FOLKLORE FORUM

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“The North American Cowboy in Folklore and Literature”[1]
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Many books have been written comparing the North American cowboy and the Argentinean gaucho, for the existence of some similarities between these two figures cannot be denied. Those similarities deserve to be defined with greater precision than they usually are, and for that reason it is perhaps interesting to talk about the cowboy, what he is and what he used to be. Both the cowboy and the gaucho have been horsemen in an American environment. The cowboy can also be compared to another American horseman, the Mexican ranchero, since it was the ranchero who gave the cowboy the techniques, the tools, the lingo, and even the cattle and drove of horses that made him a cowboy. But he must be compared to the gaucho because the Argentinean pampas are clearly similar to the Great Plains of North America.

If we examine the early significance of the words cowboy and gaucho, we discover two very similar histories. In La Rioja, according to Julián Cáceres Freyre (1961), gaucho signifies “the roaming horseman who, as he lived at the margins of the law, is taken to be a highwayman or a troublemaker….This pejorative meaning is the one given him by the country people and, in particular, the old folk, since these days the young people, influenced by movies and the radio, refer to the gaucho in glowing and generous terms.” [2] And Carlos

Villafuerte (1961) tells us, in reference to the term gaucho, that, in Catamarca, "at certain times and depending on how it is said, it is contemptuous."[3] In the United States, everybody understands the word cowboy in a glowing sense, but there was a time when it had a definition that was very similar to the old meaning of gaucho.

The first cowboys that we know of appeared during the War of Independence against Great Britain (1775-1783). That war had the characteristics of a civil war since one-third of the North Americans remained loyal to the crown, launching a struggle between bands of partisans[4] within the colonies. These partisans behaved like bandits, taking advantage of the conflict to rob and commit all kinds of barbaric acts in the isolated settlements of what was then the North American frontier. There were neither extensive plains nor large consignments of cattle in the thirteen colonies; the colonist lived among the woodlands and subsisted through small-scale agriculture. But each colonialist had his small pack of oxen and dairy cows, which the partisans would flee with after burning the farm and killing its inhabitants. So famous were these fighters for being cattle thieves that they were given the name "cowboys," signifying "cow-robbers." The term was even more pejorative than gaucho since it didn't connote manliness but simply identified the cowboy as a thief. And just in case we might perceive some similarities between the cowboy of the eighteenth century and the gaucho of the partisan troops,[5] we should recall that this was no horseman; he was a man of the "long rifle," he crossed the forests on foot, and he fought hidden in the underbrush.

The Revolutionary War ended and we do not hear anything about the cowboy until 1836, in the brand-new Republic of Texas where the term is resuscitated during another bloody conflict of partisan fighters, this time between Mexicans and North Americans. At that time Texas consisted of what is today the central and eastern parts of the state. What is today West Texas was part of New Mexico, a region solely inhabited by nomadic Indians and wild fauna. Regarding what is today the south of Texas, it was a different story. This was the northern portion of the state of Tamaulipas – the historic Nuevo Santander – a large triangle of grasslands and scrubland between the Nueces River and the Río Bravo (or the Rio Grande, as it is known in the United States), where an enormous breeding ground of cattle and horses had developed. All of the settlements in this region were in the extreme south, along the banks of the Río Bravo. Between the Bravo and the Nueces (this latter one being the border with Texas) there were only isolated cattle camps and small ranches, and a large number of cattle and horses in a wild state that were looked after – or hunted – by the Tamaulipecos, who in reality lived the life of the Argentinean pampas, and, in addition to being Spanish Americans, were horsemen of the lance and the knife.

The Tamaulipecos were federalists and sympathized with the Texans in their fight against the centralist dictator Santa Anna. Following the example of Texas, they rose up in arms to form a "Republic of the Rio Grande." For four years (1836-1840) they found themselves involved in a civil war against the Santa Anna forces. The Republic of Texas during those years sent intermittent aid to the Tamaulipecos, this aid taking the

form of groups of Texan volunteers or adventurers who fought more or less on their own account and returned to Texas when they wanted to. When they did not find themselves fighting on the frontlines for the "Republic of the Rio Grande," the Texan adventurers made incursions against the Tamaulipan ranches in the region between the Nueces and the Bravo, carrying off groups of their allies' cattle. Public opinion in Texas was divided with respect to these cattle thieves; however, those who condemned and those who approved the theft of Tamaulipan cattle were in agreement in calling these rustlers "cowboys," applying the word from the eighteenth century to another time and setting where the same activity was taking place. And that's how the cowboy appears for the first time in what will later be the West of the United States.

The war between Mexico and the United States had as its pretext the region between the Nueces and the Bravo. With the victory in arms of the North Americans, this great breeding ground of native-born longhorn cattle became a part of Texas. These cattle would later be taken to all corners of the "Wild West" by the Texans, who by right of conquest became owners of the land, the cattle, and a good part of the Tamaulipecos' culture. The new owners founded their "cattle ranches," adopting the Mexican word for *estancia ganadera*,[6] and assumed the title of "rancher." He hired men to care for the cattle but did not call them "cowboys." If they were Mexican he called them *vaqueros*, as in Spanish, and if they were North Americans, he called them "hands" (that is, laborers) or "cowhands," words that correspond to vaquero. The terms "cowpoke" and "cowpuncher" were also used, both of which could be translated "herders of cattle." "Cowman" signified "cattle dealer," while in the decades of the seventies and eighties, the people who looked after cattle in the Northwest were called "buckaroos," a corruption of vaquero. I have been assured repeatedly by people raised on those Texas ranches that still in the first years of the twentieth century, the country folk did not use the word "cowboy." And even today those in the cattle business say "hand" when they refer to the real-life figure and "cowboy" for the fictitious character of the deadly revolver. Nobody, to my knowledge and understanding, has established how or when the cattle-robbing cowboy turned into the heroic protagonist in pursuit of the cattle rustler. Nevertheless, it is clear that such a change did occur in books but not among the country folk.

We see that both gaucho and cowboy had a pejorative meaning that was converted into a term of praise under the influence of books and movies. But these words have other meanings. The first one for gaucho, given to us by Francisco J. Santamaria (1942: 4), is the most universal: "m. and f. a resident of the Rioplatense pampa or native of that region." [7] We acknowledge it when we talk about the "folklore of the gaucho," "the literature of the gaucho," or the "gaucho's folklife." It is this meaning that is also given to the word when we try to compare the cowboy with the gaucho, and, unfortunately, this is the sense in which the cowboy least resembles the Argentinean gaucho. Because by defining the gaucho as a "resident of the pampa," we presume a complete way of life, a long tradition stretching over generations, a continuous, European-style adaptation to an American environment. The Argentinean, call him gaucho, prairie dweller, peasant, or what you will, fits into that category; the North American cowboy does not. First of all, the "Wild West" period lasted a scant quarter of a century, from 1866 to 1890. Secondly, the cowboy does not represent all of life in the North American

West, having filled only one job or occupation there. He is, like the Mexican vaquero, according to Santamaria (1942: 4), "a person whose job is to work…in the handling of cattle, that is, an employee of the cattle dealer, or one of his laborers."

Nor was the cattle ranch typical of the entire culture of the West. The large holdings or ranches were very rare, as the majority of North American "rancheros" possessed relatively small properties, and the open range lasted for a very short time. Many rancheros were also farmers. In its wildest period the "Wild West" was inhabited by a conglomerate of people: farmers, miners, shepherds and goat herders, mountain men or fur trappers, buffalo hunters, mule drivers, pioneers, and many others who had nothing to do with the raising of cattle but who were also horsemen and contributed to the traditions and the working culture[8] of the West. In the mountainous regions (and it is easy to forget that not all of the West was flatlands and that many traditions of the "Wild West" originated in the high country), the mountain men were followed by the miners, who lived alongside the cattleman and farmer who inhabited the valleys. In the Great Plains the cattleman followed in the footsteps of the buffalo hunter and the soldier who hunted Indians. And the cattleman followed very closely the farmer, who came to close in the land and put it into production. The cowboy of the "open country" spent his very brief life harassed from the front by the Indian and from the rearguard by the farmer – so rapid was the colonizing wave on the North American plains, once the Indian and the buffalo had disappeared. That is to say, there never was in the West, as in the Argentinean pampa, a period in which the prairie became populated with such a great number of cattle and droves of horses by which semi-nomadic North Americans lived. The concept of "open range" must be taken with some caution; its duration, upon whose weak foundation is raised all the "folklore" and literature of the cowboy, was no more than twenty-four years.

Immediately following the war with Mexico, the North Americans did very little to exploit the rich cattle stock in the territory between the Nueces and the Bravo. Cattle had a low price, serving only for the production of leather and lard. Cotton was what interested land speculators, and during the Civil War (1861-1865) almost all of the harvest of the Confederate States came from Texas. But the war ended in the triumph of the North, leaving the South completely devastated politically and economically. The men from Texas came home to an economy in ruins, in which silver currency had almost completely disappeared. Meanwhile, the North was experiencing a commercial and industrial boom; its cities grew enormously, increasing the demand for meat. A young longhorn bull could sell for $40 or $50 in the Kansas City slaughterhouses, and was purchased in South Texas for $3 or $4. The Texans quickly realized that cattle could be the fountain of gold and silver they were missing. The first large cattle drives departed in 1866 from Texas to the cities of the North using the most direct route, that is, to the northeast through the states of Arkansas and Missouri. But the Texans were ex-Confederate soldiers, while their route took them through regions populated by veterans of the Union army. These latter made use of ambushes to break up the cattle drives, firing at the cowhands. Some Texans were taken by these partisans and lynched.

The next year, in 1867, the Texas cattlemen decided to take routes that would leave almost directly for the north, crossing the Great Plains to arrive at Abilene, Kansas, the westernmost point that the railroads had reached at that time, even though on this route they had to face hostile[9] Indians. It was from 1867 and under these circumstances that Texas longhorn cattle came to the Great Plains, beginning in this way the "age of the cowboy." In a fifteen-year period more than five million head of cattle native to Texas were delivered to the Kansas markets.[10] In spite of the expense and labor for a journey of 1,500 miles with herds of a thousand or more animals, they made money, since a young bull delivered to a merchant in Kansas yielded ten or more times what it cost in Texas. And not all of the livestock being delivered to the North were bought fairly; the cattle drivers took everything that they "found" along the way, so that they deserved, in some instances, the name "cowboy" that they would later be given.

Although the Texas cattlemen exposed themselves to attacks by hostile Indians on the Great Plains in order to elude the partisans in Arkansas and Missouri, the situation was not as desperate as it might seem. From 1865, immediately following the end of the Civil War, the U.S. Army had initiated a campaign with the firm intention of "resolving the problem of the Indians" and to make the lands of the West accessible. The main reason for this military action could be found in the growing numbers of settlers who began to establish themselves on the Great Plains. These settlers were neither hunters nor cattlemen, but rather farmers, and their numbers, as much as their use of land, incited terrible reprisals from the Indians.[11] The army could not decisively defeat an enemy who always fled, and that is why it chose to destroy the multitudes of bison and buffalo that formed the basis of subsistence for the Indians. And so Buffalo Bill, the buffalo hunter, came on the scene, and the Indian surrendered and was put on reservations. The Great Plains were emptied and there were enterprising people who immediately founded ranches there. This opened another market for longhorn cattle that came from the Río Grande, as it was stock from Texas that populated these new ranches in the West. Moreover, the Indians on the reservations lived on meat purchased by the United States government, and that meat was supplied by the cattlemen of Texas. The boom lasted only a short time. The "opening" of the West was fast and efficient, which insured a quick conclusion. By 1890 the Indian was subdued, and at that point there was no longer a "frontier." Barbed wire, in use since 1874, had done away with free pasture; the railway crossed every state in the union and reached the Pacific Coast at several points, and the best land was being converted into farmland.

Even though the "era of the cowboy" had ended, he remained alive in the imagination of every North American. He had become legendary. Nevertheless, the folklorist can inquire: to what extent is the cowboy a figure of folklore, and to what extent does he derive from a fiction woven very knowingly by commercial interests? How much is tradition and how much simply popular entertainment? And even more, is it possible that a group of workers, no matter how romantic we find their occupation, can, in a short span of twenty-four years, produce something that merits the term folklore? The North American public does not doubt the existence of a large corpus of folklore produced by the cowboy. Movies, television, and popular literature have

lent their support to this belief. Some serious writers have done the same thing, including well-known folklorists. Let's examine what is commonly thought of as cowboy folklore, trying to find out if it's really that.

The literary folklore of the cowboy is allegedly in the tall tale, the boast, the folktale and legend, and most of all, in the ballad. "Tall tale" can be translated into Spanish as *mentira* ("lie") or *cuento andaluz* ("Andalusian story"), which shows us how universal is this genre. Nor can we say that the lies told by the cowboy are original to him, since all of them are told in other parts of the United States by groups not related to the cowboy. The best versions that have been collected come from the Ozark Mountains in Arkansas and Missouri.[12] Few variants of these tales of liars can be identified as cowboy stories by virtue of specific features they contain. In the North American tradition, the figure who embodied the artist in lies is a man of the forest, Davy Crockett the rifleman, belonging to a period a half-century before the cowboy. It is true that the public recognizes as a "folkloric" personage the fantasy cowboy called Pecos Bill. But Pecos Bill in no way belongs to folklore; he is a bad copy of Crockett, a journalistic creation of very recent times.

The same thing happens with the poetic boast that is said to be a genre typical of the cowboy. Just like the bravado of the "macho" Mexican, the North American bravado derives from the first stirrings of national sentiment, and in the United States has its origin not with the cowboy but with the woodsman, the prototype of the Jacksonian era, when national sentiment took shape in North America and the common man began to take part in the nation's politics. Both the tall tale and the boast originated in the United States with a man dressed in animal skins and armed with a long rifle. And once again it is Davy Crockett who symbolizes this genre. In these two expressive forms it turns out that the cowboy is not the one who initiates a tradition; on the contrary, he comes late to the game and adds very little to it.

J. Frank Dobie, dean of the Texan folklorists and well known as one of the sharpest chroniclers of the "Old West," has many times told his friends how it was that he, a cattleman turned literature professor, came to write books about the region. "My friend John Lomax had gathered the songs of the cowboy," recounts Dobie, "so I decided to do the same with his stories." We must go, then, to the various and excellent works of Dobie to judge the importance of the cowboyesque story[13] in the folklore of the United States. The works of Dobie, both his books and articles, can be divided into four general classifications.

The first, which we can represent with *The Flavor of Texas* (Dallas, 1936), deals with popular history. The works in this category are composed of materials that Dobie compiled from books about history, biography, and personal memory. Among them we find many semi-historical anecdotes that serve to make the reading pleasant. The second category, of which *A Vaquero of the Brush Country* (Boston, 1929) is a typical work, is composed of books and articles that describe life in the West in relatively recent times. The materials used are Dobie's memories and experiences and the remembrances of people older than himself, whom he interviewed. Here, also, there is much popular history from the point of view of the cowboy and others on the topic of ranch

life, as well as some anecdotes with universal themes.

In a third category, we can place books like *The Longhorns* (Boston, 1941), *The Voice of the Coyote* (Boston, 1949), and *The Mustangs* (Boston, 1952), dealing with the fauna of the West. As one can tell from the titles mentioned, Dobie has been mainly interested in the coyote, the native or longhorn cattle, and the herds of mustangs and alzadas of the West. The note that Dobie himself offers about *The Voice of the Coyote*, in his bibliography, *Guide to Life and Literature of the Southwest*, describes very well this category of his work: "Not only the coyote but his effect on the human imagination and ecological relationships. Natural history and folklore; many tales from factual trappers as well as from Mexican and Indian folk."[14] But we find little folklore of the cowboy and most of this material is not even folklore of the Anglo-Saxon North American. The books about cattle and horses are rather based on folklife related to the uses of these animals, even though they also contain semi-historical anecdotes. In books like these we do find some stories that are genuine legends.

It is in the works belonging to the fourth category that Dobie shows himself more clearly to be a collector of folklore; these are the ones that deal with legends of the Southwest, especially its hidden treasures. *Coronado's Children* (Dallas, 1930), perhaps the most beloved of Dobie's books, is characteristic of this class. Here Dobie presents to us the stories and legends that he collected on his horseback-riding fieldtrips in the north of Mexico and in the west of the United States. In addition to the stories of hidden treasure, ghost stories and other manifestations of the supernatural are included. The best stories of this kind are not even North American, having been collected among Mexican vaqueros, shepherds, and laborers. Those having Anglo origins arose from all kinds of people in the West.

Even the legends directly related to cattle ranching – let's say the stories about ghostly colts – were not told exclusively by cowboys, and when told by the cowboy, almost always have a certain false style, as if the goal were to create a bit of "color" or pull the leg of the tourist. Because in truth the cowboy told few legends and had very few superstitions with the exception of some beliefs related to his work. The thing is, the cowboy was a businessman: the opportunity to make money attracted him to the cattle industry. There were many liars among them but few dreamers. These oddities of the cowboy caused scholars who arrived at folklore through the cowboy to believe that folkloric beliefs did not exist in the Anglo-Saxon tradition of North America. It was thought that the influence of eighteenth-century ideas was such in the United States that it had put an end to beliefs from the Middle Ages. Vance Randolph, in his folklore collections from the Ozark Mountains, has shown that not only medical folklore and all kinds of superstitions, but also some vestiges of pagan fertility rites, still persist in North American rural traditions.[15] All of this, naturally, leaves out the cowboy, since it is clear that the cowboy did not yet form a group that could be labeled "folk."

But there remains the music, which can be considered the most characteristic contribution of the cowboy, a

notion that is supported by the great prestige of John Lomax, the most gifted collector of folklore the United States has produced, with the possible exception of his son and collaborator, Alan Lomax. There is no question that "cowboy music" has had an enormous influence on popular and even folkloric music, owing to the fame of the cowboy. Some songs associated with the cowboy have achieved a surprising popularity, like "Home on the Range," for example, a favorite of presidents and the object of a half-million-dollar lawsuit.[16] The cowboy's most important contribution, nonetheless, was to introduce the Spanish guitar into the folk and popular music of the United States. Before this, the guitar was a strange instrument in North America, found only in reception halls where it was played for the young ladies. The folk instrument comparable to the guitar was the banjo; it was played alone, or accompanying a song, or together with the violin at dances. It appears that the guitar was introduced into traditional music through Texas, where people began using it at dances in place of the banjo.[17] By the twentieth century it had become the preferred instrument of black folk singers such as Leadbelly and Blind Lemon, and it was as well an instrument of white people in the mountainous regions, in Hillbilly bands. It is believed that the cowboy received the guitar from the Mexican and spread it about on his trips up north. What is known for sure is that the guitar was taken to be "the instrument of the cowboy," and with that it created such fame that it took root in the culture of the United States — among folk singers, in jazz orchestras, and among "folk" groups of the "beatnik" variety that can be heard in any cabaret in the United States today.

As early as 1890 the first collection of "cowboy songs" was in existence, even though it did not appear in print until eighteen years later. Nathan Howard Thorp, like many other cowboy interpreters, had been born in the east of the United States. Having transformed himself into a cowboy, his interests led him to collect songs sung by his companions in Texas and New Mexico. He did this collecting in 1889 and 1890 and to do it he said he travelled 1,500 miles on horseback. He did not find anyone who would publish his book, which finally appeared in 1908 in a private edition. But by this date the greatest collector of folklore in the United States had already appeared.

John A. Lomax was not a newcomer from the east of the United States, for whom the Great West would be a romantic and unfamiliar place. Even though he had been born in the state of Mississippi, to the east of the big river, he was reared in Texas. But his home was a crop-growing farm and not a cattle ranch, and so his admiration for the cowboy had its elements of exoticism and exaggerated reverence. He came to his vocation as a collector of North American song by way of this admiration. Lomax was almost forty years old when he published his first collection, the fruit of what was already his life-long occupation. He had entered the University of Texas already a grown man, bringing along with him a bundle of songs in manuscript form, collected in his region of Texas. His professors advised him to burn all of those pages. From the University of Texas, Lomax went to Harvard where he met George Lyman Kittredge, at that time the most famous scholar not only in Shakespearian criticism but also in English balladry. In 1908, the year that Nathan Thorp published his obscure little book, Lomax returned to the West with Kittredge's approval to "collect everything that he

could find." Lomax interpreted this charge to gather the entire traditional narrative song corpus[18] of the cowboy. Two years later the first edition of *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* (New York, 1910) appeared.

This work was without doubt the main reason that we now see the cowboy as redoubtable singer of traditional song,[19] composing narrative songs about his heroes, taking part in song duels with his fellow troubadours, singing of his lovers in songs he himself made, accompanying himself with his faithful guitar. In order to understand this situation, we need to know something about the overall work of John A. Lomax, as well as the state of folklore studies in the United States in 1910. From the cowboy, Lomax moved on to the mountaineer, to the farmer, to the miner, to the convict; from the white to the black, to the Mexican American, to the French American. His collections enriched to an incalculable degree the Archives of North American Folk Song in the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., an institution founded in 1928 but one that did not fully develop until 1933, when Lomax was named its curator. Without a doubt, the first and the most important of collectors in the United States was John A. Lomax.

When *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* appeared, the North American public needed a traditional narrative song corpus of its own. In 1898 the North American scholar Francis James Child had finished his monumental collection of English and Scottish ballads. The great Kittredge, successor to Child, also studied the English ballad. It was then believed that the composition of folk song was a "closed account," and that no such thing existed in the United States. The American Folklore Society had been founded in 1888, but its members were mostly interested in the tales of American Indians. The great heritage of folkloric materials from European tradition in the southern mountains and other parts of the United States was not known. At the same time, nationalistic sentiment was coming to its peak and soon would reach the point of isolationism and xenophobia in the period after the First World War.[20] Naturally, the craving for a strong national identity gave rise to a wish to possess traditions that were exclusive. That's why, when *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* appeared in 1910, it was received with enthusiasm. Here was the true North American folklore; the cowboy was a copy of the warriors in the Castilian *romancero* and a descendent of the warriors on the old frontier between Scotland and England. The cowboy song was the "ballad" or traditional narrative song of the United States. That was the position of John A. Lomax, taken under the influence of his admiration for the cowboy and theories in vogue at the time about the communal origins of song. Lomax created a vision of the cowboy as a member of a homogeneous folk group even though his own experience could have given the lie to it. He believed that the songs he had collected were native to the United States and that cowboys had composed them, not individually but rather through acts of cooperative composition.[21]

If we pay close attention to *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*, we realize that Lomax's enthusiasm sometimes blinded his judgment, and that his methods are not always worthy of a scholar. In the first place, there are very few true ballads or songs with narrative elements. And we realize that the professors who

advised Lomax to consign his files to the flames were not entirely mistaken. Too many of the songs included have no merit whatsoever, neither artistic nor folkloric. Even though Lomax was later celebrated for his recordings of folkloric material – and long before they invented the tape recorder – this was not the method that he used to collect the material for his first book. Some of the songs were indeed recorded on cylinders. The majority were collected in manuscript, some of these directly from the informant. Lomax received many more by mail from all kinds of sources. He also took material from diaries, pamphlets, and books, and accepted poorly made verses that his acquaintances would send him; all in all, he was hospitable to anything that had rhyme and rhythm and that contained the word "cowboy." Hence, a good part of the material in *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* is the work of journalists and would-be poets and there is no evidence that it has been sung in either popular or traditional forms. Moreover, the songs that can truly be called traditional do not belong to the cowboy but rather to the common heritage of North American tradition, as we have already noted for other folklore genres.

It is the case that some have undergone significant change and can be considered typical variants of the cowboy. One of these is the famous "The Streets of Laredo," which belongs to a series of variations made in the United States based on an Irish song, "The Unfortunate Rake." In addition to relocating the action to Laredo, Texas, the cowboy version has as its protagonist a mortally wounded cowboy shot through his chest. In the Irish song, the dying man is a soldier and he dies from a disease he contracted from a prostitute. Nevertheless, "The Streets of Laredo" conserves most of the expressions found in its model, including some very military characteristics that don't coincide with cowboy life:

"Oh, beat the drum slowly and play the fife lowly,
And play the dead march as you carry me along."

Even more interesting is "Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie," whose model was an English song, "Bury Me Not in the Deep Blue Sea." Here the oceanic setting has been replaced by that of the Great Plains: the coyote, buffalo, cattle, the grass, the winds, and the solitary tomb. It is also notable that, even though clearly of English lineage, this song has a theme very similar to several songs of the Mexican cattleman, this being a theme that is universal among Spanish-speaking people:

Lo que pido a mi padre	What I ask of my father
que no me entierre en sagrado,	bury me not in sacred ground,
entiérreme en tierra bruta	bury me in unplowed ground
donde me trille el ganado.	where the cattle may trod on me.[22]

All the same, songs like these were sung in the cowboy repertoire, and consequently, we see that, despite Lomax's best efforts, there is not a considerable body of songs that could be identified as the cowboy

"romancero."

Is it the case that the North American cattleman did not have his own songs, created in his own environment, and with the seal of tradition? Indeed he did have them, songs of the same kind we would expect to find in any occupation, this being the niche where the cowboy has made his real contribution. We could identify, first, the song with no words, hummed songs or songs with nonsense syllables. During the long nights of the cattle drives from Texas to Kansas, when the cattle milled about instead of trying to get some rest, this kind of song served to sooth them and also to chase away the sleepiness of those who watched over them. Naturally, this genre is not exclusive to the cowboy, but with him it took on distinctive features by virtue of the role that it performed.

In a second category we can place the protest songs, in which the cowboy complained about his bosses, about the wages he received, about the food and the working conditions. This is also a universal genre, but the protest song of the cowboy stands apart due to its jocular character. The third group includes the true ballads of the cowboy, his narrative songs, almost all of them having to do with the cattle drives to Kansas. In a fourth category we could place a variety of jocular songs about the cowboy's occupation.

We will have to conclude that there is very little that can honestly be called "cowboy folklore," even if we can find individual folkloric acts that are typical of cowhands in the west of the United States. Nonetheless, those who admire the cowboy have led us to believe the opposite, especially with regard to song. It is for this reason that D.K. Wilgus says, in his work on the study of folksong in the United States, "Lomax's work…affected the pattern of American folksong study. It placed perhaps an undue emphasis upon occupational songs."[23] Let's recall that no branch of investigation can be considered systematic or scientific if the materials to be studied have not been identified and classified in a significant way. Lomax's prestige imposed on other folklorists a false norm, that of making the informant's occupation the primary classification of North American folkloric song, setting to one side the concepts of form, theme, and function. Variants of the very same song could be classified as completely distinct songs only because the protagonist's occupation changed.

The West has its own folklife, though it includes a number of groups in addition to cowhands. Still, we see how these other groups have little by little been identifying themselves with the cowboy of the movies and popular novels. Even the real-life cowboy dresses like the movie cowboy when he comes to the towns on Saturday night, such is the power of what has been called the "myth" of the cowboy. It might be going too far to say that the cowboy has been transformed into a myth, as a good many North American scholars assure us, including some folklorists. We would have to adopt a definition of "myth" that does not agree with what the folklorist understands by the term. But we could say that the cowboy has become legendary, and we would have to study him as legend and symbol to understand his extraordinary position in the United States. In the first place, why was the cowboy the chosen one for this role? Why not such a gallant figure as the mounted cavalryman, saber

in hand, charging at the fierce Indian? Or the buffalo hunter in his suede garb and his long locks of gold, the mountain man, the nomadic fur trapper, the prospector facing all kinds of dangers? Was it because the cowboy lived the free life of the vagabond? But the other ones mentioned lived even freer and more unfettered[24] lives. Or was it because the cowboy was a horseman? But so were the others.

We must confess that the apotheosis of the cowboy, at the point that he eclipsed figures more gallant than himself, was due in great part to commercial publicity. The cowboy from 1866 to 1890, as has already been noted, participated in a grand enterprise. All of a sudden the native breed of cattle became worth a lot of money, but in order to convert longhorn calves into dollars, they would also need dollars, since they had to purchase the cattle in Texas, pay salaries, and purchase equipment. Capital was sought out in the east of the United States, and to do that the cattleman's life was romanticized making use of the advertiser's arts. When they began to establish ranches on the Great Plains, the efforts of the "promoters" were doubled, now not only in newspaper articles but in books as well. Let's look only at the work of General James S. Brisbin, one among many, *The Beef Bonanza; Or How to Get Rich on the Plains* (Philadelphia, 1881), which, as its title tells us, sought to teach the reader how to acquire wealth through the cattle business on the Great Plains.

Unlike the Mexican ranchero or the Argentinean gaucho, the cowboy of those times had not been born into his occupation. He came from other parts and considered his job of caring for cows as an interlude in his life. He brought with him his own "iron" for branding with his mark any beast "without owner" that he found, and in that way could create his own capital, knowing full well that his own boss had done the same. Or maybe his ambitions were higher and he had money invested in the herd of cattle he was driving. In general he believed that his time as a cowhand would not last long, and at last he would end up owning his own ranch, farm, or shop in a nearby town. Many did not achieve that goal, naturally, and spent the rest of their lives as cowhands, but for the failures with literary pretentions there still remained the possibility of cowboy autobiography, which could bring greater compensation than a ranch or a shop. The cowboy author took advantage of the interest created artificially through publicity in order to sell his writings about his experiences, while at the same time increasing this publicity with his books. The typical genre of literature about the cowboy during his first stage was not the novel but the autobiography.[25]

The literature of the cowboy begins with these autobiographies, which are for the most part fictitious, flourishes in novels like *North of 36* by Emerson Hough (New York, 1923), and makes its real killing on the silver screen and in television. Until recently the novels and the cinema plots regarding the West did not rise above an almost infantile level. The chroniclers of the cowboy could never produce a *Martin Fierro* or a *Don Segundo Sombra*,[26] even though already by the beginning of World War II there were serious writers who took up this theme. Around that time, in 1930, *The Oxbow Incident* by Walter Van Tilbury Clark appeared, a psychological study of the consequences of a lynching of supposed cattle thieves. The publication of this novel was received with great critical acclaim, as it seemed like the Western novel had finally reached maturity.

What happened was a change in the style of cowboy literature, the result being the “Western for adults” that has emerged in the movies and in television as in the novels. This style combines violence and a devotion to realistic details with false and superficial outcomes that ignore the moral and intellectual consequences brought about by the actions of the characters.

Perhaps due to its simplistic themes, its tendency to see black as very black and white as very white, there are writers who have compared the “adult Western” to those allegorical dramas of the Middle Ages, which educated the community from a moral point of view, and they have applied to this genre terms such as “morality play” and “folk play,” showing how difficult it still is to separate the North American public from the idea that everything related to the cowboy is folkloric. Others have found in this form a sentiment of collective guilt on the part of North Americans towards Indians, Mexicans, and blacks, groups persecuted in the historical West and painted very favorably in the “adult Western.” This sense of guilt, naturally, could not be perceived in cowboy literature prior to 1940, whose main elements were a blonde protagonist and a dark-complexioned antagonist, a revolver in the hand of the protagonist and a knife in the hand of the antagonist, the duel in the middle of the road in which the protagonist behaves like a medieval knight. In this, its original form, the “legend” of the cowboy is a frankly nationalistic expression. And we should note that even in the “adult Western” the national point of view is sustained. Now it paints the Indian as a noble character, struggling against the wicked Anglos who seek to steal his lands. But when the story is over, the Indian is still dispossessed, and instead of the flavor of tragedy, we are left tasting the sugar, as the plundering whites end up being very good people after all.

There is no doubt that the need to justify the course taken by United States history wrestles with a sense of guilt in the “adult Western” of our current time. The cowboy does represent and has represented something fundamental in the life of the North American. Whatever the factors may be that made the cowboy more celebrated than the other men of the West – and commercial promotion was one of those factors – he has become a symbol of national identity, so much so that his influence has been felt not only at the popular level but at the folkloric as well.

In a recently published article, Robert W. DuBose, Jr., considers the cowboy as a national symbol. For DuBose the cowboy does represent to some degree a feeling of collective guilt, but also something more. The cowboy is the representative figure of the North American people in its notable deed of colonizing and civilizing the Great West. It was not all glory, for ”consciously, we think of our whole history, the movement west particularly, as everything good, innocent, and holy….But there are black pages.”[27] Still, the most important thing about the cowboy is his symbolic efficacy for “a people whose most significant history was westward movement.”[28] Here we find the most persuasive similarity between the gaucho and cowboy: they are symbols of two peoples, representatives of historical stages that were of vital importance for the development of a national character. That the gaucho represents perhaps more faithfully the historical events, and that

gaucho literature has firmer roots in tradition and thus has greater value, does not affect the comparison. Both the cowboy and the gaucho stand for something that instructs their peoples about their own identity.

[1] [Translator's note: This article was published in 1963 in *Cuadernos del Instituto Nacional de Antropología* (No. 3, pages 227-240), an academic journal based in Argentina's National Anthropology Institute in Buenos Aires. It was reprinted as no. 22 in the Institute of Latin American Studies Offprint Series, University of Texas, Austin. I wish to thank Pablo García for his helpful comments on this translation, while affirming that any errors in judgment are mine alone.]

[2] Julián Cáceres Freye, *Diccionario de regionalismos de la provincia de La Rioja* (Instituto Nacional de Investigaciones Folklóricas: Buenos Aires, 1961).

[3] Carlos Villafuerte, *Voces y costumbres de Catamarca* (Academia Argentina de Letras: Buenos Aires, 1961).

[4] [Translator's note: Paredes uses the term "guerrilleros" here and elsewhere in this article; since "guerrillas" doesn't have quite the right tone in English, I have used "partisans" or "partisan fighters" to render this term.]

[5] [Translator's note: Paredes here uses the term *montoneras*, signifying irregular mounted troops that fought in the civil wars of nineteenth-century Argentina.]

[6] [Translator's note: This is the term generally used in Argentina to signify "cattle ranches." Paredes is translating culture between Mexico and Argentina here and elsewhere in this article.]

[7] Francisco J. Santamaría, *Diccionario general de americanismos* (Editorial P. Robledo: México, 1942).

[8] [Translator's note: Paredes uses the term "ergología" here and elsewhere in this article; as this term is not well known to English readers, I have used the terms "working culture" and "folklife" to render it.]

[9] [Translator's note: Paredes uses here and elsewhere in this article the expression "indios salvajes." I have chosen to use the terms "hostile" and "fierce" to render "salvaje," to capture the semantic aspect I believe he intended.]

[10] Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains* (Ginn and Company: Boston, 1931), 216.

[11] We should note that the farmer arrived on the Great Plains before the cattleman and that the efforts of the army were primarily intended to benefit the farmer.

[12] See for example the work of Vance Randolph, especially *We Always Lie to Strangers: Tall Tales from the Ozarks* (Columbia University Press: New York, 1951).

[13] [Translator's note: This is "cuento cowboyesco" in the original.]

[14] J. Frank Dobie, *Guide to Life and Literature of the Southwest* (Southern Methodist University Press: Dallas, 1952), 167.

[15] See his *Ozark Superstitions* (Columbia University Press: New York, 1947).

[16] [Translator's note: The reference here is to a lawsuit initiated in 1934 concerning authorship of "Home on the Range," which caused the song to be taken off the airwaves for a few years.]

[17] It is possible that the Spanish guitar entered the United States through New Orleans by way of black musicians who had it from Spaniards and Creoles in Louisiana.

[18] [Translator's note: Here and elsewhere in this article Paredes uses the term "romancero," well-known to students of Spanish literature as the living ballad tradition that flourished in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Spain and was brought across the ocean to Spain's New World colonies, to take root and foster a new tradition, as in the case of the Mexican *corrido*, or elsewhere to persist as a trove of traditional ballads.]

[19] [Translator's note: Paredes in this paragraph uses the term "payador," which in the Southern Cone, and especially in Argentina and Chile, refers to traditional singers who sometimes engaged in improvised song contests with their rivals. I employ "singer of traditional song" and "troubadour" to render this term.]

[20] The extent to which North American isolationism was the manifestation of a desire for national identity can be seen in the fact that the object of the greatest expression of xenophobia was the old mother country, England.

[21] See the articles by Lomax in *Sewanee Review* XIX (1911), *Journal of American Folklore* 28 (1915), and many others.

[22] [Translator's note: This is my translation of the Spanish verse.]

[23] D.K. Wilgus, *Anglo-American Folksong Scholarship Since 1898* (Rutgers University Press: New Brunswick, N.J., 1959), pp. 79-80.

[24] [Translator's note: Paredes uses the term "salvaje" here, which I render as "unfettered" to capture the idea I believe he had in mind.]

[25] One of the first autobiographies was the one by Charles Siringo, *A Texas Cowboy, or Fifteen Years on the Hurricane Deck of a Spanish Cow Pony* (New York, 1885). Siringo, son of Italian and Irish immigrants, started out in the densely populated East, and was a "detective" in the service of the big cattle operations rather than a cowboy.

[26] [Translator's note: These are two classics of Argentine literature, both presenting a literary interpretation of the gaucho lifestyle.]

[27] Robert W. DuBose, Jr., "Updating the Cowboy," *Southern Folklore Quarterly* XXXVI (1972), p. 193.

[28]Ibid., 197.

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