

Alexander, L. (2018). *Rodeo in Reverse* (1st ed.). Hub City Press.

Alpern, S., Antler, J., Perry, E., & Scobie, I. Eds (1992). *The Challenge of Feminist Biography:*

Writing the Lives of Modern American Women. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Barraclough, L. (2018). Charros: How Mexican Cowboys are Remapping Race and American Identity. Presentation, NYU Urban Studies Seminar. Retrieved from: https://wagner.nyu.edu/files/events/Barraclough_Charros_NYU%20Urban%20Seminar%20Oct1.pdf

Barry, P. (2002). Contemporary Poetry and Ekphrasis. *The Cambridge Quarterly*. 31 (2): 155–165.

Bell, R. (2020). *Cowboy poetry is a 150-year-old tradition. Will it survive in the 21st century?*. National Geographic - History and Culture. Retrieved 23 May 2021, from https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/cowboy-poetry-150-year-tradition-survive-21-century.

Bennett, V. (2001). *Cowgirl Poetry: 100 Years of Ridin' & Rhymin* (1st ed.). Gibbs M. Smith Inc.

Butler, D. (2013). Not a job for 'girly-girls': Horseracing, gender and work identities. *Sport in Society, 16*(10), 1309-1326.

DuPlessis, R.B. (1996). Manifests. *Diacritics* 26.3(4): 31–53. Project Muse.

Forsyth, C.J. & Thompson, C.Y. (2007). Helpmates of the Rodeo. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues,* 31(4), 394-416.

Gauthier, D.K. & Forsyth, C.J. (2000). Buckle bunnies: groupies of the rodeo circuit. *Deviant Behavior*, 21:4, 349-365, DOI: 10.1080/016396200404131

Edel, L. (1984). *Writing lives: Principia biographica.* New York: W.W. Norton

Gilbert, M. & Gillet, J. (2012) Equine athletes and interspecies sport. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*. 47(5): 632–643.

Helstein, M. (2010). Producing the Canadian Female Athlete: Negotiating the Popular Logics of Sport and Citizenship. In *How Canadians Communicate 3: Contexts of Canadian Popular Culture* edited B. Beaty & D. Briton, 241–258. Edmonton, AB: Athabasca University Press

History.com (2010). *Cowboys – History*. Retrieved 23 February 2020 from https://www.history.com/topics/westward-expansion/cowboys

Hole, J. (2021). The Economy of Rodeo | Western Ranches. Western Ranches. Retrieved 21 March 2021, from https://westernranches.com/rodeo-economy/.

Holland-Batt, S. (2018) Ekphrasis, photography, and ethical strategies of witness: poetic responses to Emmett Till. *New Writing*, 15:4, 466-477, DOI: 10.1080/14790726.2017.1421230

Kelm, M. (2011). *A Wilder West: Rodeo in Western Canada*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.

Krauth, N. & Bowman, C. (2018) Ekphrasis and the writing process. *New Writing*. 15:1, 11-30, DOI: 10.1080/14790726.2017.1317277

LeCompte, M. (1990). Home on the Range: Women in Professional Rodeo: 1929-1947. *Journal of Sport History, 17*(3), 318-346. Retrieved May 21, 2021, from http://www.jstor.org/stable/43609194

Lidral, T. (2019). *TAD LUCAS – SHE'S A LEGENDARY BRONC RIDER*. Buckingstocktalk.com. Retrieved 12 May 2021, from https://buckingstocktalk.com/tad-lucas-shes-a-legendary-bronc-rider/.

NationalCowboyMuseum.org (2021). *Tad Lucas Award - National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum*. Retrieved 20 Feb 2021, from https://nationalcowboymuseum.org/tad-lucas-award/.

NationalCowboyPoetryGathering.org (2021). *About the Gathering — National Cowboy Poetry Gathering*. Retrieved 23 May 2021, from https://www.nationalcowboypoetrygathering.org/about-the-gathering.

Oliver, A. (1994). *Rodeo Cowgirls: An Ambivalent Arena* (MA). Oregon State University.

Olson, J. (2015). *Cowboy Heroes | The Triple A Livestock Report*. Aaalivestock.com. Retrieved 08 Feb 2021, from https://www.aaalivestock.com/cowboy-heroes-30/.

Oswald, A. (2005) "Into the Woods." Interview by Kate Kellaway. *Guardian.*

Patton, T. & Schedlock, S. (2012). *Gender, whiteness, and power in rodeo breaking away from the ties of sexism and racism*. Lanham, Md.: Lexington, Books.

PoetryFoundation.org. (n.d.). *Ekphrasis*. Retrieved 24 March 2021, from https://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms/ekphrasis

Poets.org. (n.d). *Unexpected Odes*. Retrieved 07 Jan 2021, from https://poets.org/unexpected-odes

PRCA Sports News. Prorodeo.com. (2021). Retrieved 21 March 2021, from https://www.prorodeo.com/prorodeo/rodeo/about-the-prca.

Remington, R. (2002). Cowgirls riding high in the saddle of feminism. *National Post (Toronto)*, pp. National post (Toronto), 2002-07-09.

Richardson, R. (2013). Learning the Sonnet. *Poetry Foundation.* Retrieved 27 Feb 2021, from https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/70051/learning-the-sonnet

Shields, V.R, & Coughlin, C. (2000). Performing rodeo queen culture: Competition, athleticism and excessive feminine masquerade. *Text and Performance Quarterly, 20*(2), 182-202.

Smith, L (2012). Biographical Method. In J. Goodwin (Ed.), *SAGE Biographical Research* (pp. 1-35). London: SAGE Publications.

Stoeltje, B.J. (1975). A helpmate for man indeed: The image of the frontier woman. *Journal of American Folklore*, 88(347), 25-41.

Swensen, C. (2011). *Noise that Stays Noise. Essays.* Ann Arbor: U of Michigan.

TheStoryOfTexas.com (n.d.) *The Vaqueros' Story*. Retrieved 21 May 2021, from https://www.thestoryoftexas.com/discover/campfire-stories/vaqueros

Thomas, J. (1995). Pickup Trucks, Horses, Women, and Foreplay: The Fluidity of Folklore. *Western Folklore, 54*(3), 213-228.

Vicroy, K. (2021). *Tad Lucas - ProRodeo Hall of Fame and Museum of the American Cowboy*. ProRodeo Hall of Fame and Museum of the American Cowboy. Retrieved 24 March 2021, from https://www.prorodeohalloffame.com/inductees/notableslifetime-achievement/tad-lucas/.

Wells, A. (2013). *A Feminist Perspective on American Rodeo*. Bitch Media. Retrieved 21 Feb 2021, from https://www.bitchmedia.org/post/women-of-the-wild-west-shows-and-the-american-rodeo.

Weninger, D. & Dallaire, C. (2017). 'It's not how you look; it's what you do.' Western Canadian Barrel Racers, Rodeo Legitimacy and Femininity. *Sport in Society, 20*(8), 1077-1091.

Weninger, D. & Dallaire, C. (2019). The gendered barrel racer–horse relationship in Western Canadian rodeo. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 54(1), 104-124.

Wilkinson, J. (2016). Experiments in Poetic Biography: Feminist Threads in Contemporary Long Form Poetry. *Biography*, 39(1), 1-22.

WPRA.com. (2021). *Women's Professional Rodeo Association - About Us*. Retrieved 23 May 2021, from https://www.wpra.com/index.php/office/about-us.

WPRA. (2021). *2021 Official Rulebook for the Women's Professional Rodeo Association (WPRA)* (1st ed., p. 6).