

COWBOY NATURE

A POLITICAL ECOLOGY OF SONGS FROM THE AMERICAN FRONTIER

by

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## DEDICATION

I offer this little piece of scholarship in honor of my late grandfather, Harry Lee McDuffie. He was a rambler, a gambler, and often a long way from home. The people who didn't like him, well, they could leave him alone.

I grew up thinking cigar smoke smelled sweet and knowing that family was even sweeter. He was a man of many contradictions, true to his Texas cowboy roots. I wouldn't be here without his many moments of wisdom and many other wise cracks.

I gave 'em hell for you, Poppy. See you next time.

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## ABSTRACT

The cowboy is among the most pervasive images in Texas culture. Artworks depicting cowboys and the songs of the cowboys themselves dominate the post-revolutionary public consciousness. From the vaquero to the urban cowboy, its iconography has become a contested but normative framework for establishing Texan identity. However, many who don its trappings are unaware of its historical roots and unfamiliar with the reality of cowboy lifestyle. The myth of the cowboy surpassed cowboy reality. This mythology has ramifications, as its latent ideological claims—its epistemologies and its ontologies— influence political and cultural narratives through the present. In contemporary Texas, with its capitalist economic organization dominated by an energy industry that is predicated on the endless exploitation of non-human resources, concerns about environmental protection and climate change conflict with traditional narratives about Texanness.

This honors thesis explores the subjective understanding of “nature” in the songs of the cowboys. It complements existing research on this topic by expanding the contextualization of expressed and implicit meaning. This paper seeks to answer more than, “What does it mean?” It considers the ontological position of the cowboy in relation to the non-human in greater depth and with clearer relationships to present-day Texas. Through an interrogation of the buried epistemologies in cowboy songs, an application of new philosophical frameworks for understanding the relationship between subject and object, and historical contextualization, cowboy songs emerge at a nexus of conflicting ideas about nature that at once support and undermine the economic project of contemporary Texas.



## I. FROM VAQUEROS TO URBAN COWBOYS

As golden sun christens the Texas Hill Country, a university campus comes to life with icons of Texan identity. On the oldest land owned by Texas State University, a proud, masculine figure is set in bronze, reaching 18 feet into the Texas sky. Clad in a brimmed hat and chaps and with a saddle by his feet, he is the unmistakable type of a cowboy. Standing among native flora and stone, the “Vaquero” makes an impressive claim to a historic place. He looks natural under the expansive blues above him and the aged buildings on either side. Truthfully, he is what brings the place together. His symbol is a rallying point for many folks who came and continue to come from around the globe to make a new life here. It’s an image imbued with what some might call the Texas spirit. Certainly, the symbolism is rich and steeped in the deepest parts of what constitutes a Texan. And, if there was any doubt, his trappings are officially recognized and encoded into law as the state’s official hat, footwear, bread, and vehicle.<sup>1</sup>

Every bona fide Texan knows a little something about cowboys (at least enough to recognize them when they see them), but fewer are familiar with the term, “vaquero.” That’s a bit ironic, given that it’s simply the Spanish term for “cowboy.” But Texas history is full of ironies. Properly, however, the statue at Texas State is named, *Vaquero: Genesis of the Texas Cowboy*.<sup>2</sup> For it is from the *vaquero* that we get perhaps the most prolific symbol of Texas. The cowboy, that titan of Texan identity, comes with a lot of baggage, and it’s the persistence of the cowboy image in setting the measure of Texanness that makes cowboy characteristics worth studying. If Texans are as proud a lot as we’re known to be, then we

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<sup>1</sup> Texas Almanac, “Flags and Other Symbols,” Texas Almanac, last modified January 2022, <https://texasalmanac.com/topics/flags-symbols/flags-other-symbols>.

<sup>2</sup> The Wittliff Collections, “Vaquero: Genesis of the Texas Cowboy,” The Wittliff Collections, 2013, <https://www.thewittliffcollections.txstate.edu/exhibitions/past/past-2011-2015/vaquero2013.html>.

ought to think deeply about what we're so proud of. That's what I've set out to do here, putting the work of my fields—geography and music—to better understand the viewpoints expressed and perpetuated in cowboy music and, thus, Texan identity.

The many, varied, and dynamic markers of a Texan set the standard for who is and who isn't one. Defining a collective identity can cause discrimination or bring communities together; it can make one feel at home or feel like a stranger at home. And, with the continuing crisis at the southern border of the United States,<sup>3</sup> issues of American and Texan identities are of evergreen importance. We are quite literally deciding who is one of us and who isn't. Assimilation into Texanness or Americanness remains a part of the discussion, albeit a controversial one in defining its own parameters<sup>4</sup> and making it a cultural requirement.<sup>5</sup> As Light Townsend Cummins and Mary L. Scheer put it in their introduction to a volume exploring what makes a Texan, "Identity is shaped by myth and memory."<sup>6</sup> The cowboy, drawing on myth and rooted in memory, can serve as a proxy measure for who qualifies. Texans have explored these dilemmas and express these identities in music, which is a powerful vehicle for firming up a collective sensibility. But more on that later.

These cultural clashes bring up an irony in the deployment of the cowboy to convey Texan meaning in the present. Political conservatives in Texas, whom I often think of as

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<sup>3</sup> Greg Abbott, "Governor Abbott Issues Disaster Declaration in Response to Border Crisis in Texas," Office of the Texas Governor, June 1, 2021, <https://gov.texas.gov/news/post/governor-abbott-issues-disaster-declaration-in-response-to-border-crisis-in-texas>.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Alba, "Immigration and the American Realities of Assimilation and Multiculturalism," *Sociological Forum* 14, 1 (1999): 3-25.

<sup>5</sup> Hailey Branson-Potts, "Trump wants immigrants to 'share our values.' They say assimilation is much more complex," *Los Angeles Times*, April 11, 2017, <https://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-immigrant-assimilation-2017-story.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Light Townsend Cummins and Mary L. Scheer, "Introduction: Texan Identities," in *Texan Identities: Moving beyond Myth, Memory, and Fallacy in Texas History*, ed. Light Townsend Cummins and Mary L. Scheer (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2016), 5.

being overly concerned with preserving, or “conserving,” traditional symbols of cultural identity (consider the battle over moving the Alamo cenotaph, a 1930s addition to the battleground, from downtown San Antonio for one example<sup>7</sup>), are also the ones seeking increased restrictions on immigration.<sup>8</sup> They’d do well to realize our greatest symbol—much like our greatest foods, musics, and dances—is handed down to us from the folks whose progeny conservatives would like to keep from coming (back) into Texas.



Figure 1. Vaquero: Genesis of the Texas Cowboy by Clete Shields at Texas State University in San Marcos, Texas.

That brings us to an important historical note about the origins of the cowboy, one that guides the scope of my research here. Growing up surrounded by Texas lore, I assumed the Anglo cowboy was an invention more ancient than it was. That is, I expected the

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<sup>7</sup> Mark Dunphy, "5 things to know about the Alamo Cenotaph – and the drama – ahead of a vote to move it," *San Antonio Express-News*, September 21, 2020, <https://www.expressnews.com/alamo/article/5-things-to-know-about-the-Alamo-Cenotaph-and-15583778.php>.

<sup>8</sup> Mark Dorazio, et al., "Report of 2020 Platform & Resolutions Committee," Republican Party of Texas, 2020, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1HFtBz1vb6KSqwu9Rjv4zxc-85q14XzhZ/view>.

tradition was prominent at least since the Republic of Texas (1836–1845), if not before. I was shocked to discover that the adoption of the cowboy myth was a much more recent, though no less formative, entrant in the state’s economy and culture. Until the mid-1800s, the ranching *vaquero* tradition was largely a Hispanic one. It wasn’t until the post-Civil War boom in the cattle industry that Anglo colonists began to appropriate the methods of the *vaquero*,<sup>9</sup> creating the type of the Texas Cowboy that dominates today. This appropriation of the *vaquero*, followed by the striking absence of the *vaquero* in the Anglo myth, reflects the broader cultural (i.e., racial) conflicts at play in Texas since American colonization in the Mexican state of Coahuila y Tejas and through the Texas Revolution that severed Texas from Mexico, the annexation into the United States, the making of modern Texas, and the present.

The stories we tell ourselves matter, and the dominant story of the Texas cowboy has been stripped of much of its rich history. It was Anglicized and tidied up considerably since then. This tidy (or, perhaps, poetically untidy) myth is what I’ll be studying. While, on its face, that might seem like I’m continuing an ignoble tradition by limiting my scope to the colonial, primarily Anglo cowboy, I hope I’ve provided some context as to why. I don’t want to ignore the honest roots of the myth or fail to pay them due. In reading the mostly-Anglo stylization of the cowboy, I am studying an unreal (in the literal sense of having existed outside of imagination), mythical symbol in the fullness of its existence. It is built on the backs of indigenous peoples, Hispanic cultures, and the honest-to-God cowboy, who “was actually a dirty, overworked laborer who fried his brains under a prairie sun, or rode endless miles in rain and wind to mend fences or look for lost calves.”<sup>10</sup> According to David Stanley, Black and Mexican laborers comprised as much as 37-percent of the

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<sup>9</sup> Phil Livingston, “The History of the Vaquero,” *American Cowboy*, February 13, 2017, <https://www.americancowboy.com/ranch-life-archive/history-vaquero>.

<sup>10</sup> William H. Forbis, *The Cowboys* (New York: Time Life, 1973), 7.

working hands during the trail-drive era,<sup>11</sup> which makes their absence from American cowboy myth even more striking and problematic.

I'm not here to perpetuate the heroic myth. This is, on the contrary, a criticism of the myth and its effects. (In fact, I'd argue there is something simple but inspiring about mending fences in the rain if you're living in the context the real cowboys were.) Naturally, then, I linger on the myth at the expense of the history. It's my sincere hope to one day study the under-told stories of Black and Mexican cowboys, discover their musics, and see what differences crop up. For now, though, I am studying the controlling image—for better or worse—and how it aided or contradicted the creation of Texas today. The odd story of the mythical cowboy can inform critical readings of Texas history, music, and culture and make those of us who live here better, more honest Texans to boot.

So, what is a cowboy? What does the presence of a cowboy or his component parts mean in popular culture or media such as art, literature, or music? We're talking more than boots and hats measured in gallons. We're looking for essence.

While the cowboy of today might be made in the image of the 19th-Century cowboy, who, as we mentioned, was made in the image of the 16th–18th Century *vaquero*, we can't assume all is the same. Actually, it's probably more like the relationship between “soccer god” Cristiano Ronaldo and the bust sculpted in his image for the Cristiano Ronaldo International Airport.<sup>12</sup> In Texas, though, it works in reverse. Reality is the bust and the flesh-and-blood Ronaldo is the myth. (If you're in need of a good laugh or don't get the reference, look it up.) Put another way, as the cattle industry declined in Texas and the mythical cowboy rose nostalgically in its place, the image was “wildly disfigured by novels,

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<sup>11</sup> David Stanley, “Cowboy Poetry Then and Now,” in *Cowboy Poets & Cowboy Poetry*, ed. David Stanley and Elaine Thatcher (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 10.

<sup>12</sup> Intisar Seraaj and Christina Zdanowicz, “New Cristiano Ronaldo bust revealed that actually looks like him,” *CNN*, November 28, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/11/27/sport/new-bust-of-real-madrid-player-cristiano-ronaldo-trnd/index.html>.

movies, and television.”<sup>13</sup> As writer William H. Forbis put it, contrary to the realities of life as a cowboy, “the [mythical] cowboy had a heroic image of himself as a hard-riding, fast-shooting hombre, and that is how he appears in books and paintings of the Old West.”<sup>14</sup>

Taking a step back, we find that this hero emerged in fullness of form during the nadir era of race relations in the United States, which spanned from the end of Reconstruction (1877) to the early 20th Century.<sup>15</sup> Then, with the advent of new storytelling media such as film and radio shows through the 1940s, but not excepting more traditional forms like the novel, the cowboy was carried into national and international prominence.<sup>16</sup> The heavy lifting in this myth building process took place while the United States was in the throes of racial violence. It is no wonder, then, that literary cowboys of Mexican or Black heritage are outside the mainstream today. Anglo Americans were constructing a pseudo-historical hero in the image of their desired culture—absent persons of color. In more ways than one, the cowboy was “corrupted in reverse.”<sup>17</sup> Put another way, the cowboy was whitewashed. This makes studying the mythologized cowboy all the more important, as the characteristics it retained were presumptively of importance to the historical oppressors.

As with all myth, the cowboy retained a certain pliability throughout its history that allowed members of the controlling culture to project themselves into his boots, give each other something to aspire to, and measure the cultural “in”-ness or “out”-ness of a would-

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<sup>13</sup> Jorge Iber, “Vaqueros in the Western Cattle Industry,” in *The Cowboy Way: An Exploration of History and Culture*, ed. Paul H. Carlson (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2000), 21.

<sup>14</sup> Forbis, *The Cowboys*, 7.

<sup>15</sup> Deborah Mercer and Edith Beckett, “Unit 8 The Rise of Jim Crow and the Nadir, 1878-1915,” New Jersey State Library, last updated September 19, 2003, [https://www.njstatelib.org/research\\_library/new\\_jersey\\_resources/highlights/african\\_american\\_history\\_curriculum/unit\\_8\\_rise\\_of\\_jim\\_crow/](https://www.njstatelib.org/research_library/new_jersey_resources/highlights/african_american_history_curriculum/unit_8_rise_of_jim_crow/).

<sup>16</sup> Paul H. Carlson, “Myth and the Modern Cowboy, in *The Cowboy Way: An Exploration of History and Culture*, ed. Paul H. Carlson (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2000), 5.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*



Figure 2. Scott Glenn as “Wes” in James Bridges’s *Urban Cowboy* (1980).  
This is hardly fence-mending attire, but somehow still cowboy enough.

be Texan. Historian Paul H. Carlson expanded on the many guises of the cowboy and their debatable legitimacy.<sup>18</sup> Importantly, he notes the breadth of the image’s adoption in geographical contexts spanning both land and society. It’s not just Wrangler-wearing cowhands anymore. There’s also a strong contingent of urban cowboys, decked out in rhinestones as they tour the local honky-tonks without spending a single day herding cattle. Are they any less cowboy than the rest? The wild popularity of films such as James Bridges’s *Urban Cowboy*<sup>19</sup>—set in industrial, not agrarian, Houston—suggests the public is comfortable enough with gussied-up oilfield hands in urban dance halls as its cowboys. It seems as if there was hardly a southwestern, Anglo role that couldn’t be stretched to fit the cowboy.

Don Walker’s seminal book, *Clio’s Cowboys*, investigated these many representations of the cowboy in (primarily visual) media. He found that the history and fiction surrounding cowboy myth was, using an appropriate metaphor, “a mixed herd indeed.” Most importantly, though, he argued that “some history and fiction approach each other in

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> *Urban Cowboy*, directed by James Bridges (Paramount Pictures Studios, 1980).

material and method and that here, in this apparent converging, lies the supposed frontier.”<sup>20</sup> Though the cowboy was nearly homeless on the prairie, he found a forever home at the nexus of fact and fiction. This a testament to the need to understand the cowboy as historic reality, popular myth, and frequently both.

There is a certain *je ne sais quoi* about the cowboy that makes it so pervasive. It’s hard not to get sucked into the myth. Even as I write this at a Starbucks in San Marcos (hardly a stop on the cattle route these days), I’m wearing a pair of leather boots and boot-cut jeans to match. Though, I will admit I’m wearing a Guatemala-made shirt from Ohio-based Express, Inc. Quite the metaphor for Texas today! Regardless, we’re captivated by the cowboy in ways subliminal and subversive in today’s urban Texas.

Fortunately for Texas scholars working at the nexus of music, history, and culture, great work was done to preserve the English-language songs of the cowboys. A great deal more could be studied, tracing the cowboy songs of the trail to contemporary Texas musics—connecting the sun-fried and the Lone Star-drenched brains of agrarian and urban cowboys alike. Even more must be done to rediscover the music of non-white cowboys. And, even still, feminist readings of the cowboy songs could help us understand gender and identity in pre-modern, post-Civil War Texas. Unfortunately, all of these are beyond the scope of this work.

As mentioned earlier, debates over Texan identity are often drawn along racial or ethnic lines, as various communities within our political geography express themselves collectively—especially, for the purpose of this project, through music. Under capitalist relations of production, cultural products like music are commodified as they produce surplus value.<sup>21</sup> As music produced by individual artists in the stylings of their

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<sup>20</sup> Don D. Walker, *Clio’s Cowboys: Studies in the Historiography of the Cattle Trade* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981), 94.

<sup>21</sup> Bernard Miège, “The Cultural Commodity,” *Media, Culture and Society* 1 (1979): 301.



communities enters the mainstream, then, it realizes economic value in a system where that economic value is directly related to social and political power. In this system, the battle for identity dominance in the mainstream is also a struggle for economic dominance. This is not new to the American story, nor is it disparate from the story of the westward expansion of the United States. The exclusion of anyone non-white from society and its economy has roots in the United States' British, colonial origins, to its foundation as an independent (white) state, and throughout its delayed efforts to end slavery and reticence to make reparation to those dispossessed of their land and labor values (including not just Black slaves but also indigenous Americans). Attempts by recent non-white artists such as Selena Quintanilla to enter a state of universal recognition elucidates these cultural conflicts in closer-to-present context. In this frame, debates over identity are given not just social but political and economic urgency. To be clear, this argument should not be construed as advocating for the replacement of racist capital with a race-neutral capitalistic system (as if that was somehow possible in our historical context). It is not normative. Theorizing the role of capitalist relations of production in music is an important tool for crafting an economic critique, but a full-fledged look at the political economy of music is beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, insights provided by economic geographer David Harvey about the mechanisms of imperialism and accumulation by dispossession<sup>22</sup> were particularly important in contextualizing the struggle of those outside the normative image of Texan identity to gain power in broader systems of economy and racism.

The following section provides context on the relationship between music and “nature,” drawing on political ecology and ecomusicology literature to emphasize the importance of understanding the ways we discuss the non-human and how it can undermine or reproduce anthropocentric worldviews.

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<sup>22</sup> David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 137–183.

## II. THEORIZING MUSIC AND “NATURE”

This thesis is an act of ecomusicological scholarship. Ecomusicology, formally conceived, is a fairly new field. Its roots are primarily found in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, though concepts that would now be labeled “ecomusicological” are found as far back as the ancient Greeks.<sup>23</sup> As its name suggests, it is a continuation and expansion of the broader project of musicology, defined broadly in the Oxford Dictionary of Music as “music scholarship,”<sup>24</sup> toward a synthesis with ecology. This includes analyzing representational elements of musical works that depict “natural” elements such as landscapes or birdsongs, as in Daniel M. Grimley’s reading of Jean Sibelius’s *Tapiola*.<sup>25</sup> It also includes works of zoomusicology, the study of the music-like aspects of sound communication among non-human animals,<sup>26</sup> as in Bernie Krause’s *The Great Animal Orchestra*.<sup>27</sup> But it is broader than both of these.

In ecomusicology’s breadth, questions central to musicological scholarship in general come into sharper relief—as the aforementioned examples will prove. Ecomusicology relentlessly pursues the ontological question: what is music? The musicologist Stephen Davies notes that answering this question is rarely attempted, perhaps because “we are usually highly successful in identifying music as such, and don’t feel the need of a definition. And the task of producing a watertight definition of such a wide-ranging

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<sup>23</sup> Aaron S. Allen and Kevin Dawe, “Ecomusicologies,” in *Current Directions in Ecomusicology* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 3.

<sup>24</sup> Tim Rutherford-Johnson, Michael Kennedy, and Joyce Bourne, eds., “Musicology,” in *Oxford Dictionary of Music, 6th Ed.*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 314.

<sup>25</sup> Daniel M. Grimley, “Music, Landscape, Attunement: Listening to Sibelius’s *Tapiola*,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 64, 2 (2011): 394–398.

<sup>26</sup> Emily Doolittle and Bruno Gingras, “Quick Guide: Zoomusicology,” *Current Biology Magazine* 25 (2015): R819.

<sup>27</sup> Bernie Krause, *The Great Animal Orchestra: Finding the Origins of Music in the World’s Wild Places* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2012).

phenomenon as music is not only thankless but also challenging.”<sup>28</sup> Unfortunately, however, his answer to this is limited. He suggests defining music should “appeal to the intentional use of structural/generative principles viewed historically against the background of musical traditions that are construed sufficiently broadly that they take in not only the immediate practices connected with music making but also the cultural forces that facilitate and structure this.”<sup>29</sup>

This approach is circular in that it requires the analyst to recognize practices of music making in order to identify what music is. Further, it risks entrenching power in historically dominant traditions as it decides what is properly music in light of those traditions. Davies’s definition seems aware but unconcerned with this risk, as it apolitically refers to cultural forces and the act of structuring. Lastly, the requirement of musical intentionality and attention to structural/generative principles reproduces a power dynamic that puts the human above the non-human, revealing a firmly anthropocentric bias, and the human musician above any audience. In a time when we are facing a human-driven mass extinction<sup>30</sup> and an overwhelming scientific consensus about anthropogenic climate change,<sup>31</sup> can we afford to maintain this bias in any corner of our scholarship?

The way out of this definitional loop is to broaden our definition of what constitutes music, which I argued for in rejecting the historical term, “absolute music,” in 2021.<sup>32</sup> This project is a distinctly ecological one, for thinking ecologically forces us to realize that all

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<sup>28</sup> Stephen Davies, “On Defining Music,” *The Monist* 95, 4 (2012): 535.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 552.

<sup>30</sup> Robert H. Cowie, Philippe Bouchet, and Benoît Fontaine, “The Sixth Mass Extinction: fact, fiction or speculation?” *Biological Reviews* 97 (2022): 656.

<sup>31</sup> National Aeronautics and Space Administration, “Scientific Consensus: Earth’s Climate Is Warming”, Global Climate Change, last modified 2021, <https://climate.nasa.gov/scientific-consensus/>.

<sup>32</sup> Cutter González, “Up from Absolute Music,” *Texas State Undergraduate Research Journal* 9, 1 (2021): 18–23.

beings are interconnected.<sup>33</sup> Timothy Morton articulates the complexities and admitted weirdness of ecological thought in developing the concept of dark ecology (emphasis in the original):

What is the present? How can it be thought? What is presence? Ecological awareness forces us to think and feel at multiple scales, scales that disorient normative concepts such as “present,” “life,” “human,” “nature,” “thing,” “thought,” and “logic.” *Dark Ecology* shall argue that there are layers of attunement to ecological reality more accurate than what is habitual in the media, in the academy, and in society at large.<sup>34</sup>

It’s important to clarify the philosophical framework that enables Morton’s ecological position: object-oriented ontology (OOO). This theoretical perspective emphasizes that things in themselves are ungraspable<sup>35</sup>, that anything can be considered an object,<sup>36</sup> but that an object must be “irreducible in both directions: ... *more than its pieces and less than its effects*”<sup>37</sup> (emphasis in the original). Notably, object-oriented ontology gives primacy to aesthetic theory, affirming its appropriateness as an entry point for this analysis of musical works.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 94.

<sup>34</sup> Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 159.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>37</sup> Graham Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything* (London: Pelican Books, 2018), 53.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 59–102.

Morton also theorizes about the existence of hyperobjects, entities that exist at such large timescales that comprehension of their breadth is nearly impossible.<sup>39</sup> With Dominic Boyer, they consider (in a manner that is openly vague and brief) hypersubjects, those humans who wield outsized power usually bestowed upon them by their race or economic status, and hyposubjects, which appear to humans after a full ontological reorientation via the ecological thought.<sup>40</sup> These last two won't be of principal importance to this project, but I will make use of the hyperobject concept extensively. Whereas Morton emphasizes the timescale of an object in attaining hyperobjectivity, I would emphasize in equal measure the geographic scale and open it up further to smaller scales in both categories. And, as is only appropriate in this theoretical frame that appreciates subjectivity in the truth of its limitations, the correctness of adding the "hypo-" prefix is bound to the context in which it is used. This informs how I analyze the relationships between cowboys and their environments or components thereof in moments of subliminality especially—explained at length in the analysis.

When considering the implications of a dark ecology perspective in music, we are necessarily led to a radically different conclusion than that offered by Stephen Davies. Namely, a conclusion that "music" should be a broad term, encompassing all that is intentional sound, regardless of the type of organism providing the intention or the temporal distance between intention and effect. Wonderfully, this is supported by scholarship on the ontology of music as language. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow famously claimed that "music is the universal language of mankind." While Longfellow's intent was likely more poetic than scientific, the phrase has gained traction in the scientific

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<sup>39</sup> Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 19.

<sup>40</sup> Timothy Morton and Dominic Boyer, *Hyposubjects: On Becoming Human* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2021), 14.

community—even as recently as 2019.<sup>41</sup> Kathleen Marie Higgins, a philosopher at The University of Texas at Austin, took this claim to task. They found that music precedes language, and that it is perhaps more appropriate to consider language a music than to consider music a language.<sup>42</sup> In this way, music’s universality is simultaneously undermined and reemphasized. Its cognitive roots are found earlier in the mind, prior to the ordered linguistic thinking we know as distinctly belonging to our species.

Research into animal musics further evidences the unboundedness of music. It continually problematizes the hard categories of human and non-human. Hollis Taylor and Dominique Lestel find that *aspects* of music might belong to certain species, but many others *transcend* the species boundary. Additionally the rhetorical shifts in musicology as it expands the definition of music to include the non-human follow similar trends regarding concepts in the life sciences.<sup>43</sup> (We’re headed in the right direction.) Music *qua* music transcends any single species and, thus, cannot be adequately explained in terms limited to our species. With something so celebrated in human culture suddenly found beyond us, we face reckonings not just in aesthetics but in ethics and politics.

The idea that music is exclusively human is certainly pervasive in Western thought, but it is relatively new.<sup>44</sup> The concept of nature has suffered similarly, concurrently, and with shared purpose. Its recent prominence is unsurprising, as systems of capital sought resources to produce value. Severing and subverting the nonhuman was/is a convenient conceptual break that enables the exploitation of non-human things, whether conceived of

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<sup>41</sup> Jed Gottlieb, “Music everywhere,” *The Harvard Gazette*, November 21, 2019, <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2019/11/new-harvard-study-establishes-music-is-universal/>.

<sup>42</sup> Kathleen Marie Higgins, *The Music between Us: Is Music a Universal Language?* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 78-105.

<sup>43</sup> Hollis Taylor and Dominique Lestel, “The Australian Pied Butcherbird and the Natureculture Continuum,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary Music Studies* 5, 1 (2011): 53.

<sup>44</sup> Marcello Sorce Keller, “Linnaeus, Zoomusicology, Ecomusicology, and the Quest for Meaningful Categories,” *Musicological Annual* LII, 2 (2016): 166.

as living or nonliving, for human ends. Even worse, we have proven ready and willing to create artificial categories within our own species to exploit one another throughout history. Bruce Willems-Braun, a geographer, studied the ways nature was known to different communities in British Columbia. Their analysis of photographic artworks of the Puget Sound brilliantly uncovered “buried epistemologies” that transmitted neoliberal meaning and subverted First Nations understandings about nature in ways that were not obvious but were consequential (emphasis in the original):

Both aspects of representation, speaking *of* and speaking *for*, are present simultaneously. Failure to attend to this ... risks engaging in an unacknowledged, hidden, or buried politics that a metaphysics of presence renders invisible. Yet we cannot simply avoid the problem of representation: one cannot *not* represent. Responsibility (political and academic) therefore lies at that point of internal tension that marks the “double session” of representation; one needs to be vigilant about the problem and politics of representation.<sup>45</sup>

This reiterates the urgency of deconstructing systems of oppression, be they in economies or in artworks. As with all things, the categories *art* and *economy* are not firm, and relationships between them are mutually constitutive and supportive. As a musician, the idea that my craft, which is usually and popularly considered the most transcendent even among the arts, could be coopted to serve corrupt ends is unbearable.

The project of expanding our definition of music is not only theoretically grounded, but politically urgent.

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<sup>45</sup> Bruce Willems-Braun, “Buried Epistemologies: The Politics of Nature in (Post)colonial British Columbia,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 87, 1 (1997): 3–31.

From my first experience with “the ecological thought” in the works of Timothy Morton, I was reminded of Waldo Tobler’s First Law of Geography. I learned this concept in my early geography coursework and subsequently shared it with beginning geography students in the “Planet Earth” course I taught at Texas A&M University. This concept, developed in 1970, is summarized by Tobler as, “everything is related to everything else, but near things are more related than distant things.”<sup>46</sup> The ecological thought spans many fields, and is a growing recognition of the reality of our existence. All things are related, and reality defies categorization. It is from this geographical context and an OOO framework that the theories at play in my analysis of cowboy songs emerge.

In expanding the definition of music, I treat cowboy songs and symphonies as equally dignified artistic products. The intention and the purpose behind them might be worlds apart, but valuations on creative intention risk all the –centric biases I hope to avoid; it risks burying and silently perpetuating harmful epistemological assumptions. I treat meaning as polysemic and subjective, and I treat subjectivity as important and influential. I aim to be ecological.

Object-oriented ontology suggests that my analysis is hopelessly limited. I cannot access the fullness of these songs even if I tried. That doesn’t make me want to throw my hands up in defeat, however. The benefit, here, is the honesty it demands. I cannot infallibly suggest this is the only or objectively true meaning intended by the singers. I can only infer meaning and analyze how the text operates grammatically and in its historical and social contexts. The same goes for the subjects of my study. In my analysis, we’ll dig deep into the cowboy songs to glean some understanding of the *partial* and *subjective* experience of the

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<sup>46</sup> Waldo R. Tobler, “A Computer Movie Simulating Urban Growth in the Detroit Region,” *Economic Geography* (Supplement: Proceedings, International Geographical Union Commission on Quantitative Methods), 46 (1970): 234-240.



cowboys in relation to “nature.” I’ll couch this in the social, historical, and economic contexts of the cowboy era through the present, exploring the relationship between what the cowboys expressed and how this could have informed the ways Texans created the economic empire of today. In seeking to understand whether cowboys’ perspectives on the non-human worked with or against dominant narratives about “nature”—as other, as having anthropogenic or intrinsic meaning, as object or hyperobject and at which scales—this thesis contributes to the literature on Texas myth and identity, the cowboy, and geography and ecomusicology broadly.

### III. METHODS

Texans are blessed with a wealth of cowboy music, though the records are peppered like a dummy at a shooting range. The record isn't thorough, as the folk tradition was largely oral. When they started to get written down, the methods used weren't overly scientific. My goal, here, is not to provide an anthology or a comprehensive analysis of *all* cowboy songs, but to analyze the controlling source of the cowboy type through time. The largest and most comprehensive collection of cowboy songs is John A. Lomax's *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*.<sup>47</sup> This work garnered praise from President Theodore Roosevelt, himself a typified frontiersman, which is now included in the book's front material. Further, it was instrumental in popularizing the cowboy myth in general but especially the myth of the singing cowboy. Rather than providing a work of scholarship, Lomax aimed to provide the early 20th-Century public with an entertaining myth rooted in, but not totally reflective of, reality.<sup>48</sup> In fact, the collection was likely scrubbed of the grittier parts of cowboy life. Songs that contained more sensitive content were edited or excluded, and the act of singing, itself, was probably rare. Songs were more likely yelled or not heard at all given the physical demands of sound production while horseback.<sup>49</sup> The collection's purpose as entertainment was confounded by the introduction, which gave it undue scholarly dress and is viewed, in retrospect, with skepticism. However, its influence on myth—which is the subject of scrutiny here—runs wide and deep, so I limited my considerations to the songs immortalized within its pages.

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<sup>47</sup> John A. Lomax, ed. *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* (New York: Sturgis & Walton Company, 1911).

<sup>48</sup> Mark Fenster, "Preparing the Audience, Informing the Performers: John A. Lomax and Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads," *American Music* 7,3 (1989): 275.

<sup>49</sup> Guy Logsdon, "Songcatchers in the West: Cowboy Songs," in *The Ballad Collectors of North America: How Gathering Folksongs Transformed Academic Thought and American Identity*, ed. Scott B. Spencer (Toronto: Scarecrow Press, 2012), 52.

My analysis follows the work already done by Robert G. Weiner in understanding cowboy songs in nature. His chapter in *The Cowboy Way*<sup>50</sup> evidenced themes I found in my own reading. I agree entirely with his analysis, though I see it as incomplete, and I will use it as a guide. I hope to supplement his reading with greater depth of political and ontological context, as suggested by the preceding chapter of this thesis. Like Weiner, I use word-level, phrase-level, and document-level analysis to understand the subjective language employed in the cowboy songs. Here, “document-level” refers to a song entirely, not the complete anthology. I also draw on Willems-Braun’s work, discussed earlier,<sup>51</sup> to contextualize cowboy subjectivities. While Willems-Braun’s research focused on visual artworks, the contestations of the Puget Sound mirror those of American cowboy life as expressed in their songs many ways.

To begin, I transcribed the 112 songs in Lomax’s collection. This provided a document I could readily search, annotate, and otherwise reorganize; select annotations are included as an appendix. Then, I annotated each song, highlighting mentions of the non-human, broadly defined as objects, in the OOO sense, that were neither human nor the product of human industry. This includes landscapes, astronomical phenomena, non-human animals, and plants. It excludes routes, trails, animal-sourced but human-made products like saddles, and “alkali” (treated water). There are limitations to these categories, and many things (like saddles and alkali) could be rightly discussed in terms of their animal origin or human production. I try to address these, but the analysis is not hindered by these outliers. In fact, they contribute to the fuzziness between non-human and human animals that this thesis tries to create.

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<sup>50</sup> Robert G. Weiner, “Cowboy Songs and Nature in the Late Nineteenth Century,” in *The Cowboy Way: An Exploration of History and Culture*, ed. Paul H. Carlson (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2000), edited by Paul H. Carlson, 141–154.

<sup>51</sup> Willems-Braun, “Buried Epistemologies.”

After annotating, I took notes on the context of each instance, situating them first within Weiner's framework, then within Willems-Braun's. These dual interpretations provide historical context, insights from political ecology, and a new depth of understanding that is unattainable if we considered analysis on this topic complete with Weiner or neglected to include his work in a new analysis.

Lastly, I identified typical or particularly poignant examples for inclusion in the text of this thesis. I selected depictions of the prairie, cattle, and religious belief since these exemplified the breadth and variety of conceptions of the non-human in nature. These were chosen at my discretion, so I opted to include select annotations as an appendix so readers could evaluate the songs themselves, my notes, my interpretations, and my example choices.

The manuscript of this thesis is the result of this process of transcription, annotation, contextualization, and synthesis.

#### IV. ANALYSIS

In his analysis of the cowboy songs, Weiner finds two distinct ideas and an overall theme.<sup>52</sup> The first idea is that nature is a dreadful place, which is juxtaposed with the second, that nature is a wonderful place. The theme, whether nature is wondrous or terrible, is that it must be conquered. The conqueror may be the cowboy himself or “civilization,” broadly, and the economy that powers it. I would add that the two ideas are both expressions of the sublime, that of the strongest emotional effect, following the definition offered by Edmund Burke.<sup>53</sup> Burke’s concept prioritized the effectiveness of nature over art in eliciting subliminal feeling, though recent research suggests the two are equally able to do so but in different ways. Nature is more inclined to existential danger, while art is more inclined to existential safety.<sup>54</sup>

The cowboy songs reflect this subliminality in expected ways. From the first song in the collection (and one of the more famous), “The Dying Cowboy”, we hear the terror of death subsumed beneath the terror of being left on the vast and lonely prairie. The singer, on his deathbed, pleads with his comrades, “O bury me not on the lone prairie”. This plea occurs 17 times over 18 stanzas. The character lives for only 14 of these iterations, but the line is repeated posthumously in the chorus.<sup>55</sup> (Unfortunately for our ill-fated cowboy, his friends denied his request.) It is interesting that the infinitude of death is less concerning to the dying man than the vastness of the unfriendly prairie. But it is not nature, in general, that

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<sup>52</sup> Weiner, “Cowboy Songs and Nature,” 143.

<sup>53</sup> Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 33–34.

<sup>54</sup> Alice Chirico, Robert R. Clewis, David B. Yaden, and Andrea Gaggioli, “Nature Versus Art as Elicitors of the Sublime: A Virtual Reality Study,” *Plos One* (2021): 7.

<sup>55</sup> Lomax, *Cowboy Songs*, 3–8.

he fears, it is nature unbounded and unfamiliar. Referring to his wished-for resting place, nature is a marker of refuge, of safety:

“In fancy I listen to the well known words  
Of the free, wild winds and the song of the birds;  
I think of home and the cottage in the bower  
And the scenes I loved in my childhood’s hour.”<sup>56</sup>

This romantic image of home nestled in the trees and resonant with the music of non-human animals evidences the dual perceptions of nature, dangerous and wonderful, within a single song.

This song, in particular, draws on a tradition whose path is neither linear nor unidirectional. According to James J. Fuld, its earliest roots are in a poem by E. H. Chapin about burial at sea, “The Ocean-Buried,” and some of the lyrics are contested even after it was adapted for the prairie.<sup>57</sup> Most strikingly, the very word upon which my analysis hinges is different depending on whom you ask. Other versions are written, “Oh, bury me *out* on the lone prairie” rather than, “O, bury me *not* on the lone prairie” (emphasis added). This single, three-letter word contains a world of meaning. If the version containing “out” had proliferated, it would have perpetuated a sense of nostalgia for the prairie. Instead, Lomax included the version with “not,” for reasons unstated and likely not uncontroversial, which imbues the prairie with a sense of terror, as described above. Contestations about the “authenticity” of the words and music of this song, among others, has led some scholars to

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>57</sup> James J. Fuld, “Oh, Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie,” in *The Book of World-Famous Music: Classical, Popular, and Folk, 4th Edition* (New York: Dover Publications, 1995), 396–398.

dismiss them.<sup>58</sup> However, myth is not particularly concerned with authenticity. As my own Texan mother once told me, perception is reality. Whether we like it or not, Lomax's choices will continue to shape public perception in ways that refereed journal entries could only hope to. Academic debates of this sort are important in exposing the ways agency was, consciously or otherwise, exercised in creating a canon of cowboy literature. The most important step, though, follows after, when we consider how those choices contributed to or detracted from the political projects that loomed larger than any lone cowboy. In sum, Lomax's choice of "not" adds a song chock-full of striking images to the canon of terrible nature.

In any case, the prairie is a common venue for the terrors of cowboy life, and the cowboys sang about it mostly in kind. In fact, there are only two mentions of the prairie (of the 48 explicit mentions throughout the collection) that contradict the prevailing narrative. In "The Bull-whacker,"<sup>59</sup> the cowboys sang of "the prairie so green," a symbol of vitality in itself, but also food for the trailing cattle. Compare this to images of "the prairie so bare,"<sup>60</sup> "the prairie so dry,"<sup>61</sup> and the "hot prairie sod."<sup>62</sup> The entire "Bull-whacker" song is an assertion of self in defiance of the trials of day-to-day life, evidenced by the iteration of "Root hog or die" at the end of each stanza, an Appalachian saying that means to survive and fend for yourself.<sup>63</sup> "The Jolly Cowboy"<sup>64</sup> gives the only other upbeat reading of the prairie in its second, fourth, and eighth stanzas:

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<sup>58</sup> John Barsness, "The Dying Cowboy Song," *Western American Literature* 2, 1 (1967): 54.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 69-71.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 234.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 318.

<sup>63</sup> Tipper, "Appalachian Sayings - Root Hog Or Die," *Blind Pig & the Acorn*, June 2, 2015, <https://blindpigandtheacorn.com/appalachian-sayings-root-hog-or-die/>.

<sup>64</sup> Lomax, *Cowboy Songs*, 284-286.

[2] “Ho, I'm a jolly cowboy, from Texas now I hail,  
Give me my quirt and pony, I'm ready for the trail;  
I love the rolling prairies, they're free from care and strife,  
Behind a herd of longhorns I'll journey all my life.

[4] “Oh, I am a Texas cowboy, lighthearted, brave, and free,  
To roam the wide, wide prairie, 'tis always joy to me.  
My trusty little pony is my companion true,  
O'er creeks. and hills and rivers he's sure to pull me through.

[8] “Ho, I'm a jolly cowboy, from Texas now I hail,  
Give me my bond to Mary, I'll quit the Lone Star trail.  
I love the rolling prairies, they're free from care and strife,  
But I'll quit the herd of longhorns for the sake of my little wife.”

Unlike most songs, this one, too, uplifts the singers and praises the cowboy lifestyle. The “wide, wide” prairie is a source of joy rather than consternation. The up-by-your-bootstraps mood of these songs makes them an unsurprising venue for downplaying the treachery bemoaned elsewhere in the collection. Overall, though, these two songs are exceptions to the rule. The prairie operates on a hyperobjective scale, reaching such vastness, mystery, and danger as to evoke overwhelming dread. The prairie is an entity unto itself, and not one to be trifled with.

Cattle, often referred to as dogies or specifically as longhorns, do not reach hyperobjective status even when they are in massive herds. Unlike the prairie, they can be



plead with at smaller (individual) and larger (herd) scales, as evidenced by the gentle requests in “Night-Herding Song.”<sup>65</sup> One might expect a substantial conceptual distance between the cowboy, or any human, and the dogies, but this is not always the case. Certainly, the cattle are seen as largely passive participants in the economic dealings of humankind a majority of the time (“As you, O Lord, my herd behold, / It represents a sack of gold;”<sup>66</sup>). On the whole, they are firmly conquered, subordinated, and stripped of their subliminality. In a highly poetic exception, though, the cowboys sang about the dogies in a simile for themselves:

They say there will be a great round-up,  
And cowboys, like dogies, will stand,  
To be marked by the Riders of Judgment  
Who are posted and know every brand.

I know there’s many a stray cowboy  
Who’ll be lost at the great, final sale,  
When he might have gone in the green pastures  
Had he known of the dim, narrow trail.

I wonder if ever a cowboy  
Stood ready for that Judgment Day,  
And could say to the Boss of the Riders,  
“I’m ready, come drive me away.”

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 324–325.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 24.

For they, like the cows that are locoed,  
Stampede at the sight of a hand,  
Are dragged with a rope to the round-up,  
Or get marked with some crooked man's brand.

And I'm scared that I'll be a stray yearling,  
A maverick, unbranded on high,—  
And get cut in the bunch with the "rusties"  
When the Boss of the Riders goes by.

For they tell of another big owner  
Whose ne'er overstocked, so they say,  
But who always makes room for the sinner  
Who drifts from the straight, narrow way.<sup>67</sup>

This is a striking departure from the pseudo-industrial treatment of a non-human animal resource. Not only does it personify the cattle, it does so in a religious context. Even more, it takes place at final judgment, the ultimate spiritual moment. And it is not the only song to use cattle and cowboy imagery interchangeably (cf. "The Cowboy at Church"<sup>68</sup>).

Perhaps "passive" wasn't the right word to describe the cattle. "Receptive" might have been better. By the very act of pleading with the cattle, the cattle's individual and collective agencies are legitimized. Their agency is fated to serve an abstract goal—financial gain—for the cowboys, but there is always a possibility that the cattle could run amok. (Sometimes

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 18-19.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 246-248.

they did!<sup>69</sup>) In running the cattle drive parallel with judgment day, these non-human animals are proxies for intensely personal human experiences on the drive; their story is co-created with the cowboys' stories, and the cowboys recognize this. Cowboys were not wealthy, and they had little to their names. They were laborers in a system that would neatly map onto a Marxist critique. Cowboys owned neither the instruments nor the subjects of labor. Those belonged to the capitalist cattle barons, the "straight-eyed entrepreneurs" who "kept their eyes fixed on the profit-and-loss statement."<sup>70</sup> More broadly, the economic system of barons and cowboys relied on agricultural instruments and subjects, but followed a form theorized primarily as industrial by Marx.<sup>71</sup>

In a sense, then, the cowboys' lives mirrored the those of the non-human animals they herded. They lacked agency despite technically having the option of freedom. Their judgment on earth laid with the cattle barons and the markets they managed. Their judgment in heaven laid with God. To the cattle, the cowboys were the figures of God and baron, the guide whose power was maintained tenuously and only so long as the subject remained receptive.

The religious tones of these songs are also worthy of note. Wrapping economic and political expansion in theological dress is an American tradition. The United States' westward march across the continent, under the guise of Manifest Destiny, was legitimized through religious belief in the inevitability and God-ordained expansion of the state.<sup>72</sup> This is more often discussed in terms of its economic implications (e.g., more natural resources)

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 114–116.

<sup>70</sup> Forbis, *The Cowboys*, 47.

<sup>71</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Vol. I* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 2015), 533–540.

<sup>72</sup> Donald M. Scott, "The Religious Origins of Manifest Destiny," National Humanities Center, last modified September 2013, <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/nineteen/nkeyinfo/mandestiny.htm>.



Figure 3. Cattle baron Murdo Mackenzie (center, seated) and officers of the Prairie Cattle Company in Trinidad, Colorado (1886).<sup>73</sup> Consistently tidier than the grubby cowboys of the trail.

and social implications (the displacement of indigenous Americans). However, the technical innovations that made the western United States inhabitable at an industrial and urban scale relied on ecological exploitation. As Donald Worster noted, “That process was one of ecological intensification—of extracting more and more economic yield from the rivers and their watersheds.”<sup>74</sup> He further localizes the essence of Manifest Destiny (though he didn’t label it in those terms) in Mormon religious belief: “... they were the first in the West to propagate assiduously, in deeds as well as words, the gospel of desert conquest sanctioned by God. And they were the first to encounter the fact that that gospel had no logical point of closure.”<sup>75</sup> Further, and at a more basic level, the ordination by God and

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<sup>73</sup> Kent Brooks, “Passing of a Great Range Herd,” Baca County History, November 27, 2021, <https://bacacountyhistory.com/passing-of-a-great-range-herd/>.

<sup>74</sup> Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity and the Growth of the American West* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 64.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

the conceptual break between humans and nonhumans is Biblical. In Genesis 1:28 it is stated plainly that “God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.”<sup>76</sup>

One might expect, then, that cowboys and Mormon industrialists would see themselves in common cause, that of conquering “the West.” If the cowboy songs are any guide, that was far from reality. The ever-poignant song, “The Mormon Bishop’s Lament,”<sup>77</sup> is peppered with tongue-in-cheek references to multiple wives, unsettlingly blasé mentions of death, and the final line—which leaves no questions unanswered—“For there’s no place for Mormons but the lowest pits of hell.” No love lost.

A supermajority of cowboy songs abstain from any mention of god. None of them mention Jesus or any overly-organized religion except Mormonism, which we’ve already seen is less than flattering. This religious ambiguity might surprise the deep religious conviction we’ve come to associate with country life today. God was clearly not manifest in the cowboy destiny. Instead, the cowboy industry ran concurrently but not cooperatively with other projects to conquer the western United States. The singing cowboys, their labor subordinated to their baron masters and unlike their Mormon neighbors, were less the masterminds of environmental exploitation than they were the hands by which political and economic power were exercised.

Putting this in the framework developed by Willems-Braun in British Columbia, mentioned earlier, the implications of overly revering the cowboy songs or viewing them with some kind of nostalgia becomes clear. Like the forests in British Columbia, the songs express that western United States was understood as having a fate determined by a binary,

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<sup>76</sup> Genesis 1:28 (KJV).

<sup>77</sup> Lomax, *Cowboy Songs*, 47–50.

regulated opposition.<sup>78</sup> In this case, the struggle was between politically-empowered industry and the environment itself rather than industry and environmentalists. (There was no environmental movement at the time of the cowboys.) This is reflected in the cowboys' songs about the subliminal hyperobjectivity of nature. In these, the cowboys sang about the permanence and intractable power of nature (e.g., prairies, weather, the occasional stampeding herd) but also their thematic, if reticent, need to conquer it. Further, the songs evidence a constitutive silence about the indigenous Americans in descriptions of landscape proximal to the human-scrubbed images of the Puget Sound,<sup>79</sup> creating a concept of western wilderness that is virginal and pure (note the religious undertones).

Unlike Willems-Braun's project, where they interrogate efforts to protect environmental resources, this analysis scrutinizes the songs of cowboys who were actively engaged in the conquering of similarly-conceived spaces. The theoretical buried epistemologies of nature Willems-Braun found are also found here. In our case, however, they are even more plainly involved in enforcing colonial and imperialist ideas about nature that aid the destruction of environmental resources, the deconstruction of ecologies, and the enforcement of a fictional categorical otherness of nonhuman animals from human animals. The last of these works most perniciously, underwriting and legitimizing the exploitation of ecological cohabitants.

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<sup>78</sup> Willems-Braun, "Buried Epistemologies," 5.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

## V. CONCLUSION

Considered in a fuller context, the cowboy emerges out of—or perhaps submerges into—the nexus of many cultural, political, and economic influences that are readily reflected in the songs sung on cattle drives. The cowboy is not a capitalist, not an environmentalist, not overtly religious, nor particularly forward-looking at all. The day-to-day life on the trail was so severe and punishing that little effort was expended on singing about philosophy or politics or religion. Instead, we find the nuances of folk belief in the gentle poetry and simple melodies carried by the cowboys on the trail. It is obscure, textural rather than abstract, and often contradictory. This categorical grayness or in-betweenness is characteristic of the cowboy experience in so many ways, and it is reflected in their views of the world as expressed in song. The cowboys are a lasting image preserved from a focal point in global history and Texan culture. There is no easy way to theorize the cowboy or his role in the making of contemporary Texas.

Texas today is the energy capital of the world and, as of 2021, is its ninth largest economy.<sup>80</sup> Politicians here have unabashedly embraced capitalist economic organization. For a state replete with oil, this has meant prosperity in booms and busts, but always at the expense of the environment. The most recent platform of the Republican Party of Texas, whose officials control every statewide political office and every seat on the Texas's highest court, is illustrative of this belief system. I would not characterize it as outright science denial, since the platform does include a plank implying that climate change is an objective fact, subject to the presentation of new data.<sup>81</sup> It is, however, highly skeptical of anything

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<sup>80</sup> Texas Economic Development Corporation, “Texas Enters 2021 as World’s 9th Largest Economy by GDP,” Texas Economic Development Cooperation, January 27, 2021, <https://businessintexas.com/news/texas-enters-2021-as-worlds-9th-largest-economy-by-gdp/#:~:text=Gross%20Domestic%20Product%20is%20a,a%20GDP%20of%20%241.9%20trillion.>

<sup>81</sup> Dorazio, “Report,” 13.

that conflicts with business interests or involves collective action via state power on environmental issues:

21. Environment: We oppose environmentalism that obstructs legitimate business interests and private property use, including the regulatory taking of property by governmental agencies. We oppose the abuse of the Endangered Species Act to confiscate and limit the use of personal property and to infringe on a property owner's livelihood. We support the defunding of "climate justice" initiatives, the abolition of the Environmental Protection Agency, and repeal of the Endangered Species Act.<sup>82</sup>

While Republican politicians in Texas might wear boots and hats that are nostalgic about the cowboy past, they arguably would do better to appreciate the cowboy in his fullness and even better to think more deeply about the epistemological and ontological errors in cowboy folk belief.

The coopting of the cowboy symbol by those with political power shows the danger of incomplete histories and simplified narratives about the past. Further, they should give us pause in how we engage with the music of these icons of bygone eras because of its straightforward storytelling and its emotive and social power.

We cannot blame the cowboy for singing about their convictions, and we cannot blame the cowboy for laboring to keep himself fed and housed. The cowboy is at yet another nexus, between the economic system and the individual. To scrub the record of cowboy music because it could perpetuate false ideas about nature that embolden capitalist exploitation is to overstate its influence and fail to appreciate the nuance, the grayness of

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 3.



belief expressed within these songs. When we teach about the cowboys—and we should—we should certainly scrutinize the economic project at work, their beliefs, and their lifestyles. Simultaneously, we should understand that the real-life cowboy was a victim of poverty, exploitative economic organization, and lack of community. It's the fictional cowboys we should worry about—especially when they accumulate real-world political power.

## APPENDIX

### Select Annotations from Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads

*The following selections appear in the order in which they are referenced in the analysis. I underlined explicit mentions of “nature” and provided additional comments in the footer.*

#### THE DYING COWBOY

“O Bury me not<sup>83</sup> on the lone prairie,”<sup>84</sup>  
These words came low and mournfully  
From the pallid lips of a youth who lay  
On his dying bed at the close of day.

He had wailed in pain till o’er his brow  
Death’s shadows fast were gathering now;  
He thought of his home and his loved ones  
nigh  
As the cowboys gathered to see him die.

“O bury me not on the lone prairie  
Where the wild cayotes will howl  
o’er me,<sup>85</sup>  
In a narrow grave just six by three,  
O bury me not on the lone prairie.

“In fancy I listen to the well known words  
Of the free, wild winds and the song of the  
birds;  
I think of home and the cottage in the  
bower<sup>86</sup>

And the scenes I loved in my childhood’s  
hour.  
“It matters not, I’ve oft been told,  
Where the body lies when the heart grows  
cold;  
Yet grant, Oh grant this wish to me,  
O bury me not on the lone prairie.

“O then bury me not on the lone  
prairie,  
In a narrow grave just six by three,  
Where the buffalo paws o’er a  
prairie sea,<sup>87</sup>  
O bury me not on the lone prairie.

“I’ve always wished to be laid when I died  
In the little churchyard on the green  
hillside;<sup>88</sup>  
By my father’s grave, there let mine be,  
And bury me not on the lone prairie

“Let my death slumber be where my  
mother’s prayer  
And a sister’s tear will mingle there,

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<sup>83</sup> As noted in the analysis, this word choice is controversial.

<sup>84</sup> The prairie as terrible and lonely, also implying virginal in a darker sense.

<sup>85</sup> Could be read romantically as a song of mourning in an unusual communion of human and non-human animals if Lomax had opted for “out” (see analysis). Instead, the pleas against burial on the prairie imbue this line with a sense of fear that is so strong it corrupts the afterlife.

<sup>86</sup> Here, the bower gives an exceptional view of nature as a safe, beautiful place. It is, however, a constructed safety nonetheless, where the trees act as a sort of architecture that keeps the less savory creatures of “nature” firmly away and othered.

<sup>87</sup> Note the use of “sea,” which harkens to the poetic origins of this text.

<sup>88</sup> Again, manufactured nature. This time, it is also related to religious institutions which, as we’ve seen, legitimized human dominance over othered natures.

Where my friends can come and weep o'er  
me;  
O bury me not on the lone prairie.

“O bury me not on the lone prairie  
In a narrow grave just six by three,  
Where the buzzard waits and the  
wind blows free;<sup>89</sup>  
Then bury me not on the lone  
prairie.

“There is another whose tears may be shed  
For one who lies on a prairie bed;  
It pained me then and it pains me now;—  
She has curled these locks, she has kissed  
this brow.

“These locks she has curled, shall the  
rattlesnake kiss?  
This brow she has kissed, shall the cold  
grave press?  
For the sake of the loved ones that will  
weep for me  
O bury me not on the lone prairie.

“O bury me not on the lone prairie  
Where the wild cayotes will howl  
o'er me,  
Where the buzzard beats and the  
wind goes free,  
O bury me not on the lone prairie.

“O bury me not,” and his voice failed  
there,  
But we took no heed of his dying prayer;  
In a narrow grave just six by three  
We buried him there on the lone prairie.

Where the dew-drops glow and the  
butterflies rest,

And the flowers bloom o'er the prairie's  
crest;  
Where the wild cayote and winds sport  
free  
On a wet saddle blanket lay a cowboy-ee.<sup>90</sup>

“O bury me not on the lone prairie  
Where the wild cayotes will howl  
o'er me,  
Where the rattlesnakes hiss and the  
crow flies free  
O bury me not on the lone  
prairie.”

O we buried him there on the lone prairie  
Where the wild rose blooms and the wind  
blows free,  
O his pale young face nevermore to see,—  
For we buried him there on the lone  
prairie.

Yes, we buried him there on the lone  
prairie  
Where the owl all night hoots mournfully,  
And the blizzard beats and the winds blow  
free  
O'er his lowly grave on the lone prairie.

And the cowboys now as they roam the  
plain,—  
For they marked the spot where his bones  
were lain,—  
Fling a handful of roses o'er his grave,  
With a prayer to Him who his soul will  
save.

“O bury me not on the lone prairie  
Where the wolves can howl and  
growl o'er me;

---

<sup>89</sup> This is an odd juxtaposition of a grim sign of death and what strikes me as a symbol of great relief and freedom, the blowing wind. Perhaps this is a product of the competing iterations of this song where prairie burial is either desired or dreaded.

<sup>90</sup> This stanza provides unexpected comfort to the dead cowboy. It reads as much a reassurance to him as to those who denied his wish and buried him on the prairie.

Fling a handful of roses o'er my  
grave  
With a prayer to Him who my soul  
will save."

THE BULL-WHACKER<sup>91</sup> (*excerpt*)

[3] It's out on the road  
These sights are to be seen,  
The antelope and buffalo,  
The prairie all so green,—  
The antelope and buffalo,  
The rabbit jumps so high;  
It's whack the cattle on, boys,—  
Root hog or die.<sup>92</sup>

[4] It's every day at twelve  
There's something for to do;  
And if there's nothing else,  
There's a pony for to shoe;  
I'll throw him down,  
And still I'll make him lie;<sup>93</sup>  
Little pig, big pig,  
Root hog or die.

...

[6] There's hard old times on Bitter  
Creek<sup>94</sup>  
That never can be beat,  
It was root hog or die  
Under every wagon sheet;  
We cleaned up all the Indians,  
Drank all the alkali,  
And it's whack the cattle on, boys,—  
Root hog or die.

...

[8] Oh, I'm going home

---

<sup>91</sup> In other words, the cowboy.

<sup>92</sup> This stanza is an exception to the rule. It paints a rosy portrait of the prairie, then it quickly devolves into the mundane and dreadful parts of cowboy life—though not of the prairie.

<sup>93</sup> The pony, here, is clearly stripped of any agency. It's treated as an instrument of labor, neither dignified nor personally degraded.

<sup>94</sup> A creek, which might, in other traditions, be a place of respite, is a venue for hard times.

<sup>95</sup> Relief and the pleasure thereof aren't found in nature but in human company, even in this song which gives the prairie an above-average rating.

THE DREARY, DREARY LIFE (*excerpt*)

[1] A cowboy's life is a dreary, dreary life,  
Some say it's free from care;  
Rounding up the cattle from morning till  
    night  
In the middle of the prairie so bare.<sup>96</sup>

...

[5] Spring-time sets in, double trouble will  
    begin,  
The weather is so fierce and cold;  
Clothes are wet and frozen to our necks,  
The cattle we can scarcely hold.

[6] The cowboy's life is a dreary one,  
He works all day to the setting of the sun;  
And then his day's work is not done,  
For there's his night herd<sup>97</sup> to go on.

[7] The wolves and owls with their  
    terrifying howls  
Will disturb us in our midnight dream,  
As we lie on our slickers on a cold, rainy  
    night  
Way over on the Pecos stream.<sup>98</sup>

...

[9] Some folks say that we are free from  
    care,  
Free from all other harm;  
But we round up the cattle from morning  
    till night  
Way over on the prairie so dry.<sup>99</sup>

---

<sup>96</sup> Back on message: the prairie is horrible.

<sup>97</sup> Cattle herd acts on a nearly hyperobjective scale. It is immense and verges on uncontrollable. It certainly isn't considered, here, as comprised of individual persons. However, it fails to achieve subliminality.

<sup>98</sup> Again, water is typically viewed as a font of life—especially a mid-desert stream like the Pecos River. Even that is corrupted in the cowboy's life.

<sup>99</sup> Bemoaning the prairie's dryness is expected, but it is a little unusual given how poorly this song and "The Bull-whacker" speak of water.

THE JOLLY COWBOY (*excerpt*)

[1] My lover, he is a cowboy, he's brave and kind and true,  
He rides a Spanish pony, he throws a lasso, too;  
And when he comes to see me our vows we do redeem,  
He throws his arms around me and thus begins to sing:

[2] "Ho, I'm a jolly cowboy, from Texas now I hail,  
Give me my quirt<sup>100</sup> and pony, I'm ready for the trail;  
I love the rolling prairies, they're free from care and strife,<sup>101</sup>  
Behind a herd of longhorns I'll journey all my life."<sup>102</sup>

...

[4] "Oh, I am a Texas cowboy, lighthearted, brave, and free,  
To roam the wide, wide prairie, 'tis always joy to me.<sup>103</sup>  
My trusty little pony is my companion true,  
O'er creeks and hills and rivers he's sure to pull me through.

[5] "When threatening clouds do gather and herded lightnings flash,  
And heavy rain drops splatter, and rolling thunders crash;  
What keeps the herd from running, stampeding far and wide?  
The cowboy's long, low whistle and singing by their side."<sup>104</sup>

...

[7] Oh, he is coming back to marry the only girl he loves,  
He says I am his darling, I am his own true love;  
Some day we two will marry and then no more he'll roam,  
But settle down with Mary in a cozy little home.

[8] "Ho, I'm a jolly cowboy, from Texas now I hail,  
Give me my bond to Mary, I'll quit the Lone Star trail."<sup>105</sup>  
I love the rolling prairies, they're free from care and strife,  
But I'll quit the herd of longhorns for the sake of my little wife."

---

<sup>100</sup> A short whip.

<sup>101</sup> Only in the throes of love (see the first stanza) could cowboy life be free from care and strife. It's certainly an exceptional view of the prairie.

<sup>102</sup> Compare this to the closing stanzas of "The Bull-whacker" and the dying wish of our ill-fated friend in "The Dying Cowboy." Most songs sing of a desire to return home and quit the trail, especially in their final moments.

<sup>103</sup> That makes two of y'all.

<sup>104</sup> Refers to the practice of singing to the herd to keep them calm, especially during moments that threaten a stampede. In my analysis, I argue briefly that a stampeding herd is the only kind that truly reaches hyperobjective, subliminal status.

<sup>105</sup> This is a change of pace from the second stanza, where the singers intend to journey all their lives. As mentioned, yearning to settle down is common among the closing ideas in cowboy songs. Its rarer to have a change of heart about this internal to a single song.

NIGHT-HERDING SONG

Oh, slow up, dogies,<sup>106</sup> quit your roving  
round,  
You have wandered and tramped all over  
the ground;  
Oh, graze along, dogies, and feed kinda  
slow,  
And don't forever be on the go,—  
Oh, move slow, dogies, move slow.

Hi-oo, hi-oo, oo-oo.

I have circle-herded, trail-herded, night-  
herded, and cross-herded, too,  
But to keep you together, that's what I can't  
do;  
My horse is leg weary<sup>107</sup> and I'm awful  
tired,  
But if I let you get away I'm sure to get  
fired,—  
Bunch up, little dogies, bunch up.

Hi-oo, hi-oo, oo-oo.

O say, little dogies, when you goin' to lay  
down  
And quit this forever siftin' around?  
My limbs are weary, my seat is sore;  
Oh, lay down, dogies, like you've laid  
before,—  
Lay down, little dogies, lay down.

Hi-oo, hi-oo, oo-oo.

Oh, lay still, dogies, since you have laid  
down,  
Stretch away out on the big open ground;  
Snore loud, little dogies, and drown the  
wild sound

That will all go away when the day rolls  
round,—

Lay still, little dogies, lay still.<sup>108</sup>

Hi-oo, hi-oo, oo-oo.

---

<sup>106</sup> Cattle.

<sup>107</sup> Having tired legs, especially after exertion.

<sup>108</sup> These gentle requests are rare in the songs. Usually, an unwieldy herd isn't plead with. Here, though, the cowboy is either so desperate he tries, or he views their settling as a real possibility if he asks them enough.



THE COWBOY'S DREAM (*excerpt*)

[1] Last night as I lay on the prairie,  
And looked at the stars in the sky  
I wondered if ever a cowboy  
Would drift to that sweet by and by.

[2] Roll on, roll on;  
Roll on; little dogies, roll on, roll  
on,  
Roll on, roll on;  
Roll on, little dogies, roll on.<sup>109</sup>

[3] The road to that bright, happy region  
Is a dim, narrow trail,<sup>110</sup> so they say;  
But the broad one that leads to perdition  
Is posted and blazed all the way.

[4] They say there will be a great round-up,  
And cowboys, like dogies, will stand,<sup>111</sup>  
To be marked by the Riders of Judgment  
Who are posted and know every brand.

[5] I know there's many a stray cowboy  
Who'll be lost at the great, final sale,  
When he might have gone in the green  
pastures  
Had he known of the dim, narrow trail.<sup>112</sup>

[6] I wonder if ever a cowboy  
Stood ready for that Judgment Day,  
And could say to the Boss of the Riders,<sup>113</sup>  
"I'm ready, come drive me away."

...

[9] For they tell of another big owner  
Whose ne'er overstocked, so they say,  
But who always makes room for the sinner  
Who drifts from the straight, narrow way.

[10] They say he will never forget you,  
That he knows every action and look;  
So, for safety, you'd better get branded,<sup>114</sup>  
Have your name in the great Tally Book.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Later stanzas reveal this as much an encouragement to the herd as to the cowboys themselves.

<sup>110</sup> Alluding to Matthew 7:13-14 (KJV): "Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: / Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it."

<sup>111</sup> The cowboys view themselves in the image of the herd. Unfortunately, this poetry ceases to bridge into their ethics, remaining instead in metaphor.

<sup>112</sup> Interesting, also, is the view of nature, in the image of the trail, as a path to heaven which is, biblically, predicated on suffering (2 Corinthians 1:5).

<sup>113</sup> Here, the boss is an image of God. Again, the cowboy finds himself in between categories. To the cattle, he is God. To God, he is cattle.

<sup>114</sup> Baptized.

<sup>115</sup> Presumably the list of names that Saint Peter, in Christian myth, will read from in deciding who is admitted to the Kingdom of Heaven.

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