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# Rainforest Cowboys: The Rise of Ranching and Cattle Culture in Western Amazonia by Jeffrey Hoelle (review)

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*Rainforest Cowboys: The Rise of Ranching and Cattle Culture  
in Western Amazonia* by Jeffrey Hoelle (review)

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challenges of managing the bilateral US-Mexico relationship? I agree with Dear's answer: a resounding no! And I applaud the way he skillfully tracked down and documented the troubling emergence of a "Border Patrol Nation" on the U.S. side of the border, and demonstrated how that development simply doesn't fit the growing cross-border social, cultural, and economic convergences Dear and other border scholars have written about.

If there is, on some level, a metaphoric "Third Nation" emerging along the border, in the form of integrated communities that share cross-border jobs, investment, movement, travel modes and challenges, leisure destinations, shopping realms, ecosystems, family ties, and struggles to find adequate housing and safe neighborhoods, these cross-border life spaces clearly do clash with the police-state geography of prisons, military landscapes, and drones buzzing overhead. Here lies the ultimate wisdom of Dear's book: on this border, where millions live, economies grow, families are nourished, art flourishes, and innovation happens, walls truly don't work.

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*Rainforest Cowboys: The Rise of Ranching and Cattle Culture in Western Amazonia.* Jeffrey Hoelle. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015. xiv + 196 pp. Photos, maps, diagrams, tables, notes, appendices, references, and index. \$45.00 cloth (ISBN 978-0-292-76134-6).

Research related to tropical deforestation in the Americas has grown from a few seminal articles in the 1970s into one of the most popular topics among Latin Americanist geographers. While cattle ranchers often figure prominently in that literature, the equally popular political ecology approach that dominates such research can represent them rather simplistically, as a monolithic force that destroys rainforest and its native cultures instead of as a social group with its own varied cultural dimensions. With this book, Hoelle joins others who have begun to remedy that considerable gap in the literature by focusing on what he terms "cattle culture" and how it modulates the social interactions of ranchers, cowboys, agricultural colonists, rubber tappers, environmentalists, and government officials in the Brazilian state of Acre.

In Acre, highway BR-364 reaches the frontier between Brazil, Peru, and Bolivia near the headwaters of some of the Amazon's major tributaries. Homeland to the Kulina and many other native peoples, dominated by rubber barons during the nineteenth century, fiercely disputed by Brazil and Bolivia in the early twentieth century, Acre became emblematic of Amazonian social movements in the 1980s through the activism of Chico Mendes. Born in Acre in 1944, the union leader and environmentalist also died there, shot to death in his home by a cattle rancher in 1988. The international media portrayed Mendes as the protagonist, a martyr for the rainforest, and thereby did much to increase popular sympathy for the establishment of reserves to protect the environment, native peoples, and rubber tappers from the agricultural colonization and ranching that was

proliferating along the system of highways the Brazilian government was building to promote colonization and development of the Amazon basin. At the same time, the media narrative established ranchers as the antagonists: not only as the destroyers of the rainforest, but also as the murderers of its defenders. That narrative encouraged researchers to focus on the social movements, indigenous peoples, and the environment while essentializing ranchers as one-dimensional villains.

Hoelle's research reveals cattle ranchers and their employees as a much more complex group, with a fascinating culture that hybridizes elements from the *gaúchos* of southern Brazil with those from the *vaqueiros* of the Sertão of the northeast as well as with yet other elements from North American cowboys. Acrean *caubois* thus listen to traditional *música sertaneja* but also to the fusion genre of *contri*, sip *herba maté* tea but wear big belt buckles and other symbols of what they call the *Texano* style, and love their rodeos as much as gathering at their *churrascos* to eat steak.

Extensive field work that incorporated landscape interpretation, interviews, participant observation, questionnaires, oral histories, and qualitative and quantitative analysis reveals how social groups such as agricultural colonists and rubber tappers have adopted various aspects of that cattle culture as they increasingly began to raise cattle in the 1990s. Their adoption of some *cauboi* practices, perceptions, and symbols is not necessary to the economic integration of cattle herding into agricultural and extractive land uses and therefore suggests the entwining of cultural, economic, and political processes. Agricultural colonists, for example, began to equate the *vida contri* of the ranchers with economic success, bought cattle, began to wear cauboi hats, and consider pasture a more ideal landscape type than fields of crops, signaling a cultural as well as an economic shift. Even environmentalists, who disparage cattle ranching and consider forest the ideal landscape type, eat beef an average of nearly four days per week and have adopted various other elements of cattle culture. One environmental lawyer even opened a store named Cowboys Ranch so that all of the trappings of cattle culture—from hats and lassos to boots and smokeless tobacco—would be available to the urban *caubois de vitrine* (store-window cowboys) who hang out at the *contri* bars of Rio Branco.

Through ten chapters that address ranchers, the semiotics of beef, and many other aspects of cattle culture and its relations to political ecology, this book provides a rigorous and insightful understanding of the interweaving of social, political, economic, cultural, and environmental processes. Assumptions about the homogeneity and stability of Amazonian social groups yield to a more fluid, situational, and relative understanding of identity. Over the past two decades, as people, including rubber tappers and agricultural colonists, have come to associate cattle culture with success and the good life, “an idyllic cattle-centered vision of the rural lifestyle—celebrated in festivals, music, and dress” (p. 36) has become prevalent in Acre. That *cauboi* culture values landscapes transformed through human action, especially pastures over forest.

The intricate entanglements of culture and economy, of sustenance and symbolism, involved in cattle culture have begun to make it as compelling to the inhabitants of the rainforest frontier as it has been in so many other places and times. The Maasai of East Africa, the gauchos of the Pampas, the cowboys of the Great Plains, and many others all treat cattle herding as an integral part of their cultures rather than an economic activity

alone. Hoelle's work provides a model for how to study that emergent phenomenon in the Amazon.

The implications for the rainforest are profound. Environmentalists and government officials sponsor projects, museums, and advertisements to promote the forest-centered culture that Chico Mendes championed. While Hoelle largely ignores native cultures in his account, they also value the forest and sustainable use of its resources over replacement with pastures. During the 1970s and 1980s, those groups opposed large-scale ranchers who dominated cattle production and forest clearance. Currently, some of those groups are themselves creating pastures and adopting aspects of cattle culture, which resonates not only with an economically profitable land use, but also with a vast array of symbols and tropes of western culture. As one rubber tapper whom Hoelle interviewed explained the appeal of cattle culture, the "cowboy has his buckle and his boots. He has a costume. What would be the rubber tapper's costume? Tattered clothing!"

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