Lessons of My Father: The Double-Edged Symbols of Cowboy Authenticity

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Virginia Rieck, who grew up on a ranch in Texas, wrote this piece at Duke University in her first-year seminar on academic writing, one centered on the theme of authenticity. When Rieck was a senior in high school, her family lost half of their ranching operation and was forced to move to another town. Shortly after the move, her father began wearing a cowboy hat, which, she says, "led me to a more general interest in cowboy culture and authenticity, which was the topic of my essay." Her teacher, Kristin Solli, says of this argument, "Not only is Virginia able to produce very thoughtful writing about issues that matter deeply to her on a personal level, but she is also able to make an interesting contribution to the academic debates surrounding questions of authenticity, identity, and subcultures."

My dad is a cowboy. He wears the Wranglers, he wears the boots, and his calloused hands wear the marks of hard ranch work, but for as long as I can remember, he never donned the hat. This year, all that changed. Dad made the purchase in Gibson's grocery store, and when I asked him why, after all these years, he decided to trade his puzzling square-topped cap for a traditional cowboy hat, he told me he wanted a broad rim to protect his ears. They were getting "weathered." Sure, Dad. Looking back, I think I understand: This year, a ranch my dad leased for twenty-eight years was sold and divided among four heirs—a beautiful piece of land, chopped up, never to be whole again. It might as well have been my father's heart. Perhaps my dad bought the hat as a subconscious attempt to hold on to the ranch and lifestyle he poured his soul into. Of course, he would

never admit to that, and it might not even be true. Nonetheless, these observations make me wonder what being a cowboy means to my father. It is obviously much more than a job description, and contrary to popular belief, there is more to being a cowboy than our mythical understanding entails.

Although researchers have long studied the iconic cowboy's effect on modern America through pop culture, they have overlooked one pertinent question: How have cultural influences affected today's *real* cowboys? Scholars seem to view the cowboy as less than human. He is either a popular mythical icon or a dinosaur—the Marlboro man or an artifact. Ironically, the ubiquitous cowboy concept as it is preserved in literature and the minds of the general population contributes to the contemporary working cowboy's demise: literature disregards him and the myth swallows him. Yet, nothing has impacted the contemporary cowboy's identity more than the threat of urban assimilation. What does this mean or matter? Kembrew McLeod, in "Authenticity within Hip-Hop and Other Cultures Threatened with Assimilation," lends some insight: "By mapping the range of meanings associated with authenticity as the meanings are invoked discursively, we can gain a better understanding of how a culture in danger of assimilation actively seeks to preserve its identity" (134–35). McLeod's main interest is hip-hop culture, but his work provides a useful mechanism for studying any group faced with absorption into the mainstream as well as a foundation for my study of cowboy authenticity claims.

In my research, I sought to understand what meanings today's working cowboy associates with being an authentic cowboy by interviewing my father and drawing on past experiences in my rural hometown. Since this project is personal for me, and my father is only one working cowboy among many, I do not mean for the conclusions I draw to be taken as the last word. My goal is not to find the definitive answer, but to provide a backdrop for and inspire new work. In my investigation, I found urbanization has caused the cowboy to adopt three symbols of authenticity—land and agriculture, origins, and a code of ethics—as a means to preserve his identity in the face of assimilation.

This essay scrutinizes each of these symbols to understand exactly what they entail, how the contemporary working cowboy uses them as preservation mechanisms, and the possible negative implications they may hold for him. Ultimately, these findings will add to our understanding of the nature of authenticity claims in the grander scheme of waning subcultures.

AUTHENTICITY CLAIMS OF THE CONTEMPORARY COWBOY

Agriculture and Land as Symbols of Authenticity

Like me, my father grew up on a ranch, but he did not spend his childhood wanting to be a rancher. In fact, my dad earned a degree in accounting and assumed the position of chief financial officer at a hospital for several years before realizing he was not made for deskwork. Thus, when a ranch lease near his hometown became available, he jumped at the chance to escape the city life of Houston, Texas, and act as a steward to land and livestock in the country. The attachment Dad developed to his ranch land underlies his description of what he views a true cowboy to be: "A cowboy is someone who has roots in agriculture. He has a unique appreciation for land and nature." To cowboys, land represents more than a resource or a commodity. Though most people understand how a piece of land holding memories and life lessons can take on sentimental value for a cowboy, less clear is why it might be employed as a symbol of authenticity.

5 Perhaps a cowboy invokes authenticity with his connection to the land because from it he derives part of his identity. Studies referencing the cowboy vocation as much more than a profession exhibit the inextricable nature of the cowboy's life and work. In an essay examining the origins and early use of the term "cowboy," James Wagner concludes that we cannot use "cowboy" as a blanket description for every Anglo who works with cattle (14). This deduction supports the idea that the definition of "cowboy" is more than a job description. Actually, a cowboy's personal and professional life is one in the same. He cannot leave his work at the office because he lives at the office. By using a

connection with land as a criterion for authenticity, today's working cowboy draws a line between himself and those who do not understand the function of land as a life source—figuratively and literally. Highlighting his intimate tie with nature allows the cowboy to preserve his true identity.

Land may provide a useful symbol of authenticity for the cowboy, but it is not foolproof. With changing environments and technological advances making the rural lifestyle obsolete, urban encroachment threatens cowboys. My family and I are not the only ones who have lost a ranch. A joint study by American Farmland Trust and Texas Cooperative Extension reveals that "Texas's rural lands are being splintered into 'ranchettes,' endangering wildlife and the family farmers who make their living off the land" (qtd. in Shackelford). Growing populations spilling into rural areas across America are generating an increase in demand for land, creating economic pressures too high for ranch owners to overcome. Michael Fritz reports that "prices are increasingly driven by urbanites—from sellers of apartment buildings seeking to defer capital gain taxes through 'like-kind exchanges' and people seeking recreational property, to deep-pocket investors turned off by the stock market" (32). Such a situation combined with the cowboy's identification with the land leads to a captain-going-down-with-the-ship effect: Without a ship, a captain may feel utterly lost. In choosing to sink with the vessel that defines him, he avoids the anguish of drifting through life without a purpose. Accordingly, by linking himself to the land, the cowboy ensures that when it goes, he will as well; with the current trend of urban infringement, this may be sooner than he would like.

Regardless of its implications, using a connection to land as a symbol of authenticity implies that while one may frequently encounter wannabes in the cities, finding a working cowboy on the subway would be difficult. Nevertheless, complications can arise: wealthy landowners who purchase land and animals with no emotional investment in their "purchases" obscure the line between authentic cowboys and well-heeled men in cowboy hats. In this situation, knowing a person's background may be helpful in ascertaining their genuineness. After all,

a cowboy's connection with land is crucial, but it is a relationship that generally must be cultivated early in life. Hence, I will now address how origins have become a symbol of authenticity in cowboy culture.

Origin as a Symbol of Authenticity

Dude ranches and how-to books offering the chance to become a cowboy abound. However, such promotions are scoffed at by cowboys because apparently, one does not become a cowboy, he is born that way. Horse-trainer Jason Masterson, when asked in an interview what he had to say about those who want to be cowboys, replied, "It's hard if you weren't raised that way. I mean, going from an apartment high-rise to a farm-house is a big adjustment, and learning the ropes without someone who knows what they're doing is nearly impossible." He puts it politely. My dad, a little more frank, says that the chances of someone *becoming* a cowboy are slim to none if he does not have the background. One's social environment shapes his identity. In other words, those who do not grow up drenching cows (administering medicine to them), docking lambs (cutting off their tails), or waking at five or six every morning to start ranch work, could never truly appreciate what being a cowboy means. Daryl Hunter, writing for the *Upper Valley Free Press*, reports that when "cowboy poet and humorist Baxter Black was asked, What made you decide to become a cowboy? he replied, You either are one, or you aren't. You never have to decide." Such a consensus shows that heritage is important to a cowboy's identity, but it does not explain why.

Just as hip-hop culture does not fully accept those who do not grow up on the street or in the ghetto, cowboy culture does not recognize those who were not raised living the cowboy lifestyle as authentic. However, some, like Kembrew McLeod, might assert a cowboy's roots are significant because—like many other subcultures threatened by assimilation—true cowboy culture uses its origins to highlight its stable position in the rushing stream of society. In his discussion of hip-hop culture, McLeod explains, "[B]y invoking authenticity, one is affirming that, even though hip-hop music was the top-selling music format in

1998, hip-hop culture's core remains pure and relatively untouched by mainstream U.S. culture" (146). To apply McLeod's supposition to the case at hand is tempting: perhaps a cowboy calls on his heritage to underscore his loyalty to the original cowboy essence amid its romanticization by pop culture. Perhaps—but probably not. Cowboys' authenticity claims do not fit neatly into the mold McLeod establishes. Today's working cowboy has changed a lot since the 1800s, so to argue that today's cowboy has not deviated from the cowboy archetype would be difficult. After all, he has gone from a British Loyalist who stole cows to an iconic hero who saves the town and rides off into the sunset (Carlson 5). Most cowboys are not even aware that being called a cowboy was once an insult or that the word "cowboy" had such varied meanings.

Indeed, my dad would be surprised to find that just a few decades ago, as a rancher, he would not have been considered a cowboy. Apparently, according to *The Modern Cowboy*, ranchers or cattlemen often played prominent positions in the community while cowboys did not. Ranchers took breaks whenever they felt the need. Cowboys, on the other hand, did not govern their own schedules. John Erickson indicates the differences that existed between cowboys and ranchers when he writes, "The rancher and the cowboy may dress alike, talk alike, and even think alike, but at six o'clock in the evening, one goes to the . . . barn while the other attends a meeting in town" (5–6). Such distinctions do not seem to matter to the contemporary cowboy. More than just asserting his loyalty to the cowboy prototype, the cowboy's use of origin to claim authenticity serves as an attempt to remind people that real cowboys still exist: they are not the characters dressed up in bars, and they are not the fabricated heroes we read about in books. Sometimes, trees continue to stand even after they die; by clinging to his roots, the cowboy proves he is still alive.

While a cowboy's origins might effectively confirm authenticity, using origin as a criterion for such a large part of the cowboy identity holds major ramifications. If the cowboy's roots are cut, if urbanization eliminates the possibility of growing up on a ranch or living the cowboy lifestyle as a child, the contemporary cowboy may cease to exist.

Granted, like the trees mentioned earlier, he may continue to stand, but only as a memory—a remnant of things past. Notably, the effect of losing this authenticity claim would ripple to my third symbol of analysis: the cowboy ethics code.

The Cowboy Ethics Code as a Symbol of Authenticity

Even if one was born and raised a cowboy and loves nature, if he does not acquire a certain level of honor and integrity, he cannot—in the eyes of today's working cowboy—legitimately call himself a cowboy. In my interview with my dad, I sensed that one of the things that makes him most proud of his identity are the ethical standards he believes a cowboy represents. According to my father, the cowboy ethics code made famous by many western movies is more than a theatrical fabrication; it is a bona fide convention in a cowboy's lifestyle that sets him apart from the rest of us.

The code of ethics is not complicated. It basically entails following one's conscience. As my dad relates, "When you spend your whole life working with animals and nature, you learn to view the difference between right and wrong clearly. You can learn a lot just from watching the environment around you." One story my father shared with me illustrates perfectly the proud and serious code today's working cowboys share. Dad agreed to a $20,000 lamb sale with no more collateral than a handshake—no contract, no proof of purchase, just two men and their words. When I asked him how he could place so much confidence in a stranger, my dad said, "I don't know. It's corny, but I knew he was a cowboy; I could trust him."

Why is the ethics code such a valuable symbol of authenticity? Its purpose seems similar to that of other authenticity claims within a subculture. Stephen Duncombe observes that members of a subculture invoke authenticity to "distinguish themselves from the mainstream culture that threaten[s] to absorb them" (qtd. in McLeod 146). Another study, by Sarah Thornton, reveals like findings: "The social logic of subcultural capital reveals itself most clearly by what it dislikes and by what it emphatically isn't" (qtd. in McLeod 146–47). In line with these

views, the cowboy, by holding himself to higher moral standards than the rest of the population, highlights yet another difference between working cowboys and the materialistic urban world threatening to consume them.

Nonetheless, in assigning such great significance to this ethics code as a symbol of authenticity, the cowboy once again ensures the preservation of his identity for only a short while. As my father pointed out, being a cowboy in the city is difficult because extreme social pressures make abandoning one's values easy and adhering to a cowboy ethics code arduous. Moving to the country may seem overly idealistic, but having lived in a small, rural town, I can confirm that cows, horses, and the people who tend them generally do not worry about issues of money or power. Waking every morning to watch the sun rise over a valley filled with bluebonnets or even gnarled mesquite trees, a cowboy acquires an early appreciation for the many things in life that cannot be purchased. Nevertheless, as the city and its accompanying worldly influences continue to spill into rural America, the ethics code the cowboy uses to confirm his authenticity could gradually be eroded.

CONCLUSION

Though I derived these authenticity symbols from experiences with my dad, to assume other cowboys might utilize such criteria is not unreasonable. After analyzing what inspired the authenticity claims of cowboys and how they function, I hope I have helped build a greater understanding of the implications they hold for the contemporary working cowboy. Consider for a moment land and agriculture, origins, and the cowboy ethics code in terms of how they work together to serve as the cowboy's life preserver—literally. A connection to the land is the main flotation device, keeping the swimmer afloat. Without this portion of the life jacket, assuming the cowboy cannot swim, he has no chance for survival. Origins, like the straps of the jacket, provide shape and meaning: they substantiate the cowboy's connection to the land. Lacking straps, the jacket would just be a floating piece of material, but with them is almost a structured, functioning implement. Lastly,

the cowboy code of ethics acts as the buckle. Though the jacket could almost operate without it, a certifiable, effective life preserver requires this key component. Accordingly, if any of these parts are missing or deteriorating, the life jacket is a futile mechanism and a burden, a heavy piece of substance strangling and weighing the swimmer down.

Symbols used to invoke authenticity do provide a defense against absorption into mainstream culture. Yet, the extent to which a symbol can preserve a subculture seems to depend on one key characteristic: stability. Cowboys, deriving much of their identity from a physical symbol, land, encounter a problem of an impermanent, diminishing resource. America's steady trend toward more urbanization and industrialization reduces the efficacy of the contemporary cowboy's foundational symbols of authenticity, contributing to his destruction rather than preservation. Eventually, the only places one will find working cowboys are in countries or territories where city streets and buildings do not suffocate the land and the lifestyle it promotes. Paradoxically, the cowboy's authenticity symbols are entwined so inextricably with his identity, he cannot live with them, and he cannot live without them. After all, without the criteria from which he derives his concept of self, the cowboy can no longer exist.

Does this mean all subcultures are inevitably doomed to lose their individuality and become part of the mainstream? No. If this was a viable conclusion, Kembrew McLeod probably would have beaten me to it. In his study, hip-hop's authenticity claims give the subculture staying power because its symbols, such as race and gender, do not disappear. This leads me to believe that while a subculture's claims to authenticity may serve as useful preservation mechanisms, if symbols are concrete like land, or can be negatively affected by time and other changes, they may become counterproductive. My study of cowboy culture reveals that authenticity claims, as such an integral part of identity, cannot be extracted from a subculture. Therefore, ultimately, the degree to which authenticity claims can preserve a social group depends on the enduring nature of the claims themselves.

Perhaps the cowboy cannot be saved, but by understanding the function and implications of land, origins, and the cowboy ethics code as double-edged symbols of authenticity, I have not only gained a greater appreciation of today's working cowboy, I have come to know my father on a whole new level. I cannot give my dad his ranch back, but I must hold on to its memory: more than recompense for a home, symbol, or a piece of land, maybe my dad wears his new Stetson as a tribute to a lost part of himself. In that case, I'll keep my own hat safe—that way, if Dad ever loses his, I can lend him mine.

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