

The Cowgirl's Desires in Conflict

A Reinterpretation of the Cowgirl's Role in *Rodeo* by Agnes de Mille

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I Introduction
II. De Mill's *Rodeo* (1942)
III. The Cowgirl and Wartime
IV. The Cowgirl's Role

V. Conclusion
Bibliography
국문초록

I. Introduction

On October 16th, 1942, at the Metropolitan Opera Theatre, the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo's performance of *Rodeo*, choreographed by Agnes de Mille, opened to outstanding reviews and found instant success. The plot of *Rodeo* is a classic Western romance that follows a heroine, the Cowgirl, “who dresses and acts like a man” and finally “puts on a skirt and gets her man.”¹⁾ Although de Mille first choreographed *Rodeo* for the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, it has remained in the repertory of the American Ballet Theatre for many years in the United States.²⁾ De Mille, in an interview with Dick Cavett, noted that the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, a dance company that moved to the United States during World War II, needed new American choreographers in order to attract more American audiences.³⁾ Developing a unique American style of dance, de Mille incorporated the spirit of wartime America into her dance choreography.

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- 1) The original script notes by Agnes de Mille describe every scene and action for *Rodeo*. I compared all the description in the notes to the video ‘*Rodeo*’ that I watched, and I did not find any differences between the two versions except casting.
- 2) The Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo could not continue to present *Rodeo* anymore in the 1950-51 seasons, because de Mille held back approval of casting, and it entered the repertory of Ballet Theatre in 1951. Leslie Norton(2007), Leslie, *Frederick Franklin: A Biography of the Ballet Star*(North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc, 2007), p.79
- 3) Agnes de Mille(1980), *Interview with Dick Cavett*, New York Public Library.

Most critics praised the exciting dancing as an excellent example of American ballet. John Martin, dance critic for the *New York Times*, applauded *Rodeo* as a dramatic expression of “authentic homespun Americana, translating the feeling of the folk and something of their art in to live stuff of the theatre.”⁴⁾ In *Dance Observer* magazine, George Beiswanger asserted *Rodeo*’s position as a genuine creation of American folk art: “De Mille’s work is a festival of Western folk dance ballet that is full of energy, humor and good fun and at the same time catches the lonely and tender and thrilling beauty of the Western range, and the American’s feeling for that beauty.”⁵⁾ It shows that the *Rodeo* was praised as American ballet. In terms of earlier Korean studies on Agnes de Mille, I found that there is a dearth of research published in a Korean journal regarding Agnes de Mille and her works⁶⁾ and thus this paper will provide important information for future research.

In this paper, I firstly examine Agnes de Mille’s 1942 production of *Rodeo* in the context of World War II; this historical approach will illuminate the importance of the critical reception to *Rodeo* as expressions of American nationalism. Secondly, using Judith Butler’s theories on gender performance, I will analyze the Cowgirl’s gender role as individual expressions of sexuality. Since the original 1942 version of *Rodeo* was lost, this analysis is based on a video of the 1976 production performed by the American Ballet Theatre at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts (NYPL-PA). In addition, this paper discusses de Mille’s script notes for the ballet dated June, 1942 at NYPL-PA and the program notes for Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo from 1947 to 1948.

II. De Mille’s *Rodeo* (1942)

Rodeo consists of two scenes. Scene 1 is Saturday Afternoon: The corral, Interlude Retrospect. Scene 2 is Ranch House: Saturday Night Dance.⁷⁾ De Mille’s script notes set the first scene: “A cowgirl standing alone in center stage. She wears pants, is tough and chews gum.”⁸⁾ In the video of the 1976 production, the Cowgirl tries - and fails - to mimic the cowboy’s movements, but the cowboys do not count her in their group. The other women in the scene walk in an exaggerated feminine manner and tease the Cowgirl, who is persistent in her efforts to jump high without falling

4) John Martin(October 19, 1942), ‘Rodeo’ Repeated by Ballet Russe, *New York Times*, p.14.

5) George Beiswanger (December, 1942), A Folk Dancer Sees “Rodeo”, *Dance Observer*, p.129.

6) I found only three studies published in Korean regarding Agnes de Mille: Bae, Gui Young(1985). A Study on Agnes de Mille. Ewha Womans University Master Thesis; Baek, So Yoon(1996), A Study on Choreographic inclination of Agnes de Mille. Sook Myung Women University Master Thesis; Shin, Kyung Sook(1997). Choreographic Characteristics in Agnes de Mille’s *Rodeo*. Hanyang University Master Thesis.

7) Fred Fehl(1947/48), *Rodeo* (De Mille), Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, Souvenir Program: 1947/48. New York Public Library.

8) Agnes de Mille, *Rodeo* Scripts, New York Public Library.

and make a lasso with her rope. In this version, the Cowgirl is neither accepted in the men's nor the women's groups. In second scene of the video, the Cowgirl appears wearing a dress, free from the loneliness and conflict of the earlier scene. The Head Wrangler - for whom she had yearned - and the Champion Roper fight over her. The Champion Roper wins with a tap dance. In the final scene, she is a "typical" woman or more "traditional" woman with the Champion Roper as her man. However, this typical romantic conclusion reveals the Cowgirl's character in conflict. Why did the Cowgirl wear a dress? What made her decide to look like the other women? Did she change so that she could get married? Does the Cowgirl represent de Mille herself? These and similar kinds of questions came to my mind, leading me to research de Mille's life and the historical background of that period.

In an interview with Harry Mannis, de Mille described how she moved to London to study at Marie Rambert's Ballet Club in 1933, after graduating from UCLA. With World War II looming, de Mille had to return to the United States at the end of 1938, due to her lack of budget. She started working for the Ballet Theatre (now called the American Ballet Theatre).⁹⁾ Before de Mille was asked to choreograph *Rodeo* for the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, it seems that she was in a state of insecurity about her life. She describes this moment in her autobiography, *Dance to the Piper*. "At night in the little personal hours I did the dreadful arithmetic. Youth gone. No husband. No child. No achievement in work."¹⁰⁾ Even though she was hired for the Ballet Theatre, she recalled that it was not a real position; for example, one of the scenarios that she sent to the company was returned immediately. De Mille seemed to have felt as if she could not affiliate herself anywhere: no men, no home, no works.

In the meantime, de Mille also had to face the difficulty that she had not been recognized as a professional ballet choreographer by the Ballet Russe Monte Carlo's dancers. Locking herself in her home for three days, she thought that "it would be horrible to get stuck with all those fancy Russians standing around."¹¹⁾ So, de Mille decided to expand on the *Rodeo* studies that she had worked on in England. However, during rehearsals, she had to confront additional obstacles. Frederick Franklin, who was in the original version of *Rodeo* as the Champion Roper, recalled in his interview with Mindy Aloff on June 6, 1980 that "Russians are lounging, looking at this lady and thinking, 'what on earth are we doing?' And, there was trouble... There was trouble... They all felt it shouldn't be. And she [de Mille] fought this."¹²⁾ Although *Rodeo* became de Mille's first significant work of American Ballet, she felt insecure and unstable because she did not belong to any family, any ballet company, and even any nation during wartime.

9) Agnes de Mille, Interview with Harry Mannis, New York Public Library.

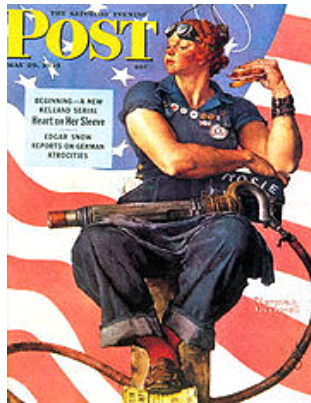
10) Agnes De Mille(1952), *Dance to the Piper*(New York: New York Review Books), p.265.

11) Ibid, p.267.

12) Frederick Franklin(June 6 1980), Interview with Mindy Aloff, New York Public Library.

III. The Cowgirl and Wartime

It is important when analyzing the Cowgirl's character to also examine "feminine" gender norms during wartime, as they seem inseparable. Putting the work in its historical context can help address some questions about it. For instance, what was de Mille attempting to represent through *Rodeo*? In the late 1930s and early 1940s, the Great Depression and the continued stresses of American's involvement in World War II brought about social and political disturbances to the traditional roles of male and female.¹³⁾ While men were fighting in the war for the United States, women were hired as replacements for positions that were normally occupied by men because they were thought to require "masculine" abilities and attitudes.¹⁴⁾ American wartime propaganda stressed the importance of women's role as citizens and assigned them significant public responsibilities.¹⁵⁾ The female icon, "Rosie the Riveter" as war propaganda rose to popularity, contributing to changes in ideologies of women's gender norms: women should retain their "femininity" even as they performed masculine duties during wartime.



<Picture 1> *Rosie the Riveter* Saturday Evening Post (May 29th,1943)¹⁶⁾

Sheridan Harvey, a Women's Studies specialist and a researcher at the Library of Congress, explains the impact of "Rosie the Riveter" and discusses real women's lives in World War II.¹⁷⁾

13) Anne Andrews Hindman(1972), *The Myth of the Western Frontier in American Dance and Drama: 1930 - 1943*, Ph. D. diss., University of Georgia, p.172.

14) Maureen Honey(1984), *Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender, and Propaganda during World War II*(The Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press), p.1.

15) Susan M. Hartmann(1982), *The Home Front and Beyond: American Women in the 1940s*(Boston: Twayne Publishers: Boston), p.21.

16) *Rosie the Riveter* Saturday Evening Post(May 29th,1943), cover featuring Rosie the Riveter, Drawing by Norman Rockwell. Photography by Dwight Primiano.. Retrieved from <www.rosietheriveter.org>.

17) Sheridan Harvey(2015), *Rosie the Riveter: Real Women Workers in World War II*, <<http://www.loc.gov/tr/program/journey/rosie.html>>.

Examining Rosie's real contributions to the nation's victory in the World War II, Harvey explains that Rosie's features in the Rockwell image (Picture 1) represents female gender norms during the 1940's: "Rosie's wearing overalls, men's clothes, and loafers. Rosie is powerful, competent, and womanly... She's masculine... Yet, she's feminine. She's wearing rouge and lipstick. Her compact and handkerchief peek out of her pocket... her curly red hair and upturned nose feminize her..."¹⁸⁾

This ideal masculine yet still feminine represented by the Rosie in the iconic picture resembles the Cowgirl in *Rodeo*. In the Cowgirl, de Mille created a sense of patriotism and nationalism with regard to female gender identity by promoting and idealizing the "masculinized" female character. For example, in the first scene of *Rodeo*, the Cowgirl wearing trousers, competes with men. In her dress, as well as her movements the Cowgirl is shown to be different from "other" women. For example, as she is depicted in pictures at NYPL-PA,¹⁹⁾ the Cowgirl looks strong and powerful, taking on typical men's gestures, such as outstretched arms and legs, riding, roping, clenching her fists, and jumping high. She does not plié or perform typical ballet hands or body positions. In the first scene of the ballet, the Cowgirl's role stands for the strong image of female identity and norms in 1940's America, yet breaks this tomboy persona with comic gestures - falling down, high kicks. In *No Intermissions*, a biography on de Mille's biography, Carol Easton writes that "The role of the Cowgirl, with its bravura exits and entrances, its off-balance turns and suspensions, requires a solid technique and, just as important, the comic timing and acting ability at which Agnes, who used her face as much as her feet, excelled..."²⁰⁾

In the second scene of *Rodeo*, however, the Cowgirl is not masculine anymore. She enters the stage wearing skirts and her movement becomes soft, elegant, and feminine. The change of the Cowgirl's character reflects de Mille's desire to belong in society. Easton quotes de Mille on the Cowgirl's prospects: "Without a man the Cowgirl can have no love, no children, no land, no home, no occupation, no reason for being. She will be wasted,"²¹⁾ revealing that in *Rodeo* de Mille emphasized women's role as dependent on men who are the heroes.

The Cowgirl is strong, competent, and independent when performing more masculine movements, but still retains a traditional woman's femininity. It is exactly the female identity that Rosie represents: masculinized features such as wearing trousers and exposing her muscled bicep, but still feminine in that there is the assumption that Rosie as a woman can work like or be like a man. Thus, the social conditions of the 1930s and early 1940s from de Mille's perspective may have affected the Cowgirl's

18) Sheridan Harvey(2010), <<http://www.loc.gov/tr/program/journey/rosie-transcript.html>>.

19) The pictures that I saw at NYPL-PA are with Agnes de Mille as the Cowgirl. I could not purchase duplications of any pictures from NYPL-PA, but was able to retrieve some of those pictures from the Internet.

20) Carol Easton(1996), *No Intermission: The life of Agnes de Mille*(Boston: Little, Brown), p.193.

21) *Ibid.*, p.188.

gendered identity in *Rodeo*. *Rodeo* turned out to be well-suited to the tastes and needs of its 1942 wartime audiences; the ballet also clearly shows the Cowgirl's conflict between patriotism shaped by national propaganda and her idiosyncratic female identity.

IV. The Cowgirl's Role

There are two different scholarly points of views with regard to the Cowgirl's role. Although scholars discuss *Rodeo* from multiple of perspectives, such as by illuminating de Mille's life, or by comparing *Rodeo* to other Western-themed ballets like *Billy the Kids*, etc., I would like to focus on their debates regarding the Cowgirl's roles: the Cowgirl who wants to be a man and the Cowgirl who is a feminist. Marcia B. Siegel argues in her book, *The Shapes of Changes*, that *Rodeo* should have been denounced by women's liberationists, asserting that "the heroine doesn't want to be a woman-- God knows, the women in her community are simpering fools-- but she shares their one ambition in life, to get that man."²²) Siegel's point of view on the Cowgirl's role is negative, arguing that by becoming a woman the Cowgirl's role reinforces conventional ideas about romance and courtship. I agree with her position to a point, but if the heroine does not want to be a woman, what gender is she before becoming a woman? Is the Cowgirl a man? If the Cowgirl was thought to be a man, the heroine does not really want to be a woman. Considering that the Cowgirl was like de Mille (Siegel also mentions this), however, the Cowgirl might want to be a woman, but expresses herself and her gender in her own way through costumes, movements, and attitude.

On the other hand, Sally Banes argues in her book, *Dancing Women: Female Bodies on Stages*, that the Cowgirl retains "her idiosyncratic character" and "'Rodeo's narrative is one of negotiated - not surrendered - female identity."²³) Insisting that *Rodeo* showed the Cowgirl's masculine movement and feminine strength in an image of female community, Banes writes that it "takes on feminist significance."²⁴) It is assumed that the Cowgirl shows her idiosyncratic character, but that does not directly link to her female identity. Although the Cowgirl's masculinized movements such as roping, riding, and kicking high in the first scene represent the feminine strength and identity, the Cowgirl finally chooses to be a typical woman as the Champion Roper's girl and lets him kiss her. Here, I found the controversial Cowgirl's character mirrors the conflicts that de Mille also faced, which were her desires for belonging with men, work, and society.

But why did De Mille change the Cowgirl's character from boyish to girlish, making her wear a

22) Marcia B. Siegel(1985), *The Shapes of Change*(Berkeley: University of California Press), p.128.

23) Sally Banes(1998), *Dancing Women: Female Bodies on Stages*(New York, London: Routledge, 1998), p.186.

24) Ibid., p.188.

dress? And what if the Cowgirl did not put on a dress, could she not get a man? It is also meaningful to retrospectively reinterpret the gender identity transformation in *Rodeo* through the lens of contemporary gender theory. Based on Judith Butler's theory of gender performance, the Cowgirl's role and character can be explained as "performative" acts. Butler's ideas illuminate gender identity beyond the two binary perspectives on the Cowgirl. Butler argues that gender is constituted through acts that one is compelled to repeat in order to achieve a desired, wished for, and idealized reality. Thus, gender acts and expressions become a made-up, fabricated performance, not a real or essential gender identity: "Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are 'performative' in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means."²⁵) In the first scene, if the Cowgirl's masculinized acts that were repeatedly shown are considered to be imposed by society as social control in wartime, the attributes of gender identity that the Cowgirl shows are "performative." The gendered bodies that both Rosie and the Cowgirl intentionally try to reveal are "fabrications" constructed through "corporeal signs," such as Rosie's muscles and the Cowgirl's roping and riding movements.

The following pictures (Pictures 2 and 3) reveal that the Cowgirl's different styles of movement are from the first and the second scenes of *Rodeo* – De Mille performed as the Cowgirl in the first picture. In the first scene (Picture 2), the Cowgirl looks like a man, wearing pants and lifting her straight leg high, as if she were fully controlling her body in a commanding atmosphere. In the ballet, she tries roping, riding, and jumping repeatedly. The Cowgirl's gendered acts cannot be explained by a simple word such as her "unique" gender identity, but should be described as stylized and "performative." What I see here is the Cowgirl's discontinuity, conflict, groundless acts that seems to limit her freedom. Butler states: "Consider gender, for instance, as a corporeal style, an 'act,' as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where 'performative' suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning."²⁶)

Yet, how does the Cowgirl overcome her conflict and fabricated gender identity? By discarding her trousers and putting on a dress, the Cowgirl breaks all of the fabrications of identity manufactured by social norm. In the second scene (Picture 3), she is shown smiling and looks happy with her man, the Roper. Holding her waist, the Roper lifts the Cowgirl high while she shows her arched back and bent knees. It looks as though, she is completely leaning on him. She is portrayed as "feminine" by being held and supported by a man. The *Rodeo* program notes (1947/48) of the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo states that the theme of the ballet deals with "the problem that has confronted every American woman ... and which has never eased to occupy them throughout the history of the building of our country:

25) Judith Butler(1990), *Gender Trouble*(New York; London: Routledge), p.185.

26) *Ibid.*, p.190.

how to get a suitable man.”²⁷⁾ The Cowgirl made her choice, following her inner desire. Similar to what is stated in this program note, it seems that de Mille also wanted to meet her own man.²⁸⁾



<Picture 2>²⁹⁾



<Picture 3>³⁰⁾

V. Conclusion

The Cowgirl’s conflict in *Rodeo* may mirror conflicts in our lives. What if the Cowgirl were not to change her character, costumes or anything, what would happen next? What about the Cowgirl’s role in the 21st century? *Rodeo* and the Cowgirl show the possibility for gender to be reshaped in many ways. In other words, the Cowgirl’s conflict represents contingent, rather than abiding, gender roles. Thus, as Butler writes “a fluidity of identities that suggests an openness to resignification and recontextualization,” so it would be significant costumed by social norm and recontextualize of gender identity.³¹⁾ I found that de Mille focuses on the Cowgirl’s inner conflict and desire to belong to someone and shows the fluidity of gender identity. Despite the female gendered images and “performative” acts shaped by national propaganda during wartime, the Cowgirl finally finds her own way to express herself through her personal freedom.

27) Fred Fehl(1947/48).

28) About the time when she was making *Rodeo*, de Mille met her husband, Walter Foy Prude, introduced to her by Martha Graham, and married him in 1943.

29) In the first scene of *Rodeo*, Agnes de Mille as the cowgirl, Photograph by Maurice Seymour.

This picture is located in the article, ‘America’s Irreplaceable Dance Treasures: the First 100’ posted at the Dance Heritage Coalition website, 1942, <<http://www.danceheritage.org/images/demille.jpg>>.

30) In the second scene of *Rodeo*, Erica Cornejo as the Cowgirl and David Hallberg as the Champion Roper in Agnes de Mille's *Rodeo* performed by the American Ballet Theatre (ABT), Photograph by Marty Sohl. This picture is located in the ABT website, 2005,

<http://www.abt.org/images/db_images/news/WEBrodeocornhallmsBRIGHT.jpg>.

31) Judith Butler(1990), p.188.

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논문투고일 2016. 11. 15.
심사일 2016. 11. 28.
심사완료일 2016. 12. 8.

갈등 속 카우걸의 갈망

- 아그네스 드밀의 작품 로데오에 나타난 카우걸 역할에 관한 재해석 -

박 정 선

중앙대 · 한성대 강사

본 논문은 아그네스 드밀의 로데오 안에 담겨진 카우걸의 고민과 갈등을 드밀의 안무노트와 프레더릭의 인터뷰내용 등 역사적 자료를 다양한 각도로 사용하여 재조명 한다. 또한, 주디스 버틀러의 성정체성 이론을 기반으로 카우걸의 모습을 분석한다. 제2차 세계대전 이후 당대에 사회 프로파간다로 여성의 강한 이미지를 부각하고자 하는 시대적 배경이 카우걸의 탄생을 가져왔다. 또한, 버틀러의 '수행성'이론, 즉 성과 성역할은 고정된 개념이 아닌 유동적이며, 수행적인 의미를 지닌 것이라는 관점에서의 카우걸의 갈등은 다양한 방법으로 재해석 될 수 있는 가능성을 시사한다. 다시 말해, 카우걸의 갈등은 지속된 성정체성이 아니라 오히려 임시적이었음을 나타낸다. 정체성의 유동성은 재의미화 그리고 재맥락화의 문을 열어두고 있음을 시사한다.

키워드: 아그네스 드밀 (Agnes de Mille), 로데오 (Rodeo), 카우걸 (The Cow girl), 성정체성 (Sexual identity), 주디스 버틀러 (Judith Butler)