



**The Gauchos:  
Male Culture and Identity in the Pampas**

**By**

**Ondina Fachel Leal**

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**Abstract**

The Gauchos, horsemen and ranch workers on the pampas of South America, constitute a specific masculine, equestrian culture glorifying the values honor, freedom, righteousness, bravery and manliness. This ethnography documents the self-reflexive construction of identity among gauchos of the border region between Spanish speaking Uruguay and Portuguese speaking Brazil. I analyze gaucho identity as they themselves construct and celebrate it; as it encompasses interlocking levels of gender, class, occupation, geographical setting and ethnic origin; and as it is presented and used by the media, the urban public and the nation states. Most gauchos live and work, segregated from women, on cattle ranches (*estâncias*). To this quintessentially male group, gender and culture are inseparable; folklore, ethos and practices are linked to a social construction of manhood.

Gauchos shape and present their identity with cockfights; tales, jokes and songs in the storytelling event; the practices of bestiality and suicide. In the gaucho universe of symbols, these are central discourses. In these discourses, gauchos use the categories humanity and animality, nature and culture to generate a group notion of power and self, envisioning themselves as supra-natural centaurs, half man, half horse. The segregation of male and female space is a principal aspect of the gaucho's



universe: male avoidance of women parallels female seduction of men. A women's sphere counters male gaucho culture: women live in small settlements bordering estancias; healing and magic, especially love magic, pertain to women.

Framing analyses of these symbolic discourses is an overview of gaucho pastoral society, an analysis of labor relations on the *estâncias*, and an appraisal of the relationship between the gaucho and national society. Gaucho culture in this rural border region transcends both linguistic and national frontiers. Representations of gaucho culture, generated by and for gauchos themselves, are appropriated by the media and consumed by urbanites and nation states. While the gaucho is a national symbol in both nations (and in neighboring Argentina), these nations neglect the social needs of gauchos. To national societies, representations of the gaucho have become more important than the living man himself.

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## **The Gauchos: Male Culture and Identity in the Pampa**

### **Preface**

Gaicho culture is celebrated in the media, literature, state agencies, and political organizations of the three countries, Argentina, south Brazil and Uruguay, that comprise the homeland of these horsemen and cowhands of the South American pampa. Gaicho folklore, and the gauchos themselves, take on different nuances in each country. My initial research questions were: What were the ever changing representations of the gaicho? Who are the original and legitimate producers of the gaicho culture? How do they consume and incorporate the representations of themselves produced by other people? Soon it became clear to me that I was dealing with a single underlying question, that of *who are the gauchos or what are their own representations of themselves*.

This work is about identity. It is about the social identity of a specific group, and about the various discourses through which this identity is presented. Gauchos are a male group. Their gender and cultural identity are entangled with each other, their ethos and practices linked to their social construct of manhood. Based on my own ethnograph-

ic data, I reconstitute the gaucho identity (or my own understanding of it) from the cultural practices that I elected as the most significant in this culture: the tales and the storytelling event; cockfights; the practices of bestiality; death by suicide. In exploring the gaucho universe of symbols and values, I have taken these items as central to the major discourses of the gauchos on themselves.

Although it focusses on these themes, this work is essentially an ethnography of a gaucho population living on the border of Brazil and Uruguay. It is based on two years of fieldwork as well as on historical accounts, official statistics and published folklore material.

In the Chapter I, first, I deal with the definition of the gaucho; next, I present the problematic of this research, delimit and *construct* its subject. Since a considerable part of the literature on gauchos treats them as an extinct people, I review this tendency. Working with historical material, I try to pinpoint its social origin. I argue that the scholars who claim that the gauchos are extinct have an historiographical bias in that they assume a narrow and static definition of gauchos: they either limit the name to the outlaws and cattle hunters of the colonial period, or to the national heroes of the wars of independence of a single country. They also refuse to recognize that gauchos, regardless of their other activities, were and are also laborers in a pastoral society. The data presented at this chapter indicate that a formalized and stereotyped gaucho is created through the mass media, state organizations and other urban institutions.



In the second chapter I give a general ethnographic account of the research sites. The pampa region, the countryside cities, and one small village divided between two countries, Uruguay and Brazil, are the major sites where this study took place. Because gaucho culture overlaps linguistic and national boundaries, this research too has the peculiarity of dealing with two countries and two languages. I explore these territorial and symbolic boundaries. I also examine my own situation as an intruder, both as ethnographer and as female in a male universe.

Next, in the third chapter, *the galpão and its tales*, I describe and analyze the daily story telling events that take place in the bunkhouses of every cattle ranch where gauchos work. The narratives recounted in the bunkhouse, the *galpão*, make up the gaucho identity and the gaucho's own perception of his identity. This identity relies on contrasts: it is to be male, not female; to be a worker not a landowner; to be from the countryside, not from the city. The *galpão* is a cultural space where social control and consensus is produced, where the dichotomy individual and group is to a certain extent resolved. Also, in this chapter, I present data on the *estância* and the labor relationships of this pastoral society.

Chapter IV is dedicated to women. The women connected to this pastoral society live away from the *estâncias*, in sparsely populated villages called by them *las casas*, dispersed on the pampa. The segregation of male and female spaces is analyzed here. A dynamic of male avoidance of women and female seduction of men is established in *las*

*casas*. The women, excluded from male gaucho society, are responsible for the biological reproduction of this society. I analyze this contradiction, and show that although the women potentially have enough autonomy to produce symbolic alternatives, it seems that they elect as their own rationale a system that inherently excludes them. Men's symbolic system is self-referenced while women's universe is male referenced. Two other points are also relevant within the female domain: some aspects of the male notion of honor which refer to woman, and magic and healing as female activities.

In the following chapters, one on the cockfight, the next on bestiality and the last on suicide, the analyses are centered on the relationship between man and the wild and the construction of categories such as humanity and animality. Indeed, it is around the classification of nature and culture that the men's notion of power and self is, in the last instance, structured.

I approach the cockfights, a traditional practice in the gaucho culture, from a structural perspective. Cockfighting is a celebration of masculinity; in the cockfight, that which is assumed to be the animal nature of the cock -- courage, strength and pride -- becomes male nature: the animal's attributes are symbolically transferred to the men who own and bet on them.

Bestiality, a mode of sexuality among gauchos (emicly called *barranquear*, "riverbanking") -- has to be understood from within the

context of segregated gender spaces and an intense and constant intimacy with animals. It must also be seen from the standpoint of a group whose dominant cultural ethos consists in mastering the wild. Male representations of woman, the process of the identification man-horse, and the symbolic construction of the gaucho as a centaur are examined. The encounter between humanity and animality is conceived metaphorically as a process of transcendence, which raises man to a supra-human condition, not as a process of bestialization in the sense of transforming man into a brute beast.

Death is also a form of transgression of the domain of culture on the domain of nature. The final chapter is dedicated to this theme, gaucho imagery in respect to death. Suicide rates are significantly high among the gauchos. In the last chapter, I investigate these data, the meanings of death and social alternatives that these men face when they became too old to be horsemen. When the gaucho loses his physical strength and is no longer able to tame nature around him, he loses his manliness and his identity as a gaucho. This is actually the moment of his cultural death. Some among them experience this cultural death as an individual death.

This work is not the result of my individual effort alone. I wish to express my acknowledgements and gratitude to the many persons and institutions that made this research possible:

First of all, Professor Burton Benedict, chair of my dissertation committee, followed closely (even when far away) every step of the research and of the writing of it with his friendly support and relevant suggestions. Professor Stanley Brandes and Professor Todd Gitlin, the other members of my committee, also contributed helpful suggestions and critical appraisal.

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With Cecila Mello e Souza and Teresa Caldeira I shared friendship, affection and intellectual exchanges during our years of graduate school at Berkeley.

I owe an intellectual debt to the gauchos who are the subject of this research, who patiently heard and discussed my findings and interpretations about them and their culture, and who unfailingly provided me

with their own extremely relevant observations. They taught me a lot about their culture.

This research was done, and this work was written during my academic affiliation with the Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul. In part, it reflects the ongoing anthropological discussions of its scholars and graduate students. I am especially grateful for my colleagues who overloaded themselves with teaching, allowing me the absence imposed by fieldwork.

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Lyn Lowry patiently edited this work, sharing her sharp anthropological comments with me.

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## Chapter I

### The Gaucho and the Pampa: Frontier Land as Frontierless Land

#### The Gauchos

The Gauchos are a singularly striking looking set of men; generally tall, very handsome, but with the most proud, dissolute expression. They wear their moustaches and long black hair curling down their necks. With their bright colored robes, great spurs clanking on their heels, and a knife, stuck (and often used) as a dagger at their waist, they look a very different race of men from our working countrymen. [...] There is a high enjoyment in the independence of the Gauchos's life -- to be able at any moment to pull up your horse and say: Here I will pass the night. The death-like stillness of the plain, the dogs keeping watch, the gipsy group of gauchos making their bed around the fire, has left in my mind a strongly marked picture of this first night, which will not soon be forgotten (Darwin 1933 [1839]:148-160).

Darwin's account of his encounter with the Gauchos over 150 years ago provides us with a sharp picture of them, a picture that points out the essential elements of Gaucho's social reality: it is a male group, with a visible cultural unity, which flourishes in the *death-like stillness* of the pampa. These three items can be retained in any contemporary definition of the Gaucho. The gauchos, subjects of this research, are horsemen and

*estância* workers from the pampa region of South America, which corresponds to parts of Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay. Most of the gauchos live, segregated from women, on the *estâncias* where they work. They form a very specific masculine, equestrian culture, which glorifies such values as honor, freedom, righteousness and bravery.

The current emic definition of Gaucho culture in this region encompasses the interlocking levels of identities of gender, class, occupation, geographical setting and ethnic origin. In their own understanding of what it means to be a Gaucho, gauchos are men; they are rural wage workers skilled in pastoral activities and horsemanship. In contrast to the landowner, whom they do not consider to be a *gaucho*, they do not own land and must work to earn their living. They live on the plains of the pampa, a region which, like their culture, overlaps national and language boundaries. In this bilingual area between the Spanish and Portuguese speaking countries, they have developed their own specific vocabulary and speech.

Their ethnic background -- Spanish, Portuguese, Indian and African -- has been self-defined as Gaucho, itself now understood as an ethnic category. Their narratives include plentiful references to the Gaucho *race* (*a raça gaucha*), and convey a political content to their supposed ethnic unity which actually expresses a cultural homogeneity.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The use of the term *race* when referring to Gauchos, nowadays used by the gauchos themselves as a figure of speech, can be found in XIX century English language descriptions of the gauchos, such as Darwin's account quoted above. The United States' ambassador to Argentina during

Certainly, Gaucho is not a race; it is rather a social category and a specific (although not homogeneous) ethnic group sharing a common cultural background.<sup>2</sup> Within the Brazilian anthropological discourse, gauchos are recognized as a specific *cultural area* overlapping national and linguistic boundaries, since the works of Azevedo (1943) and Willems (1944). Herskovits' comments on Azevedo's work also acknowledge the existence of gaucho cultural unity (cf. Azevedo 1958).

The Gaucho mestizo heritage has visibly different expressions in Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina, with the black presence being much rarer among Argentinean and Uruguayan gauchos than among Brazilian gauchos.<sup>3</sup> Although an outsider can perceive ethnic prejudice and rivalry among them, this, as well nationality, is secondary to their main identity as gauchos. I will return to this point later in descriptions of different

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the 1850's refers to the gauchos when he says, "the country population is a *race* peculiar to this country, and may be properly described as those averse to all civilized improvements, and at all times in opposition to the city population." (cf. Slatta 1983: 13. My emphasis).

<sup>2</sup> As Slatta (1983:14-5) put it: "Mixed blood probably coursed through the veins of most gauchos, but juridical, cultural, and social rather than racial considerations defined the boundaries of his existence. (...) The man's speech, mannerisms, equestrian and work skills, values and character, not his ethnic origin, determined his standing as a gaucho. Gauchos were a distinctive social group with a particular subculture -- not a separate race."

<sup>3</sup> Statistics on ethnicity indicate that, for Uruguay, over 95% of the population is White of European origin, only 1.2% is mulatto. For Argentina, 98% is White and 2% mestizo. For Brazil 11% of the population is Black, 22% are mulatto, and 12% are mestizo. (Cf. Britannica World Data, 1987).

situations where racial and national stereotypes are manifested.

*Estâncias* are ranches of thousands of acres dedicated to extensive breeding of cattle, sheep and horses. The traditional system of cattle raising is based on vast stretches of land where no agriculture is practiced and even the pasture is natural rather than cultivated. Production is typically limited to one head of cattle and two sheep per hectare (2.5 acres), and one paid worker (a gaucho) for every 500 head of cattle and 1000 sheep. An *estância*, by definition, is not smaller than 3000 hectares (approximately 8500 acres). In other words, the production of livestock is based on wage labor and the holding of a large amount of land (*latifundia*) and cattle by a few owners.

Structurally similar to the European feudal system, this system of production and land tenure has its roots in Spanish and Portuguese colonial policy.<sup>4</sup> In the Spanish territory which comprises modern Argentina, cattlemen were among the most prominent citizens of the colony. Cattle and other livestock were among the bases of the early regional economy, although wild cattle quickly became so numerous after their introduction on the pampa that until the XVIIIth century most of the hides and dried meat were taken from cattle gone wild rather than from

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<sup>4</sup> The feudalistic origin and appearance of the *estância* are not sufficient to classify the pampa cattle mode of production as feudal. Essentially this is production well integrated into world markets and it relies on wage labor. But we can observe characteristics typical of feudal society such as the landowners concentration of power and the paternalistic relationship which is established between the *Patrão* (patron, landowner) and the *peões* (peons, gauchos, rural workers).



domestic cattle. In the Portuguese colony, the Portuguese crown made land donations during the late XVIIth and early XVIIIth centuries in an area which is now the State of Rio Grande do Sul to the nobility and to citizens as payment for military service. These land grants, called *sesmarias*, were made in competition with the Spanish settlements in the region, and were a strategy for expanding colonial rule and securing territory west of that defined by the Tordesillas treaty, which had granted land to Spain in 1494. The land of the New World was the prize of its conquerors, and became in itself a title of nobility. Like the European medieval feudal estate, the *sesmaria* was relatively autonomous, with much political independence from the central government, and the landlord controlled a substantial amount of wealth and power. From the creation of the national states of Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay in the early XIXth century, this powerful landowning elite had and still has strong national political influence.

In colonial times, most of the *sesmarias* in Brazil were dedicated to plantation economy, to the production of sugar cane and coffee; and they relied on the work of black African slaves. By contrast, the *estâncias* in the Province of San Pedro (today state of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil) and Province Cisplatina (today Uruguay), at the time both Portuguese colonies, were dedicated exclusively to cattle breeding. As in the Spanish colony in the region, the cattle ran wild and did not require a great amount of labor. Seasonal labor was needed, so landowners hired Spanish

or Portuguese, Indians, free or fugitive blacks, as cowhands for the work of killing and skinning the animals. Up to the XIX century, hides, not beef or the animals themselves, were the product for trade and export.

Many of the traditional *estâncias* in the area where I concentrated my fieldwork, north of Uruguay and south Brazilian frontier, are still owned by members of the original aristocratic families who inherited the latifundium from their ancestors, who received them, along with titles of nobility, during the colonial period as a grant from the Portuguese Crown.

### **Gaicho Social Origin**

It is hard to determine the precise point at which the gaicho as a specific social category came into existence, but it is certain that its origin is connected to the existence of the horses and cattle in this region of South America. Horses were introduced by Europeans on the pampa in 1541. Pedro de Mendonza, the founder of the town of Buenos Aires, was responsible for this first expedition which brought 72 horses. When Spain started the conquest of the La Plata region it had the express intention of opening up a southern route to the gold and silver regions of Bolivia and Peru. The first Spanish attempt to settle the town of Buenos Aires was frustrated by the hostility of the native people: Medonza decided to leave; his surviving men fled in boats up the river, abandoning the remaining animals. Apparently the horses were freed on vast plains of the pampa



where they found rich pastures and no wild animals; there they peacefully coexisted with the Indians of this region, the Minuanos and the Charruas.

These horses and mares reproduced themselves and multiplied rapidly. Less than 50 years later it is reported that twelve thousand of their descendants were living in freedom on the pampa. The introduction of the horses on the pampa and their rapid multiplication had two immediate consequences: the Indians became skillful riders and their diet became almost exclusively based on horse meat. The abundance of horses made it unnecessary to rely on scarcer sources of food. Thus, the presence of the horse and its domestication brought essential changes in the Indian culture.

Bulls and cows were introduced into the region from Brazil in 1553.<sup>5</sup> Historically it is clear that cattle, like horses, began to reproduce themselves on the pampa before settlement by white men.

It is also clear that when the pioneer European conqueror did settle and begin to reproduce himself, he mated with Indian women, as no European women are reported to have come with the first expeditions.<sup>6</sup> The

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<sup>5</sup> In 1591, Lizarraga, a Dominican friar reported, "On these endless plains the herds have multiplied so prodigiously, that the newcomers believe they see wooded mountains. When they wander on and find that there are no trees worth this name, they cry out at the sight before them: we wanted to go and fell trees, but there were stallions and mares." Cf. Décotte 1978. Documentation from the middle of the 1500's to the end of the century indicate other expeditions coming from Paraguay which also brought cattle into the pampa. For data on the introduction of cattle see among others Assunção 1957, Molas 1982, Nichols 1937.

<sup>6</sup> In the case of Portuguese, inter ethnic marriage was officially recommended as a policy to populate the vast territories of overseas

point I wish to stress here is that the genesis of the gaucho as a social group is intrinsically related with the local Indian population and that the contemporary gaucho has a marked Indian cultural inheritance.

Historians usually date the emergence of the gaucho to the end of the XVIII century when the word gaucho appears in colonial registers. However, men on the pampa rode horses, hunted cattle, ate beef, traded hides, developed an equestrian culture and even were called or called themselves gauchos much early than that. To a certain extent, we can consider that Minuanos and Charruas were the first gauchos; or, as some historians prefer to put it, they were the *prehistory of the gauchos*. Early accounts and drawings from the 1500's show Indians on horseback wearing a sort of *poncho*, their soft boots made out of the leather from calves' feet. They are shown catching horses and ostriches with *boleadoras*, or  *bolas*, and lasso.<sup>7</sup> Both *boleaderas* and lasso, made out of artfully woven rawhide strips, became traditional gaucho labor tools and weapons.

The intense interaction of Spanish and Portuguese in this region of the former provinces of Cisplatina and São Pedro, including the Plata

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colonies; human reproduction was clearly conceived as an artifice of domination of the colonizer. See Bastide 1973.

<sup>7</sup> Technically the accurate name for these tall birds is rhea (in Portuguese *ema*): their tails are shorter than those of African ostriches and they have three toes rather than two. Since all of my informants call them *avestruzes* (ostriches), and most of the literature in English describing the region refer to them as ostriches, I will follow these usages. See Assunção 1957 for a collection of the early documents on the Indians on horseback.

basin and part of what is today Argentina, gave to its inhabitants singular Luso-Spanish cultural characteristics. The colony of Sacramento, facing Buenos Aires at the north shore of La Plata river near modern Montevideo, was founded in 1680 by the Portuguese (see Figure 1). By 1700 Sacramento had become an important economic center, monopolizing the slaughter of cattle, hide trading, and the smuggling of contraband goods into the Spanish dominions.

Portugal and Spain had between them a heritage of rivalries from the Iberian Peninsula, disputes between the Kingdom of Castile and Aragon. In the New World their dispute over the strategic Plata delta was intense and bloody. For almost two centuries the whole southern frontier of Brazil (which at that time included Uruguay) was the scene of continual warfare as first Spain and Portugal, and later Argentina and Brazil, fought over the limits of their empires. Four times the colony of Sacramento was destroyed by Spaniards and three times it was rebuilt by Portuguese.

It is documented that a Luso-Brazilian soldier at the Colony of Sacramento said, at one of these historical moments when Sacramento was taken by Castilians:<sup>8</sup> "Between the country's freedom and the abundance of beef, we stay with the abundance of beef." (*Entre a abundância de carne e a liberdade da patria, ficamos com a abundância*

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<sup>8</sup> Castilians (or *Castilhanos*) is a generic way to refer to the people from Spanish speaking countries. Originally the New World Spanish processions were in fact a colony of the Kingdom of Castile, not of Spain.



Figure 1 - Latin America.  
Source: Vellinho 1968



*de carne*). This saying became part of gaucho lore, meaning that the flag or the name of the country is secondary to individual freedom; or what matters to individual freedom is the abundance of the means of subsistence. It also indicates the relativity of the notion of country (*fatherland*) in this border situation. During the many wars over this region, either because they were obliged to join the military service, or because they choose to do so in exchange for pay or loyalty to a local powerful man (*caudillo*), the gaucho fought for the independence of different countries, and not rarely fought against other gauchos. In the construction of the gaucho social identity this fact, the potential or manifested hostility among the diverse nationalities, seems to be totally secondary. Among the common characteristics that the gaucho uses to identify himself is that he is a brave and virile warrior; citizenship is a secondary issue, even when the gaucho is dying for it. The honor is individual, it is not in winning a war or in obscure national ideals, but is based on a fair struggle. Honor is preserved when the adversary is an equal.

The Treaty of Madrid of 1750, signed by the kings Don João V of Portugal and Don Fernando VI of Spain, was one of the many attempts to demarcate the frontier between the two European potencies. By this treaty the colony of Sacramento was redefined as Spanish territory, but its Portuguese population was allowed to remain. To regain Uruguay (originally Spanish, by the Tordesillas Treaty of 1494), Spain gave away the large territory of the Jesuit Missions. The Jesuits had been a source

of irritation to the Portuguese, who were critical of ecclesiastical power and did not want barriers to their western expansion or to their policy of enslaving the Indian. This political arrangement between the two potencies resulted in the destruction of the Missions and the tragic end of a large part of the Guarani population.<sup>9</sup> The few remaining Guaranis, whose tribal organization was first destructured by the missionaries, and whose Jesuit settlements were destroyed by Portuguese *conquerors*, scattered on the pampa to live by hunting cattle.<sup>10</sup> They, too, became part of the social group which would later be identified as *gaucho*.

During the first three centuries of Portuguese and Spanish colonial rule in South America, the pampa region was a forgotten land: a rich soil with tender pastures was the only thing it had to offer. The conquerors were interested in silver, gold and slave labor. Minuanos and Charruas, Indians of the pampa, were relatively few when compared to other regions of Latin America, if the dimensions of the territory are taken into account. Their social organization into bands, with the almost total absence of political hierarchy and centralized power, made the task of conquering them impossible. Instead the colonizers used those "dashing mounted warriors," as the colonial registers call them, as allies to raid other

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<sup>9</sup> For historical data on this point see Assunção 1978a, Ornellas 1976 (1956) and Oliveira Vianna 1987 (1952).

<sup>10</sup> Jesuits start to establish their reductions north of this area in 1609. The first Luzo-Brazilian assault to the Guaíra Mission dates of 1628. Cf. Vellinho 1968.



Indians and to fight against Spaniards.<sup>11</sup> As we have seen, the vast unoccupied territory belonged to a few landlords, and had shifting nationality, thus the men of this plains society had reputations as thieves, smugglers and outcasts, because, by definition, they did not own anything. Since rules were established by the propertied class, anything a gaucho was able to prey upon was a theft.<sup>12</sup> Depending on what side of the border he was, and depending also from what side of the occasional border the official histories were written, the frontiersman was an outlaw. He was no longer either Spanish, Portuguese or Indian. He was not yet Brazilian, Argentinean or Uruguayan. Moreover, the frontier between Portuguese and Spanish speaking people did not always coincide with the frontier formally designated by political treaties or by the later boundaries of the emerging national states.

As soon as rawhide became a commodity, Spanish colonial authorities organized official expeditions for hide hunting, and any other hide hunting was declared illegal. But even legal raids had to be carried out by skilled rangers. During colonial times, the labor connected with the

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<sup>11</sup> This did not save them from their eventual extinction. As groups with their own identity Minuanos and Charruas disappeared before the XIX century.

<sup>12</sup> In this situation, gauchos conform what Hobsbawm (1969: 31-3) has defined as *social bandits*, men who never cease to be part of society in the eyes of the peasants (whatever the authorities say), as distinct from a criminal out-group. Referring to pastoral economies, Hobsbawm observes that among a landless, rural proletariat, unemployed for long periods, nothing is more natural that some of them should become bandits.

cattle was performed by the men identified as vagabonds and outlaws, by migratory workers who lived on the pampa with no fixed residence and who dedicated themselves to cattle hunting, running contraband, and to occasional jobs herding cattle or hunting and breaking horses. These are the men who were first *officially* called *Gauchos*.

The origin of the term gaucho is uncertain, although it is the subject of various etymological hypotheses and much academic debate. The etymologies include the English word, *gawk* or *gawkey*, which supposedly expressed "the awkward manners of these rustics"; and the French word *gauche*, meaning literally *left*, but which can also mean "outlaw." The most plausible alternative, and the one supported by the large majority of scholars, is that the word has an indigenous origin, coming from *guacho* which in Gaucho vocabulary means orphan colt or calf. *Guacho* comes from the Quechua (originally *hauck-cha*).<sup>13</sup>

If historically the origin and meaning of word gaucho is an unsolved question, certainly this is not the case when considered from an anthropological perspective. To all of my informants it is more or less obvious that *gaucho* and *guacho* are, as they put it, "kin words" (*palavras aparentadas*), related by sound and by what they perceive as similar

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<sup>13</sup> Considering that Incas ruled over different indigenous groups at west of South America, and other words of Quetchua origin are present for example in Araucanian and Guarani languages, this possibility is feasible. For the discussion on the origin of the word gaucho with extensive documentation see: Assunção 1978b; Molas 1982; Nunes 1986; Ornelas 1976 (1956); Meyer 1957.

meanings: both gaucho and guacho are motherless creatures. Graphically there is the inversion of one letter, phonetically the difference is even more subtle. It is worth quoting from one of the few contemporary authors who actually investigated the existing gauchos:

Could the word gaucho have resulted from a concealed love affair between pampa and horse, Spanish and Indio, by self-generation, as it were? As there is no proper answer to this question, let us accept the last suggestion which at least has the advantage of setting free fantasy and poetry. Anyhow, this does not worry our gaucho who, not fearing death, couldn't care less about how he is born (Décotte 1978:10).

It is also important to note that in the first written documents employing the word gaucho, reference is always made as if to an already existing term. From the second half of the XVII century the term *gaucho* started to be used to name the men who inhabit the pampa and were connected with pastoral activity. In the 1780's Félix de Azara, a Spanish official who came to the frontier pampa to carry out the terms of the 1777 treaty between Spain and Portugal, used *gauderio* and *gaucho* as synonyms for these people:

There is in that land, and particularly around Montevideo and Maldonado, another class of people most appropriately called gauchos or gauderios. Commonly all are criminals escaped from the jails of Spain and Brazil, or they belong to the number of those who, because of their atrocities, have had to flee to the wilderness. Their nakedness, their long beards, their never combed hair, and the uncleanness and brutishness of their appearance, make them horrible to see. For no motive or interest will they work for anyone, and besides being thieves, they also make off with women. These they take to the woods and they live with them in huts, catching wild cattle for their food. When the gaucho has some

necessity or caprice to satisfy, he steals a few horses or cows, takes them to Brazil where he sells them and where he gets whatever it is he needs.<sup>14</sup>

*Gaudério*, in Portuguese, refers to a creature without fixed occupation home: a vagabond, trickster, a parasite, who lives with no effort of its own. The word comes from the latin *gaudere* which means to have fun, to enjoy. In current gaúcho speech *gaudério* is employed for dogs without owner, birds who do not built nests and for gaúchos in general. In its strict sense, it refers only to gaúchos that are skillful in dancing, poetry and music and live on their artistic talent rather than a regular job. In XVII century Spanish language documents, the word was used as a synonym for *gaúcho*, and meant vagabond and outlaw. The word *gaudério* was in fact used in documents to refer to the men from pampa pastoral society earlier than the word *gaúcho*. Moreover, it is clear that both words were used orally long before they appeared in a written form.<sup>15</sup>

Lastarria, in 1805, also identifies the gaúchos as an specific social group:

By their manners, ways, and clothing one knows their customs, without sensibility and almost without religion. They are called gaúchos, camiluchos, or gaudérios. As it is very easy for them to catch and to kill cattle for food, since none lacks a horse, bolas, lasso, and knife with which to catch and kill a cow, or anyone will give them food, and since they are satisfied to have nothing but roast meat to eat, they work

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<sup>14</sup> Azara, Félix, *Description y Historia de la Plata y del Paraguay* 1784:310. Cf. Nichols 1937:113.

<sup>15</sup> See Assunção 1979b for an extensive documentation on the etymology of both words.



only to acquire the tobacco they smoke and the Paraguayan yerba mate which they drink, ordinarily without sugar and as many times a day as possible.<sup>16</sup>

There are various early narratives on the gauchos; most of them share the ethnocentric bias of the European colonizer and contain the accusation that gauchos are outlaws and bandits. All of them are unanimous in distinguishing the gaucho as a social and cultural unity. In 1832 the chargé d'affaires for the United States in Argentina wrote:

Gauchos lived in the incipient stage of civilization --a pastoral people watching the immense herds of cattle horses and sheep which feed on these plains -- untaught either in letters, manners, religion or morals: --always mounted they never quit the back of the horse except to throw themselves on a hide to sleep. (...) In some respects they are the most efficient Cavalry in the world -- dismount them they are nothing, for they are scarcely able to walk. Constantly engaged in hamstringing and slaughtering cattle they have engrafted the ferocity of the butcher on the simple habits of shepherd and are more ignorant and cruel.<sup>17</sup>

At different historical moments, allied to one or other Indian group, the gaucho raided and fought enemy Indians, sometimes conquering territory in the European interest, sometimes capturing Indians to be sold as

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<sup>16</sup> Lastarria, Miguel - "Memorias sobre las Colonias Orientales del Rio Paraguay o de la Plata, 1798-1799." In *Documentos para la Historia Argentina*. Buenos Aires: Facultad de Filosofia y Letras. vol. III, 1914. Cf. Becco 1978:80.

<sup>17</sup> Report by Francis Baylies, July 24; document 70 in William Manning, ed., *Diplomatic Correspondence of the United States*, 1:130. Cf. Slatta 1983:13.

slaves, sometimes fighting against the colonial powers and protecting the Indian. The gaucho was the pioneer of a frontier land who fought the Indian at the same time as he mixed with him.

In the early colonial period, as I mentioned above, Minuanos and Charruas, the two nomadic bands that inhabited the region that today is Uruguay and Rio Grande do Sul (extreme south of Brazil) were traditional allies of the Portuguese. Excellent horsemen, cattle hunters and hide traders, they fought against the Guarani Indians, who were organized into tribes and nations.

Jesuit *estâncias*, established in the frontier region, with an economy based largely but not exclusively on cattle herding, were successful with the Guarani Indians. Guaranies who did not join the Jesuit settlements, or those dispossessed after the second half of the XVIII century when Portuguese colonial forces destroyed the missions, and some untribalized Guaranies also contributed to the group of social outcasts that were beginning to be identified as gauchos.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> See Figure 1 for the location of the Jesuit Missions. The establishment and the destruction of the Missions is a complex and polemical chapter of Latin American history. The Jesuits themselves had expansionist political goals which, depending on the historical context, brought them into conflict with Spanish, Portuguese or the secular Catholic church. These missions developed a productive organization based on socializing ideals; they hope to save the indigenous peoples by preserving them from contact with the "civilized" world. Theirs was a policy of segregation (similar to present day Indian reservations) based on the understanding that the "primitive" was the true Christian way. Of course, Jesuit attempts to monopolize the Indians elicited strong Portuguese reaction. For the history of the Missions see Lobb 1970; Vellinho 1968.



The first Jesuit mission in this region was established in 1609. The Treaty of Madrid of 1750 provided the exchange of the Colony of Sacramento for the territory of the seven missions at west of Rio Grande do Sul, and inspired an armed rebellion of the missionary Indians. Sepé Tiarajú, a mission Indian, had an important role in this rebellion. Legends dealing with Sepé Tiarajú's mystified figure are an important part of the current gaucho repertoire of heroes.

Several elements from gaucho culture come from the different Indian groups. Many words and expressions of Gaucho dialect, in addition to the term *gaucho* itself, are from the Indians; items of his material culture, especially his clothing: the *poncho*, the *chiripá*, the *vincha*, the *bota*, the *poltro*, and the *boleaderas* are an Indian inheritance.

The *poncho* is a heavy piece of woven material (nowadays usually wool) with a opening in the middle to admit the head; it is also used as a blanket. The color, the material and the length of the poncho varies according to the region. The *chiripá* is a loose cloth tucked between the legs, tied at the waist by a broad sash, and lacy leggings were worn underneath it. *Bombachas*, baggy pants with embroidered sides were introduced latter and nowadays are what the gaucho uses everyday. For a special festivity, a dance or a folkloric celebration he might wear a fancy *chiripá*. The *vincha* is a head band, made out of leather or a folded handkerchief, worn either with a hat or without it. The *bota de poltro* are

the hand-fashioned boots made out of calf skin.<sup>19</sup> Finally the *bolas*, *boleadeiras* or *boleadoras*, is a weapon which consists of three rounded stone balls covered in leather and fastened to a long leather rope by a leather strap. The *boleaderas* are first whirled in the air to give them momentum, then thrown to wind round a victim's legs to immobilize it. They are no longer used for hunting or catching animals, but every gaucho will have one just to play with, or to show off a valued skill at special gaucho celebrations or at rodeo gatherings.

The *mate* or *chimarrão*, the gaucho's constant drink, is perhaps the most notable Indian influence. The *mate* is a hot tea made from the *yerba mate* (*Ilex paraguariensis*) which was originally cultivated by Guarani Indians: It is drunk out of hollowed-out gourds though a *bombilla* or *bomba*, a metal tube with a fine perforation at one of the sides which serves as a filter for the tea. The *mate* is drunk many times a day, usually collectively; the men sit around the fire, and drink from the same gourd and *bomba*, which is passed from mouth to mouth.

The gaucho Indian ethnic background is less notable, since it involved different groups and over 400 years of racial interaction and conflict. One element is clear in the colonial history: the women available

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<sup>19</sup> Knee high, hard leather boots have replaced the calf boots; only exceptionally will today's gaucho have the time and the material to manufacture his own boots. Slatta (1983: 74), quoting MacCann, describes the making of the gaucho's footwear: "A young colt is killed and the skin of the hind legs, from the fetlocks up to about the middle of the thigh, is taken off; the hair is removed, and while the skin is moist and flexible, it is fitted to the leg and foot of the wearer."

to the gaucho were Indians; Indian women were to bear the gaucho, that is, the mestizo population of the pampa. Referring to the gaucho, Estrada states:

His father was one of the invaders and he would leave. His mother belong to the vanquished and she would die. But he was the people who would remain. Nothing could incline him toward respect for the past, for the family, or for legal or ecclesiastical customs and forms... (Martinez Estrada 1971 [1933]:26).

Even today, *china* is a derogatory epithet for the gaucho's woman, meaning a woman of Indian origin with oblique eyes and straight black hair. The word *china* means young girl and servant; but nowadays, when employed by the gauchos, *china* means prostitute, and *chinaredo* is a prostitution area in rural towns. But the word is ambiguous; depending on its context it loses its pejorative meaning. In its diminutive form, *chinoca*, it is an affectionate way of addressing an attractive young woman; when combined with the title *dona* (Mrs.), it is a respectful common nickname to woman of Indian appearance.

As related above, gauchos were recruited to fight in the diverse local or national wars of the different countries which shared this frontier. The gaucho's horsemanship, his ability to fight and his cultivation of the values of courage, bravery and independence were useful and he became an idealized symbol of freedom and national pride and achievement.<sup>20</sup> For

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<sup>20</sup> The history of the armed conflict in this region is complex, since it involves three nations. Just to give an idea, during the XIX century all three Platine nations suffered foreign invasions. During the Brazilian im-

the purpose of this work, one of these wars, the Farroupilha Revolution, deserves special attention: first, because it occurred in the precise region under investigation; second, because it is the only conflict which appears in current gaucho narratives, and is recognized by the gauchos with whom I was working as the *Gaicho Revolution*.

The Farroupilha revolution lasted 10 years; its main demand was the decentralization of imperial authority; its aim was to separate the Rio Grande do Sul from the Brazilian empire and to establish a republican government.<sup>21</sup> The gaucho rebels who fought this horse mounted guerrilla war, were called *farrapos*, which means *rags*, in reference to their miserable condition. The name *farrapos* soon became a synonym for gaucho and a badge of honor. This struggle for the independence of Rio Grande do Sul from Brazil was in accord with the interest of local ranching latifundia elite. Unhappy with the duties levied by the central government on the export of their *charque* (jerky, or salt preserved beef), the elite found it impossible to compete with Uruguayan and Argentinean producers in the international market. The Republic of Piratini, the Gaucho Republic, was

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perial era, Rio Grande do Sul was involved in four major wars -- the Cisplatine campaign (1817-28), the Farroupilha Revolution (1835 -45), the Platine campaigns of 1849-52, and the Paraguayan War (1864-70). Cf. Love 1971.

<sup>21</sup> Unlike the countries of Spanish America, Brazil became an empire, even before it became an independent country. In 1808, Napoleon invaded Portugal, the Portuguese Crown and the Entire Royal family escaped to Brazil, making it the center of the Portuguese Empire. Brazilian independence came in 1822, at which time Brazil became an autonomous Empire.



proclaimed on November of 1836 by Bento Gonçalves, a rich landowner and one of the leaders of the revolution. Giuseppe Garibaldi, another important leader of this revolution, defended more popular ideals. He extended the revolution to the north and to Atlantic littoral of the state (at that time a province).<sup>22</sup>

The rebel gauchos' goal was the creation of an independent republic which would include the Argentine provinces of Entre Rios and Corrientes, Uruguay and Rio Grande do Sul: that is, the pampa region dedicated to pastoral activities. After ten years of struggle, the gauchos were defeated by the imperial forces. The terms of the peace agreement satisfied in part their economic demands, but were far from expressing gaucho republican ideals.<sup>23</sup>

### **The Literary Death of the Gaucho: A Review of Gaucho Historiography**

Historical literature on the gaucho is abundant and frequently polemical, some crediting the gaucho with a hero role, some imputing him with rebellious or savage attributes. Although historical analysis is not

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<sup>22</sup> Garibaldi, although Italian, and later the national hero of Italian Unification, is never called *gringo*, the word used to name Italian immigrants by the gauchos. In their tales, they always imply that is a gaucho.

<sup>23</sup> For a history of the Rio Grande do Sul during the Empire and the First Republic see Love 1971.



the goal of this dissertation, historical material will be presented throughout this work when relevant to an understanding of the gaucho culture from an anthropological perspective.<sup>24</sup> Distinct from Brazilian and Uruguayan scholarship on the gaucho which describes the gaucho as a living presence transcending national borders, a substantial part of Argentinean literature on the gaucho could be classified as the "mourning of the gaucho." It insists upon considering the gaucho, as social group or as cultural reality, to be *dead* (and the word death is used persistently), totally extinct from the face of earth. Molas (1978) is an exception to this approach within Argentinean tradition; he perceives the gaucho as a social actor changing according to historical context. The gauchos were and are a group of socially oppressed and dispossessed rural workers.<sup>25</sup>

The "mourning" approach is usually followed by the few American historians who have studied the gauchos (Nichols 1936 and Slatta 1983). These authors also have assumed that gauchos were only an Argentinean reality (even though they are dealing with data which are not limited to Argentina). This elementary misunderstanding has serious consequences

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<sup>24</sup> In particular three works deserve special attention: Assunção (1979a;1979b), Molas (1978) and Ornellas (1976). I selected one scholar from each of the countries that share the pampa region and the gaucho culture: respectively, Uruguay, Argentina and Brazil.

<sup>25</sup> This is indeed the main understanding among contemporary Brazilian and Uruguayan historians (see for example Assunção 1979a; 1979b; and Freitas 1980), although all of them treat the gaucho from the past. Besides the historians, there is much popular modern literature on the gaucho.

in their works: they are not only *killing* the Argentinean gaucho, but burying all gauchos along with him. This academic representation of the gaucho deserves an analysis.

As I have indicated earlier, official historiography only acknowledges the existence of the gaucho when the word *gaucho* began to appear in colonial documents. This makes sense from a strictly historical perspective, which is supposed to rely on written material, but does not help an anthropological attempt to identify when gauchos, as a self identified cultural entity, emerged. For the colonial ruler, the gaucho came into existence when this group of landless and dispossessed rural inhabitants became large enough to represent a menace to the few latifundists who owned everything. When the State was sufficiently organized to decree that the land belonged to someone (an *hidalgo*, etymologically *the son of someone*); that the semi-wild cattle which ran freely had an owner or there was government to whom one should pay tax to hunt cattle, and when arbitrary lines started to demarcate nations -- the *gaucho*, the one who was not *son of someone*, inhabitant of this frontierland, also become landless, cattleless, and without a nationality. He became an outlaw. Distant and absent royal powers dictated rules which did not have any legitimacy to these scattered pastoral people. He was a outlaw by decree. He repudiated the colonial order that did not mean anything to him and which excluded him from the latifundium society.

After all, in gaucho dialect, *guacho* means orphan, *motherless creature*, the one who does not have someone to bear him. Perhaps in calling himself *guacho* or *gaucho*, he was not only recognizing his own unsettled biological parenthood, but was manifestly perceiving that his social condition was that of the dispossessed. Maybe it even included the recognition of his lack of *patria* (fatherland), nation. If he were Indian, his nation had being destroyed by the foreign conqueror; if he were black, he had been snatched away from his African nation; if he were a descendent of the Iberian conqueror, his nation had also been left behind in the search for a new identity.

It is helpful to remember that many (if not most) *non-hidalgos* who came from the Iberian peninsula to settle in the New World were being persecuted in their homeland, first by the Crusades, later by the Inquisition. It is possible that one of the meanings of being outlaw at that point was not being Christian. Between Spanish and Portuguese in the New World this was one more source of hostility and exchange of accusations. Portugal had the policy of allowing and aiding the immigration of Jews (or of exiling them) to its overseas colony. On the contrary, Spanish policy required a document testifying "limpieza de sangre" ("purity of blood," meaning not Jewish or Moslem) to those who emigrated to the New World.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Although the immigration of Jews was formally forbidden, it was practically impossible to control. The Iberian nations did not have enough people to populate the vast empire overseas. For this point see Molas 1982:34. For the immigration of Jews to colonial Brazil see Wiznitzer

Not only does the gaucho officially begin to exist when he is classified as a social pariah and outlaw, but he also ceases to exist according to many historians when the outlaw characterization is no longer apt. When the so called cattle thief and pampa vagrant was transformed into the warrior of the independence wars or when he followed local caudillos in regional disputes, he became at once a hero and a barbarous enemy, depending upon which side of the border his picture was drawn. At that period many historians decreed his extinction:

This was the real gaucho -- not the figure of romance, the later fiction of the history and of literature. He lived outside the law, and in this respect different from his Spanish vaquero ancestor, even though they often did the same kind of work. (...) Today it is the vaquero who rides the plains of the Plata lands. He keeps the gaucho name because of nationalistic and patriotic reasons. But the independent, vagrant, mestizo, cattle-hunting outlaw and soldier, for whom the name was necessarily created, has gone. Only his name remains (Nichols 1937:115-6).

There is a clear paradox in the text: the gaucho whose skills have to do with riding, horse-breaking and cattle and sheep herding, paraphrasing it: the gaucho was a *vaquero* (cowboy), called a *gaucho*; now, he is still a cowboy who insists in call himself *gaucho*. He does not exist, only his name remains.

Another aspect of these definitions of gaucho shows an ideological bias in the academic tendency to classify productive activities of pastoral



society as *non-work* or as an idle pastime. If it is not labor, it does not deserve a salary and if this class of rural workers does not exist as such they should not have any social benefits either. This sort of analysis implies a mystification of the category *nature* in relation to the specificity of pastoral capitalism, as if *nature* in itself was responsible for the commodity cattle.<sup>27</sup>

Nichols seems to realize that there is some inconsistency in her own representation of who is a gaucho when analyzing gaucho literature. Referring to *Martin Fierro*<sup>28</sup> she says:

This portrayal was real. But whether his *Martin Fierro* was a proper gaucho or not is another matter; he was too hard-working an individual to be convincing. Could he have been merely a country laborer, the gaucho who survived through transformation into peon? (Nichols 1937:138).

The author presents us with the reality of the gaucho's labor, but immediately returns to the original sophism: The gaucho works, but if he works, then he is not a gaucho.

Slatta cleverly indicates that we are not dealing with the gaucho in himself but with the fluidity of the representations of him:

The difficulty of dating the gaucho's demise stems from the

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<sup>27</sup> See also Freitas 1980 and Maciel 1984 for this point.

<sup>28</sup> Jose Hernández's *Martin Fierro* (1967 [1872]) is an Argentinean epic poem of almost 1200 verses having a gaucho as the hero. *Martin Fierro*, is the gaucho saga, symbol of the indomitable pampa horseman, victim of injustice. The epic is well known to the modern gaucho population, and has become part of gaucho folklore in all three countries.



conundrum of defining who and what he was. Depending upon the scope and nature of the definition, a social group meeting the criteria could be found to vanish at almost any point the Argentina past. (Slatta 1983:189)

However the author concludes few pages later:

*Gaicho* -- only the name remained (...). Vanquished in reality, the gaucho still rides a romanticized frontier pampa as an idealized myth and political symbol. His qualities, real and imagined, represent an essential ingredient in the continuous quest for the Argentinean to define the essence of their national character (Slatta 1983:192).

Typical of this literature on the gauchos, is Jorge Luis Borges' introduction to a book which is a photographic documentation of present day gauchos in Argentina:

Dead, the gaucho still survives -- in the literature he inspired for men who lived in towns, in some dark (or much too public) revivals of the past, and in the blood of every Argentine (Burri 1968:11).

The obvious question that the reading of this book raises is, of whom then, are these pictures? Who are these men who dress themselves as gauchos, who talk like gauchos, tell gaucho tales, work all day long herding cattle, live on the pampa, call themselves gauchos and who are yet denied this name? This book offers no less inconsistent final comments:

The gaucho as national type, as a human group to be seen apart from other human groups in the country does not exist today as a reality.(...) The gaucho seen as class, has been a

contrary presence since his very first appearance on the pampas. The freedom of his way of life, with no attachment to God or to country, made a deep impression on the minds of less educated, frustrated, or asocial men who could find no place in the accepted order of organized life. (...) They were drawn into and absorbed by cattle farming and other kinds of rural work where a gaucho could make himself useful because of his horsemanship and his endurance when working in the open and, because he needed practically nothing to subsist, his willingness to accept low wages. (...) Progress, in short, has driven away the gaucho's physical presence as it drives away all barbaric and primitive things (Kramer. In Burri 1968:53-5).

First of all this historiography assumes a narrow definition of gaucho, which has more to do with the accusation of social pariah, *marginal* to the established order than with recognizing the gaucho as a cultural group and gaucho activity as productive labor. Second, the gaucho is conceived as limited to Argentinean territory, perhaps because would be harder to not see and not to deal with the more obvious and clearly delineated social reality of the existing gaucho in Uruguay and South Brazil. By restricting him to one country, official history can usurp the authority to decide when the gaucho was born and when he should be extinguished. Once he is designated a national symbol, it is more convenient to have the gaucho *dead*, immobilized as a museum object, either as hero or as bandit, than alive as a rural worker whose specific needs and political revindication should be heard. Besides, the notion of a frontierland without clearly demarcated geographical borders, occupied by a social group who shares a cultural identity, is at best a disturbing idea.

This kind of historiography and social analysis presumes a static

conception of social group: it would be impossible to conceive of any group not undergoing transformation for a period of four centuries. Certainly, gauchos from colonial period are different from contemporary gauchos. But basically they were and continue to be horsemen proud of their skills and their ideals, men who dedicate their labor to cattle production. The fact that the gaucho labor has not always had a price does not substantially change his condition. If he is now regular wage worker, in earlier periods he also received a pay for his work, although not always in the form of a salary. Socially oppressed, then and now, his culture cultivates the irreverence and the dignity of those who do not submit to oppression. As a group, during all these centuries they have forged an identity -- that of the gaucho. Only an academic authoritarianism with an intense ethnocentric bias can deny to a group the right to define their own identity and to determine for themselves whether or not they exist.

To be fair in my criticism, it is necessary to say that from the three countries where the gauchos live, Argentina indeed is the one which underwent the most intense and radical changes in its rural area. The introduction of agriculture, modern ranches combined with cultivated pastures and the massive introduction of European immigration in the rural area during the end of last century more radically changed the life of the traditional Argentinean cattle worker than those in Uruguay and south Brazil. Indeed, the gaucho as a social type is much more reduced in Argentina than in the neighboring countries where my fieldwork took

place.

There is only one ethnography on contemporary gauchos: *The Grandsons of the Gauchos: a Study in Subcultural Persistency*. The author's fieldwork was done in Argentina in the late 1950's; he points out the impasse between a general representation on gauchos and their actual existence:

However, when one enters the cow country of Argentina for the first time there is a feeling of something amiss. the visitor hears people telling him that the gauchos no longer exist, but his eyes tell him that there are people around who certainly look like gauchos (Strickon 1960:2).

Strickon seems also influenced by what I called the *mourning* approach, but he switches it to Argentina, rather than to the gaucho:

The Argentina of the gaucho is death. [...] In few places in the world has a traditional way of life been involved in such changes and survived as a coherent way of life (Strickon 1960:132).

### **Mass Culture, Popular Culture and Folklore**

The anthropological subject that first interested me was the ever changing representations of the gaucho. In recent years in southern Brazil, in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, programs presenting gaucho folklore have increasingly flooded the mass media. Government agencies and private organizations claim to celebrate the gaucho way of life.

Gaicho music and literature based on the gaicho are important items in a market of symbolic goods and they have become the construction material of a regional identity. Indeed, one of the ways Brazilians use the word gaicho is to refer to anyone born in this southern state. That is not the way we will be employing the word in this dissertation: as it was stated earlier, what is called gaicho culture here is limited to pampa pastoral society.

What is relevant to us at this point is how a given ethos became recodified to incorporate meanings that stretch from bandit to hero, that move from a pejorative designation for a backward population to a fashionable urban middle-class ideal. Also interesting is that a single social actor, through different processes, has come to indicate such contradictory identities: at once he has become the symbol of regional identity in Rio Grande do Sul and the symbol of national identity in both Argentina and Uruguay. It is clear that the gaicho's ideal of a independent self can be used to assert independence vis a vis others, it can be shaped to distinct national ends and used to bolster the national pride of disparate groups.

Most recently, in 1988, by a commercial agreement signed among Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina, "*gaicho*" also become the name of the currency used for export and import purposes among these three countries. The products which are part of this agreement (the ones that have *gaicho value*) circulate freely without duty. In the presidential speeches of



all three nations the idea that the gaucho was our common reality and cultural inheritance was stressed.

To give an example of the contemporary proliferation of gaucho culture in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, there are around one thousand *Centers of Gaucho Traditions* (so called *CTG*, *Centro de Tradições Gaúchas*) affiliated to the Movement for Gaucho Traditions (*MTG - Movimento de Tradições Gaúchas*).<sup>29</sup> The first Center of Gaucho Tradition was created in 1948 in Porto Alegre, the capital city of the state. These clubs promote events such as dances, rodeos, music, poetry, and tales, presentations which are part of gaucho culture. The most important function of these centers may be that of dictating to an urban public eager to *play gaucho* what it means to be a gaucho, to teach the public how a gaucho should dress, talk, sing and act. The *Movement of Gaucho Traditions*, as a state agency, counts on the participation of folklorists, anthropologists, sociologists and historians. It has created a forum where issues related to gaucho lore, the Rio Grande do Sul culture and regional identity are frequently discussed. The Gaucho culture promulgated by these experts is presented out of its original locus, the pastoral region. It is sanitized, domesticated and carries an explicit ideology of social hierarchy and harmony.

It is suggestive that, as a organized cultural movement, this

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<sup>29</sup> The estimation of the number of Centers is from the vice-president of Movimento de Tradições Gaúchas. Cf. Interview *Diario do Sul* on June 24, 1988.

renaissance of gaucho tradition was organized by intellectuals, more representative of a urban middle class than of a population of rural cowhands. This movement coincides with the intensification of the urbanization and modernization of the pampa. It also coincides with changes in land tenure, with the conflict between a more traditional form of cattle production and the modern ranching associated with agriculture, and with a more intense exploitation of the soil. Moreover, the conflict is overlaid with ethnicity: most of the grain (rice, soy bean and wheat) producers are the so called *gringos*, that is, of Italian origin.

Although the rural structure of classes has not been modified, some traditional landowners have not been able to compete with the modern elite, whether these are backed by multinational capital or urban industrial capital, or are members of more recent European immigrant groups dedicated to the agriculture of goods for exportation. Modern agriculture requires a larger investment of capital but is more lucrative in the short run. These changes have not meant the extinction of the traditional agrarian elite. Production has become intensified, but the social structure upon which the production is based has continued essentially the same.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> For statistical data on the introduction of agriculture and the presence of ethnic minorities on the ranching region in Rio Grande do Sul see Pebayle 1977. My reference to "more recent European immigrants" is a relative figure: Italian and German peasant immigration at least four generations old in the state of Rio Grande do Sul; however, their immigration to this region is recent.

Clearly, in its beginning the gaucho cultural movement was a reaction to the changes in the traditional agrarian order. An organized group entitled themselves the gate keepers of the gaucho tradition. *Traditionalism* acquired political connotations, sometimes very conservative ones, sometimes being subsumed to nationalistic ideals or regional identity, sometimes taking on the more radical meanings of resistance to large capitalistic investment and ecological preservation.

The same phenomenon, the urban expansion of gaucho culture, happened in Argentina and in Uruguay -- although in Uruguay, where the change in the rural sector was less acute, it has occurred with much less intensity than in the neighboring nations. This underlines the interesting social fact that when a given cultural reality is threatened, it usually finds forms of expressing itself which involve the creation of orthodox parameters.

In Argentina, the transformation of the rural sector was more radical and it happened earlier. Urban gaucho centers also appeared earlier: "As late as 1914 there were over two hundred small clubs, the avowed intent of which was to perpetuate the gaucho tradition" (Nichols 1937:143).

Hobsbawm's notion of *invention of tradition*, especially his conceptual distinction between *tradition* and *custom*, can be applied to the so called *Traditionalism Movement*, that is, the promotion of the gaucho culture within a urban context:

*Invented tradition* is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which normally implies continuity with the past. (...) *Tradition* in this sense must be distinguish clearly from *custom* which dominates so-called *traditional* societies. The object and characteristic of *traditions*, including invented ones is invariance. The past, real or invented, to which they refer imposed fixed (normally formalized) practices, such as repetition. *Custom* in traditional societies has the double function of motor and fly-wheel. It does not preclude innovation and change up to the a point (...). Hobsbawm 1985:1-2).

Typical of a this sort of cultural *invention* was the creation of the dress (*vestido de prenda*) worn by women at gaucho festivities. Since the gauchos are in their essence male in a male culture, they have their traditional *pilchas* (gaucho clothing). As women are excluded from this chevalier's world, the women who live in the rural towns, with whom the gaucho occasionally interacts, do not dress in any specific way. They wear inexpensive clothes, trying if possible to follow urban fashion. The activities of the gaucho *centers* cannot exclude women, at least not from the dances -- especially since the dances are actually an important function of these centers in rural towns, explicitly used to promote opportunities for encounters between men and women.

Based probably on an idealized model of the way the daughters of landlords used to dress during the XVIII and XIX centuries, folklorists have defined how the woman's clothing should be: an Andalusian style



dress, long, with ruffled skirts and full petticoats, covered with embroidery and lace. It must have a marked waist, a high neckline and full sleeves. Only those in full *traditional* clothing are allowed at the dances.<sup>31</sup> *Invented*, defined through published rules, reinforced and praised by the mass media, in its half century of existence this costume acquired social legitimacy and has become a *custom* for the festivity occasions which include women.

A formalized and stereotyped notion of what the gaucho ought to be, created in the urban setting and based on a nostalgic image of the gaucho, travelled back to the *real gaucho*, the cattleherding horseman of the plains. He recognized himself in this image; the gaucho and his working clothes had now become fashionable and had taken on an urban middle class status which he disdained by creating new and subtle marks of distinction which were impossible to imitate: a special way of tying the scarf, a way of folding the hat, the peculiar use of language, even certain gestures and body postures are immediately recognized by the members of this group as marking the authentic gaucho. But the gaucho is actually at once critical and proud of this urban appropriation of his culture: although he makes fun of his imitators, the mass propagation of his culture is not a threat to his identity, but on the contrary reinforces it.

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<sup>31</sup> Dances are actually the only activity of the gaucho centers which include women. The other activities, such as cockfighting, story telling, music duels, *truco* (a card game), and *tava* (bone game) are exclusively masculine.



I observed that even in *CTG* (gaucho centers) in the remotest spots of the Brazilian pampa the *traditionalist* rules of woman's dress were obeyed, in spite of the considerable cost that these dresses represent to a worker's budget.<sup>32</sup> Conversely, in Uruguay where these gaucho clubs are rare, among one Uruguayan group on the border who frequent a Brazilian *CTG*, the women began calling *prenda* dress ridiculous, and decided not to wear it. In this area, women from the village (*las casas*) had organized themselves and made a formal demand to the owner of the *CTG*,<sup>33</sup> that he not require "gaucho dressing" from the women. During fieldwork in this area, I attended a dance where most of the women were wearing jeans. Since I did not know they had rejected the *prenda* dress (and I did not want to go through the embarrassing situation of not being allowed in the dance), I was the only one in *traditional* dress. I felt totally ridiculous. Ironically, at this dance where I felt myself to be most fully an *outsider*, I was supposedly totally invested with the female's appurtenances of gaucho culture.

Another interesting situation that has escaped the control of official traditionalism was the adoption of the *bombachas* (gaucho traditional

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<sup>32</sup> During field-work I myself was not allowed in one of these dances because I was not considered properly dressed. Later, I decided to go to the city and buy a *prenda* dress. The dress costs around US 30 dollars. This price is equivalent to one third the monthly wage of a rural worker. To me it represented at least three times what I would usually spend on a regular dress.

<sup>33</sup> In this case the *Center of Gaucho Traditions* was privately owned and built as an extension of a general store.

male pants, baggy with embroidery at its sides) by middle-class women in the large urban centers. *Bombachas* became fashionable: they were sold at fancy boutiques, made out of expensive materials (such as stone-washed jeans or linen), and bore prestigious design labels. Traditionalists were offended by this female appropriation of the male pants, and it became a polemical issue. This incident, widely covered by the mass media, indicates that items of gaucho culture, although reinterpreted, found fertile terrain among the urban public.

This case, the use of gaucho's pants by women, is especially symbolic: the wide pants are supposed to give room to the male genitals.<sup>34</sup> The appropriation of the gaucho's pants well illustrates the dynamic of the circulation of folk culture within the state and the market. It also reveals that the efficacy of orthodoxies which aim to control cultural traditions is actually very limited if a traditional item can also be appropriated as a commodity. From a given social reality, state and folklore organizations select and sacralize cultural items. These items find a urban public eager to consume identity devices and a market sufficiently dynamic to incorporate them as commodities. This cultural industry, which produces both material and symbolic goods, is oriented to a market which in its turn is a dynamic social group with the autonomy to reinterpret *customs*, question tradition and create new cultural items.

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<sup>34</sup> A gaucho folk expression, employed in diverse situations illustrates it well: *Grande como pau crescendo em bombachas* (*large as penis that grew up in bombachas*). See Chapter III for the use of this folklore genre.

Irony and arrogance, important elements of the gaucho ethos, are used to demarcate the spaces of gaucho identity. For example on one of his monthly visits to an *estância*, the veterinarian wore *bombachas*, the gaucho baggy pants and boots or hempen shoes -- not unusual clothing for an urban visitor to a rural region to wear. One of the men look at him slowly and commented: *Entonces*,<sup>35</sup> *mister-doctor came disguised as a gaucho today (Entonces, o senhor-doutor veio hoje fantasiado de gaúcho)*. The veterinarian was clearly embarrassed, realizing that the symbolic boundaries between him, the outsider, and the gauchos should not be trespassed.

Very recently, March of 1989, by law approved by the State house of representatives, the gaucho's clothing (*pilchas gaúchas*) as defined by the Traditionalist Movement, became the official vestments of the state of Rio Grande do Sul for formal occasions and solemnities. The text of the law define the *pilchas* "as the outfit of honor and preferential use for both sexes."<sup>36</sup>

No matter what ideological reasons guide the Traditionalist Movement in Rio Grande do Sul, the fact is that the pastoral ethos was accepted, has become rooted and is consumed apart from its original setting as an essential part of a regional identity. We can also observe a

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<sup>35</sup> *Entonces* is a Spanish expression meaning *so*, and was employed in a Portuguese-speaking context.

<sup>36</sup> Law 8813 of March 11 of 1989 cf. Porto Alegre: *Diario Oficial do Estado* of this date.

reciprocal phenomenon: the gauchos and the rural population have had access through the mass media to these representations of themselves and their culture. How much of this *ideology* on the gaucho penetrates gaucho *culture* itself was the initial question of my research.

My previous research (Leal 1986; Leal and Oliven 1988), a cross class ethnography of the audience of a television soap opera in Brazil treats a domain relegated to *ideology*. A cultural industry and the mass production of a given representation of culture might be said to promulgate notions that are peculiar to a dominant group in a given society. My intent in that work was to criticize the limitation of such notions of ideology, to demonstrate that the matrix of meaning of a cultural industry message is not the message as sent by the media, but rather how the viewers integrate that message into their own experience. In contrast, the present research deals with a domain that is classified as the other pole of this dichotomy, the so called *authentic culture*: folk culture. By centering on traditional folk practices in this study of the gaucho identity, I aim to contribute to the understanding of the process through which folk culture is transformed and incorporated into the mass media production circuit and then returns to its producers-consumers.



## Gaicho Lore and Regional Identity

Gaicho as an identity marker acquires different nuances in Argentina, South Brazil and Uruguay. In Argentina, as I indicated earlier, it is a national symbol, historically frozen and mystified. In Uruguay the gaicho is recognized as the social actor in the war of independence, but he is most commonly depicted as a specific type of *peasant*, the productive agent of the economy upon which the entire country has been built: the production of high quality leather, beef and wool for the international market. Compared to gaichos in the other two nations, the gaicho in Uruguay is less a product available for consumption in the urban areas either as folkloric entity or political symbol. He is viewed more as a part of social reality than as an ideological construction of either the state apparatus or the popular imagination. Interestingly enough, when compared to the other two countries, Uruguay is clearly the place where the State has initiated the most efficacious (although still insufficient) social policies -- such as housing and health care -- which directly affect the gaicho.

For the Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul, the gaicho is symbol of regional identity: Brazilians stress the cultural similarities of this region with the Platine nations. Contrary to that of Argentina and Uruguay, the Brazilian state's official representations of the gaicho, as well as that reproduced in popular imagery and by political organizations, emphasize the gaicho as a regional social type distinct from other Brazil-



ians: the gaucho is the brave pioneer and warrior who expanded and guards the frontiers of southern Brazil. The region itself is distinctive: "but this state is only part of Brazil by its own option" (an historical reference to the Farrapos separatist revolution) is a recurrent theme in local political discourse.<sup>37</sup> To better understand the context in which the representations of the gaucho are created, take on different nuances and are consumed, it is necessary to take into account some general data on the three contiguous countries.

Argentinean territory has an area of almost 3 million square kilometers and a population of 31 million inhabitants, with one third of its total population concentrated in the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires. Brazil has an area of 8.5 million square kilometers and a total population of 140 million inhabitants. The southernmost state of Brazil, the Rio Grande do Sul, the region which interests us here, has a population of 8.5 million inhabitants. Although the area of this state only represents 3 per cent of the territory of Brazil, the state alone is larger than Uruguay. Uruguay's

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<sup>37</sup> Regional identity and the political claim for autonomy must in part be understood in relation to the republican system of Brazil, which concentrates a high level of state tax revenues at Federal level. For a specific discussion on regionalism in the Rio Grande do Sul see Oliven 1987. Recent anthropological works dealing with the theme of the gaucho identity in south Brazil are Araujo 1986; Maciel 1984; Oliven 1983 and 1989; and Teixeira 1986. These works focus on the manifestation of the gaucho culture in the urban centers, and on state appropriation and political manipulation of the gaucho ethos. My own perception of the gauchos benefited from the discussion carried on by these anthropologists, all of whom are affiliated to Universidade Federal of Rio Grande do Sul.

total population is 3 million, with 1.5 million living at Montevideo, the country's capital city. Uruguay occupies a territory of 180 thousand square kilometers.<sup>38</sup>

The livestock breeds from the pampa region are of high quality, mainly Aberdeen Angus and Herefords. Uruguay had 10 million head of cattle and 24 million sheep in 1988; Argentina, 54 million head of cattle and 29 million sheep in the same year. Rio Grande do Sul had an estimated 14 million head of cattle and 11 million sheep.<sup>39</sup>

Livestock products such as beef, leather and wool are the main items of Uruguay's national production and external trade.

Although an important part of Brazilian economy, the exportation of meat (not exclusively beef) represents less than 3 per cent of the total value annual exportation. Also, in Rio Grande do Sul (a state with almost twice the number of cows as people), the total of rural production (agriculture and livestock) is less than half of the value of the production of its industrial sector.<sup>40</sup> Argentina follows the same pattern with only 12 per

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<sup>38</sup> The population data are from the National Census of each country. The numbers are approximate and refer to the year 1986.

<sup>39</sup> The total number of cattle in Brazil is 130 million. Unless otherwise stated, the source of the statistics on livestock and on trade for the different countries is *Europa Year Book 1986: A World Survey*. London: Europa Publication, 1986. An additional source of economic statistics for the state of Rio Grande do Sul is the *Anuário Estatístico do Rio Grande do Sul 1980* Porto Alegre: Fundação de Economia e Estatística, 1981. All the numbers are approximations.

<sup>40</sup> Source: *Anuário Estatístico do Brasil 1986*. Rio de Janeiro: IBGE, 1987. As a comparison, the total head of cattle in the United States for the year of 1988 was 99 million, a rate of 2.5 people for each head of

cent of its total labor force dedicated to agriculture and cattle raising. Neither Argentina, Brazil or Uruguay can be classified as agrarian states, as most of their population (over 70 per cent) is urban.

These data interest us at three points. First, the larger societies which encompass gaucho cultural reality are urban and modern. Although underdeveloped when aspects such as income distribution or other social indicators are considered, from a strictly economic point of view all three countries have capitalist systems integrated in the world market.<sup>41</sup> These are societies with an extremely unequal distribution of wealth, and with well established, affluent and modern elites. We are dealing with national social realities, where poverty and inequality as well as sophisticated high technology are present.

Second, the numbers of livestock in Argentina, Uruguay and Rio Grande do Sul indicate that cattle are a significant presence. Since the subject of our study is the social group which is involved with the herds, these data interest us here. There are no statistics on the number of cowhands; national and local censuses do not distinguish between the agricultural and cattle production sectors when presenting their figures.

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cattle.

<sup>41</sup> To illustrate the unusual pattern of development in these so called *Third World* countries, I will point out that in terms of aggregated gross national product (GNP) Brazil is among the world's 10 leading countries. Manufactured goods accounted for 54 per cent of the exports; Brazil is a major producer of armaments, naval vessels, cars and aeroplanes (Cf. Europa Year Book 1986: A World Survey. London: Europa Publishers, 1986).

Although these two sectors may be combined (and this is characteristically the case in Argentina), traditional ranching, where gauchos are typically found, is dedicated exclusively to cattle and sheep. As a rough estimate (using the owners' own estimate of a rate of 1000 head of cattle and 500 sheep per worker), 100 thousand men would be necessary to care for a total of 78 million head of cattle and 64 million sheep. From this we can infer that the total *gaucho* population at the present time must be about 100 thousand men.

I exclude women because in the gauchos' own perception of their identity, to be gaucho means to be male. Moreover, these estimates must refer to a male population: this kind of pastoral activity is only performed by men. Sociologically it is hard to conceive a society without women, but it is exactly such a culture, one which emerges from a specific and extreme case of segregated male and female spaces, that is the focus of this study.

Economic statistics lead us to a third point related to the identities forged in this region. What underlies regional identity and, at least at an ideological level, the claims to separatism or autonomy in the southernmost state of Brazil, are both specific cultural characteristics and a relatively privileged economic situation. Recurrent in the same state political discourse which uses the gaucho as its central figure is the argument that Rio Grande do Sul, in relation to the other states of Brazil, has one of the highest gross products and per-capita incomes, far above the



national average. Social indicators are also an important part of this argument: this state has the highest life expectancy and the lowest rate of infant mortality (significantly almost half of the average rate for Brazil) in Brazil.<sup>42</sup>

### Gaicho Lore as Cultural Good

Especially relevant to our general subject, the production and circulation of gaicho culture and identity, are the data on mass media. Television industry in Brazil is a major industry. Globo, the leading network, is the fourth private television network in the world after the three American ones.<sup>43</sup> It reaches 80 per cent of the four thousand municipalities in Brazil. Moreover, Globo productions are an important export product (interestingly enough the communist countries are major consumers of these cultural goods). Its products are not only sold to other countries, but also reach the territories of its Latin America neighbors directly by satellite retransmission.

I observed that in the cities of the frontier region of northern Uruguay most of the televisions were tuned into this Brazilian channel.

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<sup>42</sup> Statistics confirm these arguments. See *Anuário Estatístico do IBGE* 1986.

<sup>43</sup> Its annual profits range between US\$ 50 million on sales to about US\$ 450 million (Cf. Diehl, Jackson: *The Washington Post*. May, 3 1984).



Actually, in the short periods that I spent in these cities I was preoccupied with Uruguayan programming in order to better understand the local institutionalization of gaucho imagery. I must warn that my data at this point are more impressionistic than statistically based, but it is worth noting that, except for the national news, the audience mainly watched Brazilian television.

Local teachers and intellectuals are extremely concerned about what is seen as a cultural imposition; and they are concerned to defend their national language. Since the hegemony of Brazilian television in this frontier region has now lasted more than 20 years, this has shaped, if not bilingualism, a very specific way of talking; and it has affected the cultural mores of an entire generation. Many people claim that it is not a matter of cultural choice, since the reception of Uruguayan television in this region is worse than the Brazilian one.

In Artigas, an Uruguayan town in the border, the hotel where I stayed had a special antenna: that is, Uruguayan broadcasting was received with no problems. In the hotel hall a television was turned on for the collective audience, and I witnessed a discussion about the choice of channels. People from other regions of Uruguay insisted that it was impossible for them to follow the Portuguese. The ones who were able to understand Portuguese would rather watch the Brazilian channel.

In the surroundings of Passo de los Libres, an Argentinean town on the Brazilian border, I got a flat tire. Looking for help to repair it, I

stopped in an isolated gas station on a secondary dirt road. A friendly old man helped me, and also surprised me by his Spanish, which was sprinkled with the Brazilian beach surfing slang used by urban teenagers. Since I was Brazilian, he was eager to know how I thought one of the current prime time soap operas broadcasted by the Brazilian television network would end. At that point I understood where he had picked up his speech peculiarities.

I was able to observe the influence of Brazilian television outside of Brazilian territory, but never the other way around. In the case of Uruguay, the Brazilian influence seems considerable; in the case of Argentina, it is only localized in the frontier area. But what interests us here is how much of the gaucho population from the three countries is exposed to any specific programming on gauchos, and precisely of what this symbolic production consists.

Briefly, the rural population actually exposed to television is not significant. Electricity is not available in many *estâncias* and given the great distances, the technical quality of the transmissions would be poor; but, most importantly, television does not have great appeal to the gaucho male population. I will be addressing this point throughout the dissertation.

It is important to bear in mind that *if* or *when* *estância* workers from this region, whatever their nationalities, are exposed to television in their occasional trips to more urban areas, they probably will be exposed

to the Brazilian television networks. This becomes important in the context of national identities and cultures, which are to a certain extent blurred and overlapped by gaucho culture at two levels: first, as a social reality; second, as a institutionalized media production.

An extensive analysis of the content of the media discourse on the gaucho is beyond the scope of this work. As presented earlier in this chapter, this discourse is centered on regional identity and on an idealized notion of gaucho's ideal of individualism and personal freedom, which is expanded to include state autonomy. It is realized through musical festivals; poetry, dance and tale contests; and political debates on the *Traditionalism Movement*. The specific programming is local: that is, it is produced by local television and radio networks (most of them connected to the national networks) and consumed in this region of south Brazil and its (international) vicinity.

This gaucho television lore is not transmitted to the rest of Brazil; the regional culture is too unique to attract a public in the other states of Brazil. However, stereotyped characters representing gauchos are a constant feature of soap operas, comedies, and TV series in national programming. At the national level the representations on the gaucho concentrate on the peculiarities of a male culture that for general consumption becomes *macho* culture. Prepotency, presumptuousness and arrogance are features of this picture of the gaucho.

Regional media representations of the gaucho are idyllic, nostalgic and romanticized. Independent and indifferent to that, in his own space, within his peer group, the gaucho produces every day an imagery about himself that is also romanticized. He is the author of a romance where he casts himself as the main character and the hero.

## Chapter II

### Fieldwork: When the Field is the Field

#### The Subject

It is almost ironic that in order to estimate the number of men involved in pastoral activity my starting point must be the number of animals; however this also says a lot about the essence of this society, which is one centered on the herds.

For the purpose of this dissertation, we can consider that the gaucho population of the area where my field work took place, the border region of Brazil and Uruguay, totals 15 to 20 thousand men who are directly involved with pastoral activities. They are scattered over a vast area of approximately 60 thousand square kilometers.<sup>1</sup> (See Figure 2 and Figure 3 for the fieldwork sites). I concentrated my research around the municipalities of Alegrete and Quarai on the Brazilian side, and Messojer (municipality of Riveira) and Artigas on the Uruguayan side of the border. Since on the one hand the integration between agriculture and cattle production is higher in Argentina than in the neighboring countries, thus

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<sup>1</sup> I am referring the male population. I may be underestimating their numbers since, given the lack of other sources, I must rely on the official numbers of cattle. It is my impression that for income tax reasons cattle tend to be under declared.



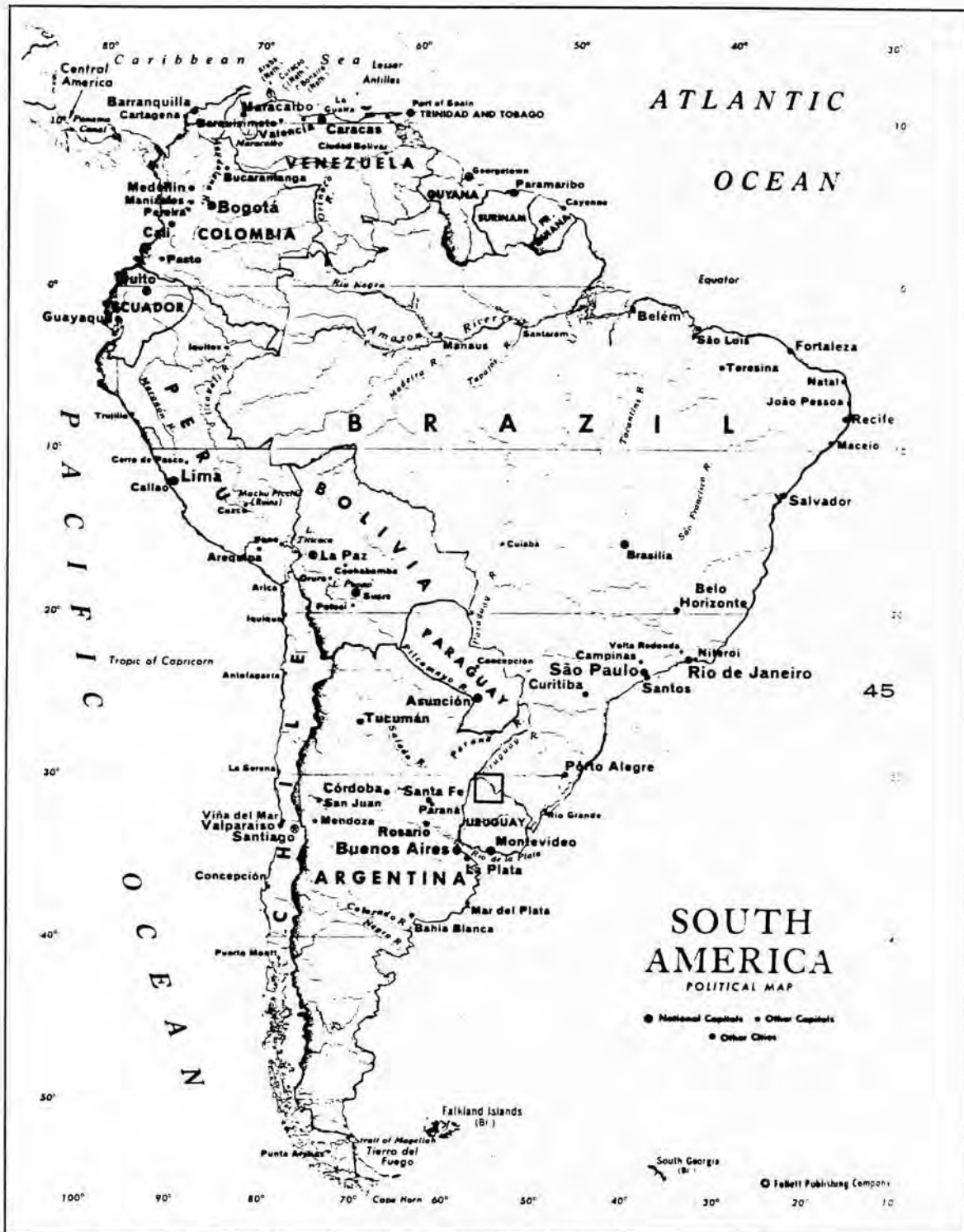


Figure 2 - Latin America: fieldwork area indicated.

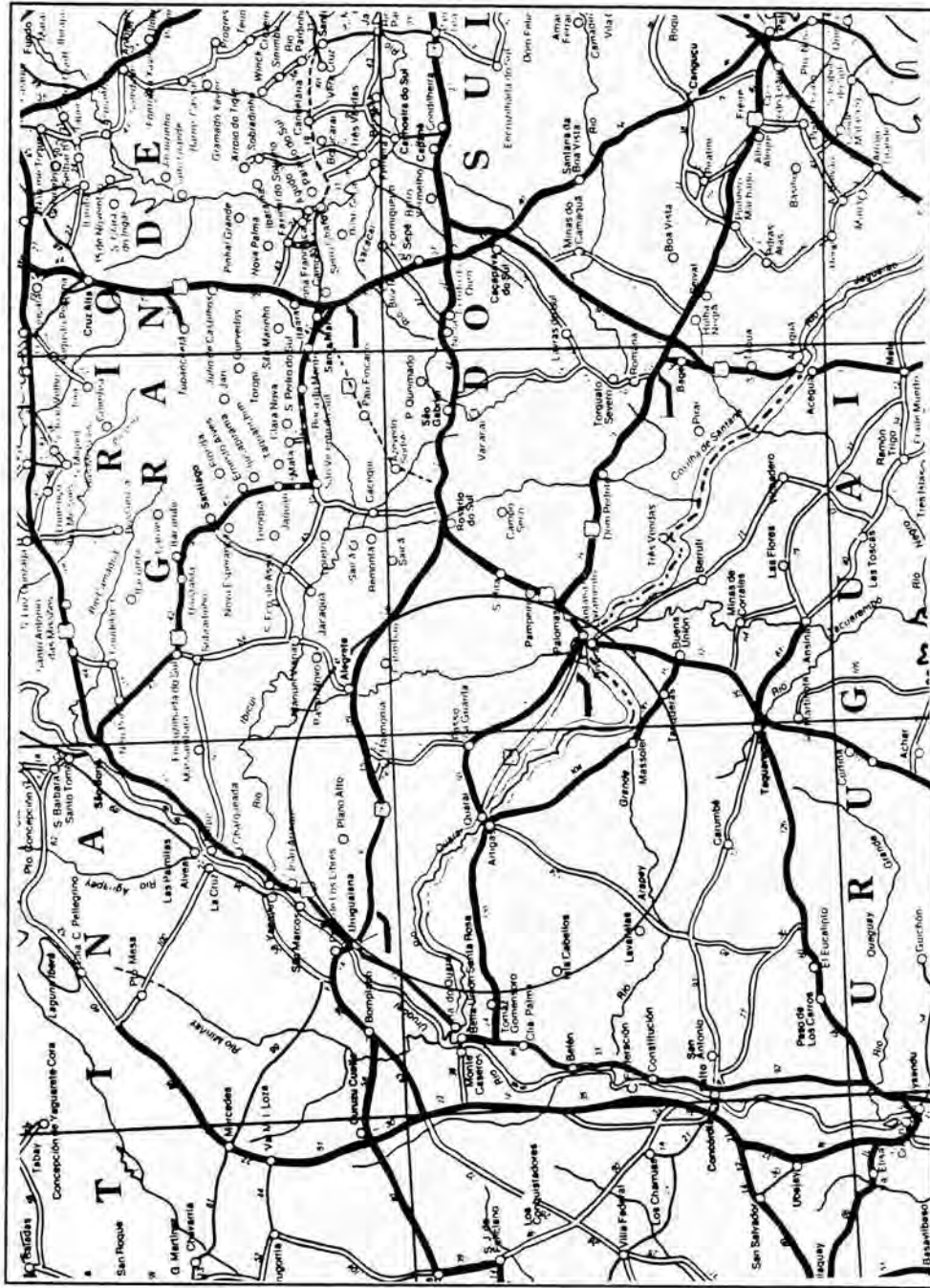


Figure 3 - Fieldwork area: fieldwork site indicated.

modifying -- but not eradicating -- the cultural reality of the gaucho, I would rather not generalize my ethnographic findings to the contemporary Argentinean gaucho.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, I will be dealing with items of Argentinean gaucho folklore as well as a general understanding about gauchos (of which the Argentinean gaucho is an important part) that nowadays also belong to the repertoire of the groups with which I worked.

As I expressed above, based in my previous fieldwork, I was interested in the issue of mass media and the production (or reproduction) of cultural goods through the cultural industry. Thus I set up my research object as the other face of this coin. The questions I had in mind were: Who are the original and legitimate producers of gaucho culture? How do they consume and incorporate the representations of themselves produced by other people?

In way, I now realize, my preoccupations were naively similar to those of classical anthropology: I was searching for the *primitive*, the *pure*, a group *uncontaminated* by the urban ethos. To a certain extent I was so successful in finding remote spots in the countryside, that I engaged myself in a contradiction: this group is not exposed to television, does not read and has no access to newspapers. There was no electricity on the *estâncias* that I selected. The gauchos there have battery operated

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<sup>2</sup> It is worth mentioning that the only existing ethnographic work on contemporary gauchos (Strickon 1960), has as its site an Argentinean region surprisingly close to Buenos Aires. Although this is not an interpretative work, the general description of the gaucho way of life presented there coincides very much with my own findings.

radios, occasionally they frequent the activities promoted by the *Centers of Gaucho Traditions* in the small villages (*las casas*) in the countryside. They go to the cities no more than once a month. Thus, I would be able to observe their culture, but the influence of the mass media would remain a secondary question.

When I realized that I was caught in my own trap, I was already too emotionally involved with the bucolic pampa and its people to step back and readdress the research to a group or place more fully penetrated by the mass media. Although the mass media did not occupy the role that I initially ascribed to it -- that of cultural arbitration -- this was not a reason to switch subjects. The gauchos were much more interested in their own representation about themselves, their own tales and rhymes. Their oral texts turned every action of a long working day into an act of bravery which was much more important to them than whatever others might think of them.

Gaicho culture is strongly self centered and self reflexive. The gaucho easily becomes the theme of others' sagas, and urban intellectuals usurp the oral productions of the gauchos (not rarely after first elaborating a polemic on the *disappearance* of the gaucho). I myself cannot avoid thinking of my ethnographer's craft as a form of appropriation of their culture, an appropriation that might sometimes also take apologetic or romantic tones. I do not want to excuse myself for that, but I want my own text to be understood as a text within the context of a romantic

culture. Romantic in the sense of having richly imaginative content, heroic situations, and appealing to the emotions.

Affection certainly is an efficacious mode of knowledge: the more time I spent in the field, the more I was captivated by the gauchos' culture, the more their lives and words would make sense to me. I quickly learned that the real people, as research subject, were much more interesting than the domesticated urban image of the gaucho. I also learned that between these two domains -- gauchos and the discourse on gauchos -- neither can be categorized strictly as reality or ideality, in such way that one can be striped away from the other.

Yet, why study the gaucho and not any other group from which folklore is also appropriated and which constantly reconstructs its identity? First, the celebration of the gaucho is especially intense in the media in southern Brazil; it has already been the subject of anthropological attention; it is an issue with which I was quite familiar. Second, I would have to combine at least partially the fieldwork with my teaching obligations at Federal University at Porto Alegre, capital city of the state of Rio Grande do Sul, the place where I was born and where I live. Third, I have a good command of both Portuguese and Spanish and can easily understand the gaucho speech or dialect.

The duality insider-outsider followed me for the entire duration of the research. The fact that I myself am from the south of Brazil, knew the languages and had a previous knowledge of gaucho culture without



any doubt facilitated initial contacts and improved my understanding of every situation. But for the gauchos, the cowhands on the farms, I represented all possible oppositions. I was a woman, I was from another class, I was a friend of the *patrão* (landowner), I was from a distant big city, I was educated, in some situations I was even from another country. For me also, this male world, the life among cows and horses, their fantastic tales plenty of animal metaphors, their strict honor code, was totally foreign.

### **Boundaries**

To delimit the boundaries of the research universe and the boundaries of fieldwork is always a crucial issue. I was interested in two aspects of gaucho identity, the everyday rural culture of a group of gauchos and the propagation of this culture beyond these limits. As a methodological strategy I decided to focus my work on the gauchos in the *estâncias* -- the place where they work and live. Anchored to this place, I would follow them in their activities, expanding the limits of the fieldwork as they expanded the loci of their activities.

I selected two sites, one on the Brazilian side of the border, the other on the Uruguayan side. The region is geographically continuous; no natural boundaries demarcate the frontier. But when one considers the size of the properties and the locations of the automobile roads, the

distance between one site and another is considerable (approximately two hundred kilometers. See Figure 2). The gauchos from the first site had no personal connection with the gauchos at the second site, although there is a clear cultural continuity between the groups. It is also common for temporary workers, mainly at sheepshearer season, to circulate from one country to other, mounted on horseback, even distances as great as this. My own connection between the two sites was established through the land tenure pattern of the region: here, the land is monopolized by a few landowners. The owner of the Uruguayan *estância* where I stayed was also the owner of few other *estâncias* on the Brazilian side, in the region where I first stayed, and I was able to conduct interviews on several of his *estâncias*.<sup>3</sup>

The total time of my research was two years. During the first year (1986) due to a series of other personal commitments, I was only able to travel to the frontier region a couple of times. Through a few contacts with landowners I tried to establish a physical setting for the fieldwork. During this period I visited various *estâncias*, but none of my connections in these farms were good enough to allow myself to choose any of them for fieldwork. At that point I was never more than a visitor on these farms. Not only a guest, in their view, I was a friend of the *patrão*, and

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<sup>3</sup> To give some notion of the landlords' concentration of land, all together on both sides of the border this man owned over 25 thousand hectares (approximately 70 thousand acres). He had an administrator and a veterinarian, who made the circuit of all the farms.

always accompanied by him. It was impossible to convince the landowners that I wanted go and stay in the farms alone. Even if after few days they would agree that I could stay by myself, I realized that the very fact of a prior introduction by him established an unsurmountable distance between me and the gauchos.

The owner is only occasionally present on the farm. If the *estância* has an experienced *capataz*, or foreman, an owner may visit his farm only once a year; even then he may not stay overnight if the farm does not have the appropriate accommodations for him or for his family. The presence of the owner on the *estância* is clearly something that breaks the gauchos' routine and is extremely uncomfortable for the workers. Many landowners confided to me that the less they go there the better things run. As one son of a landowner, member of an educated urban elite, who was starting to assume the administration of the family's *estâncias* put it:

The gauchos only respect you on the basis of your work skills and horsemanship. Since we have neither, it is better to not have to show it. [...] They might accept an absent owner but if one stays here he has to be better than they are to be able to have some ascendance over them.

Let me clarify the hostility that permeates the relationship patron-peon, within the ethnographic context. The class conflict between the patron and the peon is latent but hardly carries any political content. In the gauchos' tales and talks at the *galpão* in the evenings, this hostility is

expressed mainly in jokes or by making fun of the landowner's lack of skills. On one occasion, I heard comments such as: "Can you imagine someone who is a doctor in numbers and does not know how many cows he owns?" and the speaker then began to make fun of how the patron tried to calculate the size of a herd. Other comments included, "Can you imagine a man who does not recognize the limits of his own land?" The comments, although hostile, defuse potential aggression in laughter. In the gauchos' imagery, the *estância* owner easily becomes "*a poor man ignorant of the essential things of life, who does not ride well, who wears tied pants*" (a reference to the use of jeans, which they see as female pants), *walks like a woman*, and is unable to talk using the rhymes and the vocabulary characteristic of gaucho speech, which is in turn identified as male speech.

In this situation, the landowner (actually a relative of the owner) was a "doctor in numbers" (he had a PhD degree in Mathematics from a prestigious American university), who for lack of experience was having a hard time counting an enclosed herd with the help of an electronic calculator. The situation was hilarious given that a gaucho, illiterate and unable to recognize written numbers, with the aid of his *tarca* -- and I would say, with his familiarity with the herd, since he was able to distinguish one cow from another by their color nuances and knew well the dynamic of animal flocks -- was able to make an exact total much faster than the "expert in numbers." *Here one has to know about cows, not about*



*numbers*, was the gaucho's conclusive irony.<sup>4</sup>

The *tarca* is a counting device called also *taia* or *taiadeira* made of leather strings threaded with rings of ostrich bones. They are artfully made and the gauchos wear them on their belts. The *tarcas* are reminiscent of a Christian rosary or a flexible Chinese abacus. Usually they have two strings with ten units each. The bone units represent different values depending upon what is being counted. If the universe of things to be counted is larger, every unit will be worth more. For example if they are counting sheep the units will be ten on the first string and one hundred in the second, signifying the counted animals. If the units are head of cattle, they are usually 5 and 50, or 50 and 500. The mathematical operations involved in this process are addition and multiplication, although they are not recognized as such by the users of the *tarcas*. This detour shows how distant are the universes of signification of the patron and the peons. In setting up my research universe some boundaries, such as class, gender and geography, were very clear. Among these, the hardest distance to bridge was that of social distance.

To return to the point stated earlier, as soon as I was introduced

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<sup>4</sup> Darwin (1933 [1836]:193) presents an elucidating comment on the cattle counting strategies: "The chief trouble with an Estancia is driving all the cattle twice a week to a central spot, in order to make them tame and to count them. This latter would be thought a difficult operation, when there are ten or fifteen thousand head together; it is managed on the principle that the cattle invariably divide themselves into little troops from forty to an hundred. Each troop is recognized by a few peculiarity marked animals and its number is known: thus one being lost out of ten thousand is perceived by its absence from one of the tropillas."



by the owner into his *estância*, all attempts of contact with the workers was frustrated. In fact, I was viewed with suspicion by both sides: by workers because I was accompanying the patron; by the landowner because social scientists who insist on talking to workers are always suspect.

This was especially relevant in 1986 because at that moment in Brazil, after 20 year of military rule, the nation's new constitution was in contention and there was a strong popular movement in support of the land reform. My own political position, publicly stated, was in favor of the land reform. On this level, I was clearly located as an *insider*, identified with a particular position on the issues concerning the national society. It was impossible to avoid issues of political polemic, nor did I wish to dissimulate my position.

By the end of the first year I had plenty of what I would label secondary material but I was unsatisfied with the ethnographic data and my with own understanding of gaucho culture.

Finally through new contacts, this time from within my own academic circle, I got in touch with a landowner who had enough knowledge of anthropology to agree that I should go by myself to his *estância*. He agreed that I could stay as long and as often as I liked, and that any special arrangements for physical comfort would be made without a big commotion. On my first visit, the agronomist who visits the farm once a month took me to the place and introduced me to the people. From then

on I spent long periods on the *estância*, and with patience was able to build an empathic relationship with the workers and to establish an entire network of *estâncias* and gauchos.

The second year was entirely dedicated to fieldwork in what was actually a *field (campo)*, that is, I was in an open countryside of endless plains. Even though my focus was the *estâncias*, I was able to spend some time in the different cities of the region and I tried to participate in the festivities that are important to the gauchos. The cities, distant one from the other, attract most of the population of the region. Minuscule villas, called by the gauchos *las casas* (because they are just agglomerated houses), are dispersed along the roads, or lie on the border between one *estância* and the next. The country towns, *las casas* and the *estância* are the entire universe of the gaucho. These spots also framed the universe of this research.

### **Pampa Pietá**

The region where my field work took place is 500 kilometers (340 miles) from Porto Alegre, the capital city of the state of Rio Grande do Sul. Alegrete, the municipality (*município*) where the *estância* that I concentrated part of the fieldwork was, is west of Porto Alegre and at the same latitude, 30 degrees south. The temperature varies from a little below zero centigrade on winter nights (June to August) to 40 degrees

centigrade in the summer (November to March). On winter mornings, frost is common and a violent freezing south wind called the *Pampero* or *Minuano* blows across the flat landscape.

The road that connects Porto Alegre and Alegrete is paved and in good condition. Even so, driving alone across this impressive and monotonous landscape, these five hundred kilometers seem to be infinite. The first impression is that of an optical illusion: as we advance the plains move along with us. After the paved road, I had to drive through other *estâncias* for an extra 60 kilometers on a perilous side road which would take me to the *estância* where I was staying. The only way to manage it was by driving very slowly; it took me at least three more hours. This track was cut by creeks, and if it had rained the day before it was impossible to get through. Once in a while I had to stop the car for a herd of cattle or sheep. The noise of the motor of the car frightened flocks of ostriches on the fields.

I travelled this straight road with its rigid horizon which divided the world ahead of me into green and blue halves so often that at last this feeling of illusion was extended to my own presence there. There were moments in which the pampa appeared to be a surrealist painting: the end of my trip would take me to the frontier lines between the countries, but all my sensation was that of a frontierless land. I should talk to people, in a human settlement, but I could only see cattle on the open plains.

To travel for a long period on deserted plains always gave me the sensation of immobility. Once a woman, one of my informants who lived isolated on one of the *estâncias*, said that each day was the same as the day before. During my trips to the *field*, this statement often came to my mind: each movement forward would give the impression that I was traversing exactly the same space that I just left behind. In the pampa, space and time are motionless. As Martínez Estrada (1971 [1933]:7) put it, "The landscape of the plains, if such there is, assumes the form of one's dreams, the shape of a chimera; it becomes sterile when the dream is unworthy" .

This observation, the accounts of my informants, and my own feelings in the midst of that geography lead me to understand the gaucho's elaborated oral culture, its crafted rhymes and its metaphors with their dense imagery, as a way of dealing with the emptiness of their surroundings. It is worthwhile to note that the impressions of XIXth century travelers on the pampa sharply convey this notion of solitude and of a deserted land. Darwin (1933 [1836]:99), referring to a southern region of the pampas says,

Then comes the Pampas, which extend for many miles, (...). The ground was in every direction tracked by ostriches and deer; a large one of the latter bounded up close to me, excepting these, death appeared to reign over all other animals. I never saw any place before so entirely destitute of living creatures.

Head (1827:16) referring to the pampa says:

The rivers all preserve their course, and the whole country is such beautiful order, that if cities and millions of inhabitants could suddenly be planted at proper intervals and situations, the people would have nothing to do but to drive out their cattle to graze, and, without any previous preparation, to plough whatever quantity of ground their wants might require.

Saint Roberts, an official representative of the French government in Uruguay around the 1850's was quoted by Hadfield (1854:302):

The population of the Pampas has a peculiar physiognomy, such as is to be found in no other part of the world. They exhibit the instincts and the faculties which the desert every where develops, but still they have not those traits which elsewhere particularize a pastoral or a warlike tribe. (...) In the bosom of those immense plains, (...) there are to be found neither distinct castes, nor tribes, nor creeds, nor even that which may be properly called a nation. There is nothing to be found but *estâncias* scattered here and there, which form so many petty republics, isolated from the rest of the world, living by themselves, and separated from each other by the desert.

But what most interests us here is how the gauchos themselves experience the pampa. The pampa is described by them as "our country," "my homeland" (*pago*, which means the place where one is born, the place of one's origin). The notions of infinitude, endless space, and boundlessness are used to describe it. One of gauchos stated that the pampa (the word is always accompanied by a feminine article) "was the place where one has to meet himself."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Portuguese dictionaries indicate that the word *pampa* is masculine, although it is always used by rural gauchos as a feminine word.



A song presented in one of the Gaucho Music Festivals<sup>6</sup> which I was able to attend while in the field introduces us to the gaucho's verses and to the pampa:

uma líquida quietude  
se faz constante parceira  
sobre a linha imaginária  
que dimenciona as fronteiras

a liquid quietude  
is one's constant partner  
on the imaginary line  
that delimits the frontiers

Solitude, silence and boundlessness are the recurrent themes the gauchos use to portray the pampa and their own reality in their conversation and their poetry. The immensity of space around the individual is described as a sort of mystical experience, as an intense degree of intimacy with nature. This contemplative attitude and the mystical feeling they express in relation to the open nature is specially interesting considering that the gauchos are characteristically irreligious. Occasionally "God" might appear as a character in their stories, or one might use the word "God" as a figure of speech, but they are critical of and sarcastic about institutionalized religions. In no sense do I want to suggest that they engage in magical or animistic thought; rather, I am suggesting that the daily, unavoidable, aesthetical experience of contemplating this landscape with the intensity of its sunrise, the melancholy of sunset, the

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<sup>6</sup> Song of Sérgio Rojas: *Elegia Reflexiva sobre um Homem e seu Pequeno Contrabando*. Presented at 17th California da Canção Nativa do Rio Grande do Sul, at Uruguaiana, December of 1987. In the translation I have not preserved the rhymes.

whistle of the freezing *minuano* wind has to be taken into account in order to understand this self-centered culture. Surrounded by such immensity, one turns inside himself, or holds to himself as a sort of fixed point of reference. At the end of each day on the *estância*, the men came back from the field, unsaddled their horses, prepared the *mate* and sat down facing the west. Motionless and quiet, apparently uninterested, they observed the sunset. At this point, it is hard to distinguish my own feelings from those I attribute to them. After all, we were all subject to this same wide open landscape -- they, with the continuity of spectators of an entire life.

The dramatic tone with which gauchos are able to invest their words while skillfully playing with them is ever present in their poetry. *Pampa Pietá* is the title of an acclaimed song from the Gauchos' festivals and is a good example of how they express their feelings about the pampa.<sup>7</sup> Even if we consider that the songs that end up winning these festivals are written by urban intellectuals, these are usually from rural towns; moreover, these songs reflect the gauchos' reality, or would not otherwise become popular among them.

It is hard to translate the rich wordplay of *Pampa Pietá*. Its title, which is repeated over and over in the song in the rhythm of prayer, is suggestive enough, meaning at once piety and a Virgin who sustains her

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<sup>7</sup> *Pampa Pietá* is song of Dilan Camargo and Newton Bastos. 17th California da Canção Nativa. Uruguaiana, 1987.

suffering son. The point of the verses is an elegy to the pampa invested with a female figure:

Pampa, pampa, Pampa, pietá	Pampa, pampa Pampa, pietá
....	....
O'mãe das nascidas manhãs	Oh mother of borne mornings
....	....
Tende piedade de nós herdeiros, parceiros dos pecados do mundo, no campo, no amplo, na pampa sem fim	Have pity on us inheritors, partners of the sins of the world, in the field, on the wide, on the endless pampa
....	....
Pampa, quantas luas, sangas nuas, dores tuas, só lonjuras criaturas pés sem sorte, fé para os fortes.	Pampa, so many moons, naked creeks, your pains, only distances, creatures feet with no fate, faith for the strong.

The poem attributes mystical tones to this female pampa, with short sentences it relates feminine pains (all the words are feminine gender, in the original stressing their feminine a ending). The entire poem (not presented here) with its conclusive statements indicating that the dispossessed have the sins, the powerful have the faith, indicate a potentially religious content which is subverted by a social critique.

## The City

The political center of every municipality (or district) in Brazil and its hispanic neighbors is a city. If a town is not the capital city of a state or province, it is called *cidade de interior* (countryside city), which labels it as backward. These have a relatively small population, and a "less urban" culture. Alegrete is typical of these countryside cities of the pampa along the frontier, and it is an important center of the cattle production.

Alegrete has a population of 70 thousand inhabitants. Eighty percent of its population is urban. The rest, 14 thousand, sparsely populate an area of 7,760 square kilometers, which accounts for the total area of the municipality, giving a rate of demographic density of 1.8 inhabitants per square kilometer in the rural area.<sup>8</sup>

Following a pattern representative of the other towns of this region, the rural population is 8,000 men and 6,000 women; the male population is 13 per cent higher than the female population. Conversely, in the urban area women account for the larger portion of the population. In the countryside, the women are agglomerated in scattered settlements on the border of the *estâncias* or roads (*las casas*) and the men live on the

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<sup>8</sup> The source of population statistics is the Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia and e Estatística (IBGE), at its local agency at the city of Alegrete. All the estimates are approximations and are based on the census of 1980.

*estâncias* where they work: this rupture is the basis of a very specific society and a culture where gender segregation is an essential characteristic.

Less than 8 per cent of the total area of the municipality is cultivated, its main products being rice, corn and soy beans. We can infer from this data that most of the rest of the area of the municipality is dedicated to extensive cattle raising, which gives a rate even higher than the one hectare per each head of cattle declared by the official statistics.<sup>9</sup>

Another set of data that interests us here is in relation to the rural exodus. Although the total population of the municipality is increasing, rural population is decreasing in absolute and relative numbers. In 1970, 30 per cent of this population was rural; in 1980, only 20 per cent was rural; the estimate for the current year, 1989, is that 15 percent of the population is rural.<sup>10</sup> The data specifying which part of this population in this municipality is male and female are not available (I have only the ratio for the census of 1980); however, my hypothesis is that the rural/urban population changes at unequal gender proportions. My fieldwork,

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<sup>9</sup> For the municipality of Alegrete, the declared number of head of cattle is 505 thousand and 1 million sheep for the year of 1984. Source: Central de Informações e Análise Econômica.DT/SIC.

<sup>10</sup> In absolute numbers, for the municipality of Alegrete, for 1970 the urban population is 46 077; while the rural population is 18 953. For 1980 urban population is 55 598; and the rural 13 874. For 1990 the estimate is that a rural population decreases to 10 943 while the urban increases to 63 564 people. Population statistics show the same tendency for all municipalities of this region.



concentrated in the rural area, supports this tendency. The women have no labor opportunities in the countryside, no access to land to settle down, and they wish to live in the city. On the contrary, the gauchos do not want to leave the pampa; if they do, it is because they are too old for work that requires strength, or -- occasionally -- because they want to constitute and live in a family. To the horseman from the vast prairies, leaving the countryside also means leaving behind his identity.

The landowners generally claim that there is a shortage of specialized cowhands. Indeed, jobs opportunities for *peão campeiro* on the *estâncias* -- that is, for the task performed by the gauchos -- are constantly announced on the local radio . This point leads us to one of the essential contradictions of this system of extensive cattle raising: historically it relies on a single cultural group, the gauchos, as labor force; but to be a gaucho is not just to execute a particular job.

The economy of Alegrete, like that of other cities of the pampa, is largely dependent upon cattle production. On the one hand this means that the city has a series of cultural activities dedicated to the gauchos, the labor force of the basic industry. On the other, it means that supporting these and other kinds of activities is a small and very rich urban elite whose core is the group of absentee owners of the *estancias*. The city has around twenty *centers of gaucho traditions*, places for gaucho dances, rodeo and traditional games. Among these *CTGs*, as they are called,<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *Center of Gaucho Traditions* or *CTG* is the generic name. Each association carries expressive names with words specific to the gaucho's

there is, at least at this city, a clear social hierarchy. One of the *CTGs* is only for *patrons*, that is, for the upper class. As these clubs are private associations (to frequent them, one has to be associated or pay a fee and be introduced by one of the members) socio-economic discrimination is easily conserved.

On the average, gauchos from the *estâncias* come to the city no more than once a month, usually when they receive their wages. Frequency also depends on the geographical situation of the *estância* and its access to a route served by bus. Usually a gaucho rides his horse to a point on the bus line.

However there is one annual festival in the Brazilian region, the commemoration of the Farroupilha Revolution, that is massively attended by the gauchos. It is an entire week of festivities, dances, rodeos, cock-fights, and gaucho folklore presentations which culminates with a big parade and civic speeches organized by the local governments.<sup>12</sup> For this

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lexicon. In Alegrete, some of the names are: *Farroupilha* (the gaucho's revolution), *Vaqueanos da Fronteira* (Track-followers of the Frontiers), *Lanceiros de Canabarro* (Lancers of Canabarro, one of the heroes of the Revolution), *Aconchego dos Caranchos* (a place for uninvited persons to stay), *Querência Charrua* (native place of the Charruas, an earlier Indian tribe).

<sup>12</sup> The celebration refers to the date of the creation of the Republic of Piratini (the 20th of September, 1835) when the state of Rio Grande do Sul declared its independence from Brazil and installed a Republican government. Later the revolution was defeated by the Luzo-Brazilian Empire army. The intensity of these celebrations by those who are supposedly the losers, indicates a chief characteristic of the gaucho ethos: the important thing is to fight and defend one's ideals, honor and dignity; the outcome of the dispute is secondary.

celebration the gauchos come to the city on their horses. There is a mounted parade with the men grouped by their gaucho associations, or -- if the landowner is local and an "activist" of the traditionalist movement -- by *their estâncias*.

The men present themselves carefully dressed in the gaucho's *pilchas*: Soft leather boots, *bombachas*, hat, scarf and the wide belt with the large knife on the back, *bolas*, and lasso. Special attention is given to the horse and its riding gear; it would be unthinkable for a gaucho not to ride a horse at these parades. On these occasions, prizes and titles are given to the best dressed gaucho, to the best dressed horse (the word used in relation to both man and horse is, in this context, the same -- *pilchado* -- meaning dressed on the traditional appurtenances).

In the celebration in Alegrete I was able to observe, two thousand mounted men parading. It seems that it is impossible for a landowner to refuse to let the workers come to the city for a few days for this yearly celebration: this event is understood as the gaucho's holiday. Most frequently, the owner knows nothing about his workers' labor schedule, and the foreman -- "if he is a good foreman" -- will make the arrangements for the peons to go to the city.

During the so called Farropilha week, city government sponsors the construction of a replica of a *galpão*, the men's house on the *estância*, in a public place. The ground fire is built, *mate* is served and the men talk around the fire; music and verbal duels of rhymes go on. It actually ends

up being more a place for political speeches and for urban people dressed up in gaucho clothes to meet each other than for the gauchos themselves. But we can see, all over the city in every little store that serves liquor, the gauchos drinking, talking loudly, and, not rarely, fighting.

Traditionally, the *official galpão*, as it is called, is built in the central plaza. The year in which I was present the entire *galpão*, complete with floor fire, was built in the main hall of the civic center. The location was awkward, and the reason for its choice was, as city officials explained to me, so that they could "have some control over it." In earlier years, when it was in the town square, "the gauchos understood the place was theirs." Needless to say, I could not resist asking: "Wasn't that what it was supposed to be?" The argument was that "their presence, their noise and arrogance and their horses in the public gardens disturb the people." The reproduction of the *galpão* inside city hall is the most obvious example of the attempt to domesticate the gaucho. It is an almost literal attempt to appropriate gaucho culture: only an attempt, because a few months later I heard considerations about moving the *galpão* back to the park for the next year's festivities. Apparently the government had realized that the problem with the city hall *galpão* was the lack of gauchos. Local politicians had a dilemma: either they were able to make their speeches but lacked a public, or they had the public but were unable to make speeches because the gauchos would not allow it.



Cities of this region characteristically have a wealthy center. Here are located not only the city hall and the elegant houses of the elite, but also large stores, commercial banks, a church, schools. On the outskirts live the poor, who do not always share such urban amenities. In this fringe around the city the newcomers of rural origin establish themselves, relying on previous social networks which are related to the rural areas of their origins.

Through my own network of gauchos, started at the *estâncias*, I was able to spend some time in these peripheral areas of the city. I conducted a series of interviews, mainly with old men who had spend their lives working in *estâncias*. I was especially interested in reconstituting and understanding their life trajectories. The urban periphery was also the place where women were present, and I was able to get to know them better.

From the gauchos' perspective, one of the main attractions of the city (and perhaps also one of its main terrors) is women. For the men who live in the *estâncias*, most of them unmarried with marriage not part of their plans, a visit to the city represents a rare opportunity for getting in touch with women. Not only do women live and work in the cities rather than in the countryside, but the dances which are appropriate places to meet them are held in the cities, and houses of prostitution are also very much part of the landscape of the urban outskirts.



As I will show later, the gauchos tend to avoid women from *las casas*, the small settlements which surround the *estâncias*. First, to get involved with women there implies some level of engagement and thus, in their understanding, harassment. Second, although it is rather unusual for gauchos to come to the city, the fact that they come indicates an attempt to overcome the distance which separates male and female space. The condition of this proximity is its transitoriness.

In terms of the spatial organization of the houses in the urban periphery, a curious detail came to my attention: most of the houses I visited recreated a *galpão*, in the form of small outbuilding in the backyard, an extension of, but independent from, the house. This room, like the *galpão* in the *estância*, has a hard dirt floor; and a floor fire, a barbecue place or a wood stove is central in this compartment that is recognized as "the man's place" -- even in the urban setting. There, the man receives his friends and with them drinks *mate*. It seems that if for any reason the man moves to the city, the only way he can cope with it is to recreate within urban space a hideout for himself, away from the female domain the house.

### **A Village on the Border**

We can hardly call the agglomerations of houses one sees in dispersed spots of the countryside, *villages*. Their inhabitants call them

*the houses (las casas)*, apparently because of their tiny size, the absence of any sort of institutional organization and a lack of self identity as a community. Furthermore, *houses* are identified as the women's place, and this is actually the women's space within the countryside. Strickon (1960:134) who studied Argentinean gauchos called it "open-country neighborhood." However, since most of the time the houses are not even close to each other, I would rather use the residents' own category to designate the settlements: *las casas*.<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps more than the houses, what marks the existence of people living nearby along the empty roads on the pampa is the *pulperia* or *bolicho*. The *bolicho* is a combination of general store, bar, and a bus stop. Not rarely it is next to an area cleaned and demarcated for horse races (*cancha reta*), and another laid out for the bone-game (*jogo do osso* or *tava*). Some of the large *bolichos* have semi-open extended constructions, or just hard-packed ground, for dances. Men drink, talk, sing, and play cards (the *truco*) inside the *bolicho* on Sundays. On days of horse racing, which happens every other month, a good many people are attracted to the place. The *tava* is played all day long, as a parallel activity

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<sup>13</sup> In the border region, even on the Brazilian side it is common to put the modifying articles in Spanish, stressing them in a way which emphasizes the gender of words -- *la pampa*, *las casas* -- in this case feminine, with an open *a*. For example, this speech pattern of stressing the vowel indicative of gender is also employed in the verses of the song on the pampa I refer above *quantas luas/sangas nuas/dores tuas/só lonjurás/criaturas*, thus sewing together gender and meanings: *moons/naked creeks/pains/distance/creatures* turning the pampa on a female entity.

to horse races. Sometimes, if a special place is provided, cockfights also go on.

The main horse races of a day are previously arranged by means of a prior bet between each pair of owners of the horses. The races are announced by radio during the weeks preceding the event. Only two horses run in each match; the jockey rides the horse without a saddle, and the tracks measure 500 meters. Besides the main bets between the horse owners, which use the owner of the place as an intermediary (the latter receiving a percentage of the total amount of the bet), many other bets go on between other pairs of individuals in the audience. Similar dynamics mark the betting at cockfights.<sup>14</sup>

*Truco*, a game played with the Spanish deck of cards, is centered on the oral bluff. There are well known verses for every suit, and verbal challenges are constantly presented by the opponents throughout the course of the game. A well publicized part of gaucho culture is the ideal of honesty, which makes lying and cheating reprehensible conduct; it is remarkable that this very culture has a game which gauchos play for hours and hours where the whole point is a ritualized lying and cheating.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Cockfights are described in Chapter V.

<sup>15</sup> For rhymes referring to every card of the game, and game rules on verses see Sobrinho 1988.

*Tava* is a game, and also the name of the game token, a cattle knee bone (which men frequently refer to as a bone from a bull) that has to be thrown over a certain distance. One side is called *suerte* (luck), the other is called *culo* (ass hole); depending on which side the bone falls, one wins or loses. One of the sides of the bone is polished and has a sharp corner that allows it to be stabbed on the ground. Some *tavas* have their "luck" side covered with metal. Few men are specialists (*coimeiro*) in throwing the *tava*; the fun is to watch the game, to cheer and bet. The *tava* court is nine meters long and one to two meters wide. Ritualized gestures and spells are present in the game, as the warming up of the *tava* by rubbing it on the hands, by spitting on the bone, or by urinating on the soil to prepare a good ground for the *tava*. The men, with one voice scream rhymes such as: "*é macho, alumiou para baixo!*" (*it's male, luck side is down!*) or "*ararula, tia Carula, china e ficha não se adula*" (the latter is a reference to "a game token and women should not be fawned over," a saying pronounced while winners are collecting the money they won). A very offensive stanza we hear at the *tava* court is:<sup>16</sup>

Yo quiero que me concedas,  
aunque te cueste trabajo,  
lo que la tava hecha arriba  
quando la suerte está abajo!

I want you to give me,  
Even if it costs you effort,  
What the *tava* leaves up  
when the luck is down!

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<sup>16</sup> Rillo 1988 presents a good collection of sayings from the *tava* game. The ones I am referring to I witnessed in the locality of Vila Albornoz, border of Rio Grande do Sul and Uruguay. These are very common sayings and are also part of Rillo's collection.

The other side of the "luck" means "ass hole" (*culo*). Gaucho culture is rich in exchanges of male insults where the suggestion of having a passive homosexual role is the ultimate affront. In this cultural context the active sexual role is never shameful, as it is always considered to denote masculinity even when it is exercised with another man.

Except for dances, which usually take place at evenings of horse race days, the activities connected with the *bolicho* are essentially male activities. The *bolicho* are generally run by *gringos*, that is, more recent immigrants to the region. If the *bolicho* is prosperous it might offer some jobs, such as domestic tasks, to local women. But this is rather unusual: most of the time, these are small stores which serve an impoverished population, and are run by a man and his family. This man, the *bolicheiro*, exercises some influence over the local population, since it is at the *bolicho* that much of the social life of a vast region is concentrated. At election periods politicians will look for the *bolicheiro*, and he might be influential helping to decide matters such as petitions for rural teachers or a bus lines. But his occupation *per se* is not a prestigious one. In the land of the horsemen, to be a skillful rider is the only activity that is highly regarded.

The rural school, when there is one, is a one room school for children of different ages and scholastic levels who are learning the basics of numbers and letters. It is common for a school to have a formal



existence; but there is not always a teacher, who has to come from the more urban areas; nor are there always students.<sup>17</sup> Some arrangements are made for a teacher to come at least for few periods during the year; but it is clear that the formal system of rural education is ineffective: the teachers are poorly paid and insufficiently prepared; and what is taught has no appeal to a rural population that, to get to the school, has to come long distances. Most of the male population is illiterate (even when formally they are not)<sup>18</sup>; school is considered a "women's thing." If a boy is old enough to travel the long distance to get to school, in their understanding he is also ready to work on a *estância*. He really prefers to work; at very young ages boys begin to model their lives around the male domain: the *estância*, the open fields.

I observed that children in general are raised to be very independent of their parents, are given freedom even to decide if they want go to school or not. The father is absent, working in the *estância*, but even during occasional weekends, my impression is that his authority over the

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<sup>17</sup> The statistics show that, for example, for the municipality of Alegrete the total number of rural schools is 76; the number of assigned teachers is 98 and the total number of registered students at the beginning of the academic year is 1453 -- what gives us theoretically a rate of only 14 students for teacher. Source: *Anuário Estatístico do Rio Grande do Sul 1980*. Fundação de Economia e Estatística. Porto Alegre: 1981.

<sup>18</sup> Formally, for statistics and electoral proposes, literacy is defined as the ability to write one's name. It is not uncommon that people know to draw the letters of their names but, do not know the sounds and meanings of letters and words. Also, if a man once in his lifetime went to school (when he was a child) he will declare himself literate, but this does not means he is able to actually read and write.

children -- and there is no doubt that the adult male figure has strong influence mainly over the male children -- does not rely upon coercion. Strickon (1960: 70) also observed that children were rarely punished or disciplined in any way. For female children, school is thought to be essential "because they won't live for ever here." Since there is actually more pressure and incentive for girls to go to school, the girls perceive themselves as subject to more restriction than the boys. If the children are of school age, the mother is concerned to find ways of moving to the city or of sending her daughters to the city under the care of a relative or friend so that she may go to elementary school -- as they put it, "only the city school is a true school." The women see very clearly that the rural schools do not prepare the children for urban middle school, should the opportunity arise; their conclusion is that rural school " has no worth."

The *bolicho* with its sudden effluence of men on Sunday, a problematic school, an infrequent bus and scattered mud houses identify the countryside "villages." Less typical, because of its special geographical situation, but deserving anthropological attention, is Messoller, a village exactly on the frontier between Brazil and Uruguay (see Figure 3).

Messoller is Uruguayan, but it is part of the region in northern Uruguay where the inhabitants speak Portuguese rather than Spanish. The Uruguayan rural schools are much better structured than the Brazilian ones. They are also more traditional and rigorous in terms of rules, discipline and didactic approach: for example, clean white uniforms are

required of the students, which, if not impossible, are totally beyond the means of most rural residents. School is mandatory for children seven and over, and attendance is supposedly enforced by some sort of school district authority. The state provides the students' books and materials (unlike in Brazil), and after school and during vacation periods the students have to complete an hour of homework which is transmitted over the radio. These radio transmitted exercises are corrected every day by the local teacher, even during vacation.

The one room school in Messoller had around 20 students, the majority of them female. Clearly the teacher was sufficiently trained to teach and had much more institutional support than did teachers in the situations I observed on the Brazilian side. But one essential detail was totally disregarded: the population speaks Portuguese, not Spanish.<sup>19</sup> Most students were able to understand Spanish, but to teach them how to read and write was especially hard, mainly because, as the local teacher said, "the children will just write and read in Spanish, but they will keep speaking Portuguese. The worst is that, if they need to read or write -- you know, for their life, they will probably need to do it in Portuguese,

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<sup>19</sup> I could not find official Uruguayan statistics on the spoken languages. But we can read in the *American Area Handbook* for Uruguay: "The northern area had a substantial Brazilian settlement in the past, over which Spanish language and culture have been imposed. There are several places where pure Portuguese is spoken; other were a *dialect fronterizo* (border dialect), a combination of Spanish and Portuguese, exists; and still other where only a slight Portuguese influence is apparent". (Cf. *Uruguay: A Country Study. Area Handbook Series*. Washington: United States Government. 1985:63)

not Spanish". I did not find similar situations the other way around, that is, populations on the Brazilian side where the spoken language was Spanish.

What is unusual about Messoller is that it has what is called a "dry frontier" (*fronteira seca*), that is, there is total territorial continuity here between Uruguay and Brazil, without any river demarking the country boundaries. Only a few cement poles, erected by the Brazilian government in 1856, indicate the border between the two countries. On the Uruguayan side, as I mentioned, there are a few houses (and a population that is relatively high for these rural area, around 80 people), a small old bar and the school. One step from this, on the Brazilian side, there are three large *bolichos* that are more like real general stores, and two gas stations. Except for the people who own and run these stores, many of them without their families, there is no Brazilian population living there.

These stores are prosperous and have a large variety of goods, from regular cereals and traditional gaucho outfits to fancy and expensive canned food, goods such as disposable diapers, and electronic products. They engage in a more or less formal contraband. Ranchers and farmers from far inside Uruguay will come to buy goods there. As a general pattern, industrialized products are cheaper and more available in Brazil than in Uruguay; but wool and leather clothes of good quality, milk products and fruits are cheaper in Uruguay. The price of gasoline on the



Brazilian side is almost half of the price in Uruguay, and Brazil sells fuel alcohol (ethanol) which is not available in Uruguay.<sup>20</sup> These goods guarantee a considerable influx of people, cars and trucks to the area. Strangers come from far away to buy something; to local people they are just travelers passing through. Although they have little interaction with the local population, their presence surely changes the dynamic in *las casas*.

The geographical situation of Messoller offered me a privileged spot from which I could observe the manipulation of nationality, rules, and even cultural traditions from both areas, and the way in which these are interwoven with gaucho identity. The everyday commerce of these stores bring in clients who are foreign to the place, but the Sunday activities of these stores (actually only one opens) are those of a traditional *bolicho*: liquor, cards, *tava*, races. Since *tava* is forbidden in Uruguay,<sup>21</sup> it is played on the Brazilian side. This was rather unusual, because it meant that the horse track and the tava court, separated by a few meters, were further apart than most. I was told the reason for the separation was this prohibition by Uruguay. Since Uruguay also forbids cockfighting, the same thing happens with cockfights along this border, but at other sites; this specific place did not have a *rinhadreiro* (cockfighting pit).

The *bolicho* also disseminates information. Requests for laborers can

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<sup>20</sup> Nowadays almost half of the cars produced in Brazil are build to run on ethanol from sugar cane and manioc, instead of petroleum fuel.

<sup>21</sup> Perhaps the prohibition of *tava* is not a national law, but just local restrictions.



be found there, and day laborers for the *estâncias* look for jobs there: laborers go back and forth across the border depending on wage rates and job offers in one country or the other. Nationality is not a consideration if the gauchos are willing to work on a day-to-day basis, but long term employment entitling the worker to (scarce) social benefits would be illegal to foreigners in both countries.

The limits of the *estâncias* do not necessarily coincide with national boundaries, so at least for those *estâncias* which straddle the border it is very hard for states to control contraband or tax payment. All these *estâncias* have herds of sheep and cattle, but wool has a higher price in Uruguay and cattle a better price in Brazil, so the frontier is literally manipulated: depending on the price, the herds will be declared to be of one or the other nationality.

Intermarriage between the landowning families of both nationalities is also common -- but of course we are dealing with a very small group (and the more they own, the smaller is their number) where any numerical conclusion would be statistically irrelevant. It is also clear that more Brazilians own land in Uruguay than do Uruguayans in the Brazil. A common media polemic states that the Uruguayan government will soon start to require Uruguayan citizenship as a prerequisite for buying land in Uruguay.

Apparently there is an older polemic, occasionally raised by Uruguayan politicians, demanding that their government take an official

position as to exactly where the boundary between the two countries should be placed -- the area in question coincides exactly with the site of my fieldwork. Uruguayans claim that the limits stipulated by the Treaty of 1851 were misplaced and that the boundaries should be further into what is today Brazilian territory. The local gaucho population is totally indifferent to these questions.

During the period of my fieldwork this controversy was raised once more. No official attitude was taken by the Uruguayan government. Meanwhile, in a period of few months a village was built in the Brazilian territory facing Massoller. This village has electricity and piped water, a school, a medical post and one Center of Gaucho Traditions. The school is large enough for 80 students, but the only students registered when I left the place were the two children of the teacher just assigned to the position and who had just moved in. They were also the only Brazilian children in the region. Brazil is encouraging families to apply for housing (free to Brazilian settlers) as well as schooling and medical services. An ostentatious sign reads: "Vila Albornoz;" the township was inaugurated on March of 1985. But except for the local Uruguayan population and the owners of the Brazilian stores that sell to Uruguayans, there are no other people there -- at least, not yet.

By the time I came to Messoller, I was sufficiently familiar with the situation of families who live in rural Rio Grande do Sul not to be shocked with the sudden creation of a village in a place where there were

no people and a school where there were no students. Despite the poverty of these families, the issue here was clearly not the solving of social problems. The village was built to address what the military calls "national security."

When I asked the women in *las casas* if they could not apply to live in the new houses, the answer was "no, we do not have the papers", meaning by that a birth certificate indicating their nationality, they only can live there if they are Brazilian. But the school was open to any child who wanted to attend it. A Brazilian school teaching in Portuguese is extremely attractive to the local population, and very soon will have Uruguayans students who will identify themselves more and more with Brazil and not Uruguay. Certainly, in the short run the area will also attract Brazilian settlers. The reason that none have come previously is that until the creation of the new "settlement," this was somebody else's land. In fact, from the Brazilian side, access to this area is impossible except from within the *estâncias*. Land owners do not allow settlers on their land, but they do donate land to the State when their own interests are at stake.

This geopolitical situation raises the questions of nationality and cultural reality. For the gaucho, what is in his symbolic world a land without limits, is actually the social reality of extended latifundia and unsettled national boundaries. On another level, national expansionism can benefit from a national identity diluted by gaucho identity. A carica-

ture comes to mind when I think of this particular frontier: an image of opposing groups of three institutions, each in a row facing the other country -- three stores selling attractive goods. Disposable gadgets are available at the general store; language and nationalism at the school; and tradition and identity at the Center of Gaucho Traditions. These are the building blocks of an hegemony.

### **A Woman Intruder: Notes on Method**

I have already alluded to the great distances I have to cross in order to reach the gaucho: the social hierarchy, the physical space and the gender distinction. So far in this chapter I have treated the first two of these, the social and geographical spaces. Let me turn now to the issue of gender, the third level of this process of *getting there*, which is also the process of constructing a relationship between the ethnographer and her subject.

The logic of my presentation of these diverse boundaries here is that of the order in which the distances were presented to me during my fieldwork. There is an unavoidable parallel between social hierarchy and that between urban and rural, which in its turn parallels the female-male segregation. That is to say, in a spatial continuum, the more rural the domain, the more masculine it is, and the farther it is from my own social reality.

The spatial image is more than metaphorical: from the city to the *estância*, we have three concentric circles which range from the most general to the most specific. From the gaucho's perspective, the *estância* is the center of this universe, and it is from there that I will try to construct my understanding of them. But to get there we have to follow a sort of reverse path. First, we penetrate urban space -- there we find the gaucho only occasionally, on brief visits, and on civic occasions which remind the urban public he exists, generously sharing some aspects of his culture with this public. He is also there when he is too old, and can no longer be a gaucho, but he will be there holding to what is left of his identity: the backyard *galpão*, the *mate*, a cockfight or a *tava* in the neighborhood. In the second sphere, that of *las casas*, we enter a female domain; but on Sundays the gaucho will be there, again occupying a well demarcated space, the *bolicho*. Here he performs little rituals of dispute and solidarity, by which male cohesion is confirmed through the exclusion of women. Finally we get to the *estância* -- the male domain *par excellence*, the vast open space of herds and herdsmen. This is the space of the gaucho's ordinary daily existence and that of the extraordinary imagery he constructs around his own existence.

Being a woman makes the penetration of this universe, if not impossible, certainly difficult. Without a doubt it shapes the nature of my own ethnographic data.



I stated earlier what led me to study the gauchos: the themes of sex and gender were not part of my initial intellectual preoccupations. In other words, I did not decide to study the gauchos because they were men. Their male culture assumed its central role in my work when I realized that their culture and identity is itself centered on the notions of what means to be a man; their sexual identity is constantly presented in their practices and in their lore. I knew *a priori* I would be dealing with a group of men, but not necessarily with a male culture, nor had I any previous notion of how segregated the male and female universes in this situation were.

To intrude into somebody else's space is always a hard task; to leave it with some understanding of the situation is even harder. On each of the *estâncias* where I stayed there was one woman in charge of house-keeping and cooking for the men;<sup>22</sup> the presence of another woman kept me from feeling totally isolated. But even within the *estância* the male-female distance is enormous. Since the first day on each estancia, I stated as clearly as I was able, what my research was about and in what I was interested. Actually, I think they were as much interested in my work as I was interested in theirs. It took a long time for them to decide to invite me to hear their stories in the *galpão*. By the time I was able to participate in these evenings of tales, rhymes and music, I had already

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<sup>22</sup> In both cases, the women were wives of the *estância* foremen and they received a regular wage for their work. See Chapter IV for an account of the woman within the *estância*.

collected a good number of life histories and informal interviews.

I do not have any illusion that once I was allowed in the *galpão*, the story telling events were pristine. The presence of a female outsider doubtlessly modified the evenings -- their presentations were probably *cleaner*, that is, they would make an effort to present more well structured tales and less casual chatter. Emphasis was put on the well known gaucho repertoire of jokes, poetry and songs rather than the relation of mundane stories about daily work. There was also a selection of subjects, and more intimate or personal matters were not presented collectively. But not rarely, during the next day, very informally, one of the men would say: "Let me tell you what was said after you left...."

One evening when I was sitting with them around the fire, drinking the *mate* and hearing their stories and silences in the *galpão*, they noticed that someone was coming (while the visitor was still at a great distance they recognized first the horse and then the horseman). It is not uncommon for a guest to join the evening talks in the *galpão* of *estâncias* that have a large number of gauchos. It was a very cold winter night and I was wearing a heavy *poncho* which covered me almost entirely. When they saw the man, they decided to play a joke on him, and they asked me to wear one of their hats hiding my hair that was tied at the back, and not to talk. The newcomer was carrying a guitar and was specially skillful in verbal dueling. In a corner of the *galpão*, only illuminated by the ground fire, I remained unidentified for quite a while, until they could not

stop laughing because the things the man was saying were not what they considered to be the most appropriate to be said in front of women; and I was beginning to feel uncomfortable with the "undercover" situation. The man was extremely vexed when he realized that I was a woman; the gauchos had a lot of fun with the situation and I felt -- at least for that moment -- capable of playing on the sexual meanings constructed in the group. For a short period I was not the outsider; I became an insider playing a trick of gender inversion on an outsider.

I was truly interested in their skills with cattle, and they are men proud of their work, so observation and the act of being observed were not in especially difficult. I knew how to ride but I was not an experienced rider, and horses are the only way of move around the open field. It was hard (and painful) for me to spend long hours on horseback, either to go to one of the neighboring farms or to observe one of their round-ups (*campereadas*), driving the herd somewhere. I was never able to move alone on the fields. I would get lost: a flat land with no signs, no paths or any other reference was something totally foreign to me. It would be unthinkable for me to kill a lamb and skin it, to make a fire. My total lack of skills to live on the pampa to a certain extent subverted the power relationship pre-established by class: I was there to hear them and learn about them, not to teach anything, not to order anything.

In this male culture, woman is seen as threatening: this is expressed in their folklore, in my interviews of them and in their way of

living. I am a woman, but in no way did I act or I was thought of as setting up seductive situations that they perceived as intimidating. *Respect*, one of the essential values of the gaucho ethos, was a clear mutual understanding. *Respect* is a category by which things and people are classified. I am not entirely sure of the rationale by which this classification is made, but I was among the ones who deserved respect.

The amount of data I collected is enormous and the quality of the interviews good. I was talking with people that think what they do is important, people that are used to thinking and talking about themselves. Since the construction of masculinity is a central issue in their culture and my work, I asked direct questions on intimate subjects. I always got direct answers to such questions -- if I did not ask direct questions I would not receive straight answers; in many interview situations I realized that I was dealing with my own difficulties and hang ups, ones that are part of my own culture, not theirs.

This is a culture that has very clear rules of what is correct and what is not. An ideal of righteousness is constantly reaffirmed, but there is not such a thing as the observation of rules of conduct imposed by the formal institutions of overall society. In no way is aggressive sexual behavior towards women sanctioned by this male culture -- "after all," they would say, "only cowards impose their strength on weaker beings." Alone among them, I always felt safe: I cannot say the same about urban situations; in the hotels and restaurants of the cities of the region, a



woman alone always inspired surprise, and always prompted some sort of verbal harassment from traveling business men.

My stay on these *estâncias* were intercalated by periods spent in the capital city of the state. There, I had the help of graduate students well trained in anthropology; they transcribed the interviews and discussed the field notes with me. These breaks away from the field gave me an exceptional opportunity of rethinking the data and readdressing my questions. During the fieldwork itself, I would take for granted points that later in the context of academic discussion would arouse my attention. Back in the field, I would clarify obscure points and discuss my conclusions and interpretations with the *gauchos*. This process of working the data and interpretation back and forth is a fieldwork method which we call *negotiation of interpretations*. By *we* here I mean mainstream Brazilian anthropology.<sup>23</sup> The basic rule of this methodological approach is simply that every time the ethnographer is puzzled by the complexity of meanings of cultural practices she will first ask her subjects about them. She will reveal to them her own interpretation, and will incorporate their responses into the body of the ethnographic text. Needless to say, coherence or harmony are not always part of this picture.

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<sup>23</sup> This anthropological tradition in Brazil can be identified as influenced by Freire (1970). Within the field of anthropology this approach is presented mainly by Brandão (1986). In no way can my own research can be understood as an example of the original propositions of such *participant research*, with the political content which is implied by this field technique; but it has been highly influenced by the entire epistemological discussion that this approach involves.



Considering that this approach is part of my own theoretical bias, and also considering that with the gauchos I have learned a lot about *respect*, there is not any piece of information exposed in this research which does not have the consent of my informants. This also means that many pieces of information (such as personal statements told in a confessional tone) were left out because they do not conform to this criterion. Such materials are not explicitly used to support any given argument, but of course -- and it could not be otherwise -- they have become part of my own understanding of the gauchos' cultural reality.

## Chapter III

### The Galpão and its Tales

#### The *Galpão*

The *galpão*, or bunkhouse, is a shed apart from the main *estância* building where the Gauchos, the men who work in the *estância*, gather together when they are not working. There they keep their personal belongings, they have their meals, and they sleep at night. It is the *men's house*. In the *galpão* they build a fire. Seated around it, drinking the *chimarrão*, they listen to the radio, they sing and play musical instruments, they talk and tease each other, and they tell stories at the end of the day. These *galpão* stories, or *causos*, are specific to the bunkhouse and are a genre of tale which gauchos tell in slow voices, interspaced with long intervals of silence, in a style of speech peculiar to themselves.

The *galpão* constitutes a cultural space which relies on the unity of culture, class and gender. In this chapter I will explore this cultural space, the *galpão*, with its voices and sounds, and I will take the storytelling event as key moment in the construction of the Gaucho identity. The *galpão* talk is, as they put it, "a space to organize thought." In fact, it is where and when these men organize their thoughts about who they are. Partly in prose, partly in verse, sometimes by joking, sometimes

through the voice of the radio or just in deep silence, they say who they are.

The *galpão* is a building, open on one side, with a sort of porch as entrance to the main room. The walls are made of brick, rough wood stakes or adobe. The floor, at least that of the main room, is packed dirt; and the roof is of straw (*santa-fê*) or reeds supported by poles. The open side always faces the north to offer some protection against the *Minuano*, the cold winter wind that sweeps up from the south pole. The wind is named after the *Minuanos*, the Indian group who were known for their ability to ride horses; they lived on the pampa before and during the early colonial period.

There is always a fire in the large main room of the *galpão*. The fire can be built either directly on the ground, or in a fireplace. Around the fire are little benches or whole tree trunks where the men sit. If a man makes his own bench -- out of a specially chopped piece of wood or even from a cow skull -- he will always sit in the same place. The fire is fed with a large tree trunk which is pushed slowly into the fire as it burns. During the day when the gauchos are out in the fields herding the cattle, the *peão de casa*, the home peon, will keep the fire going, always ready for cooking, warmth or hot water for making *chimarrão*.

It is significant that the animal shed in the *estância*, where fine horses, a purebred bull, or animals that need special care are kept, is also called *galpão*. The animal *galpão* is usually separated from the men's

*galpão*, but except for the fire and the separate bedroom (when it has one), the men's house and the animal shed look the same. Both are equally distant from the main *estância* house, they bear the same name, and they are built in the same style and with the same kind of material.

The men's *galpão*, like that of the animals, is destitute of any nonessential element. The corners and the walls of the men's house display only the man's and the horse's gear, providing us with a sort of identity puzzle to figure out who - the man or the horse - wears what. Saddles, spurs, leather straps, lassos, whips, bolas, and knives are spread out in the room.

In the men's *galpão*, adjacent to the main room, without windows or with only a small window which admits little light, is the men's collective sleeping room. Stake beds are placed side by side, closely spaced; in some cases, there are bunk beds. A few clothes hang on ropes or hooks. Some owners provide sheets, towels and blankets; on other farms the peons sleep on sheepskins, with or without sheets. In the winter they cover themselves with their own heavy wool ponchos. Under the bed, they may have a bag in which they keep their few belongings. Occasional workers paid by the day (as for example at sheep shearing sheep time) sleep on the floor, resting against their saddles covered with sheepskin.

A bathroom, with a rudimentary toilet bowl and a shower, is also part of the *galpão*. Many *estâncias* do not have piped water for their

peons, and most do not have hot showers. Electricity is not available in many *estâncias* and the transport of liquefied gas is not always easy. In the cold winter the bath is taken by heating large pans of water in the fire.<sup>1</sup>

The deprivation of the bunk house, its naked walls, the lack of furniture and its poor living conditions contrasts with the main farm building, the house of the patron (*patrão*). What makes this contrast more striking is the fact that the farm owner's (*estancieiro*) mansion is empty of people while squeezed into the *galpão* will live 5 to 10 workers. Except in rare cases, the landowner does not live on the *estância*. He lives in big cities although he visits his *estância* with some regularity. If he has more than one *estância*, he will visit each of them even more rarely. Infrequently during the summer his family will occupy the farm house. Occasionally the veterinarian and/or the agronomist, who makes regular visits to the *estâncias*, will also stay overnight in the owner's house.

### **Wage Earning Gauchos**

In earlier times, up to the beginning of the XXth century, the owner used to live in the *estância* at least during certain seasons. The

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<sup>1</sup> Technically this region is served with electricity, but the *estâncias* are so large that electricity is a large investment which, from the owner's perspective, will not add any profit. Since landowners do not live on the farms they have little interest in providing the farm with electricity.



size of the properties (larger then than now) and the difficulty of communications made this necessary; the patron had to be present in order to not lose control over his land and his peons. During the last decades, the work relationship has changed: the patron now buys gaucho labor, and the salary itself ties the gaucho to his work. Low wages have replaced African slave labor, payment in kind, tenant landholding and paternalistic relationships of labor in an economy that has been market oriented and well integrated into the international market since its origin in colonial times. The peon can leave for a job in another *estância* when he wishes to do so. The owner's presence will not change his decision, and the gaucho knows very well that his working conditions will not change or improve on the next farm. Even so, the workers tend to circulate a lot within a few farms in the same region, making use of the very little bargaining power they have. When the owner is permanently absent from the farm, workers' living conditions tend to be worse. Workers will lack supplies, such as sugar, fuel for lamps, batteries for flash lights and radios, soap, cleaning supplies and sometimes even firewood, things that have to come from the cities.

Today, since communications and access to the farms has become easier, and since the landowner can hire technical assistance from specialists, his presence has become unnecessary. Moreover, one can hypothesize that a century ago, urban living conditions for the landowner were not much more attractive than those that the *estância*, as a self contained

production unit, had to offer. Nowadays, the large city offers him much more: it offers him the opportunity to consume his profit.

Although its owner is gone, the landowner's house, a solid construction from the last century or even earlier, is an impressive detail in the pampa landscape. Moreover, even though the house is empty, the patron is present in the imagery in the evening tales in the *galpão*.

The *capataz*, the foreman, is the man who actually guides the everyday routine of the farm. He is the intermediary between the owner or the technician and the peons. He passes on orders; organizes the daily work schedules; chooses herds for the market; arranges for the reproduction of the animals. The foreman is also a wage worker, and his salary is 30% to 50% more than the others, not truly significant in terms of economic power, since salaries, based on the minimum wage, are very low. But the foreman's authority and prestige among the workers is high. Above all, he has to be fully in command of the rural gaucho code. He owns his position to the trust of the patron; but he must prove his skill, courage and leadership in order to be accepted by the peons. The foreman is the only one who has the privilege of marriage: that is, he is able to have his family with him. If he is married, his wife will do paid general domestic labor on the farm, and the couple will live in small house or in a room in the *estância* house. In most cases the foreman is also allowed to raise some cattle of his own in the farm. The landowners are very uncomfortable with this situation of the foremans' cattle on their property,

but landowners must provide this sort of privilege or it will be almost impossible find a skilled foreman. The *estância* production and the patron's profits depends on the foreman. If he can find a *true* gaúcho, experienced with cattle, skilled at herding and in leadership, the *patrão* must make such concessions as letting him have his own cattle.

There is also the position of *sota-capataz*, that is, under foreman. The *sota-capataz* is also respected for his experience, but has very little power and gets very little extra monetary compensation for his position. His work is exactly the same as that of the others, but usually he is older, more experienced and has more stories to tell. He sleeps in the *galpão* together with the other peons.

This *estância* hierarchy is taken so seriously that in one *estância* with only three permanent salaried workers, one was the *capataz*, other was *sota-capataz* and the last the *peão*. In an universe which is essentially that of equals - the *galpão* - and within a social structure of profound inequality and very little possibility of social mobility either horizontal and vertical, hierarchy, in the form of symbolic ranking becomes very important: it is the only possible form of social ascension. A competitive ethos, celebrating both the individual and hierarchy, is always present in the bunkhouse talks.

The gaúchos are separated for long periods from their families -- if indeed they have families.<sup>2</sup> Most of them are unmarried, and marriage is

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<sup>2</sup> A survey realized among *estância* workers of the frontier region of Rio Grande do Sul indicated that only 19.2 per cent of the workers were

not part of their plans or their cultural ethos. The structure of land tenure and the way traditional cattle production is organized oblige these men to live lives of unusual gender segregation. Gaucho culture, centered on the celebration of manliness, expresses this reality.

*Peões campeiros* (field peons) are the *estância* workers who are skilled with cattle. They are men who work all day long on horseback in the open fields, herding cattle and sheep, driving them to different pastures, to baths against parasites, to be weighed, or to a point from which they will be transported in trucks for sale. They dehorn, castrate and brand the animals; they break the horses. Very strictly, these cowhands are the gauchos.

The *peão de casa* (home peon) is defined in opposition to *peão campeiro* (field peon). Every farm has at least one worker who will be charged with the domestic tasks of gathering wood and tending the fire, cooking and cleaning for the men. Even if the ranch has a woman servant, usually the foreman's wife, the farm will have a *peão de casa* for the men's house. Except in the rare case of a special arrangement with the landowner by which the *peão de casa* or *caseiro* is married, his wife works in the *estância*, and his duties include a sort of home administra-

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married. This study also indicated the correlation between marriage and the position of foreman or some other specialized function (cf. Medeiros 1969:24). Sociological studies about gauchos are almost inexistent, so this study deserves special attention. More recent and general quantitative data on male and female population distribution are presented on throughout the dissertation; see mainly Chapter II and Chapter VII for this data.



tion which encompass buying the *estância* supplies, this position does not have any prestige at all. Most commonly, the position will be occupied by a younger man, someone with a handicap, or even by a man who is identified by them as effeminate or homosexual.

The gauchos receive the minimum wage. Legally, the patron is allowed to discount up to 20 per cent of their salaries for housing and food. In the cases I observed, these discounts were not made. The landowners complain about the shortage of cowhands; at least in this region, they say that if they do not pay the full wage, they will lose their workers to a neighboring *estância*. With his salary, the gaucho buys his *pilchas* (clothing) his horse's *pilchas*, his *vicios* (what he calls his *vices*: *mate*, raw tobacco for smoking, his drinks at the *bolicho*). On Sundays he gambles at the rural *bolichos*; occasionally he goes to the city either to buy something, for a dance or to find women. If he is married and his wife and children live in *las casas* he will give part, or even most, of his salary to them.

This is not a society organized around the consumption of goods. The gaucho not only lives on a low wage, but he is not attached to money. Many of them are unfamiliar with the value of cash. Actually, even aside from their general lack of skills and interest in urban ways of life, there is a good reason for this. Brazil has suffered a soaring rate of inflation in the past few years. In the two year period of my field work alone, there were two major monetary reforms which changed the value



and even the name of the national currency.

I met an older gaucho living on an *estância*, who saved all his money together with his few belongings. He told me that he did not spend his money because he "did not feel like going to the city; it is too much trouble to go the city just to spend my money." Much of his currency was from two years ago and no longer had any value, but he did not know this. I tried to explain to him that with an inflation rate of 20 per cent a month, he was not saving but losing money, and that he should put the money in a savings account in the bank. He was not interested, and it was hard for me to explain what inflation is or even to answer his simple questions about it.

The other gauchos do not keep their money in the bank either. Most do not have savings since their income is so low; moreover, they not trust banks on principle, "they are too complicated." Gambling is seen as fun and as a way to appreciate their capital. They say, "we might lose it but we might get even ten times what we have; that is more than any bank gives. If we lose it does not make a big difference, money is not worth much unless one has a lot of it." Conversely, women in general have a good notion of how the banking system functions and are oriented toward saving, when they have any money.

The condition of gaucho existence is isolation. The gauchos are concentrated on the *estância*, but as a class of workers they are dispersed. Their successful organizations such as the *Centers of Traditions* are

supported by the landowners' class and by the State. They have the explicit goal of perpetuating gaucho culture, gaucho lore and gaucho pride, but not gaucho society or working conditions.

The landlord's rural associations are much more organized and have much more power than the rural workers' unions; thus, even with the shortage of *peões campeiros*, the price of labor does not rise. Labor laws regulating rural work and a minimum wage date to 1945 in Brazil. Almost 20 years of dictatorship, however, insured that the labor laws would not be applied. Only in the last decade has the situation changed.<sup>3</sup>

In the evenings in the *galpão*, we observe on the one hand a verbal celebration of individual courage which stresses few differences and little distinction of skills among the workers. It emphasizes achieved status and the working hierarchy. On the other hand, gauchos think of themselves, as a group, as different from the patron, who has an ascribed status. The landowner inherits everything he has; for him, land and cattle are a given. The landowner's social condition, too, is an inherited position and identified as such by the ranch workers. Gauchos too conceive of their own social condition as ascribed: "He who is born peon will die peon," they say. But unlike the patron's status, the gaucho's individual social situation is perceived as an achieved one. Like the plot of a certain type of gaucho story in which the hero has many tasks to perform in order to achieve something, the worker experiences his life as a sequence of

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<sup>3</sup> See the next chapter for an exposition of current labor laws.

achievements, where day by day in every task he has to prove his strength and skill.

### Mounted on Freedom

The *galpão* has a bare, spartan, atmosphere. The place has little furniture and the men few possessions, but minimalism rather than misery would better describe this space. Their diet is based on only two items, meat and mate, but they have these in abundance.<sup>4</sup> The men are physically healthy, with robust complexions and tanned skin. In fact, I never met a fat gaucho nor a skinny one: it is as if in their own body they carry the statement: "only the necessary."

Conspicuous consumption certainly is not part of this world. The gaucho's notion of liberty is strongly connected with his lack of possessions and his spatial mobility. A Gaucho has to be able to carry all his belongings with him on horseback: his *pilchas* (an extra set of clothes), his knife, a sheepskin, and his riding equipment. Freedom means to be without ties, to be able to move freely "in this big world." His gestures, too, are minimal, with a total economy of movement which is reduced to only the most necessary during leisure hours. Although gauchos do not

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<sup>4</sup> On one of the farms where I stayed for a long period, a total of 9 people (including myself) consumed 3 entire lambs per week. I counted myself having over 40 *mates* a day, trying to follow their rhythm of mate drinking. For more data on dietary habits see the next chapter.

stint on metaphors, they choose their words carefully and pronounce them meticulously in low voices. Laconic with outsiders, fluent among themselves in the *galpão*, gauchos speak if they have something to say, sharing a quick joke, a tale, a poem. Verbal skills, "uma boa charla" ("a good piece of conversation"), are highly prized in the group; but it is not appropriate for men to engage in gossip, or "chicken talk."<sup>5</sup> Speech is an event in itself; In the *galpão*, two men will never speak at the same time, nor will they listen to the radio and talk simultaneously.

The notion of freedom as being able to move "in this big world" was well expressed by one of my informants. Capitulino, a 90 year old black man, whose parents were slaves,<sup>6</sup> said in telling me about his life, "When I became of age, I left the *estância* where I was born; I rode all over the world. There was no spot in this huge world that I didn't know as well as I know the palm of my hand, I performed all kinds of jobs. I went to foreign lands." Later in the interview I realized that "all this huge world" was exactly five *estâncias* in this region. Without doubt, it is a huge space - maybe a total area of 100,000 acres of green pasture and few tiny villages. This was, indeed, *his world*, and his world view had this space as its frame of reference. Actually, the reality of the latifun-

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<sup>5</sup> The expression is *cacarejar*, that is, to make chicken sounds; is an expression they employ to refer to constant chatter and nonsense talk is *falar como uma galha*, meaning also "women's talk" and gossip. Literally, it means "to speak like a *galha*", a noisy bird from the region.

<sup>6</sup> Black slavery was abolished in 1888 in Brazil.

dium, the extensive size of private landholdings, and the absence of the owner and of boundaries is experienced by gauchos as freedom, not as an unequal distribution of land. Freedom, in Gaucho speech, includes an indifference to material well being and a lack of attachment to things. An exception, of course, is the gaucho's horse and his riding gear. A Gaucho couplet sung in the *galpãos* says:

Mi mujer y mi caballo  
se me fueron para Salta,  
como my caballo vuelva,  
mi mujer no me hace falta.

My wife and my horse  
have gone to Salta,  
As long as my horse returns  
I don't need my wife.

The horse is part of this individualistic conception of freedom - the Gaucho needs the horse to move around, to switch jobs, to go to *las casas* or the *povo* for a dance, a drink, or gambling on Sundays. The woman means exactly the opposite: marriage means ties and being anchored in one place; and if this is impossible for the gaucho, it means leaving the wife behind, and thus in his understanding, available to another man. In his code of honor, this is a serious threat to his masculinity. The well known verses from Martin Fierro, the gaucho epic, say:

Las mujeres son todas  
como las mulas;  
yo no digo que todas,  
pero hay algunas  
que a las que vuelan  
les sacan plumas.

Women are, all of them,  
just like mules,  
not quite all, I'd say -  
but some of them  
pull the feathers from  
birds who fly away.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> This refers to a man whose wife, when "he flew away from his nest," "plucked" his honor by being unfaithful. Hernandez 1967:150 (English edition). Martin Fierro is a Gaucho epic in verse of almost 2000



Every gaucho is expected to have his own horse, besides the ones belonging to the *estância* where he works. But a horse has become expensive, and nowadays not all gauchos can afford to have one. A gaucho who has no horse uses and takes care of an *estância* horse which becomes "his." If he does not have a horse of his own, he is looked down on by the others as a gaucho of lesser quality, as a "gaucho without legs," even if he is a master of all riding skills. The *estância* horses are supposed to stay within the limits of the *estância*, so a *peão* who does not have a horse is "tied" to the farm where he works: the distances are huge and it is practically impossible to leave on his day off. There is a general belief among them that a gaucho should not ride a mare, or at least never have one as "his horse." Many jokes and anecdotes are told about this subject: it implies bestiality for a man to ride a mare instead of a stallion.

Observing the gaucho gives us the impression that he has an intimate and mysterious pact with his horse, and that he assures his own freedom and self-esteem by placing himself on the horse's back. The process of identification of the gaucho with his horse will be more fully analyzed in Chapter VI, at this point however I want to emphasize that two of the meanings that the horse takes on in this culture are those of liberty and honor. The rationale is that a man only has honor if he is

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stanzas. It was written by the Argentinean poet Jose Hernandez and first published in 1872. Those verses have been incorporated into Gaucho folklore just as Gaucho folklore was incorporated into Jose Hernandez's poem. Today, verses from Martin Fierro are part of the common lore of any Gaucho on the pampa.

free; he only commands respect if he is not submissive -- all these are essential conditions of manliness.<sup>8</sup>

The stories the gaucho tells in the *galpão* confirm him, every evening, in his individual condition, which is imposed upon him both by his work and nature. I use *nature* here in its literal sense. Gaucho imagery has the texture of his surroundings, the grandeur of the open plains. The horse with its gear is an instrument of labor, giving him a certain freedom and making him a very specific kind of rural worker: one who works for a salary but owns his own means of production. The gaucho controls his horse, and he and his horse control the wildness of nature. As the verses from *Martin Fierro*, which we can hear in the *galpão*, say:

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<sup>8</sup> To better describe the dimension of horse culture, it is worthwhile quoting the early anthropological work of Willems among German settlers in this region of south Brazil: "Actually the borrowing of the saddle horse, with its more or less closed associated traits, from the pastoral society of the central plateaus, contributed to raising the social status of the German-Brazilians. Certain cultural patterns of the homeland, which associate high social value with riding horses, exercised a marked influence upon the attitude of the settlers toward the native horse complex. Under the control of this inherited pattern, the borrowing of the new trait complex became a conspicuous source of social satisfaction for the average settler" (Willems 1944:161). Other scholars who analyze the horse culture and its influence are Oliveira Vianna 1987b (1952) and Vidart 1967.

Su esperanza es el coraje,  
 su guardia es la precaucion,  
 su pingo es la salvacion  
 sin mas amparo que el cielo  
 ni outro amigo que el facon.

courage is his hope  
 caution is his protection  
 his horse means salvation  
 with only the sky for shelter  
 and no friend except his knife.

The gauchos' daily individual and lonely tasks contrast with their cohesiveness during the *galpão* evenings. In the *galpão*, they share their food, all eating from one single large piece of barbecued beef or lamb. With no individual dishes, they cut pieces with their knives and carry them directly to their mouths. They also drink the hot *mate* or *chimarão* collectively, passing the *cuia* hand to hand, and the *bombilha* mouth to mouth. The men sit together, very close to each other around the fire. The *mate* drinking is a ritual; it has well established rules as to who serves, the order of drinking, and the way the *mate* is prepared. At night, in the cold emptiness of the plains, these men, through the warmth of the place and their bodies, assure each other that they exist and are equal.

The gaucho's work is solitary, his strength and courage must be proven in every action he performs, and the wild has to be conquered anew every day. This gives him a strong sense of individualism that becomes a group value. His individual courage needs collective recognition: it is in the warm space of the *galpão*, while sipping hot *mate* from one straw, surrounded by the darkness - "the infinite," as they put it, that they assure each other that they are brave individuals. This ambiguity of individualism, competition, freedom and total *comunitas* that is created in the *galpão* is also present in their talks.

Competition and rivalry are present in the *galpão* talks. They are diluted as jokes and ritualized aggression. The *trova*, a song challenge, verbal duels and even dancing are forms this aggression takes among the men. The *chula* is a competitive dance between two male partners, which is performed around a long stick placed on the ground which cannot be touched. Many of their more complex dances, meant to be performed by men and women together, are learned by practicing them in the *galpão*.

Danilo, a *galpão* poet -- as he calls himself -- recites his rhymed verses, slowly, taking long breaks to drink the *mate*:

....  
As vezes deixo meu *pago*  
Pra' ver se ainda acostumo

E saio meio sem rumo  
no lombo do pensamento,  
ao *tranquilo*, passo lento.  
Minutos. *Pago*. Anoiteço.

....  
É o pensamento me sopra  
Forte, que nem tempestade  
E a cavalo, na verdade,  
Só sobre minha conduta  
Devo ajuntar reculutas  
Perdidas na liberdade

....  
Sometimes I leave my *pago*  
To see if I can get used to  
being away  
And I leave without a route  
on the shoulders of my thoughts  
by *tranquil*, slow steps.  
Minutes. *Pago*. I'm nightfall

....  
And the thoughts blow across me  
Strong, as a storm,  
And on my horse, truly  
Alone, mounted on my own conduct  
I have to gather strays  
Lost in liberty

*Pago* means the place where one is born, where he belongs, that he is part of. There is a tension between the *pago* (that here stands for the *galpão* and the gaucho's peer group) and freedom, as a individual journeys away from the *pago*. In this poem we have a rhythm, a rhyme and a sequence of metaphors typical of Gaucho speech. Every verse has a equal



number of syllables (eight), and the way the sounds are stressed gives to the poem a cadence reminiscent of the way a horse walks. The rhymed intonation helps to convey this rhythm (the pattern is AA/BB/A/CC/D-D/C...). This is a long poem narrated in the first person singular; its presentation in the *galpão* evenings, with the stressing some words and the intercalation of silence pauses, takes more than half an hour. The narrative style in itself conveys the notion of a lone horseman in a long journey across the pampa.

Metaphors, in this poem and in Gaucho speech in general, are drawn from nature; natural attributes are applied to man. The man turns into night (*eu anoiteço*), he is the setting sun; his thought blows and walks at the same pace as the horse. The horse is always a powerful image in the Gaucho's universe; in these verses the horse becomes his thoughts and it becomes the man's own way of carrying himself, the man's own bodily movement. *Tranquito*, from the Spanish here employed by Portuguese speakers, refers to the horse's pace and way of walking. *Reculutas* means stray cattle, animals lost from the herd. Solitude and freedom are at once ideals and dangers: "away from one's herd" one can lose his identity.

In gaucho speech there is a constant condensation of images: humans take on animal attributions, or the other way around. In ongoing metamorphoses, men become animalized and animals become humanized. After hearing their tales, puzzled, I asked myself the same questions as I



had earlier when I observed their objects in the *galpão*: Whose is what? Which is animal? Which is human?

### He Who Tells a Tale Adds a Detail

The saying *Quem conta um conto, acrescenta um ponto*, better translated as "he who tells a tale, adds a detail," well describes the storytelling situation. Traditional stories, jokes and legends circulate among gauchos, but the details added to the narratives and the style of each storyteller are more important than the stories alone.

The radio is an important part of the *galpão* situation. It initiates the dynamic circulation of cultural items, such as tales, from people to mass media and from mass media back to the people. There is a dynamic of appropriation from both poles. We have, for example, Danilo, *peão campeiro* at one side, and Danilo folk singer at the other, the category *folk* being a creation of the mass media. It is a creation in the sense that the radio has an authority that the gauchos in the *galpão* do not have: it transforms Danilo's speech into a commodity, names, classifies, and sells it.

Danilo, the gaucho poet to whom I referred above, has a vast repertoire of his own poetry, none of it written down. He is also a *repentista* or *payador*, that is, someone able to engage in a *trova*, a verbal duel of improvising rhymes. He is a well known poet in the region, and

occasionally one of the radio stations from the closest city invites him to recite his poetry and tell stories on the radio. As if this man were following the argument I made above on the role of the mass media, one of the final lines of one of his long poems says:

Que peguem meus versos  
e domem!

You can have my verses  
and tame them!

The radio is important in the *galpão* but is in no way a substitute for their talks, nor will it silence the gauchos. The radio is only important if it says something of direct interest to these men; otherwise, they would rather hear themselves. This is a culture whose members, both in their daily practices and in their imagery, are self-reliant. They are profoundly proud of their skills, both work and verbal skills. If the radio promulgates this culture of pride, gauchos might listen; but it is the urban public, mainly from the provincial cities, that will consume the media production of the gaucho. This does not mean media programming on the gaucho is not authentic -- the gauchos' own evaluation of it is that most of it is of good quality. It just means that the act of production of this folklore in the *galpão* is itself still important and meaningful.

A few hours a day, the radio also transmits programs of personal messages. Given the distances, this is an essential source of information. One of the workers, usually the *peão de casa*, is assigned to listen to the daily news. The landowner, the veterinarian or the agronomist sends

orders by the radio; women in the town send messages to people on the *estâncias* and in *las casas*. Information about where the weekend rodeo, horse-race, or dance will be held are also announced on the radio. I observed through the comments of gauchos that for the patron to come to the *estância* without first announcing himself would demonstrate a lack of "consideration," would be an intrusion which showed a lack of respect. The patrons usually announce themselves for their own convenience; I doubt that any of them ever realized that such an announcement facilitated his relationship with his *estância* workers.<sup>9</sup>

Depending on the radio station, these announcements are free or very cheap. They are priced by word; because of time or price restrictions, there is an economy of words about them that makes them rather telegraphic. Some tales in the *galpão* include jokes about radio messages, puns based on malicious misunderstandings or by agglutinating meanings. For example, one tale refers to a announcement where the radio said:

"Attention, Attention, so-and-so, *estância* São Pedro, in such and such place. The mare's thing [business] is open. The horse's thing [business] is hard, but it's a good deal for you  
..."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> As soon as I learned this rule, I would always call the local radio station and place the announcement when I had plans to go to the field.

<sup>10</sup> In Portuguese *negócio* can mean business or commercial transaction and also for a generic unspecified "thing," that in this case is immediately understood as the animal's genitals. In the original the text is: "Alo, Alo,

I collected a variety of similar stories. What they demonstrate is the gaucho's incorporation of the radio into his own lore.

In terms of themes, the radio and the oral material of the *galpão* are essentially the same. However, tales are not a common item of radio programming. Gaucho music, songs and poetry make up most the media performances. The media presentation of this folklore is also *clean*, formalized, organized, with the genres clearly defined. In the *galpão* speech events, there are no such separations between songs, poems or tales, mythological accounts or jokes, reality and fantasy within the structure of the narratives. Moreover, in the male intimacy of the talks, the sexual content of the tales or jokes is much more explicit.

The most remarkable distinction between the urban institutionalized presentation of the gaucho ethos and the gauchos' representations about themselves can be seen in the hero tale. The gaucho is proud of his reputation as a warrior, but disdains political and nationalist appropriations of it. Fighting is honorable, whether it be for an obscure ideal of freedom, or a pragmatic battle for his personal space. A gaucho also can follow a leader with whom he has affective ties or to whom he owes respect, but he will not support a leader out of political ideals. The fact that one is a monarchist and another a republican, one Uruguayan and the other Brazilian, is meaningless to the gaucho. In respect to the bloody

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Fulano de Tal, Estancia sei-lá-das-quantas, em tal lugar. O negocio da égua esta aberto. O negócio do cavalo está duro mas tá prá ti..."

disputes of the last century, official lore presents a brave gaucho, eager to fight, ready to defend national territories and political leaders. On the contrary, in the stories the gauchos themselves tell, they commonly refer to how unfair it is that one should have to fight a war that is not his; and, to them, serving an obligatory term of military service is in itself a cowardly act. Many of their stories recount how a gaucho hid from army recruiters in historical times when officers would go from *estância* to *estância* recruiting soldiers.

### **Do Females Pigs Kick ?**

The story telling event encompasses more than one particular folklore genre. What we have in the *galpão* is a very specific social situation, a speech event where epic poems, songs, verbal duels, song challenges, tales, proverbs, jokes, the playing of musical instruments and listening to the radio go on. These things do not happen all at once, but a tale may include proverbs and riddles, and a song can have the structure of an epic tale. What we have are blurred speech genres, called *causos*. The literal translation of *causos* is *cases*, but probably the translation *oral culture* is more appropriate, as the *causos* encompass such a variety of "cases" of speech genre, even including the voice of the radio.

The *causos* are narratives in which the organizing concepts are defined through contrast, and they are tools used to construct basic



understanding of the self. The recurring organizing principles, as in any quest for identity, are: "we" and "the others." In the Gaucho's oral culture these are the *pago* and the city, peon and patron, personal self and group identity, man and woman, and humanity and animality. My focus in this chapter is on the situation, the style and the themes of these narratives on identity.

An example of the *causo* situation and style emerged in something I was told the first time I went to the *galpão*. The teller was Clement, the foreman, who was also the oldest man in the group. First, he made clear that it was to be a special story, for a special situation, because of my presence among them:

*Buenas*, there were two students who went throughout the world. They were students-doctors and they traveled in this well studied world to study it even more and they arrived in the home of an old lady in the open country. The little old lady was very poor...

There was a long pause, it was Clement's turn to drink the *mate*. He drank it slowly. Nobody said one word. Then he continued:

*Entonces*, the old lady, who was poor as a *galpão* mouse, offered them some food and said they could sleep inside, because it would rain in the night. The two students studied the weather. They had some equipment to watch stars (...) it was summer time, a beautiful night and they were sure it would not rain, they wanted to sleep outside (...) She said, *buenas*...They watched the stars, they wrote and wrote, and finally slept (...) In the middle of the night the weather changed and a storm came up. (...) They ran and knocked at the old lady's hut. She didn't open the door.

At this point the men in the *galpão* laughed a lot. Clement added more details of the students' desperation to get into the hut, and the peons laughed more:

The old lady thought: They have to stay outside to learn from experience and not from paper, they have to feel the rain to be sure it is raining. (...) Next day they were very curious to know how she knew it would rain. She told them: Do you see my donkey there? Yes. Well, every time it is going to rain my donkey gets under the shelter. And then the students said to each other: "If a donkey knows more than we do, then something is wrong with our learning".

The story was clearly addressed to me, "student from the city," who does not know the very basic things the country people have mastered. What made the story even more derogatory is "even the old lady knew, not just her donkey," the idea being that she knew how to interpret the donkey's signs. To make sure I got the irony, a man commented, referring to the story: "Well, that one was as short as a female pig's kick" (*curta como coice de porca*), meaning that besides the story being really short, it was also too direct, lacking courtesy. It was a way of saying that the foreman was a rude man (*grosso*). The Gauchos laughed a lot at that. I was naturally uncomfortable with the situation, and the only thing that it occurred me to say was: "But, I didn't know female pigs kick!". Clement got serious and the other men laughed again. Without being aware of it, it seems that I had just made a clever play on words; they understood me

to be saying, "I wasn't expecting to find female pigs here," in subtle way, very much in their style.

From that moment on, I was welcomed to the world of metaphors. The entire situation became a new *causo*, with a story inside the story, which was told and retold days later when other people were present in the *galpão*, each one adding a different colorful detail to it. By the way, I still don't know if pigs - either male or female - kick.

On the same subject of scorn towards educated people, or "city people," a popular stanza from *Martin Fierro* says:

Aqui no valen dotores:	Professors aren't no good here
solo vale la experencia;	Experience is all that counts;
aqui verian su inocencia	Here, those people who know everything
esos que todo lo saben,	would see how little they know,
porque isto tiene otra llave	because this world has another key
y el Gaucho tiene su ciencia	and the Gaucho knows what it is

The use of rhymes abound in the *galpão* talks. To be able to make rhymes and to use figures of speech are skills highly praised in the group. They also have an exclusively male way of speaking: maleness is celebrated in every sentence, both through the play of images, and in the way the sentences are pronounced. Rhymes and images with metaphorical content are linked together in a sort of chain; mastery of this code and an ability to play with words bring great prestige. For example, they make chains of rhymes such as: *chão/rincão/galpão/fogão* (ground/home/galpão/fireplace); *peão/patrão/razão/paixão* (peon/patron/reason/passion); *valente/co-*

*ntente/quente* (valiant/content/hot); *pago/afago* (pago/caress); *vidas/idas* (lives/depart). The sequence of sounds ends up as a necessary sequence of images.

Spanish expressions such as *buenas*, *entonces*, *a la pucha!*, and *Che*, among others, very characteristic of Gaucho speech, are indications that someone will start to talk, meaning also that silence is required. These Spanish phrases are employed even when the Gauchos are speaking in Portuguese. The two languages of this area, the frontier between Brazil and Uruguay, are sometimes used as a speech strategy, to "soften" some expressions, such as by putting the expression *a la pucha!* ("whore"), into another language (and then pronouncing the Spanish with the soft Gaucho "t", a "ch"), thus defusing some of its aggressive power. This strategy is used for entire sentences and works in both ways: that is, Spanish is used by the Brazilians and Portuguese by the Uruguayans.

To be considered a skillful storyteller a gaucho also has to be able to embellish the story he is telling with systematic imagery. The folk similes or proverbial comparisons<sup>11</sup> he adds are usually funny; they are employed in a way that creates suspense in the story or breaks the monotony of a narration. For example, in the middle of a dramatic story of the hero-tale genre, when the audience is intent and emotionally involved in the story, suffering with the character through all his misfortunes, the storyteller says:

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<sup>11</sup> In Brazilian Portuguese, this folklore genre is called adagio.

...And then, Pedro the brave Gaucho - who suffered more than a cripple's armpit (*mais sofrido que suvaco the aleijado*)  
 ...[*aleijado* is a person who uses crutches]

At that moment, the men will start to laugh, breaking the tension of the atmosphere. The sudden laugh reminds them that they are there in the *galpão*, and that they are together. To be able to laugh together is a powerful way of reinforcing their identity.

I collected a great number of these comparative expressions:

*Grande como sapato de padre* / Big as a priest's shoes.

*Pior que baile de china em dia de carreira* / Worse than a whores' dance at a horse race.

*Mais manso que gato de bolicho* / Tamer than a store cat.

*Descofiado como cego que tem amante* / Suspicious as a blind man with a lover.

*Grande como pau criado em bombacha* / Large as a penis raised in *bombachas*.<sup>12</sup>

*Cheio como ovelha em alambrado* / Crowded as corralled sheep.

*Rapido como alegria de pobre* / Fleeting as the happiness of a poor man.

*Picado como melancia em galinheiro* / As chopped up as watermelon in a hen house.

Their speech contains a profusion of such sayings, which always use things from their concrete life experiences as references. They are funny

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<sup>12</sup> *Bombachas* are the traditional Gaucho baggy pants.



because there is a deliberate abuse (over use) of elements peculiar to the Gaucho's universe. The use of these elements also creates a specificity of meanings which reinforces the private identity code of the Gaucho. These images give comic relief to a sad story, and help the storyteller and his audience to map and contextualize the narrative: the proverbs function as guidelines. As the familiar images follow the Gaucho hero to faraway lands or through frightening experiences of the supernatural world, they serve to bring the listener back to his familiar world and to remind him of his connection to ordinary life.

The *galpão* talk is the locus of the production of a consensus about the practices of the gaucho's everyday life, and the locus of their elaboration of the emic categories by which they construct their own identity. Proverbs and folk similes, as well as spontaneous comments, work as devices indicating what is righteous, respectable, honorable, reasonable.<sup>13</sup> These speech devices are used to construct a universe of values. They are a form of social control, as they describe a clear code of group conduct. Gaucho pastoral society, essentially a group of horsemen who live isolated in a unpopulated region, is also a society where the formal institutions of family, religion, schools, or state scarcely exist. Although these institutions are part of the larger society and of the gaucho's frame of social

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<sup>13</sup> They make constant use of three expressions by which they classify things: "what is right" (*o que é de direito*), "what is respectable" (*o que é de respeito*), and "what is reasonable" (*o que é de razão*). See Chapter VII for this taxonomy.

references, they hardly affect his daily life. He only participates marginally in urban institutions, and these have no validity or legitimacy in the everyday practices of gauchos. Such institutions are clearly identified by gauchos as belonging to *the others*: to the landowners, to women, to people from the city.

In their story-telling events, they confer upon each other the strength of the group by recalling the imagery of the group, while at the same time confirming their existence as individuals by elaborating the canons proper to a Gaucho individual. The galpão can be seen as a institution, a place where consensus about social reality is produced. The dynamic of the story-telling event has contractual elements, in the sense of *a social contract*; in this event the individual presents (or *offers*) to the group his deeds and thoughts. The group will return to him either approval, recognition or censure; will offer him either disapproval or honor and respect.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Salamander: Male Representations of Woman**

In the *galpão*, as I stated earlier, narrative genres and themes overlap, and it is hard to untangle them. In an effort to systematize the material I collected, I have sorted the material into five main themes and

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<sup>14</sup> For the notion of social contract as I am employing here, see mainly Humbert and Mauss 1964 (1898).

styles: 1. Stories of gaucho work, for instance how someone tamed a horse or how many sheep he sheared; stories about wild bulls, hunting, or fishing. 2. The epic, whose hero's feats might be told in rhyme; tales of valor in the many wars of independence the Gauchos fought; or the intrepid and smart Gaucho, the trickster genre. 3. Myths, legends, and stories about the supra-natural, *causos de assombração* which are a kind of ghost story, dealing with "lost souls" (*almas penadas*): a series of traditional characters from legends are introduced to these. 4. Funny anecdotes, about Gaucho troubles getting around in the city, or about courtship situations (which include courtship of animals as well as women) 5. Stories of love, passion, woman and death.

Accounts of their working day and decisions pending about the next day duties with the herds are always subjects for the talks in the *galpão*. The evenings, although they are non-working and unpaid hours, are times which are, to a certain extent, still dedicated to labor in the sense that, by sharing their experiences, gauchos learn how to improve their skills. This is very clear when there are new peons in the *estância*: then there is a bulk of information that has to be transmitted and numerous tasks that have to be explained. Even stories about a special work accomplishment, though embellished with imagery and narrated by one among them recognized as skillful storyteller, also perform a didactic function in regard to daily labor. Moreover, these narratives which magnify the every day tasks of the gaucho, glorified and enhanced by metaphors, are the recompense

for hard work.<sup>15</sup>

A legend of gaucho folklore that condenses both the hero tale and the mythological genre is the *Salamanca do Jarau*. I actually never heard the entire story being told by the men in the *galpão*; but references are often made to the legend or to the Jarau itself, and fragments of its story appear within other stories.<sup>16</sup> Jarau is the name of a low rocky mountain close to the area where my fieldwork took place. Since elevations are not usual in the pampa landscape, it is not surprising that this mountain is invested with mystery.

*Salamanca* is the same of *salamandra*, the salamander, and in the story refers to both a female gecko and the Spanish city from where the enchanted gecko came. In short, the legend says that:

Long ago, in the city of Salamanca, the moors were the masters of magicians, and in a dark cave they kept a secret magic wand which was also a old fairy and a beautiful moorish princess. After many wars the moors, pretending to

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<sup>15</sup> A contemporary literary work of male authorship but with a feminine voice as narrator, well describes this point: "You don't allow me in the *galpão* [...because] this is a magic space that would turn me into people. You need the *galpão* because only there you know how to live like real people. Extinguish the fire, silence the songs, destroy the worlds built up with the strength of words, and you fall into the reality which made you tough. They dominate you with toughness, and with the same toughness you dominate. The distinction is in that of the space of domination. They dominate many, and you, almost nothing" (Schüler 1985:31. My translation).

<sup>16</sup> For written versions of the legend see Laytano 1984; Ornellas 1967; and Lopes Neto 1973, whose late 1800's version is a classic of the literature *gauchesca*, that is, the literature from Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay that has as its theme the gauchos.



be christians, came to the pampas. In the pampas, the salamanca princess in the shape of a wand met *Anhanga-Pitã* and other Indian divinities and mythical figures and became a *Teiniaguá*,<sup>17</sup> a salamander or a mystical female gecko. The *Teiniaguá* changes its form, from beautiful princess into a salamander; from the handsome Indian daughter of the chief of the Guarani tribe into a serpent.

She seduces men, and she lives in inside the Jarau mountain, in a dark cave in which are hidden moorish treasures. The men whom she seduces never come back from the dark cavern of the Jarau. To the gauchos who go to the Jarau she says, "I have secret knowledge and I make happy the few men who know that the soul is a weight between commanding and being commanded.(...) The men are afraid and desire me because I am the rose of the treasures hidden inside the world shell."<sup>18</sup> Inside the cave there are seven labyrinths to go through; in each, the men must not be distracted by any challenge or lure. The sequence is: men fighting with sharp swords; wild animals; death; fire; *boincininga*, the enchanted rattle snake; seductive women; and jolly midgets. He should not accept these challenges because they are not real, although the man experiences them as real.

After the man goes through all these trials, he can choose among seven prizes offered by *Teiniaguá*: luck in gambling; the gift of being a great musician and singer; knowledge about plants for curing and witchcraft; skill with the lasso and knife; charisma and power; land and cattle; and finally the gift of being an artist in poetry and handicrafts.

A gaucho who was of Guarani origin went through all the trials but did not accept any of the *Teiniaguá*'s gifts, so she give him a magic money that only brought unhappiness to him. He returned this money to the salamander, and at that moment the inside of the Jarau mountain caught fire and the enchantment of the *Teiniaguá* was over. She died in the fire. The gaucho kept on being poor but happy living alone, eating his barbecue and drinking his *chimarrão*.

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<sup>17</sup> *Teiniaguá* in Guarani means small lizard.

<sup>18</sup> See Lopes Neto (1973) for the complete dialogue.



There are different versions of this legend and many endings, but basically the elements are the same. It is not my intention to make an extensive analysis of the story here; the narratives are extremely dense and deserve careful analyses. Here, I want first to point out that the tale outlines a sequence of tasks and achievements to be followed by an individual. Second, the entire legend is very rich in symbols, but some of the elements deserve special attention because they recur in gaucho narratives.

In short, the seductive salamander-princess is also a dark cave that swallow men. The man has to resist many attractions, all of them dangerous and exercising a fascination upon the gauchos. In the tale, the dangers and seductions lie within a female domain; the image is that of endless female labyrinths in which one can easily lose oneself, labyrinths impossible to know or control. The lures the salamander offers are illusions, because in gaucho culture they are elements which are identified as male or which belong to the male universe. In the order presented in the narrative, the pleasures are:<sup>19</sup> the bodily dispute between men for manliness; the taming of the wild; the enticement of death, fire and warmth; modes of sexuality, erotic pleasures and sexual satisfaction which are represented by both the snake and the woman; and finally, humor, fun and laughter.

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<sup>19</sup> I am indicating them in a very schematic way, but to arrive at these conclusions I took into consideration the long description of each one of the labyrinth episodes.

The prizes the female offers can be seen figuratively as an identity card for a gaucho. All are practices related to gaucho culture, and are modes of gaining prestige and recognition as a *true* gaucho within this group: to be a winner at gambling with cards, horse-racing, the *tava*; to have musical talent; to have knowledge about his botanic environment enough to become a medicine man (maybe so he need no longer depend on the female knowledge); to be powerful, not submissive; to have land and cattle; and finally, to have verbal and manual skills.

In other words, what the woman has as part of her being, and what the woman has to offer to the man, if he does not perish from her illusive charms, is something that he already has, his own identity. He might lose it, if he surrenders himself to her. The sequence of trials that the man stoically goes through (metaphorical denials of his male condition and a refusal to have pleasure while inside the woman's body), are performed in order to recover his own identity as man and as gaucho. In the narrative these two levels of identity are presented in two different sequences. The first, which are represented as symbolically embodied in the woman, relate to the man's ontological condition, to his manhood. The second refers to his social condition as a gaucho.

In the story, the gaucho did not accept any of the *teininguá's* seven gifts; in other words, he refused the elements related to his condition of gaucho. So she gave him a different reward, a perforated coin without any specific value: with the magic money he was able to acquire anything, but

he would end with nothing because, in the exchange, his money would lose its value. We can infer that this is an allegory on the rejection of the gaucho condition and of wage labor.

A final point is that in the salamander's tale we can observe the metamorphosis of a moorish princess into a indigenous *teiniaguá*.; the first from the Iberian peninsula, the second from the South American pampa. A changing of names and representations follows these transformations, which correspond to a process of acculturation by the Europeans to the region.

Now, returning to the different genres of gaucho oral culture, I should point some of their common features. The heroes of the stories are always individuals: a male *I* or *he*. *He* acts within a given place - an *estância*, a battle field, a village - with no reference to his origins, and it seems that he could not care less about his destiny. He is never born into a particular family or in specific place. But he is a Gaucho, and the pampa is his *pago*. He is just there, a character on a stage. Life and death are very close to each other. One moment he fights, the next he kills or dies, not without the storyteller making fun out of it:

...and then the brave Gaucho Indian<sup>20</sup>, who had been in such bloody battle fields, so full of corpses, that black vultures would eat only bodies above the rank of captain, survived

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<sup>20</sup> Indian is used as synonymous with Gaucho when associated with another word, such as *indio velho* (old indian) or *indio guasca* (crude indian). The meaning of Indian in this context is "native of the place," not necessarily of Indian ethnicity, but rather "authentic" and brave.

everything ...[long pause]... and believe it or not, [pause] he made no enemies. [pause] And to those who asked him how he was able to get involved in so many conflicts yet have no enemies, he would answer: "Of course, I have killed all of them.

Religious faith is not part of this universe either: "This is a men's world, not a saints' world," as they put it. "God" is, however, a familiar figure. He is "the owner of everything, who is never there". I collected two stories where a humanized God with all sort of powers was the patron who kept assigning impossible tasks, and the Gaucho had to find strategies to get rid of the tasks and trick God.<sup>21</sup>

Priests are favorite subjects of jokes, in which they are depicted as very naive characters for being priests, celibates and "stupid" city people. Most of all, the priest is an outsider. The priest character in the jokes has an Italian accent, which identifies him as a *gringo*, that is, a foreign immigrant.

This raises the issue of ethnic rivalry among the peons. Immigrants of Italian origin are relatively recent in the region and most of them are engaged as field hands, part of the rural proletariat, in extensive agriculture on soybean or wheat farms. These *gringos* are identified, by the others and by themselves, as peasants. For the gauchos "peasant" takes the negative connotation of "linked to the soil," and a peasant is one

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<sup>21</sup> The texts of these stories are extensive; what interests us at this point is the theme. For the text of one of these stories in the original see the Appendix under the title, Pedro Malasartes e Deus.



lacking the skills to deal with cattle<sup>22</sup>.

The priest's Italian accent, besides making the story more realistic (indeed, it is common for priests to be of Italian origin) is often a subtle way of teasing one of the workers, even when ethnic rivalry is not the main point in the stories:

A little girl was walking on the open pasture fields, leading a cow. She met a priest. [...here the teller introduces a long explanation about what the priest was doing there] *Buenas*, the little girl met the priest and the priest said: "How wonderful is the world of the Lord: a little girl walking on the prairies with her cow. Where are you going with the cow, little girl?" And she said: "I am taking it to the next field to be covered by the bull". The priest was shocked and says: " Oh! Why doesn't your father do that himself ?" To which she answers: "No, it has to be done by the bull!"

The joke here lies in the girl's taking the priest's words literally and in the bestiality that the girl takes for granted as part of daily life. (For the gauchos, the humor lies in the fact that the outsider does not take it for granted). *Barranquear*,<sup>23</sup> as one more rhetorical metaphor drawn from nature in their speech, meaning sexual intercourse with animals, is a common subject with which they tease each other in the

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<sup>22</sup> For this kind of farm worker, the *colono*, "peasant" means one with a level of political organization. It also denotes an ethnic identity and one who is dispossessed of his land.

<sup>23</sup> *Barranco* means riverbank or small cliff. They have turned the noun into a verb - *barranquear* - which refers to a sexual relationship with animals, usually mares. See Chapter VI on this subject.



closed male complicity of the *galpão* evening gatherings. As in the tale about the old lady and donkey, presented earlier in this chapter, in the above joke we have a little girl who knows more than the outsider. The speech strategy works in the same way: "Even a little girl knows such down to earth things."

The representations of women in gaucho speech ranges from "worse and more complicated to deal with than mules" to an idealization of the absent woman, paradoxically responsible for all they suffer in not having her. In any case, the woman is both desired and feared by them.

The texture which makes up the Gaucho's identity and his own perception of it relies in large part on contrasts: to be male, not female; to be a worker, not a patron; to be from the countryside, not from the city.

But they also have stories where they allow themselves to play with these different layers of identity:

A man from the city was traveling in the country. His car broke down and he had to stay overnight in an old gaucho ranch, deep in the countryside, the ranch of old Aparicio. But, you know, Aparicio was a true Gaucho, an *indio macho barbaridade*<sup>24</sup>, a Gaucho from the old times, and such a crude genuine male as Aparicio isn't made any more nowadays. The visitor was there, trying to chat

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<sup>24</sup> *Indio macho barbaridade* - The entire expression sounds funny as it is pronounced; it means "primitive tough male". *Macho* is a term usually employed to refer to animal's gender while *masculine* (masculine) is used to refer to man's gender. It is important to point out to English-speaking readers that the meaning of *macho* in this context is simply *male*, without the stereotyped connotations which have been added by contemporary Anglo-Saxon culture.

with Aparicio and asking all kinds of questions, when he saw a bell at the side of Aparicio's bed. He was curious and asked: What is this bell for, Aparicio? And Aparicio said: Well, I am a true gaucho, and with a true gaucho the things are like this: When I want my old woman, I ring the bell and she will come to bed with me. The visitor was astonished by such a servile relationship. He said: "Come on, this is not an appropriate way of treating your wife. What if she wants to have sex with you?" Aparicio answered: "No problem, she will just say: Did you call me, honey?"

Aparicio is a character in many jokes; he personifies the stereotype of the crude and rustic man. He always lives in a more remote area than the subject of the narrative. This kind of joke is told by city people as well as Gauchos. For the people in the city this kind of anecdote is a way of making fun of the *bacudos* (illiterate, crude people); for the gauchos it is a way of laughing about themselves or of teasing one man among them who, for one reason or another (age, ethnicity, lack of verbal skills), is considered "tougher" than the others. Probably this joke is not specific to Gaucho lore: similar jokes also circulate in the mass media in general; but the point here is the meaning that it takes for the Gauchos. It seems that gauchos incorporate the point and turn it against somebody else, as a way of building one of their canons of identity, and of situating themselves within different levels of naivety and crudity.

These jokes take subtly different connotations depending upon their contexts. In the urban setting, they stress the anachronism of the "macho style." Among Gauchos, who are identified as typically "male," the point of the joke is that, no matter what, the woman will do what pleases her.

"Stupid Aparicio does not realize that." They will have as references both Aparicio and the city man, the first as the "more savage," the second, as the outsider, someone who does not understand at all what is going on. Of course, on another level, I am their listener (a woman, educated, from another class and from a faraway city) and that they choose this story to tell, with all the explanation that follows it, is a way of saying: "See who is laughing at whom."

In the *galpão* the men are a group of individuals whose everyday experiences or life perspectives deal not with women, but with the absence of women. The simple idea that anyone would have a woman available, as the joke presents, is in itself an odd and funny idea. The predominant notion about woman in gaucho stories is that she is both impossible to have and impossible to control, although the underlining assumption, always present in their speech, is the need to exercise control over women.

## Chapter IV

### Women, The Absent Other

#### Absence of Women

To be gaucho means to be a man. The central argument of this dissertation is that the gaucho's culture and identity are constructed in reference to male identity in a highly gender segregated situation, and in the almost total absence of women. My ethnographical work centered on the men's lives and had as its site the *estâncias*, places that are recognized as male domains. However, as I became more and more deeply involved with the male domain and began to understand it as a specific gender reality, such questions as "Where are the women?" and "How does this group reproduce itself?" arose. The circumstances of my field work made these seemingly simple questions at once both hard to answer and crucial to the understanding of the gaucho cultural universe. This chapter is an attempt to answer these questions.

The data I have on women were collected with the bias of an observer situated within a men's world; that is, spatially and symbolically, the male domain was my frame of reference. The fact that I had to ride on horseback for hours to meet the few women in the closest village

points to the **distance** between the male and female spaces. I am myself a woman, which somewhat facilitated my encounter with women, yet I was treated by the village women with suspicion. My situation was ambiguous: I was a woman living among men. Constraints of fieldwork meant that I could not devote enough time to construct an effective dialogical relationship with women.

If within the body of this research the data on women are scarce and fragmentary or even **absent**, this is intrinsically connected to the fact that woman herself is part of the men's universe as an absent being. In her absence she is mysterious, praised and feared. But she exists as an ideal constructed by men, and she plays an important role in the gaucho's imagery. She is **the other**, against which the men construct their identity; she is everything a man is not, and a man cannot be anything a woman is supposed to be.

### Once Upon a Time There Were Women

The foreman's (*capataz*) wife is the only woman who has a job in the *estância* and is allowed to live there. Not every farm has a woman as a wage worker, a *caseira*, performing domestic tasks such as cooking for the men and cleaning the *patrão's* house; but if there is a woman living within the *estância*, she will be someone's wife. The notion that she "belongs" to someone, and in fact to the man who has the most authority



among the gauchos, is very clear to the men.

The two *estâncias* where I stayed for long periods of time, one in Uruguay and the other in Brazil, each had one woman; in fact, this was the reason I was allowed to stay on them. Another feminine presence was thought to make my own presence more appropriate, and this was indeed true. In both cases the women were very pleased I was there to rescue them from their long periods of isolation. My long stays and my regular returns to these farms allowed me to establish close and affective links with these women. As the women spent their lives observing the men's activities (and wishing to get away from the *estância*), they became very good informants: not in terms of the content or understanding of this men's world in which they lived but did not belong, and in which they could not participate; but in terms of providing me with guiding questions and with an understanding of the very real segregation of male and female domains.

"There was a time when there were women" or "there was a time when more women used to live in the *estâncias*" and even "there was a time when men and women lived together" are recurrent comments in this region. The way the expression is phrased sounds like a reference to a mythical past; the intonation is that of folk tales told to children in this region which start with "once upon a time when animals could talk." For a woman who lives and works on a farm, the comment is intended to be a complaint about her isolation. For the women who live in *las casas* (*the*

houses), a small agglomeration of houses between *estâncias*, this imprecise time was a better time. These women express feelings of lost security, although they acknowledge that now they have more freedom. For women who have left the rural area to live in the outskirts of the cities of this region, the impossibility of living on the farms means freedom and potential social mobility: "women are not tied to their men," "they have a value of their own." Moving to the city is seen as an achievement.

Since its origins in the XVII century the *estância* has been characteristically a male space. Cattle raising and the tasks that it involves -- taming, castrating, dehorning, branding and, most of all, herding on horseback, tasks where physical strength and capacity of control over nature are required -- are considered male activities. Indeed, historically it is men who have performed these tasks. Although the woman was never an important part of the farm as a production unit, she had to play a crucial role in the reproduction of this male labor force, the gauchos themselves. Moreover, the vague reference to a time when women were allowed on the *estâncias* has some historical truth; it refers first to the time when the boundaries of the immense properties were unclear, and second to the period when female labor was not considered as such and did not have a price.

Only at the end of the last century were wire fences introduced on the cattle breeding *estâncias* of the pampa.<sup>1</sup> Stone fences existed earlier,

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<sup>1</sup> The first fenced *estância* in Argentina dates from 1855 (Décotte 1978; Slatta 1983). In Uruguay the introduction of wire fences occurred in

but only at strategic points of each property, the huge size of the properties did not permit them to be surrounded it with stones. The limits of the latifundia were demarcated by the animal brands and by natural features, such as rivers or mountains. This system of production of animals was based in the extension of the land as well as concentration into the hands of great landowners. The *estâncias* encompassed thousands of acres, which means thousands of miles of wire and barbed wire. The fencing allowed the consolidation of the latifundia. The stretched wire across the plains changed the gaucho's way of life and his conceptions of limits and liberty. With fencing sheep raising and agriculture were introduced. It radically changed the animal reproduction pattern, the wild was confined, turning into tamed. The animals no longer reproduced freely and diverse breeds and pure-breed stock were introduced. Less work in herding the animals was required, so fewer gauchos were necessary. The fences displaced cowhands and meant the introduction of the *alambrador*, the man who makes fences, who is looked upon with disdain by the gauchos as a "foot worker".<sup>2</sup>

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1875 (Vidart 1969). Darwin referring to his stay in a pampa *estância* wrote in 1833: "They were curious about the price and conditions of horses and cattle; upon finding out we did not in England catch our animals with lazo, they add 'Ah, then you use nothing but bolas': the idea of an enclosed country was quite new to them." (Darwin 1933:195).

<sup>2</sup> *Alambrador* the word comes from *alambre* in Spanish, meaning metal wire. Given the large size of the *estâncias* building and maintaining fences is a constant necessity on the farms; but the *alambrador* is not considered as permanent worker or a gaucho of the *estância*, nor does he share the *galpão* with the men for sleeping. He pitches his tent close to where he is working on the fence. Most of *alambradores* are *gringos*, that

The fencing of the properties kept animals in and people out. The clear demarcation of the boundaries of the *estâncias*, only achieved during this century, coincides with the expulsion of the (already few) women from the *estância*. Although most *peões* always lived without wives on the *estância*, some of them were able to build a *rancho* (small house), to raise a few animals and to constitute a family in lands of unclear ownership, in the remote areas of the *estância*. Given the size of the properties (which used to be even larger than nowadays) and the lack of clear demarcations, the *puestero* or *posteiro* was the one who defend the property limits. The *puestero* was a specific worker, a gaucho with a family, who lived on the boundaries of the *estância* in a *rancho* usually provided by the owner of the land. He received a low wage, but had some subsidies and was allowed to raise animals of his own. The number of *puesteros* in each *estância* depended on the size of the land and its geographic situation.

It is hard to pin down exactly when the majority of *patrões* (landowners) stopped living on their *estâncias*, but it seems to coincide with the process of fencing proprieties, which in its turn paralleled the development of urban centers, better means of transportation and the infrastructure of roads. Once the limits of rural property were clearly defined by fences, when cities became more attractive, and when an easier access to the countryside was provided, the *patrão* left the *estância* and started to administer it from a distance with only occasional visits. From that

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is, immigrants of Italian or German origin.



time, since he was absent and unable to maintain close control over his land and the activities of the workers, everyone who did not have a clearly specified function within the farm was excluded from it. Since the *patrão* and his family were no longer living there, there was no need for domestic servants, a function traditionally performed by women.

Nowadays only the foreman is allowed to have housing, family and animals on the *estância*. Explicitly, the couple must not have an extended family; one or two young children may be tolerated, if the landowner has no other alternative. Any arrangement that would allow women, families or someone else's cattle to stay on the *estância* is avoided because at a formal level, legislation protects the family which settles the land by giving property rights to them. Also, a woman living in the *estância* necessarily will carry out domestic tasks such as gathering water and firewood, milking a cow, raising few *guachos* (motherless calves), or growing some vegetables. In such a case, even if she does not have a formal labor contract, her situation as a worker is legally acknowledged and she can legally appeal to be paid for her work. Currently, this is the main reason for the landowner's intolerance of the presence of women on the *estância*.

Beginning in 1945, some of the urban workers' rights guaranteed by Brazilian labor legislation were extended to rural workers. These rights included the definition of a labor contract (the characterization of the working situation did not depend on a written contract), a minimum



wage, the forty-eight hour week and equal pay for men and women. Alleging the specific nature of rural labor, landowners, a class with enormous economic and political power in the overall context of Brazil and Uruguay, were reluctant actually to apply the laws. In the last few decades, both countries underwent long periods of dictatorship by military governments which accepted the landowners's claims with impunity. It was only at the end of 1970's and the beginning of the 1980's with the so called Political Opening (*Abertura Política*), that a few of these privileges were actually granted to rural workers.

Women had a prominent role in this overall political transformation.<sup>3</sup> Although this political process and the role women played in it are extremely complex and beyond the scope this work, it is important to mention that rural women connected with the structure of cattle production made themselves heard. In the region under study, the number of legal claims formalized by women against the *patrão* was significant.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>In Brazil, *comunidades de base* (base communities), *Movimento contra a carestia*, and *Anistia* (political amnesty); or in Uruguay and Argentina, the political movements for amnesty, the return of the exiled people and *Las Madres*, the Mothers's organization to search for "missing" people were the movements greatly responsible for the end of the dictatorships in these countries. All these political movements were characteristically feminine (not feminist), with massive participation of women.

<sup>4</sup> My data on the number of female juridical claims refer to Brazil. This information was only available in counties where the Rural Labor Union was independent and organized, as for example, the city of Uru-guaiana, Brazil. Historically the situation of the rural worker in Uruguay is better than in Brazil, they have higher wages and enjoy more social benefits. I will try to indicate the peculiarities of Uruguay and Brazil labor relationships in different contexts throughout the dissertation.

These were individual actions, not an organized collective movement. Because of the way the labor legal system is structured, the cases potentially affected large numbers of people, since when one person legally wins a claim it is unlikely that others will lose claims of a similar nature. These cases directly affected the people who lived in the *estâncias*, even if they were totally unaware of their rights or did not intend to claim anything; the *patrão* would not risk future law suits.

If at a formal level women are less organized than men (for example very few women will join the rural worker unions or political parties), at an informal level, the women are able to cultivate dense and extensive social networks that provide them with crucial information on the urban institutions. By contrast, the gaucho who works in the *estância* does not have access to the urban code.

The greater female mastery of what we can call a legal-bureaucratic culture is not only connected with the fact that the woman is more exposed to the city than the man. In societies structured upon the patriarchal and paternalistic principles, the assumption is that woman "belongs" to the man or that the man is responsible for the woman. Legal procedures usually are women's weapon against men, their husbands. As the union lawyer of a city in this region put it: "The women know they have the right (*o direito*) to sue their husbands for alimony, so they understand easily that they have rights and that they can institute a judicial action against their bosses".

The transformation of woman's work into wage labor, that is, into a commodity with a price, allows the landowner the option to buy it or not. On the *estância*, domestic work, that is, female work, is superfluous to the production of beef, leather and wool for the market. Female work is superfluous to the landowner's profit. So, the woman is excluded from the production unit as much as possible. Although women are superfluous from the short term perspective of individual landowners, landowners as a class depend upon gaucho labor. In turn, the gauchos too need women in order to reproduce themselves.

This form of extensive cattle production involves a very specialized knowledge; owners can only recruit labor power from within a specific social group, the gauchos. Since its genesis, this system of production has been organized upon the appropriation of the pastoral cultural tradition of this group. Paradoxically, the sexual division of labor that excludes female work from the *estância* relies on a division of sexual labor from which woman cannot be excluded: the reproduction of more gauchos. The immediate result of the exclusion of women from the *estâncias* is that the reproduction of the gaucho as a social group is threatened, together with this particular mode of cattle production (and an eco-system of natural pasture).<sup>5</sup> The resulting shortage of cowhands is relatively recent. The

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<sup>5</sup> As stated earlier in the dissertation, this cattle raising system is based in extensive land, no agriculture and non cultivated pasture. It is a very traditional mode of stock breeding but perfectly integrated in the world market system. To switch to more intensive cattle raising means the cultivation of the land. There is a strong ecological argument against it, which ends up supporting landowners' conservative position against the

appeals of the landowner associations sound naive: we see in small cities in the pampa colorful posters with the inscription: *Seja um peão!* (Be a cowboy!). Cattle raising requires such specialized and long term learning skills that the slogan sounds almost like a joke; as a gaucho put it: "One does not become gaucho, one grows up a gaucho".

The shortage of cowhands is a generalized complaint of the landowners, and it is backed up by statistics.<sup>6</sup> The landowner's strategies to deal with the shortage of gauchos seem to concentrate at the ideological level; landlords attempt to appropriate and propagate the gaucho tradition through the mass media and government agencies, as in the above mentioned poster. By funding radio and television commercials and programs on the gauchos, by sponsoring the MTG (Gaucho Tradition Movement) and the CTGs (Centers of Gaucho Tradition) celebrating the gaucho tradition, urban residents imagine that they can recreate gaucho culture and the gauchos' way of life.<sup>7</sup> The efficacy of mass-produced folk culture is

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land reform.

<sup>6</sup> Statistics indicate that when the cattle production rises, the rural exodus increases. In this case, modernization of the cattle production means an intensification of labor and increase of the need for cowhands. For general statistics see *Anuario Estatístico do Rio Grande do Sul 1980*. Porto Alegre: FEE. Medeiros 1987 also indicates that from the landowners' perspective there is a acute shortage of workers for this kind of activity.

<sup>7</sup> The landowner class is not the only one responsible for the mass media reproduction of Gaucho culture; state political agencies, political parties, the mass communication industry, an urban and a rural public and the gauchos themselves appropriate (or reappropriate) the Gaucho ethos or different resemantizations of it, according to their specific interests. The consumption of the Gaucho culture is far from being uniform.



very limited either in terms of avoiding a rural exodus or recruiting new gauchos from the urban centers; but it is significant in propagating gaucho values to a female and urban public. Although those programs reproduce the gaucho's mytho-and-ideal-logic, they are not sufficient condition for the social reproduction of the gauchos themselves as a group or as labor. The social space for their simple reproduction is missing.

### **The Women in *Las Casas***

*Las casas* is a *povo* (population), a village squeezed among *estâncias*, a settlement that had its origins probably around a *puesto* (*post*)<sup>8</sup> or at the side of a road. These villages are not autonomous in any sense, they are not organized around the production of anything. Their people -- women, children and elders -- live from the waste of the *estância*. In the same way the extension of the **land** is the organizational principle of the *estância*, the extension of the kin group, loosely defined and organized around **households** is the principle of the village.

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Depending on its context it can take a very conservative connotation of maintaining the tradition or the meaning of protest, resistance, denounce and national or regional identity. See Chapter I for this discussion.

<sup>8</sup> *Puesto* is the ranch of the *puestero*, a salaried worker and/or renter charged with guarding the boundaries of an *estância*. Nowadays this function no longer exists, but there are still few remaining *puesteros* living on the farms.



The perversity of the structure of latifundia is such that even if some space is granted for the settlement of few people, this space is barely large enough for **houses**. There is no room for paddocks and pastures needed to raise animals. Without land, cattle or horses the man born in *las casas* becomes dependent upon a landowner, and a mixed relationship of exchange of favors, wage and labor is established. The mandate of his culture is that he must become a gaucho in order to obtain his manhood and become a person. He is not a gaucho if he does not have a horse to ride; the choice that the social structure provides him with is that of becoming a wage worker. He cannot work without a mount, so necessarily he must work in someone's *estância*. As I indicated in the previous chapter, if the man, one way or another, can acquire his own horse, he will not be dependent on a single farm, he will have **liberty**, the liberty of circulating among a few *estâncias*. I will return to this point in the next chapter.

*Las casas* is not a structure for the production of goods, but a structure for the reproduction of gauchos, that is, the labor essential to run the specific system of reproduction of animals that prevails on the *estâncias*. Those who manage this production of people are the women, and within this domain the men are seen as functionally superfluous. Reproduction, sexuality, health, housing and kin networks are feminine concerns, and the woman's world is organized around them.

The domestic units in the villages are established by female headed households. Levi-Strauss<sup>9</sup> once said that there are families that work as houses and that there are houses that work as families. In the pampa certainly we have the latter. The head person of the domestic unit is the woman, and her young children live with her; not rarely an older parent or a sister also lives there. She has a husband, not necessarily the father of all her children, who is absent most of the time, working and living on a *estância*. Depending on how far away the *estância* where he works is located and on his willingness to come to *las casas* (not home, he does not refer to "home" or "my home" but uses the generic expression *las casas* to identify it) he will make occasional visits. On his day off he may prefer to go to the horse races, a cockfight, a *tava* game (bone-gambling), that happens to be in another village. If he returns to "his" house he will bring some money, fresh lamb or jerked (salt dried) beef. From the women's perspective, the husband is a provider: "a husband is the one who **brings** [things] home" ("*marido es el hombre que aporta a la casa*"). This understanding is implicit, and the relationships tend to be more or less stable for a couple of years. If a man stops coming home, or if he does not have anything to bring home (not unusually, he will spend all his small salary gambling), he loses his "right" over "his" woman.

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. a quotation of Lévi-Strauss in the catalogue of the exposition Anthropologie de L'Espace. Pompidou Museum, 1986.

Within the context of the village, and using the women as reference point, there is a high circulation of men. One of the woman in *las casas* had four husbands simultaneously. This information about the number of her husbands was eagerly offered by the other women of the village and by the men in the *estância* as an indication that she had special powers over men, that allowed her to "tie" them. She would not acknowledge to me that she had four husbands, but she said that each one of her five children had a different father. Later it became clear to me that the notion of *marriage* in this case (and always) includes sexual intimacy and the provision of goods to the domestic unit. In that sense, this woman indeed had four husbands. Each worked on a different *estância*, there was a well defined annual schedule, and the men would never meet each other at the house. In a sort of silent pact, they pretended that they did not know about each other's existence. The notion of marriage (*casamento*) is employed by them as a condition, that of *being married*, rather than in the sense of a legally constituted union.

This case may be an extreme example, but it illustrates the fluidity of the relationships, the flexibility of the notions of marriage (*casamento*) and family (*familia*), and the strategies that this group employs to cope with the reality of male and female segregation and the scarcity of women. There was some implicit criticism of the "lady of four husbands": others attributed magic powers to her, for which she was both feared and respected. However in no way was she ostracized in the village; on the



Semens, sonhos de fartura,  
 Delas trata feito terra  
 São Marias e Helenas  
 Mulheres campeiras apenas.

Semen, dreams of abundance,  
 Treat them as land  
 They are Marias and Helens<sup>11</sup>  
 They are just *campeira* women.

I collected a riddle from the women.<sup>12</sup> It has a female voice, in contrast to almost all orally performed folklore, which not only assumes a male subject but is also told by men:

Yo fui hija  
 Ahora soy madre  
 Criando un hijo ajeno  
 El marido de mi madre

I was a daughter  
 Now I am a mother  
 Raising somebody else's son  
 The husband of my mother

I could not avoid imagining that I was in mythical Thebes facing the sphinx's enigma: to solve the riddle I would have to understand the enigma of kinship arrangements of this social group that engenders the gaucho. I was unable to solve it; the answer was:

It was a daughter whose father was in prison. In the prison, he was condemned to die of starvation, he was not receiving any food and was dying. So the girl, who was a mother, would visit him and feed him with the milk from her breasts.

The relevant point here is that the riddle reflects a situation of

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<sup>11</sup> In the context of the song the reference to "Helen" creates a parallel between the *campeira* woman and *Helen of Troy*: women who spend their lives waiting for their husbands.

<sup>12</sup> I collected a version in Spanish and another in Portuguese of exactly the same riddle. The Portuguese version was told by a man, on the Brazilian side of the border.



confused - if not paradoxical - kinship patterns, not only from whatever ethnocentric perspective the outsider may have, but in the perception of those people themselves (and this is not manifested only in the riddle). The people of *las casas* flexibly adapt the kinship rules dominant in the overall national societies to the social reality of their own daily practices and emotions.

In the riddle, the notion that the "father" is imprisoned can be understood as a metaphor for the loneliness and seclusion of these people, for gender segregation and the broken or impossible family, and for the actual historical reality of the repression and imprisonments suffered by the gauchos during the various wars. "To bear an alien son," an *hijo ajeno*, can also be taken as a powerful image of the woman's feeling of alienation from the sons she herself bears, the gaucho, who does not belong to her but to a male world in which she has no place. The "father" whose "daughter" she is, is not her actual father: he is called "my mother's husband," indicating that ties of blood and alliance are considered to be distinct in this system of relationship.

The randomness of affinal relationships and the fluidity of kinship patterns in the pampa are noted by Martinez Estrada (1971:126-7):

The vast plains are dotted by small settlements accidentally peopled by beings of diverse origins who eventually come together and have children. [...] They [the men] live like guests in their own houses and their children pursue a morally [sic] emancipated life, as children of solitude do.

This description coincides with the remark of one of my informants when I asked him what were the possible ways of finding a wife (*companheira*):

One may or may not want one. One may or may not find one. If even rolling stones find each other and break themselves into smaller stones -- why would people ending up not meeting each other?

The term most frequently used by the men to refer to a wife is *companheira* or *parceira*, which means *partner*. These words (in their masculine form) meaning friend and implying a non hierarchical relationship of equals are also commonly used among men to refer to each other. The women usually refer to their husbands as *marido* (*husband*), not *partner*. The issue of legal marriage is totally secondary; very few marriages in this region are legally formalized, and religious marriage is totally foreign to this context. To start residence together (even in the constant absence of the man), to build a house or to have children together are formalize relationship, and indicate a marriage.<sup>13</sup>

Regarding the way marriage and family are defined and structured, the group places different expectations upon male and female behavior. For both men and women *marriage* is a more or less stable commitment

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<sup>13</sup> In Brazilian legislation, "common-law" marriage is recognized on a par with legal marriage, and religious (any religion) marriage has only the status of a ritual marriage. Uruguayan law is probably slightly different; Brazilians are seen commonly by Uruguayans as being more "liberal" and "promiscuous". In any case, among the gauchos on the Uruguayan side, the dominant ethos is the Brazilian one.

between the couple. On the one hand the worthy woman is the one who is able to raise her children whatever the circumstances. On other hand the self-respecting man is the one who *feels* responsible for his children, but this commitment is understood as directly connected to the intensity of *feelings* and emotional links that a man establishes with the woman. Emotion is a socially constructed category, here essential to understand the logic of these matrimonial exchanges: a man has to be sufficiently *enamorado* (*enamored*) with, or captivated by, a woman to give her his *word* about providing the material conditions for the children's subsistence. In the gauchos' code of honor, a man fails only if he does not keep his word. He need not provide his descendants with care, unless **he feels** responsible for it, that is, unless the intensity of his emotions for the woman led him to this commitment. Ultimately, it is the woman who is held socially responsible for seducing the man to the role of husband and father. Moreover, the role of father occasionally is not restricted to one man's own children. The woman may or not succeed in her seduction maneuvers, but the manipulation and display of sexuality constitutes an essential part of female culture on the pampas.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> During last century foreign travelers presented this female culture of seduction as "promiscuous women" or "immoral family." See for example, Baradere 1834 (in Becco 1978:103-4); Head 1827; Mantegazza 1916 (1876): 62-64. In this century, comments on the "promiscuous family" are also present among Argentine writers, such as Martinez Estrada 1971 (1933):32 and Cony 1945: 71-3.

In the male order of things and the male grammar of honor and righteousness, a man's word is highly valuable. He only gives it to an equal.<sup>15</sup> Thus, to give one's word to someone means to turn him or her into an equal, a *companheiro(a)* or *parceiro(a)*. A man tries to avoid obligations which in his understanding are serious ties, which would not only make a woman his equal but give her power. The woman in turn constantly seeks to establish or reinforce such attachments.

The cultural aspects of woman's seduction and man's obligation to his own word (and with the man's world), imply a dynamic of female action oriented toward man which contrasts with the male action centered on himself or in the male symbolic universe. The system of values and attitudes regarding marriage and family is manifested in various male folk sayings:

*Mulher não casa com carrapato porque não sabe qual é o macho.*  
A woman does not marry a louse because she does not know which is the male.

*O dono do porco<sup>16</sup> é o dono dos porquinhos.*  
The pig's owner owns the piglets.

*Égua cansada sempre encontra um retalho.*  
A tired mare always finds a gelding.

*Tatu velho não abandona o seu buraco.*

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<sup>15</sup> The logic here is the same of that of the dispute: to challenge someone is to acknowledge him as an equal, an essential condition to an exchange of honor. For this point and the "grammar of honor" in a Mediterranean society see Bourdieu 1977 (1972), 1979 (1963).

<sup>16</sup> *Porco* (pig) in Portuguese employed in the masculine form refer to the class of animals.

An old armadillo does not leave his hole.

*Pra' correr éguada chucra, grita;  
com os homens, apresilha a lingua.*

To run untamed mares, shout;  
with men, tie up your tongue.

Through animal metaphors gaucho lore communicates an understanding about affinal relationships. The first proverb refers to woman's eagerness to find a sexual partner. The *carrapato* is a repulsive cattle parasite, the saying implies that women will marry almost anyone. The second one refers to the situation of a man who marries a woman who already has children, he inherits the youngsters. The third one is a commentary on a man who is attached to an old or unattractive woman; it implies that he is not sufficiently male to have a better woman. The next, although is also employed in other situations, has a sexual connotation which means that an old (male) lover does not leave his woman.<sup>17</sup> The last one implies that with women it all right is to shout or say no matter what, but in the relationships with men, respect is required and words should be measured.

Far from constructing an harmonious representation of the world in which men and women interact, the animal imagery reflects a reality of gender segregation and hostility. It also reveals how people who are

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<sup>17</sup> For this interpretation see also Porto Alegre 1975. *Tatu* or *mulita* is also a way of referring to a poor and old gaucho. See last Chapter for the meanings of *tatu* in the gaucho folklore.



denied the social space necessary to their reproduction as a group strive for strategies to reproduce themselves.

The fluidity of the notion of family in this group is connected with the fact that these people are economically dispossessed. Classically, a family is not only a domestic association of individuals with mutual affections based on blood relationship; but it is also a corporate group owning all significant property in common. In this case, the significant property is just not there. Gauchos and their families are landless, they are cattleless. The children are fatherless and the women are separated from their male descendants very early. The house, which originally sets the boundaries of the family, is built on somebody else's land and belongs to those who live in it. It is a temporary solution to the problem of shelter. Even if people stay in it for their entire lives, it is not by intention; it is an accident that makes the provisory permanent.

Significantly, the village is called *las casas* and not *vila*. In the perception of the inhabitants, *las casas* does not exist because of human intention, nor is it a result of their social project as a group. Perhaps by calling it *houses* they are even denying the status of community to it. In fact, their individual networks are much larger than *las casas*, and hostility and suspicion permeates most relationships in the village. Affect may define obligation or solidarity among people, but geographical situation does not:

People rest on [the land] without settling down and they do not truly occupy a place: they will feel space, between them

is solitude. Martinez Estrada (1971:105).

Early travelers accounts also convey the image of sharp division between the women's and men's spaces, gender segregation and female particular mode of existence:

The habits of the women are very curious: they have literally nothing to do; the great plains which surround them offer them no motive to walk, they seldom ride, and their lives certainly are very indolent and inactive. They have all, however, families whether married or not; and once when I inquired of a young woman employed in nursing a very pretty child, who was the father of the "creatura," she replied, "Quien sabe?" (Head 1827:31).

Sir Francis Head failed to understand that he had asked a rude question (to ask a woman about the paternity of her children is different from asking her who her husband is; he was asking: with whom did you have sexual relationship?); Head also did not understand that her answer was just a speech device meaning "it is none of your business," It certainly did not mean that she actually did not know who the father was. Women have very clear notions and control over their bodies, their sexuality and reproductive process -- what they call the "rhythm of the body". Since the only thing the woman has is her kin network, mainly a network of women, she cultivates carefully every link of this web. This is not a closed system of relationships, and it is generously extended through blood, alliance and fictitious kin. Her life perspectives depend on the size of this network; the larger it is, the greater are her possibilities. The

man is important in this system, even if he is not present: a female ego's network is directly correlated to the number of husbands and children she has.

Children as well as of men circulate in *las casas*. A child can be adopted, that is taken as a "raising child" (*filho de criação*) by another household, but only by people with whom there are previous links, not necessarily consanguinial ties, but never by an unknown family. The circulation of children is a survival strategy. A clear understanding of what is best for the children orients these exchanges: Female children should go to the city and male children should be placed on the *estâncias*. If the woman does not have a husband, an older son, or a male relative who is able to help the boy to make this passage to the male world in the beginning of his puberty, she will try to place him in a household which has such connections.

Although they do not carry religious meanings, terms of fictive kinship from the Catholic tradition are employed to indicate close relationships of affection. *Compadre* and *comadre* are necessarily mutual treatment terms, two persons in the context of *las casas* who call each other *compadre* or *comadre* have elected each other as special friends; they care about each other and each other's kin. If it is used between a man and a woman, the terms imply respect: that is, they make a *distance* between the couple. *Padrinho*, *madrinha*, *afilhado* and *afilhada* are terms less frequently used. They are employed between people from different

generations, for example between a child and someone who has a important role (material or emotional) in the child's life. All such bonds can overlap or expand consanguinal or affinal ties. The links, similar to that of marriage, imply mutual trust and the giving of one's word. Mantegazza relates:<sup>18</sup>

This *compadrazgo* is distinct from the religious ritual relationship, which is a link sanctified from the altar [...], instead it is a link made by the **word** of honor, which is a link by choice, the consecration of a friendship by the word which sanctifies it. Mantegazza 1916 (1876):75. [My translation].

Descending and ascending kin are defined bilaterally, but the household is organized around uterine relatives. Both females and males usually have a female figure as the main reference in their networks: for example, a man will say "I am the son of Dona China's brother" when he is trying to explain his kinship position to me. The men apparently know very little and are extremely uninterested in talking about their families. When asked about their families, men usually answer with the (above mentioned) standard question: *Qui lo sá?* (literally, who knows?). Even when asked questions such as whether or not they have children, they answer in this evasive way; this does not mean that they do not actually know, but means "who cares?" or even, "it is none of your business" or "it

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<sup>18</sup> See also Strickon 1960 for the description of fictive kinship without a religious content among Argentinean gauchos.



is none of my business".

By contrast, kinship is the main subject of women's talks. The women were able to spend hours trying to explain me all the blood, affinal and other possible connections between individuals, and the residence of each of the persons involved. This ambiguity is also revealed in the diversity between feminine and masculine discourses: in the former, everybody is *meio-parente* (*half-kin*), while for the gaucho the symbolic emphasis is that "he is a man without kin."

Regarding the relationship of affinity there is no pattern of preferential marriage. The group is highly endogamous, and marriage between first and second cousins is very common. This is what I would call in Portuguese a *contingente* marriage system, in the etymological sense of the word *within the limits*, that is to say, given the circumstances, there are no options. Within the scope of alliance theory, we also can call it *compulsory* restricted exchange.<sup>19</sup> The opportunities are so limited that most gauchos will never marry at all: after all, gaucho society is a bachelor society. Although endogamy is not the most appropriate label as there are no jural rules that require a person to take a spouse from within his/her own group, existing marriages are of necessity endogamous.

Forbidden as sexual partners are the immediate **blood** kin: father, mother, sister or brother and son or daughter. The extent to which incest taboos are actually observed is hard to say. There is an elasticity in the

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<sup>19</sup> On marriage alliance see Lévi-Strauss 1949 and Dumont 1971.



definition of both marriage and kin which tends to expand the *parentela*, the relatives. In effect, this dynamic tends to make incest taboos more elastic rather than less so, because the logic seems to be: since we are all half-kin (*meio-parente*) it is hard to distinguish full-blood kin from the other modalities of kin. Since each category ("son and daughter", "sister and brother" or "mother and father") is inflated to include all the people who "one grows up with" (*os de criação*) restrictions start to lose their meanings, because we are no longer dealing with specific classes of kin. From my own data, from gaúcho tales and from published fiction,<sup>20</sup> we can infer that no strong sanction follows the non observation of incest rules.

When the men on the *estância* say that they prefer not to get involved with the women from the village either because they are *meio-parente* (half-kin) or because they will get trapped (*enrolado*), what is meant is that these are relationship from which one cannot easily escape. Relationships with half-kin require *respect* and *giving one's word* (not necessarily to the woman), in such a situation means that social control is exercised mainly through men and among men. But the point here is that what is understood as a social sanction, from men's perspective, is the marriage itself.

The figure on the next page shows the endogamy of the group,

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<sup>20</sup> I am thinking here especially of the literary works of Jorge Luis Borges, Mario Arregui and Sergio Faraco, when dealing with that specific region.

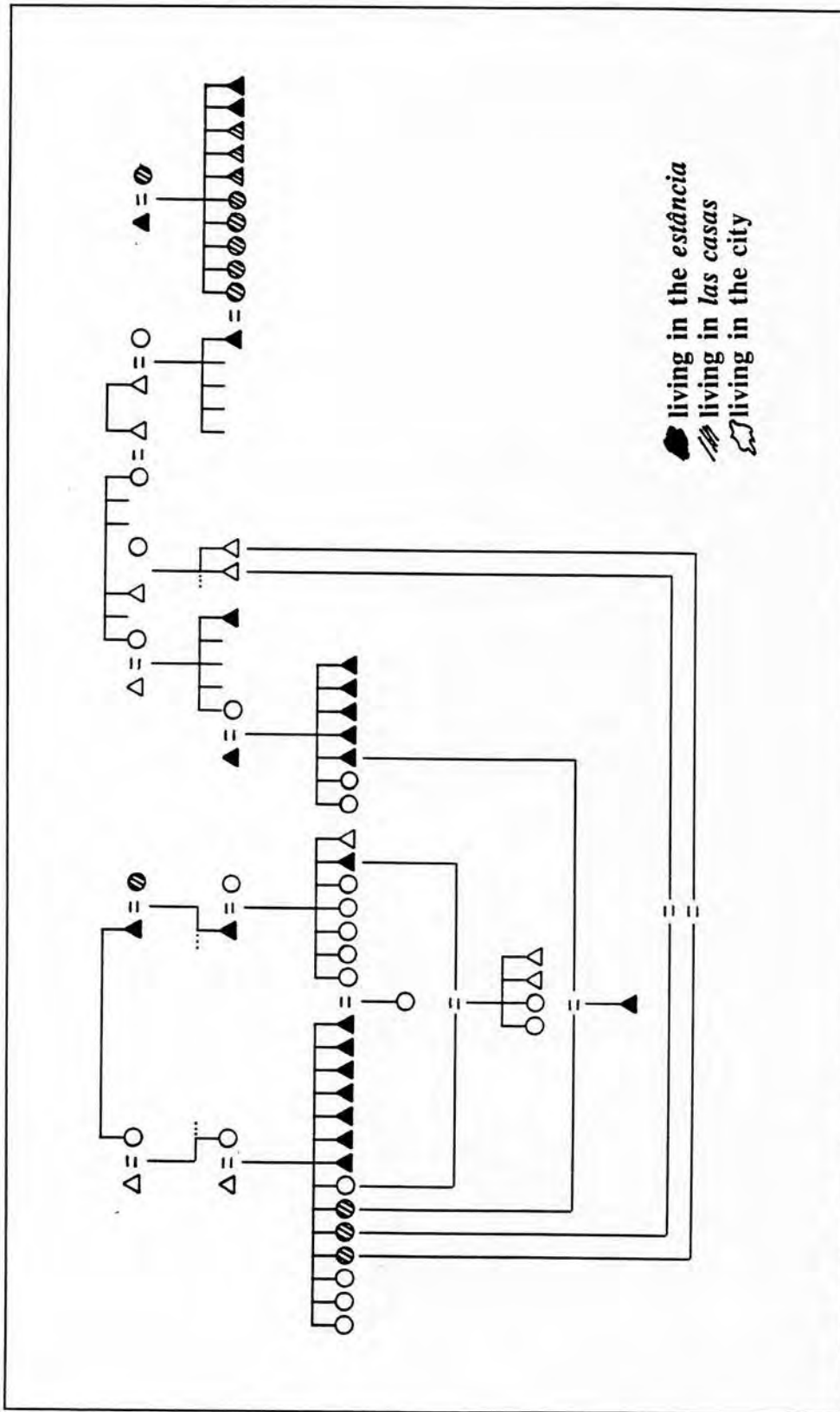


Figure 4 - Kinship chart.

which as they put it, "follows the law of necessity not of desire". In the figure, my intention is to map the kinship links of the men who worked in one of the *estâncias* I studied. As I stated earlier, as a research artifice my reference was the *estância* and although these specific data on kinship were collected from the women in *las casas*, the women's frame of reference when speaking of men was also the *estância*. That is, women refer to males as being from the farms Boqueirão or São Pedro (for example, "João from Boqueirão who is Maria's son"). Men's organizing principle to identify themselves is also the *estâncias* where they work and live, but within the kinship map all the roles are mediated through women.

The figure also indicates the locale of residence (the *estância*, *las casas* or the city). Although not statistically significant given the small universe, this chart is typical in showing that virtually the total population of the *estância* is male, while the majority of the village population is female, the majority of those who go to the cities are women, and the overall population of the countryside is male.

The adult population of the rural area is predominantly masculine; but the village is basically populated by women, and the children grow up within a family of women. Male children at the beginning of adolescence leave the mother's home and follow their fathers, an uncle, or an older brother to an *estância*: sex role patterning and gender identity have clear loci. Not rarely it is a foreman recruiting gauchos who will introduce

children in the men's world. The boy is promised (*prometido*) to a *estância*; that is, there is a previous understanding between a *patrão* or his foreman and the boy or his family that he would have a horse, learn the horsemanship and help in a given farm when old enough.

The boy leaves the female sphere very early because maleness is something to be acquired outside of this space. Maleness will become a life time project, something continuously at stake, which must continuously to be conquered. The boy's first ten years of life are experienced within the feminine domain, where the father is physically and emotionally absent, and where a strong mother has all the power. He breaks with this space by leaving it, by rejecting any possible identification with women and any positive image that he may carry about women. The gaucho's constant ritual display of manliness and manipulation of symbols of manliness are directly connected with this drastic separation from the feminine domain. Every time he performs the acts that his culture prescribes as essentially masculine, he is reenacting this separation; he symbolically regains his masculinity, and he inwardly reassures himself of his rupture with the female domain.

To be a woman is a given; it is not achieved or conquered. Sexuality and maternity are understood as natural attributes and indications of a woman's being. Since these are taken for granted as "natural" activities, not much social prestige is placed upon them; a woman internalizes these processes as natural. She is inserted into this feminine

world at birth, and a rupture with it is never necessary. There is no fundamental discontinuity in the process of becoming a woman.

On the other hand, she is socialized to conquer -- to seduce -- a man. A significant part of her identity as a woman and her realization as a person is connected with her reproductive powers, and she needs a male partner to exercise them. The dynamic of male and female interaction in this gender segregated society is that of man's avoidance of woman and woman's aggressive sexuality in relation to man. *Las casas* is the scenario of this gender conflict. Verbal and physical aggression, accusations of witchcraft and mutual suspicion are common among women. The man ostensibly absents himself from this space, from the houses; this avoidance is interpreted as rejection and aggression by the women. Women are verbally hostile to men. Either a woman seduces a man (by means of what a man understands as her uncontrollable and intimidating powers), or (if she is not successful) she turns his lack of sexual initiative against him: she accuses him of being sexually incompetent. These accusations are serious threats to one's masculinity.<sup>21</sup>

The dynamic of the gender relationship in the gaucho culture is that the woman is both seductive and aggressive in relation to man, while

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<sup>21</sup> As I show in Chapter VI, women know that they have this power and use it strategically. On women's verbal aggression against men among gauchos see also Mantegazza 1916 (1876):63. See Oliveira Vianna for a description of the women from the gaucho pastoral society as "showing virile manners, being expansive, uninhibited, and unreserved toward the other sex and even foreigners" (Cf. Oliveira Vianna 1987a [1952]:186).



the man avoids, misses and idealizes woman. Two pieces of the gaucho male folklore indicate this. Regarding the women it is said:

El demonio son los hombres  
dicen todas las mujeres  
y solo estan deseando  
que el demonio se la lleve

The evil are the men  
say all the women  
but they are just wishing  
that the evil takes them

And, regarding the man is said:

Campeio a tua presença  
em todo este rincão  
Relinchando de saudade  
dando patada no chão.

I search your presence  
in all this entire place  
neighing for missing you  
pawing the ground.

Both texts have a male voice and are representative of the gender dynamic in this pastoral society. The first indicates women's constant claims and belligerence against men, combined with the intimidating wish to establish a relationship with them. The second illustrates man's total identification with the horse and desire for an ever absent woman.

### **The Woman on the *Estância***

The life of a woman on an *estância* is characteristically solitary. She spends her entire day alone, busy with the daily domestic tasks that,

as she put it, "are always the same and very boring."<sup>22</sup>

The *estância* has demarcated male/female domains, and these segregated spaces are maintained even if there is no woman on the farm. Female space partially corresponds to the *patrão's* space. The main division is that of the *casa* and the *galpão*, from which follow the notions of inside and outside, the farm and field, the secluded and the open. The dynamic between these two physically established domains has implicit cultural rules: The *patrão* does not go "there", to the *galpão* -- the foreman is the mediator between him and the workers. The woman, too, never traverses the space that separates the two domains; the men come to the house collectively for meals, and only on that occasion.

The woman's space is delimited by the *casa grande*, the main farm building and the foreman's dwelling, usually adjacent to the *casa grande*. She maintains a constant distance from the men; the *peão de casa* is her mediator. She will never go to the *galpão*, if she has to call her husband or the *peão de casa* (the gaucho in charge of the domestic and ground (*chão*) tasks at the *estância* she uses the farm bell. The bell is also used at meal times to call the men. Depending on the arrangement of the *estância*, either the meals are served at a large common table in a

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<sup>22</sup> "*Estância* life," describes Bishop, "has a degree of loneliness and quiet that would be unbearable to any one but those who have been reared in it. [...] Around them is one continual monotony, with no moving thing, as far as the eye can reach [...]. Day after day the same routine is followed, until the very habit, it becomes a second nature" (Bishop 1883: 94-95).

workers' dining room close to the kitchen in the *casa grande*, or in the *galpão*. When the meal is served in the house, she first sets the table, puts the food on the table and then rings the bell. She will not participate in or be present during the meal. If the food is served in the *galpão*, that also means that she does not cook for the men regularly. When she does cook for them, she rings the bell when the food is ready and the *peão de casa* will come and get the pot of the usual over-cooked lamb stew.

As I mentioned before, the *peão de casa* is a man who for one reason or another is unable to be a *peão de campo*; in the gaucho's understanding, he is not actually a gaucho. Usually he is very young, he has some kind of handicap, or he acts in an effeminate way. In all cases, he represents someone sexually neutral. The *peão de casa* brings raw milk, raw meat and fire wood into the house. He takes the food the woman cooks to the *galpão*, the *puchero* or *cozido*, a casserole of slowly boiled chopped lamb with potatoes, tomatoes, rice or pasta, which is identified as woman's cooking. Any barbecued meat is cooked in the *galpão* and brought into the house by this *peão*. If the woman in the farm does not cook for the men, or if there is no *caseira* (housekeeper) on the farm, the men eat barbecued meat almost exclusively. There is no stove in the *galpão*, just the constant floor fire; no boiled food is prepared in the *galpão*, nor is roasted meat prepared in the house. On one of the farms, when I asked the *peão de casa* what his duties were, he listed them but

did not include cooking. Since by then I had spent at least one week eating roasted lamb everyday, and I saw him bring the roast to the house every day, I questioned him further, to which he answered: "I don't cook, I just barbecue" (*eu não cozinho, só faço o churrasco*).

It is a basic rule of female conduct not to penetrate the space between the house and the *galpão*, or to make any movement in that direction. Symbolically the distance established between these two places is that of the *respeito* (respect). To break this distance means also to destroy the respect that exists between man and woman. Since the woman on the farm is someone's wife, she really cannot break this limit or go beyond her own space. If she did, very serious conflict would ensue. Moreover, she would not feel safe in the *estância* anymore. Not uncommonly the foreman has to travel to the city to buy supplies for the farm or to buy or sell an animal. He may even stay away few days. His wife feels perfectly safe alone as long as *respect* exists, between her and the other men.

I discovered this dynamic only after long and patient observation. It was the understanding of these rules of interaction between the male and female space that finally granted me access to the male domain. I told the men very directly that it was very important to my work that I be able to enter the "men's space", but that it was not my intention in any way "to break the respect". They were surprised at the connection I was making between the yard space and respect. We talked a lot about this,

and about actions and meanings. One of the men said that "when things are understood through words maybe they do not have to be made clear by other means." A few days later they finally invited me to join them in the *galpão* for the evening tales. The woman of the farm never came along with me into the *galpão*: after all, a cultural system will not collapse as long as it is an outsider who is breaking one rule.

The woman on the farm sees her job as a temporary one. She wants to accumulate her salary and then move to the city when she has children, or when it is time for her children to go to school. She lives on the *estância* waiting for this moment. She is able to save her money because food and housing are provided on the farm; she keeps her money in the bank in a savings account. At both *estâncias* the women whom I came to know well were well informed about the monthly rate of inflation and the saving account rate of interest. Their dreams were to have houses of their own in the city.

A woman on the *estância* lives in extreme isolation. She feels lonely, and in contrast to the men and their dominant male ethos in the pampa, she does not attach any positive value to the notion of *individual, self* or *solitude*. As often as possible, she goes to *las casas* where she has kin, and she maintains contact with the city where other relatives and friends live. Women usually do not ride horses, so distances are serious barriers for them; but they manage to get a ride to the city with the veterinarian when he visits the farm, or they walk for more than 15 miles



to take a weekly bus to the city. If a woman cannot go to the city, she is willing to walk the 15 miles just to send a note by the bus driver to someone who lives in the city. The bus driver one week later will bring her a note or a package. I observed that these notes were not about anything urgent, they were felicitations for a birthday or a solicitation for a special brand of toothpaste. But if the content of the notes is trivial, the network of affinities and affections that are maintained through this exchange of notes is essential to the woman's life project of getting out of the countryside.

While alone in the *estância* house the woman listens constantly to the radio. The men are away in the open fields most of the day and they only listen to the radio on the evenings. Moreover, their tales and talk always take priority over the radio. The radio is the main means of communication in this region; music, news, commercials, messages and job opportunities are heard attentively by the woman. So, because she is well informed on local and urban activities, she -- through her husband or the *peão de casa* -- is the mediator between the world outside the *estância* and the men.

Unlike the men, a woman on the *estância* does not think of her work as productive or important. She does not feel committed to the *estância* routine, and if she has an opportunity or a excuse, such as a sickness, she finds ways to stay away. She is, however, always concerned about preserving her *direitos* (*rights*) and about not losing her job. The

notion of rights (employed in the plural), current in women's talk, refers to legal rights, mainly in labor situations. An employer cannot fire his employee unless he has a just cause (*justa causa*): if he does, he has to pay certain benefits. If, however, the motive is unexcused absences, the worker "loses his/her rights". This notion of "rights" contrasts with the expression more common in male speech *o que é de direito* (literally *what is of right*) meaning by that, what is righteous or morally right.<sup>23</sup>

In this society centered on pastoral activity where the woman does not have a place, women find it easier to move to the city than do men. The man is totally unprepared and without skills in the city. A woman can always find a job and housing, if necessary, as a maid. Domestic work is not prestigious work, but it is always available and, like any other unskilled labor, it pays the minimum wage. If she is young, a woman may also integrate herself into urban life through prostitution or by finding a husband in the city ("Which after all", a woman joked, "is not that different").

### ***Las Casas: Female Space, Male Ideology***

In the *estância*, a male domain, the men's avoidance of women is the carefully spatially structured distance between men and any occa-

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<sup>23</sup> Male notions of *right* and *righteous* are discussed at Chapter III and at Chapter VII.

sional women. This even has a name, respect. In *las casas*, the rules are different; the notion of *respect*, if it exists as a feminine construct in this context, is certainly not manipulated by a woman as a way of distancing herself from man. Her life strategy is to get close to man. The village, although a female domain, is haunted by the male ethos hegemonic in gaucho society as a whole which is internalized and sanctioned by women as society's ideal. It is not the women's own ideal, because women's ideal should be that women cannot have their own ideals, that women are worthless in this essentially male society. Gaucho society, whether in the *estância* or in *las casas*, is an androcentric culture where women experience feelings of inadequacy. Incongruously, the woman both despises and desires man, and as long as she stays in *las casas* she has no means of solving this contradiction except by seducing men and having male children.

The major goal of most women in gaucho society is to leave it. Maybe the female exodus to the city, the women's resistance to settling down, the established disorder of female social space or the very act of denying the status of community to *las casas* can be interpreted as a silent resistance by women to the role of procreators **in** and **of** a world that is not theirs. A woman is able to make this passage from the rural to the urban more easily than a man: in contrast to men, she reads and writes; she has a urban support network; she finds a job easily and "she knows her way in the city", which means, she knows how urban institu-

tions work. But from the dominant cultural perspective there is no prestige attached to going to the city, because it is also connected with the idea of working for (and under) somebody else, being a servant, to being "run by a clock not by nature." In the *estância*, the *patrão* is absent, in the tasks the man has to perform he perceives himself as autonomous, his labor journey is adapted to nature circle, he thinks of his (limited) bargaining power of quitting the job as liberty and his horse is embedded with the meanings of power, mobility and freedom.

When asked if they prefer to have male or female children, the women readily answer "male." When I try to argue saying that everything they say indicates the woman's life is easier, they say it that it may be easier but not better: "Men's work is much more fun," "who wants to be woman in a man's world?" or "Did you ever see a woman singing?"<sup>24</sup>

The desire to be a man or to have a man (either as husband or as son) which is expressed in women's discourse is coherent with the acknowledgement that the gaucho society is a male world. The hegemony of a male ethos in *las casas*, the female domain, is not only related to the fact that the village itself is not economically or socially autonomous, but also to the urban infra-structure, even if precarious, provides woman with symbolic elements that constantly reaffirm her subordinate position. Through an appropriation of the gaucho folk culture, radio programs

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<sup>24</sup> The reference is to the male's cultural tradition in poetry and playing instruments: the figure of the *payador*, *milonga*, challenge songs, verbal duel and all musical activities that goes on in the *galpão*.



massively present music, poetry, tales and commercials that celebrate the gaucho system of values, which is essentially male. In this region, women are the main consumers of this production and, as noted earlier, to a certain extent mediators between what comes out of the radio and the men, who when they are not working, are too busy creating their self-referenced symbolic world through rhymes and metaphors to listen to radio.

In the village there is electricity, piped water, occasionally television, elementary school and transportation to the city; in short, *las casas* offers to women the means of access to the urban universe. This, in relation to overall established power relationship, places the women in a privileged locus. That is, from the perspective of larger society, the village belongs to the sphere of the **public**, while the *estância* functions as a secluded and autonomous **private** unit. Thus, the situation of these women is very peculiar: potentially they are able to integrate themselves into the urban life and even to participate in the larger socio-economic structure; but no matter what women do, their participation in the production of the structure of meanings of gaucho's society remains totally marginal.

People not only live in society, but they also produce the society in which they live, that is, they create ways of thinking and cultural practices.<sup>25</sup> This addresses basic questions: Why do women, who in this

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<sup>25</sup> I am concerned here with the categories *ideal* and *material*, or *imaginary* and *real* (Godelier 1984) or yet *relationship of production* and



context, potentially have enough autonomy to produce symbolic alternatives, elect as their own rationale a system that inherently excludes themselves? Why is men's symbolic system self-referenced while women's universe is male referenced ?

The woman blames the man for her situation while the man sees the woman's dilemma as part of the unhappy fate of being female, a being with an intrinsic impossibility of having its own ideals, a woman cannot be a gaucho with everything that entails. Men tend to mistrust women, they fear their proximity, and fear that they will steal their power, their masculinity. Men freely admit they would rather have women far away from them.

Even the sexual act has a paradoxical gender dispute embedded in it. Both men and women believe that if in sexual intercourse the man has the orgasm first,<sup>26</sup> the child will be male; if the woman has the orgasm earlier than the man the child will be female. Since the ideal for men as well as women is to have male children, many prescriptions and magic procedures exist to obtain this goal. I interpret this to mean that the sexual relationship (as everything else in this society) was centered around the man's pleasure. The women vehemently denied this. Their

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*relationship of meaning* (Bourdieu 1974, 1979), having as theoretical framework the contemporary French discussion within the marxist tradition of the anthropology.

<sup>26</sup> The term employed was equivalent to orgasm (*gozar*) and not ejaculation.

argument was that the delay of woman's orgasm meant that her pleasure would last longer, obviously, highly desirable from the woman's perspective. Also, as they put it, "the man will have time to recuperate himself and do it again." Thus this reproduction formula and the magic associated to it seems to be part of women's lore (which men accept) and as one way of controlling men.<sup>27</sup>

The hostility of the woman to the man is clearly manifested in how she manipulates the man's *honor*. Honor, which is a central element in man's self identity, is not possessed by him. To a large extent it is the woman who controls the man's honor. Traditionally in many other societies where honor is an important value, the ultimate test of a man's honor is woman's chastity.<sup>28</sup> This certainly is not the case in gaucho society, where seduction is thought to be a prerogative of women and an essential condition of femininity. But in Gaucho society, too, the man's honor rests with the woman: if he loses "his woman" to another man, he loses his honor.

This reveals another apparently contradictory point. In gaucho society there is a generalized scarcity of women. A high circulation of men

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<sup>27</sup> In regard to this anthropology of the emotions, for Bourdieu (1987:88): "Love can be described also as a form of *amor fati*: to love is always to love in the other another realization of one's own social destiny." For De Certaux (1980:40), "Eros has an irreducible violence; it restores at the same time the conflict and the pleasure."

<sup>28</sup> Cf. studies on Mediterranean societies, Bourdieu 1972, 1979; Campbell 1963, 1964; Knudsen 1988a, 1988b; Pitt-Rivers 1977.

is a way of sharing these women. This sharing of women is in no way explicit or part of the images that the group has about itself; if it were made explicit, it would conflict with the central notion of honor. But within each gender segregated universe of quotidian practices, there is an image of the other. In the male domain this is **the impossible woman** and in the female domain (emically conceived) *a mulher deixada do marido*, meaning literally, the woman left from the husband,<sup>29</sup> the abandoned woman. The man's avoidance of woman or abandonment of her before she abandons him is a means of protecting his honor, of not giving it away, which in the last instance means not giving away his masculinity.

### **Witchcraft and Woman's Craft: The Domain of the Disorder**

In this society of drastically separated gender spaces, the encounter between men and women has two grounds: sexuality and disease. Both sexuality and disease are symbolically situated within the female domain and share the common characteristic of disorder, an attribution that is also perceived as inherently female.

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<sup>29</sup> *Deixada do marido* become a strong emic category because grammatically (in Spanish and Portuguese) this form does not exist.

As I suggested earlier, the **disorder** in *las casas*, can be taken as a resistance to reproduce the established **order of things**, the order of male pastoral society. The theoretical implications are clear: women are the dangerous and dynamic half within this social structure, and potentially they are also its transformative agents.<sup>30</sup> But, if on one hand, the female domain is par excellence the place of anti-structure and privileged locus of social change; on the other hand, woman's intimacy with disorder, or specific manifestations of it such as sexuality and disease, gives her a knowledge and a power that entitles her to convert the disorder into order. That is, the female system of representation, knowledge and practice in *las casas* is centered in the organization of the sexuality and disease.

At the level of social structure, women can be seen as possible agents of change (in the sense of horizontal social mobility and in the sense that women are the main introducers of the urban ethos in the rural area), and they are seen also as potentially responsible for evil events. Individually, in their immediate daily experience, women try to order social chaos in a way to cope, at least in part, with the destructive aspects of disorder, simply in order to continue to exist. In *las casas* women are the symbolic mediators between sexuality -- or the desire -- and kinship, and between disease and its cure. The principle that regulates these passages are of the order of emotion. Women's craft is the

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<sup>30</sup> For the category **disorder** see Balandier 1974, 1988;



control of emotions, her power is directly linked to it. Up to now in this chapter I have discussed the first aspect, the practices concerning sexuality and how kinship terms express the flexibility of personal relationships. Let us now turn briefly to the role of women in healing

In this universe, the mystical power to bless or to curse cannot be separated. Magical procedures are classified in good and bad, white and black depending on their objectives -- by principle, the magician and its magic are always both. Diagnosis, medicine, prescriptions or solutions to crises are part of every woman's knowledge in the pampa villages. Among these women, some establish prestigious reputations as *rezadeira*, *benzedeira*, or *curandeira*, that is, as healers. In *las casas*, no one is a self appointed witch (*bruxa*), but the existence of witches is directly related to the existing amount of conflict and hostility.<sup>31</sup> In other words, we do not have witches, but we have the accusation of witchcraft: we have the social construction of a belief.<sup>32</sup>

A man comes to *las casas* and looks for a woman in two situations: when he is in love and when he is sick. Both situations are interpreted as

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<sup>31</sup> Witchcraft accusations were significantly present in Massojer, the Uruguayan village that is situated exactly on the borderline of Uruguay and Brazil. In that case, personal hostilities overlap with political and economic differences. In that context, ritual elements from African Brazilian religion, common in Brazil urban areas, were identified as "black" and *mandinga* or *feitiço*, that is, witchcraft, by Uruguayans.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. De Certeau (1988:178): "belief" is not the object of believing but the subject's investment in a proposition, the *act* of saying it and considering it as true -- in other words, a "modality" of assertion and not its content.



signs of weakness and as signs that the man is not acting out of his own will; he is under the action of forces beyond his control. A physical debility or the enchantment of his feelings (because love itself is understood as a magic moment) legitimate his contact with woman.

The men deny any belief in witchcraft or magical healing which they call "superstitions" (*superstições*) and "women's beliefs" (*coisa de mulher*). Folk sayings with a clear origin in cattle herding activities express this:

*Curar bicheira com benzedura  
é preguiça da pura.*

To cure parasite infected with blessing  
is pure laziness.

*Sabugo no pescoço de res pestuada  
é o mesmo que nada.*

Corncob on the neck of sick cow  
is the same as nothing.

*Quem não acredita em mandinga  
não usa patuá.<sup>33</sup>*

One who does not believe in witchcraft  
does not carry an amulet.

These sayings criticize superstitions; the original versions rhyme, making them recurrent refrains in everyday life situations. At the level of the discourse, the irony and professed disdain in the sayings, does not express actual non-belief; it is rather a way of reaffirming themselves the

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<sup>33</sup> *Mandinga* and *patuá* are words from Brazilian-African religion and their own context would be imprecise the meaning of witchcraft.

contrast between male and female symbolic universes.

As a general healing principle, diseases or misfortunes, in one word, the disorders, are organized as stemming from either inside or outside sources. For example, respiratory illnesses, a cold or cough have an outside cause; skin diseases are understood as coming from inside to outside. An infection wound, even if the original injury is an external cut or a burn, its infection is perceived as coming from inside. Ailments are also classified as cold and hot, structuring homologies such as inside/outside; hot cold; wet/dry; water/fire at the level of the disease, its causes and its cure.

Another principle of the healing process is that *as coisas se atraem e se repulsam*, that is, "things attract and repulse themselves." The cure is inversely associated with the disease cause. Suffering will be relieved by its opposite, so the inhalation of hot steam (water boiled with eucalyptus leaves) and an *escalda-pés* (immersion of the feet in very hot water) are recommended for colds, bronchitis and asthma. The cure also includes the ingestion of large amounts of hot liquids in the form of teas;<sup>34</sup> a high dose of aspirin or similar pharmaceutical product, and the *benzendura*, the blessing procedure. In another example, an infected wound, the infection is understood as coming from inside to outside in reaction to the

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<sup>34</sup> For colds and pulmonary diseases the most common are garlic teas (or fresh garlic), lemon tea, and *avenca* (*Pityrogramma calomelanos*), *barba-de-body* (*Aristaide pallens*) and *camomila* (*Matricaria chamomilla*). For a description of the therapeutic quality of plants from this region see Mantegazza 1916 (1876) and Mariante 1984.

wound. As the infection is hot, the wound should be washed many times with heavily salted cold water (salmoura). The wound is wet and should be dried, to kill the germs ("the reproduction of bad things") salt or other chemical element are employed to cauterize it. A fever is also classified as inside/hot; and outside/cold treats it: an immersion bath of almost cold water or alcohol compresses, aspirin and blessings are the treatment. This system of cure is sufficiently flexible to play with the logic of binary opposition at the three levels (cause, manifestation and treatment of the disease) not always in a linear way.

The question at this point is, where is the magic ? First of all, the magic is in a previous tacit understanding that the sickness as well as its healing are elements that do not belong to everyday life; treatment requires a rupture in routine. Sickness authorizes men to seek help, to rest, and "to take care of themselves" -- all practices identified as feminine, which performed in other situations would "feminize" them. Second, magic, as a solution, relies on the women's ability to construct a specific symbolic system which gives coherence to the unknown and explains the sickness. The healer basically provides a diagnosis and orients the patient to what he should do next. In a really serious case she will help the patient go to the city and look for medical services. Third, she has a good knowledge of herbs and plants, as well as knowledge and access to regular pharmaceutical medications available in the city. Finally, a *ben-zedeira* (healer) knows the spell appropriate to each sickness and each

situation. The combination of all these elements offers a solution to the patient.

People say that *reza* or *mandinga* (magic) alone does not work, but without *fé* (faith) no medicine cures. Most women have a general knowledge about how to identify sickness, about teas and chemical medication. But only the *benzedeira* is skilled in manipulating the symbolic elements that should be combined to obtain the cure. Usually the *benzedeiras* are elderly persons with accumulated experience who are also skilled as midwives. A popular proverb of this region says:

O diabo mais sabe	The devil knows --
por velho	More because he is old
do que por diabo.	than because he is the devil.

This means that one knows more from experience than any sort of special powers. It reaffirms the power of experience over mystical forces. While in one of the *estâncias*, I heard this proverb used when a man, apparently with a serious tooth infection, was trying to decide whether he would go to town to consult a doctor or to *las casas* to see a healer. A trip to the city was more expensive and time consuming, but in this case I had offered to drive him (a two hour trip each way). Medical doctors who provide social services in the towns in rural areas are usually very young; most have just finished medical school and are starting their careers. Indeed, the reference to lack of experience was reasonable. Interesting here is that the metaphor of devil presented in the proverb

does not ascribe mystical power either to the doctor, the healer or to the evil itself. The man decided to go to *las casas* by horse. The healer blessed, medicated him against pain and fever and recommend that he should go to a dentist and a to doctor in the city.

The healing ritual is a short encounter between the *bezendeira* and her patient in her house. A *benzedeira's* home usually displays a few religious images or pictures of Catholic and Umbanda origin in her house to indicate her calling. A bough of *arruda*<sup>35</sup> and other herbs are also there. She asks the patient about the symptoms and the causes of his/her affliction. She will examine the patient and then decide on an appropriated ritual procedure and prescription.

The basic ritual elements of healing are water, fire, *arruda* and a knife. From that comes hot or cold water, vapor, charcoal, smoke and ashes. Various associations are made between the characteristics of the disease the different states of these elements. In standard blessing procedure, the healer throws a handful of ashes into bowl of cold water, dips the *arruda* bough into the water, and then makes crosses in the air with it while saying a spell. She also may make gestures with the knife. Examples of spells are:

*Casa velha, estrela nova. Homem manso, mulher maligna. Quem es-*

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<sup>35</sup> *Arruda* (*Ruta graveolens*) is believed to have magical powers to protect people against *mal olhado* (the evil's eye). *Mal olhado* can be defined as a feeling of hostility caused by jealousy, a common condition in the everyday life of *las casas*. I only heard comments on *mal olhado* while in *las casas*.



*tiver neste estomago desça pra' baixo, não suba pra'cima. Pelo amor de Virgem Maria.*

Old house, new star. Docile man, evil woman. Whoever is inside this stomach go down, don't climb up, for the love of Virgin Mary.

*Homem bom, mulher ruim. Espinha de peixe, feijão na água. Suba pra' cima, desça pra' baixo.*

Good man, bad woman. Fish bone, beans into the water. Climb up, come down.

*Eu te benzo e te tiro  
o mal que em teu corpo se meteu.*

I bless you and I take away from you  
the ill that got inside your body.

The magic spells are word plays rich in symbolic associations and meanings. In each healing session some elements are concretely represented, that is, they are actually part of the ceremony as for example the fish bone and beans. It is not my intention to make an analysis of the rationale of the enchantment rituals here, but I call attention to the fact that in two of the above spells, both performed by a woman for a man, there is play with the opposition: bad woman/good man. I interpret this to mean not simply that woman is associated with man's source of affliction, but that is the healer's strategy to tell the patient what he wants to hear, thus offering some compensation and relief for his suffering.

The knife and its manipulation during the healing ceremony signifies the "cutting out" (*cortar*) of the disease. Among gauchos, the

knife is essentially a male instrument<sup>36</sup> and certainly in this context it is a powerful male token. In the curing ceremony symbolically it is the woman who owns the man's magic wand which she uses to exorcise evil and to exercise powers. Perhaps metaphorically the woman needs to steal man's prerogative or potency in order to achieve the authority necessary to perform the cure.

Women have diverse superstitions involving knives: To "cut away" the pain during labor and delivery the woman should put a knife under the bed with the cutting edge up. Combined with it, a man's coat turned inside out should be placed in the room. Both the inside-out coat and the knife are represent the reversal of a man in the intense and dramatic feminine moment of giving birth; probably they are elements demarcating a female space. This negation and/or appropriation of male attributions makes a statement about the female domain; it is a way of saying "this is our space," Interestingly this is done by subverting male signs which change neither their inner truth nor essence as male tokens.

To "cut out" children's nightmares the prescription is to place a knife under the child's pillow and to sing this lullaby:

Dorme filhinho,  
dorme meu amor

Sleep my son,  
sleep my dear

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<sup>36</sup> A boy gets his knife as soon as he leaves his home and starts to learning to be a gaucho. He uses his knife as working tool, for eating and as weapon. This a special knife sharp, usually large and with a decorated handle. Although women use knives in cooking, these are just regular knives; different from the ritual knife which is invested with the *aura* of the Gaucho's knife.

que a faca que corta  
corta sem dor.

so that the knife which cuts,  
cuts without pain.

The version I collected is addressed to a male child, but it may be adapted for daughters. The knife here retains its potential for aggression and danger and implies a conformity with this danger, since "it cuts but does not hurt and it is there to protect you." The efficacy of the magic may stem from the direct attention given to the child, and may be a symbolic way of domesticating fears.

Throughout this section I refer to the patient as a generic "he". In the first place what interests us here is the dynamic of male/female interactions. Secondly, my impression is that more men than women look for healers. Although it is true that the men only look for help when they badly need it; it is also true that there is a general female healing culture, and the gap between the knowledge of healing specialists and that of other women in the village is not great. That is, women take care of themselves before looking for help. Also, the relation between healer and patient in the cross gender situation is more formalized and structured as a medical encounter: waiting, expectation, treatment, prescription, payment and all involved. The payment is very flexible; not rarely it takes the form of goods from the *estância* where the man works.

Women themselves are concerned with prophylactic measures, that is to say, with things where curing magic is unnecessary because there is no magic of the disease if the disease is not there. Fertility, birth control

and the immunization of the children are their major preoccupations and they are able to deal with these very well. Through the radio and their contacts in the city they know the dates of the public campaigns of immunization. They frequent urban health services, because, in contrast to men, most of them have both the time and the expertise to seek a clinic in the city at times other than crises. In the cities they have access to basic drugs such as aspirin, contraceptive pills, potassium permanganate, baking soda, vaseline and occasionally antibiotics. Since reading is also woman's craft (*coisa de mulher*) women understand the medications texts and how to apply them in different situations. Women's magic is the competence to combine different systems of knowledge. They are experts in combining the available chemical drugs with herb teas and other traditional procedures or sometimes just "translate" them in terms of their very concrete reality.

Both men and women, when they have a choice, feel more comfortable dealing with traditional medicines and solutions guaranteed by their own experiences than they do with things over which they have no control. Prescription drugs are always viewed with suspicion. Moreover, the traditional healing system is less dogmatic and has a greater capacity to incorporate elements from the urban clinical system than the other way around. Urban health workers are not trained to perceive traditional medicine as a body of knowledge, a symbolic system in its own right. Urban health social services are insufficient and intolerant, medical

doctors frequently incapable of dealing with what they label as "ignorance" and "superstition." Their reactions only confirm the gaucho patients tendency to avoid them.

An example of the communication dissonance between the health service and its rural public was the intensive radio and television campaign aimed at teaching mothers to combat infant diarrhea and dehydration:

At the first symptom of diarrhea give your child a bottle of home-made *soro* . To make the *soro*, boil water for twenty minutes, add one teaspoon of sugar and half teaspoon of salt.

Although the message was very simple, three things in the text were not clear to the women with whom I was working: the word "symptom", the idea of boiling the water for twenty minutes, and the unit of measure. However, all women knew and used the following remedy against infant diarrhea: camomile tea "brought to a boil three times" to which was added a pinch of salt and a pinch of sugar together with some sort of spell with words to the effect that what is inside should remain inside. For these women, it seems senseless to boil water without anything in it, healing procedures must always have a magic number of times (varying between 3 to 7) that the water should be brought to a boil and a "pinch" (*pitada*) is a comprehensible measurement while a teaspoon is not. This message was both inefficacious and unnecessary; worse still, it raised a controversy among the women, who began questioning their own me-



thods. For this group, from the point of view of public health such a campaign can only have negative effects.

Women combine traditional and modern medical care. Even if she regularly takes contraceptive pills, a woman will also maintain accurate records of her menstrual period which in turn are associated with considerations on the basis of lunar year. If her menstruation is late, she will start to drink a tea of erva-de-passarinho (*Stelaria media*) root, which is considered to have abortive effects. In that case, conception probably never took place, but they use the remedy "just in case." Thus the traditional medicine keeps its symbolic efficacy.

An examination of the seduction curses used by women against men indicates that they follow the rules of contagious magic. Women use two strategies: they pollute a man with a woman's fluids, and they steal male fluids. For example, a woman who wants to attract a man should offer him a tea which was strained through one of her own worn and sweaty shirts. Other magic consists of grabbing a man's personal belongings, or body wastes such as a moustache hair which are combined with female elements.

Male magic to seduce women is almost unheard of, except maybe for teenage boys; but this and all magical procedures are performed or oriented by a women healer. Male curses are narcissistic associations with natural elements which are believed to give strength and reinforce male "natural" qualities. For example, a tea of a cock's spur is recom-

mended for masculinity, a tea of the tendons between ostrich's toes is good for agility, a cream of fresh chicken excrement applied on the face of teenager boys causes the growing of moustaches and beard, a "water of cricket" is indicate to develop speech ability or fresh mare's milk is prescribed for male weakness. Such magic never includes control over women's things but rather are enchantment strategies that stress male identity through elements that are independent of women. The dynamic of the magic of seduction reproduces the logic of the relationship between men and women in gaucho society at large: women try to reach men, men avoid this contact. From the women's perspective the men are unattainable, as is everything which manhood represents. From the men's understanding women are impossible, idealized and dangerous.

Whether or not these magical practices are actually performed is hard to say. Apparently men joke about these beliefs, but, as a set of representations the charms **mean** something and say something about the group who creates them. As I suggested, the magic prescribed for men is self-referenced (in the sense that its goal is to improve men's own attributions and bring about personhood), while female magic is centered in a dynamic of giving and taking intimate fluids to attract men. My data on magic show a consistency in gender rationale of charms: men makes an alliance with animals (the therapeutic elements are mare's milk, cock's spurs, ostrich's tendons etc.) while women's seduction magic is connected with male elements, and female fertility and sexuality are closely associa-

ted with plants and various herbal teas. Seduction is a gender-coded magic, where man and woman respectively construct an intimacy with animal and vegetable species, turning male and female into beings from different natural kingdoms.

## Chapter V

### The Men and Their Cocks

#### On Cockfighting

What do the two bleeding cocks fighting to their deaths mean to the breathless gauchos watching them? What understandings and emotions regarding what is at stake in each fight do these watchers share? In this chapter I will seek for an answer to these questions through an analysis of the cockfighting activities in Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. Cockfighting is one among various discourses -- an especially dramatic one -- which celebrate gaucho identity and express the content of the gender demarcated gaucho culture. All such discourses on gaucho identity use animal metaphors and involve conflict and notions of honor, but perhaps none of them has the enunciatory power of cockfights. Cockfighting is a celebration of masculinity where men, through their cocks, dispute, win, lose and reinforce certain attributes chosen as male essence. In the fighting, that which is assumed to be animal nature -- courage, fierceness, strength and pride -- becomes human nature or, more precisely, men's nature: the animals' attributes are symbolically transferred to the men

who possess the cocks.

Cockfighting is not just a localized cultural survival,<sup>1</sup> nor is it an activity restricted to rural gauchos. In southern Brazil, it is an urban event which draws together cocks and men from different places. Whenever cockfights take place, involvement of the audience and the intensity of feelings aroused by these performances are so striking that I believe that this subject deserves more anthropological attention and analysis.

Quantitatively considered, cockfighting is perhaps not very representative of gauchos. Not all gauchos, nor even the majority of them, are *cockers* (*galistas*, i.e. cock breeders, trainers or cockfighting addicts).<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the symbols, meanings and feelings that surround cockfighting can be taken as those most representative of gaucho ethos. The gauchos themselves (**gauchos** here in its restricted sense of *estância* workers) consider the breeding of fighting cocks and cockfighting as a practice peculiar to the gaucho.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Among the very few anthropological works on cockfighting, are Geertz's insightful essay "Notes on the Balinese Cockfight" Geertz (1973); and the brief comments of Bateson and Mead 1942.

<sup>2</sup> I will be using the English terms *cocker* for *galista* and *cocking* for *fazer rinha*, to breed cocks and to participate in cockfighting. In English, as in Portuguese and Spanish, these words are part of a specialized vocabulary of the people involved with this activity. For reference to these terms in English see for example Sketchley 1814 and Gilbey 1912. As classical British *cocker's* manuals for cock breeding are part of Gaucho *cocker* culture, this material is specially pertinent here.

<sup>3</sup> For a description of cockfighting among gauchos see Ebelot 1943 [1890]; Laytano 1984; Mantegazza 1916 (1876); Seitenfus 1967 and Teixeira 1986.



Cockfighting is an ancient and worldwide sport with historical and geographical differences, and with statuses which vary from illegal, illegal but tolerated, to legal or even royal according to national laws and circumstances. Regardless of its variations, cockfighting is always a male activity. In this chapter I will introduce cultural data from *cockers'* own specialized literature on *cocking*, when relevant, to support possible generalizations.

Cockfighting originated in the Orient and it was introduced into Europe in the 5th century B.C. It was popular in Greece, and Romans spread it throughout their Empire. It was a national tradition in early England and Spaniards carried cockfighting to the Americas.<sup>4</sup>

Argentina was colonized by Spain and later was strongly dependent economically, politically and cultural influence on England. In both Spain and England cockfighting has been a strong cultural tradition, and we find references to cockfighting as early as the 1700's among Argentinean gauchos. For this reason, the Argentinean gauchos are usually identified as the source cockfighting among gauchos. Brazilian society in general considers cockfighting to be Spanish or Gaucho, rather than Portuguese or Brazilian. Nowadays, however, cockfights are more popular, better organized and institutionalized in Brazil than in Argentina or Uruguay. In contrast to Argentina and Uruguay, cockfighting is not forbidden in

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<sup>4</sup> For an historical account on cockfighting see Boulenger 1912, Finsterbusch 1980, Llanes 1981 and Sarabia 1972.

Brazil, although there too, it is a very discrete, an almost invisible activity. Its legality may be a good reason, albeit not a sufficient one, for its larger popularity in Brazilian territory. I shall return to this point later.

During my fieldwork I never witnessed cockfighting in Uruguay -- which does not mean it does not exist there -- but since the region where I conducted my research is on the frontier of Brazil, cockfights in that region are probably held in the cities on the Brazilian side. Certainly the cockfights that I observed, for example in Uruguaiana (a Brazilian city on the border with Argentina) have a definite Argentinean audience. This sort of *play* with national frontier establishing new boundaries occurs with other types of gambling, with the flow of goods and pricing, with political ideas, legislations and even cultural rules. In general, people living on the border manipulate regulations and meanings to their best advantage; the tendency is that the less strict will rule.<sup>5</sup>

The data presented in this chapter are drawn mainly from my observations in a *rinhadreiro* (cockfighting house) in Porto Alegre. Given the nature of the subject -- cockfighting is relatively infrequent, conducted in a self proclaimed male space and in semi-secrecy -- continuous and long term research was required to penetrate this closed universe. In Porto Alegre, the city where I live, I was able to carry out systematic observations for a period of over two years. The data on Porto Alegre

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<sup>5</sup> See Chapter II for a description of the countries' border dynamic.

reveal how folk practices are interwoven with modern ones; how the traditional is sufficiently dynamic to be redefined, reinvented, and to present itself in new forms or new contexts.<sup>6</sup>

### **Cocks and their Ownership**

Walking in a suburban area of any city in Rio Grande do Sul, someone with intruding anthropologist lens can occasionally find game cocks in their cages or a cockfighting training section going on in a house courtyard. But cockfighting is a serious business as well as a popular tradition; it involves a considerable amount of money, and one will not find fighting cocks out in the streets with other common fowl. That is, cockfights only happen at special places, with special cocks, at proper times.

Cockfighting tournaments are the only occasion in which cocks actually fight, and many cocks from different owners are necessary for a tournament. A man will never pit his own cocks against each other except for training purposes, in which case the cocks wear protective leather muffles over their spurs and beaks. The whole point of cockfighting is

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<sup>6</sup> Porto Alegre is the capital city of the state of Rio Grande do Sul. It is a modern and industrial city with a population of 1 500 000 ha. The best example of this articulation between the traditional and the modern is that a cockfight was the opening scene of one soap operas (*O Outro*) from the main national television network; in which one of the actors portrayed a stereotyped gaucho.

that a man competes with another man using his cock as a mediator.

The *possession* of a cock can be either real, through its actual ownership, or symbolic. Betting, emotional involvement with a cock, the activity of training of a cock, specialized knowledge of cocking and the mastery of a particular cock's life history and kinship records are effective ways of *having a cock*. In fact, symbolic ownership is the most important way of establishing links both with cocks and among men in every cockfighting performance. The link among men, the man-cock-man bond, the rivalry of one man betting **against** another is provisional, lasting only as long as the match; it is redefined according to which cock one bets on in every cockfight. The link man-cock lasts longer. As the *cockers* put it: "If you believe in a cock, when his bruises have healed, and he fights again in another tournament, you are expected to be loyal and bet on him again." Cockfighting always tends to be a big event because, as they say: "There is no fun in playing always against the same cocks because then the result of the matches doesn't bring surprises."

People will not get together only to watch few matches. Each game cock breeder will bring those of his cocks which are ready (*prontos*) to be matched. If ten breeders with an average of two cocks each participate, this will mean long hours of cockfighting, since the matches may not have a time limit: the cocks fight to their exhaustion, which sometimes means their death. Regular tournaments happen once every two weeks,



depending on the season<sup>7</sup>. A tournament takes at least an entire day, beginning early in the day. Usually it takes the whole weekend; and on holidays, it may last three or four continuous days. The audience of *cockers* (*galistas* or *aficionados*) seems to be able to watch with the same intense enthusiasm no matter how many there are, as long the cocks in question are "fine cocks". A well known cock which has won on many other occasions; one strong enough to survive a good adversary; or a cock with an impressive genealogy, son or grandson of a champion, will have a larger audience and attract higher bets.

For betting purposes, and as part of general representation of the cockfight public, the cock is only identified by its male line. An ideal of a self generated male species certainly is part of the men's imagery about cocks. Although some breeders caution that is incorrect to perceive the cock only by its *male line*, saying that a cock inherits *fighting spirit* and *aggressiveness* from the father's line but *gameness* from the hen; others insist that a cock that comes from a line of fighters as a rule will produce only fighters. In the heat of a dispute in the pit it is not uncommon to hear comments about "the mother's blood is showing" referring to the cock which is losing.

The notion that fighting cocks are rare, expensive, and very special

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<sup>7</sup> The regulation of one of main *cockers'* society sets a time limit of one hour and half per mach, others organization or less structured cockfights do not have a time limit. The cockfighting season extends from May or June to December or January. The rest of the year the cocks are molting.



is constantly stressed. In the cockfights that I observed, the majority of the cocks were **bankiva** cocks, also called "English." Their colors are a mixture of black and red with a red-brown tone. The cock has long legs and thighs, a broad chest and stands in an upright position. This body posture and attitude in fighting is identified as *dignidade* (*dignity*).

Usually cocks start to fight only when they are two to three years old. A bankiva cock may live (if it survives the fights) up to six or seven years. Another game cock breed, the bantam, also called "the Malay", is considered of poor quality. *Race* (*raça*) is a concept used to define cocks. A cock is not only of bankiva or bantam *race*, but it also **has** *race*, meaning an eagerness to fight, vim and dignity. Ethnic stereotypes overlap the cock breeds' actual origins. In a fight between a Malay (bantam) and a English (bankiva) cock the first, which is heavier, is considered a *ground* combattant while the latter is a *flyer*; it flies to hit its adversary with its spurs and beak. Fights between cocks of different breeds are unusual; *ground* and *flying* usually refer to fighting strategies and style.<sup>8</sup> During a fight, every movement of the cock is followed by the crowd's cheers of "go ahead!", "mount him!" (*monta nele! trepa nele!*). As to *mount* or to *climb* (*trepar*) are also expressions commonly used to refer to sexual intercourse,

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<sup>8</sup> It should also be pointed out that the classification of cocks into *ground* and *flyer* parallels the contrast between *ground* worker (*peão de chão* or *peão caseiro*) and mounted worker (*peão campeiro*) in the gauchos' life on the *estância*. The first is identified as passive, feminine and tied to the ground; the second is identified with mobility, freedom and dominance.

usually implying the man's position in the sexual act, the crowd's cheers are not only metaphorical. The fight is a succession of alternate bows, gestures and movements on the part of each cock as they use subordinate and dominant body positions to achieve victory. The men, through these dialectical moves of their cocks, gain or lose masculinity in every round. On the *estâncias*, away from the atmosphere of cockfighting, I collected a folk stanza where the erotic association *between mounting and fighting* is clear:<sup>9</sup>

Quien tuviera la suerte  
que tiene el gallo,  
que en medio de la juria  
monta a caballo.

Who would have the luck  
that the cock has,  
that in the middle of the fight  
mounts on horse.<sup>10</sup>

*Dignity* refers to the cock's body posture while standing, striking or even while being beaten, as well as the cock's attitude and its way of looking at men and other cocks. Dignity is a sort of arrogance. Those qualities associated with cocks are usually immaterial items (where even objective characteristics, such as breed, becomes *race* an subjective category). Although subjective, the cocks are priced by such characteristics, and a man will acquire these qualities by buying the cock, betting on it or

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<sup>9</sup> Gonzáles 1943 also makes reference to this poem as of Argentinean origin.

<sup>10</sup> In Spanish or in Portuguese *cock* rhymes with *horse* (*gallo/caballo*; *galo/cavalo*) strengthening the semantic association between them.

even just cheering for it. Different ways of owning the cock (such as actual ownership, being the cock's handler, or betting on a cock) will entitle man to different degrees of ownership over it. What is really being *sold* are those abstract, taken as *natural*, attributes: *vim*, *vigor* and *victory* as an old English cocker's advertisement put it.<sup>11</sup> *Nature* itself is a cultural category here.

Interesting enough, in my data, *dignity*, to a certain extent, replaces the idea of *victory* from the British cocker's ad. Consistent with an ethos of *el sentimiento tragico de la vida* (*the tragic feeling of life*) characteristic of gaucho culture, *dignity* is connected with the ability to endure suffering stoically, heroically. To win is an important, but not the most important part of cockfighting. Every sequence of blows is significant by itself, and each is long enough to offer some winning recompenses even if the cock does not win in the end.

We can see the cockfight as a play of images where ultimately what is at stake is masculinity, not cocks, not even "ambulant penises" as Bateson, Mead or Geertz suggested. Bateson and Mead (1942) and Geertz (1973) were dealing with another social context, Bali, where this interpretation may be applied. I wonder if the equation cocks = penises is not a oversimplification, immediate to English speaking people.<sup>12</sup> Even if in

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<sup>11</sup> A XIX th. century English advertisement selling game cocks says: "Old English Game fowls / To all parts of the inhabited world/ These birds are full of / *Vim, Vigour and Victory*". (Sketchley 1814).

<sup>12</sup> The English speaker reaction to the title of this Chapter indicated to me how much the meaning of *cock* is confined to *penis*. The homonym

Bali this semantic identification exists (this is not the case in gaucho culture or the Portuguese and Spanish languages), to take *cock* for *penis* may be to reduce a symbol to its signifier, not to its meaning. In my understanding, phallus itself is a sign invested with the meaning of manliness and power: androcentric cultures ascribe power to the ones who have penises. In contrast to Bateson and Mead, Geertz does not limit his analyses to the cock as a phallic symbol; masculinity and status concern are his main points.

For the men crushed together watching the cockfights, individual cocks are being sacrificed to a greater cause, an ideal of manliness. Necessarily one of the cocks will win, so men and manliness will always win. The logic here is that of the sacrifice: the men *own* the victim, and the victim is different from the sacrificer. As in any sacrifice ritual, there is an act of abnegation since the sacrificer deprives himself and gives up something.<sup>13</sup> In this profane worship of manliness, the men's sense of abnegation, their sense of *necessary sacrifice*, finds compensation in the cock's *dignity*: he suffers but he is not a loser, his *honor* is saved if he

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does not occur in gaucho speech, Portuguese or Spanish.

<sup>13</sup> On the rationale of the sacrifice Humbert and Mauss (1964 [1898]:-101) state: "For the sacrifice to be truly justified, two conditions are necessary. First of all, there must exist outside the sacrificer things which cause him to go outside himself, and to which he owes what he sacrifices. Next, these things must be close to him so that he can enter into relationship with them, find in them the strength and assurance he needs, and obtain from contact with them the benefits that he expects from his rites."



(the man and the cock) knows how to suffer and thus preserve his masculinity.

If a cock fights to the death, never running from the pit, or never *crying like a chicken* (*cacarejando feito galinha*); and if, even when badly wounded, he keeps fighting back, his *honor* and the man's honor is not at risk: A man may lose money, but not his honor. Actually, when the cock is badly hurt, perhaps suffering some sort of neurological trauma, he may "start to cry like a chicken." This is considered the ultimate insult to its owner and its supporters; symbolically at that moment the cock and the men become females. This is associated to the other meanings of the word *chicken* in common usage: "loose woman" and coward.

To better understand male and female gender attributions in the representation of the men involved with cockfighting, it is worth quoting a *cockers' manual*:

Females are strongly sexual and henceforth impulsive. Their actions are instinctively generated by feelings and they need the presence of a male. They are amorous, though they do not show it. Just as most female beings [sic]. Nature made them so and provided that their actions be governed by their sexual impulses. Males are cooler in disposition and have developed a different brain. They act according to logic and brains are stimulated by external impressions. Females act impulsively and their nerve centers are stimulated by internal impressions. They are closed related to nature and can by this fact not go over certain limits (Finsterbusch 1929:166).

A cocker may breed many cocks, but few will be *fine* cocks. A fine cock is a bankiva cock, with a certified genealogy; but it is also a cock



with other subjective attributes such as *race* and *dignity*, one which is a real warrior and fearless conqueror in the pit, bringing honor to his owner, to his handler and to those who expected him to win.

Breeding game cocks is an expensive activity. The cocks need heated rooms in the winter, air conditioning in the summer, warm food and a special diet. Cocks also receive constant training and intensive care while recuperating from fights, and they may need one or more handlers or trainers. The cocks' genealogy and fighting curriculum, common conversation topics at cockfights, imply a good deal of grooming, manipulation and intervention, and capital investment by men. The cock's expenses include occasional air fare, and hotel accommodations for the owner, the handler and the cocks.<sup>14</sup>

Cock owners are usually people from a rural area; even those who live in the cities, usually have rural origins. The breeding of game cocks is a secondary activity for most, and they can afford to hire people to take care of their cocks. They run other businesses, or they may be veterinarians, cattle breeders or landlords. Cocking is considered a sport, a hobby, "an activity one engages in for love, not for money". Although it can become a very profitable investment, men will insist that in other investments there are less risks, and that they are engaged in this sort of activity just for pleasure. The sale price of a bankiva cock may go up to

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<sup>14</sup> In Santa Rosa, a Brazilian city bordering with on Argentina, a fancy hotel advertises, together with its apartments, special rooms with air conditioning for cocks.

\$2000 US dollars, mainly if they are sold to cockfighting adherents outside Brazil. There is a generalized idea among themselves that the best cocks are the gaucho cocks, that is, cocks from this region of Brazil where the bankiva is breed. Here bankiva is equated with gaucho.

Breeding for export at high prices in the international market is a recent business. People call it, with irony, "The Bolivian Connection." Most of the exported cocks go to Bolivia: "You know, Bolivia has their cocaine's *nouveaux rich*, they are crazy about cocks and gambling, but they don't have any tradition in breeding bankiva cocks." Someone else adds: "They buy a cock just for one fight, because they use Bolivian spurs (sharp metal needle-like spurs) and no cock survives it. It's stupid, because even the winner won't survive the fight in condition to have another fight." Cocks are also exported to the United States (to Filipinos in the United States, it is said). These cocks, too, get into the United States through the Bolivian circuit: that is, cocks and cocaine go together through the same illegal channels.<sup>15</sup> Many cockers, the ones who do not own cocks, are very critical of this kind of business. They say cocking will end up becoming a big business. In fact, since cocks have become more valuable, bets are higher, cocker societies more organized and bureaucra-

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<sup>15</sup> *The San Francisco Chronicle* of November 24, 1988 published a news item from San Jose, California under the title "Cockfight Surprise in Drug Raid." The narcotics unit searching a home during a drug raid found 30 caged fighting cocks and more than 200 cockfighting spurs in a home. The suspects were charged for sale and possession of cocaine and possession of cockfighting equipment.

tized. Nowadays, in large cities, cockfighting has a clear middle class audience.

Gauchos, that is, workers on extensive cattle farms, the specific group with whom I worked, will be at a *rinhadeiro* (cockfighting place) cheering for a cock only on special occasions, since organized tournaments tend to take place only in cities and betting is relatively expensive. More important than their presence at cockfights, is the place of fighting cocks in gaucho imagery, in tales, metaphors and poetry. Reciprocally the gaucho image is part of the cockers' societies, helping legitimize cockfighting, under the rubric of "traditional folk culture." In the cockfighting events, it is considered appropriate to dress as a gaucho, to drink *chimarrão* (*mate*), to barbecue beef and to talk stressing using the gaucho vocabulary and accent.

The metamorphosis of the gaucho into a cock and the other way around, the cock into a gaucho, is explicit in the gauchos' representations of themselves and it is present in the gaucho lore (Hernandez 1967 [1872]:337):

Vos sos pollo, [...]  
En las rinas he aprendido  
a no peliar sin puyones.

You are only a young chicken [...]  
I've learned my lesson from cockfights  
never to fight without spurs.

The well known verses of a popular poet from the region were my field work took place are exemplary illustration of the conjunction man/-cock:<sup>16</sup>

Valente galo de briga,  
*Gasca* vestido em penas  
 Quando arrastas a chilenas<sup>18</sup>  
 No tambor de um rinhadeiro  
 No teu ímpeto guerreiro  
 Vejo um gaúcho avançando  
 Ensaguentado, peleando  
 No calor do entrevero!

Brave fighting cock,  
*Gasca*<sup>17</sup> dressed in feathers!  
 When dragging your spurs  
 In a *rinhadeiro* pit  
 With your warrior grit  
 I see a gaucho advancing  
 Bloody, fighting  
 In the heat of the pit!

Pois assim como tu lutas,  
 Frente a frente, peito nu  
 Lutou também o chirú  
 Na conquista deste chão.  
 E como tu -- sem paixão  
 Em silêncio, ferro a ferro  
 Caía sem dar um berro  
 De lança firme na mão!

Just as you fight,  
 Face to face, bare breast. So too  
 Long ago, fought the *chirú*<sup>19</sup>  
 Conquering this soil.  
 As you routinely toil  
 In silence, in combat to the death,  
 Fallen without a scream or breath  
 Holding the lance tight!

Evoco neste teu sangue  
 Que brota rubro e selvagem,  
 Respingando na serragem,  
 Do teu peito descoberto,  
 O *guasca* no campo aberto,

Evoking in your blood  
 Which spurts savage, maroon,  
 Haphazardly to dust strewn,  
 From your heart, revealed,  
*Guasca* on a open field,

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<sup>16</sup> Jaime Caetano Braum, *Potreiro de Guachos* 1979, translated by David Lampert. This poem was also cited by Teixeira 1986 in his work on cockfighting.

<sup>17</sup> *Gasca* originally meant old and hard piece of leather. According to the context it can mean *penis*, *man*, *Gaucho*, or *hard and strong man*, or even, as in this case, the word may be a condensation of all those meanings.

<sup>18</sup> *Chilenas* (*Chileans*) are the kind of spurs used by gauchos. Spurs for cocks are called *Bolivians* when long and sharp, or just called spurs (*esporas*).

<sup>19</sup> *Chirú*: gaucho of Indian origin.







Há de ser depois de morto!      a espinha      It will never be while I'm alive!      fold me

Without doubt, cockfighting is a dramatization of male identity. The verses are typical of gaucho aesthetics, emotions and metaphors. First, the analogy man/cock, refers not just to any kind of man, but means gaucho/cock. As it constant in this culture, ethnic identity overlaps gender identity and excludes females. The second aspect is the saga of the gaucho as an historically oppressed social group. Third, it concludes with the notion of the refusal to submit; and to pride, not in winning, but in fighting. The metaphor here equates fight with the gaucho's struggle to maintain his values, his identity, his *dignity*. In the concluding statement, we see the gaucho's intimacy with the death. Death is always an honorable life solution.

### **Pits and Fights**

In order for those gifted cocks, whose supreme desire seems to be to fight each other, to be together, men also have to get together. Men will come from different cities, break their everyday routine, and create a well delimited space to praise their cocks, and the male condition of the men and their cocks. Since cocks fight continuously, men will be continuously together. They will eat and spend day and night together, creating an extraordinary situation out of their ordinary lives, a situation imposed

upon the men by their cocks.

The *rinhadeiro* is a large enclosed building, a sort of sport gymnasium where the cockfights take place. From the outside we do not see any sign indicating that this is a cockfighting place or a cockers' society. Sometimes it is built behind a store or a restaurant, and except for a sudden influx of people on weekends, nothing calls our attention to this place. This gym is a large space with no full interior dividing walls; in the different points of the building many different activities go on at the same time. What is most striking upon entering a *rinhadeiro* is the contrast between the cocks and the enormous space around them, and the immediate realization that one has penetrated into a totally male domain.

A *rinhadeiro* has two or more pits. The main pit called *tambor* is about 5 meters in diameter. It is surrounded by an upholstered wall less than 60 cm. high. Auxiliary pits - called *rebolo* - are smaller in diameter (about 3 meters), and also enclosed by low walls. All the pits have carpeted floors. Each pit is surrounded by many rows of chairs, in a way that the first row of chairs is contiguous to the pit and at the same level with it. The next row is farther and higher from the pit and every ring of seats larger than the preceding one. The seats in the first row of the main ring are upholstered with the same material that covers the ring wall around the cocks. Each of the chairs in the first row has a man's last name printed in a small metal plaque fixed to the chairs. These chairs are the permanent seats of well known cockers who run the society

and have paid for those seats. Even when they are absent, nobody sits in these privileged spots close to the fighting cocks.

The center of each pit is highly illuminated either by a skylight or, at night, by artificial light. There is a circular heater hanging over the pit which is used during the winter.

The magnificence of the space, the arrangement of the chairs and illuminated spots give the impression of a Greek theatre or, perhaps, a coliseum, since stage and seats are entire circles. The posted rules, padded seats, the cleanliness of the place, the attention of the audience, every detail to the drama of the pit conveys the understanding that we are watching a play<sup>22</sup>. The figure in the next page shows the space arrangement of the *rinhadeiro*.

At one corner of the *rinhadeiro* there is a table with scales, where the cocks are weighed by a referee just before a fight. The cocks are matched by their weight. At tournaments the main matches are prearranged. The name of the cock's owner with the cock's weight at its side is written on a blackboard posted above the pits. Most of cocks do not have names of their own, they are referred to by their owners' names, although while fighting, they are given nicknames to distinguish them from their opponents: "the red", "little black", "the bald", "the little". Owners' names

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<sup>22</sup> Mantegazza 1916 (1876) in early anthropological work in this region describes the cockfighting setting in Argentina as a **theatre**. Geertz' 1973 article also stresses this point: Balinese cockfighting is a **play** about their society.

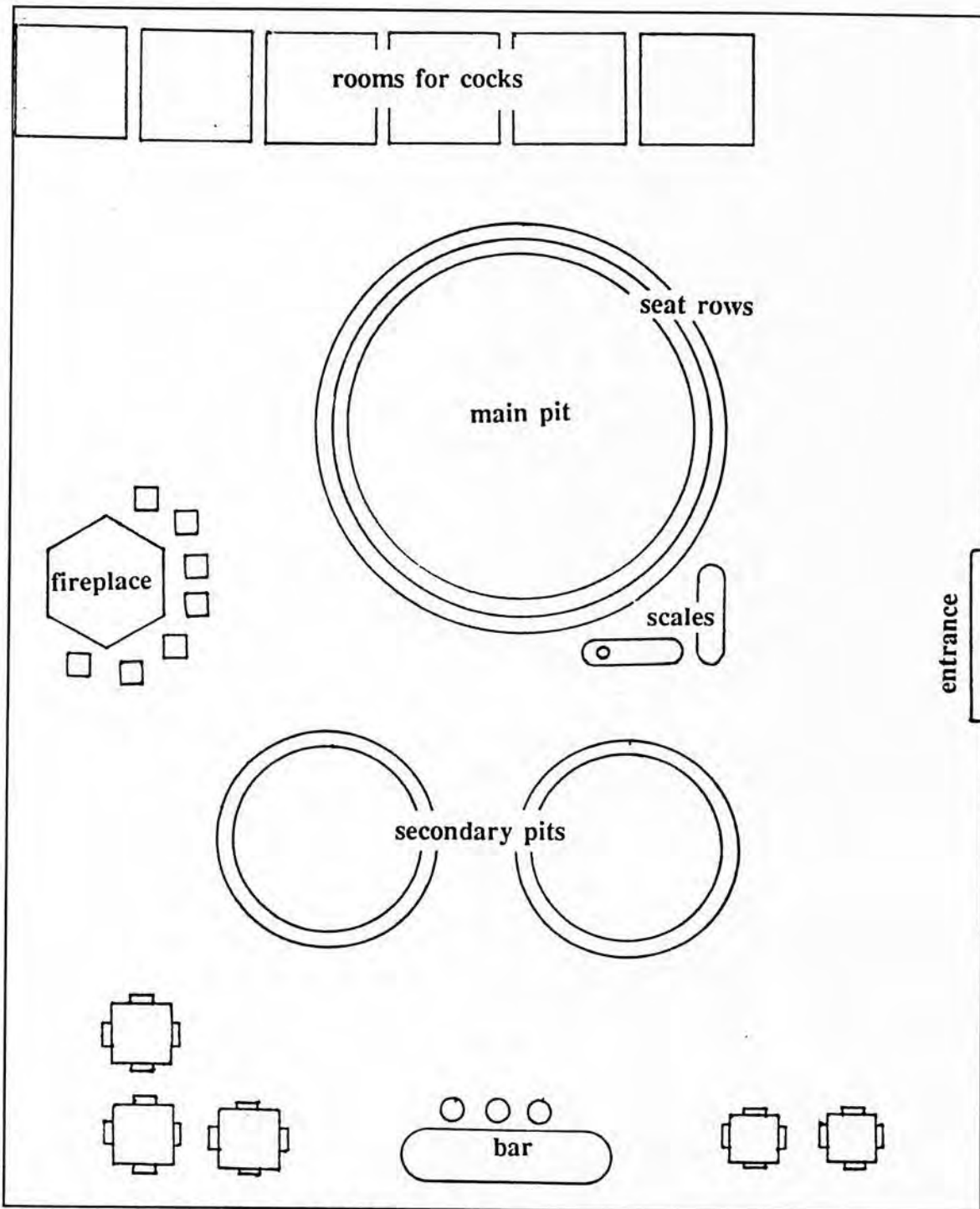


Figure 5 - Rinhadeiro (cockfight house).

and the terms specifying cocks are totally confounded in the cheers of the men during the fights.

The difference of weight between two cocks who are going to fight each other cannot be greater than 50 grams. On the table where the cocks are weighed, sharp metal spurs and metal beaks are fixed to the cocks by their handlers. The spurs' and beaks' sharpness is measured by the referee. Only one kind of spur is allowed. "Bolivian heels", steel needle shaped spurs, are forbidden. During the fight, each cock owner or handler can reset fallen spurs only once on each of the cock's leg.

Fighting rules change from city to city, from *rinhadeiro* to *rinhadeiro*. The rules are posted on one of the walls and the referee's word is always final. Cockfighting in big tournaments usually has a time limit of one and a half or two hours for each match, with rounds of 15 or 20 minutes and a break of 2 or 5 minutes each. The break is called *refresco* (*refreshment*) and it is the moment that the handler or the owner will take intensive care of his cock's wounds. To start or restart a fight the handlers *encostam* the cocks, that is, try to make the cocks engage each other. This is repeated three times. If the cocks refuse to fight, the fight is cancelled and the owners of the cocks are shamed.

*Rinhadeiros* usually have a bar or a restaurant, where they serve coffee, beer and soft drinks on a counter. *Churrasco*, barbecued beef, is prepared in the traditional gaucho way either in a ground fire in the yard, where the meat is roasted on spits or on a special grill. Joking



about "we are eating your cock" goes on, but I never observed any barbecue other than beef during cockfights. Somehow it seems totally inappropriate to eat chicken there.

Cockfighting brings together breeders from diverse cities, regions and countries. In every cockfighting the betting and cheering for different cocks is extremely dynamic and there is no regularity in the alliances among men in the audience. On the contrary, as I mentioned earlier, there is a sort of fidelity between men and cocks; when the same cock fights again the same men are expected to bet on the same cocks. Although important bonds among men are not established through betting, there are pre-existing links among them, and their constant attendance at the *rinhadeiro* reinforces those links. During cockfights, groups of friends cluster together, and class and ethnic origin plays a role in the pattern of the affinities. In my interviews more than once appear a complaint which is told in a gossip intonation:

The Jews come here just because they are crazy about money and love gambling, but they do not have any tradition in cockfighting and don't know nothing about cocks.

To what is immediately added: "But they know how to maintain a compromise and to keep the word." Meaning by that the only men who share the gaucho code of honor participate in cockfighting; the comment was

addressed to group of men identified as Jews.<sup>23</sup>

The general atmosphere in a cockfighting house is that of camaraderie. There is a rivalry and competition among men that seems to take the form of joking. In one of the *rinhadeiros*, a sign in big size letters painted on the pit wall reads: *While the cocks fight, the men fraternize (Enquanto os galos brigam os homens confraternizam)*.<sup>24</sup> In fact every time there is a public polemic on the subject, part of the cockers' argument in defense of cockfighting is that violence is natural to man and that they need to channel it through ritual means. Their own perception of it is very close to that of sacrifice: cockfighting is a response to imperative needs, from a power above themselves -- nature, which demand that violence and death must be played out.

Cockfights are not forbidden in Brazil, but occasionally organization such as societies of protection to animals or neighborhood associations initiate a debate in the mass media against it. It is unlikely that cockfights will ever be forbidden there, or that its actual prohibition would restrict the practices of such a culturally legitimated activity.<sup>25</sup> Neverthe-

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<sup>23</sup> This information was collected in a *rinhadeiro* in Porto Alegre, a city that has a large Jewish community.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Teixeira 1986.

<sup>25</sup> My assumption that it is unlikely that cockfighting would be forbidden, relies on the Brazilian population's cultural tolerance for practices that are usually forbidden in other countries. Moreover, black cocks (not game cocks) and goats are ritually sacrificed in the African-Brazilian religions widespread in Brazil. Political organizations that depend on popular support would never take openly the initiative against popular customs. The general attitude is that there are more important

less, it is enveloped in secrecy, in order to avoid public polemic, to preclude female presence and to maintain a selected audience of men initiated in this practices. The seclusion of cockfighting is also a way of controlling the betting, to keep cockfighting a private affair among *men of honor* who know its code. Also the climate of secrecy cultivated around cockfighting gives it a desirable aura of exclusivity and complicity that reinforces male identity and links among men and their group.

There are two kind of bets: the *Central* betting with a pre-established price which is done only between the owners of the two cocks that are fighting. It is also *central* in the sense that it is *centralized* by the "the house" (*rinhadeiro*), the rules of the cocker's association define the price of it. *Lateral* betting is done between any two individuals in the audience, with any sort of bureaucratic intermediation. Any man in the audience may shout out his odds: "Two against one on the *Pintado*" (a nickname for the cock or the cock's owner name is used). As in an auction, someone else will indicate with a discreet gesture that he is willing to take the bet. The bids are numerous, continuous and ever

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things than cockfighting to worry about, such as infant mortality, inflation, economic dependence. On the contrary, these cultural practices tend to be incorporated by government agencies as folklore and symbols of identity. Interestingly, cockfighting was forbidden for a short period in Brazil by a presidential decree in May of 1961 which caused strong popular reaction and was canceled in July of 1962. It seems that the main motive for this prohibition was that the father of the president responsible for the decree (Janio Quadros) killed himself because he had lost a considerable amount of money betting on cockfighting. The personal motive of the legislation against cockfighting made the law itself totally ridiculous.

changing in each cockfight. The amounts are usually lower than the central betting, but probably the total amount of money wagered in peripheral bets is higher than in the central one. The bets are relatively high and clearly there is a class distinction between those who can afford to bet and those who just watch the fights. This parallels the place where men sit in the *rinhadeiro*: the farther they are from the pit, the farther they are from the higher bets or even from the possibility of betting.

The bets, as with many things in gaucho culture, rely on oral contract, on a *man's word* enforced by group cohesion and a shared sense of **honor**. Sometimes no word is even spoken; two men look at each other and a *contract* is made. It is unthinkable that bets not be paid.

Every *rinhadeiro* has posted rules on moral conduct, but no explicit rule about the obligation to pay bets. This only concerns the men who are engaged in the betting. Regulations include items such as "it is forbidden fight inside this place" (referring to fights among men, I suppose); or "it is forbidden to be drunk"; and even "animal abuse inside this society will be severely punished."<sup>26</sup>

All fights start at the main pit and cocks will fight there at least the first half hour, depending on the total number of fights scheduled for

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<sup>26</sup> In the original: Art.18: "Será severamente punido pela diretoria o frequentador que, no recinto da sociedade, infrinja mal tratos aos animais ou os sacrificar, bem como aquele que se portar de maneira inconveniente." (Sociedade Avícola Bankivia at Porto Alegre).



the event. After the second or third break the cocks will be transferred and will continue to fight in one of the other pits. The wall of the pit, padded with a synthetic material, become blood soaked. At some intervals, the janitor carefully washes the pit walls with a sponge and water or alcohol.

By the time the cocks are switched to secondary pits, the fight is already defined, that is, the audience knows who will be the winner, and there is less interest in it. Most of the public will continue in the main pit for the next fight. A few men, a sort of close cock escort will follow the cocks. The escort of the losing cock will be quiet, almost solemn, sharing solidarity and *dignity* with the cock and among themselves. Unless one of the cocks runs away, "cries like a chicken," or if the losing cock makes an unexpected movement, the crowd in the secondary pit will follow the cock's fate in silence. If the cock is being struck or if it is dying with *dignity*, no one will make jokes. The obligation to follow one's own losing cock is a rule of honor. However, the men whose cock is winning (with exception of his handler), may choose not to go to the next pit, even when the cock seems to be as badly injured and bloody as the other. Sometimes a cock may react unexpectedly, changing the result of the fight. In such a case, men scream, some cheering, others in despair, and most of the people from the main pit run to the other pit. The bets are promptly paid in cash but only at the moment the referee decides the fight is over.



At one end of the gymnasium are some small closed individual rooms which are used by the handlers to take care and to exercise the cocks before the fight. Preparing the cock to enter into the scene is a private matter and is done behind closed doors. In those small rooms men massage their cocks with heated almond oil and warm them up with exercise. They will give some liquid to the cocks that first was warmed up in the man's mouth. They will feed the cocks through their own mouth, in a mouth to mouth operation. Dope is forbidden by the rules, but it seems impossible to verify if a cock is actually doped or not. Talk about doping is always going on, and endless discussions are held as to what is **natural** and can be given to the cocks. In fact, every handler acts as if he had a magic potion, a special gesture or a spell to treat the cock.

During each of the cockfight's three minute breaks, when the judge rings the bell, the man in charge of the cock will run into the pit, hold his cock, wrapping it immediately in a towel. The man warms up some alcohol in his mouth, and then throws it over the cock, with the man's mouth so close to the cock that he actually licks the cock and sucks the cock's bruises. At each fight interval he feeds the cock with a few drops of water or saliva and brandy, the secretion that the man warms first in his mouth, in this mouth to mouth resuscitation. When the cock is badly injured, apparently dead, and the bell rings, the man will massage the cock with quick movements and will put the cock's entire head inside his

mouth in a desperate attempt to revive the cock for the coming round.<sup>27</sup>

Fighting cocks have trimmed combs because combs are easy targets for the adversary. They also have shaved legs and thighs. An infusion of oil and boiled herbs is constantly massaged on the cock's skin. It is believed that the oil and a regular sun tan on the cock's legs will make his skin less sensitive to pain and he will be able to fight longer.

Cocks are also placed on a rigorous diet and not permitted sexual intercourse for long periods before fighting. Their diet is based on heated moistened bread and cooked grains, boiled milk, and ground cooked meat. The cocks are kept in individual cages apart from the hens. The cock's sexual activity is rigorously controlled: the cock will have contact only with one chicken for reproduction purpose. It is believed that sexual abstinence will give it the strength and will to fight, and that decreased sexual activity will create better quality semen. The underlying assumption is that sexual intercourse or even the contact with female turn the male into a weaker being. "Fighting spirit" is understood to be a direct consequence of sexuality and virility.

To train a game cock means also to tame him: the cock is supposed to be **wild**. To achieve this, he has to be trained to tolerate men and to stay in the pit without be distracted by the public. This taming is done

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<sup>27</sup> Boulanger 1912:353 presents a poem of Victor Breda on cockfighting which describes well the man's attempt to revive the cock at the fight breaks: *Lui caresse la tête et the sa main pressant / Le col qui s'engorgeait, en fait sortir le sang. / Le coq, grâce à ce soin, ressuscite à la vie / et reprend sur-le-champ sa première énergie.*

basically by handling the cock and by segregating it from other cocks. Man's intimacy with the cock is intense, caring for a cock implies affection and the exchanges of body fluids from man to cock and cock to man. An old English cocker's manual has a detailed description of how to care for a cock:

... and then with your spit moistening his head all over, turn him into the pit to prove his fortune. When the battle is ended the first thing you do, you shall search his wounds, and as many as you can find, you shall with your mouth suck the blood out of them, then warm them very well with warm urine, to keep them from ranckling, and then presently give him a roule or two of your best scouring, and so stove him up as hot as you can, both with sweet straw and blanketing in a close blanket for all night, (...) you shall suck his wounds again, and bathe with warm urine (...), and give the cock a good handful of bread to eat out of warm urine (...). Markham 1649:116.

The procedure I observed in caring for cocks similar to the one described here; the same actions are performed but with less intensity. It is important to note that British Pre Victorian game cock breeders' manuals are part of breeders' literature in Brazil. When a good quality cock leaves the pit badly hurt there is a general commotion and his owner or handler carefully examines his wounds. As soon as the cock is better, the handler checks the cock's sexual organs to see if they have been affected: with the cock supine the man gently rubs behind the cock's leg in direction to its testicles. If the cock ejaculates and the sperm contains blood, it is considered that the cock is seriously hurt and will not be able

to fight again. Special prescriptions and methods on how to take care of cocks are always kept secret.

### **Nature and Culture: The Wild and the Tamed**

Cocks are masculine symbols, but my point here is to show how these symbols of masculinity spring from the context of the gaucho culture. The association men/ cocks, which seems to be self evident in cultures that have the word *cock* as a signifier for penis, is not an obvious one in gaucho culture. I am not denying the semantical association man/cock; rather I am suggesting that in cockfighting situations, the meaning of cock imagery cannot be reduced to the notion of male genitals, for the reason that masculinity is not reducible to **natural** anatomical attributions. In gaucho culture, maleness has to be constantly achieved and proved among the male peer group. That is to say, it is not enough to have a penis to be a man. The penis is only a distinctive mark; a man acquires masculinity if he is invested with a set of values as honor, dignity, braveness, righteousness. If he is able to perform the tasks and rites which assure masculinity he becomes a *man*, he acquires the *phallus*, which means he gains prestige and power. Regarding cocks, breeders' manuals indicate that:

The male comes into the world with natural prerogatives, but must fight and play his life to put these into play. (Finsterbush 1929:172).



*To be a cock* in gaúcho dialect (and this is true of Brazil in general) means to be a man, which entails **having power**. In male slang, "*Quem é o galo aqui?*" (*Who is the cock here?*), is best translated as "who is the boss here?". *Galo*, is not just man, but necessarily the boss or the most skilled or prestigious man. *Galeza* (*cockness*) is a neologism used by teenager boys in Brazil to impute cocks' attributions to man.

Cocks and cockfighting have a sexual content. The *cockers* say of their fighting cocks that if a cock is with a hen, the cock is extremely pugnacious and jealous of men. It is said also that hens confined without cocks, assume the copulation position when a man enters in the chicken house and tries to pick them up; and that they do not behave so with women.<sup>28</sup> My data on sexual attraction magic also indicate the connection between cocks and virility: a tea of cock's spurs is recommended for sexual potency; a paste of fresh chicken excrement is prescribed so that the beards of male teenagers will grow faster.<sup>29</sup> Therapeutic and reinvigorating powers are assigned to game-cock's comb (cf. Finsterbusch 1929). Jokes are made about *mounting* (*trepar*) or *eating* (*comer*) *someone's cock* (That is to say, the cock' owner) in the cockfight situation. Both words, *trepar* and *comer*, in Brazilian Portuguese are used for coitus while *cock* can stand for man, although not for man's genitals. It is important

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<sup>28</sup> Finsterbusch 1929:189 also refers to this sexual behavior and attraction between cocks and men.

<sup>29</sup> See Chapter IV for the data on magic and healing.



to note that the meaning of laughter here has special cultural references. The men play with their sexuality as much as they play with their cocks to settle and to reassure themselves what manliness is all about. Yet regarding sexual intimacy between cock and man, the fact that chickens are, at the level of imagery and actual experience, one of the animals with which boys engage in sexual practices cannot be put aside.<sup>30</sup>

My intention here is not to demonstrate the connection between cocks and maleness, but to indicate **how** in a specific situation -- in cockfighting -- a referent, *cock*, assumes a given meaning, *manliness*, and becomes a symbol. Particular symbols are parts of larger ones and refer ultimately to a whole in which they are inserted. The issue here is how symbolic representations are constructed or, in other words, how an encoding process is established in a given reality.

In reviewing the data presented, first in reference to the space of the cockfighting and, second, concerning the care and manipulation of the cocks, there are some elements which can be taken as recurrent.

In relation to the spatial organization of a *rinhadreiro*, we have two main elements: **center** and **periphery**. During a cockfight, cocks are in the center of the ring, men around its border; cocks are inside, men are outside. See Figure 5. This coincides with the low/high dichotomy in relation to the position of the seats and male hierarchy. The low/high or

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<sup>30</sup> See Chapter VI for a description of these practices. The chickens used in bestiality are not this species of fowl: they are not game hens.

near/far binary opposition is also homologous to hot/cold in the actual illumination and heating in the *rinhadeiro* .

Except for the judge (who is neutral by definition), no man will step inside the pit. The pit is a *clean* space with carpeted floor and washed walls. Blood is part of this cleanliness. Blood is thought of as hot, savage, and pure. The blood is washed away after each fight when the combatants are changed, but during the fight, the blood is left on the walls, and carries the connotations of the purity of sacrificial blood. The public space is noisy, dirty and polluted. Clear rules determine that smoking, eating and alcoholic drinking have to be done away from the pit. The traditional *chimarrão*, the gaucho hot tea, is the only drink allowed close to the pit.

In regard to betting there is an inversion in terms of high/low, center/periphery dynamics: the higher betting is *central* (in their words) while the *lateral* bets cost less and are more numerous.

Choosing **center** and **periphery** as an organizing principle around which we can order recurrent circumstances and attributes, we have:

	<b>Center</b>	<b>Periphery</b>
	<b>cock</b>	<b>man</b>
<b>position</b>	low near inside	high far outside
<b>situation</b>	light clean hot	dark dirt cold
<b>betting</b>	expensive  few	cheap  many

In regard to the relationship between cocks and the men who care for them, we can take as signifying elements **tamed** and **wild**, which at another level of abstraction can be defined as **culture** and **nature**. We have information on food, on the manipulation of cocks, and on the bodily fluids of man and cock:

<b>Nature</b>	<b>Culture</b>
cock wild	man tamed
semen blood receives	saliva urine sucks
hot cold	cold hot
cooked clean	row dirty

In the dynamic of caring for the cocks, we have first, the man as a giver of heat, warm food, and man's own body fluids to the cock, and the cock as a receiver. At another level, we can think these interactions as an exchange, since man sucks and licks the cock, this means, the man is receiver and the cock a giver. The cock's blood in the middle of the pit can be seen as the cock's sacrificial offering to the man. Traditionally, societies encircle what is defined as culture. Man and a given culture is central, and everything outside this core will be understood as part of the **other**, as the **wild**: as **nature**.<sup>31</sup> But here what we have is a reorganization of the wild, and its space -- the game cock space -- becomes the central spot. Indeed, the ring, the pit, works here at both levels, at a metonymical and at a metaphorical level: the center of the ring has the heat (and the heater), it is the cleanest spot (constant warmed alcohol bath of the cock), and it is also the most illuminated. It is through the inversion of the classical attributions of the dichotomy, **nature** and **culture**, that the man here redefines these domains. This is, to a certain extent, a strategy, which permits him to own the wild and to own nature. In cockfighting, nature is, *par excellence*, the place of strength and power.

The bloody drama is a gratifying scene that functions as a strong signifier which encompasses all the maleness signified. The cock has been carefully nurtured by man, even with man's own products, his body fluids,

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<sup>31</sup> For a classical structural approach on nature and culture see Lévi-Strauss 1964.



for a long period. Metaphorically the cock is full of semen and holds man's fluids. Man's fluids (food, saliva, urine) become cock's fluids (semen and blood). When, in battle, cocks are ripped and their insides come out in the form of blood, men symbolically **obtain** the cock's fluids which become their own and thus reach their plenitude. The cock's inside or the cock's fluids encode male values.

The narcissistic component of this game on manliness is clear: men think of themselves as strong, brave and handsome individuals. The sexual energy of these individuals is carefully cultivated to be driven toward each other in the fight, a moment where sexuality, aggressiveness and masculinity become one. The definition of cockfighting as a male space, the mechanisms of continuous exchange through betting, the experience of an extraordinary time during the tournaments (when the fights go on without stopping for the night), the shared feeling of secrecy in engaging in this activity together, and men's notion of sacrifice, of a worship of masculinity, all elements that have efficacy in reinforcing the male group solidarity and consensus about what should be male roles in society. Perhaps man's narcissistic process of identification as male, which is inseparable from its homosexual component, might find in the choreography of the two bloody cocks fighting a vicarious satisfaction for homosexual drives.

We can return now to the question posed at the beginning of this chapter: The intimacy cock/man which is basically an exchange of at-



tributes, is essential to the construction of maleness. Man acquires ownership over what he elects as animal nature, basically strength and power, and makes them part of human nature. This process of **naturalizing** certain attributes relies on previous and well demarcated categories of what is nature and what is culture. Power in gaucho classification is part of nature; one way to obtain power is to have dominion over nature.

Men's profound psychological involvement with their cocks exists because this underlying symbolic coherence is present. Conversely, men who share this symbolic universe find these practices highly gratifying and absorbing. Cockfighting has enormous symbolic efficacy; embodying practices which validate a given symbolic universe.

## Chapter VI

### The Gaucho as the Centaur of the Pampa: Bestiality and the Meaning of Sexual Practices

#### Not every women...

A proverb from the pampas of the state of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, says, "Not every woman is a cow, but every cow is a woman" (*Nem toda a mulher é uma vaca, mas toda a vaca é mulher*). This and similar sayings alluding to bestiality are part of gaucho lore, having been incorporated into songs and jokes promulgated by the mass media. That is, in more or less explicit ways, reference to the practice of bestiality is as much part of the general representation of gauchos as it is part of their sense of self and their own representation of manliness.

In the saying, bestiality is implied in the idea that cows are females, and as such can serve men's sexual purposes. The comparison between women and cows is aggressive and it is meant to be so: it expresses the latent conflict between men and women and is employed in the social context of the absence of women, a proclaimed gender autonomy and the search for emotional and sexual self-sufficiency. "We don't need them" is a recurrent claim in both the female domain, in *las casas* or the cities; and in the male domain, the *estância*. However, in both the female

and the male universe, the celebration of the absence of the other is ambiguous: a constant idealized **other** is also presented as part of everyone's expectation. When I asked one of my informants if comparing women to cows wasn't an aggressive act, he said: "Of course it is! - - But why don't you study why women are offended if the men call them cows, but men are proud if women call us bulls?"

In this chapter, using my informant's assertion as the underlying question I will discuss the data on bestiality both as a signifying practice of the gauchos, and as an important element in their perception of the **self** and their definition of the boundaries between culture and nature.

Given the intimacy of the theme, most of the material presented in this chapter is based on interviews with the gauchos and other people from this region, and published folklore material, but not on direct observation. It is clear to me that only long and patient interaction with the people we are studying justifies a question -- any question -- in the field. My field experience, and the fact that I myself am Brazilian and grew up in the south means that, to a certain extent, I am familiar with this culture, and leads me to believe in the veracity of the collected information.

## Ethnography of a Riverbank

Bestiality, as a mode of male sexuality among the gauchos, has to be understood within the context of segregated gender spaces and the intense and constant intimacy of men with animals. It must also be understood, as they understand it themselves, as a legitimate practice within a group where the dominant cultural ethos consists in mastering the wild.

A sexual relationship with certain animals is not only a sanctioned practice within this group, but seen throughout south Brazil as a herdsman's or rural tradition. It is a subject of curiosity, joking or censure like any other sexual behavior. In the larger society there is a tacit acceptance of bestiality as "typical," "folkloric," "normal," or at least "intrinsic to Gaucho life-style". As such, it has become part of the urban ethos of a nostalgic return to origins, sort of a Rousseauian return to the pure state of nature. As was discussed in an earlier chapter, through mass media, literary fiction and in the very mind of the people from south Brazil, an idealized image of the gaucho has been selected as regional symbol; certainly part of this image is a *wild* and powerful sexuality.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This is true too for Uruguay and Argentina, which also have the Gaucho as national symbols. But in this chapter, the ethnographical material on bestiality refers mainly to gauchos in Brazil. Probably the data would not be different in Uruguay and Argentina since gaucho culture in terms of life-style and values can be seen as a unity; but the acceptance of animal sexual intimacy varies among national societies

*Barranquear* is the regional term used to refer to male sexual relationship with animals, usually mares. *Barranco* in Portuguese means bank (small cliff, usually at the border of rivers); *barranquear* means to bank; the noun is turned into a verb in the active voice to indicate sexual activity. *Barranco* is a masculine noun but when employed as a feminine noun, *barranca*, is also a reference to bestiality. The association of river-bank with intercourse is made supposedly because the man has to step on a bank to be as tall as the animal to be able to introduce his penis in the animal's vagina.

Although this is said to be the origin of the term, it is unlikely that the man actually climbs a bank. The word seems to be more a reference to the place where the animal is led to *barranquear*. The geographical landscape of the region is an endless flat prairie; the few places that are not wide open flat land are the borders of creeks or small rivers where denser and taller vegetation grows. Thus, riverbanks offer some privacy and are chosen for this kind of sexual activity. So the reference to *barranca* is more generic, conveying a meaning of secluded place. The word is widely and maliciously employed as an euphemism for bestiality wherever a man and an animal are involved, even in urban settings and in the absence of a bank. Folklorist's dictionaries of gaucho speech make only

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according to religious influences, laws and ethnic differences (mainly the Spanish and Portuguese background). For a number of reasons, bestiality is not so evident or acknowledged in Uruguay and Argentina as it is in southern Brazil.



subtle reference to the sexual connotation of *barranquear*, defining the term as, "to lean on a cliff." But comic strips, tales and gaucho popular songs presented in the mass media make explicit sexual references to *barranquear*.

Sexual intimacy with animals is a common part of male sexual initiation in this pastoral region and as a sexual initiation this practice is not restricted to rural areas. In the towns and cities of this region, bestiality is just another form of sexual play among male teenagers, like collective masturbation, urination competitions, ejaculation competitions, homosexual exchanges (*troca-troca*) and verbal dueling. In general, it is tolerated by society, as part of growing up and as a necessary erotic experience. Like these other practices, bestiality counts on the adult male's discreet complicity and women's strategic ignorance. In these puberty games reciprocal verbal acts parallel non-verbal sexual practices which reinforce male group solidarity and consensus about what it is to be a man and what should be male roles in society.<sup>2</sup>

Bestiality within this more urban context is practiced with hens, ewes, sows, cows, mules and mares, but not with more domestic animals like cats or bitches. As a sexual initiation, these activities are collective, concealed but in a public situation. It is considered funny and an indication of manliness to engage in them: the group of boys will hold the

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<sup>2</sup> On this subject, teenager sexual games in Brazil see Leal 1986. On male sexuality in Brazil see Carvalho 1985, Duarte 1981, Fry 1982 and Parker 1988.

animal while one of them has intercourse with it. An exchange of insults, obscenities, and teasing and a shared sense of transgression go along with situation. The joking is more important than the intercourse in itself. A good deal of exhibition, genital manipulation, and genital contact between a boy and the animal goes on; but actual penetration is often frustrated since the animal is frightened by the noise of the group.<sup>3</sup> Yet the idea of *barranquear* remains an erotic fantasy and a challenge to be pursued. A dyadic relationship of boy/female animal would lose its efficacy as display of manliness, adulthood and sexual initiation in the absence of an audience of peers. The **transition** from one stage of the life cycle to another and the achievement of manhood has to be recognized by the group.

There is a sort of hierarchy of animals to be followed in the *barranqueamento*. The sequence starts with the chicken (with whom a cliff is unnecessary!) and culminates with the mare, the scale of animal sizes coincide with what is suitable to a boy's age and size. The notion of animal hierarchy is an emic representation and even the word "hierarchy" was employed by the informants, meaning a gradation of animal prestige. The sequence combines four levels: human size; human age; animal dimensions; and most important of all, the qualities and values ascribed to the animals, all of which form a sort of "great chain of being" with the equine species at the top. Interestingly, all these classes of female ani-

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<sup>3</sup> Devereux is one of the very few anthropologists to refer to this subject; he gives an ethnographical account of bestiality among Mohave teenager boys. See Devereux 1936.

mals have attributes associated with them at the common sense level which classifies women in derogatory terms.

Chickens are for small and young boys, and intercourse with them is taken to be an early initiation. Since it is a small animal, sexual penetration hurts the chicken, sometimes killing it, so the act is more evident and sanctions from the chicken owner are probably applied. A relationship with a chicken is not something to be proud of, although it is desired in this sequence of sexual achievement toward manhood, but contradictorily it is also the subject of ridicule: to have had intercourse with a chicken also means that the boy was unable to have it with anything or anyone else. Jokes are also made about the size of the boy's penis and his height and inability to reach taller animals, both indications that he has not grown yet.

The chicken, unlike the other animals with whom there is a sexual play, is not a mammal, and has its sexual organs together with the anus. It is also the only one that is clearly edible. A notion of pollution is associated vaguely with all these elements. Bestiality is only practiced with female animals and, at least at a **representational** level, with animals that are not edible: people eat hogs, but not sows; lambs or rams, but not ewes, oxen or bullocks but not cows; they definitely eat neither male nor female horses. The classification of what is edible is highly ambiguous, and so are the feelings in relation to having sex with animals

that are thought as comestible.<sup>4</sup> It is important to realize that the current word for "to have sex" in Brazilian Portuguese is *comer*, that is, *to eat*. This refers to the active role in the sexual act, and it is opposed to *dar* (to give) which means to take the passive role in the sexual act. In the Brazilian context, the association between the act of eating and the sexual act is immediate, and is so firmly established in the language that it works at a metonymic level, not at metaphorical level. Constant word play occurs, mainly by men referring to women. We also find specific jokes linking having sex with and eating chickens, a pun that would not work for the other animals:

In the country village a boy carrying a chicken under his arm passes a man. The man says: "Oh! Will you eat chicken today?" The boy answer "No. I ate it already".

Sexual intimacy with sheep usually involves more than one boy or man. It is necessary to hold or to tie the animal. Sheep in herds are not tamed and it is hard to get close to them. In the *estancias*, cases of bestiality with ewes occur with *guacho*<sup>5</sup> sheep, bottle-raised next to the house. Contrary to my preconceived idea of the submissiveness of the sheep, it is said that the only way the animal will be quiet enough to

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<sup>4</sup> Leach 1968 and Sahlins 1976 analyze English language cultural classification of animals and eating habits.

<sup>5</sup> *Guacho* is the Gaucho word for orphan calf.



allow genital penetration is if it faces the river, because sheep are intimidated by the water. It seems that here also the riverbank has another function than a place for the man to stand: it is the sheep who step on it, and the man's position in intercourse with a ewe is on his knees.

A popular saying goes, "if the rape is unavoidable, relax and enjoy it" (*se a curra é inevitavel, relaxe e goze*) that is used also to refer to a situation described as "facing the worst, one allows himself to be screwed" I doubt that this saying is connected only to man/sheep intercourse; but among the gauchos in some conversational situations it is said, to tease someone: "facing the water, the lamb..." or just "facing the water..." The sentence is incomplete, conforming to the closed male code typical of *galpão* speech. It is almost impossible for the outsider, who must understand an entire chain of associations, to figure out its meaning in the absence of a specific referents and signifiers, although the group immediately decodes it. The interruption of the sentence, far from arising from any sort of moral constraint, is a speech strategy to maintain this male code only intelligible to those initiated into it. It is a symbolic production that is meant to be consumed only by its own producers, reinforcing the ties among them through libidinous aggression and by the deliberately hidden meanings. In this situation, the sentence is applied to a man, and substitutes "lamb" for ewe; "to be screwed" (*ser fodido* or *ser comido*); the offensive implication of anal penetration and the passive role in the sexual relationship, is left implicit.



On sexual intercourse with sows, there is a general belief that the sow "falls in love" with the man and becomes an embarrassment. Indeed, there are pigs who follow a man everywhere. If the man is in a group, she will come and sit at the feet of the man who had (or has) sexual relations with her. The sow's attachment to the man is taken as indication that an "affair" is going on. It is said also that the sow is jealous, intruding and aggressive with the man's wife, if he has one. There is also a well known expression "sow love" (*amor de porca*), referring to relationship between people, which indicates an obsessive and emotionally dependent relationship. When it is said of a man that he suffers of *amor de porca*, it is extremely insulting. It seems that the cross gender condition is more offensive than the transposition of species, the suggestion of animality. The imputation of passive and dependent role is also degrading.

In this case, it is hard to distinguish what is part of the lore and what is actually part of their experience, or to use the French sociological categories, to distinguish the boundary between *le pensé* and *le vécu*. Nevertheless, I found more than one instance in legal divorce proceedings in which the wife's grounds for divorce was that the man had sexual relations with a sow. Far from any notion of perversion (on the part of legal system or the plaintiff), the issue is that the woman was neglected and the sow was intruding on the intimacy of the household.

As for sexual intimacy with cows, the only specific information I collected is that a milking cow has a very warm vagina. This is generally said of cows and mares, and it is put in a comparative form: "The mare's vagina is warmer than a woman's vagina." It may be empirically true, but certainly, depending on the context where it is verbalized, the intention seems to be the same as the use of the proverb presented in the beginning of this chapter: hostility to women.

Once more I will point out that it is important to realize that this conflict takes place in a society that is organized in such way that the men and the women are segregated from each other. Hostility is one form of representation of the absent and unknown **other**. It is also, at subjective level, an emotional compensation for the exclusion of the other, and a way of internalizing the objective impossibility that most individuals to have a life project which includes the other gender.

This hostility is not unilateral, and references to bestiality are used offensively by women against men: "He thinks he can fuck a mare, but he can't even cause tickles in a chicken's asshole". The insult here is not an accusation of bestiality, rather it a reference to the size of the man's penis and to his sexual inability.

This kind of verbal offense is unlikely to occur between men and women in a face to face interaction, but it will be said by women in relation to men and in their presence. Men are much more vulnerable to verbal aggression than women, so they will never create a situation where

there is an exchange of insults. The men are very skilled verbally, a competence carefully constructed in the *galpão* socialization, but they will not engage themselves in a public discussion with women. The man has something extremely essential to preserve, his **honor**, and in this group honor is conceived as an ontological part of being a man. As Pitt-Rivers put it: "Honour is not a single value but a complex of values united at the level of social relations rather than a conceptual level of ethics" (1977:77). One way a man may lose his honor is through women, either because he "loses" a woman to another man, or because his manliness is questioned in public, and the woman is the only one with authority to do so. A woman well knows how powerful verbal offense may be, and she uses it -- this is her power.<sup>6</sup> The man is aware of his vulnerability to

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<sup>6</sup> A comment Pitt-Rivers (1977:73-4) made with regard to Mediterranean society is pertinent here: "Let us [...] focus our attention first of all upon relations between the sexes in general before examining how they come together within the household.[...] The significance of their status as men and women [...] depends upon the recognition of certain values vested in one sex or other, which determine the ideals towards which they strive, the modes of conduct they adopt and the pressures that exert force in forming their conduct. Such values also lie at the basis of the interpretation of the customs of another culture. So it is not surprising if the sexual mores of the Latin people have often been criticized by Anglo-Saxon authors, particularly with regard to the status and treatment of women. A phrase, heavy with the tones of reprobation, 'a double standard of sexual morality', is frequently heard. It is not clear what this phrase means, nor that it always has the same meaning, but it always suggests that those cultures that contain 'double standard' are somehow not morally respectable; decent English-speaking people, it is implied, have single standards. The contexts in which this phrase occurs show it to have two alternative senses: in the first case the 'double standard' refers to different standards for ego and alter. Here it attaches to the fact that a man may think it perfectly right to seduce someone else's wife or daughter, yet think that it is very immoral if someone else seduces his. [...] In the second case the 'double standard' refer to the fact

an intricate cluster of meanings (not merely a double but a multifaceted standard of mores, and far from amoral!), so he will avoid any threat to his honor, which is also a threat to his manliness and to his perception of self. If necessary, he will push this stance to its limits by avoiding all contact with women. Conflict with women in face-to-face interaction is also avoided because if a woman becomes dissatisfied, she may decide to leave the man; he cannot afford to lose "his" woman where women are so scarce. Moreover, if he decides to leave her, his honor is not at stake; but if she leaves him he is seriously threatened, especially because he will "lose her to another man." From the male perspective, the underlying dispute is between men; rivalry and competition constitute important elements in the statute of manliness. The rival is a model to the subject of a dispute: desiring the same object is a powerful way of becoming the same or an equal, and "winning" the disputed object is a way of becoming better, *more a man*.

Returning to my informant's initial question - Why is it offensive to be a cow and it is not offensive to be a bull? - I suggest that to be active and to be passive are also ways of having power and not having power. They are also perceived as animal gender attributes; as *natural* attributions. Male and female anatomical distinctions turn into signifiers of power or lack of power. In a society where the sexual meanings are organized around the categories of *comer* and *dar* (that is, *to eat* and *to*

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that different standards of conduct are demanded of men and women."



*give*), these attributions also reflect the cultural logic of male and female roles. The classification of the sexual relations into active and passive roles, *eaters* and *givers*, expresses the social relations of society at large. It is a division between the ones who have a phallus and the ones who do not have one, between the ones who have power and dominate and the ones who are dominated.

*To give (dar)* means to allow phallic penetration, sexually and social it also means to be passive, to be powerless -- as such, it represents a threat to masculinity. The male's genitality symbolically is build upon a negation of the passive role, in this sense, manliness may also be built up through the negation of another man's masculinity. A male homosexual relationship is only offensive when it implies a receptive role. But passivity cannot be simply equated with femininity. The emphasis here is **sexuality**, not gender, as the core of the politics of sex and active and passive roles are not reducible to male and female anatomy. Although the phallus is an essential signifier of power, to have a penis is not a sufficient condition to be a man, that is, to have the *phallus*. To have a penis and to not use it, to not exercise an aggressive sexuality or to allow anal penetration is an act of castration, it means to **give** up manliness.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Although subtle, it is important to realize the distinction between sexuality and gender either as an cultural construct or as focus of anthropological analysis in order to not reify anatomical differences and female subordinate condition. The woman in this cultural context can "eat", that is, can exercise an active sexuality. She may be feared, but not segregated by that. See Chapter V for a understanding of woman within the gaucho society. For an anthropological discussion on passive and active roles and male homosexuality in Brazilian society see Fry 1982 and Parker 1988. In



## Mares and Sexual Mores

Most of the data on bestiality I have presented refer to an entire region including urban areas and not just to the gauchos with whom I worked. How frequent is this modality of sex relationship among the gauchos? I would say that the great majority of them (my guess is that of 90%), adult males from pastoral regions, have had this kind of experience at least once in their lifetime. It is also clear to me that most gauchos do not engage in this practice as a regular activity. Nevertheless it is an important part of their *eidos* and their universe of desire and fantasy. Yet, a few among them have "affairs" with animals, usually a mare, and usually the same animal on a regular basis.<sup>8</sup>

Within the boundaries of the *estância*, the mare is the favorite animal as a sexual partner. As I explained earlier, the other animals frequently used sexually -- chickens, sheep, sows and cows -- are animals that live close to the house, that is, animals that belong to the domestic sphere. The ewe, if tamed is also part of this sphere. For the purpose of

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gaucho culture, as in Latin America in general or throughout the Mediterranean, it is not offensive to play (or the accusation of playing) metaphorically or not, the active role in a male homosexual relationship. For this point on Mediterranean societies see Brandes 1980:95-6; Dundes and Falassi 1975:189.

<sup>8</sup> The subject of my research is men, and prolonged field work was done among them, not among women, but it also became clear to me that this is only a male activity. No reference to female bestiality was found, except in literary fiction of male authorship.

the intercourse and only in this circumstance the gaucho rides a mare. If one man notices that another is riding a mare, he makes discreet, jocular comments, mostly when the man returns from his journey with the mare.

Three elements should be taken into account here to understand the logic of this male universe. First is the notion of mastering the wild. This involves a strategy that the intercourse with animals has to be far from the space of the **house** and with animals that are classified as wilder and more powerful. The wildest in the animal hierarchy is also the most prestigious. Second, for the adult male, the privacy of the encounter is important, so the animal has to be able to be led far from the house. The proximity of another man during sexual activity may represent a threat. There are jokes about two men who went to *barranquear*, one to help to hold the animal, but suddenly there was an inversion in the situation, and one man got interested in the other man. This reveals a basic cultural rule that, at least explicitly, one man does not share the same sexual object with another man. The third and most essential element is that the mare is a female horse and the female of the horse, as such, elicits complex emotions. That is, by desiring and actually having sexual relationship with the mare, the man is performing the stallion's role. Symbolically, by penetrating the mare, the man **has** a stallion's phallus.

The accounts I have collected say that a warm day at dusk ("that is the time when one who lives in the field knows the day is over and that the next one will be exactly the same") is the best moment to have sexual congress with mares. The mare is led to a riverbank. The mare is *desencilhada*, that is, she is "undressed" of the saddle and the gear. The man pats the animal and the animal's genitals, "to calm her down". He stands on the *barranco*, on a rock, on the saddle, or "on the third wire of the fence". He ties up the mare's tail, he leans on the mare and penetrates her. "At the beginning she is frightened, then she likes it and helps, accommodating herself ("se ajeita"). The man ends up lying on the back of the mare, embracing her body with arms and legs. It is also said that when it is "well done" the mare also has an orgasm. One knows, because an unusual secretion, in an amount greater than man's semen, comes out of the mare's vagina shortly after the intercourse. This is one of the reasons why they will not come back to the *estância* house right afterwards. I do not have enough knowledge of animal physiology to evaluate what actually happens, but what is important to take into account here is their beliefs in the mare's satisfaction in intercourse with men. An important part of the man's sexual desire for the mare is the notion that the mare is willing to have an intercourse with him; in their representation of it "they are as good and as powerful as the stallion," and the mares desire men as much as they desire stallions.

Although the encounter with the mare is highly romanticized, sexual aggression is certainly part of this transaction. Other practical details can be added here. "An animal, unlike humans, cannot control its bowel movements (*intestinos*)", so it may happen that during the intercourse the mare decides to defecate. This seems to create a hilarious situation. Depending on the man ("because there are good and bad gauchos"), he may stick the handle of the whip in the mare's anus in order to make her stop defecating.

It is also said that the horse has an incredible sense of orientation. When she is being lead to the *barranco* and it is not her first time, she "knows" what will happen; she recognizes the place and even knows the way to the river bank. In interviews men also indicated that an animal has feelings and may not allow certain persons to mount it: "mount" in all its senses.

### **Centaur of the Pampa**

The notion of the gaucho as a centaur is essential to the Gauchos' own definition of self. The horse is part of the gaucho's perception of his own body, and an extension of it. The symbol of the classical centaur, mythical half-man, half-horse, is appropriated in all its original meaning:

strength, savage passion, invincibility and liberty.<sup>9</sup> As a symbol it keeps all its mythological power, symbolizing a *pagan* being of unknown genesis. Whether it is a coincidence or not, as I have said before, the gauchos call the pampa, their native place, the place where they belong, *pago*. *Pago* (*pagus*), in latin, means village, remote place, country, and it is the etymological root of *pagan*. To call the Gauchos centaurs also conveys the meaning of warriors, referring to the many revolutions and civil wars they fought, always on horseback.

Perhaps no other idea is so central to the definition of Gaucho than this notion of centaur. It appears on all levels, as a representation of self and as a representation of others about him, either with a positive or a negative connotation. It is widespread in Gaucho lore, songs and poetry; it is part of the mass media discourse on Gauchos; it is present in the entire literature on Gauchos, both sociological and fictional.

The intimacy of the Gaucho with his horse, and the horse as a sort of extension of the man's body is described in early accounts. Dreys, a British traveler from the beginning of the last century says:

A Gaucho on a horse is a superior man and he is convinced of his superiority, even though its power comes from the four legged beast he is associated with. The Gaucho believes that he loses his strength, will and ability to move if he is without a horse. (Dreys 1839 cf. Assunção 1978a:423)

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<sup>9</sup> See Dumézil (1929) for an understanding of the centaurs in the Greek mythology.



Hadfield, also British, describes:

The natives [the gauchos] are generally athletic-looking men, mounted on horses that appear part and parcel of themselves; seemingly centaur-like, demi-incorpsed with the brave beast. (Hadfield 1854:233)

Mantegazza, an Italian medical doctor and early anthropologist who traveled on the pampa in the middle of last century, relates on his ethnographical accounts on the Gaucho:

The Gaucho spends more than half of his life on horseback. Some times he eats and sleeps in the saddle. On foot, he walks poorly, dragging his heavy spurs. His view is from the height of his saddle. [...] The Gaucho physical and moral life, from his skeleton to the expression of his feelings, is formed by this. (Mantegazza 1916[1876]:57-8)

Mantegazza goes on to give a detailed description of the Gaucho's body with its curved legs, (de)formed by the prolonged horseback riding.

For Ornellas:

In the Gaucho [as in the Arab Bedouin] a psychological phenomenon occurs that we could call "transposition". The Gaucho transposes onto the horse all the personal care that he does not give to himself. An insult to his horse is a personal offense [...] Thus, the name "centaur" fits him well. Actually, he shares his life with the horse, in perfect symbiosis (p.236). *Both man and horse form one body.* (My emphasis, Ornellas 1967 [1948]: 156).

For Bastide, in "The Pampa and the Horse":

It is not only folklore that is focussed on the horse, but language as well [...] to the point that to read literature from the south of Brazil one needs a special dictionary. There is also this affection that links men to animals. Thus, a deep love attaches the Gaucho to his horse, many times greater than the affection that he devotes to a woman.[...] His love affairs [with women] are primarily a reason to fight with other men (Bastide 1969[1950]:176-7).

Assunção, the Uruguayan historian and folklorist who has made an extensive historical study of the Gaucho writes:

The woman [for the Gaucho] is a totally secondary element, with no function in this cattle raising culture. Usually she is stolen from a neighbor (who not rarely consents to it). [...] She is only an exciting factor which increases the exhibitionism of the male, who always seeks stand more among his peers by his way of dressing as a feathered courting bird by the provocation and the poetic inspiration of his song challenges. The man is everything in this primitive society. *And the horse is his dynamic half* (Assunção 1978a:255).

In some of these early scholarly accounts of the gaucho we can find a veiled indication of the practice of bestiality:

...the universal abuse of love pleasures, pushed almost to the limits of human possibilities (Mantegazza 1916[1876]:64).

The Gaucho is a collection of everything human nature has that is inferior and depraved, an incarnation of all unspeakable desires (Vignati 1937:439).

A life centered on the cattle and the open space of prairie fields shaped the abilities and the behavior of the male population, making them regress to a biological stage inferior to that of their European ancestors (Assunção 1978a:204).

The comments of Darwin are also worth mentioning. He was surprised that the gaucho would perform every task on horseback. He hypothesized that the abundance of nature, which provided the men with meat, made them lazy. Gauchos had no need to be agriculturalists or industrialists. Darwin was surprised that these people of savage mores were mainly of European origin; this brought him to speculate on the premises of his theory of evolution (Darwin 1933 [1839]). Mantegazza discusses this point, and argues that "these carnivorous men who live in isolation as carnivorous animals do," have internalized a custom by its continuously practicing it over generations until it becomes part of their *nature* (Mantegazza 1916 [1876]:55).

From an emic perspective, using my own ethnographical data as reference, the notion of the horse as a continuity of the man's body is central to gauchos: the recurring idea is that a man learns to ride before he learns how to walk. If a man is without his horse he is "without legs." Darwin relates:

The next morning with nothing to eat or drink we started; the horses could hardly to walk; at last that of the Gaucho was quite tired, *and as Gaucho cannot walk*, I gave up my horse and took my feet (Darwin 1933 [1839]:167. My emphasis).

Exactly because the gaucho perceive their horses as an extension of its own body, it is fundamental to them that the horses they mount be male. To mount a mare means to acquire female genitals and female

attributes. Early foreign travellers note the repulsion of riding a mare:

A beautiful young mare attracted my attention, and I must confess I wished to possess her. I desired the *don* to select her for the one to undergo the breaking-in process. I saw at once that i had made a *faux past*, for all the gauchos burst into a loud laugh, and declared that "North Americans must be queer people. Who ever heard of training a mare to the saddle?" "Why!" exclaimed another, with a contemptuous curl of his lip, "do you work mares in your country? Why, man, I would as soon think of putting a saddle upon my poor old mother's back, and forcing a bridle into her mouth, as of breaking in a mare! The people of North America are savages!" Mares are respected in the country of the herdsman, and it is considered an ungrateful and indecent act to require labor of the mothers of the horses (Bishop 1883:89).

Bishop's interpretation is that of the mare as the horse's mother, although the gaucho himself is referring to his own mother. My own data support this identification; this is one among various aspects of the multi-faceted gaucho's process of identification with his horse; at a symbolic level the mare is not only the horse's mother, but the Gaucho's mother. While in the field, it was common to hear sayings such as: "Gauchos are born from their saddles" or "Gauchos are not born, they appear." None of these expressions represents an actual belief, but the ideas are a relevant part of the gaucho's social imagery. This social imagery referring to the Gauchos is also used by society at large. In tales and poetry, as well as in literary fiction, the gaucho "appears" with no reference to any kin.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Hohlfeldt (1982) in his analyses of the literary fiction on the gaucho points out that the absence of the character's ascendent kin is constant in this genre. In Chapter I presented a kinship chart of the peons from one *estância*. Only three family units -- or rather, female units



As we saw on the first chapter, one of the possibilities for the origin of the word gaucho is *guacho*, which means orphan calf, either sheep, cattle or horse. *Guacho* is also frequently used in Gaucho speech to refer to a person without parents. Although there is an unresolved scholarly discussion about the etymological origin of the term gaucho<sup>11</sup>, when I asked the gauchos I was working with, what did they think about the origin of the word *gaucho*, they immediately identified it with *guacho*, because phonetically it sounds almost the same and because both meanings are analogous. Their discussion was if *gaucho* came from *guacho* or the other way around. For them, the calf without parents, "without home" is similar to the gaucho with no ties, no kin or uncertain parentage.

The gaucho is attached to his horse; there are many tales of Gauchos who wanted to die when their horses die. The feeling described is that of being "half dead". It is also said that on the open country, if a man is not on horse, a bull or a wild horse is not able "to recognize" him, and thus may think he is a beast and attack him. It is probably true that a man on foot will be more vulnerable to attack, but the rationale of the

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-- for three generations have reproduced most of labor force of an extended region. As I mentioned, I was able to collect information on kinship only from women. In male discourse the kin group does not appear even as an affective framework.

<sup>11</sup> For an extensive exposition of the various hypotheses on the origin of the term Gaucho see Assunção 1978b. For Paul Groussac, among others, the etymological origin of *gaucho* as *guacho* Groussac, Paul: *El Gaucho*. In *World's Folk-Lore Congress*. Chicago: July, 14 1893] cf. Assunção 1978b. See also Meyer 1957 and Chapter I of this dissertation.



motive is that: the other **animal** will not recognize him as a **man** if he is not mounted on a horse.

Conversely, there are jokes about gauchos who want to die because their mares die. And some of Gaucho mores of the last century held that if a woman were unfaithful to her man, the offended husband or lover would cut off the long braid customarily worn by women and tie the braid to his horse's tail to humiliate his betrayer (Slatta 1983). A popular *galpão* tale refers to a gaucho who carefully braided his daughter's hair when she died, to use as reins for his horse. Whatever the woman's braid tied in the horse's tail may mean, aside from the obvious aggression, the nuances suggest the associations man/horse, women/mare.

Lehmann-Nitsche (1981 [1923]:307) collected an expression from the Argentinean rural area (La Plata) that corroborates the overlapping meaning of man and horse. To refer to a woman who has had a sexual relationship is said "the stallions rode her" (*la han galopao los potrillos*). There are two levels of associations in this saying; first, an inversion, in the sense that instead of the man having intercourse with the mare there is a reference of the stallion having intercourse with the woman. Second, the association man/horse has the connotation of savage sexual power. The word stallion (*potrillos*) being employed in the plural leads us to believe that it alludes to rape or some situation of collective sexual abuse of woman. The saying infers sexual violence and power, it takes the wild (the horse) to dominate the uncontrollable (the woman).

There is a common gaucho saying: "If I have never fallen from a horse, I won't fall from a mare" (*se nunca caí de cavalo, não vou cair de uma égua*). The expression is employed in two situations: first, meaning if one is able to perform a difficult task, he will not fail in performing an easier one. The riding of a stallion or a mare here is a metaphor for different degrees of difficulty in controlling a situation, implying that it is easier to master a female horse than a male horse. The expression is also used in a situation of dispute and conflict between two men, when one of them says it, implying that the other is a mare and he is able *to mount* him. This is highly offensive, not only because of the comparison man/mare, but also for the sexual conation of active and passive roles.<sup>12</sup>

The gaucho does not ride mares, but women on the pampa are always expected to ride female horses, and it is believed that if a woman rides a good horse (male or female) she will take away its strength: the horse will become weak or sick. If the woman rides a male horse she may also take away his masculinity, the horse loses his power.

All of this connects us with the other aspect of the centaur logic: if on the one hand the Gaucho identifies himself with the mythological centaur, even incorporating the horse as part of his own body, women are excluded or totally secondary in his universe of emotions and desire.

The sexual relationship with the mare pushes the identification man/horse to its ultimate conclusion, both because

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<sup>12</sup> See also Chapter V for the meaning of *to mount* (*montar* or *trepar*).

the man is a horse when he performs the stallion role, and because by the **penetration** he transcends the limits of his human condition, through not of his male condition. The sexual act is a profound form of incorporation, an incorporation of this male condition which was expanded beyond the limits of humanity; it is a wild manliness. At that moment, a man's ambiguity between controlling the wild and becoming wild is resolved as he achieves power and pleasure. It is in an orgasmic metamorphosis (and this is not a figure of speech!) during which the man turns into a centaur. He gives birth to a centaur. He recreates his mythical ancestor, and no metaphor is more exact than that the man and the horse are the generators of this society.

### **The Legitimacies of the Riverbank Centaur**

In the everyday life of the Gaucho the word *bagual* replaces the notion of centaur, conveying all the meaning of centaur, except for its mythical content. The word centaur itself is saved for poetry and tales in the intimacy of the *galpão* evenings. Like any sacred symbol, it is manipulated with reverence. If the word centaur connotes a being with a dual nature, man and horse, *bagual* also has a double meaning: it refers indiscriminately to man or to horse. *Bagual* means wild, untamed horse;

non-castrated animal and strong, tough man. In gaucho speech, the duality man/horse is denoted by a single sign which includes both meanings and signifies "non-castrated animal" In fact, it is in the male genitals of both that identity resides.

Associated with this very concrete figure of man-horse is an image of woman, constructed as its reflection: the woman-mare, which, as we have seen earlier in this chapter, is a recurring image in Gaucho lore. I will present some data from the mass media referring to woman as a subject of desire, images which are an expressions of male sexuality. My point is to indicate to what extent bestiality is considered to be a legitimate practice, accepted by the public in general. In fact, in poetry and music which make explicit reference to bestiality, it is entangled with the theme of women, either as a facade (they are explicitly talking about woman but the feelings are addressed to a mare), or as condensation of woman and mare as the subject of affection. Woman is presented as a threat, as a being impossible to control, or as someone absent who causes pain and nostalgic feelings. Many songs, although written by males, are presented with a feminine "I":<sup>13</sup>

Longas noites na janela  
Ouvindo teu assobio  
Tu montado em tua sela  
Eu sozinha no meu cio

Long nights by the window  
Hearing your whistling  
You mounted in your saddle  
Me alone in my heat.

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<sup>13</sup> This song was presented at one of Gaucho Music Festivals (*Musicanito*, 1984) and it was especially successful among women. Lyrics of Dilan Camargo, music of Celso Bastos.

Nos campos espalhei meu cheiro Semei um pouco de mim Respira meu cavalheiro O perfume de alecrim. ....	In the fields I spread my smell  I saw a little bit of myself Breath in, my horseman The perfume of rosemary. .....
Sob a luz das lamparinas Despirei os meus vestidos Minhas ansias femininas Farão todos teus pedidos	Under the candle light I'll undress myself My female desires I'll make all your wishes
Vem, lavrador e te afunda Cheio de amor somente Terra fértil e fecunda Meu corpo pede semente	Come, peasant, come deep Full of love As fertile land My body needs seeds.

The idea of the woman as sexually insatiable is a common theme in Gaucho lore, and in this male representation, she longs for a man. *Cio*, which I translated as *heat*, is a word only used for animal sexual desire. Applied to a woman it takes on a very strong meaning; it is aggressive, giving the idea of uncontrollable sexuality. The song stresses the metaphor woman/nature; and man as woman's horseman, rider, the one who *transforms and cultivates her*.<sup>14</sup>

Pra domar o meu destino Comprei um buçal de prata Nenhum pesar me derruba Qualquer paixão me arrebatá	To tame my destiny I bought a silver bit No sorrow makes me fall Any passion takes me on
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<sup>14</sup> The rhyme of this poem (a/b/a/b) is important aesthetically, but I was unable to keep it in the English version. Rhyme in general is important part of gaucho speech and characteristic of the male voice. The verses are the lyrics of a popular song in the region, the author is Luis Coronel.



Here the subject of the speech is a male. In the context of the song he is a man on horseback; all the images about life and emotion go through the horse. Horse and nature are appropriated as signs of emotions.

At this metaphorical level, the **horse** stands for liberty, for power, for the wild, and for man. So it is not surprising that the Gaucho's feelings will be expressed by the horse and the elements of nature, although for someone outside the Gaucho's universe it sounds aggressive. In a song about a woman,<sup>15</sup> the lyrics employ elements of nature to describe her:

Teus silêncios	Your silences
Tuas tramas	Your texture
O teu rastro, as tuas sanhas	Your track, your wrath
O teu pasto, teus achegos	Your grazing, your caresses
Teus pelêgos, tuas manhas	Your sheepskin, your cunningness
...	...
Teu mormaço, tuas sangas	Your muggyness, your creeks

Even the association of woman with grazing and the reference to her "sheepskin" or "sheephide," which the man uses on the top of the horse under the saddle or to sleep on, is not meant to be hostile to woman in this context. They are powerful metaphors to convey strong

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<sup>15</sup> Lyrics written by Dilan Camargo.

feelings. This is not the case in *Morocho*, a controversial song that became a hit in the entire state, far from this specific Gaucho universe:

Aprendi a domar	I learned to tame
Amanuciando éguas	Petting mares
And for the women	And for women
Vale as mesmas regras:	The same rules are worthwhile
Animal te para!	Animal be still!
Sou lá do rincão <sup>16</sup>	I am from the countryside
Mulher pra'mim é como	Woman for me is as young horses
[redomão	
Maneador nas patas	Tied hoofs
Pelêgo na cara	Sheepskin on the face
....	....

*Morocho*, meaning Moorish woman, is a affectionate word for a dark-haired and skin tanned woman. The song goes on to describe the taming of a mare and the entire violent relationship with the animal; tacitly the verses switch from mare to woman, making the comparison explicit, and implicitly conveying the idea that "he would rather have a mare." Because the melody is very appealing (and probably the theme too, is appealing even to the urban population), the song became a success in radio, television and popular music festivals in urban centers. Feminist groups made public declarations that this kind of production should be censored as offensive to women. Gaucho folklorist and Nativist groups defended it the name of the preservation of traditions; political parties defended it in the name of democracy. In my understanding, which

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<sup>16</sup> *Rincão* is a generic remote place in the cattle raising region.

parallels the author's justification, the music is a satire of the rude Gaucho *barrancador*. Satirical or not, the song, written by an urban author, became immediately popular among rural gauchos and has become incorporated into their *galpão* repertoire. If it was meant as an ironical comment on their wildness and their savage sexual activities, the gauchos have turned it into a celebration of these qualities, and the song has become even more popular.

To understand to what extent bestiality has some legitimacy in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, it is significant that one of the many Gaucho music festivals is called the *Festival da Barranca*. All such so-called nativistic music festivals are promoted by local county government in smaller cities throughout the state, and have the support of the mass media (television, radio and newspaper).<sup>17</sup> The *Festival da Barranca* is a music festival, but it ostensibly claims to be a celebration of *barranca*, that is, of the practice of bestiality. It is the only festival of this type to which women are not admitted, and the only one that is "secret". It is secret, but public. No one knows where or exactly when it will happen, it occurs once every year, always in the same period, and speculations are made in the mass media as to where this festival will be and who will be there. Basically it congregates male Gaucho musicians, poets, and folklorists. The festival is a self-proclaimed ritual of anti-structure, where

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<sup>17</sup> For an anthropological study of the Gauchos music festivals, including the *Barranca Festival*, see Araujo 1987.

everything is permitted. It lasts four days; 100 to 150 men participate in it; and the only way to get in is, first, by being male, by having a special invitation and a secret password, and by knowing where it will be. The male secrecy implies publicly that bestiality is practiced in this festival. Like all such festivals it is a camp-out but this one, for symbolic reasons is held at a river.

At the level of the general public, a book called "The *Barranco* in the Sexual Formation of the Gaucho" (Kessler 1985, 1988), with a subtitle stating "*Barranquear* is the oldest and most noble tradition of the man from the pampa", sold 25.000 copies in less the six months. A second volume was published recently with equal success. The books are collections of jokes and satirical stories, mostly involving bestiality. Protests against this book from the so called traditionalist gauchos were published in the newspapers, their point was that "the Gaucho traditions [which includes the practice of bestiality] that took a long time to be recognized were now being subject of joking."<sup>18</sup>

The best examples illustrating the public tolerance of bestiality and its diffusion by the mass media appear in comic strips and short stories published in newspapers and books, whose central character is the *Analista de Bagé* (The Psychoanalyst from Bagé). This character is extremely popular among an urban, intellectualized public. Bagé is one of the frontier cities in the pastoral region of Rio Grande do Sul, close to

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<sup>18</sup> Porto Alegre: *Zero Hora* September,17 1985; October,29 1985. \_

where my fieldwork was done. People from Bagé are stereotyped as crude Gauchos, and this character happens to be an orthodox psychoanalyst. He is a "true Gaucho", and bestiality practices are a constitutive part of his sexual experiences, fantasies and personality. The plot is a series of hilarious situations in which the analyst or his patients have to deal with, among other things, an Oedipical complex centered on an animal figure.<sup>19</sup>

At an official and state level the gaucho has been chosen and manipulated as a regional symbol; society has legitimated the gaucho and gaucho practices. It is not surprising that the public representation of the gaucho has converged with its is most essential: image of the centaur. The logic is that of totemism where the totem is a socially constructed identity; it is an elected symbol which at once celebrates the distinctiveness of a group from others and unites the individuals of a group as equals.<sup>20</sup> Most of the power of the gaucho centaur symbol relies on an implied transgressive sexual pact with nature; to incorporate the boundary nature/culture using different criteria than other groups it is certainly a powerful mark of *distinction*.

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<sup>19</sup> To better understand the context of this kind of humor it is relevant to note that Porto Alegre is an important psychoanalytical center in Brazil, with diverse schools and tendencies of psychoanalytical formation, linked with the International Society of Psychoanalysis. Veríssimo's book *O Analista de Bagé* (1981) from 1981 to 1983 sold 250,000 copies (Oliven 1983). Other volumes were published later.

<sup>20</sup> See Mauss "La Nation" In *Oeuvres*. vol.3 (1969) and Lévi-Strauss *L'Identité* (1977). Both texts deal with the notion of totemism in complex societies.



## Unspeakable Desires

Symbolic logic is not linear. It resists the anthropologist's positivistic attempts to order it in a cause-effect relationship. So it is with the case of bestiality. If at first the key to understanding this mode of sexuality seems to be a matter of where a group sets the boundaries between society and nature (or *nomos* and *physis*), we soon also realize that **they**, like **we**, share exactly the same conception of mankind. A man is a man, a horse is a horse: the first belongs to the domain of humanity, the second to the domain of animality. Fundamentally, gauchos set limits between these categories, and then transgress the limits. The cultural emphasis here is the **transgression**, is this ambiguity. Distinct from the judeo-christian ethos hegemonic in western societies, this ambivalence is not seen as negative, although it may be dangerous, profane, polluted, savage; one who makes an alliance with these elements becomes powerful.

From the emic perspective, the dynamic is the transubstantiation of the species into a new being. The encounter between humanity and animality is conceived symbolically as a deification: It is a process of transforming man's circumstances in a supra-human condition; not a process of bestialization, in the sense of transforming the man into a beast.<sup>21</sup> The transgression from one domain to another, from culture to

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<sup>21</sup> For English speakers I think the word beast has also the denotation of a Christian evil and bestiality the immediate connotation of not

nature, to attain (and obtain) the wild and, at a symbolic level, to become **uncontrollable**, is done through emotions. Desire is a fundamental component of any social imaginary and in this case (and probably in other similar situations of profound social inequality) it is the only element capable of operating this passage, since the desire allows an actual form of control, sexual possession.

The dominant understanding in western societies<sup>22</sup> is that of bestiality as animalization of the man and as a diabolical act. Bestiality is not only a crime, but is rigorously punished. The western reaction can only be explained by the fact that this transgression represents a threat, to the extent that an individual violation can endanger the human condition. Durkheim and Mauss's (1963:82) seminal work on the forms of classification is insightful:

The first logical categories were social categories; the first class of things were class of men, into which these things were integrated. It was because men were grouped, and thought of themselves in the form of groups, that in their ideas they grouped other things.

In other words, categories of thought are social categories; the limits between the classes are social attributions and so are liminal

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just animality, but diabolical.

<sup>22</sup> The notion of Western society is vague and not explanatory in itself, I am using it for the lack of a better expression. I am referring to the **dominant** ethos of Western society, although I consider the *gauchos* part of Western culture.

situations created by them. In Christian thought bestiality was considered as "the most abominable of the crimes against *human nature*" (My emphasis, Dubois-Desaulle 1905:225). In the middle ages and early modern period, the punishment was the same as that for witchcraft, to be burned alive with the animal. Intimacy with an animal was taken to be demoniacal.<sup>23</sup>

With the advent of modern medical science, bestiality was classified under the category of sodomy, both considered "unnatural" abuses<sup>24</sup>:

Violation of animals, *monstrous and revolting as it seems to mankind, is by no means always due to psycho-pathological conditions*. Low morality and great sexual desire, with lack of opportunity for natural indulgence, are the principal motives of this unnatural means of satisfaction. (My emphasis, Krafft-Ebing 1953:561).

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<sup>23</sup> The bibliography on bestiality is almost non-existent, except for Dubois-Desaulle 1905 and Villeneuve 1969, both of whom present trials on bestiality in France and England. They cite trials punished with the death penalty up to the last century. All the trials refer to male activities, and the careful reading of the trial texts indicate that in many of them, women were the denouncers.

<sup>24</sup> The classification of bestiality under sodomy is imprecise: male bestiality is practiced with female animals, while sodomy originally referred to anal intercourse (including both male homosexuality and male-female anal intercourse). We can speculate why this condensation of meanings occurred in some cultural contexts: either because it became an euphemism to the "unnamed desire"; or because it is an ideological and detracting way of dealing with male homosexuality and other forms of sexuality.

Contradictorily, in the text above, bestiality is treated as a pathology, even when the individuals do not present "psycho-pathological conditions." Also, it is said to be an abuse of animals, but the animal is considered an accomplice in the "crime" and it suffers the some punishment. A logic that considers that considers sex with animals, but not killing and eating the same animals, to be abusive, is at least paradoxical.

In a relatively recent medical survey on sexuality, bestiality is classified under "sex offense":

In our society [United States] an amazing amount of shame surrounds sexual activity with animals. *Despite its frequency among country boys*, it is one of the most taboo of all sexual acts, one toward which society reacts with both condemnation and ridicule. (My emphasis, Gebhard [Kinsey Institute] 1965)

It is interesting to follow the transformation in how bestiality is understood. Bestiality moves from crime against *nature* to crime against *mores*, mirroring a change in the notion and classifications of what is the domain of nature and what is that of culture. It is not my goal to make here a cross-cultural analysis of the thinking on bestiality in Western society in general; even if the available data are too fragmentary and insufficient. It is, however, important to indicate that the western understanding of bestiality is totally different from that of Brazilian Gauchos.



In Brazil, there is no legislation against bestiality, either under criminal or civil law. It is only an offense and can be sanctioned when it is done in a public place, then under the accusation of "indecent exposure". In such cases, the offence involved is not bestiality. During the first century of colonial Brazil, we can find references to bestiality in the Holy Inquisition as a possible indication of judaism, but data on the trials do not show any accusation of bestiality.<sup>25</sup>

The fact that this theme is almost entirely absent in anthropology and the lack of ethnographical reference even in works that deal with non-western pastoral societies, indicates that this is a taboo subject in anthropology.<sup>26</sup> That human sexual intimacy with animals is unmentionable suggests a sort of inside-out ethnocentrism, where in order to "protect" the group which is taken as an ethnographic subject, the anthropologist does not "see" cultural practices that he/she presumes as having a

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<sup>25</sup> For inquisition trials in Brazil see Wiznitzer 1960 and Trevisan 1984. The inquisition in Brazil was addressed to Jews and judaizers, from high social strata in a clear dispute of power. The role of the Inquisition in Brazil is confusing since the Inquisitorial punishment applied in Portugal was already the exile from Portugal to Brazil. Colonial Brazil was basically populated by the so-called judaizers (Jews who do not profess publicly Judaism) and New Christians (Jews who formally profess Catholicism), that is, Sepharadi Jews who massively emigrated (or were expelled) from Iberian Peninsula in the 1500's and 1600's. Moreover, the relationship between the Portuguese Crown and the Church was always in conflict, Portugal's interest was to populate Brazil as much as possible so as not lose territory to Spanish colonizers in the New World.

<sup>26</sup> Davis and Whitten (1987) in their review of "Cross-cultural study of human sexuality" indicate only Devereux (1936) as reference on the subject. Also Freyre 1976 (1933) does refer to bestiality in rural northwest Brazil.



negative content, denying to others modes of sexuality and pleasure that are different of his/her own. This approach implies that a specific practice has the same meaning in the **other's** universe as it has in his own, implicitly assuming that his ethos is the valid standard of morality. In that sense, the anthropologist's assumption does not differ from the dominant religious and legal understandings of bestiality, supposing that to acknowledge its existence would imply that there is not a clear-cut discontinuity between human beings and beasts, and this represents a threat to the integrity of mankind. Maybe there is a inner fear that the evidence of bestiality would question the anthropologist's own definition of what is nature and what is culture, and where he or she stands.

## Chapter VII

### Suicide: A Final Statement

#### Life and Death

Since I first began research on the gaucho, I came across narratives about death, not rarely involving someone who choose to kill himself. I also began to hear casual references to someone's suicide. The former foreman (*capataz*) of the *estância* where I stayed, had committed suicide while still living and working in the *estância*. Comments on how and why he had killed himself were a common topic of conversation. Once such a conversation had begun, the participants would be reminded of other deaths of friends, relatives, or friends of friends in similar circumstances: apparently every man knew another man who had committed or attempted suicide.

The stories took a standard pattern: the subjects were male, they were "getting old, weak and tired of working," "they were loosing the will to live" (*perder la gana de vivir*), they were unmarried or without family, and they would choose to hang themselves. I began to wonder whether, since in this restricted universe of scattered people, every one knew of

others who had committed suicide, I was dealing with an anomalous social group with an extremely high suicide rate, or whether this single suicide of a man close to them had caused such a deep impression that it occupied a large part of their preoccupations and imaginations.

When I asked direct questions about suicide, all the men insisted that suicide was a common occurrence. One even answered, "It is one of those things that happen every day." He immediately added, "Well, not every day but we hear about it every day." I began to ask about death and suicide on other *estâncias*, and received the same types of answers and the same stories both in Brazil and Uruguay. I started to wonder if I were dealing with fact, representations of fact, or both, the latter a symbolically powerful version of the first.

The typical suicide was described as a man who becomes more and more thoughtful about life, quiet, "alone in his loneliness." One day, he completes all of his normal tasks and, mounted on his horse and carrying a rope -- probably the lasso that he always has with him to rope cattle, he looks for a tree (not an easy task on the treeless pampa) and hangs himself.

The ways an individual chooses to die have to do not only with the objective alternatives that his culture offers him, but also with the interpretations of existence which he shares with other members of his culture. First, every culture has its own understanding of what it is worth living and dying for, and what life and death mean. Second, every group

defines what is legitimate in relation to death and life. Third, ways of dying -- like ways of living -- say important things about a given culture.

In order to conclude and organize my own understanding about gaucho culture and identity I will address the theme of suicide, taking into consideration these three levels. Suicide, and the meanings which cluster around death will take here the form of *a conclusive statement*, for the gauchos, and for myself. For the gauchos, because death is a decisive moment, suicide is especially significant in a culture which thinks of its members as having some power of decision over it. For myself as the ethnographer, because the essential elements of this culture -- manliness, honor, respect and freedom -- are all present in the gauchos' discourse on death.

### **Statistics on Death**

Regardless of whether or not the number of actual suicides among gauchos is high, their concern with the social meanings of this form of death is in itself significant. However, the official statistics on suicide for this region are not irrelevant.

There are several problems with the statistics on gaucho suicide. The published material presents the total number of suicides by year: few years are available, the total period covered is too short to allow the calculation of a significant rate, and the existing surveys are grouped by

geographical areas that do not necessarily correspond to the universe of our own research. Moreover, there is a *classical* problem with collecting statistics on suicide which involves the definition of suicide and the declaration of a death as such. The way the information is collected, always dubious, is especially so in this case, where it is isolated rural areas which are the focus of the research. There is no way to have statistical control over an isolated rural population that cares about death, but has no interest in giving information to official urban institutions.

Nevertheless, the statistics are useful. Compared to other regions within Brazil, the state of Rio Grande do Sul in the year 1984 had the highest rate of suicide: 10.6 for 100,000 of the population. This is far above the average rate for Brazil which is 3.9. Rio Grande do Sul alone had a total of 883 suicides cases out of the total of 5190 cases for Brazil for this same year.<sup>1</sup>

Another aspect interests us here: the majority of suicide deaths (54 percent) are by hanging in this state, while in all other regions in Brazil hanging accounts for only 36 percent of the suicides. In general worldwide, suicide and gender are clearly correlated; the great majority of suicides are male. In the state of Rio Grande do Sul, 76 per cent of the

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<sup>1</sup> For general statistics on suicide for Brazil the source is: *Anuário Estatístico do Brasil 1986*. Rio de Janeiro: IBGE. For the few other years recorded, the extant data confirms the same tendency. Suicide rates for Uruguay were not reported in the country's general statistics.



suicides are committed by men.

In both absolute and relative numbers, Rio Grande do Sul is the state that presents highest number of suicides of people who work in the rural sector. Within the state itself, the rural sector has the highest rate of suicide among all productive sectors (the other significant concentrations of suicides are of people tabulated under "with no occupation" and "occupation unknown").

The available statistics do not specify rural and urban in geographical terms. Deaths are grouped by activity sectors. The data do not distinguish between people connected with cattle production and agriculture, but group both as "rural production." In Rio Grande do Sul, these two sectors are well differentiated; there are significant cultural differences between the people involved with one and the other kind of production. It is my guess that the figures on suicide refer mainly to the cattle production sector, that is to say, to the gauchos. My assumption is based on the fact that in this region, agriculture either is that of peasant production or one-culture plantation system, both modes of production traditionally performed by groups with immigrant origins -- Italians, Germans and Poles. Among these peasant ethnic minorities, the Catholic religion has an important role: given the Catholic and the peasant ethos, it is my supposition that suicide is not common among this group. If my assumption is correct, then the number of suicides among gauchos, that is, of men connected to pastoral society, might be considerable: for the

year of 1984 this total would be 295 cases.

Although they are very general and not without problems, the available statistics support the information I obtained in the field: the suicide rate is high, it is male, it is by hanging. The unusual point about these data is the rural concentration of suicides for the state of Rio Grande do Sul. These suggest a different pattern from that of classical sociological studies on suicide, where suicide is conceived as an essentially urban phenomena (cf. Durkheim 1953 [1897]; Halbwachs 1930). In fact, the data for the other states of Brazil reveal an urban tendency, and do support the classical theory.

The statistics of the specific region in which I worked are available through two sources. Locally, at the Census agency (IBGE) of every municipality these data are collected at police stations. The other source is the State Health Department at Porto Alegre centralizes the information for the entire state. The sources of the latter are the medical death certificates issued in every municipality. The problem with the two bodies of data is that they are fragmentary, not representative of the total deaths; additionally, each source makes distinct correlations or groups the figures differently.<sup>2</sup>

From the data collected by the police, there are a total of 16

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<sup>2</sup> The data on suicide exist but are not easily retrievable because they are stored as raw data on magnetic computer tape. Further work with these materials, comparing the different sources, would be interesting and fruitful. The focus of the present work was not suicide, therefore I decided to deal with only the data immediately available.

suicides for the municipality of Alegrete in 1986, 12 of them male, 9 -- all male -- by hanging.<sup>3</sup> From the data collected at the hospitals, also for Alegrete but for the year of 1985, there are 15 cases: 14 of them male; 7 by hanging, all of whom are male.<sup>4</sup> Data from Artigas (a Uruguayan town at the border with Brazil with a total population of 68 thousand inhabitants), which I collected directly from the local police station, indicate 9 suicides, 6 of them male, and 30 suicide attempts for the year of 1987.

These statistics suggest a clear pattern that coincides with the information I obtained in the field: suicide is rural, performed by males over 40 years old, and is by hanging. Although the statistics support this tendency, only a more detailed quantitative analysis would demonstrate it. In any case, data on suicide in isolated rural communities, where people are not infrequently buried locally on the *estâncias*, will continue to be contaminated with the problems of collection. For the gauchos, distance and the lack of transportation; the absence of family, property and inheritance disputes; the lack of religious affiliation, are sufficient reasons to insure that not all suicides are reported. Officials from the local institutions that collect the data, the hospital and the police (whose figures do not coincide<sup>5</sup>), agree on the difficulties of collection.

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<sup>3</sup> Source: Alegrete agency of Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística.

<sup>4</sup> Source: Secretaria da Saúde e Meio Ambiente do Rio Grande do Sul: Unidade de Informática.

<sup>5</sup> For example for the year of 1985 the total of suicides for Rio grande do Sul from the State Health Department is 771 cases; for IBGE at the

The available figures give us a suicide rate of 20.9 (per 100 thousand inhabitants) for Alegrete, the municipality that I am taking as typical of the cattle production region. This is in itself far above the average rate of all countries in the world.<sup>6</sup> Almost half of the suicides are rural (and by rural we mean only the ones that take place in the rural area, without consideration of origin). If we consider the rural population, the rate is extremely high. For example for the year of 1987, it would be 50 (per 100 thousand inhabitants).<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the rate is double if we consider it only in relation to the male population.

It is clear that in such a small universe, numbers lose their statistical validity; but in any case, they are sufficient to indicate a tendency. Recently, two other anthropologists working with populations who studied symbolic universes and ways of lives similar to that of the gauchos have called attention to the high incidence of suicide in these groups.

Tomás (1988), while working with *vaqueiros* in Spain, discovered the same syndrome that I found among the gauchos with whom I worked: suicide was rural, male, and by hanging.<sup>8</sup> Her material is rich, providing us with the texts of her interviews with the local population on the issue

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same year the total is 794 cases. I was unable to verify other years.

<sup>6</sup> As mentioned the rate for Brazil is 3.9 for the year of 1984.

<sup>7</sup> As a comparison, the highest recorded suicide rate is 28.6 per 100 thousand of the population for Denmark in 1986 (cf. *Guinness Book of World Records*. 1989).

<sup>8</sup> Of the 39 cases of suicide that Tomás was able to document, 30 were men and 27 of them died by hanging (Cf. Tomás 1988:218).



of suicide. The reasons for suicide that her informants give are loneliness, the avoidance of suffering in sickness, and frustration over inheritance disputes. The study provides us with a functionalist explanation of the mode of death -- hanging -- as being fast and efficacious. My argument is that the way people chose to die is meaningful within their symbolic system, and the procedure of dying abounds with ritualistic elements. Other means of killing, such as guns, are available in these cultures; but the symbolic aspects of hanging in a group whose members spend most of their lives catching and tying animals with a lasso cannot be disregarded.

Stein (1987), whose subject is contemporary American cowboys, specifically the cattle-ranching families of Oklahoma, observes that the enticement of death and what he calls disguised suicide are very much part of male construction of identity in this cowboy culture:

Death defiance is death enticement. God, nature, and health alike are tested to their limits. Rugged manliness and self-righteous godliness go together in continuous cycles of superego purges -- in disguised or blatant homicides and suicides, in the cowboy's proverbial temptation of danger and fate (the archaic superego projected), in letting one's health go to the last minute. (...) Danger was thus not merely an external and unavoidable attribute of reality: endangerment was a measure of a man's ability to meet challenges, master the wild, affirm his manhood -- yet stand to lose it all. (Stein 1987: 183-4)

These two works corroborate my own findings of the correlation between the horsemen's culture and suicide. The argument of classical



sociology of suicide is that there is a direct correlation between the rate of suicide and the quality of urban life, that suicide represents a social response to the loss of cultural rules (anomie) which guide individual action in the course of moving from the rural to the urban setting. What this means is that when the individual undergoes a change which causes his frame of reference shift drastically, or when an individual experiences a total rupture with his lifelong frame of social meanings, his action will be dysfunctional. It seems that other elements -- and other meanings -- are present in the situation of rural suicide among cattlemen. In the case of the gauchos, in no way can suicide can be understood as anomie, at least not in its classical assumption that suicide varies inversely to the degree of integration of the individual in his group. In this case, it seems rather to be the final outcome of a set of well prescribed normative conducts. It is true, however, that suicide among gauchos can be seen as a reaction -- and a socially legitimate one -- to an imminent situation of anomie encounter by the rural worker who is getting too old for the work of herding and has to face the possibility of leaving the rural area. The distinction is subtle, but if the social meaning of suicide involved in each situation is examined, the distinction becomes relevant. In the case of the gaucho, the social content of the suicide is not anomie but the avoidance of anomie. From the perspective of the group, suicide is not a socially amoral act but a righteous act.

## Of Right and of Reason

In the *galpão* talks, the gauchos have ways of classifying their own social practices and world views: the accounts referring to actions, people or thoughts are followed by the comments: "what is right" (*o que é de direito*), "what is reasonable" (*o que é de razão*), and "what is respectable" (*o que é de respeito*). Using these short phrases, they classify things around them and build up their fabric of consensus and meanings. The remarks are tags, figures of speech, and do not seem to carry any explicit endorsement, sanction or censure. It is the recurrence of these expressions in gaucho speech that draws the outsider's attention. The phrases can be unfolded or expanded. They may take other variations, such as *correct* (*correto*) instead of right -- meaning *righteous*, or *honor* may be interchanged with *respect* (*respeito*). By "what is reasonable," gauchos mean rational in regard to *cause*, *motif*, or *explanation*.

Whether the expressions are intentionally used to shape actions -- and the gauchos do not recognize this intention -- I think that the classification of what is *of right*, *reasonable*, or *respectable* indeed works as guide to daily practices and as an efficacious system of social control. The lack of traditional institutions such as religion, family, school, state or legal system in gaucho society is notorious. Although it is relevant that this group is inserted into a complex society full of well established institutions, it is also clear that the gauchos have their own values, their

own peculiar understandings of what is righteous or what is wrong. Rules from the larger society have little influence or legitimacy within this group.

My argument is that these constantly used speech devices which assert the *righteous*, the *reasonable* and the *honorable* shape a coherent normative system. Within this system, the phenomenon of suicide is perceived as "right" (*de direito*), although not always "reasonable" (*de razão*). That is to say, the idea (and the practice) of suicide in gaucho culture is legitimated by the canons of this culture.

In regard to suicide, when the gauchos say that it is "right," they mean that it is an acceptable action, that an individual has the right to decide whatever he wants do with his life. This is a culture that praises individualism, one in which the individual must constantly prove himself vis a vis nature, vis a vis the wild. The evening *galpão* talk is a closed collective situation where every individual exposes himself to collective approval. The man who commits suicide is the one who performs one last brave feat, "he faced death, instead of waiting for it like an old lady." Thus it is *right*, and the word in Portuguese or Spanish carries the meanings both of lawful and correct; when gauchos stress the word with such appreciation they are actually giving correctness the force of a legal act, that of action sanctioned by customary law.

In their understanding, to kill oneself might not always be "reasonable," that is, they may comment that "there were other options, but

he got "confused with his own ideas" (*atrapalhado das ideias*). In that sense, the act is not *rational*, but in gaucho logic, every man has the *right* to commit irrational acts as long as they affect only himself. In no way is the individual who kills himself seen as manifesting some sort of pathology. Actually, as far as I was able to collect information about the men who committed suicide, all of them were very active workers, skillful horsemen, but unmarried (or without a more or less regular female companion). They had what is considered *normal* lives within this cultural context. But one day, as they put it, "one starts to think too much about his life, he ask himself why does he live, what is the world, what is death -- he gets sad, he does not find answers, he feels too lonely."

The system of values and meanings manifested in relation to death do not differ from those related to life: individualism, freedom, honor and manliness. These notions are all interconnected: to be a man one has to accept challenges, has to be courageous. This also means to *have honor*; in order to have honor a man can never be submissive.

The gaucho lives dangerously, he lives exposed to the weather, to animals, to nature. To tame a wild horse for example is a duel in which he can always be seriously injured. For him, living also means be unafraid of death, and every day of his life he has to reaffirm this fearlessness. If he decides to die, the decision is considered courageous much in the way that his daily confrontation with the possibility of dying, which he faces throughout his life, is seen as courageous.



The gaucho, horseman of the plains, mounted on his horse constructs for himself in his everyday tasks a world that he masters; he experiences feelings of dominance over nature, over his own life and over his destiny. When he starts to lose his physical strength, when he is no longer able to hold an ox with his lasso, when he starts to lose in this everyday body-to-body dispute with an animal -- at that moment, he thinks about death. Symbolically, that is the moment in which he *ties* and entraps himself, he hangs himself with his own lasso in a sort of silent epitaph: he is himself the last animal to be caught. He has to perform this act alone; he will not allow anybody to control him. To the very last, he maintains the illusion that nobody has control over him.

### **The Dead Horseman and the Dead Bride**

Two images of suicide recur in gaucho tales. One is the gaucho that decides to kill himself, who mounts his horse and hangs himself in an umbu tree. The other is that of the woman who dresses herself in bridal clothes and takes poison. The first narrative describes a more frequent event. The second case is not as common, but comes up in gaucho conversation. The point insisted upon is that women only kill themselves after carefully dressing themselves in their best clothes. Both narratives describe actual cases of suicide, as I was able to confirm. The circumstances of the deaths are sometimes slightly different, but what interest us



here are the meanings that these ways of dying, as well as the meanings aggregated by the narratives, take on for the gauchos. Let us now focus on these stories.

In the gaucho's suicide, the elements involved are the horse, the lasso, the umbu tree, the open plains, and solitude. Alone on the open plains, mounted on his horse, the gaucho ties a noose to a branch. Kicking the horse out from under him, he hangs himself.

The importance of the horse in this culture was described earlier; the horse is the man's instrument of work, it is his "means of walking," it is seen almost as an extension of his own body. Even gaucho sexuality is related to the horse. It is extremely significant that it is from horseback that he chooses to die. After all he is the centaur of the pampa.

In gaucho imagery, to die from horseback may mean, not the final dissolution of the centaur, but its converse. At the moment of death, the gaucho completes the metaphor: he elects to die as a centaur not as a man. A classic piece of dialogue from fiction, referring to the gaucho's endurance of his daily confrontation with the wild and to his mastery of the necessary skills, says, "You have become a man -- better than a man, a gaucho."<sup>9</sup> Paraphrasing this, at the moment of the gaucho's death from horseback, he is saying, "I have become a gaucho -- better than a gaucho, a centaur."

Alternatively, death is the dissolution of the centaur: the man-half,

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<sup>9</sup> Ricardo Güiraldes: *Don Segundo Sombra*.

who has tamed and subdued nature in life, dies, while the beast-half survives. It is in a sense both dissolution and resolution: in death the gaucho becomes fully subsumed, finally reconciled, to nature. His death is perhaps, at a metaphorical level, not a complete death, but rather a return to wildness. Indeed, stories of death, the supernatural and *almas penadas* (wandering souls) fill many evenings in the *galpão*.

The lasso is also a work tool, and an instrument of control. All his life the gaucho avoids *ties*, for him marriage and children mean to be *tied* (*enrolado, amarrado*). Woman is a *tie* which suffocates. To own or cultivate land creates *ties*. However, he chooses a tie to die precisely because he has no other ties. Either because he was not allowed, or because he has not wanted them (and he creates an entire symbolic universe justifying his lack), the fact is that he does not have these *ties*: he does not have anything holding him back, keeping him on the ground. Coincidentally or not, his death also keeps him away from the ground: the salient fact of death by hanging, is that his feet must not touch the ground.

A horseman has no alternatives outside this world of horses and herds. But even if the outsider understands his suicide as the result of this lack of social alternatives, the gauchos understand it as a act of dignity, arrogance and liberty. In the poem about the fighting cock that I transcribed earlier (see Chapter V) this is clear:

Ao te ver quase defunto  
De arrasto, quebrado e cêgo  
Como quem diz: "Não me entrego

When I see you almost dead  
Blind, broken, dragging yourself  
it is as if you are saying: "I won't  
surrender myself

Sou galo; morro e não grito."

I'm a cock; I face death without cry  
or shout."

The open fields of the pampa are treeless, except for the umbu which is typical of this region. The umbu is a solitary, large and leafy tree, with roots that grow above the ground. It gives shade, but other than that, is considered useless because its wood is soft, spongy with a resin that makes it unsuitable for firewood. Because of its shade, the umbu is planted close to houses. Thus, in the deserted pampa, when we see an umbu it usually indicates that there will be water and people near by. Its leaves are used in the *mate* as a mild purgative; its bark is used in tea as a strong laxative. In this region, even those who never drank umbu tea, associate the umbu with physical purges and purification. Its little fruits are of the size of peas and are used also as remedy for fever.

The umbu bark is soft and easily marked. In tales and poems the analogy between the umbu and the gaucho is common: both are lone *creatures* on the pampa, "useless" away from the place where they belong, heroically resisting sun and rain, and carrying the scars of a glorious past. Its thick, twisted trunk is an impressive image; in many gaucho tales, an old umbu is a haunted place (*mal assombrado*). A dried hollow umbu or its dense foliage is conceived as an appropriate hiding place for *assombração* and *almas penadas*;<sup>10</sup> it is the favorite place nesting place of

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<sup>10</sup> *Assombração* is an indefinable spooky thing or event, something that one cannot explain. *Alma penada* (vagrant soul) is a soul that has no place to rest.

owls. A gaucho will not admit he believes in supernatural beings, but tales of lost souls and haunted trees form a well defined genre of their folklore: the gauchos admit that there are many things which are incomprehensible to men, which do not conform to *reason* (*não são de razão*), but still occur.

Various elements give the umbu a mysterious aura. In the pampa, violent storms with thunder and lightning are not uncommon; the umbu, being the only large tree, attracts thunderbolts, burning or splitting in half. Gauchos say that the Guarani Indians used to plant an umbu tree when they had to bury someone far from their homeland.

The umbu encompasses many meanings. It is associated with both solitude and the existence of people, with bodily purges and purification, with mysteries, with the ability to attract the energy of nature. The umbu also has a metaphorical association with the gaucho in its strength and solitude, in its useless wood which gauchos liken to useless skills, in its characterization as a tree without fruit, which is linked to the gaucho's own lack of family. Finally, as we have seen, the umbu is also associated with death through the stories of Indians' tombs and of suicide.

Let us turn now to the story of the woman's suicide, also relevant to our understanding of a culture that is prodigal in providing us with dramatic statements about itself. This story was told to me by a man who had attempted suicide twice a few years earlier. He was not a typical gaucho because he owns some land, a small amount compared to the



regional pattern of land tenure, where he raises few heads of cattle in his ranch with the help of three other gauchos. He was a patron, but since he also works and lives on his ranch, he was seen as a gaucho: his property is too small for him to be considered a landowner (*estancieiro*). He was 45 years old, and unmarried. He told me the will to kill oneself is "in the blood". He was born on the same day and in the same house where his unmarried maternal aunt committed suicide. He gave me many details of her suicide: she was dressed in a white bridal gown, her face carefully made up with red lipstick. All this happened in the city where they lived, away from his father who lived in the countryside. He speculates that she may have killed herself because she was in love with his father and wished to have his child. He also identifies her somehow with his own mother, saying that it is as if she could have died in the labor of bringing him to life. No matter the exact reasons for this female suicide, it is clear that it involves a dramatization of experience, solitude, frustration in relation to procreation, and the concrete impossibility of finding a mate given the social structure of segregated male and female spaces.

Both female and male suicides can be seen as ritualized acts expressing a specific social reality. In the male narrative of woman's case, he stresses that she is unhappy because "she does not have a man;" her preoccupation with her appearance by dressing in her best clothes to die is seen as futile. In the male perception, her act of suicide is in itself both futile and cowardly. In a way, female suicide is seen as the result of a



frustrated search for identity while male suicide is seen as the courageous epitome of male identity.

### Death, Challenge and Honor

To grasp the meaning of the act of suicide is not an easy task. Perhaps no other phenomenon is at once so individual and so subjective a decision while at the same time so clearly the corollary of the collective representations and values imposed upon its members by a group.

In most cultures a system of values is enacted rather than conceptualized, but in gaucho culture, where self-reflection and verbalization are very much part of social practice, the gauchos themselves explain in the *galpão* talks:

Eu faço do pensamento  
as cordas de uma guitarra  
que muitas vezes por farrá  
me prendo num bordoneio  
Pra' destruir os anseios  
da minha propria existencia

I turn my thoughts  
in the strings of a guitar  
and many times for fun  
I play with its grave sounds  
to destroy the desires  
Of my own existence

Or yet:

Nós todos bem o sabemos  
Ninguém nasce pra' semente  
E quando, num derrepente,  
Um galderiar se termina  
Então cumpri minha sina.

We all know very well  
Nobody was born to be seed,  
And when, all of sudden,  
A herding is over  
Then I have accomplished my fate.

Both the wish for death as a difficult challenge that has to be pursued and death itself represent a certain pleasure:

Solitude incites and removes the brakes to his [the man of the pampa's] carnal appetites. Fear of total and anonymous death pushes him toward that act symbolic of life. Sexual frenzy is the fever of the cold and arid plains. [...] sexual appetites permit one to remain in this world to penetrate it, to possess it. That man who with all his animal forces wishes to procreate, with all his human forces wishes to die. (Martinez Estrada 1971 [1933])

The potential connection between the sexual drives and death wishes might be part of this culture as Martinez Estrada indicates. The gauchos' narratives show that they fear being engulfed, tied, and suffocated by women; and it is at least paradoxical that this is a way they choose to die. Asphyxiation has a sexual connotation, at least in its imagery. Death is also a challenge, and every challenge in this male universe is an opportunity for a man to prove himself, to prove his manliness. Love itself is presented by them as a relationship of dispute between two men rather than an affective involvement with a woman:

E quando a prenda do lado  
me olha com picardia  
Caramba! Que judiaria  
se não existisse o pecado!  
Em uma carreira de amor,  
é lindo soltar atras  
pra' assustar o parceiro.  
Todo índio tarimbeiro

When the woman next to me  
looks at me maliciously  
Caramba! What a pity  
if the sin didn't exist!  
In a love race<sup>11</sup>,  
it's nice to start behind  
to scare the partner.  
Every Indian<sup>12</sup> with skills

<sup>11</sup> The word race refers to a horse race (*carreira*).

<sup>12</sup> *Indian tarimbeiro* stands here for experienced and skillful male.

sabe que china com manha  
 é carreira que se ganha  
 mas tem que chegar primeiro.

knows that a woman with charm  
 is a race that one wins  
 but one has to arrive first.

Competition and rivalry are very much part of the gaucho culture, this is present also in their sexual mores. The verses above were the answer a gaucho gave to me when I asked about his relationships with women. In his answer woman was an object to be conquered, but the competition and the relationship between the two men is more important than the woman. The pleasure comes from the dispute and interaction with other men, not with the woman. Early accounts of the gaucho had also observed this phenomenon:

This habit of competition followed him even in sexual affairs. He as firmly desired to be successful in love as to possess the reputation of being invincible as horse-breaker, poet, and duelist. Rivalry, competition inspired him. A woman attracted him when she must be disputed with someone else [...] She did not tempt him in herself. (Levillier 1912 cf. Nichols 1937:126).

Many gaucho cultural practices are in the form of competition, male song challenges (*trova*), male dance duels (*chula*), the bone-game (*tava*), the horse race, the cockfight, the cards (*truco*), and horse-breaking. All these activities also involve a considerable amount of verbal dispute and gambling. Gambling is in itself a defiance: they say, "a man has to be man enough to bet everything he has" or to be man is also a measure of

"being able to lose everything he has."<sup>13</sup> Challenge is always a defiance to manliness. Death can in this context be seen as gambling with life -- a last *parada*,<sup>14</sup> a last stand -- and the common reward for the strong in this culture is manliness. Actually this culture of defiance and the fascination that betting exercises over the gaucho can be seen as prefiguring a fascination with death. Every act of gambling in which he bets all or nothing (*tudo ou nada*), where he risks everything he has even if he possesses very little, is an act of self-destruction. In fact, the lure and the fascination of gambling is more in the danger of losing everything than in the possibility of winning. To acquire things one can just buy them, but gambling offers the possibility of losing everything. The gaucho does not care about cash or goods; what is at stake is his social prestige. To be able to give away things is honorable, to give away his own life is even more honorable.

Death, woman, and challenge are somehow linked. Both woman and death are at once frightening and enticing. The former the gaucho can avoid, but the latter is his fate. Man's decision "go to meet death" (*ir de encontro a morte*), an expression used by them, is part of the ethos of omnipotence acquired by one who spends his life taming the wild. To

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<sup>13</sup> In the original *um homem tem que ser suficientemente homem pra' perder o que tem or topar qualquer parada*. These and others are expressions frequently used in defiance.

<sup>14</sup> The closest possible translation for *parada* is *match*, but the word also means *stop*, and *instance*.

tame -- *domar*, from the Latin *domus*, meaning to have dominion over -- is the condition of his existence and the condition of his manhood. When the gaucho loses his strength and is no longer able to tame the nature around him, he loses his manliness and his identity as a gaucho. This is actually the moment of his cultural death. He experiences *cultural death* as his individual death. It is time for him to dismount his horse (that formally belongs to the *estância* owner); it is time for him to leave the place where he lives (which does not belong to him and where he is not allowed to settle down). A horseman without a horse is no longer a horseman.

The imagery that the gaucho creates around death, making it an act of courage and liberty, is a way of making this moment of his cultural death less painful. If he does not have children, he realizes a gaucho *death* with all intensity. Without reproduction, there is no sense of continuity; without woman there is no place to go, the connections with the urban world (which does not in any case offer anything to him) are made basically through female networks. To follow a woman or to become dependent on someone, especially a female relative, is degrading for one who thought of himself as the *monarch of the fields* (*o monarca das coxilhas*). Gaucho lore shows this clearly:

Qual matungo apaixonado

As an old horse in love



Atrás da égua madrinha  
Assim pena, assim padece  
Está bem triste minha alma

Following the godmother mare<sup>15</sup>  
This way I suffer and endure  
My soul is very sad

On the one hand, this sudden inversion of a power relation by which the gaucho's experience of dominion over his world and the things around him changes to a situation where he will be dependent on others (the other probably being a female) is perceived as an humiliation. One of the colorful expressions the gaucho uses to indicate that he rejects this situation of dependence is: "I do not drink water out of somebody else's ears" (*não bebo água nas orelhas dos outros*). By this he means that he rejects a situation where he does not have the means to perform the daily life tasks to satisfy his basic needs.

On the other hand, the social situation that imposes itself upon the gaucho the absence of woman, family, home, a place to stay or even the means of daily survival is also presented by them:<sup>16</sup>

El anda siempre juyendo,  
siempre pobre y perseguido;  
no tiene cueva ni nido  
como si fuera maldito;  
porque el ser gaucho - Barajo!  
el ser gaucho es un delito.

He is always on the run,  
always poor and hounded;  
he has neither grave nor nest  
as if he were cursed;  
because being a gaucho - curse it,  
being gaucho is a crime.

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<sup>15</sup> *Egua-madrinha* -- *godmother mare* -- is the mare that wears a bell; the other animals of the herd get used to it and follow her. It is a derogatory way to refer to a person who is able to maintain the people around him or her.

<sup>16</sup> Both are *Martin Fierro's* stanzas, part of the gaucho repertoire of rhymes. See Hernandez 1967 [1872]:100-2.

No tiene hijos, ni mujer,  
ni amigos, ni protectores,  
pues todos son sus senores  
sin que ninguno lo ampare;  
tiene la suerte del guey  
- y donde irá el guey  
que no are?

With no children or woman,  
no friends, and no protectors  
since everyone is his master  
and no one on his side  
he has the fate of an ox - and  
what happens to an ox that  
doesn't plough?<sup>17</sup>

Gaicho folklore is so rich in representations of death that some scholars seem to have confounded the gaicho's own social critique, which sometimes takes the form of an apology, with the literal death of the gaicho as a group, and the gaicho' symbolic preoccupations about death with the historical death of the gaicho.<sup>18</sup> Actually, gaicho suicide may be described as the acting out by an individual of his symbolic reality, which exactly parallels the way that the official ideology on the gaicho presents him: the gaicho, like any other character, only becomes a hero after his death. His last act of bravery is to play the heroic role that the institutionalized representations and his own culture assign to him.

The theme of death which recurs in gaicho folklore is part of this universe of meanings that encompasses a *tragic feeling about life* (*sentimiento tragico da vida*). The theme is also presented in gaicho folk dances. A dance called *vitalitá*, which means *vitality* or *life*, is actually an elegy to death (cf. Gonzales 1943:119):

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<sup>17</sup> *Guey* means ox, animal of work. It implies a parallel between the gaicho -- as an animal of work -- who, like an ox, is killed when he becomes useless for work.

<sup>18</sup> See Chapter I for a review of this literature on gaichos.

El buscar la calma,  
vitalitá,  
es un vano empeno,  
porque en este mundo,  
vitalitá,  
la vida es un sueno.

Sueno es la esperanza,  
vitalitá,  
la gloria, el amor,  
realidad es la muerte,  
vitalitá,  
la pena, la dolor.

The search for tranquillity,  
vitality,  
is a vain effort  
because in this world,  
vitality,  
life is a dream.

The dream is hope,  
vitality,  
glory, love,  
reality is death,  
vitality,  
the sorrow, the pain.

Intimacy with death is a condition of the existence of a life organized around the production of cattle for slaughtering. Although animals are driven to a slaughterhouse, and mass slaughter is not part of *estância* activities, death is present in the daily life of the *estância*. Animals to be consumed on the *estância* are killed there; winter frost or summer droughts reduce pastures sometimes killing the cattle; a sick animal or one with a broken bone has to be sacrificed. In other words, the buffers urban culture has from death do not exist on the *estâncias*. The fact that the final goal of the entire production of the *estância* is slaughter, and more or less frequent decisions about killing an animal are necessary (for example, the decision to kill an old horse, which also entails emotional considerations), exposes the gauchos to an intimacy with death.

Gaicho emotions and representations of death significantly differ from those of a population that rarely deals with it; gauchos live with death and think about it. It is acceptable that an animal, too old or in

pain, should be killed (sacrificed, *sacrificado*, is the term used). This rationale extends to man: when a man gets old and loses the agility and strength necessary to be a horseman, within this logic it makes sense that he should decide to kill himself.

The process of internalizing death as a fact of gaucho life was noticed by travelers from the last century:

The savage education of the *estância* produces in the gaucho a complete indifference to human life, by familiarizing him from his most tender years to the contemplation of the violent death, whether it is that he inflicts it on another or receives it himself (Hadfield 1854:303).

### **From Horse to Little Mare**

So far in this chapter I have explored the meanings which comprise a system of signification around death in gaucho culture. My research aims to present the diverse aspects of the construction of the gaucho identity. Their own representations, values and actual practices about life and death are essential to an understanding of the elements that constitute this identity.

Reviewing the key elements in the construction of the identity of the gaucho, we see certain established dichotomies -- male/female, wild/tame, country/city, strong/weak, nature/culture -- around which every gaucho will define himself. Gauchos are male, and virility is a condition of

being gaucho. The gaucho masters the wild, identifying himself with the wild, with strength, power and nature. Only one who has more power than the wild will be able to tame it. The gaucho on his horse, alone on the open plains, experiences feelings of mastery over the world around him. He praises his own body, his strength, his force, his virility -- a male culture is the ostensible display of these characteristics. After all, physical strength is also his labor and way of living. This is a narcissistic culture that teaches him to be proud of himself, to be arrogant, imposing and aggressive. All these elements become part of the image that he has of himself.

The gaucho is omnipotent in relation to the nature around him. As I have indicated throughout the dissertation, gaucho speech is laden with metaphors drawn from nature: he is a horse, he is the bull, he is the fighting cock, he is the wind, he is the river, he is the umbu tree. He embodies the nature around him. He is each and all of these elements with such an intensity that nature itself becomes an extension of the *self*.

Perhaps his self-destruction is an ultimate act of self-esteem. In his narcissistic omnipotence he *is* the world around him. Symbolically the tenuous boundaries between the man and the nature which surrounds him are erased by a suicide that can also be seen as an incorporation of nature. Moreover, if his culture causes him to construct an identity so interwoven with natural elements the moment of the separation of the gaucho from this space must be extremely painful, regardless of the



alternatives. Indeed, the pain of separation may be greater than that of self annihilation.

From an outsider's perspective, is hard to think of the gaucho as a prepotent figure. Considering the class structure of the society into which he is inserted, he is in actuality in an extremely subordinate position. He is a wage worker, unorganized, with only weak links to the union of rural workers. Given the considerable profit of the sector of cattle production and the reduced numbers of workers involved, gaucho labor probably generates the highest rate of surplus value when compared to the other sectors. Unions and political groups expect him to make the claim of the peasants -- land -- or the claim of the urban workers -- better wages. Neither land nor money interests him; neither bears any relation to his existence as a gaucho.

The gaucho system of values refers to a very specific social reality, that of a pastoral life. It does not have much to do with the social solutions presented to him by the urban organizations such as political parties or labor unions. Such organizations, and even the possibility of integration into the urban labor force, necessarily require that he leave behind his identity as a gaucho. What these institutions require figuratively is his *death*, his cultural extinction.

As I have documented earlier in this work,<sup>19</sup> the *Centers of Gaucho Traditions*, at least at an ideological level, offer, if not an alternative, at

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<sup>19</sup> For the role of Centers of Gaucho Traditions see Chapter I and II.

least affirmation to the gaucho. The *centers* are not an economic or social solution, but in their celebration of the gaucho, they offer him a place, within the urban setting, to cultivate his pride, his values and some of his cultural practices. They offer self-esteem.

In order to conclude I would like to explore a last metaphor from gaucho folklore. A series of popular stanzas depict the metamorphosis of the gaucho into a *tatu*. The verses, the rhythm and the dance are also called *tatu*. *Tatu* means armadillo, a small, burrowing mammal with a hard bony shell, that crawls on the ground. It is common on the pampas:

Depois de muito corrido  
Nos pagos em que nasceu  
O tatu alçou o poncho  
E pra'outras bandas se moveu.

After being expelled  
From the place where he is born  
The *tatu* got his *poncho* and  
To other places he moved.

Eu vi o tatu montado  
No seu cavalo picaço<sup>20</sup>  
De bolas e tirador,  
De faca, rebenque e laço.

I saw the *tatu* mounted  
On his black horse  
With bolas and *tirador*,<sup>21</sup>  
With knife, whip and lasso.

O tatu desceu a serra

The *tatu* came down from the moun-  
tains<sup>22</sup>

Com fama de laçador  
Bota laço, tira laço

Famous for his roping  
Put on the lasso, take the lasso  
off

Bota pealos de amor

Put ties<sup>23</sup> of love on him.

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<sup>20</sup> *Picaço* in the gaucho vocabulary means a black horse with white forehead and white hooves.

<sup>21</sup> *The tirador* is a wide leather belt used by the gaucho.

<sup>22</sup> *Serra* is a reference to a region of the state of Rio Grande do Sul.

<sup>23</sup> in the original *pealos* refer to a specific way of catching and tying a horse by its legs.

O tatu foi encontrado  
 Pra's banda de S.Sepé  
 Mui aflito e muito pobre  
 De freio na mão, a pé.

The *tatu* was found  
 Close to S. Sepé<sup>24</sup>  
 Afflicted and poor  
 Holding the reins and without a  
 horse.

Those rhymed stanzas are endless; I myself collected over ten. The verses follow a sequence where in the beginning the *tatu* impersonating the gaucho is mounted on his horse and leaving his *pago*, the place where he was born. He goes to different cities, encounters many obstacles, performs different tasks, but becomes more and more miserable and less of a gaucho: he loses fights, he is tied up by his feeling for a woman, animals bite him, he is defenseless, he is injured and seeks out a female healer. With her medicine he gets sicker.

The saga has the narrative structure of a hero tale, but the *tatu-gaicho* is a loser, basically because he has left his place. It reverses the heroic deeds. Though brave and honorable, the gaucho in this ground animal form is restrained by his own form, he defends himself with his hard shell and endures suffering, but he is unable to fight back. The *tatu-gaicho* lives on the ground crawling, the opposite of any gaucho ideal.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> São Sepé is the name of a city of the region.

<sup>25</sup> There are striking similarities between the armadillo in gaucho lore and the pangolin in Lele ritual life described by Douglas (1966:170-9). Both animals are anomalous, looking like reptiles, but being mammals. Both also have in common the fact that they do not attack, instead, they curl in balls and wait for the aggressor, seemingly in a voluntary submission to their own death.

The armadillo is peculiar in the fact that each time the female armadillo gives birth the entire litter will have the same sex, the young will be either all female or all male. Folk verses stress this peculiarity. The subtleties of gaucho imagery reflect the social reality of gender segregation. The other name by which the armadillo is known in the region is *mulita*, which means *little mare*, to be more precise, *little mule*. Although the association between the failing gaucho and the mare is not explicit, it is unavoidable. Gaucho failure is perceived as a gender reversal, a feminization: from the height of his horse to the ground, from mighty centaur to lowly little female horse. The loss of his gaucho identity is also the loss of his identity as a male.

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## Appendix

The following tale, in its original Portuguese version, is an example of the *galpão* oral culture. See Chapter III.

### Pedro Malazartes e Deus

E o caso do Pedro Malazarte, justo com Deus, tu sabes? Então Pedro se deu justo com Deus, sem saber com quem tratava, tá? [Pause] Chegô na casa do velinho e disse:

"E o senhor, que anda fazendo?"  
"Eu ando percurando serviço."

Já tratô com Deus, sem saber com quem falava. Os dois sem saber com quem fala, nem o Pedro nem o Deus. Mas o Pedro Malazarte, muito sabido e muito falado, não? Então estava, então já interessou, sabe.

"Patrão, eu ando percurando serviço," diz.  
"Tem serviço prá ti, mas é serviço bem pouquinho."

Claro e já falou com Deus, e já sabia qual era o pensamento que ele tinha, né? Todo o pensar dele, né. Pois era Deus! Sim, mas o Pedro não sabia. Pedro não sabia, quem tava na ignorancia era o Pedro, pois Pedro não sabia que era Deus. Aí disse:

"Qual é o serviço que tem que fazer amanhã?"  
"Só isso, só capiná aquela hortinha ali, agora, daqui a oito dias tu tem que saí e viajá comigo. O serviço é só arrumá poso prá nós posá e andá comigo assim."  
"Tá patrão. Muito bem. E só esse serviço, muito bem."

Pedro muito preparado. Pedro Malazarte falado uma barbaridade. Bueno, aí, ah! diz Deus. Se recordou Deus, tá? Disse:

"Todos os dias leva um bilhete na casa da minha mãe."  
"Fica muito longe?"

"Fica lá pro lado daquele arroio que o senhor tá enxergando ali. O senhor tá enxergando?"

"Ah, tô." [Pause]

"Agora, tem de ser tudo certinho, a hora que eu lhe mandá o senhor tem que saí, tal hora que a minha mãe lhe mandá o senhor tem que sair e, claro, por que chega é quinze minutos e aquele arroio ferve água e o senhor não cruzô, fica do lado de lá."

Tanto do lado de lá, como o lado de cá. Tá, Pedro já ficou, ele bah! Ele .... só prá fazer bandalhera ele queria ser mais que tudo, no outro dia se levantou cedo. [Pause] Diz:

"Amanhã cedo." Já ele deu as ordem, "amanhã cedo, antes de'eu escrevê o bilhete que eu lhe que tem que mandá prá minha mãe, tu agarra a enxada e vai capiná aquela hortinha ali."

Capinou, deu umas três enxadadas ali e olhava prá dentro e nada de o velho aparecê, né? Ele com bandalhera, não? [Cough] Agarrou, bateu contra um moitão, quebrou o cabo da enxada, prá fazê tempo, né? Daqui a pouco ai, tá, Deus veio de lá de dentro.

"Já tomou café, Pedro?" - diz.

"Já Patrão, já tomei."

"Quem é que te deu café?"

"Não, eu não tomo café de manhã."

"Ah, tá, como é que tu me mentiu agora? Tu já falou me mentindo - - Ah, tá, Pedro. Está aqui o bilhete tu pega - - e vai lá, mas ólha cuidado com a ordem que eu te der, tu sai agora, são sete horas, tu não embroma muito se não quando tu chega lá, tu não pode cruzá o arroio ali, ferve a água."

Então, saiu. Quando chegou lá, tava já querendo cria fumaça por cima da água. Levô o dedo ainda tava morna. Ele cruzou, num arroio que eu acho que tinha dois mil metro de largura, ele olhou, se espichô mas, barbaridade, o velho quer me matar aqui, mas tem que ser muito fundo, claro, ele muito perparado e sabido não? Bueno, e foi endo, foi indo, foi indo e metendo a burrinha quando tapava o casco, não demora deu no joelho, cruzô, se foi pro outro lado, chegô lá entregou o bilhete. Bueno, foi uma vez só. Bueno, chegou lá ela deu respotinha ele trouxe, tá, tá aqui pronto.

Seguiu capinando a hortinha dele. Ah, e disse Pedro e aquela enxada como é que quebrou? Foi sua burra que pisou em cima. E, eu tava enxiando que burra né? Caborteira! Pirou em cima do cabo da enxada e quebrou. Já mentiu prá ele, né, tá ainda - - ele tava fraquejando aquela hortinha, olhou prá trás aquele bambuzal velho

dessa altura, ué sai? Que não tinha nada. Claro, tava castigando era ali tá limpo prá trás agora, o bambuzal mais alto que está?! Ficou nessa ficou olahando prá trás o bambuzal velho que tá tramando, "té nem vou capiná mais". [Pausa] Foi lá falou:

" Patrão, não vou capiná mais a horta, se tem outro serviço, eu sigo."

" Se não capiná não quero mais Pedro, sabe porque aquilo ali, aquele tramado de, de cerca que tramô ali. Tudo os peão que se justa comigo, que mente, ali aquilo é o acesso das mentira."

Aí, ele ficou botou a mão no rosto ficou a pensar.

" Mas o que que eu lhe menti?"

Ele diz:

" Tu deve de saber o que foi, hum, não é? Tu alevantou injúria da minha burrinha, o mas que tinha alevantado o cabo da enxada?"

" Mas claro que foi."

" Tá bom; Bueno Pedro tu fica pelo Galpão por aí e vamo sair." [Pause]

Bom, aí noutro dia, né, se foram, ele enfiou um casal de burrinho. Diz Pedro, agora se foram, viajaram viajaram, já tinha uma casa disse:

" Tu vai lá naquela casa me pede uma ovelha preta que tem lá, e carneia em uma que tem na estrada assim na estrada. Agora, pra mim tu assa só os rinzinho e o coração agora pra ti tu assa o que tu quizer."

Ele muito enganado botou a metade pra ele - e comeu os rim da velha - naquela chuliazinha assô ligeiro e botou a metade inteira, se danou, né? Bueno, bom, mas nessa parte os rim ele comeu, comeu um só. Ah, e Deus ia atrás tranqulito no más.

" ... mas Patrão mas que cosa séria! Eu tô velho já, não, não sou muito velho, mas não sou muito novo, nunca tinha visto, ovelha preta tem só dois rim."

" Tem ", diz.

" Não, só dois rim, o que é que o senhor me diz?"

" Não, ovelha preta tem só um."

Claro, já saiu prá cá né? Então, já saiu explorando Deus, não? Claro, e claro e pensando que não:

"Não Pedro, ovelha preta tem só um rim, essa quantos tinha?"

"Ah, é mesmo tem só um, tá."

Sim, mas ele tinha comido um. Claro então ele botou boato pro patrão né? Que tinha dois rim. Qué pra ver o que que Deus ia dizer pre'le, se tinha tres quem sabe quantos tinha né? Tá. Bueno, diz Pedro agora churrasquiá, aquele assado não assava nunca então ele comeu meio por cima, sapecou um pouco.

"Agora, tu vai lá naquela vilazinha que tem, não sei quantas casa de pobretão. Tu me pede o caixão mais grande que tivé lá, tá?"

Acho que ele sabia com quem ele tratava né? Ele não tava nessa, o Pedro, tava perdendo o Pedro, é, ele já tava perdendo. Bueno sai por ali. Descobriu um caixão daqueles que cabe uns 200 kilo por dentro. Veio o Pedro, com aquele caixão nas mãos assim na cabeça taí?

"E agora, tu me enche esse caixão de jóia aí", diz Deus.

E claro, ele achando que já tava enrolando o Pedro, e Deus deitado assim.

"Eu podia tá deitado aí", pensou, "Tô enchendo esse caixão de foia e gaio."

Tá. Encheu aquilo de gaio tudo já brabo ele aí, o Pedro. E, diz:

"Bueno, agora tu vira esse caixão com a boca prá baixo," virô, e, "Bueno, querendo te deitá um pouco, pode te deitá."

[Pause]

Já daqui a pouco se alevantaram. Mas a erva de virtude né? Aí, aí então diz:

"Pedro, alevantou da cesta, desvira esse caixão aí?"

Xiii!... Aquele mundo de dinheiro. Pedro diz:

"O, mas, eu ando trabalhando de bobo aqui, né? Não vou mais trabaiá com esse véio. Claro, mas eu chego lá em casa, encho um caixão de folha, boto de cabeça prá baixo e me deito a dormi, é certo que enche de dinheiro,né? Não?"

Mas como a gente é burro não? (o Pedro) O Pedro, claro, faz das orientação pra ele, é claro, não tinha nada com o velho não, tá?



Seguiram viagem, seguiram se foram, mandô chamá primeiro aqueles vizinho ali né? Pra cada um ele deu um bocado de dinheiro, pra outro, e pro Pedro, já brabo, não? Claro, mas, este véio nojento né? Eu que tive trabaio, perdi de dormi, não ganhei nem uma, nem uma moedinha, tá? Ficou na dele, eu vou viajá mais um pouco mais contigo e vô te deixá pra não ser bobo, tá? Se foi uma, Buena, mas se foi, se foi, na boca da noite. Diz:

"Pedro, tu vai lá naquele ranchinho, tá enxergando lá aquela casinha bem pequenininha lá? Que tá aquela ramada lá?"

Diz: "Tô"

"Pega a posada pra nós lá."

"Tá"

Se foi.

E assim se foram. Pedro sempre querendo passar a perna no Deus, sempre fazendo picardia, mas Deus sempre sabendo o que Pedro fazia e Pedro sempre de bobo empenhado na picardia que não resultava em nada.