

UC SANTA BARBARA

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## **From Amazon pastures to suburban lawns and groomed bodies: Anthropologist's new book explores the meanings of plants and hair**

Cultivated lawns, cleared cattle pastures and carefully groomed hair all reflect a shared cultural logic, according to a new book by UC Santa Barbara anthropology [professor Jeffrey Hoelle](#).

In "[Cultivated: Plants, Hair, and the Aesthetic of Control](#)" (Yale, 2026), Hoelle explores how people shape both landscapes and bodies through practices tied to cleanliness, order and control. The book draws from research in the Brazilian Amazon as well as urban and suburban landscapes in Brazil and the United States, following what Hoelle calls the "imprint of cultivation."

"It examines this relationship between how people shape plants and hair, and how the two are connected in an overarching aesthetic of control," said Hoelle. "The way these two 'covers' are managed is similar in the emphasis on straight lines or geometric shapes, and people consistently read clean-cut bodies and lawns in similar ways."

The project grew out of Hoelle's research on ranching and deforestation at the edge of the Amazon rainforest in Brazil, where he has worked since 2007. After studying

the expansion of cattle raising for his [first book](#), he became interested in the symbolic meanings attached to cultivated landscapes.

“I walked to interviews to ask people about how they used their land. I was focused on the upcoming interview, but I slowly noticed that the people from the local community who accompanied me were always commenting on the state of the pasture while we walked,” he said. “They might say it was ‘clean’ or ‘dirty,’ based on how it looked.

“I gradually realized these observations of pasture were connected to the character of the people who owned the land,” Hoelle continued. “The farm with the clean pasture was linked to a hard worker, while ‘dirty’ overgrown pastures created concern and criticism — what was wrong with the person who lives here? Were they sick? Lazy? Dead?”

In frontier Amazonia, the “clean” pasture tells everyone that a hard worker lives in that house, but it also shows they are contributing to a larger project of bringing progress to the forests they see as unproductive and wild.

Hoelle never intended to study the body, he said, but he noticed that people were evaluated in similar ways, based on their control over hair. “Like the plants on the land, the hair on the body was also described using similar terms. I began to see hair and plants as ‘covers’ that both grow, fall out, sprout up and otherwise behave naturally,” he said.

People recognize the hair-plants connection, he added, giving examples like “stubble,” “cornrows” and “tendrils.” “We use similar tools and procedures to manage them, creating similar imprints, such as straight edges, uniform density, symmetry or removal. Even when the intention is to create a ‘natural’ look, it is necessary to show that a cover has been shaped in some way by a person for it to be considered cultivated.”

Extending the study to the body required thinking about the ethical issues surrounding sensitive and highly personal topics of hair and the body. Hoelle interviewed barbers and beauty experts, but did not ask people about their own hair or observe any procedures.

Thinking about where hair was on the body and what society defined as the *padrão* (the dominant standard or pattern) in Brazil revealed general expectations for the groomed body, he explained. It also made clear that women and Afro-Brazilians faced greater scrutiny and baseline standards for grooming body and head hair.

As Hoelle details in his book, many Americans are already familiar with famed Brazilian beauty exports, the Brazilian wax and the Brazilian blowout. These popular procedures remove pubic hair and straighten or smooth textured or curly hair, respectively. “These and many other beauty procedures associated with a good appearance are influenced by standards of beauty that paint naturally occurring covers of women and Afro-Brazilians as undesirable forms that must be ‘improved,’” he said.

When Hoelle returned from fieldwork in Brazil, he thought he could focus on writing, but he could not help but see the imprint of cultivation. “It looked a little different,” he said, “but the same emphasis on shaping covers in human spaces was there, as was the reading of the landscape and assigning values to people.

“These things I observed about plants and hair in Brazil helped me see that the imprint of cultivation extended beyond the boundaries of what I considered the field, and so did the broader system of thought that equates control over covers with virtue,” Hoelle continued.

“This forced me to reconsider external critiques of Amazonian land use and the ways people from outside of the U.S. might find our land uses irrational. While Brazilian farmers clear land to produce food, lawns are the largest irrigated crops in the U.S., consuming massive resources without yielding sustenance. Yet, Americans face immense pressure to maintain them as a symbol of character.” As Hoelle notes, a perfect lawn might reflect hard work, but it could just as easily mean someone paid a landscaper, or that a serial killer lives inside. Ultimately, the link between outward appearance and inner character can be deceptive, whether applied to lawns or hair.

For Hoelle, questioning inherited assumptions about order, cleanliness and control is increasingly important to conversations about sustainability and equality.

“If we’re trying to move toward a more sustainable and just world, then it’s necessary to really question these assumptions,” he said. “We have to understand the system of thought that is inherited and confront it. With plants, how might we move toward relations that are less domineering? And with the body, this is more

about being able to decide what is right for you. As one woman in Brazil put it, they just want to be able to have the freedom to decide where and how hair will grow on their own body, like a white man, without all the pressure or assumptions that something is wrong with them.”

Rather than treating environmental destruction as a problem that exists somewhere else, the book draws parallels between the Amazon frontier and the cultivated landscapes of the U.S.

“This is a similar system of thought that transcends these frontiers,” Hoelle said. “If we believe in sustainability and equality, we have to come to terms with these covers that grow out there, but also on us.”

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