

## *Introduction*

ON JUNE 11, 2013, ELEVEN-YEAR-OLD MARIACHI STAR Sebastien de la Cruz—best known for his performance on *America's Got Talent*—sang the U.S. national anthem at San Antonio's AT&T Center, setting the Internet on fire. Introduced by his moniker "El Charro de Oro," de la Cruz opened Game Three of the NBA Finals by belting out a moving rendition of "The Star-Spangled Banner."<sup>1</sup> The *Daily Dot* applauded his superb performance and impressive vocal range: "The kid was dynamic. He was [as] theatrical as it gets. He hit all the high notes. He stayed long on the low notes."<sup>2</sup> But others took to Twitter to express outrage at a Mexican American boy singing the U.S. national anthem, calling him a "wetback," "beaner," and "illegal" with the hashtags #yournotamerican and #gohome.<sup>3</sup>

The tweeters were especially incensed by de la Cruz's outfit: a perfectly pressed, light blue *traje de charro*. Most recognizable as the suit worn by mariachi musicians, the *traje de charro* references a broad set of cultural forms associated with *lo ranchero*—Mexican ranch life and ranch culture.<sup>4</sup> Among these are the *charro*, a term sometimes translated as "Mexican cowboy," though the *charro* is better understood as a gentleman horseman associated with Mexico's elite. He is also a deeply nationalist figure. Ranchero cultural forms, including the *charro*, have signified *lo mexicano* (Mexicanness) since the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution (1910–20); *charrería* (the art and sport of charros) is now Mexico's national sport, and the *charreada* (Mexican rodeo) is as popular with some Mexican audiences as soccer.<sup>5</sup> Yet the *charro* also has evidentiary claims to be the "original cowboy"—the skilled horseman who introduced ranching and rodeo to the region that became the U.S. Southwest. The nativist tweeters intuited the Mexican nationalist history in de la Cruz's *charro* suit, even if they didn't know the specifics, and rejected

the implication that U.S. ranching and rodeo might owe a great deal to Mexicans. One person tweeted: “Is this the American National Anthem or the Mexican Hat Dance? Get this lil kid out of here,” while another wrote: “Why was the kid singing the national anthem wearing a mariachi band outfit? We ain’t Mexican.”<sup>6</sup>

The tweeters may not have considered the collective “we” they invoked to be Mexican, but neither did de la Cruz, who told a reporter, “I’m not from Mexico, I’m from San Antonio born and raised, a true San Antonio Spurs fan.”<sup>7</sup> Like countless ethnic Mexicans in the United States since at least the 1930s, de la Cruz viewed the charro and lo ranchero as powerful means to express his pride in being Mexican *and* his rights to occupy central spaces in American life; for him, there was no contradiction between these goals. Many reporters, politicians, and entertainers shared de la Cruz’s view of the charro and its symbolic potential for Mexican Americans. San Antonio mayor Julian Castro, U.S. president Barack Obama, and actor Eva Longoria all rallied to de la Cruz’s defense, appealing for a multicultural America where a brown-skinned boy wearing a charro suit could sing the U.S. national anthem with pride.<sup>8</sup>

Clearly, the public debate over de la Cruz’s traje de charro was about far more than sports or patriotism. Rather, it invoked an ongoing struggle over the relationships between race, masculinity, and national identity in the United States, particularly in the U.S. Southwest and U.S.-Mexico border region. This struggle has taken shape through contests over the meanings of the American cowboy and the Mexican charro—two iconic forms of masculinity derived from the multicultural ranching societies of the Americas but now firmly associated with the nationalist projects of their respective states. For nearly a century, ethnic Mexicans in the United States have navigated between these two racial and nationalist formations in flexible but strategic ways. Drawing on the figure of the charro—symbol of Mexican identity *and* a distinguished horseman with claims to be the “original cowboy”—they have expressed their attachment to Mexican culture while claiming rights and opportunity in the United States.

This book documents their visions, hopes, and struggles. I focus on the many ways in which ethnic Mexicans in the United States have mobilized the charro in the service of civil rights, cultural citizenship, and place-making since the 1930s. Traversing a range of cities with distinctive histories, geographies, cultures, and social structures, I show how ethnic Mexicans have used the figure of the charro to nurture their cultural heritage, to resist subjugation,

tion and challenge inequality, and to transform the landscapes and institutions of the places in which they live. The charros' work across these domains has inevitably required them to engage—and sometimes challenge—the presumed whiteness and U.S. nationalism of the American cowboy. Thus, the book considers how U.S. charros have transformed core narratives of American history and identity centered on the cowboy, rodeo, and ranching in order to create more inclusive and equitable conditions.

Although the history of charrería within Mexico is well documented (indeed, romanticized), few have studied its meaning or practice in the United States. This book seeks to fill that silence, by offering the first history of charros in the United States. Those studies of U.S.-based charros that do exist were conducted in the 1990s and early 2000s by anthropologists Kathleen Mullen Sands and Olga Nájera-Ramírez; their ethnographic accounts explain the contemporary expression of charrería, its internal dynamics, and its importance to participants.<sup>9</sup> Building on this important work, *Charros* contributes a historical and cultural geography of charros and charrería in the U.S. Southwest. Taking the long view, I show that charros have been ubiquitous in Mexican American communities since at least the 1930s, and that they have consistently galvanized ethnic Mexicans' pursuit of equity, inclusion, and belonging. Indeed, the charro has been as important to Mexican American history, culture, and politics as his better-known counterparts, the bracero, the pachuco, and the Chicano activist. At the same time, U.S. charros have played key roles in transforming the Mexican nationalist formation of charrería from abroad. They have sustained vibrant transnational cultural linkages amid the waxing and waning of U.S.-Mexico geopolitics, and they have infused migrant sensibilities into Mexican nationalist culture. Working at multiple scales, then, charros have been crucial agents in the simultaneous coproduction of U.S., Mexican, southwestern, and border cultures.

The main protagonists in this story are members of the U.S.-based charro associations. These are formal organizations of ten to twenty men, often from the same extended family or place of origin, who ride, practice, and compete together in the regional, national, and transnational circuits of Mexican rodeo. The first U.S. charro associations formed in Texas and California in the 1940s, just after World War II, and facilitated ethnic Mexicans' engagement with institutions that had proved key to their racial subjugation since U.S. conquest, namely law enforcement and the capitalist economy. Many other charro associations formed in the 1970s, at the height of the Chicano movement and Mexican Americans' struggles for land and dignity,

when the charro guided ethnic Mexicans' work to create more responsive and multicultural public institutions. Still more charro associations were established in the 1990s, in the aftermath of the North American Free Trade Agreement and the tremendous migration it unleashed. In the face of discursive constructions of "illegality" and corresponding racial violence, charrería since the 1990s has cohered Mexican migrants with Mexican Americans in affirming their cultural heritage and galvanizing political action. Yet the charro associations have never had a monopoly on the meaning or political utility of the charro, who circulates in popular culture and politics as much as in the *lienzo* (the distinctive keyhole-shaped arena used for charreadas). Thus, while centering the leadership of the charro associations in remapping race and national identity, this book also traces the efforts of public figures such as elected officials, school principals, county sheriffs, business owners, and artists, all of whom have used the charro for a wide range of political, economic, and cultural purposes.

The charro associations and their supporters represent a particular perspective on ethnic Mexican empowerment in the United States—one that is middle class, masculine, and aligned with Spanish-Mexican histories of colonialism and aspirations to whiteness. The charros' initiatives reflect their position at the intersection of these social identities. Much of their work, as we shall see, has focused on securing ethnic Mexican men's access to institutions from which they were historically excluded, such as law enforcement and business, and to public space and the agencies governing its use. Charros have lobbied for inclusion in these spheres by invoking their patriarchal control of family, community, and ethnic identity and by forging masculine networks that transcend ethnicity, race, and citizenship in order to access the privileges of middle-class status and whiteness. Still, even those groups that are relatively subjugated within charro culture—women, workers, and indigenous peoples—have sometimes used the charro and other rancharo practices to claim greater power. Women, in particular, have mobilized the charro to create more inclusive public institutions, especially in areas related to social reproduction, such as education. Women have also found in charro culture the expansion of personal opportunities for marriage, family formation, competition, and travel. While ethnic Mexicans' relationship to nation and colonialism in the U.S. Southwest is complex, charrería has been attractive to many ethnic Mexican women because, as Elleke Boehmer explains, the concept of the nation "remains a place from which to resist the multiple ways in which colonialism distorts and disfigures a people's history."<sup>10</sup>

Incorporating these diverse figures and their work into the fold of Mexican American history requires a capacious sense of politics—one that exceeds a focus on electoral politics, grassroots organizing, or direct action and that transcends neat divisions between liberal and conservative agendas. Until very recently, most members of the charro associations have not been involved in formal politics. However, they *have* nurtured meaningful partnerships with well-known politicians, business owners, and cultural producers, both ethnically Mexican and not, and from across the political spectrum. Using strategies of collaboration and persuasion rather than protest or direct action, they have mostly labored to transform U.S. institutions and spaces from within. As a result, charros often lurk in the background—both literally and symbolically—of the most important struggles for inclusion, equality, and justice that ethnic Mexicans have waged for nearly a century. Many of their goals and accomplishments have corresponded with those of better-known and more explicitly political Mexican American and Chicano organizations, from the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) in the 1940s and '50s to the immigrant rights movement of today. Though quieter and less obviously politicized, their work has been equally important in enabling ethnic Mexicans to claim citizenship, belonging, and rights.

The charro has proven an enduring and transcendent figure for a simple but compelling reason: as a representation of skilled masculinity, economic autonomy, and landownership, he allows ethnic Mexicans to resist the core processes through which they have been racially subjugated in the United States. The U.S. military conquest of Mexican land, people, and culture that began in the 1830s unleashed processes of displacement, migration, proletarianization, and barriozation that are still very much in motion, sustained in the present through neoliberal trade arrangements, processes of “illegalization,” and racial violence. In the face of these contentious histories and contested geographies, the charro promises power: power over land, over the conditions and fruits of one’s labor, over the ability to bind family and community, over the meaning of ethnic and cultural identity. As we shall see in the chapters to come, that power has not always been actualized, nor has it come without struggle even when the outcomes are successful. Nonetheless, for many ethnic Mexicans, identification with and organizing around the charro galvanizes hope for a more autonomous, dignified, and equitable future. It is that sense of hope—and the collective action it guides—that I trace in this book.

The remainder of this introduction proceeds in three parts. First, it documents the social history of ranching in colonial Mexico and its spread north

into the region that would become, after 1848, the U.S. Southwest. Generated through the interactions among wealthy hacendados and working-class, often indigenous vaqueros (ranch workers), the ranching culture of the Americas became even more complex when it migrated north, where Anglo-Americans, African Americans, and indigenous peoples of the North joined the mix. The introduction then explains how, in the early twentieth century, amid industrialization, urbanization, and the rise of the modern nation-state, elite men and the mass culture industries in both the U.S. and Mexico abstracted the working horseman from his hybrid, multicultural origins and constructed the cowboy and the charro as racially and nationally distinct cultural icons. Finally, it gives an overview of how ethnic Mexicans in the United States have strategically mobilized charros and charrería since the 1930s, detailing the scope of the chapters to come and the methods and sources used for the analysis. Following this introduction is a photographic interlude that describes the spaces, rituals, and competitive events of the charreada, which adapts the historical conditions of ranching to the urban sporting context.

#### A SOCIAL HISTORY OF RANCHING IN MEXICO AND THE UNITED STATES

The charro's origin story begins in the sixteenth century with the Spanish import of horses, as well as riding equipment and techniques adapted from the Moors, to the Americas as a deliberate strategy of colonization. The high costs of equine transport as well as frequent illness and death en route meant that the breeding of horses and cattle within the colonies became a top priority. Colonists established vast and profitable cattle ranches on the Caribbean islands and Mexico's central plateau. In 1549, Viceroy Luís de Velasco ordered that cattle ranching be moved north, to spread Spain's economic and "civilizing" missions to what were then the far-flung colonial frontiers of Jalisco, Aguascalientes, Querétaro, and Guanajuato—a region known as the Bajío. The ranchers who took up this charge, typically creoles born in New Spain, fashioned a group identity and political consciousness as resourceful, rugged, and rebellious subjects; they tended to oppose and resent the Spanish colonial elite's concentration of wealth and power in Mexico City. Despite their sense of marginalization, they benefited substantially from the domestic labor of women who ran the vast households of the hacienda, as well as the



The United States and Mexico, featuring important locations for the development of charrería. By Jennifer Tran and Alexander Tarr.

coerced labor of indigenous and mestizo (mixed-race) vaqueros.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, it was the vaqueros who developed most of the materials and techniques that made large-scale cattle ranching possible. Denied the luxury goods that the hacendados enjoyed, they invented or adapted what they needed for their craft. These included magüey rope, which was woven of local fibers; intricate roping techniques, now called fancy or trick roping; and the use of leather chaps to protect the workers' legs.<sup>12</sup>

These materials and techniques were shared and ritualized among hacendados, workers, and visitors during the annual rodeos (round-ups) in which cattle were gathered and branded. At the rodeos, hacendados and vaqueros engaged in practices such as the *cola*, or grabbing the tail of a bull or steer and twisting it under the rider's boot or around the saddle horn to flip the animal to the ground; *piales*, which involves roping a running horse around the back legs to slow it down and bring it to a standstill without injury; and *ternas*, or team roping techniques used to down cattle for branding. The rodeos also included other events that had little to do with the work of the ranch but showcased riders' skill and bravery, such as bull and bronc riding, sliding stops, bullfighting, and roping displays. These were social occasions, too, featuring food, entertainment, and music as well as opportunities for courtship that were rare in the sparsely settled, isolated ranching society of colonial Mexico. Collectively, these techniques, materials, and social rituals constitute the prehistories of charrería—the art, sport, and culture of charros.<sup>13</sup>

Although the early rodeos served pragmatic and social purposes, they were also essential opportunities for the performance of masculinity and for the negotiation (and sometimes transgression) of the class and ethnic fissures that characterized Spanish colonial society. Nájera-Ramírez explains that for the wealthy sons of the hacendado, the charreada was an important occasion to prove they were worthy inheritors of their father's land and business, while for the laboring vaqueros, the events were a chance to show they were just as skillful as their social superiors. For these reasons, "charreadas were a means by which men of any social class might prove themselves to be worthy charros and thus greatly enhance their status as real men."<sup>14</sup> This sense of masculine unity across class differences rested on men's shared patriarchal status over women. According to Spanish law, a father made most decisions for his daughters until his death or until they married, at which point their husbands assumed control. The hacendado was expected and assumed to rule and protect his wife and children, just as men of lower social status ruled over women and children within and below their rank.<sup>15</sup>



The world of the rodeos/charreadas did not exist on the far northern frontier of New Spain—the area that would become the U.S. Southwest—in any meaningful way until the early nineteenth century, on the eve of Mexican independence.<sup>16</sup> Although Spanish settlers brought horses, cattle, and other livestock on their colonial expeditions to the North, the region's sparse population, near-constant warfare with powerful American Indian nations, the monopoly on land held by the Franciscan missions, and extremely limited access to material goods stalled the development of an elite hacienda society.<sup>17</sup> During the 1820s and especially the 1830s, however, the newly independent Mexican government made extensive land grants to both Mexicans and foreigners on the condition they attract settlers and make capital improvements. The Mexican government also liberalized trade and immigration policies, which enriched access to material goods among settlers of the far northern frontier, and permitted mestizos to hold political office for the first time. The net impact of these changes was the creation of a newly propertied, politically empowered class of Mexican landowners in the North who formed the core of an emergent but tenuous hacienda society by the 1830s.<sup>18</sup>

Hacendados and vaqueros, later grouped uneasily under the name “charros,” created a culture in the Mexican North that was similar, though not identical, to that which existed in central-western Mexico. Like their counterparts farther south, the newly empowered hacendados of el Norte depended almost totally on the labor of women, indigenous, and mestizo workers, insisting on their superiority as gente de razón (people of reason). Also like their southern counterparts, they created a world marked by leisure and lavishness—not as extensive as their counterparts in the Bajío, to be sure, but definitively so relative to the vaqueros with whom they were co-creating a distinctly norteña version of Mexican ranching and charro culture. The hacendados or charros of the North consumed and flaunted luxury goods such as clothing, imported furniture, and ornately tooled saddles. They constructed and maintained elaborate ranch homes with the red tile roofs, archways, and ornate woodwork that would later be associated with the Mission Revival and Spanish Colonial Revival architectural styles. They also hosted elaborate fandangos and festivals, including rodeos, that sustained a sense of community and kinship among the region's emerging elite class.<sup>19</sup> Through their cultural rituals and efforts to shape the physical landscape, they mimicked what they perceived as the more “authentic” ranching and charro cultures of central Mexico, even as they adapted to the distinct political, economic, and geographic conditions of the North. This core

tension, between the perceived authenticity of *charrería* in central Mexico and the heterogeneous *ranchero* practices of el Norte/the U.S. Southwest, has been an enduring feature of *charrería* ever since.

One key difference in the Mexican North was its intercultural nature, especially the presence and influence of well-capitalized Anglo-American men. Concerned more with local issues and private gain than with nationalist attachments, elite landowning men in the North formed families, engaged in business partnerships, and shared political power across ethnic and racial lines. Although the degree of collaboration differed from place to place, elite Mexican men and elite Anglo men were partners, if unevenly so, in shaping the region's social structure and ranching culture both before and after U.S. military conquest in 1848. They mingled together in the homes, ranchos, and plazas of the region's pueblos; they established business partnerships; they campaigned for elected office in roughly equal numbers; and they participated together in violent mobs that criminalized the region's indigenous and working-class inhabitants.<sup>20</sup> Laborers, too, joined together in crafting a transnational, working-class ranch culture of significant hybridity. When white and Black American cowboys sought work on the long cattle drives from Texas after the end of the U.S. Civil War, they adopted the style, equipment, language, and ranching practices that mestizo and indigenous vaqueros had been using in Texas and Mexico for decades. It was also common for ethnic Mexicans to compete in events organized by white promoters, and for Anglo-American and African American cowboys to cross the newly delineated border line to participate in bullfights and rodeo-style contests in Mexico.<sup>21</sup>

The interculturalism of the nineteenth-century U.S. Southwest generally, and of ranching culture specifically, shifted dramatically with U.S. military conquest and the maturation of American capitalism. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, signed in 1848 to end the U.S. war with Mexico, ceded approximately half of Mexico's territory to the United States—the future states of California, New Mexico, Arizona, Texas, Utah, Nevada, and Colorado. The treaty gave the hundred thousand Mexicans living in the region the choice of relocating within Mexico's newly established borders or converting to U.S. citizenship; over 90 percent chose the latter. Though the treaty was supposed to protect the religious, linguistic, civil, and property rights of those who opted to stay in the new U.S. territories, it usually failed to do so. Much of the land previously held by the hacendado elite was systematically transferred to Anglo corporate ranchers and agriculturalists, who fenced their lands and restricted access to public waterways, ending the era

of the open range. Anglo ranchers also adopted scientific breeding methods and modern management techniques, deskilling ranch work and alienating the large pool of working-class, multi-ethnic cowboys and vaqueros.<sup>22</sup>

While U.S. conquest and the introduction of American corporate methods affected all cowboys and vaqueros to some degree, they did so in ways sharply delineated by race and citizenship. Native laborers, who had worked extensively in ranching and agriculture at the missions and the ranchos, were routinely subjugated by laws and vigilantes that criminalized their cultural and spatial practices in order to secure a cheap, captive labor force.<sup>23</sup> African American and ethnic Mexican laborers, who made up between one-quarter and one-third of the cowboy workforce, were also structurally subordinated within the industry. They held the lowest-status positions, were frequently paid less than their Anglo-American counterparts, had little chance for upward mobility, and faced significant interpersonal hostility and institutional discrimination.<sup>24</sup> Ethnic Mexicans experienced these processes in direct relationship to the military conquest and territorial dispossession that increasingly structured their racialization in the United States. As the nineteenth century wore on, Mexicans of all class backgrounds, including many members of the elite class, were displaced from the land, concentrated in the region's rapidly expanding wage labor forces (especially in agriculture, construction, and manufacturing), and confined to urban barrios and agricultural colonias. These racialized spaces expanded still further when hundreds of thousands of Mexican nationals fled the violence and economic instability of the Mexican Revolution in the early twentieth century, seeking political peace as well as work in the Southwest's burgeoning economy.<sup>25</sup>

All of these changes signaled the modernization and economic maturation of the region, now rapidly urbanizing and industrializing, as well as the institutionalization of white American settler power and the growing rigidity of national borders. But they also created significant and widespread anxiety about the shifting relationships between race, masculinity, and national identity in the early twentieth century. During the Spanish and Mexican eras, elite Mexican men *and* elite American men in the U.S. Southwest had enjoyed shared social status through their paternalistic control of land, animals, workers, women, and children. After U.S. conquest, this form of patriarchy was replaced by a new conception of manhood defined by control of mobile capital and industry, ownership of private property, command of republican democracy and the instruments of republican citizenship, and adherence to Victorian gender and sexual ideals. Similar processes were

under way in Mexico as dictator Porfirio Díaz opened the Mexican economy, land base, and natural resources to foreign investment in the name of modernizing the country, a process that some postrevolutionary Mexican leaders tried to redirect, with only partial success. Elite and middle-class men in both the U.S. and Mexico struggled to perform the emerging masculine ideals of their respective states in these rapidly changing political-economic contexts. Their collective reaction, remarkably similar in both societies, was to seek a unifying masculine symbol of nationhood: the cowboy in the United States, the charro in Mexico. Along the way, each figure would become racialized and nationalized—the cowboy became “whitewashed” and the charro became “brownwashed”—in ways that elided the significantly more complex, pluralistic, and hybrid social history of ranching in both central-west Mexico and the U.S.-Mexico borderlands.

#### MAKING RACE AND NATION THROUGH RURAL HORSEMEN

Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, elites in both the U.S. and Mexico responded to profound social change with cultural and political initiatives that sanctified the premodern rural horseman as the foundation of emerging national narratives. The point was not to return to the agrarian world of the cowboy or the charro, but rather to celebrate him as part of the nation-state’s origin story, thus freeing the modern nation to chart a progressive course forward under the leadership of a conservative elite.<sup>26</sup> In both the U.S. and Mexico, these nationalist cultural projects corresponded with, and mollified resistance to, the hardening of economic and political inequalities along the lines of race and citizenship.

In the United States, the most prominent example of this phenomenon is Teddy Roosevelt’s self-fashioning as a “rough rider.” Criticized for being genteel and effeminate in his early career, Roosevelt remade himself as a cowboy to restore public perceptions of his manhood. This strategy carried him to election to the U.S. presidency and helped him win support for his foreign policy initiatives, especially those that brought new imperial possessions into the American fold.<sup>27</sup> Other elite American and European (especially British) men dressed in “Indian” clothing, coordinated “Indian” spiritual gatherings, and established exclusive hunting clubs throughout the American West as well as Australia, Canada, East Kenya, and other British colonies.<sup>28</sup> They also

sent their sons to ranch schools in the U.S. West that were, as Melissa Bingmann explains, meant to “inculcate individualism, bravery, strength, democracy, hard work, and fortitude . . . at the same time as they preserved boys’ status as the next generation of American leaders.”<sup>29</sup>

By the 1930s, the U.S. mass culture industries spread similar practices of “playing cowboys and Indians” to the working classes, among whom they were meant to inculcate modern notions of masculinity and citizenship through reference to—and implicit distancing from—a shared premodern past. Corporate organizations such as the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association (PRCA), which formed in 1936, promoted the idea that rodeo was an outgrowth of informal contests among Anglo—and *only* Anglo—cowboys on the Texas open range. In this way, the PRCA’s shows and institutional histories of rodeo differed markedly not only from the social history of ranching in Mexico and the U.S. Southwest, but also the Wild West Shows of the 1890s, which had featured charros, vaqueros, and other diverse characters in their casts.<sup>30</sup> The country western music industry likewise transformed the radical, ethnically inflected working-class politics of individual musicians into a collective celebration of conservative, and increasingly suburban, whiteness.<sup>31</sup> The Western film industry, which reached its height from the 1930s through the 1950s, also depicted the cowboy as a white American figure while relegating Mexicans, African Americans, and indigenous characters to limited and stereotypical roles.<sup>32</sup> Collectively, these cultural products and practices mass-produced the idea that the cowboy was a working-class, white, and American male hero, obscuring the historic and ongoing participation of ethnic Mexicans, other Latinos, African Americans, and indigenous people in rodeo and ranching.<sup>33</sup>

At the same time, their Mexican counterparts were engaged in a remarkably similar process via their efforts to “brownwash” the charro. Mexican presidents and political elites from across the ideological spectrum had long called upon the charro’s symbolism to bolster their authority and forge national unity, but this agenda accelerated after the Mexican Revolution (1910–20) amid land reforms, the commercialization of agriculture, industrialization, and the mass migration that these structural changes unleashed.<sup>34</sup> In order to consolidate their power and legitimacy while subduing social tensions, the emergent Mexican state and the Mexican cultural elite created elaborate mythologies of the country’s haciendas and ranchos. Popular culture, such as *música ranchera* (ranch/country music) and *comedia ranchera* (ranch comedy, a cinematic genre similar to the American Western)

constructed Mexico's ranch life as a much simpler time and place, where traditional gender roles and family structures held sway and where diverse social classes lived peacefully together under the benevolent leadership of the patriarchal hacendado/charro. These cultural forms elevated the charro to a heroic and quintessentially Mexican national icon, while sweeping the tensions and inequalities of Mexican ranch life—past and present—under the rug.<sup>35</sup>

Meanwhile, elite men in Mexico's rapidly growing urban centers institutionalized the sporting culture of charrería in ways that commemorated the historic ranching activities of the creole hacendado elite while eliding the roles of vaqueros, women, and people of indigenous and African descent. In 1921, they established the first formal charro association in Guadalajara, Jalisco; others soon followed in Mexico City and elsewhere. In 1932, a coalition of these charro associations successfully lobbied for September 14 to be declared Mexico's "Day of the Charro," and in 1933, they established the Federación Mexicana de Charrería (FMCH) in Mexico City to regulate the sport's practice. Under its elite, urban leadership, the FMCH assumed an authoritative role in defining the structure and culture of charrería. It established measurements for the size and shape of the lienzo and formalized the nine official *suertes* (events) of the charreada, which can be seen in the photographic interlude following this introduction. The FMCH also developed guidelines for the number and use of the various *trajes de charro*, and passed a code of conduct mandating sobriety, personal dignity, commitment to brotherhood, religiosity, and loyalty to Mexico.<sup>36</sup>

Equally important, the FMCH's officers wrote and published "official" histories of charrería, many of which remain highly influential today. These texts emphasized charrería's evolution as a distinctly Mexican, not Spanish, cultural form and centered on the role of landowning Mexican men, rather than workers and women, in its making.<sup>37</sup> These same histories located the origins of the charro most decisively in Mexico City and the west-central states of Mexico, especially the Bajío—the states of Jalisco, Aguascalientes, Querétaro, and Guanajuato—and Michoacán; according to Ricardo Pérez Montfort, they "reduced the tremendous regional diversity of lo mexicano and emptied charro culture of any indigenous signs or traces of class conflict."<sup>38</sup> Reductionist narratives of Mexico's ranching history were linked to policy. Wealthy landowners opposed agrarian reform on the grounds that it threatened a treasured way of life that they claimed to protect, via their practice of charrería and other ranchero cultural forms. Collectively, the FMCH's codes, rules, and histories framed postrevolutionary Mexican manhood

around whiteness, social class privilege, and the geographies of central-western Mexico in ways that reproduced historic inequities of race, class, gender, and citizenship into the mid-twentieth century—much like the cowboy narratives and institutions then being created in the United States.

In both the United States and Mexico, then, the elevation of the cowboy and the charro to masculine nationalist icons proceeded in strikingly similar ways and toward similar ends. In both nations, the rural horseman channeled nostalgia for a premodern, patriarchal, and colonial past at a time of widening inequality and growing dissent, helping to unify diverse national populations through invocation of a supposedly shared cultural heritage. Though constructed as distinct figures, however, the cowboy and the charro were produced in relationship to each other. Indeed, the parallel construction of each figure reflected and helped to define the prevailing cultural norms and values of each nation-state, as well as their unequal positions within the global political economy. Constructed as an individualized symbol of working-class, white, rugged manhood who guided the nation's divinely ordained western expansion, the cowboy was an emblem of the United States' position as a settler nation and American elites' growing control of territorial possessions and colonies—as well as Mexico's economy—in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The charro, on the other hand, helped cultivate attachment to Mexico after decades of war, conquest, and revolution, as its leaders struggled to define a modern economic and political system amid debt and corruption, as well as territorial loss and ongoing migration to the United States.

To this day, these historical, cultural, and geopolitical differences are fully apparent in the stylistic differences between the cowboy and the charro. Spectators and journalists who encounter the two cultural forms inevitably comment on their differences. Cowboys embrace a rugged, informal, and utilitarian aesthetic that communicates the cowboy's working-class symbolism and American emphasis on economic efficiency: they wear Wrangler jeans, plaid button-up shirts, and cowboy boots, with only a prized silver belt buckle for ornamentation. Charros, by contrast, wear formal and elegant *trajes de charro*, handcrafted *sombreros*, intricately tooled leather belts, and boots of the highest-quality calfskin, all of which are meant to signal their dignity, skill, and cultural pride. Individualism versus collectivism are powerful differences as well: U.S. rodeo cowboys mostly compete as individuals, whereas charros specialize in particular events but ride, practice, travel, and compete as members of teams. In addition, while U.S. rodeo cowboys tend



to be professionals who travel a competitive circuit in search of prize money, charros are amateurs who compete primarily for tradition, status, and pride. Aside from prizes such as saddles, belt buckles, or horse trailers (increasingly, with growing corporate sponsorship of events), winners of charro competitions do not receive money. The stylistic differences between the cowboy and the charro circulate in the spaces and events of the American-style rodeo and the Mexican charreada, as well, where the national, racial, and gender identities associated with both practices are performed and negotiated. As Kathleen Sands notes, “In rodeo, speed and strength are dominant values, reflecting the value Americans place on efficiency, practicality, endurance, and power. In charreada, style and precision dominate, reflecting the emphasis Mexican culture places on elegance, colorful embellishment, baroque richness, and mastery.”<sup>39</sup>

The cultural and stylistic differences between charrería and American-style rodeo matter greatly to charros in the United States, as they navigate their complex relationships to both nationalist formations and their associated logics of race, class, gender, and citizenship. For many ethnic Mexicans in the United States, the charro’s noble, dignified, communal, and prideful character facilitates subtle resistance to the histories of U.S. imperial expansion, economic dominance, and racial violence through which ethnic Mexicans have been persistently subjugated. This is a key reason why the charro has been such a popular figure among ethnic Mexicans in the United States for over a century. For them, the charro is at once the “original cowboy,” an elite form of patriarchal manhood, and a revered symbol of Mexican identity. As a composite of these multiple meanings, values, and potentials, the charro has cohered ethnic Mexicans in the United States in their collective resistance to conquest, displacement, and institutionalized racism.

## CHARROS AND CHARRERÍA IN THE UNITED STATES

Like diasporic subjects around the world, both past and present, ethnic Mexicans in the United States have drawn on the figure of the charro to address their distinct needs and experiences in the U.S. while simultaneously shaping the Mexican nationalist project of charrería from abroad.<sup>40</sup> Beginning in the 1880s but especially after the 1930s, ethnic Mexicans turned to the charro to demonstrate their loyalty to Mexico and their authenticity as Mexican cultural subjects in diaspora while also laboring to transform



their living conditions in the United States. In doing so, they challenged all-too-recent histories of dispossession, alienation, and subjugation and began the work of remapping race and national identity.

This project was, at first, concentrated among elite Mexicans and their descendants living in the U.S. Southwest, especially through late nineteenth-century literature that remembered and honored the world of the hacienda.<sup>41</sup> But such commemorations gained steam in the 1920s and '30s amid the tremendous transnational migration unleashed by the Mexican Revolution and subsequent efforts to rebuild postrevolutionary Mexico. During this period, Mexican elected officials, diplomats, businessmen, and filmmakers traveled extensively throughout the U.S. Southwest and sometimes beyond, to New York City and other influential urban centers on the eastern seaboard. As they traveled through the United States, these elite figures tried to cultivate both political and economic opportunities for themselves and loyalty to the nation among Mexicans living in diaspora.<sup>42</sup> Among them were officers of the newly organized Federación Mexicana de Charrería, who were not only charros but also businessmen and politicians.<sup>43</sup> Entertainers and performers such as Tito Guízar, Pedro Infante, Jorge Negrete, and Antonio Águilar, to name just a few of the more famous, also traveled extensively throughout the United States during the early and mid-twentieth century, infusing rancho cultural ideas and practices into American popular culture.<sup>44</sup>

The rancho nationalism that these Mexican figures promoted during their travels provided a framework within which working-class Mexicans in the U.S. Southwest negotiated the complexities of their daily lives. Across the U.S. Southwest during the 1920s and '30s, working-class Mexican migrants and Mexican Americans immersed themselves in charro- and rancho-themed mass culture. They sang along to the rancho songs that played on Spanish radio stations and watched comedias rancheras at Spanish-language theaters in San Antonio, El Paso, Tucson, Los Angeles, and other cities and towns. They dressed as charros and chinas poblanas (a traditional style of women's dress) for Cinco de Mayo and Mexican Independence Day parades, often sponsored by the Mexican consulates, that wound through the streets of the U.S. Southwest's growing Mexican barrios. The expanding class of ethnic organizations and mutual aid societies that served Mexican migrants and their communities also drew on rancho cultural forms. For example, they sponsored events at "Spanish"-themed locations like Olvera Street in Los Angeles or La Villita in San Antonio—many of which had been conceived, designed, and financed by the Anglo elite—where they encouraged Mexican

migrants to dress up as charros and dance the jarabe tapatío (often referred to as the “Mexican hat dance”).<sup>45</sup>

Ethnic Mexicans’ embrace of charros, charrería, and other rancharo cultural forms during this period complicates current scholarly understanding of the so-called Spanish fantasy past. The term was first coined by critic and journalist Carey McWilliams, who used it to describe the constellation of Anglo-American cultural projects that glorified the Spanish colonial era and justified indigenous genocide and Mexican dispossession in the U.S. Southwest.<sup>46</sup> The Spanish fantasy past took many forms, among them a relentless parade of “Spanish”-themed costume parties and pageants; preservation of the Spanish missions as well as Spanish Revival and Mission Revival architecture; and mission-themed school curricula. The Spanish fantasy past reached its heyday in the 1920s and ’30s, when it worked to boost local identity and attract tourists and settlers. Institutionalized in civic organizations and concretized in the physical landscape, it persists in the public culture of southwestern cities to this day.<sup>47</sup> Yet ethnic Mexicans’ attachment to the charro and other rancharo cultural forms from the 1930s onward should give us pause in dismissing the Spanish fantasy past as *only* an expression of white Americans’ imperialist nostalgia or modernist anxieties. Their use of the charro and associated rancharo forms, whether through moviegoing, fashion, parades, performances, or parties, allowed them to exercise cultural citizenship through the claiming of public space in ways that were otherwise often denied.<sup>48</sup> At a time when the U.S.-Mexico border was selectively but violently patrolled, and when pressures for Americanization were especially intense, ethnic Mexicans could work within the “Spanish” fantasy past to express their longings for Mexico and the pains of dislocation, migration, and racial subjugation. And they could do so in ways that were both supported by powerful Mexican institutions and palatable to Anglo-Americans, who may not have even recognized the Mexican nationalist impulses at work within the “Spanish” culture they valorized.

Amid widespread economic affluence, the ascendance of postwar liberalism, and the burgeoning Mexican American civil rights movement after World War II, the charro became a much more focused and intentional conduit for organized political and cultural activity. In this period, middle-class and upwardly mobile ethnic Mexican men—many of them now veterans, parents, homeowners, and business owners—went from watching charros on stage or screen to competing and performing as charros themselves. As they formed charro associations and rode and competed together, ethnic Mexican men used the symbolic power of the charro and the organizational structure

of the charro associations to pursue opportunity and inclusion in U.S. institutions. The chapters that follow consider a range of these initiatives, organized by time period, geography, and the kinds of institutions that U.S. charros targeted for change. The first four chapters explore charros' work at the local level as they labored to transform the institutions that had been key to their racial subjugation in those places, from state violence in Los Angeles to economic disenfranchisement in San Antonio to school segregation in Denver and suburban public space in Southern California. The final chapter then considers how U.S. charros have "scaled up" to the national level in recent years, becoming formal actors in the American political system as they respond to animal welfare concerns in the Mexican rodeo.

As will become apparent, the scope of the U.S. charros' work has been wide-ranging and diverse. The charro's flexibility as a symbol of dignity, autonomy, skill, and cultural pride has made him useful for a wide spectrum of social struggles, and the opportunities pursued by charros in one city have not necessarily made sense for their counterparts in another. Instead, their initiatives have generally responded to the local geographies of racial subjugation, as well as the unique opportunities born by the particularities of place. In exploring this geographic variability, this book aims to nurture the burgeoning field of Chicanx and Latinx geographies, which explores how the social production of space and place shapes Latinx identity, the location of Latinx people within structures of inequality, and the form and content of their resistance to the spatial conditions of their lives. With regard to this study, it is not only that the social world of the charro has been historically more complex than is often remembered, but that the spatial form of the hacienda and its chief protagonist, the charro, developed across the Spanish empire and postindependence Mexico, including the region that became the U.S. Southwest, in highly uneven ways. These differentiated geographies have affected not only *how* ethnic Mexicans since the 1930s have understood and mobilized the charro, but also whether the charro "sticks" at all as a meaningful way of knowing the land, forming collective consciousness, and advocating for change. The diversity and unevenness of these initiatives illustrates sociologist Wendy Wolford's contention that any social movement "is shaped by—and shapes—the way people internalize and engage with their specific material and symbolic spatial environments."<sup>49</sup> Put differently, the historic and ongoing production of space matters in terms of whether and how ethnic Mexicans find the charro to be meaningful, useful, or effective as an instrument of social change.

The charro emerged first as a unifying force for social change in California and Texas—places where elite hacienda culture developed most fully under Spanish and Mexican rule, where ethnic Mexicans retained significant power for a brief period after U.S. conquest, and where the largest numbers of Mexican migrants moved during and after the Mexican Revolution. For these reasons, ethnic Mexicans who mobilized the charro in these border states were able to achieve some significant political, economic, and spatial gains. The first two chapters document their efforts, looking at the establishment and early work of the first U.S. charro associations, founded in San Antonio and Los Angeles just after World War II. In Los Angeles, as chapter 1 shows, working-class charros from the East Los Angeles barrio negotiated an alliance with Eugene Biscailuz, the elite descendant of Spanish-Mexican Californios who headed the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department (LASD) from 1932 to 1958. This relationship allowed the East L.A. charros to join the LASD's mounted posse program and to serve as extras in *The Young Land* (1959), an important film about racial justice in California during the transition to U.S. settler rule. These activities enabled working-class and middle-class ethnic Mexican men to claim a limited form of state power at a time when the city's law enforcement agencies were otherwise targeting Mexicans for harassment and persecution. Meanwhile, in San Antonio, as chapter 2 explains, the city's tiny class of Mexican American businessmen formed a charro association that worked with a wide range of civic groups, in both South Texas and northern Mexico, to build the city's postwar tourist economy. Their focus on entrepreneurship and business networking gave them power over the shaping of San Antonio's culture and landscape in ways denied most other ethnic Mexican groups in South Texas at the time, though their initiatives primarily benefited middle-class men with a pro-capitalist outlook.

Beginning in the late 1960s and well through the 1980s, a period marked by the rise and demise of the Chicano movement, struggles for land, and pride in Mexican cultural heritage, charros and their associations operated in the service of ethnic Mexicans' efforts to integrate public institutions and public spaces. Buoyed by an increasingly influential cadre of Mexican American politicians, businessmen, and cultural producers, charros began making more direct claims upon American institutions and social spaces, frequently deploying the language of "original cowboys" to do so. In Colorado, as chapter 3 explains, ethnic Mexicans used the charro as a resource for bilingual education in Denver Public Schools, the integration of the Colorado State Fair in Pueblo, the expansion of Hispanic participation in