

1-1-2020

Charros: How Mexican Cowboys are Remapping Race and American Identity

Andrew Sluyter

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/geoanth_pubs



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), and the [Geography Commons](#)

1-1-2020

Charros: How Mexican Cowboys are Remapping Race and American Identity

Andrew Sluyter

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/libraries_pubs

 Part of the [Geography Commons](#)

such examinations, yet studies of this form miss marginalized viewpoints and recreate the narratives of those who held power. Though outside the immediate scope of the book, a bit of discussion on if and how the positionality of this famous playwright frames his representations of an epoch of territory could hint at the existence of alternative, co-existing ideas on territory. Do Shakespearean plays, which Elden notes might not have been written solely by Shakespeare, provide an archive on territorial thinking that is representative of the time and place of Shakespeare? What other narratives might have existed?

Regardless of these two relatively small points in which some additional discussion could be informative, this book provides a unique view into how territory was thought of in Europe during Shakespeare's time. Alongside his two other books on territory, Elden has created an extraordinary account of the concept of territory. Over the last ten years or so, there has been an uptick of focused work on the concept and practice of territory, particularly within critical and feminist geopolitics and within Latin American studies. *Shakespearean Territories* adds to this rethinking of territory. Moreover, within the broad discipline of human geography, textual analyses (e.g. maps, cartoons, and political speeches), have often provided a key source of examination. However, literature and plays have been a lesser focus. Elden's analysis of Shakespearean plays not only provides a keen analysis of changing conceptualizations of territory, but also introduces or reminds geographers of the value of literature as a analytical approach. Lastly, as the audience for this book includes scholars and students of Shakespeare too, this book inserts geographical analyses into disciplines in the humanities. In summary, I highly recommend this book to advanced students and scholars of territory and Shakespeare.

Karen Culcasi
West Virginia University, USA
E-mail address: Karen.Culcasi@mail.wvu.edu.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhg.2020.01.003>

Charros: How Mexican Cowboys are Remapping Race and American Identity, Laura R. Barraclough. University of California Press, Oakland (2019). 304 pages, US\$85.00 hardcover

The polarized debate over American national identity between advocates for multiculturalism versus those for a homogenous cultural core often focuses on issues of Mexican ethnicity and immigration, especially in Southwestern states with large populations of Hispanic origin. This innovative book by Laura Barraclough, an already accomplished historical geographer of the peoples and places of California, presents a particularly insightful intervention into that debate. The cowboy of the Western frontier in the nineteenth century, after all, has long encapsulated the ideals most fervently espoused by those who define American identity as unified around Anglo ethnicity, whiteness, and individualism. Barraclough's research challenges that view with meticulous interpretation of primary documents to reveal a different type of cowboy, the *charro*, equally as present as the stereotypical cowboy during the emergence of the US West but associated with Hispanic rather than Anglo ethnicity. While marginalized during the nineteenth and early twentieth century, *charro* institutions in the Southwest – *charreadas*, for example, in which teams of *charros* compete in equestrian events – have more recently undergone a renaissance

that now places them at the center of Hispanic cultural politics in the USA.

The introductory chapter explicates the origins of *charro* culture in colonial Mexico. The *vaqueros* who tended the herds of cattle and the land owners they worked for engaged in *charreadas* that involved equestrian competitions based on the practices used to control and roundup cattle. But only after the Mexican revolution of the early twentieth century, in which *charros* such as Emiliano Zapata fought against the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz, did *charro* culture emerge as a self-conscious movement to glamorize ranch life as one of the major repositories of national identity. Significantly, the events involved in *charreadas* contrast with those of US rodeos that emerged in the nineteenth century as part of a similar process of national identity construction. Although similar in many ways, rodeos feature cowboys who compete against each other as individuals in a series of events such as calf roping while in *charreadas* teams of *charros* compete against other teams. Similarly, Anglo cowboys typically wear utilitarian clothes while *charros* wear embroidered and ornamented pants, short jackets, and wide-brimmed hats. Female *charras* likewise wear short jackets and wide-brimmed hats but match them with colorful, ankle-length skirts.

Following that introduction, five chapters present case studies of major aspects of *charro* cultural politics. They range from Los Angeles, California, across the Southwest to San Antonio, Texas, and as far north as Denver, Colorado. They cover the florescence of *charro* culture as Hispanic communities, whether settled across the Southwest since Spanish colonial times or more recent immigrants from Mexico, began wearing the distinctive *charro* costume in patriotic parades in the 1920s to signal their aspirations for an America inclusive of their ethnic identity. Formal *charro* associations emerged in the late 1940s as influential mutual aid societies that organized a wide variety of community celebrations and charitable events featuring *charro* culture, as well overlapping in membership and activities with Hispanic chambers of commerce to promote the development of their neighborhoods. Moreover, *charros* were by then participating alongside cowboys on the rodeo circuit, as well as in their own *charreadas*. By the 1960s, an independent *charreada* circuit thrived, with *charro* teams from across the Southwest and Mexico participating. As *charro* associations proliferated in succeeding decades, they became a force within the civil rights movement that helped to elect Hispanic politicians. Throughout that process, *charro* associations have confronted challenges related to access to public space and animal welfare while empowering millions of Americans to nurture transnational connections with Mexicans while asserting their element of a multicultural national identity.

One of the greatest challenges involved in countering any orthodoxy, of course, involves resisting the urge to create a new one. Demonstrating that *charros* are as integral to the multicultural national identity of America as cowboys can result in the elision of other diverse actors. Barraclough, for example, relies on an outdated literature on the establishment of cattle ranching during colonial times that privileges the roles of Europeans. The latest scholarship, in contrast, demonstrates that some of the key elements of both cowboy and *charro* culture have African roots. Roping cattle from horseback, for example, emerged among enslaved *vaqueros* of African origin in seventeenth-century Mexico before becoming an iconic practice among both *charros* and cowboys over the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Such acknowledgement of the diverse origins of much of both cowboy and *charro* culture in no way weakens the central contribution of this book, though. Rather, it unlocks opportunities for the study of relations between *charro* associations and such African American groups as

the Compton Cowboys of California and the Trail Riders of Louisiana.

Andrew Sluyter
Louisiana State University, USA
E-mail address: asluyter@lsu.edu.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhg.2019.12.006>

Silk Roads: Peoples, Cultures, Landscapes, Susan Whitfield (Ed.). University of California Press, Berkeley (2019). 480 pages, US\$65.00 hardcover

Here is a lovely coffee table book on the Silk Roads, with splendid illustrations of maps, objects, peoples, arts and crafts, architecture, and landscapes. The written texts are brief and generally informative for the general reader. They are simple and provide basic facts. Historians, geographers, art historians, and specialists on cultural exchanges will not find much that is new in this volume. Yet the target audience consists of the non-professional average reader who will no doubt enjoy the beautiful illustrations. Peter Sellars, the renowned theater and opera director, wrote the foreword for the book, another indication of the attempt to reach a wide audience.

Students in geography, art history, and history courses will also profit from the maps and photographs of steppes, deserts, and other environments along the Silk Roads. Reproductions of the maps of Ferdinand Richthofen, al-Idrisi, Ptolemy, the Catalan Atlas, and the Ming dynasty's *Da Ming hunyi tu*, among others, are beautifully photographed. The double-page color map, drawn specifically for this volume, shows the various Silk Roads, but no date is given. Which date in history is being represented?

The various sections in the book highlight specific objects that the authors relate to a specific landscape of way of life. For example, the Chinese ceramics, which were transported to Korea, Japan, the Middle East, South and Southeast Asia by ship, are displayed and discussed in the section on Seas and Skies. Coins and money are dealt with in the section on Rivers and Plains, which is generally appropriate, although Deserts and Oases and Steppes also used money. Unfortunately, there are very few primary sources on commerce, including the mechanics and scale of trade and descriptions of merchants, which limits understanding of the Silk Roads.

More important for a general work on the Silk Road is the ethical question, which many art historians ignore. One description of the great Buddhist cave site in Dunhuang states, without comment, 'The manuscripts from the hidden cave [in Dunhuang] were dispersed to collections worldwide by visiting archaeologists, including the French Sinologist Paul Pelliot (1878–1945)' (p. 138). Pelliot was a great Sinologist, but he simply carted out great treasures illegally and without compensation for the Chinese government. English, Japanese, American, German, Russian, and other adventurers, explorers, archeologists, and scholars joined in the wholesale export (or should it be called smuggling?) of spectacular objects from Silk Road sites, which were then dispatched to collections and museums in Europe, Japan, and the United States. This volume misses a great opportunity to inform the general reader about these purloined treasures.

The book starts with the assertion that 'There was no 'Silk Road'' and that 'slaves, horses, semi-precious stones, metals, pots, musk, medicines, glass, furs, and fruits' were also traded (p. 15). To be sure, as I have noted elsewhere, the local markets, which required only short-distance travel, dealt with essential products. Silk is a

luxury good and certainly not essential for survival. Yet a survey of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), which has the most complete records of foreign embassies of all the early dynasties, indicates that nearly every single one of the foreign envoys to China requested and received gifts of silk and was allowed to trade for silk as well. No other product comes as close in the lists of gifts to foreigners. Removal of 'silk' from its pedestal as an important product in Eurasian interactions may not be necessary.

There are always quibbles about coverage in a book. It is, in this case, surprising that Rabban Sauma, the first attested voyager from China to reach Europe is not mentioned, especially since he traveled during one of the heights of the Silk Roads trade and since Marco Polo, a contemporaneous traveler, is repeatedly cited. Another omission is Johan Elverskog's book *Buddhism and Islam on the Silk Road* (2010), which offers a comprehensive view of religions along the Silk Roads but is not cited.

Yet these are minor issues and should not be viewed as tarnishing Susan Whitfield's contributions to the study and popularization of the Silk Roads. Her book *Life Along the Silk Road* (2015), which consists of the stories of lightly fictionalized composites of individuals who traveled or played a role in the Silk Roads, is the most approachable and well-written popularization of the subject. This latest book adds to her earlier contributions.

Morris Rossabi
City University of New York, USA
E-mail address: mr63@columbia.edu.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhg.2019.12.003>

The James Losh Diaries, 1802-1833: Life and Weather in Early Nineteenth Century Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Deborah Smith. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle-upon-Tyne (2019). 337 pages, £64.99 hardcover

Weather diaries which offer fascinating insight into weather in the past, have long attracted the attention of those interested in the history of weather and regional climates. Often they provide further information about the locality or region and reflect the interests of the individual who kept them. The value of James Losh's (1763–1833) diaries has long been recognised having been used by geographers. Although the main focus of his entries is the weather, he discusses political and social developments in Newcastle-upon-Tyne more generally. Whilst previously studied and published in an abridged form, this book provides a complete transcription of his diaries covering the period January to May 1787 and 1802 to 1833. They are held by the Newcastle Literary and Philosophical Society, a body which Losh was involved in establishing in 1793 (there is a statue of him in the Library entrance); a further volume is held by Carlisle City Library and Archives, a transcription of which is also included in this book.

Chapter 1 provides a biographical introduction to Losh. Born at Woodside near Carlisle, he was educated at Trinity College, Cambridge, before pursuing a legal career. He considered joining the Church. A notable political reformer and Unitarian, his circle of friends included Humphrey Davy and the Lakeland poets Robert Southey, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth. He moved to Jesmond near Newcastle-upon-Tyne in 1798 from where he made his observations, playing a prominent role in politics and was influenced by developments in science and technology. His notes reflect his interests more widely in the state of agriculture, gardening and horticulture such as harvests and crop prices, the