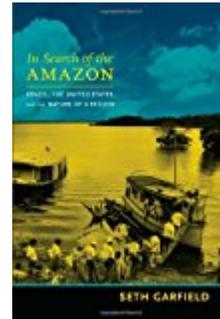


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Seth Garfield. *In Search of the Amazon: Brazil, the United States, and the Nature of a Region.* American Encounters/Global Interactions Series. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014. 369 pp. \$94.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-5571-7; \$26.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-5585-4.



Reviewed by Teresa Cribelli (University of Alabama)

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While the title of Seth Garfield's impressive new tome, *In Search of the Amazon: Brazil, the United States and the Nature of a Region*, gives the impression of a more general comparative study of the place of the Amazon in Brazilian and US political, scientific, and economic imaginaries, the core of the analysis centers on Amazonian rubber production during the build-up to and execution of World War II. Garfield examines the role of the Amazon in the sometimes converging, sometimes competing visions held by groups as varied as the US government, local oligarchs, Brazilian bureaucrats, and public health scientists, as well as the rubber workers for which the Amazon came to mean economic opportunity and even salvation. He argues that the Amazon, at heart, "is a social product, forged by people and institutions that have made material and symbolic investments in the region" (p. 1). Showing how it was viewed as alternately a promising and problematic region for much of its history after Portuguese colonization and into the nineteenth century, Garfield traces the twentieth-century transformation of the Amazon from a dangerous wilderness to a tamed center of progress and modernity, tying together analytical threads that focus on "labor, social conflict, and representation in the making of nature." He explores these topics in five chapters and an epilogue.

The first chapter begins with a reinvigorated focus on the development of the Amazon under President Getulio Vargas's Estado Novo (New State) in the 1930s and 40s. As exemplified by the state-sponsored *Marcha para o Oeste* (March to the West), Garfield argues, the Amazonian region was understood as a geographical and social space vital to the enactment of modernity, especially economic development. Visions of development were motivated by a combination of local and national interests that ranged from securing government funding for the modernization of extractive and agricultural economies to the military's goal of protecting Brazil's northern and eastern borders through settlement and the construction of infrastructure. Both economic and scientific visions of development centered on transforming the Amazon from a "green hell" inimical to modernization and far from the industrialized and politically dominant southern states, to a charismatic and docile region amenable to order and progress.

Chapter 2 explores the United States' rekindled interest in the Amazon as a rubber supplier during WWII. As is well known, rubber was a crucial raw material that undergirded the production of war machinery from engine gaskets to airplane tires. When the loss of Asian sources of rubber due to Japan's invasion of Malaysia in

1942 resulted in shortages for domestic consumption in the US, the threat to the production of trucks, planes, and gear quickly became a matter of vital military importance. US manufacturers had abandoned the Amazon as a source of rubber with the rise of Asian production by the 1910s, but now saw Brazil as a viable, though problematic, alternative for solving the rubber crisis. Joining forces with local and national Brazilian actors, the US government invested in programs aimed at bringing in rubber workers from other regions (primarily the Northeast) to Amazonian *seringais* (forests where rubber trees grew). Beyond expanding rubber production, US agencies sought to improve the public health of workers through education and medical care, as well as reforming the debt-peonage system between rubber bosses and tappers. While US wartime investment in the Amazon never met rubber production goals, it did result in the construction of airfields, urban infrastructure, and roads, effectively contributing to the growth of “rain-forest cities” like Manaus, today an industrial hub and important urban center in the Amazon.

Chapters 3 and 4 focus on the rubber workers themselves. The oft-maligned peasant workers who followed routes through the forest to cut the bark of trees and collect sap for rubber production were recast during WWII as *soldados da borracha* (rubber soldiers) directly engaged in defeating Nazi Germany. Garfield provides a poignant example of tappers proud and motivated in their work by magazine photographs of finished planes and trucks that their rubber helped to produce (p. 123). Workers were recruited from within Brazilian borders and the Northeastern states in particular, with Ceará providing the lion’s share of migrants. Garfield rightfully places this mass migration of workers (nearly 7,000 Cearenses migrated to the Amazon in 1943 alone) alongside Rosie the Riveter and the Braceros program that recruited women industrial workers and brought Mexican farm laborers to the United States within a greater international context of the wartime mobilization of labor (p. 123). Garfield also sheds nuanced light on the reasons that Northeastern laborers decided to try their hand in the rubber fields. Periodic devastating droughts are often identified as a push factor in outmigration from the Northeast. Garfield observes that drought was more than a geophysical phenomenon; it exacerbated already sharp economic and social inequalities, driving the poor to desperate measures. Well before WWII, Northeastern migrants fleeing the dire conditions of drought sought refuge in the Amazon. By seeking new lives in the distant forest in the nineteenth century, workers escaped periodic droughts, but

they also saw the Amazon as a beaconing refuge where they could build a better life for themselves and their children. This vision of the Amazon as economic opportunity was rekindled with the mass exodus of Northeastern rubber workers in the 1940s.

Chapter 5 completes Garfield’s analysis with an investigation of the competing interests and resultant Amazonian imaginaries that emerged during the war. He writes, “During World War II, a multinational, cross-class set of actors battled to remake the Amazon. Although formally allied against the Axis, their common mission was fractured by subjectivities of class, gender, profession, and nationality” (p. 212). In other words US government officials, Brazilian modernizers, migrant workers, local oligarchs, and Getúlio Vargas himself all participated in the transformation of the Amazonian landscape, though their underlying motives were varied and even sometimes at odds with one another. Nonetheless, with rubber as the central catalyst in the twentieth century, the Amazon was transformed from a dangerous and chaotic jungle into a benevolent rainforest, providing poignant examples of the ways different interests reshaped both the imagined and material contours of the Amazon.

This short review cannot do full justice to Garfield’s analysis and the rich array of archival sources (US and Brazilian government records, newspapers, travel narratives, and Brazilian folk songs and poems) that provide much-needed nuance to our understanding of Amazonian development, particularly the role of rubber in shaping landscape, culture, and politics in the twentieth century. In this vein, *In Search of the Amazon* complements Geoffrey Hoelle’s recent *Rainforest Cowboys: The Rise of Ranching and Cattle Culture in Western Amazonia* (2015), Susanna Hect’s *The Scramble for the Amazon and the “Lost Paradise” of Euclides da Cunha* (2013), Greg Grandin’s *Fordlandia: The Rise and Fall of Henry Ford’s Forgotten Jungle City* (2009), as well as Barbara Weinstein’s classic *The Amazon Rubber Boom, 1850-1920* (1983). As the above summary demonstrates, Garfield’s work falls at the intersection of the histories of labor, the environment, political ecology, and culture. In weaving together these analytical threads, the author invites his audience to see the Amazon as a dynamic social landscape that goes beyond contemporary popular conceptions of the region as a timeless, ahistorical space. In the epilogue he returns to the example of rubber tappers to illustrate the shifting meanings of the forest. Whereas tappers were seen alternately as impoverished laborers exploited by rubber barons or shifty ne’er-do-wells too unreliable for more

respectable professions during WWII, by the 1980s they were reimagined as “green guerillas” whose sustainable use of forest resources stood in sharp contrast to predatory logging and clear-cutting of forest for cattle ranching. Today they are categorized as a protected traditional population (alongside the indigenous) with rights to extract rubber in forest reserves codified in Brazilian law.

Garfield effectively demonstrates that rubber extraction played a key role in the transformation of the Amazon (both in physical and conceptual terms) by the mid-twentieth century. Nonetheless, this reader is left with a few questions. While the author shows beyond a doubt the importance of rubber in attracting infrastructure investment to the Amazon, it would be useful to know

more about how rubber projects coincided or fell into conflict with other development schemes. Rubber extraction never returned to its late nineteenth-century heyday; what lessons did Brazilian actors take away from its failure? What other projects were important in shaping development in the region by the midcentury? What happened, for example, when ranching and rubber interests collided over access to forest? Despite these questions, Garfield successfully brings to light the complicated and rich history that too often is flattened in contemporary national and international imaginings of the Amazon. In this he provides a model of how to write the history of the environment from a multifaceted, complex, and nuanced perspective.

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