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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Representation of Cowboy Myth in Spanish American Literature: Reaffirming Regional Identity

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| ABSTRACT

Spanish American literature vividly depicts various cowboy archetypes, each illustrating distinct cultural identities and regional traits. This article explores the portrayals of cowboys—gauchos in Argentina, llaneros in Colombia and Venezuela, vaqueros and charros in Mexico, huasos in Chile, and morochucos in Peru—across notable literary works. The gaucho, illustrated in José Hernández's Martin Fierro and Ricardo Güiraldes's Don Segundo Sombra, transitions from a figure of hardship to a celebrated symbol of Argentine identity. Colombian and Venezuelan literature, as seen in José Eustasio Rivera's The Vortex and Rómulo Gallegos's Doña Bárbara, contrasts the traditional llanero lifestyle with the encroaching forces of modernization and exploitation. Mexican texts, including Juan Rulfo's Pedro Páramo and various charro narratives, showcase the integration of cowboy culture into Mexican national identity and resistance. In Chilean literature, huasos embody rural life and national character as depicted in Pablo Neruda's Canto General. Peruvian morochucos, featured in José María Arguedas's Deep Rivers, reflect Andean heritage. These literary portrayals underscore the significant impact of indigenous and mestizo cultures on regional identities, portraying cowboy figures as symbols of resistance, cultural pride, and regional uniqueness amidst colonial and post-colonial shifts.

| KEYWORDS

Gaucho, llanero, vaquero, charro, huaso, morochuco

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background of Spanish American Literature

Spanish American countries share significant similarities with Spain, predominantly speaking Spanish and boasting a rich literary tradition dating from the era of Spanish colonization to the present. Initially, Europeans, primarily Spanish, pioneered the New World's cultural and literary landscape (Spiller, 1970). The four-hundred-year history of Spanish American literature reveals a diverse range of contributors: European-born scholars, friars, conquistadors, soldiers, colonial administrators, missionaries, educated nuns, exiled Jesuits, indigenous peoples who adopted Spanish as a second language, advocates for political and cultural independence, and later, professional writers. Much of the literature before Spanish American Independence focused on history and practical aims. European writings often justified their rule over the New World, while indigenous writings aimed to counter that domination. One of the attempts to explain the white man's rule in the new land was to stereotype the cultural heritage of the Indigenous people, and different kinds of cowboy stories were written to serve this purpose. Later, the same cowboy archetypal characters, such as Gaucho, Llanero, Vaquero, Charro, Huaso, and Morochuco, were portrayed in

Spanish American literature by Indigenous and Mestizo authors to reaffirm their distinct culture and identity across the Spanish Americas.

The term "Spanish" refers to the descendants of Spaniards who immigrated to the Americas during the colonial period (1492–1824) and those who permanently settled in South America following Latin American independence. It signifies a population that shares a culture and language rooted in Spain. In addition to "Spanish America," several other terms are commonly used interchangeably, including "Latin America," "Ibero-America," and "South America." "Latin America" encompasses the vast territory south of the United States, divided into two main language-speaking groups: Spanish and Portuguese. These languages, derived from Latin, characterize the regions of South America, Central America, Mexico, and the Caribbean Islands. The term "Ibero-America" refers specifically to all former colonies of Iberia—Spain and Portugal. Throughout this essay, terms such as Latin, Ibero, South, and Hispanic will recur interchangeably; however, the primary focus will be on the concept of "Spanish America." This essay will explore the representation of cowboys in Spanish American fiction, particularly in works by indigenous and mestizo writers.

Four geographical features characterize South American identity: the Amazon rainforest, the Amazon River and its tributaries, the Andes Mountain range, and the vast grasslands. These grasslands are distributed in four ecoregions – Paramos, Puna, Pampas, and Campos. The vast grasslands are highly suitable for grazing, so these grasslands in the Americas allowed local people to ranch cattle, and the tradition of cattle ranching shaped the lifestyle and identity of the local people for thousands of years. In the words of S. Griswold Morley, "... cattle raising is conditioned necessarily by the geography of the land" (1946, p. 253). Historically, the expansive plains hosted vast herds of cattle, leading to the rise of cattle ranching as a dominant economic activity on the continent. The arrival of the Europeans introduced horses to the continent, and horse riding and cattle herding became integral to each other. César R. Tores explains the relation between herding and cattle raising:

> The Spanish colonizers brought the first horses to South America, which prompted the evolution of a rich equestrian culture that eventually became central to the life of the gauchos in Argentina, the gaúchos in Brazil, the huasos in Chile, the llaneros in Venezuela and Colombia, the chalanes in Peru, and the morochucos in Bolivia. These groups developed amazing degrees of horsemanship and put them to use not only in the necessities of rural tasks but also in a variety of games, contests, and diversions. (2009, p. 556)

The South American grasslands have a rich cultural history intertwined with a character known as the cowboy, who is known, as Tores explains above, by different names in different countries. They are known as gauchos in Argentina, llaneros in Venezuela, huasos in Chile and Bolivia, charros and vaqueros in Mexico, and morochucos in Peru. These figures have been portrayed from romanticized perspectives to reassert regional identity.

2. Literature Review

The Spanish language once competed with English, and much of the literature written in Spanish in South America remained largely unknown to the English-speaking world until the second half of the 20th century. It gained significant attention in English-language scholarship following the Spanish American Boom of the 1960s, when authors such as Gabriel García Márquez, Julio Cortázar, Mario Vargas Llosa, and Carlos Fuentes achieved international acclaim. Other factors, including the Cuban Revolution, leftist movements, military coups, the rise of postcolonial studies, the influence of comparative literature curricula in U.S. universities, and advancements in translation studies, brought Spanish American literature and culture into mainstream global scholarship. Cowboy figures such as the Gaucho, Llanero, Vaquero, Charro, Huaso, and Morochuco have gained recognition in the study of Spanish American folklore.

Helen Chaffee, in her Master's thesis, *The Gaucho: Contradiction and the Construction of a National Symbol*, explores the use of the gaucho as a symbol of Argentine culture in the works of Ricardo Güiraldes, Luis Bayón Herrera, Ezequiel Martínez Estrada, and Alberto Ginastera, highlighting contradictions in their representations and tensions

between historical accuracy and nationalist portrayals. Keli Rae Loff, in her Master's thesis *Charro Days: History, Culture, and Identity on the US-Mexico Border*, analyzes the Charro Days celebration in Brownsville, Texas, examining how it uses symbols of both Mexican and American culture to shape and express a unique bicultural border identity. In "The Silent Treatment: Alejandra Basualto's Aesthetic of Censorship," Resha Cardone discusses Alejandra Basualto's use of silence and censorship in her portrayal of women writers, drawing a parallel between Basualto's marginalized identities and the figure of the Huaso in Chile. Carman E. Lamas, in the article *"Americanized Criollos: Latina/o Figures in Late-Nineteenth-Century Cuban Literature,"* examines the representation of the "Americanized criollo" in late 19th-century Cuban literature, paralleling it with the figure of the Guajiro, as both characters embody rural, creole identities shaped by social, political, and cultural forces. Lastly, Scott De Vries explores environmentalist discourse in *A Novel of the Self*, relating it to the figure of the Llanero, as both represent the rural, ecological, and social tensions of their respective regions, highlighting the intersection of local identities with broader environmental and political concerns. While cowboy figures have been studied individually, they have not been explored in the broader regional context of identity within the Spanish American continent. This represents a significant gap in the existing research.

3. Methodology

This research adopts an analytical survey approach to examine the representation of cowboy characters in literature. The study involves a comprehensive review of both literary and critical works that focus on the portrayal of these characters. It includes a range of fictional works from various Spanish-speaking countries in South America. These texts are carefully interpreted and analyzed to determine how cowboy figures are depicted within their respective cultural and social contexts. Through this comparative analysis, the study aims to uncover the nuances of these representations, exploring their symbolic significance and how they reflect and engage with broader historical, cultural, and societal themes.

4. Discussion

4.1 Gaucho in Argentine Fiction

A gaucho is known as a skilled horseman and herder in the Argentine Pampas. The Pampas, meaning flat land in the Indigenous Quechua language, are fertile South American low grasslands covering more than 1,200,000 square kilometers. They include the Argentine provinces of Buenos Aires, La Pampa, Santa Fe, Entre Ríos, and some parts of Brazil and Uruguay, but the gaucho myth is mainly associated with the Argentine region. According to S. Griswold Morley (1946), "The name gaucho appears first in the eighteenth century, but the origin is unknown" (p. 253). Gauchos are known for their distinct clothing, including a brimmed hat, poncho, and loose trousers. They can be compared to North American tricksters in terms of cunning, resourcefulness, status, and oral tradition.

Martín Fierro (1879), an epic/narrative poem by José Hernández, is considered one of the first works to portray the life of the gauchos. *Martín Fierro* tells the story of the eponymous character, Martín Fierro, an impoverished gaucho who serves the nation at the border to defend the Argentine inner frontier against tribal people, while his wife and children suffer at home. The author presents Martín Fierro in an ironic situation. On the one hand, he is a national hero who fights for the nation, but on the other hand, his family suffers from a lack of resources. Martín Fierro speaks:

> Next, I loaded up
>
> everything I had
>
> saddle blankets, poncho, all there was
>
> at home I took with me
>
> I left my woman

with a house stripped bare.

I left nothing behind;

Everything I had went with me. (Hernández, 1879, lines 367-374)

The Europeans rationalized the conquest and colonization of America as a struggle between civilization and barbarism. In Annick Pellegrin's view, "The gauchos were sent to the 'frontier' to fight against the 'Indians' and bring 'civilization' to the region" (2010, p. 12). However, the irony lies in the fact that people viewed them as outlaws. Martín Fierro describes himself:

Now listen to a story

told by a gaucho on the run

who, as a father and husband, has been

hardworking and willing

and still the people

take him for an outlaw. (Hernández, 1879, lines 109-114)

Describing the plight of the gauchos, the translators mention in the introduction of the book, "Since the contract of many of them expired a year and a half ago, disappearing over the injustices and vexation with which they were subjected, they threw down the guns and deserted. Some went to earn their living elsewhere, others perhaps to live as outlaws…" (Hernández, 1879, p. 4). Thus, like Martín Fierro, most of these romantic characters faced tragic lives afterward.

Don Segundo Sombra (1926) by Ricardo Güiraldes is considered a masterpiece in the genre of the gaucho novel. Contrary to the portrayal of the gaucho in Martín Fierro, this novel glorifies the role of the gaucho as purely Argentine. The book attempts to establish Argentine identity and define what makes Argentine literature. Fabio Cáceres, a young boy from Buenos Aires, develops a deep bond with Don Segundo Sombra, a senior gaucho who becomes a role model for the young man. Susan Savage Lee (2021) comments on the novel, "While nineteenth-century gauchesque literature portrayed the gaucho negatively, thus forcing him into a life of crime and outlawry in famous works like José Hernández's Martín Fierro… by the turn of the twentieth century, Argentine authors turned to the gaucho as a means of defining Argentinidad" (p. 118). Don Segundo Sombra is an example of resistant literature and attempts to resist the cultural appropriation of the Americas by Europeans. Hence, the author has glorified the gaucho character in the novel. Lee further writes, "For Güiraldes, a foreign presence always hailed to an Argentine loss, starting with economics and eventually ending with culture. Instead of a basis for shared values, the gaucho became a symbol of resistance to first, foreign investment and then, cultural appropriation" (2021, p. 121). According to Lee, by portraying the positive roles of gauchos, the author aimed to uphold Argentine culture over foreign culture.

The author indirectly condemns European cultural influence in different parts of the novel. The author shows the class pretensions of the higher class, who replicate foreign norms. The novelist describes an incident inside a restaurant, where the narrator critiques, "The waiter greeted us with a sly smile we didn't understand. Perhaps it seemed to him an excessive extravagance, this business of two cowhands having lunch in the 'Fonda del Polo'" (Güiraldes, 1926, p. 85). The cowhands were not expected to have lunch at a luxurious hotel. The novel was written during a period when local farming was being replaced by commercial ranching, and foreign investors viewed local

people in terms of their labor. The novelist believes that the immigrant "considers the native as simple and only useful for economically improving the life of the immigrant" (Güiraldes, 1926, p. 109). Argentina was one of the leading suppliers of beef in the first quarter of the 20th century, and the meat industries were westernized, with Europeans packing supplies using new technology. The novelist comments on their actions: "All around the cart, on foot or mounted, were Englishmen from the packinghouses, clean-shaven, ruddy, and plump as well-fed friars... the local butchers were there, too, on the lookout for a bargain, looking like boys who might try to steal off with the entrails" (Güiraldes, 1926, p. 95). Throughout the novel, the author creates a division between the locals and immigrants, national culture and borrowed culture, and the unprivileged and privileged to create a rationale that one's identity should not be forgotten for foreign replication.

4.2 The Llaneros in Colombian and Venezuelan Literature

The Llanos are expansive grasslands in northern South America, covering roughly 570,000 square kilometers. They stretch across western Venezuela and northeastern Colombia, bordered by the Andes Mountains to the north and west, the Guaviare River and the Amazon River basin to the south, and the lower Orinoco River and the Guiana Highlands to the east. The horsemen who provide cattle herding in the Llanos are called llaneros and have been duly represented in regional literature. Colombians and Venezuelans have emphasized the representation of llaneros in their literature, mainly during the transition phase when the South American continent was shifting from a subsistent economy to a capitalist one. The writers have celebrated the traditional values and lifestyles that make Venezuelans distinct from their neighboring countries. The llanero has been depicted as a symbol of freedom and a connection to the native land.

In his novel The Vortex (1924), José Estacio Rivera presents two contrasting settings: the Colombian llano and the Amazon rainforest. These two places represent opposing forces: one symbolizes the traditional lifestyle, and the other represents the modern race for industrialization, particularly in rubber. The peaceful, uncompetitive lifestyle of the Llanos is disturbed by the arrival of a recruiter who seeks men for rubber collection. The novelist describes the situation:

> And she excitedly explained that a labor recruiter by the name of Barrera had come to sign up rubber tappers to work in the Vichada region.
>
> "Like I told Fidel Franco, it's the opportunity for us to get ahead. Barrera pays five pesos a day, plus food."
>
> "And which Barrera is this?" Inquired Don Rafo.
>
> "Narciso Barrera, who's got gold coins coming out of his ears and merchandise particularly to give away." (Rivera, 2018, p. 17)

The naïve llaneros are tempted by the offer of "five pesos, plus food," and join the rubber tapping campaign, where most of them die without ever returning home. The author idealizes the subsistent lifestyle of the llaneros in comparison to the stark exploitation in the rubber fields.

The great savanna region of central Venezuela represents nature in its wild and disorderly state. It is a natural region consisting of a flat depression of about 243,774 square kilometers. The novelist Rómulo Gallegos depicts this flat land, the Llanos, in his novel Doña Bárbara. It is a vast, open space with raw and unmediated land characterized by flatness, long stretches of grassland, crisscrossing rivers, swamps, and forests. The protagonist of the novel, Santos Luzardo, describes his encounter with the Venezuelan Llanos:

> A vulgar case of envy, perhaps; but I was already in the presence of a dramatic scene—the desert, which nourishes bravery, protects barbarism, almost dehumanizes—and it was as if, by taking away Mr. Rodríguez's word, someone had stood in front of me, saying, in a stuttering voice:

> — This land does not forgive. Look what the barbaric plain, devourer of men, has done to me.
>
> I stared at him. He was not bad as a dramatic character and I named him Lorenzo Barquero. (Gallegos, 1931, p. 3)

In the rest of the novel, the protagonist is in conflict with Doña Bárbara, a landowner in the Llanos. Santos Luzardo represents modernization, education, law, and order, while Doña Bárbara represents traditional power, superstition, and lawlessness. The entire novel depicts how life proceeds in the Venezuelan Llanos, a lifestyle distinct from the rest of its neighboring countries.

4.3 The Vaquero in Mexican Literature

Moving from Venezuela to Mexico is akin to casting off the robes of the llanero and donning the robes of the vaquero. Traditionally, vaqueros were Mexican cowboys or herdsmen. Clayton et al. (2002) define the term vaquero, stating, "The vaquero was—and is—a man on horseback who works cattle, a 'cow worker,' the word appropriately derived from the Spanish word vaca, meaning cow" (p. 1). Vaqueros belong to Mexican culture, and they have been represented in folk tales, ballads, poems, stories, and novels. Their portrayal led to the development of a new genre: the vaquero genre. This genre addresses the challenges faced by vaqueros while living on the frontier, their participation in battles, and their interactions with tribesmen. Vaquero literature portrays characters with strong motivation and good moral character. The genre offers a window into understanding traditional Mexican culture and society.

Juan Rulfo is known for reviving vaquero culture in his short stories and novels. The collection of stories The Burning Plain (1955) and Pedro Páramo (1953), a novella, are two representative texts dealing with vaquero culture. Mexican oral literature is rich in vaquero culture, and modern poets have also written poems in this genre. The following two stanzas are from a poem written by Juan Olivárez in 2010, entitled "The Vaquero":

> He sits tall in the saddle,
>
> Firm, steady, and proud.
>
> Away from the masses,
>
> And the maddening crowd.
>
> His face weather-beaten,
>
> The jaw set like stone.
>
> Over hills and through gullies,
>
> He rides all alone.
>
> (Olivárez, 2010, as cited in Poetryhunter.com)

The poem indicates that modern writers have assimilated their own traditional culture and represent vaqueros as distinct characters from their regional neighbors.

4.4 The Charro in Mexican Literature

Charro culture originated in Mexico during the colonial period, but its representation in written literature emerged in the 19th century. In Mexican culture, a charro is an equestrian figure that serves as the archetype of Mexican identity, embodying an amalgamation of cultural tradition, national pride, and societal values. Garry Moreno (2010) defines Mexican charros as "horsemen distinguished by tapered trousers, wide-brimmed sombreros, and elaborately embroidered bolero jackets with southern variants of American cowboys. While both figures are rooted in vaquero culture, the Mexican charro is not a cowboy" (p. 1). Moreno distinguishes the charro from a North American cowboy. The charro archetype is distinctly Mexican, deeply rooted in Mexican culture, national pride, and social justice. Sluyter (2002) provides a historical explanation of charro culture, stating that it was not until after the Mexican Revolution in the early 20th century that charro culture emerged as a self-conscious movement to glamorize ranch life as a major repository of national identity. Sluyter (2002) further explains that charro culture in the United States owes its origin to its southern neighbor, Mexico. The Spanish-speaking populations of some U.S. states also celebrate charro culture, which is similar to that of Mexico.

4.5 Huaso in Chilean Literature

Chilean huasos are similar to Argentine gauchos and Colombian/Venezuelan llaneros. While gauchos and llaneros are strictly cattle herders, huasos are involved in both herding and agriculture. These rural farmers are typically associated with the central and southern regions of Chile. Resha Cardon (2015) analyzes the origin and development of huasos, noting that the term originated from white men from Europe who had sexual relations with Indigenous women in Chile. The resulting child, an orphan with a missing paternal figure, was known as a "huaso." Cardon (2015) explains that "in Chile, this derogatory term and its more common derivative, huacho, designate the absence of a man's father, whether the paternal figure is deceased or does not recognize his son as his own" (p. 136). Huasos have been widely represented in Chilean literature, with Nobel laureate Pablo Neruda referencing them in his Canto General. Neruda (1950) writes:

> You are Chile, between patriarch and huaso,
>
> you are a poncho from the provinces, a child
>
> who does not know his name yet,
>
> a tough and shy child at school,
>
> a sad young man from the provinces.
>
> (Neruda, 1950, lines 1-4)

Neruda's portrayal of the huaso helps shape the national identity and celebrates rural life in Chile.

4.6 The Morochucos in Peruvian Literature

The Morochucos are cowboys from the plains of the Peruvian Andes, primarily residing in the Department of Ayacucho. They make a living through cattle breeding and horse training and are closely tied to Ayacucho folklore. The Morochucos are famous for their bravery, strength, and exceptional horsemanship, playing a pivotal role in the War of Independence in the early 19th century. Di Hu (2015) delves into the historical background of the Morochucos, explaining:

> The alliances activated over the landscape in this particular revolt correlated with the geographic and ethnic composition of a new identity known as the Morochucos, which means multi-colored hats in Quechua. Morochucos were Quechuas, peaking mestizos, and Indians who dedicated themselves to animal husbandry and mule-driving. (p. 308)

Much literature has been written on the Morochucos and their culture. José María Arguedas's (1958) third novel, Deep Rivers, alludes to the depth of the Andean rivers, which originate at the top of the Andes Mountains, but also refers to the activities of the Morochucos. The narrator of the novel describes:

> Near Huamanga, as we slowly descended the hill, about ten passed by; they descended cutting across the road, at a gallop. I could barely see their faces. They were covered in ponchos; a high scarf covered their necks; the long ponchos fell over the horse's sides. Several of them carried wad'rapucus on their backs, horn trumpets fastened with silver rings. Far below, near a shining forest of molles, they blew their bugles announcing their arrival in the city. (Arguedas, 1958, p. 76)

The Andean range is one of the most formidable regions in the world, and the warriors who traverse this difficult terrain are considered special to the country.

5. Conclusion

The varied portrayal of cowboy figures in Spanish American literature emphasizes the region's rich and multifaceted cultural identity. From Argentina's gauchos to Mexico's vaqueros and charros, Colombia and Venezuela's llaneros, Chile's huasos, and Peru's morochucos, each archetype reflects the unique geographical, historical, and social contexts of its origin. These characters embody the spirit of their respective nations and highlight the lasting influence of indigenous and mestizo cultures in shaping the New World. Their stories serve as symbols of resistance, resilience, and cultural pride, challenging the dominant narratives imposed by European colonizers and asserting a distinct Spanish American identity that honors both tradition and modernity.

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