Embodying Decolonial Salvage in the Sertão of *Boi neon* and the American West of *The Rider*

DAVID M. MITTELMAN
United States Air Force Academy

Abstract: The water-scarce regions of the Western United States and the *sertões* of Northeastern and Central Brazil have been alternately imagined as representing the promise and limits of their imperial nations. This article compares how two recent films, Gabriel Mascaro's *Boi neon* and Chloé Zhao's *The Rider*, represent these regions as spaces of vital possibility, salvaging from the colonially-inspired sports of *vaquejada* and rodeo materials from which to refashion gendered embodiment and define the West and *sertão* as stages for decolonial projects of cultural salvage.

Keywords: Decoloniality, Brazilian *sertão*, Western United States, Gabriel Mascaro, Chloé Zhao

Nostalgic and celebratory representations of national-colonial, cis-hetero-patriarchal normativity in the Brazilian *sertão* and Western United States continue to circulate widely within popular culture as they have for decades, often through their most recognized symbols – the cowboy and the *vaqueiro*. These include the Paramount Network's *Yellowstone* (2018-), as well as Tim McGraw's 2001 ballad "The Cowboy in Me," re-recorded for the series in which the country star also performs. In another case of contemporary cowboy-themed country music, former bull-rider Cody Johnson's 2019 "Dear Rodeo" was re-released as a duet with the world-famous Reba McEntire in 2020. In Brazil, Zé Vaqueiro, who performs the *forró* "Boi no chão," has a YouTube channel with well over four million subscribers as of January 2022 and *pisadinha* star João

Gomes's "Que nem vovô" had been viewed on YouTube over twenty million times within six months of being posted in July 2021. As these examples suggest, the figures of cowboy and *vaqueiro* continue to enjoy cultural currency and persist especially in the forms of the contemporary rodeo cowboy and *vaqueiro de vaquejada*.

Sports like rodeo and *vaquejada* celebrate daring feats of domination. In the most popular events in U.S. rodeo competition, bull and bronco riding, cowboys are assessed on their riding form and endurance as they forcibly ride animals that desperately try to throw them off; in Brazilian *vaquejada*, riders chase down running steers and attempt to pull them to the ground by the tail within a designated scoring area. In most U.S. rodeos, women are excluded from all events except barrel racing, while the vast majority of *vaquejada* competitors in Brazil are men (Flores). Although the sports have undergone transformations over time, they wear their origins clearly as stylized, competitive evocations of the labor historically performed by mounted cowhands during and following the establishment of colonial order, the "winning" or "*desbravamento*" of the semi-arid *sertão* and West.

As Elyssa Ford discusses in her recent study of rodeo cultures beyond the white, masculine norm, whatever contestatory meanings may be expressed by participants and spectators of rodeo within distinct communities, the sport carries association with conservative social politics, particularly with respect to gender, within the national cultural ecosystem of the United States. This follows the general pattern of conservative nostalgia for rural purity and simplicity, paired with a rejection of multiracial urban cultures, immigration, intellectualism, and cosmopolitanism. Similarly, *vaquejada* has in recent years become a flashpoint in Brazil's escalating culture wars, outlawed in 2016 by the Supremo Tribunal Federal on the grounds that it inherently inflicts unconstitutional cruelty on animals, before the Congresso approved a constitutional amendment that exempts sports involving animals from considerations of cruelty, provided they be deemed manifestations of Brazilian cultural heritage. Controversy regarding the status of the sport has prompted right-wing politicians including President Jair Bolsonaro and Federal Deputy Carla Zambelli to declare their commitment to preserving *vaquejada*, as they attempt to position themselves as defenders of the true body politic (Brant and Uribe).

Given the strong associations of rodeo and *vaquejada* with the history of colonial expansion and cis-hetero-normativity, aesthetic projects that "queer" these performances and their subjects may be usefully understood as undertaking a kind of decolonial salvage operation in that they attempt to wrest the signifying power of established signs within the hegemonic discourses of modern/national/settler/ heterosexist culture in Brazil and the United States, to ask what other meanings they might express, how such symbols might be used to change which and in what manner, to borrow Judith Butler's classic formulation, bodies are made to matter. Two recent films, Gabriel Mascaro's *Boi neon* and Chloé Zhao's *The Rider*, can therefore be read as posing questions about the possibilities and limits of decolonial cultural salvage within the symbolically rich spaces of the semi-arid West and *sertão*. I will first discuss what I mean by decolonial cultural salvage before briefly considering the repertoire of literary and cinematic constructions of the West and the *sertão* that constitute the textual salvage yard from which *Boi neon* and *The Rider* draw important materials. Having established this terrain, I will present a comparative analysis of how these two notable films attempt to envision and enact the embodiment of decolonial salvage.

Decoloniality comprises political, aesthetic, and cultural projects that imagine futures and possibilities not defined by the logics of conquest, expansion, domination, and control endemic to the interwoven worldviews of modernity and coloniality. Decolonial work seeks to bring about human flourishing such that the well-being of some does not depend on the sacrifice and subjugation of others, requiring an aesthetic and intellectual attitude that decenters the domineering gaze of the colonizer, not in order to replace it with an unshakable, singularly true, uniquely virtuous single perspective, but in order to cultivate a multiplicity of centerless ways of living, doing, knowing, and creating. This requires what Walter Mignolo calls "delinking" from colonial power, an effort that implies not only divestment from the explicit apparatus, discourses, and structures of colonial power, but a rejection of the epistemological presumptions of Eurocentric modernity (52-62).

In discussions of cultural work that might be considered decolonial, critics often emphasize strategies and aesthetics of resistance, contestation, and denunciation. Here, however, I wish to ask what may be possible to achieve by means of cultural salvage, where this is conceived as what one does with cultural

resources one has inherited, when one is estranged from the inherited culture, its producers, its signs and conventions, its ways of thinking and doing. What may decolonial projects retain from colonial cultures whose ideologies they reject? What might be achieved by the cultural salvage of colonial aesthetic resources – texts, forms, practices, artifacts, performances – not to obey an imperative to preserve the cultural goods of coloniality or the nation or Western modernity, but instead to claim the freedom of remaking them – taking them up, tinkering with them, turning them into something else, something other to their origin and design, employing what Angela Naimou has called in another context an aesthetics of salvage: "a critical and creative practice that animates every encounter with the ruined, junked, and trashed: What is to be done with it? What is being valued, what is being purposed, and who is at work?" (9). Our question, then, is: how can cultural formations closely tied to coloniality be used – aesthetically, politically, symbolically – in efforts to delink from colonial power?

Historically and symbolically, much of the Western United States and the *sertões* of Northeastern and Central Brazil are distinguished from other national spaces due to their (semi-) aridity. These regions are largely not true deserts in ecological terms, but they receive significantly less precipitation than expected in other regions of each nation. Since early colonial conquest, therefore, the *sertão* and the West have been sites of boom-and-bust cycles of cattle running and mining, while sustaining only spatially restricted intensive agriculture, urban growth, and industrial development. Semiotically, the *sertão* and the West give rise to figures that express both the desires and anxieties of what Aníbal Quijano calls the "coloniality of power" and Walter Mignolo terms "the colonial matrix of power": the hegemonic ordering of economic, racial, sexual, and epistemic relations in modernity such that the white, male, European subject position is taken as primary, neutral, and authoritative (Quijano 549-556; Mignolo 8-21). Heroic, nation-forging representations of the dry lands and their people abound in literature and cinema, beginning at least as early as James Fennimore Cooper's *The Prairie* (1827) and José de Alencar's *O sertanejo* (1875), narratives that set off the interior space as distinct from the Eastern urban and agrarian regions of the young nations, even as their rugged, masculine heroes mark a boundary between the nascent national race/culture and the excluded indigenous peoples beyond its bounds. Triumphalist as these texts may at times appear, the seeds of national-colonial anxiety sprout within them: in Cooper's story only the

frontiersman Natty Bumppo remains in the West as the other settler characters depart back to the East, while in Alencar's novel the quasi-feudal order of the *sertão* depends on but does not valorize its laborers, culminating in a "surpreendente atmosfera de desintegração e esterilidade" (Valente 145).

In Cooper and Alencar, such indications of anxiety about whether settler/plantation colonial promise and national progress could in fact be achieved remain buried, if incompletely. By the turn of the twentieth century, however, such concerns blossomed in both countries in the work of Frederick Jackson Turner, who theorized that the western frontier had served as the motor of U.S. democracy and that the end of the frontier era therefore threatened the national character, and Euclides da Cunha, whose analysis of the Canudos campaign condemns both the deficits of the modern-colonial state in its paltry attempts to control the *sertão*, as well as its excesses, the explosive violence unleashed by the national army against the *sertanejos* – to the author, famously, "a rocha viva da nossa raça" (766) – with their glittering bayonets and German-made cannons.

In both Brazil and the U.S., this construction of the *sertão* and the West as spaces in which to envision both national fulfillment and the threat of national failure proved so compelling that in the early twentieth-century the colonial frontier and the cattle-raising lifestyle of the *sertão* and the West would be elaborated in numerous literary projects. In some, including Owen Wister's *The Virginian*, Harvey Fergusson's *Wolf Song*, José Américo de Almeida's *A bagaceira*, and José Lins do Rego's *Pedra bonita*, these regions preserve a degree of individualist, masculine freedom not to be found within the plantations, homesteads, and cities of coastal society. Elsewhere, however, we find a more critical vision of the colonial-national project to dominate these lands and their peoples, as in the indictment of frontier lynch mobs in Walter Van Tilburg Clark's *The Ox-Bow Incident*; Cormac McCarthy's unrelenting recitation of the perverse and all-consuming violence of U.S. expansion in *Blood Meridian*; the unusually bold narration of the unconstrained brutality of landed, patriarchal power in the *sertões* of central Brazil in Hugo de Carvalho Ramos's "Gente da gleba"; and Graciliano Ramos's portrayal of *sertanejos* and the *sertão* in *Vidas secas* as martyred by the twinned afflictions of environmental extremes and economic exploitation.

If the terms by which the *sertão* and West would be constructed in national discourse were established by literary Romantics like Cooper and Alencar,

elaborated by intellectuals like Turner and Euclides, and contested by later modernist and postmodernist prose artists, cinematic representations of these spaces have been decisive in shaping their meanings within national and mass culture over many decades in both countries, although not symmetrically. The early rise of the Western genre film in U.S. cinema and its exportation around the world ensured the ubiquity of representations of the West as the boundary zone between civilization and savagery requiring white, masculine, Christian violence for the establishment of patriarchal order and the security of colonial property. This formula, represented iconically by the many Western collaborations between director John Ford and actor John Wayne including *Stagecoach* (1939) and *The Searchers* (1956), would in time inspire critical reappropriations of genre conventions in films such as Joel and Ethan Coen's *No Country for Old Men* (2007), adapted from Cormac McCarthy novel's novel of the same title, in which the cyclical violence of the semi-arid Western landscape produces neither valor nor salvation, as apparently empty of meaning as the wind blowing across the Texas plain.

While the Hollywood Western quickly succeeded in reaching massive audiences both nationally and internationally – thereby exerting significant influence on the twentieth-century reinterpretation of the spaces, myths, and histories of the West – Brazilian cinema took much longer to reach significant numbers of viewers domestically or abroad. As Randal Johnson and Robert Stam once lamented: "The flow of sounds and images tends to be unidirectional. … While American films are seen daily throughout Brazil, Brazilian films do not reach their potential audience in the United States or even within Brazil itself." (18-19)

Despite the difficulties of establishing a national film industry and visual culture in a global market dominated by Hollywood and the pernicious effects of censorship and repression during the period of the military dictatorship, Brazilian cinema would come to take an enduring interest in the *sertão*. In dialogue with earlier literary constructions of Brazil's semi-arid regions, particularly the tradition leading from Euclides da Cunha through Graciliano Ramos, exponents of the *Cinema Novo* movement such as Nelson Pereira dos Santos and Glauber Rocha famously turned to the *sertão* to focus their critiques of Brazilian society and define the aesthetic parameters of their new Brazilian cinema. Dos Santos's *Vidas secas* and Rocha's *Deus e diabo na terra do sol* lionize poor *sertanejos*

who endure cycles of ecological, social, and economic crisis in the drought-stricken *sertões* of the Brazilian Northeast while facing the neglect and depredations of the wealthy and powerful. Each film offers a visual proposal for how its subjects, themes, and spaces should be expressed cinematically. Cued by neo-realist style, *Vidas secas* opts for over-exposed, bleached, almost blinding photography and verbally constrained human figures to convey the stifling dryness of the landscape and the subjective desiccation of its inhabitants. *Deus e diabo*, meanwhile, is governed by Rocha's "estética da fome," so that, as Ismael Xavier explains, "The film attunes its style to its own conditions of production and thus marks its esthetic and ideological opposition to the colonizing discourse of the film industry. Its very texture expresses the underdevelopment that conditions the film, transforming its own technical precariousness into a source of signification" (139). Enshrined by *Cinema Novo* as a crucial space for the visual construction and contestation of national meanings, the *sertão* has recurred in subsequent films as a locus for the utopian recovery of cultural authenticity, as in Walter Salles's *Central do Brasil* (1998), and more recently as the perhaps equally utopian ground of radical popular resistance in Kleber Mendonça Filho and Juliano Dornelles's *Bacurau* (2019).[1]

On the cracked mud of the Pernambuco *sertão* and in the windswept badlands of the Pine Ridge Reservation, Mascaro and Zhao entwine documentary footage of rodeo and *vaquejada* competition with narrative fiction to ask what salvage can be made of these sports that encode the colonially imposed definitions of bodies and their relationship to the land. In landscapes formed by what Ann Laura Stoler calls imperial ruination, can performances and spectacles associated with colonial/imperial nostalgia be made to mean something else, "queer," emancipatory?[2] *Boi neon* follows a set of characters who thoroughly defy viewers' presumed expectations of what and whom a *vaquejada* narrative can or should be about. Mascaro's camera largely excludes the riders, owners, and spectators from the frame to focus instead on those who run the show. Acting

---

[1] Compare, for instance, discussion by Lúcia Nagib (37-46) and Tatiana Signorelli Heise (83-85) on the *sertão* as utopia of national authenticity constructed by films like Walter Salles's *Central do Brasil* and others.

[2] In Stoler's conception, "ruination is more than a process that sloughs off debris as a by-product. It is a political project that lays waste to certain peoples, relations, and things that accumulate in specific places. To think with the ruins of empire is to emphasize less the artifacts of empire as dead matter or remnants of a defunct regime than to attend to their reappropriations, neglect, and strategic and active positioning within the politics of the present" (11).

in the wings of a spectacle that glorifies the colonial past and its continuing legacy of domineering masculinity, the itinerant characters of *Boi neon* appear to be only incompletely subject to the gendered social constraints of the *vaquejada* circuit. The film's loose narrative structure and visually sumptuous photography contribute to a sense that the cinematic experience will ground the viewer in a contemplation and continual reconsideration of the characters, bodies, and subjective positions represented on-screen – a viewing experience in which one is asked not just to see, but to see again and see differently the labor, interactions, and performances so portrayed. In contrast, *The Rider* focuses on Brady Blackburn (Brady Jandreau), an Indian rodeo cowboy who is told he should no longer ride after sustaining serious injuries in competition. For Brady, the loss of bodily ability threatens his economic future, social prestige, and masculinity as he rides and drives around the scenic but scarred Reservation and West. Initially unwilling to heed medical advice and reluctant to buck the powerful homosocial expectation that he continue riding and competing despite the evident risks, Brady ultimately steps away from the saddle and attempts to redefine his subjectivity. Focusing closely on Brady's physical and emotional struggles to accept with his limitations, Zhao provokes viewers to not only observe but imaginatively embody the cowboy's pain, despair, and, hope, concluding her film with the suggestion that Brady will salvage his knowledge of rodeo and riding in formulating a freer, previously unimaginable future.

In attempting to salvage the signifying potential of *vaquejada* and rodeo, these films thematize the work of salvage itself; in *Boi neon*, a *vaquejada* worker collects discarded materials in order to realize his fashion design projects, enacting the film's interest in the possibility of remaking/resignifying the socially-defined body, while in *The Rider* a cowboy salvages riding knowledge in order to make other disabled bodies matter and thereby salvage the livability and potential meaning of his own.

To the extent that *Boi neon* offers a narrative, it might best be thought of as the dialectical development of viewers' changing perceptions of the subjectivities and relations its characters might express, an evolution of what might be enunciated through the repeated questioning of spectator expectations, rather than a plot governed by a specifically discernable socio-causal logic. From the first frames, Mascaro and cinematographer Diego García convey their interest in defamiliarizing their content and the viewing experience by opening with a slow

tracking shot focused close on what turn out to be *vaquejada* steers crushed against and on top of one another in the rough wooden chute through which they will be driven into the arena to be chased down by mounted *vaqueiros*. In the distance, an announcer's voice on loudspeaker, cheering crowds, and air horns situate the initially vague scene within the recognizable universe of *vaquejada*, but already the viewer is displaced from a conventional point of view on the familiar content: we see the target animals, but not the riders; the antechamber, but not the arena; the camera views the steers from a position too close, too low, too obscured by fence posts to take in their bulk, defying any expectation of an unencumbered gaze. These and other aspects of the opening *mise-en-scène* recur or persist throughout a film constituted by a series of events and interactions that present only a modest sense of recognizable story. Another partially obscured tracking shot introduces the cowhand Iremar (Juliano Cazarré) as he prepares the steers to enter the arena, sanding and securing their tufted tails before releasing them through the chute. With the soundscape continuing, a cut moves to a long shot inside the field of competition, as two riders pursue a steer toward the camera's first unimpeded position, pulling it down by the tail, prompting cheers and a jumbotron message: "VALEU BOI."

Although there are several shots of *vaquejada* competition throughout the film – including the running of the eponymous steer splashed with photoluminescent paint and an excruciating shot of an animal that, having been yanked to the ground, struggles in pain and fails to get up again – *Boi neon* is disinterested in conventional sports-movie storytelling and trains no attention on the potentially dramatic triumphs and disasters of the competitors themselves. Shots taken in the arena become backdrop, illustration, and, perhaps, metaphor for its focus: the people and animals who make the popular spectacle possible. The filmmakers soon make clear, however, that *Boi neon* will not simply be a neorealist or *Cinema Novo*-inspired document of the hard labor of exploited *sertanejos*, but will instead question the constructions and performances of subjectivity that make them who they are. Likewise, though the film at times recalls Carlos Diegues's classic *Bye bye Brasil* (1979) and its interest in rootlessness, the possibilities and constraints of sex, and the tension between tradition and modernity/development, *Boi neon* remains grounded in the *sertão* and does not aspire to the earlier film's national-epic scope. After establishing the space within a few shots, and after the competition has evidently concluded,

the camera follows as Iremar drifts away from the arena, climbing over fences and passing massive billboards glorifying the equine heroes of *vaquejada*. An extended and distant tracking shot shows Iremar slowly trudging across a field strewn with colorful, initially indistinct debris, fragments of discarded textiles, until he reaches a mud puddle from which, standing knee-deep at the edge of the frame, he plucks the limbs, torso, and head of a mannequin from an assortment of detached and abandoned parts: a human agent preparing to construct the body from the affordances of primordial muck and inherited wreckage. Though subsequent scenes make clear Iremar's pragmatic interest in the simulacrum of the human form as he takes measurements, sketches designs, and scavenges materials for a costume he will sew for Galega (Maeve Jinkings), a fellow *vaquejada* worker who moonlights as a horse-masked erotic dancer, this early shot grounds the film's interest in the possible reconstructions of the body as a site of socially-defined meaning.

Figure 1: Iremar salvages mannequin parts from a muddy debris field in *Boi neon*.

Iremar and Galega anchor the *Boi neon*'s development as the primary characters with whom viewers experience what Murray Smith calls subjective alignment, a film's invitation to consider events in relation to the interests of specific characters. Thrust together in the cramped truck cabin early in the film as he takes measurements of her body, the proximity of Galega and Iremar can create the expectation that they be or that they become romantically/erotically involved, but this does not occur. This nucleus, however, traces the contours of much of what the film will explore in the symbolic realm of embodiment and sex/gender. Immersed in femininity as single mother to the alternately spirited and surly Cacá (Alyne Santana), purchaser of lacy underwear from a road-side vendor, and cook for her fellow workers, Galega also performs masculine-typed labor, driving and

maintaining the cattle truck that transports the animals and workers from arena to arena, and wielding the hot branding iron to mark a young maverick with the herd owner's sign. Iremar performs the intensely physical, masculine-coded labor of cattle husbandry and rodeo running while pursuing a sideline in feminine-coded costume design and sewing.

This bending and blending of gendered subjectivity by Galega and Iremar is exposed gradually by the film's understated composition in many long, stationary or slowly tracking takes including little dialogue, minimalist editing that eschews conventional dramatic techniques like sight-line matching, and very limited use of non-diegetic sound and music. It is also supported by shots that linger on animal and human bodies, establishing a comparative gaze on both as the camera follows steers grazing or roaming their corral and elsewhere trains on a group of *vaqueiros* bathing or two people having sex among the animals. In parallel to the characters' straining of the supposedly distinct embodied boundary between the spheres of the feminine and the masculine, the film's juxtaposition of long takes of human and animal bodies frays the supposedly distinct embodied difference between species, as we watch bovines and humans seemingly just going about their business. Meanwhile, the film's unsignaled intercutting of documentary footage taken during *vaquejada* competitions with fictional shots produced on set also tests any supposition of a secure distinction between the real and the fictional/imagined.

The world of *Boi neon*, however, is not a utopian fantasy of gender freedom, and the hegemonic, heteronormative, partriarchal culture asserts itself even for characters like Galega and Iremar who appear to an extent unconstrained by its demands. Iremar is ridiculed for his interest in sewing by Zé (Carlos Pessoa), one of his main work partners for the first half of the film, and Cacá is advised by Iremar not to listen to the men who mock her for not having a present father. But the contestation of the heteronormative requirement realized by Galega and Iremar is validated by the sexual partners they encounter in the second half of the film, Júnior (Viníníus de Oliveira) and Geise (Samya de Lavor), who also confound gendered conventions. After Zé and Iremar comically fail in their attempt to steal the semen of a prize stallion, a *fazendeiro* arrives to take the hapless, pudgy Zé away from the group to tend to an ill-tempered prize mare, leaving Júnior in his place. The strapping Júnior takes significant care with his appearance, wearing his hair long and performing an indulgent, apparently

"feminine" personal maintenance and hair-straightening routine, while also acting paternally toward Cacá. Geise first appears as a highly feminine perfume salesperson who approaches Iremar and Júnior to make a sale and, although this is deliberately obscured by the placement of the camera when she first arrives, is in an advanced stage of pregnancy. It subsequently turns out that she also works as an armed overnight security guard in a garment factory. In coupling Galega with Júnior and Iremar with Geise, *Boi neon* celebrates the viability of sexed subjectivities that are unencumbered by colonial, patriarchal strictures and normative assumptions of distinct and separate spheres of femininity and masculinity.

In Mascaro's *sertão*, it is enough to peek behind the scenes of the apparently consistent hegemonic culture to find alternatives to its norms of gender expression and, indeed, to see that the performance of normative gender is but a spectacle made possible by the labor and creativity of subjects who reject its presumption of naturalness and universality. Moreover, the centrality of salvage as a technique and metaphor for evading repressive constraints in favor of free and creative futures is emphasized when Iremar modifies and reconstructs with a saw and some difficulty the broken mannequin so that he can use it to realize his designs; when he repurposes Zé's sticky, pornographic magazine as a drawing canvas; and when he collects the tufted ends of steer tails ripped off in *vaquejada* competition and spray-paints them golden blond to adorn the mane of Galega's horse costume.

Having posited these possibilities of salvage and illuminated gaps in the hegemonic control of bodies, the film ends with two sexual encounters. First, Galega and Júnior indulge themselves at night in a corral, in a carefully lit shot in which their bodies are initially incompletely distinguished from the bovine bodies that surround them. Shortly afterward, Iremar meets Geise at the empty factory she guards, where they remove their socially marked clothes and have sex on the fabric cutting table, again in carefully composed chiaroscuro in a long, uninterrupted take that lends a sense of immediacy to viewers' contact with their exchange of pleasure. Culminating with these two visions of mutualistic erotic fulfillment, *Boi neon* challenges canonical cinematic inscriptions of the *sertão* as the bleak, scorched hell of dos Santos' *Vidas secas*, the site of epic, existential, and cosmological conflict as in Rocha's *Deus e o diabo*, or the repository of national cultural authenticity offered by Walter Salles's *Central do Brasil*.

Mascaro's interpretation of the *sertão* stands in marked contrast not only to preceding representations of the region, but also to the director's own *Ventos de agosto*, which envisions the Northeastern coast as a space in which life is suffused with death, where the bones of the deceased refuse to remain buried, its Afro-Brazilian population trapped by the violence of a past that has been obscured but not resolved. In *Boi neon*, however, the *sertão*, in its aridity, functions instead as a space of fleshy plenitude and promise, where the constricting garments and imperatives of coloniality and patriarchy can be shed and remade into something new and unimagined, where bodies thus uncovered and refashioned can be resignified, and where even death acts only as a figure of succulence and plenty, appearing only in one of the film's final shots: a bovine carcass slowly rotating on a food stand rotisserie.

Figure 2: The harsh *sertão* of *Vidas secas*: the death of Baleia.

Figure 3: Omnipresent death on the Northeastern coast in *Ventos de agosto*: Jeison (Geová Manoel de Santos, left) and Shirley (Dandara de Morais) observe the resurfacing traces of the dead.

Figure 4: Death in the service of sensual fulfillment in *Boi neon*.

Where *Boi neon* glories in possibilities of embodiment imagined beyond the confines of coloniality, Chloé Zhao's *The Rider* frames its narrative around a struggle for regeneration in the face of abjection and death. In the opening scenes of the film, Brady Blackburn awakes with a start from a dream to cold early morning light; he then begins pulling staples out of the back of his own head with a pocketknife, already straining to accept the limitations and needs of his own body. Previously a bronco rider, Brady sustained injuries in competition that will ultimately force him to choose between continuing to ride – as demanded not only by his own ambition, love for horses, and financial pressure but also by a destructive homosocial masculinity that envelops him – and finding another means of forging a future, a sense of identity, and relationships with others. Zhao and director of photography Joshua James Richards make extensive use of Steadicam and close-ups to ground the viewers' sense of bodily proximity to Brady and to encourage, to use again Smith's terminology, their subjective alignment and allegiance to him as they observe his physical and psychic pain. Similarly, composer Nathen Halpern and music supervisor Ben Sokoler fill the soundtrack with an ethereal score, whose slow tempos and long, droning string notes lend an air of romantic heroism and tragedy to numerous shots of Brady riding across the prairies.

Brady's painful path to salvage is defined by loss and hardship, not only his reduced physical ability, but also the death of his mother prior to the time of the story, the sale of his favorite horse due to money problems in the family, his father's alcoholism, and his friend Lane's severe disability resulting from injuries sustained in an accident. After breaking out of the hospital and resisting medical orders to rest and recover from his head injury, Brady begins to heal, only to find that he is plagued by continuing effects of his injuries and threats to his

masculinity. His father, Wayne (Tim Jandreau), complains that by getting injured Brady has abandoned his responsibilities, since he is now unable to work as a horse trainer, leaving Wayne to pick up the slack. Brady visits his mother's grave, kneeling on the prairie earth, dry flowers standing up in the boot next to her headstone, his hand seizing uncontrollably around a toy horse he has plucked from the grass. Back in the house, he vomits and smokes, and explains to his sister Lilly (Lilly Jandreau), who has Asperger's syndrome, that he had had surgery after his injury. Shortly thereafter, several of Brady's cowboy friends sneak into his bedroom as he sleeps, waking him up by blowing cigarette smoke in his face, an taking him out to carouse on the night prairie. Sitting around a campfire, Brady tells the story of his rodeo accident and the others share accounts of their own close calls. Tanner (Tanner Langdeau), one of the other cowboys, pokes Brady's wounded sense of ability and masculine pride, reminding him of an occasion when Brady had goaded him to ignore an injury and get back to riding:

> Tanner: Brady over there told me to get on my short-go horse even though my ribs hurt like a son of a bitch. Ain't that right, Brady? You don't let no pain put you down. You ain't gonna be turning out horses left and right just cause your head hurts a little bit now, are you?
>
> Brady: I'm not, I'm not drawing out of anything. I'm just taking some time off. Your brain's a little different than your ribs.
>
> Tanner: Yeah, I know, but it's all the same to a cowboy. Ride through the pain. You gotta make sure this head of yours don't get you scared. I know how that goes with some guys. They get scared to get on again and then they end up becoming farmers.

Sensing that Tanner is provoking Brady, one of the other cowboys turns the conversation to their mutual friend Lane Scott (Lane Scott), a former star bull rider, asking if Brady has gone to see him recently, which Brady admits he has not. As they trade stories about Lane's riding prowess, James (James Calhoon), another cowboy relates:

> James: Shit, one time, me and Lane was coming back from a party. We was driving in Tanner's brother's car, and we was kind of talking about women. We was a little drunk. And Lane looks over at me says, "James, you know what? One thing I've learned in life," he says, "I've always thought girls come in with a name and they leave with a number." [Laughs nervously.] Kind of fucked up, but…

After the others hoot in appreciation, Cat (Cat Clifford), another member of the group, offers a prayer for Lane, noting that they should pray for him every day as "he sure could use it":

> Cat: I just want to go ahead and say, I pray to God that he takes in all the strength from all his friends across the nation. North, south, east, and west, cause we all know he's got friends all over this country. That he pulls through. Hope he gets to ride again. Feel the wind hit his back and watch it flow through the grass. We are him and he is us. We're all one in this together. Mitákuye Oyás'iŋ. Mitákuye Oyás'iŋ.

As Cat speaks, the camera cuts occasionally to the other cowboys, lingering on Brady in close-up, his face and the Indian National Finals Rodeo logo on his jacket glowing in the flickering firelight as he listens to the other cowboy pray for their friend in words that could as well express his concern and hope for Brady and the others.

Wayne conveys a patriarchal imperative to provide financially for the family and to protect Lilly from a world that imposes gendered norms that she cannot understand and which she refuses to accept – the father repeatedly tries to coax Lilly to wear a bra, but she categorically declines – creating pressure for Brady to return to training and riding horses despite his condition. Brady's cowboy friends reiterate a homosocial expectation that he continue competing in rodeo, an expression of their own fear of losing masculine supremacy and bodily ability, reverently conflating the rodeo and heterosexual conquests of their now disabled comrade as they shudder to think of him—and to imagine themselves: partially

paralyzed, unable to speak, communicating slowly through sign language, a shadow or wreck of the dominant male subject he once was.

Unlike Mascaro's warm and sensually rich *sertão*, Zhao's chromatically cold and erotically barren badlands offer constant reminders of suffering and death in the Lakota lands of Pine Ridge, where Brady's loss of a rodeo future seems bound to constitute a death in life, his disabled body incapable of fulfilling the social demands of masculinity, thereby becoming abject, unacceptable, unlivable. Brady tries to cheat his condition, returning to the training pen and briefly finding his body acceptable again as he uses it to forge connection with the powerful quadrupeds. At the home of a business partner, Brady wanders the yard strewn with car parts and scrap materials before coming upon a horse named Apollo who has remained untrained because, according to his owner, he had been mistreated and began to develop bad habits. With Wayne's help, Brady takes Apollo in and succeeds in training the horse, reviving his own confidence and pride by salvaging the neglected horse, a creature that others had all but given up on.

But this salvage option turns out to be illusory for Brady. Narrowly avoiding a serious injury when his hand seizes around the reins of an agitated horse only to suddenly take ill while out riding Apollo, vomiting and losing consciousness, a physician informs him that he should no longer ride at all due to his worsening seizures and the risk of additional injuries. "Think about it, OK?" she implores, "No more riding, no more rodeos." Brady struggles to accept this advice, giving away some of his rodeo clothes and gear to the younger James, but then roughing him up in a wrestling match as though obligated to reassert masculine dominance in compensation for conceding that he might walk away from rodeo competition. When Apollo gets tangled in barbed wire and injures his leg, Brady and Wayne euthanize the horse, throwing into relief Brady's subsequent suggestion to Lilly the he is unable to envision a life for himself after the end of his riding career and his difficulty accepting that he, unlike an injured horse, be expected to live beyond his ability to ride:

> Brady: You know, I got hurt like Apollo did. But I'm a person so I got to live. If any animal around here got hurt like I did, they'd have to be put down. You know, Lilly, I believe God gives each of us a purpose.

> Lilly: Very true.
> Brady: To the horse, it's to run across the prairie. For a cowboy, it's to ride.

But despite his deep sense of abjection and his earlier failed attempt to salvage his sense of himself, Brady ultimately does walk away from rodeo and finds another way to salvage something of his life. Brady ultimately salvages himself by salvaging Lane, a process made possible by his salvage of the resources of rodeo, a reinterpretation of the only purpose he has seen for himself: *to ride*. Brady's friendship with Lane, born of competitive cowboy camaraderie, survives Lane's injury and disability, which predate Brady's own, because Brady sees Lane as worthy of life, rehabilitation, and love in his new state as much as in the old. Brady's appreciation and care for the disabled Lane had allowed him to attempt a transition from bronco rider to horse trainer, a change that remained incomplete since despite his apparent gift for communicating with and earning the trust of animals, his body will no longer tolerate this work. But after his success and eventual failure as a trainer, Brady refashions his rodeo experience, friendship with Lane, and horse training knowledge into an effective therapeutic tactic, an expression of care and healing for his friend through which he may ultimately save himself. In two scenes of intense tenderness and intimacy Brady and Lane use the motions and memories of riding horses to retrain Lane's body, sharing a bond through which they also redefine for Brady a subjective position that recognizes value in his own changed body as well.

Figure 5: Lane (left) and Brady reuse the physical and social remnants of rodeo as therapeutic resources in *The Rider*.

These, Mascaro's and Zhao's, are different visions of the possibility for decolonial cultural salvage afforded by the semiarid *sertão* and Western United States, though they have in common an interest in tracing and bending the defining contours of gender/sex expression, particularly those of masculinity. This results in some limitations for each project, even as it opens up certain important interpretative terrain. While the world of *Boi neon* allows for expressions of masculinity that embrace aspects of the conventionally feminine and expressions of femininity that embrace aspects of the conventionally masculine, the narrative space offers little room for more radically queer sexualities or expressions of sex and gender in other than binary terms, nor does the film appear to grant equal standing to women and men, as male perspectives and bodies predominate. Similarly, *The Rider*'s strongly homosocial setting, from which sexual desire itself appears to have been all but banished, suggests relatively little about possible interactions across the boundary of sex/gender difference, and perhaps just as little of possible redefinitions of femininity. These limitations may in turn be taken to indicate the filmmakers' sense of the most urgent loci for salvage and reinvention. If *Boi neon* reimagines social and sexual relations mainly within the bounds of cis-heterosexual identities and interactions, it may betray an assumption that social and sexual liberation must depend on a remaking of hegemonic categories and identities from the inside. But perhaps not only this, since Mascaro's film optimistically suggests that depatriarchal alternative systems of gender/sex relations are hardly even out of view, requiring only a slight specificity in our way of seeing in order to be glimpsed. Established signs here need suffer only a moderate change in their reception in order to be resignified. Hence, Galega waxes her pubic area in what viewers can easily expect at first to represent an enactment of and capitulation to male-imposed standards of attractiveness in femininity, but which can come to be seen as an act of sexual agency to facilitate her own pleasure when she seeks and receives oral sex from Júnior. Similarly, among the film's long and steady shots Mascaro and García display the nude male body – bathing, urinating – not as a controlling locus of agency acting on others, not as the primary, determining point of view, but as an object of visual contemplation, a thing observed by others. Directed, focused, and held far longer than conventional by Mascaro and García, our gaze takes in the male body as another body among bodies, the male person a human among other humans, the human an animal among other animals, flattening

familiar vertical taxonomies of socially defined power. If we but look to the margins, slowing down and seeing fully what is already there to be seen, *Boi neon* seems to claim, a great openness of anti-hierarchical possibilities awaits. The price paid for this conjecture, however, is the risk of suggesting that the emancipatory promise of the *sertão*—as a space in which bodies and their relations can be redefined—is or should be available only to conventionally attractive, cis-heterosexual subjects.

Zhao and *The Rider* are not so optimistic, but their resignifications perhaps more hard-won, in their effort to salvage rodeo protagonists for and from themselves. Thus we repeatedly watch Brady ride across the prairie, the striking scenery of the badlands all around him, sublime and austere, and cannot avoid comparing this rider to the familiar horsemen of national myth and mass-cinematic imagery. Brady rides across the treeless plain, not as a colonial hero defending order and property from threatening cattle rustlers or marauding "Indians," but as a member of the Oglala Lakota community training an abused horse and reviving his own ability to ride. The horseman on the plain recalls for us how the arid West can function as a metaphor for a combined colonial anxiety and desire, but this is not a generic Western and we are not watching Gary Cooper or John Wayne or Clint Eastwood. This rider is an indigenous subject, whose very presence on the screen and at the center of the cinematic narrative contests the hegemonic myth of the West as the space of white, masculine self-realization through domination, even as his appearance and actions decline to invoke the markers of a stereotypical "Indianness" demanded by the cultural dominant of coloniality. *The Rider*'s repeated imagery of the horseman riding on the prairie is therefore necessary not only as an expression of the character's desires, but as a citation of the normative masculine hero of Western cinema that must be repeatedly invoked in order to acknowledge its function in hegemonic discourse and then ask what decolonial salvage might be made of such signs. In the end, by relinquishing the inherited symbols of free, maximal masculinity – the unobstructed gallop across the open range, the wild ride on a bucking, unbroken bronco – Brady Blackburn rejects the demand to pursue glory in conquest and domination or their simulacra, and stakes instead a decolonial masculinity that seeks fulfillment and renewal in care and healing.

Figure 6: Canonical Western masculinity: John Wayne and fellow white gunmen heroically save white women and child from attacking Apaches in *Stagecoach*.

Figure 7: Brady riding Apollo in *The Rider*.

And yet this possibility is not just hard-won in symbolic terms, but also in painfully material ones. Though Brady Blackburn sets aside saddle and reins, taking his friend Lane's admonition not to give up on his dreams and daring to consider what it might mean *to ride* without riding horses, Brady Jandreau, who in Zhao's film portrays this version of himself, never did this (Gross). As Brady Blackburn struggles to face a life after horsemanship, we are watching Brady Jandreau continue to break and ride horses, having already received the same medical prognosis as his fictional double, thereby creating the image of an alternative option that is made possible only by his own refusal to take it.

In addition, the film's effort to reconfigure the signs of masculinity depends on a near complete banishment of women from the narrative. With the exception of Lilly, who occupies a unique position due both to her kinship bond with Brady and to her intellectual difference to the other characters, women appear here only as incidental, unnamed figures who lend support to Brady before disappearing: a social services worker (Helene Gaddie) who helps Brady get a job at a

supermarket and tells him that he reminds her of his late mother; the absent mother herself; a young woman, played by Jandreau's spouse Terri Dawn Jandreau, who hangs out with the cowboys in a bar and defends Brady when Tanner baits him about being reluctant to return to the rodeo; the physician (Amanda Reddy) who tells Brady that it is too dangerous for him to continue riding at all. This diminishment of the feminine strengthens the intensity of the film's focus on the homosocial subjective constraints within and against which Brady will struggle to redefine himself, but ultimately reinforces the centrality of masculinity, which may be restyled but ultimately not revolutionized as a normative dimension of embodiment.

But just as these films ask what salvage can be made of the semiotic resources of coloniality and its attendant cultural formations, and as they enact and embody this project of salvage through narratives in which self-realization is an act of repurposing, refashioning, and re-creation, they solicit a critical reading that is itself engaged with such a project of recovery and remaking. Within the limits of their scope, *Boi neon* and *The Rider* invoke the contingency and fragility of normative heterosexist subjectivities, even if they are unable to conjure a radical alternative to a society organized by such demands, and nevertheless open a space of ambiguity in the definition of bodily meaning and embodied relations, enacting this challenge to coloniality within symbolic realms rife with the resonance of colonial power. They thus invite a reception that asks what possible meanings they call forth, a decolonial mode of interpretation concerned with options rather than univocal truths. As Brazilian and U.S. cinema have been especially influential in representing these regions as sources of national authenticity, including the sexed subjectivities that the national-colonial project engenders, and as sites of special possibilities and crises distinct from those of the national political, cultural, and economic centers, *Boi neon* and *The Rider* attempt to salvage the semi-arid lands for decolonial imagining through the reappropriation of familiar figures already worn with hegemonic use. In so doing, they reinscribe the symbolically overloaded spaces of the *sertão* and the West as zones of potentially fruitful uncertainty in the heart of Brazil and the United States.

Works Cited

Alencar, José Martiniano de. *O sertanejo*. Edições de Ouro, 1973.

Almeida, José Américo de. *A bagaceira*. J. Olympio, 1974.

Bacurau. Directed by Kleber Mendonça Filho and Juliano Dornelles. Kino Lorber, 2019.

Boi Neon. Directed by Gabriel Mascaro, Kino Lorber, 2015.

Brant, Danielle and Gustavo Uribe. "Carla Zambelli reforça tropa de choque de Bolsonaro e fera atritos no Congresso." *Folha de São Paulo*, 3 May 2021.

Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* Routledge, 1993.

Bye bye Brasil. Directed by Carlos Diegues. New Yorker Video, 1979.

Central do Brasil. Directed by Walter Salles. Riofilme, 1998.

Clark, Walter Van Tilburg. *The Ox-Bow Incident*. The Press of the Readers Club, 1942.

"Cody Johnson, Reba McEntire Team Up For Powerful Duet Of "Dear Rodeo." Warner Music Nashville, 2 October 2020.

Cooper, James Fenimore. *The Prairie*. *The Works of James Fenimore Cooper*, vol. 5, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1907.

Cunha, Euclides da. *Os sertões: campanha de canudos*. Edited by Leopoldo M. Bernucci, Ateliê Editorial, 2009.

Deus e o diabo na terra do sol. Directed by Glauber Rocha. Copacabana Filmes, 1964.

Fergusson, Harvey. *Wolf Song*. U of Nebraska P, 1981.

Flores, Júlia. "Conheça as mulheres que enfrentam homens e bois em vaquejadas pelo Nordeste." *Universa,* 16 July 2021.

Ford, Elyssa. *Rodeo as Refuge, Rodeo as Rebellion: Gender, Race, and Identity in the American Rodeo*. UP of Kansas, 2020.

Gross, Terry. "A Devastating Fall Couldn't Keep This Rodeo 'Rider' Off Wild Horses." *Fresh Air*, 10 April 2018.

Handley, William R. *Marriage, Violence, and the Nation in the American Literary West*. Cambridge UP, 2002.

Heise, Tatiana Signorelli. *Remaking Brazil: Contested National Identities in Contemporary Brazilian Cinema*. U of Wales P, 2012.

Johnson, Randal and Robert Stam. "The Shape of Brazilian Film History." *Brazilian Cinema*, edited by Johnson and Stam, U of Texas P, 1982, pp. 15-51.

McCarthy, Cormac. *Blood Meridian, or, the Evening Redness in the West*. Random House, 1985.

Mignolo, Walter. *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*. Duke UP, 2011.

Nagib, Lúcia. *Brazil on Screen: Cinema Novo, New Cinema, Utopia*. I. B. Tauris, 2007.

Naimou, Angela. *Salvage Work: U.S. And Caribbean Literatures Amid the Debris of Legal Personhood*. Fordham UP, 2015.

No Country for Old Men. Directed by Ethan and Joel Coen. Miramax, 2007.

Quijano, Aníbal. "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America." *Nepantla*, vol. 1, no. 3, 2000, pp. 533–80.

Ramos, Graciliano. *Vidas secas*. Martins, 1968.

Ramos, Hugo de Carvalho. *Tropas e boiadas*. J. Olympio, 1965.

Rego, José Lins do. *Pedra bonita*. J. Olympio, 1938.

The Rider. Directed by Chloé Zhao. Sony Pictures Classics, 2017.

The Searchers. Directed by John Ford. Warner Bros. Pictures, 1956.

Smith, Murray. *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema*. Clarendon Press, 1995.

Stagecoach. Directed by John Ford. The Criterion Collection, 1939.

Stoler, Ann Laura. *Imperial Debris: On Ruins and Ruination*. Duke UP, 2013.

Turner, Frederick Jackson. *The Frontier in American History*. Holt, 1950.

Valente, Luiz Fernando. "Palmilhando a tradição alencariana: Um modelo intertextual de história literária." *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana*, vol. 20, no. 40, fall 1994, pp. 141–54.

Ventos de agosto. Directed by Gabriel Mascaro. Kino Lorber, 2014.

Vidas secas. Directed by Nelson Pereira dos Santos. New Yorker Video, 1963.

Wister, Owen. *The Virginian: A Horseman of the Plains*. Grosset & Dunlap, 1911.

Xavier, Ismael. "*Black God, White Devil*: The Representation of History." *Brazilian Cinema*, edited by Randal Johnson and Robert Stam, U of Texas P, 1982, 134–48.