Andrew Sluyter

Black Ranching Frontiers: African Cattle Herders of the Atlantic World, 1500–1900.

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One of the most iconic elements of North American western imagery is that of the Marlboro man, a portrait of masculinity, freedom, and mastery of beauty and nature. John Wayne, Jimmy Stewart, Kevin Costner all incarnated a kind of hagiography of (white) frontier Americanism, with only the occasional whiff of a black presence in the Cowboy World in films like Clint Eastwood's *The Unforgiven* with its black sacrificial sidekick. This mythology also infused the description of the *vaqueiros* of the Sao Francisco valley by the great Brazilian writer, Euclides da Cunha.

Black Ranching Frontiers documents conquest by the “*patas de boi*,” the hooves of cattle, whose plodding progress has transformed Latin American landscapes more than any other kind of land use and continues to do so even today in the deforestation front of Latin America's forests. It's not just the animals but their fodder, the African grasses and more recent Australian ones that have claimed so much tropical land. Livestock systems themselves have not been particularly industrialized, but increasingly their fodder crops, both grasses and grains, have been genetically engineered for better adaptation to tropical milieus. Today, almost 50 million hectares in South America are devoted to soybean, a substantial portion of which feed European and South American cattle and Asian pigs and chickens.

Books on slavery frontiers and slave refuge states throughout the hemisphere have helped infuse more black history into writing on the habits of daily life in the production of food for subsistence and commerce, recasting the roots and provenance of knowledge systems and the practices of regional economics. Plantations and provisioning grounds have been increasingly scrutinized. While ranching frontiers and livestock practices haven't been entirely scanted, considering their cultural and landscape importance there are fewer studies of them than one might expect. In part this may reflect the uniformity of the ranchland aspect which cloaks the history and diversity that underpins the livestock sector. Also, ranching ubiquity has contributed to a kind of invisibility. Overviews of the evolution of ranching systems have not seemed very compelling to scholars of late, but Sluyter's excellent book should change that, amplifying our understanding of American ranching traditions profoundly. It shows both the West African and Afro-Mediterranean roots of the livestock system we have come to see as so symbolic of an American “liberated” manifest destiny marking out the “empire of liberty.” In fact, as Sluyter shows, in the New World livestock as an extension of slavery systems constituted one

of the most profound land grabs, by undermining other livelihood production systems, transforming them into oceans of grass and very large horned mammals.

Although the bovine face of conquest looked mild, it was in many ways a kind of “biological warfare” against native agriculture and its complex semi-domesticated production landscapes. As Elinor Melville and others have noted, livestock large and small were the shock troops of imperial dispossession, extending dominion as the hooves of cattle trampled the tropics before them. Ranching was rooted in Spanish Iberian bondage and especially the sahelian and coastal West African livestock systems implanted initially in tropical swamps and based on African techne. In this way, conventional ideas about cowboys and cowboy landscapes have been turned on their head in the deeper shadows and histories as they unfold in this remarkable book.

Sluyter focuses mostly on the Spanish circum-Caribbean networks, institutional forms, and patterns of occupation, emphasizing the Yucatan, Cuba, Barbuda, Louisiana, and, away from this matrix, the Gaucho lands of the southern cone. The circum-Caribbean focus is especially useful because it points to the complexity of the “staging networks,” and the *longue durée* of the livestock enterprise in both the Iberian (and later Moorish) Mediterranean and western Africa, and their very complex historical linkages. Sluyter explores the transformations in systems and practices as they faced various ecologies and labor regimes in the production of hides, meat, and tallow. Tighter management ensued as the sugar economies expanded and as oxen for milling became a critical resource in the new sugar industries, but away from these zones, free-range cattle claimed the terrain, and in many ways the regional histories, and in cases like Argentina, national identities. Areas where cane was not a major crop, such as Louisiana, became sites for “off shoring” food production so that the relentless production of sugar could go forward in environments seen as most apt for it. Cane and cattle were in many ways the twin economies of conquest, but, as Sluyter painstakingly documents, they also took the lowlands of Veracruz and the swamp lands of Louisiana, the island of Barbuda, and the Pampas grasslands.

Detailed case studies and a heterodox approach to a diversity of sources underpins Sluyter’s attention to the mechanisms of diffusion, the changing structures of livestock systems, and the role of Afro knowledge systems as they moved throughout the New World economies. He deploys an array of archival material from land grants and wills to ship manifests and dowries. His emphasis on actors marks this book as an outstanding example of comparative frontier history contextualized within changing ecological contexts, regional power dynamics, and historical periods.

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