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Work to worldview: Rancher identity and cultural solidarity in *Cow Talk*

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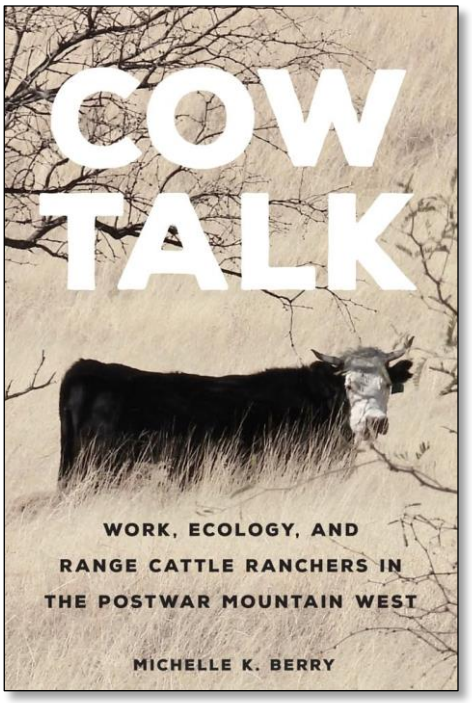

Review of *Cow Talk: Work, Ecology, and Range Cattle Ranchers in the Postwar Mountain West*, by Michelle K. Berry. (2023). Published by University of Oklahoma Press. Available as hardcover, paperback, and ePub; 304 pages. Publisher's website: https://www.oupress.com/9780806191782/cow-talk/

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Histories of western ranchers have often treated them primarily as political antagonists of the federal state or as precursors to late-twentieth-century protest movements. *Cow Talk* challenges this framing by asking how ranchers in the postwar Mountain West came to imagine themselves as a cohesive community long before those conflicts crystallized. Berry frames cow talk as a ranching analog to shop talk, emphasizing how occupational language helped forge solidarity among cattle ranchers, a shared occupational vernacular rooted in everyday cattle work.

Ranchers' recurring stories of drought, blizzards, disease, and market collapse form the experiential core of *Cow Talk*. Berry argues that these shared narratives, circulated through association meetings and publications, allowed cow talk to function as a form of cultural glue, enabling ranchers to manage profound postwar changes such as mechanization, scientific management, federal

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regulation, ecological instability, and demographic pressure without fracturing internally. In Berry's telling, cow talk was not merely slang or occupational chatter but a powerful discourse that framed how ranchers understood threats, elevated forms of labor, and justified claims to expertise, authority, and entitlement. By repeatedly narrating shared hardships and triumphs, such as recurring environmental and market crises, ranchers constructed a sense of common fate that muted divisions of class, gender, and race while reinforcing a singular producer identity. While Berry persuasively demonstrates how cow talk forged cultural solidarity, this emphasis invites further scrutiny of how that solidarity depended on the selective suppression of class distinctions between ranch owners and wage laborers, as postwar ranching became increasingly capital-intensive.

What *Cow Talk* sets out to accomplish, then, is twofold. First, Berry aims to recenter the lived experience of ranch work, what she calls "cow work" and "ecological labor," in the history of the modern West. Second, she seeks to explain how cultural practices, rather than overt ideology, laid the groundwork for later, more confrontational rancher politics. From a materialist perspective, cow talk can also be read as an ideological response to mounting economic pressures—one that transformed structural contradictions in postwar ranching into shared cultural narratives rather than sites of open class conflict.

Methodologically, Berry draws on an expansive archive that includes ranchers' letters, association periodicals, cartoons, poems, photographs, field-day reports, meeting minutes, and ephemera, reading these materials not simply as sources of information but as sites of cultural production. Influenced by Benedict Anderson's (1983) concept of imagined communities, she treats cattle growers' associations and their publications as institutions that allowed geographically dispersed ranchers to see themselves as part of a singular "herd." Berry blends environmental history with labor history, gender history, and the history of science and technology, refusing to isolate ecological processes from social ones. Grass, insects, microbes, weather, and cattle bodies matter as much in her analysis as prices, policies, or politics. While Berry compellingly foregrounds discourse and vernacular, the book is less explicit about how shifting relations of production (mechanization, access to capital, and labor displacement) shaped the contours of cow talk itself.

The book succeeds particularly well in demonstrating how work itself generates ideology. Ranchers' ecological labor, managing grass, eradicating invasive plants, combating disease, and coping with climatic volatility, produced both knowledge and anxiety. These experiences fostered a defensive worldview rooted not merely in suspicion of government but in everyday encounters with unpredictable nonhuman forces. Berry's ranchers were pragmatic actors navigating a fraught ecological economy with the tools and assumptions available to them. This nuanced approach usefully complicates polarized debates about ranching and environmentalism.

Gendered labor provides one of the book's most revealing analytical lenses. Berry shows that ranchwomen's work, often invisible and unpaid, was crucial to the reproduction of ranch life, even as public cow talk privileged masculine, outdoor labor with cattle. Women's auxiliary organizations, such as the Cowbelles, offered ranchwomen a sanctioned avenue into the public face of ranching culture, particularly through beef promotion and consumer outreach, though these roles rarely disrupted underlying patriarchal norms. Berry does not overstate ranchwomen's agency, but she convincingly demonstrates their centrality to the survival of ranch culture and usefully challenges masculinist narratives of ranching. However, the relative absence of sustained class analysis raises questions about whether gender becomes the primary explanatory framework at the expense of a fuller account of labor relations in the ranch economy.

If there is a limitation to *Cow Talk*, it is one that the author herself largely acknowledges. By focusing on how unity was constructed, the book necessarily foregrounds the narratives ranchers told about themselves rather than those they suppressed. Indigenous dispossession, racialized labor, and deeper class antagonisms appear mainly as silences or absences within cow talk rather than as fully developed counterhistories. This is less a flaw

than an invitation for future scholarship to build outward from Berry's framework. Berry's decision to prioritize cultural cohesion over structural analysis yields important insights, but it also limits the book's ability to fully account for how labor relations, labor exploitation, and ownership hierarchies conditioned the very possibilities of unity that cow talk made visible.

In terms of significance, *Cow Talk* makes an important intervention in both environmental history and Western history. It fills a chronological and interpretive gap between early twentieth-century grazing politics and the highly visible confrontations of the 1970s and beyond. More broadly, it offers a compelling model for understanding how communities facing environmental precarity and structural change use culture, language, memory, and ritual to generate political power long before that power becomes overtly militant. In an era marked by renewed rural alienation, resource conflict, and debates over expertise, Berry's work resonates well beyond its historical frame.

Ultimately, *Cow Talk* is a persuasive and elegant study of how work, ecology, and discourse intertwine. By taking ranchers' words, images, and practices seriously without uncritically endorsing their claims, Berry gives readers a deeper understanding of how a powerful rural constituency came to speak with one voice and why that voice still echoes across the political landscapes of the contemporary West.

Reference

Anderson, B. (1983). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. Verso.