

THE RECLAMATION OF THE COWBOY



Est. Time: 60-90 minutes

Subjects: History, Social Studies

Age Range: High School

See the full lesson [here!](#)

★ *TEACHROCK* ★

A black and white photograph of a line of young girls, likely a dance team, performing a move. They are wearing cowboy hats and boots, and have their arms extended horizontally. The image is semi-transparent, serving as a background for the text.

**How has the image and history of the American cowboy
been reclaimed in the 21st Century?**



In this lesson you will:

- Trace the evolution of the cowboy from a working class ranch hand to a symbol of American masculinity.
 - Examine the roles of President Theodore Roosevelt and “Buffalo Bill” Cody in developing the romantic image of the American West
 - Listen to the music that often accompanied Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show
 - Discover the reclamation of the cowboy and cowboy culture through actual cowboys such as the Compton Cowboys, fashion brands such as Telfar and Pyer Moss, and artists of color such as Mitski, Solange, Lil Nas X, Los Tigres del Norte, Joan Sebastian, and Christian Nodal
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Consider or ask a friend:

- In what ways does this image meet your expectations of a cowboy? In what ways might it not?
- What do you think daily life was like for the cowboy featured in the photograph? How might have they made a living?



Consider or ask a friend:

- What does this image depict?
- What differences do you see between the historical photo and this film poster?
- Why might have Hollywood decided the figure of the cowboy is interesting enough to create a movie around?



The profession of the cowboy likely originated in 17th century Mexico, when Native American and Hispanic vaqueros practiced the livestock herding traditions first developed in Spain. Centuries later, the vaquero lifestyle migrated to what is now considered the Western United States.



The notion of the cowboy working in the untamed “frontier” of the American West eventually reached the Eastern United States, and the cowboy became a romanticized figure in the American imagination.

One of the most prolific people to advance this romanticized image was none other than Theodore Roosevelt, the 26th President of the United States who is often referred to as the “Cowboy President.”



Growing up a sickly child in New York, Roosevelt developed an obsession with the cowboy which he maintained throughout his life.

As an adult, he took up big game hunting and ventured West in 1883 to hunt Bison, at a time when the animal was nearing extinction due to overhunting by settlers. He would regularly take photographs in a Manhattan studio outfitted in cowboy attire, made frequent trips to the Dakotas, and bought two ranches in the West.





Examine **this image**, and read the quote.

Consider or ask a friend:

- Using your own words, how does Roosevelt describe the West? How does he describe life in the West? How does he describe the people living in the West?
 - Based on the quote, what might have appealed to Roosevelt about the West, considering he grew up in New York City?
 - What do you think the West represented to Roosevelt?
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During the Spanish American War, Roosevelt led the First U.S. Volunteer Cavalry, which he called the “Rough Riders.” The term was borrowed from Williams Frederick Cody, otherwise known as “Buffalo Bill” Cody. A soldier and professional bison hunter, Buffalo Bill likewise played an enormous role in developing the romanticized notion of the cowboy.



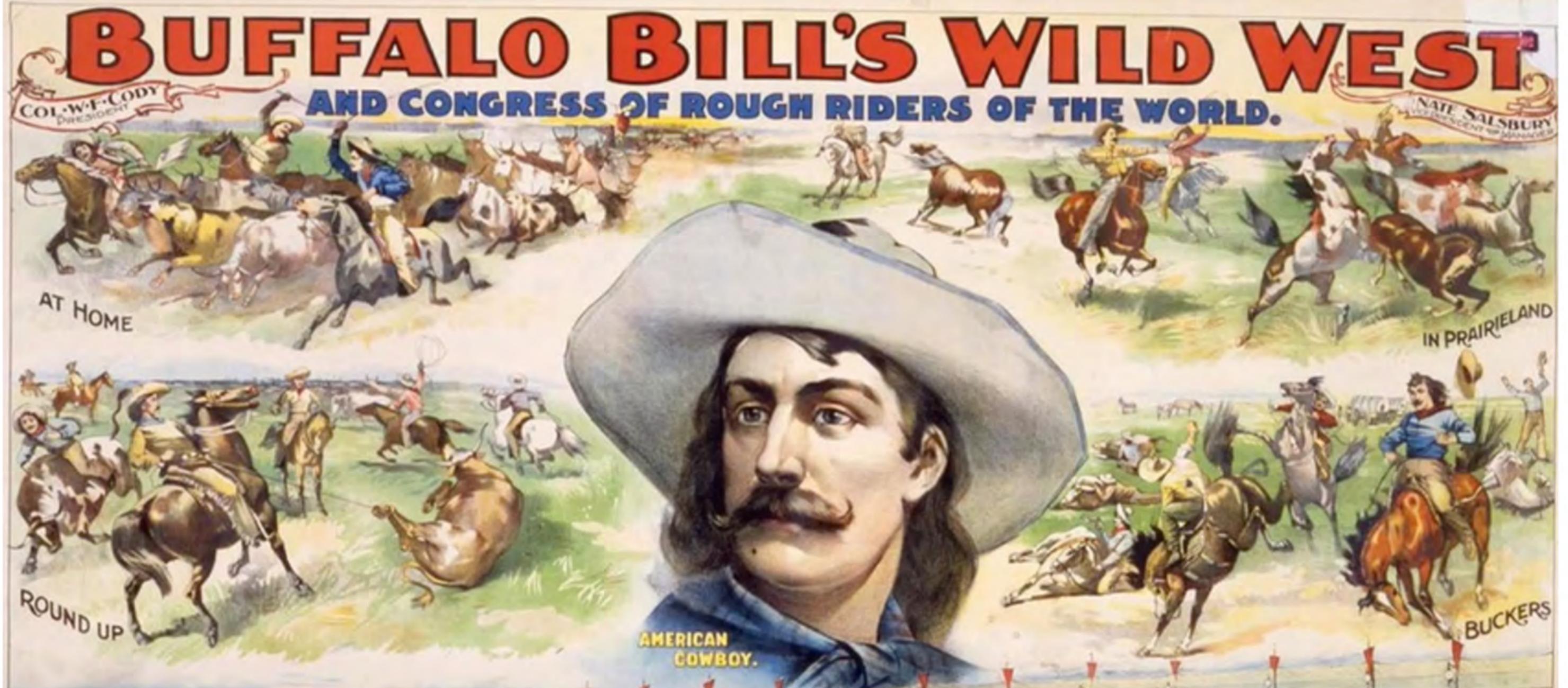
In the 1870s, Buffalo Bill's "adventures" began being published in print, and their market success inspired a traveling show that featured horses, shooters, and dramatic reenactments of battles between cowboys and Native Americans, who were usually depicted negatively as aggressors and the enemy.





These performances were accompanied by Buffalo Bill's Cowboy Band, a brass band led by cornet player William Sweeney which played heroic and lilting music to fit the spectacle's adventurous spirit. The show was immensely popular and traveled around the globe.





WILD WEST

Watch [this clip](#), containing a poster advertising one of Buffalo Bill's Wild West shows, and the music that would be likely heard at one of the performances.



Consider or ask a friend:

- How do the images and words on the poster reinforce the idea of the West and the cowboy described by Theodore Roosevelt?
 - Considering the image in the clip, and even the Western poster you saw earlier, who is not represented in these images of the “Wild West”?
 - How would you describe the music you heard in the clip? Does it remind you of anything else?
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GOING DOWN THE ROAD FEELIN' BAD

Watch [this clip](#) of a traditional American song performed by musician Dom Flemons from his 2018 Grammy nominated album *Black Cowboys*. Pay attention to the instruments and the lyrics.



Consider or ask a friend:

- What did you picture in your head as it played? What were the lyrics of this song about?
 - In what ways does this song differ from the “Equestrian March” you listened to earlier?
 - Who’s perspective might be represented in these lyrics?
 - Which might be more representative of the lifestyle of a cowboy? Why?
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In 1965, writers James Baldwin and William F. Buckley Jr. participated in a debate about race at University of Cambridge. Watch a clip from this debate [here](#).





Consider or discuss with someone:

- What might Baldwin mean when he says “ it comes as a great shock when the same flag you pledge allegiance to does not pledge allegiance to you”?
 - Baldwin goes on to say “it comes as a great shock to discover that Gary Cooper killing off the Indians, when you were rooting for Gary Cooper that the Indians were you...” What is Baldwin saying about the problematic cowboy vs. “Indians” trope and how does it relate to race relations in the U.S.?
 - Why does Baldwin use the example of the Western here? What larger point might he be making about growing up a Black person in the United States?
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In the late 2010s, cowboy inspired aesthetics was seen in many aspects of popular culture. From fashion, to musicians, to actual cowboys, creatives helped reclaim the image and history of the cowboy.



Select two of the following handouts profiling the artists listed above. Answer the questions at the end of the handout.

- **Mitski**
- **Los Tigres Del Norte**
- **Solange**
- **Compton Cowboys**
- **Lil Nas X**
- **Pyer Moss and Telfar**



SUMMARY

- The American cowboy went from a working class ranch hand to a glorified myth that celebrated white masculinity and an American hero
- In spite of the cowboy originating from the Mexican vaquero and there being Black cowboys, the romanticization of the American West led to the erasure of people of color from larger discussions about the American West
- In the 21st century, artists of color such as musicians, fashion designers, and actual cowboys have all contributed to reclaiming the image and history of the cowboy



BE CREATIVE

- Create a Western movie poster or visual representation that is a more historical representation of the American West. It should feature people, perspectives, and narratives left out of traditional depictions of The American Cowboy.
- Put together a presentation on an underrepresented voice or perspective that's often erased from narratives and history of the American West.

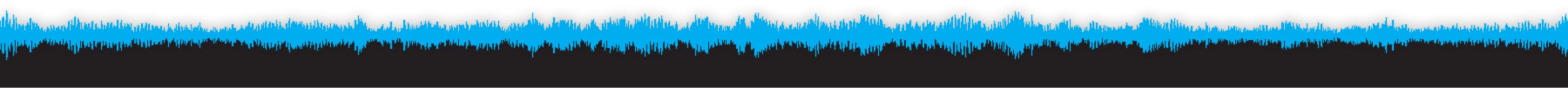
BE CURIOUS

- Watch the two part mini documentary **“The Last American Rodeos”** which is about Navajo young adults who participate in rodeos in the South West.
- Read the New York Times article **“The Last of New York’s Black Cowboys”** and write a short response.
- Find a contemporary song, music video, or fashion with references to the American cowboy. Explain how it deviates from or plays into the stereotype.



CONNECT

Share it with us! Either you or an adult in your life can share your poster or presentation with TeachRock on **Instagram** or **Facebook**, email to **info@teachrock.org**, or Tweet it to **@TeachRock**





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