

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

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# Reclaiming space and memory: Black cowboys and the right to the city

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USA.Email: [m.c.babers@gmail.com](mailto:m.c.babers@gmail.com)**Abstract**

This article draws on ethnographic observations from a Black trail ride event in Houston to examine how African Americans negotiate identities and spaces through embodied memories and mobility. Movement and mobility have always influenced racialised belonging through the geopolitics of borders and boundaries, which are inextricably tied to collective meanings of “blackness.” Everyday negotiations of blackness require Black Americans to reckon with the historical and contemporary implications of limited mobility and their place in U.S. society. Engaging with Lefebvre's notion of “the right to the city,” this article reflects on how Black trail riders challenge dominant constructions of space and belonging through collective movement and memory. By analysing a specific ethnographic moment during the trail ride, when Black participants moved from a place bounded by property lines to the space of city streets, the article explores the intersections of race, geography, and mobility. It considers how embodied memories and public reclamations of the past by Black communities pose a threat to established spatial and racial hierarchies. The article contributes to theoretical discourses on geopolitics, borders, and boundaries by centering the experiences

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and agency of Black trail riders in reimagining and navigating racialised landscapes.

#### KEYWORDS

geography, mobility, race

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

*"You ever been to a trail ride?"* The question was Ray's way of inviting me to the trail ride as he continued, *"It'll be interesting to see how those African American cowboys operate."* *"Now,"* he said, talking over my incomplete thoughts, *"I'ma tell you, it's gon be a lotta people out there. It's gon be folks dancin' under the big tent— they got a big white tent with a stage underneath — where they have dances."*

After weeks of showing up to Ray's ranch asking open-ended questions that he answered with some story, parable, or riddle, one Friday evening, this is what he asked me. I had not had a chance to answer his initial question because I was focusing on my balance at the edge of his F-350 dually truck while trying to close the door and not fall out. I had finally built up enough momentum to swing the door and myself toward the inside his vehicle so that I could answer his question, but he had already moved on to reasoning how I should expect the space to be organised:

*"They usually put the tent way back there on the back of the association property, but it's supposed to rain, so I don't know where they gon' set it up now. You like zydeco [music]? You know they got J Paul Jr [and the Zydeco Nubreds]. I don't know why they did that. I like 'em, but I think they overrated. That money could'a went to something else. [Anyway, ] it's gon be folks drinkin' an' dancin' and sittin' aroun' shootin' the shit; little kids gon' be everywhere runin' aroun' chasin' each other — some of 'em gon be ridin' horses. I'm tellin' you, people gon' be standin' around lookin' at the girls walkin' aroun' in they lil groups and they gon be walkin' around lookin' at them boys. [Do] you got a man? Well, I'ma tell you now, all them niggas gon be tryin' to see how they can get you to come over an' talk to 'em. But I'ma just let you see fuh yuhself. [Do] you got some boots? Well, it's supposed to rain this weekend, so you betta' find some of them rubber boots."*

Ray's concern about having boots could be connected to wearing the proper footwear for the cultural event/practice he invited me to participate in. However, as it turns out, the weather was his cause for concern. Either way, looking or dressing appropriately meant not seeming like an outsider who needed to prepare for the performance about to take place. His attention to detail and cause for concern proved to be skills from lessons that, if repeated in different contexts, could have had grave consequences for Black people, especially once on the trail ride.

This was my re-introduction to the community, facilitated by Ray, an African American rancher who provided me with unique experiences and perspectives on an African American trail ride. Ray's positionality as a rancher who participates in an annual trail ride that kicks off the Houston Rodeo (HSLR), sanctioned by the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association (PRCA), is particularly noteworthy. The HSLR and PRCA are predominantly white organisations, with the Houston Rodeo—an NGO—offering the largest rodeo prize in North America of about \$2 million. The HSLR trail ride kickoff lasts 5 days, covering about 120 miles, but this is not an ethnography about that specific event.

This study employs an ethnographic approach to investigate a Black trail ride event in Houston. Fieldwork was conducted over 18 months, from May 2013 to December 2014. The primary data collection methods included participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and detailed field notes. A total of 20 interviews were conducted

with participants selected through purposive sampling. Interviewees included trail ride organizers, riders, and attendees, ranging in age from 15 to 80 years old, with a gender distribution of approximately 95% male and 5% female. The interviews covered personal experiences, perceptions of the trail ride, and the event's significance to participants and the community. The study received ethical approval from the Texas A&M University Institutional Review Board (IRB) IRB2012-0395D. All participants provided informed consent and were aware of the study's purpose, their rights, and the confidentiality of their data. Participants' anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the research process and in reporting findings.

This paper examines how Black trail riders negotiate identities and spaces through embodied memories and mobility. Prior research has examined the racialisation of space and the construction of Black geographies as sites of resistance and belonging (McKittrick & Woods, 2007; Eaves, 2017; Hyndman, 2012). Movement and mobility also play a crucial role in shaping racialised identities and meanings of "Blackness" (Cresswell, 2006, p. 149). Everyday negotiations of Blackness require reckoning with the implications of constrained mobilities (Sheller, 2018). Human territoriality, defined by Robert D. Stack as "the attempt to affect, influence, or control actions and interactions (of) people, things and relationships" within a geographic area (Stack, 1983, pp. 55–74), informs the analysis of how Black riders engage racialised geographies as a strategy of power shaped by historical and social contexts.

In this paper, I focus on a specific incident I observed during the trail ride to which Ray invited me, aiming to unpack issues of spatial boundaries and racialised conceptions of space in its various dimensions—physical, social, and psychological. Flyvbjerg, in "Five Misunderstandings About Case-Study Research (2006)" discusses how case studies are well-suited for examining issues in their real-world complexity and context, stating that "the advantage of the case study is that it can 'close in' on real-life situations and test views directly in relation to phenomena as they unfold in practice (p. Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 234)." Employing an autoethnographic approach lends authority and salient insider perspectives to this case study, foregrounding marginalised voices on these complex topics. I find support in Flyvbjerg's contention that "all experts operate based on an intimate knowledge of several thousand concrete cases in their areas of expertise. Context-dependent knowledge and experience are at the very heart of expert activity (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 221)." My and my interlocutors' first-hand experiential knowledge emphasised in this case study aligns with centering marginalised insider voices. Finally, the case study contains no more significant bias toward verification of the researcher's preconceived notions than other methods of inquiry (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

Alexander Bridger contends, "the limitations of psychogeography lies in its grounding in the male gaze (Bridger, 2013, p. 285–298)." This critique intersects with notions of human territoriality. My first-hand account as participant-observer aims to counter normative masculine biases that permeate ideological constructions of space by providing an intersectional gaze situated in my simultaneous experience of gendered and racial oppression. I centre minoritised—Black men's vantage points and counter narratives that challenge racialised delineations of place and belonging.

## 1.1 | Mapping the conceptual trails

McKittrick and Woods (2007) offer a framework for examining the relationship between Black populations and geography, one that engages with narratives drawing on Black histories and subjects to make visible often displaced and ungeographic social lives. The interruption of the trail ride reveals the psychogeographic reality of Black cowboys and trail riders navigating real property as a conceptual space (Bridger, 2013). Their interactions with the land materialize mental maps representing their constructed reality, a complex blend of past and present, urban and rural, traditional and modern, authentic and discursive, as they locate self and other and displace "place-identity" in their discussions of the interrupted ride back 'home' (Dixon, 2000, pp. 27–44).

Within this critical lens, what is at stake is a reimagining of how we spatialise our lives. Jackson (2011) examines the importance of place in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, focusing on the experiences of internally displaced persons in New Orleans. The approach centres on the stories, critiques, and future visions of the Black population,

recognising the complex and contested history and future of New Orleans. Black anthropologists have emphasised the urgency of collecting these types of data (hooks, 1990; Jackson, 2011), highlighting the need to prioritize Black voices and experiences in understanding the intersections of race, place, and displacement.

It is easy to think that the statistical and demographic truth of Black cowboys lacks significance or is inaccessible because they are not shown enough in official histories, popular media, and mainstream practices. But racialisation affects and is affected by how Black people move through the material and non-material world. This is fundamental when talking about how space is defined by and through boundary-making processes. This is not just about geography or geopolitical borders; it is about all kinds of social phenomena in general, but in this case, it is about public and private places, mental space (the Black spatial imaginary), and place and place-making ("Black sanctuaries") in the United States.

On my way to the association property, I noticed that the subdivisions and houses look older than those along the Sam Houston Toll Road. The collective identity and belonging signs become more evident as I approach the association's property. The median age of the residents is 31.3 years, and 68% of the homes are owner-occupied. Ray's club belongs to the association that owns its property. The members were proud because they were only a few thousand dollars away from being the only Black trail riding association in the area that owned its land. Due to the rights and privileges associated with this status in American society, many Black communities teach their children to aspire to land ownership. This is different from saying that every member of this landowning association possesses private land separately; however, in this story, the trail ride we are going to is hosted by an independent club without property ownership. They were renting the association property for this trail ride.

The cowboy's contribution as the protector of his community and society defines him. Historical representations of the cowboy do not show how history has stripped Black people of their place in the growth of country-western culture, then and now. Given that official archives and repertoires have undermined Black Western traditions through erasure and exclusion, I offer instead a discussion of Black cultural ideas formed around the family, interpersonal relationships, and specific definitions of masculinity. In this essay, I discuss how public embodiments of Black Western heritage agitate dominant representations and meanings associated with Blackness, whiteness, masculinity, and Western-ness. The way Black cowboys reclaim this history—out loud and publicly – offers a glimpse into how interactions with the past and present of spatial delineation transform embodied cultural norms. Spatial inequality and the racialisation of places and spaces reinforce racist hierarchies and domination of Black sanctuaries and the spatial imaginary. An example of this is the trail ride as a public embodiment practice to remember historical cultural events and practices that link the past and present of a racialised cultural identity.

In their 1966 book, *The Social Construction of Reality*, Berger and Luckman argue that reality does not need to be verified beyond its presence. Reality is perceived as unproblematic as long as everyday routines continue uninterrupted (p. 23). However, when an interruption occurs, reality seeks to integrate the problematic sector into what is already unproblematic (24). In *The Right to the City* (1996) Lefebvre argues that the right to the city is not merely a right of access to what already exists, but a right to change the city according to the desires of its inhabitants. One version of this human territoriality—using tactics and strategies—is how the socially constructed fantastic hegemonic imagination seeks to integrate African Americans—representing the problematic sector—within its perceived real estate (Berger & Luckman, 1966; Gordon, 2008; Stack, 1983, pp. 55–74).

The trail ride transformed an empty lot into a vibrant, communal space through music, dancing, and socializing. As one rider noted, "It was as if I was in a rural part of Texas, on a private Black-owned property far removed from the worries and anxieties of being Black in the city." This aligns with Lefebvre's (1968) concept of the right to the city as a collective right to transform and appropriate urban spaces in accordance with the desires and needs of inhabitants, creating lived spaces that challenge dominant power structures and official representations of the city. However, tensions emerged when the group was confronted by white police officers from the neighboring city, claiming they had trespassed beyond city limits. The way preconceptions of Black cowboy's masculinity collided with the archive in this instance reveals how a trail ride group and their mounted police escort—a Black man—dealt with these misconceptions (Babers, 2022, p. 160; McKinnin, 1987).<sup>1</sup> As described in my field notes, "I could sense

the historical weight of the silent 'boy' punctuating the atmosphere around them. The look on the Black cop's face expressed disbelief, disappointment, anger, and frustration." This encounter highlights how racialized constructions of space surface through constrained mobilities and policed boundaries (Gregory, 2009).

Individual and group actors construct meaning through manifestations of spatial delineations, and this climax symbolizes a sequence of such initiatives delineating space, place, and time (Massey, 1993). David Harvey (Harvey, 2003) builds on Lefebvre's ideas by emphasizing the collective power to reshape urbanization processes and framing the right to the city as a common rather than an individual right, which could help contextualize the trail rides as a collective practice of place-making and resistance. These findings align with prior work demonstrating how Black populations construct counter-geographies through ingenious spatial practices and mobilities (McKittrick, 2006). However, this single case analysis is limited.

Future multi-site studies could build on these findings. This research also has implications for Black identity and space scholarship, underscoring how collective memories and movements challenge and reconstruct racialised boundaries. In "Displacing place-identity: A discursive approach to locating self and other (2000)" Dixon & Durrheim review critical scholarship contend that traditional conceptualisations of place-identity are limited, viewing it as an individualistic, mentalistic, uncontested, and apolitical phenomenon located predominantly in people's minds. They theorize how a discursive approach examines how place-identity emerges through collective talk and linguistic practices. Discursive approaches reveal place identity as a socially constructed process shaped by power relations rather than merely expressing personal attachments. Their approach highlights the rhetorical functions of place discourse, acting as symbolic resources oriented towards social legitimation. Place constructions may sustain ideological dichotomies between "our space" and "their space" that normalize identities while marginalising others. Exploring resisted or contradictory place representations can uncover these naturalised sociospatial divisions (Dixon, 2000). Applying this theoretical lens illuminates how racialised codings of space discursively uphold racial hierarchies of belonging and entitlement.

For example, in *Cow Boys and Cattle Men: Class and Masculinities on the Texas Frontier, 1865–1900* (2009), historian Jacqueline M. Moore says that "the masculine cowboy hero portrayed in film and literature is usually a figure straddling the frontier between civilization and the wilderness, sometimes siding with the townspeople against the wilderness and sometimes with the equally mythical, noble Indian savages against civilization." Moore goes on to describe how "the [news] paper also participated in the cult of the cowboy hero, painting the men of the Wild West as manly heroes and perfect gentlemen." It is easy to wonder where the contemporary Black portrayal originates. We can trace the genealogy of modern Black cowboy culture to a distinctly Black American past (Moore, 2009).<sup>ii</sup>

During the second industrial revolution (1870–1914), also known as the technological revolution in the United States, many working cowboys (both black and white) were forced to leave their rural homes to perform as rodeo cowboys. On the other hand, some Black cowboys selected "civilised employment," such as train porters for the United States railroad system (Nodjimbadem, 2017). While the American cowboy myth of masculinity was written down in the literature, the picture of "the original cowboy" was transformed and stabilised.

For example, rodeos can be profitable, but they are expensive and keep cowboys away from their families for a long time. Cowboys used to put on shows like steer wrestline, bulldogging, and other events to make money, but today most Black cowboys cannot afford to be in the pro-rodeo world. Instead, they compete in Black rodeos or in the Black rodeo circuit, which has a lower payout and charges lower entry fees to compete (Wagner, 2007). As part of the American tradition of erasing the connection between Black history and its present, Black Western culture and cowboys have been mistaken for appropriating white culture from the look to their relationship with the land. The biographies of famous African American Cowboys Isom Dart and William "Bill" Pickett prove otherwise.

Ned Huddleston (Isom Dart) of Arkansas was born enslaved in 1849. He earned the nicknames "Black Fox" and "Calico Cowboy" for his riding, roping, and bronco-busting skills, which were undoubtedly helpful as a notorious outlaw in the Wyoming Territory. After the war, Huddleston worked at a rodeo on the southern Texas-Mexico border, where he became a stunt rider and a master horseman. Around 1890, Isom Dart started his ranch in Brown's Hole. Local ranchers thought he stole cattle to grow his herd, and some hired Tom Horn to punish Dart. On October

3, 1900, Horn fatally ambushed Isom Dart in Brown's Hole. Residents of Brown's Hole mourned Dart's death, claiming Horn killed him for his land and cattle. It was highly likely, given Dart's reputation in town, and Black land-owners are frequently terrorized for their land (Agyeman & Boone, 2020). However, others believed he kept rustling cattle and remained a threat.

William "Bill" Pickett was also an African American and Indian cowboy. Pickett started roping, riding, and bulldogging in elementary school for donations. Soon after moving to Taylor, Texas, in 1888, he performed at the town's first fair and started working at Taylor's horse-breaking shop. 101 Ranch hired him in 1905; by 1907, he was a full-time employee. Later, he moved his family to Oklahoma. 101 Ranch Wild West Show was a national attraction from 1905 to 1931. Pickett also invented bulldogging (steer wrestling) by twisting a steer's head and biting its upper lip to gain control. He would go on to perform in South America, Mexico, Canada, and England. Pickett could have set a record [in bulldogging] if he'd competed against White rodeo competitors. He frequently emphasized his Native American-ness to compete in rodeo competitions (Kats, 2005).

Pickett was also the first Black cowboy movie star. In 1922 Bill Pickett's second acting role, *The Crimson Skull*, was filmed in the All-Coloured City of Boley, Okla., according to the Norman Film Manufacturing Co. press book (1970). The press book also states that the film's "action and story [are] on a par with white productions with the striking feature of a cast composed entirely of colored artists." There is not a white character in it. [It is] a story free from the usual mimicry of the coloured man; free from 'race problems' that engender friction. "Publicity material stated that the cast included" 30-coloured cowboys.<sup>iii</sup>

Unlike generic white men with pistols executing their racist, sexist fetish for power over Native Americans and Black men, Black cowboys rejected Hollywood and popular culture's mythology of the cowboy. Consequently, Black cowboy cultures today are illegible as cowboys when visually represented. Therefore, it is crucial to emphasize images and narratives that explicitly link the emergence of Black Western culture to a creative and aesthetic staging since perceptions of what it means to be a "cowboy" vary greatly. This manifests in various ways for those who engage in Western cultural practices. The diverse subcultures Black cowboys occupy make up overlapping work and play areas, including public reenactments, which entertain and educate and are not too far removed from the farm, ranch, or trail ride.

## 1.2 | From rural to urban: Black folks on the move

During my first day at Day one of the trail ride—a two-day event—one trail rider explained to me that:

*Trail riding is the evolution of the family reunion from back when [Black] people were living in the country. Most [of] these people [today] got kinfolks that still live in the country, and some of them migrated to the city. . . you know like they grand-parents and great grandparents and such.*

This account of trail rides' history originates from African American migration from rural to urban areas in the South between 1900 and 1941. In "The Other Great Migration: The Movement of Rural African Americans to Houston, 1900-1941," historian Bernadette Pruitt describes what it would have been like for African Americans migrating and settling in Jim Crow Houston. The land is what they worked for, and the land between rural towns and the city is where they navigated for a chance at economic stability (Pruitt, 2013).

The trail riders' story also tells how the family reunion had the potential for urban environments to evolve rural folkways culturally. Land and space to accommodate big families created under the extended family model are essential for Black family reunions. To some extent, this framing is correlative, but it might equally be viewed as the modern-day trail ride being analogous to the Black family reunion. Whatever the case may be—and it might be a combination of the two—the way Black individuals, families, and institutions are treated when reclaiming, reenacting, and remembering their heritage and past as it intersects with the present leaves a lot to unpack in terms of public history, memory, and mobility.

Taking part in the trail ride and being out on the land is essential to the public celebration of this history and Black people's relationships with the land from an entirely different historical perspective. The spatial limitations of a plot of land, a neighbourhood, or a part of the city bound by a geopolitical jurisdiction frame the experience of an urban trail ride. Authenticating geospatial belonging also has political implications. Deeds or addresses within one of the administrative divisions of the city provide the quickest proof of ownership and belonging. Apart from this, which I will return to, is the formation and function of "Black sanctuaries," as all-black towns, beauty shops, barber shops, the association property, and the trail rides that are hosted there.

Black sanctuaries are locations where Black people can go to feel comfortable or at home. James Allen, a collector who has amassed a collection of lynching photographs over a 25-year period, asserts that sanctuary is something Black people in America lack in both life and death (Allen & Littlefield, 2019). Another powerful tale about the necessity for Black people to have spaces and places to go where they can be is told in his collection and book. While investigating Black cowboy manhood and masculinity, I discovered such a place in the trail ride community. While investigating Black cowboy manhood and masculinity, I discovered such a place in the trail ride community. However, I learned that trail rides represent much more for Black cowboys, country-western folks, and Black people.

Recent scholarship in Black Geographies has emphasised the importance of centering Black epistemologies and lived experiences to challenge reductionist understandings of Black subjects and spaces (Bledsoe et al., 2017). This work highlights how Black survival and resistance strategies are intricately tied to the production of Southern spaces, constituting "Geographies of Resistance Within the Black Belt South" (Harris & Hyden, 2017). These counter-movements and mobilisations demonstrate agency and transformative potential, defying narratives that depict the Black Belt solely in terms of poverty and lack of education. Eaves (2017) argues for expanding notions of validity in geographic research to encompass the space-making practices of Black subjects and communities as they negotiate with and extend beyond fixed, hierarchical categories.

I investigated definitions of belonging and authenticity among groups of Black cowboys through interviews and conversations that led me to The Buffalo Soldier's Museums by recommendation and eventually trail rides by invitation, from the rancher I met earlier in the project. This is relevant because notions of authenticity lend authority to belonging. Still, in my case, the act of seeming out of place to the trail rider community and, in their case, seeming out of place riding horses in the city streets provides boundaries about bodies moving through spaces as authentic and belonging. In much the same way in my larger project, a buffalo soldier, a rancher, a rodeo cowboy, and a trail rider might all be considered an authentic or inauthentic cowboy depending on the context and how one would know could be determined in many ways; the one I focus on here is visual—by looking or seeming.

I seemed sorely out of place at trail rides, leading to questions about my belongings and what I was doing there. This led to a lesson in how I, too, could spot other people who, like me, did not "fit in" in the traditional sense. As an ethnographer, it did not take long to map boundaries around cowboy "types" within my community. For example, the fluidity of masculine performances between ranchers and trail riders adds breadth and depth not commonly associated with Black masculinity.<sup>iv</sup> Public displays of this identity illustrate how time organises social and cultural returns to seasons—rodeo season, trail riding season—and notions of a return to manifestations of "a time when" that create a space of ambiguity and fictionalization. Would it be possible to return to an official country-western narrative that includes Black cowboys? Visibility creates legibility for a Black cowboy in public but outside the regularly designated time to recognize a heritage intimately known to him daily.

### 1.3 | The return to rural in the urban

The 'act of return' expresses how Black people cultivate the memory of their history and heritage, which I see as tied to the relationship between how the Black family functioned as an economic unit in an agrarian system in dominantly rural places. The racialization of place "is a process of constructing particular geographic landscapes that help define and reinforce racialized hierarchies, thus facilitating domination and exploitation (Inwood & Yarbrough, 2010)." This

line of inquiry might be expanded on with current examples of Black farmers being targeted for their land, often passed down generationally and fighting to retain this land in the supreme courts. However, my larger research question explores how Black manhood and masculinities are cultivated in predominantly Black spaces and places outside of the white gaze.

The question, which I frame here in part, as one concerning a mobile Black sanctuary, is what brought me to the trail ride, an event hosted by a trail ride club that is part of a more extensive system of organisation that in practice functions like an extended family where each club (or family) is responsible for representing that club at the events hosted by other clubs with their trail ride association. For many Black country western people in the city, trail riding season organises their lives as Rodeo Season does for Cowboys. It is a seasonal return to a migratory oscillation between space, place, and time.

The material and immaterial consequences of this are essential to the way Black people move and the decolonisation of history. The racialisation of space that is delineated in a way that sees “the black side of town” or “black” neighbourhoods policed differently impacts the lives of Black people and culture that take up the Black mental space (and health) in efforts to live safely and in peace. This is a knowledge that Black people “just know.” It contributes to the creation of mental maps representing what Black history, geography, and social interaction look like in the way space is conceptualised in the material world—through and against a white racist frame. The embodiment of Black experiences in public performance results from collective reclamation and collective memory in time.

As people arrived from the main street and the back road, a line of cars and trucks had formed at two gates. The large plot of treelined land was exposed only at its entrance gates, facing a narrow side street leading to the neighbourhood. Vehicles neatly lined up in rows just off the dirt and mud trails created by vehicles in places where the grass was allowed to grow. After entering the gate, I met Ray and other club members who set up near a gate on a plot of land the size of a parking space. Ray introduced me, and I walked around the property with my camera. Everything looked exactly the way Ray described.

To me, the people turned the space into a place much like a family transforming a house into a home: It was where representations of country-western notions of traditional, modern, hybrid, and something else were performed, negotiated, and affirmed. An empty plot of land by day transformed into a lively place stimulating all five senses.

*The sight of familiar friendly faces moving to a cultural rhythm and the sounds of live music filling the air make a whirlwind of sensations with the smell of barbecue being cooked and consumed while walking around seeing other people experience a range of pleasant emotions from the same environment. I treated these areas as I would privately owned homes in a neighborhood. I began to feel as if I was no longer in Houston as I walked further away from the gates. It was as if I was in a rural part of Texas, on a private Black-owned property far removed from the worries and anxieties of being Black in the city. In the city, strangers, white people, and “others” frequently view Black people with suspicion and confusion about how they belong. Ray echoed a similar sentiment when he mentioned three Black men in high-ranking positions in the city. He then introduced the notion of “class and character” among cowboys and said they were “political cowboys” therefore, not “real” cowboys.*

*If I made eye contact with someone, we would either smile and say “hello” or they would reply with a head nod or tip of the hat, and I kept it moving as I took photos. I photographed old Black men sitting on horses with beer in hand while people-watching, people dressed in casual western wear, a western-urban hybrid style, and casual street clothes. I watched kids take turns roping a makeshift steer and other kids taking turns roping each other by the leg. For the most part, the kids were left to play games that simulated rodeo events, and every so often, they'd be interrupted by an “old-timer” who stopped rodeoing ages ago but couldn't resist the urge to “fix” their form. After “showin’ em how it's done,” each kid had to prove themselves before the man disappeared onto the property, satisfied that he imparted knowledge to the youngsters.*

It was unclear to me whether the kids knew the man. Generally, trust was not an issue, but safety (around the animals) was. Several people stopped me to ask what I was doing with a camera and recorder. In response to my research, one trail rider explained to me:

*like most members in uniform, most riders on horseback, furthest distance traveled, and, more recently, the category of "crunkest party wagon." Some clubs will make up their categories. [But as far as the trail ride] you will spend about 5–6 hours dealing with your horse from going to the barn, loading up, driving to the trail ride, taking the horse out of the trailer, and rope off and so on. On the day of the ride, you will spend about 3–5 hours with your horse. It's all about social gatherings, the party, the music, the dancing.*

The other part of the trail ride weekend is planning for the actual ride on the city streets. This part of the event is generally understood as the representation of past ways of mobility, meeting the contemporary landscape of Houston's geography. This requires playing by the regulatory rules as citizens of today who want to reenact their history of which connections to the land are an integral part. Requests, permissions, and permits are required from local police officers to do this in a public space that is no longer an open space in the same way it used to be, or that is currently being used in a way that does not interfere with motorised traffic.

Urbanisation, migration, and city planning make it impossible for trail ride organizers to transform the landscape to what it may have looked like when rural Black folks migrated from rural areas to the city. The Black spatial imaginary helps with heritage reenactments partly because it helps people imagine the landscape when rural Black people moved from rural to urban areas. Unfortunately, their capability to map out routes that reflect actual paths travelled in the past is also limited. However, this trail ride is partly about reclaiming and remembering a Black Western past embodied through reenactment.

## 1.4 | The trail ride

*We prepared for the ride the following day. A residential area and city-owned property surrounded the trail riding association's tract of land, where we camped. The trip began with much more organisation than the night before, when a line developed at both gates as people waited to enter the association property and find a space to park and camp. The organizers intended for there to be only one way in and one way out. They could not, however, regulate traffic on the main street or the back road. Despite this, we were met with lovely skies and sunshine for our trail ride on this day. After finishing our morning rituals, some of us prepped our horses for the ride while others loaded drinks and food into their vehicles and waited in line at one of the gates. Once the narrow street had been cleared by the mounted police officer who holding traffic, and the scouts opened the gate and moved the horses to the street so that the wagons, trucks, and four-wheelers could line up.*

*I rode in a wagon with club members who belonged to the association that owned the property, and we talked about the differences between this trail ride and theirs from the previous weekend. The ride had been postponed due to weather, but their account of what I would have seen draws a stark contrast to how Western culture is defined as traditional versus modern and authentic versus something else. Their organisation supports education and heritage preservation through historically accurate representation. I would have only seen horses, wagons, and trailers if the weather permitted. Party wagons, four-wheelers, or other customised vehicles would not have been allowed. Instead, everybody would have been dressed up in traditional western garb, complete with wrangler jeans, button-up (or down) shorts, cowboy boots, cowboy hat, cowboy belt buckle (either store-bought or won from a rodeo competition), and—the pièce de résistance—the cowboy hat. Each person took their turn sharing stories to contrast a typical trail ride weekend for their group with this ride. We did not realize that we were nearing the point where the trail*

*ride would return to the campsite. The discussion primarily showed how trail rides operate and what proper representation is in public.*

The association property was a safe space to perform Black Western identity, whether traditional, modern, hybrid, or considered something else. The social aspect of these events creates secure networks between people and clubs, within an association, and between Black trail riders who are part of different associations. The network of Black Western people in Houston provides independent clubs that do not own land a resource to gain access to land they can rent from another Black trail ride association that does. The landowner versus renter status of the two clubs highlights how the quality (and sometimes quantity) of different networks begins to create a way for the collective (landowning and renting) Black trail riders to talk about a sense of “us” versus “them.” Otherwise, there was no need to leverage symbols of a Black Western identity to mark these distinctions, except for when an outsider comes specifically to mark these differences. When this happens, identifying markers of belonging becomes a matter of delineating authenticity.

For the landowning group, the visible image of the collective should represent a clear, authentic connection to the history of Black Western culture. This trail ride's departure from the traditional Western attire makes a recognizable link between past and present a stretch for the untrained eye. Ray and his group are members of the trail ride organisation, chartered by a prominent (mainstream) rodeo association. Their mission, vision, and focus emphasised education and Black histories in Western culture. Their association has given them access to different forms of capital, which explains the differences they highlighted to me.

In many ways, a hierarchy of influence emerged and played out through authentic representations of Black Cowboys and Black Western history. One woman explained that there are “real” trail rides and “pleasure rides.” Her organisation took pride in presenting an authentic image of Black cowboys and the Black West. A standout feature is a slippage between forms and types of representation and the willingness of this club to participate in a decidedly non-authentic Black Western cultural practice. Territoriality allows groups and individuals to influence access, often through enforcement of boundaries (Stack, 1983). The following encounter reveals how racialised codings of space are enforced to constrain mobility and claim access.

## 1.5 | Cowboy crossing: Yielding the right of way

*The association property is now well out of sight as we ride down a service road parallel to the Sam Houston Toll Road. Eventually, we reached the turnaround point at a dead end on a large plot of land, where we were met by two police officers from the neighboring city. Initially, one police car was present. One officer got out to speak with “the person in charge” while his partner remained in the car. The rest of us made our way onto the property. Watching as they reorganize for the ride back to the association property, and more police cars show up, I stand near the field's entrance. The lady next to me says: “It's only so many people you can have on your trail ride before you have to get a parade permit.”*

The officer's presence was not in response to the size of our trail ride because it is not unusual to see social clubs occupying city streets. This is evident in shows like Sons of Anarchy and The Devil's Ride that feature motorcycle clubs (like Hells Angels). Although these groups are predominantly white, the visibility of mostly black motorcycle clubs in Houston is accepted as usual, and they are yielded to, or given the right of way.<sup>▼</sup>

*I waited to learn why the cop disturbed our peace when a scout rode through the crowd, telling people, “You need to get off the property, or he'll write you a trespassing ticket.” The association property went from being a Black sanctuary symbolizing freedom and belonging to something akin to a round pen used for herding cattle to restrict their ability to roam freely. Visible and audible responses ranged from anger to panic. Some people were mad because they weren't doing anything wrong or different from previous years. Some people wanted to avoid a citation. At least one man, who had my undivided attention at this point,*

*appeared disappointed. The orderly procession broke down, with people abandoning the line the organizers attempted to arrange for the ride back. People got separated from their groups, now fragmented and moving in the general direction of the association property. Due to the confusion, they were on horseback and 4-wheelers, and some were even on foot.*

*Standing face to face with the officer from the neighboring city, a white man, was the mounted Houston Police Officer, a Black man hired to escort the trail ride. Each of them is in uniform, and this shows their membership in the same occupational brotherhood. I moved closer to hear what they were saying. Another scout rode past me, and I heard him say our police escort was explaining to the neighboring city cop what was happening and that all was under control.*

*When I look back at the two officers, I hear the white cop say, "you have no jurisdiction in this city. I'll write you a citation, too." I can sense the historical weight of the silent "boy" punctuating the atmosphere around them. The look on the Black cop's face expressed disbelief, disappointment, anger, and frustration.*

Almost everyone packed up what they had and returned to the city instead of hanging out until the trail ride weekend came to an organic conclusion. I asked myself, "Is this what trail rides are like?" Is this normal? My notes and audio recordings, however, answered a more pertinent question of what happens when Black people publicly reclaim stories about their past that do not fit into the official country-western storyline of race, place, and space. In particular, the time when two police officers met was a time when race, space, and place fought with history, geography, and understanding. As discussed previously, territoriality seeks to affect interactions by controlling geographic areas (Stack 1983). Despite constrained mobility, Black trail riders find innovative ways to traverse racial boundaries through collective movement and memory.

Here, geography is the stage where actions, characters, and relationships should make sense. Through this public performance of embodiment that remembers and reclaims the past, I see a reimagining of geography as performance in the way it evokes physical geographies that no longer exist as social, political, and natural limits once defined them. In the Black spatial imagination, this is what geography looks like, taking on meanings informed by identity and experience.

In "The Geopolitics of Migration and Mobility, Jennifer Hyndman describes how on a national level, the geopolitics of race in the United States is the" management of territory [where] grids of intelligibility come to bear on one another at borders, in detention, during deportation, and at ports of entry where asylum claims are made (246). "The biopolitics of migration that focuses on border crossers and methods of governmentality in mobility politics is comparable to Black urbanism. On the scale of international relations, Hyndman observes that refugees occupy a liminal space in a state-centric understanding of citizenship and belonging. She observes," geopolitical scholars have essentialised 'the territorial' at the expense of examining how power relations render specific bodies of the object of surveillance and discipline [and] mobility of others is captured, ordered, and emplaced to make it legible in modern society (244).

The geo-spatial landscape in which these two officers' interaction punctuates how geopolitics for Americans within national borders is contained by and within other entities regulating space/place as it is the foundation for identity and belonging. For this group, other entities claiming power over their space, place, movement, and mobility leverage their nexus of capital at different defining moments leading up to the event and the unexpected moment that marked the termination of the cultural (re) enactment. The convergence of varying power-holding entities, each occupying their own socially, culturally, economically, and legitimised positions of authority, rooted in tradition, history, and authenticity. As a club that is part of an independent association that does not own its land, the trail ride organizers must navigate the power structures that control the private property (the place) where the campout is held and from which the trail ride starts. They also must navigate the bureaucracy of the city's law enforcement agency, which controls the (public) space where the trail ride takes place.

The problem is that Black male identities are held in a liminal state between negotiating differing and oftentimes opposing, social-cultural rules that signify belonging and “authenticity” with two groups—Black communities and mainstream America—who are equally suspicious of each other. Ideologies about authenticity as a “real” cowboy versus other aspects of Western cultural uses of horses as material culture, cowboy fashion, notions of prestige and work ethic, and issues of race, gender, and generation highlight this illegibility from different vantage points. The mixed emotions among the group and the shock and disappointment on the HPD Officer's face characterised the mood on the ride back to the association property. And with that, the trail ride was over.

## 1.6 | Cowboy crossing: Right to the City

Authenticity is a resource that is translated from the different ways of performing cultural repertoires in the Black Western community. In the campout space, the degree of variation in the way these trail riders appear western though their attire, vehicles, and quality of their horses do not need to be deployed. These qualities are marked in conversation, possibly among club members who hold a “traditional” view about how trail rides should look but, indeed, in the descriptions provided to me as an outsider. Trail riders were labelled inauthentic because of the history of trail riders being rooted in the Great Migration as opposed to the evolution of the rancher or rodeo cowboy from working on ranches. Along with this came a different uniform or dress style, indicative of the type of work or labour performed with the horse. However, there did not seem to be any implications of this for the way people interacted with each other, and no mention was made of the economic resources.

The image of authenticity in the public space of Houston's city streets illustrates a different narrative about the power of legibility and the outside world correctly interpreting markers of your identity and presence in this space as a “member” and “belonging” or more importantly not “out of place.” When faced by the white cop, there were no resources that any representative of the group, not even the mounted Houston police officer, could draw on to keep the trail riders from feeling scared, anxious, and unsure about their right to be or belonging in the city. However, the possibility of drawing on the social power of the mounted Black police officer, as a member of the same brotherhood of police officers, escorting the trail ride through the city could be deployed. The reality of this moment brought me to the geopolitics of being Black and carrying the total weight of one aspect of America's racial history in trail rides as a Black Western cultural practice of belonging. Not looking country western in the streets resulted in the threat of regulatory sanctions by a white police officer.

They do not have the right to pass through any juncture between “here” and “there” geographically, especially, not even traversing the black imaginary between history and the present because of how they are presented at this moment in public. The problem is more than just not looking like they belong or do not belong. A political aspect to belonging abuts the tense moments between white and black cops defining where the group can and cannot go geographically (spatially). By examining how Black Western identity is imagined and shaped by the past, and then (re) enacted in the contemporary moment, the political contributes to a heightened awareness of what has been lost, ignored, or silenced by official narratives about America's history.

Although this is not the first time such an encounter has happened, this is not a typical encounter that has become part of common expectations for Black trail riders. Such as it is, this event is one real possibility for what might happen when Black people attempt to publicly remember and reclaim narratives of a particular past that do not fit into official country-western narratives about race, space/place. Each type of cowboy participates in Western cultural practices in different capacities, as evidenced by their differing use of and relationship to horses, which most people consider a cultural artefact and staple of Western culture in general. I learned that Black cowboys recognize multiple masculinities among themselves through a series of conversations with Ray and other cowboys and by observing how they interact with each other across Western cultural spaces. In part, this was dictated by their fluid manoeuvring between performatives of masculinity embodied in each cowboy “type.”

The way Black cowboys think about themselves as models of class and character challenges notions about cowboys as anti-social outlaws who simultaneously uphold the beliefs, values, and boundaries of “civilised” society on the frontier. It also challenges the idea of Black men as anti-social outlaws lacking breadth and depth of character. Black cowboys are more than pathologised behaviours toward criminality and exaggerated degree of physical strength in the media, they are one another's models of class and character.

Their interactions during campouts and trail rides display the notion of “class and character” in policing each other's behaviours. These negotiations frame concerns related to the occupations that grant many trail riders social responsibility that influence their performance within the class status associated with their profession. Policing in this public-private space means facilitating and maintaining safe boundaries around the place where Black males can cast aside, at least symbolically if not temporarily, the veil of twoness.

Cowboys are portrayed differently in these definitions. As a result, generational ideas about masculinity are cultivated in ways other than racialized behaviors that are otherwise interpreted as “boys being boys” and “men being men.” This modern Black Western experience fills in some of the fragmented structures of history where this was previously a space or place for imagination and play (for real and show) (Gordon, 2006). From the outside, this space appears to be an expression of folkloric romanticism instead of micronarrative performances accessible to African American country-western people who have relied on other textual means of knowledge production to remain visible and recognizable (even if only to themselves). A geography of the collective imaginary can be valid when temporal embodiments are material manifestations of narratives that have been manipulated to dis-identify cultural and ethnic characteristics of iconographic figures, if not to erase them entirely.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

**Data Availability Statement** The data collected and analyzed for this study consist primarily of ethnographic field notes, interview transcripts, and audio recordings documenting direct observation and participation with the Black trail ride event described. As detailed qualitative data containing potentially identifiable details and sensitive information from a specific community, the primary data cannot be made openly available to protect confidentiality and privacy. Direct quotes and descriptions included in the analysis aim to provide appropriate contextualization while masking any personal particulars. Given the in-depth, qualitative nature of the autoethnographic approach guiding methodology and analysis, the insights generated depend heavily on retaining thick descriptive fidelity without decontextualization. As an exploratory single case study focusing on lived experience in a localized setting, the ability to preserve narrative coherence and meaning relates more to resonant themes than isolated data points. Therefore, the descriptive and interpretive essence constitutes the fundamental analytical substance more so than itemized artifacts detached from embedded contexts. While confidentiality constraints surrounding human subjects research prevents releasing or reproducing extensive excerpts from the first-hand documents, the level of rich descriptive detail included in the article provides appropriate transparency into the qualitative data foundations behind reported findings. The goal remains elucidating larger conceptual, theoretical, methodological, and social justice implications that speak to broader communities and conversations in the literature. All empirical premises and factual assertions have been thoroughly documented. The paper aims for resonant public scholarship over replicable data outputs. Interested readers should contact the lead author with additional inquiries.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>i</sup> By shifting our notions of Black cowboy culture, [Cowboy Cool: A Professional Black Cowboy's Perspective] article intends to fracture any static notions of Black masculinity as well as any singular or “authentic” formation of Blackness. Black cowboys allow us to go beyond the limitations placed on Black male bodies by showing how they might perform different forms of hypermasculinity, even when the hegemonic or white way of exhibiting masculinity is seemingly incompatible

with so-called Black cultural values. Indeed, even as we recognize that the very notion of “male dominance” itself proceeds white Western cultural gender norms, through the Black cowboy experience we can reveal inconsistencies in different forms of patriarchy and masculinity. It is important to understand the myriad ways that Black men experience sex/gender roles and the associated privileges they are given in Black communities as a result (Babers, 2022).

- <sup>ii</sup> I would also add “and beyond” across the Atlantic to Africa where the skills of African herdsman were transplanted with the enslaved and brought to the Americas.
- <sup>iii</sup> “The Crimson Skull.” (1922)—Turner Classic Movies. Turner Classic Movies, January 1, 1970. <https://www.tcm.com/tcmdb/title/579718/the-crimson-skull/#synopsis>.
- <sup>iv</sup> In “Introduction: What is performance? (2003),” Marvin Carlson illustrates how “we have two different concepts of performance, one involving the display of skills, the other also involving display, but less of particular skills than of a recognized and culturally coded pattern of behavior. The third cluster of usages takes us in a different direction [when we speak of] the global success of activity considering some standard of achievement that may not itself be precisely articulated. Here, the observer, the audience, acts as the embodied manifestation of the dominant social structural culture and determines the performance's success (Carlson, 2003).
- <sup>v</sup> According to the Safe Motorist “The concept of the right of way is important to understand since the law never really grants the right of way. The law states when the right of way must be yielded. Right of way can be used when the law permits its use by requiring that others yield the right of way to you. Failure to yield the right of way leads to crashes in all states. The law gives the right of way to no one, but it does state who must yield (give up) the right of way.”

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