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## Review of *The Cowboy: Representations of Labor in an American Work Culture* By Blake Allmendinger

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## BOOK REVIEWS

*The Cowboy: Representations of Labor in an American Work Culture.* By Blake Allmendinger. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992. Introduction, black and white photographs, tables, notes, bibliography, index. 201 pp. \$32.50.

Of all the mythologies Americans have constructed for themselves, that surrounding the cowboy is among the most influential and persistent. Blake Allmendinger's book attempts to correct this popularized myth by examining how cowboys represented themselves. *The Cowboy* argues that authentic cowboy culture is best defined as an expression of labor and its self-representation in art. While this is an interesting direction to take in itself, what especially recommends it is Allmendinger's interdisciplinary method. He skillfully combines traditional historical and literary approaches with an examination of folkloric and pop culture sources to create a complex picture of an evolving culture.

Allmendinger particularly emphasizes the marginalized nature of cowboy life. Since cowboys were a group that existed on the fringes of a society that held them in disrepute and kept them economically disenfranchised, they were forced to fashion an identity in opposition to those that excluded them. They did this by subverting the negative stereotypes thrust upon them into emblems of a distinct and positive self-identity. Allmendinger examines different facets of this subversion in his discussions of branding, gender, professional identity, and orphanhood. Particularly strong is his portrayal of a culture wishing to

remain true to its exclusive traditions yet tempted by the financial rewards that come through producing art appealing to mainstream American culture.

Of course, given a book that claims to portray authentic cowboy culture, a skeptic can't help but wonder how an actual working cowboy might respond to Allmendinger's portrayal of branded cattle as floating texts or his discussion of symbolic castration. To hypothesize such an audience may not be quite fair, but one suspects that most cowboys and (more appropriately) some critics would be put off by Allmendinger's post-structuralist terminology. These qualifications aside, *The Cowboy* is a solid piece of work that offers an intriguing analysis of an important aspect of American labor history.

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