

## Barksdale Award Proposal

### A View from the Saddle: An Exploration of the Uruguayan Gaucho and the American Cowboy

Joseph Bell

Soy gaucho, y entiéndalo como mi lengua lo esplica:  
Para mí la tierra es chica y pudiera ser mayor;  
Ni la víbora me pica ni quema mi frente el sol.<sup>1</sup>

I am a gaucho, and take this from me as my tongue explains it to you:  
for me the earth is a small place and could be bigger yet --  
the snake does not bite me nor the sun burn my brow.

The horses' hooves pound a rhythmic cadence as we streak across the landscape as one. The wind rushes over my hat as I lean forward expressing my desire to move faster, to feel more free, and to embrace the beauty of all that surrounds me. Horseback riding in the Sierra Nevada Mountains whetted my appetite for adventure and since then I have sought new and challenging experiences that open my world.

I am intrigued and inspired by the independent and somewhat tragic lives of the North American cowboy and the Uruguayan gaucho. These two entities, although separated by an almost hemispheric landmass, have long suffered from the same cultural, economic, and legal marginalization. I propose a cultural ethnography as a participant-observer over the course of two 4-6 week stays on a Uruguayan estancia and a North American ranch in order to observe the lives of the gaucho and the cowboy.

Before the middle of the 19th century the gaucho played an important role in the culture of the Pampas region (Argentina and Uruguay) and the development and expansion of the frontier economy. Due to systematic marginalization under the Sarmiento regime the gaucho disappeared as a social group by the end of the 19th century because of the negative attitudes created by the dichotomy between the urban, civilized and rural, barbarian, populations.<sup>2</sup> The subjugation of the gauchos was perpetuated throughout the 19th century, until the gaucho was resurrected as a symbol of national pride and solidarity in the beginning of the 20th century. Although vanquished as a man, the gaucho was transformed into the essential quality of the region and a mythical symbol of national virtue and political power.

The transformation of the gaucho has many parallels to that of cowboys who were subjugated through land reform, but were eventually made the symbol of American independence, self-reliance, and virtue. The evolution of the gaucho and the cowboy provides an essential framework for an ethnographic study that will not only allow me to see the daily life and routine of the gaucho and cowboy, but also to capture the feelings, emotions, and aspirations

---

<sup>1</sup> Hernández, José. *El Gaucho Martín Fierro*. N.p.: n.p., 1872. Print.

<sup>2</sup> Slatta, Richard W. *Gauchos and the Vanishing Frontier*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska, 1992. Print.

that are so rarely portrayed in the traditional historical narrative.<sup>3</sup> By observing the lives of the gauchos and cowboys I will be able to understand something of their respective heritage within the man to myth framework and also record the changes that are overtaking rural Uruguay and the American West.

Utilizing the methodology of participant-observer I will be a part of the daily activities of the gauchos and the cowboys and seek to examine the world from their perspective as an active member of the community. I have contacted the Institutional Review Board (IRB) regarding this preliminary research proposal and I am prepared to complete the necessary process before my departure. I will complement my research as a participant-observer with photographs, an essential part of many ethnographic field studies, of the lives of gauchos and cowboys. This additional component will allow me to gain a more complete and full picture of the lives of the cowboy and gaucho and would support the presentation of my research and experiences upon return. The study would follow an emergent design that would seek to discover categories of experiences and daily activities such as ranch labor, local business, and community interaction. The framework of man becoming national myth and the effects of modernization would support the emergent design.

I plan to begin my research in June of 2015 with a 4-week stay in Colorado or California. This will provide me with the opportunity to conduct the first section of my experiential research. Immediately after I intend to travel to Uruguay in order to begin my academic semester. Following my first semester, I will travel to a rural part of Uruguay to spend between 4-6 weeks (December-January of 2015-2016) on an estancia conducting the same research.

A portion of my early adulthood was filled with western horseback riding and horse camping, which not only provides me with valuable experience but also spurs me forward to seek new and challenging adventures. I have studied intensive Spanish while at the University of Mississippi and prior to embarking upon my research I will have accomplished an additional semester of high-level Spanish courses in Uruguay and a semester long homestay with a local family. These will be essential building blocks in preparing me for my adventure and research experience living on an estancia and a ranch in the American West.

This year I have taken two research methods courses through the Public Policy program (PPL 210) and the International Studies program (INST 381) both of which have provided a foundation for quantitative and qualitative analysis. My public policy course has inspired my interest in ethnographic field studies. Upon my return from Uruguay I would plan on continuing this research, in the form of my thesis, in an empirical manner in order to complement the qualitative research. I think by pursuing both a qualitative and quantitative approach I will be able to understand the effects on gauchos and cowboys of labor policy, agricultural policy, and the globalization of food systems in Latin America and the United States.

---

<sup>3</sup> Creswell, John W. *Research Design, 4th Ed. Research Foundations*. S.I.: Sage Publications, 2013. Print.

I am confident that I will be able to execute this research and experience successfully given my commitment to creating cross-cultural connections, the inspiration I draw from learning new things, and an honest desire for adventure and challenge in my life. I have long sought out adventure and learning opportunities through extensive backpacking and canoeing trips. If presented with The Barksdale Award I will be able to pursue my passion for people and the natural environment. My research will provide an experience requiring growth and learning as I build connections and seek to understand the constantly evolving, yet deeply rooted, culture of the South American gaucho and the North American cowboy.