

## **Treacherous Waters: Shipwrecked Landscapes and the Possibilities for Nationalistic Emplacement in Brazilian Representations of the Amazon**

*Mark D. Anderson*

The turn of the twentieth century was a dynamic moment in the construction of Brazilian nationality. Deodoro de Fonseca's proclamation of the Brazilian republic in 1889 finally divested the Brazilian monarchy of its political hegemony, which many Brazilians viewed as a continuation of Portuguese colonialism. Likewise, the abolition of slavery in 1888 signaled the beginning of a century-long project to redefine concepts of national citizenship to be inclusive of all people living in Brazilian territory. The 1890s were a particularly ebullient decade for Brazilian liberals, who set in motion projects to rewrite Brazil by modernizing government, generating new notions of cultural nationalism, and liberalizing the national economy. Effective democracy seemed to lie just over the horizon.

Nevertheless, contemporary intellectuals recognized that many barriers to their project remained. A prime concern was the existence of large portions of the nation that lay within its geographical borders, but whose inhabitants lived beyond the grasp of the federal government and its institutions, outside the rule of law. Living in almost complete isolation, these people necessarily had little notion of national citizenship, and they did not contribute to the national economy since they lived primarily from subsistence agriculture and paid taxes only on the rare occasion that a tax collector found his way into their lands (and made it back alive). The territories in which they lived were virtual blanks on the national map; little was known about basic geographic features, never mind resources that might be available for industrialized development. This kind of national negative space was embodied in the concept of the *sertão*, the wilderness or backlands, defined not by its own qualities but rather by its distance from political control and disciplined knowledge.<sup>1</sup> In many cases, these *sertões*

came not only to symbolize the unknown but also to be seen as threatening spaces that actively resisted the superposition of national control and symbolism.<sup>2</sup>

One such space was the Amazon River Basin. Despite the founding of two sizeable cities, Belém and Manaus, during the 1600s and frequent incursions into Amazônia by adventurers, homesteaders, escaped slaves, scientific expeditions, planters, and rubber gatherers, until the mid-1900s the region remained a tenuous, fantastical space in the national imaginary. It was a land submerged in aquatic ambiguities. Maps existed, but they were of the kind etched feverishly into the bark of unfamiliar trees or scribbled in sodden books that held the accounts of rubber barons. Desirous of consolidating political authority in the region as well as its economic position in the rubber boom, the newly formed Brazilian Republic looked to fix the Amazon on paper and sent a variety of expeditions to survey the region's inhabitants, geographical features, and natural resources.

This essay studies the challenges that the Amazonian fluvial environment posed to notions of Brazilian geographic nationalism based on the landscape of the coastal Mata Atlântica at the beginning of the 1900s, when the nation began a sustained project to incorporate marginalized regions into national governance. I am particularly interested in the work of Euclides da Cunha and Alberto Rangel, two authors who traveled to Amazônia at the turn of the century as part of this project. Their writings scrutinize the positioning of the Amazon in the national imaginary with an eye to incorporation in the regionalist model.<sup>3</sup> Paradoxically, tropes of frustration and disappointment dominate their representations of the region despite their stated intentions to territorialize it within the national imaginary; they find themselves mired in the ambiguity of the aquatic landscape, whose blurred boundaries and murky waters place into question the manifestation of empirical subjectivity as well as national destiny. I engage the field of biosemiotics to argue that much of the frustration experienced by these authors was due to their inability to read satisfactorily the Amazonian environment in spite of their use of naturalism as an act of translation of biological and geographical meaning. In the end, the nationalistic symbolism and the international scientific imaginary on which they relied to decipher the landscape clashed with the physical experience of the river, creating a rift between sign and object that they failed to resolve satisfactorily. As part of the nation, however, the Amazon could not be left completely outside of the national imaginary; therefore it came to symbolize indeterminacy, the space of the enigmatic or mysterious in the national narrative as well as that of future potential. In a purposefully ironic twist, the indeterminacy of the Amazon in the representations of these earlier authors subsequently became a liberating trope for the younger generation of Brazilian modernists, who wished to escape the deterministic fatalism of their predecessors and open up national identity to revision during the avant-

garde movements of the 1920s.

Euclides da Cunha, author of the Brazilian classic *Os sertões: Campanha de Canudos* (1902) (*The Backlands*), was the most prominent member of one of the expeditions sent by the Brazilian government to survey (and surveil) the Amazon. Euclides had a history of traveling Brazil's backlands not as a wanderer but in a purposeful search for a national narrative that would tie the nation together geographically.<sup>4</sup> In his earlier travels in the arid *sertões* of Northeastern Brazil as a journalist covering the War of Canudos, Euclides highlighted the formative role of the São Francisco River in the construction of the national narrative, arguing that it had served as a route for intrepid explorers known as *bandeirantes* who carried the nascent Brazilian culture beyond the coast into the interior wilderness or *sertões*.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, he also presented the São Francisco as a metaphor for Brazil's challenges in creating national unity; it embodied the conceptual boundary between the more industrialized (and liberal) South and what he viewed as the backward (monarchist or federalist) North, characterized by the aforementioned isolation in its interior and the exploitative sugar cane economy associated with slavery on the coast.<sup>6</sup>

For Euclides, as for nearly all nineteenth-century environmental determinists, national destiny was inscribed almost textually in the national landscape. Before scientists developed a clear understanding of the genetic code, many intellectuals believed that the environment, rather than individual organisms, was the main repository of biological meaning. The landscape was seen as a natural (and national) archive that encoded and directed all evolution, a concept that was extended even to human social and political structures. The work of the naturalist, then, was to decipher and interpret correctly the geographical code, which would, in turn, explain national destiny. In this view, rivers such as the São Francisco played an active and constitutive role in codifying national landscapes, emplotting the generative possibilities of the land within the national narrative.

Euclides expected to find an analogous function for the Amazon River system in the national symbolic geography when he was invited to participate in a bi-national mission to map the Purus River (a tributary of the Amazon) and delimit the border between Brazil and Peru in 1905. As he would discover, however, the fluvial landscape of the Amazon resisted deciphering. Euclides found himself thrust into what could be called a biosemiotic "contact zone," to borrow Rolena Adorno's and Mary Louise Pratt's terminology for describing colonial social relations, in which plant, animal, and cultural signs vied for interpretative primacy.<sup>7</sup> He recognized the presence of nonhuman communicative codes, but he was unable to engage fully the semiotic system, in part because he was a traveler who lacked emplacement within the Amazonian bioregion, in part because he was searching for a metanarrative where none was available: meaning is relational rather than inherent in biosemiotic systems (Kull 22–23).

Furthermore, his possibilities for reading nonhuman signs were fettered by the hierarchical dualism between culture and nature that Horkheimer and Adorno, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, associate with the hegemony of instrumental reason in modern culture.

The Amazon's semiotic complexity resisted the assignment of meaning from without, impeding the superposition of nationalist geographical and cultural symbolism over local signage. Its mutability defied cartographic precision, while its waterlogged, muddy surfaces and entangled vegetation thwarted penetration by the empirical gaze. This presented a serious problem at a time when the nation saw itself primarily through the eyes of the traveler (Belinaso Guimarães 707). The natural codes of the Amazon could not even be read, never mind translated directly into text, and Euclides rapidly became frustrated with the possibilities of the Amazon as a metaphor for the national geographic narrative. Nevertheless, this frustration did not lead him to abandon his deterministic theories of nationalism, which he viewed as infallible due to their inscription within the framework of positivist science; rather, the Amazon came to embody both the frustrations and failings that he diagnosed within the Brazilian national project as well as hope for fruition in the future. He penned a comparatively dry official report on his journey and published several pieces attempting to reconcile the contradictions he ran up against in the Amazon in *Contrastes e confrontos* (1907) (Contrasts and Confrontations), as well as in the *Estado de São Paulo* newspaper, the *Revista Americana* (American Magazine), and *Kosmos*. A compilation of these essays and reports appeared posthumously as *À margem da história* (1909) (On the Margins of History), and, a half-century later, Hildon Rocha published *Um paraíso perdido* (1976) (A Lost Paradise), a definitive anthology of all of Euclides's writings on the Amazon, including his personal correspondences and the speech he gave upon accepting his chair in the Academia Brasileira de Letras.<sup>8</sup>

Like Euclides, Alberto Rangel came to Amazônia from afar, although he lived there for nearly seven years in contrast with Euclides's mere nine months in the region. Rangel was an engineer from Recife who travelled northward to work for the government in development and urbanization projects, and he later became the secretary-general of the State of Amazonas at the behest of the local oligarchy. He wrote a collection of short stories based on his experiences entitled *Inferno verde: Cenas e cenários do Amazonas* (1908) (Green Hell: Scenes and Scenery from the Amazon), which many critics consider the inaugural work in the Latin American *novela de la selva* (jungle narrative) genre. Since it is based on Rangel's years of personal experience and interactions with the Amazonian environment and inhabitants, *Inferno verde* cannot help but impart some sense of emplacement within the local environment and social life; nevertheless, it depicts movement and dislocation as the dominant tropes of life in the region (Krüger 10).<sup>9</sup> His stories leave one with the suspicion that

the sense of impermanence that he associates with the Amazonian environment is actually that of his own transience: the Amazon was never a home, only a means.

Travel writing on the Amazon has historically formed part of those projects aimed at converting alien environments into landscapes codified using human interpretations that would be compatible with preexisting worldviews.<sup>10</sup> Early foreign travelers searched within the Amazon for the fantastical otherness that would justify the Western tradition and the colonial enterprise; later eighteenth- and nineteenth-century naturalists rewrote the Amazon as a prehistoric repository of life forms—including primitive humans—that, when viewed through the lens of evolution and species succession, would unlock the secrets of natural history and, with them, the *telos* of human history.<sup>11</sup> In the work of these authors, naturalism was conceived of primarily as the translation or deciphering of environmental cues in order to uncover natural laws encoded in the landscape.

Both Euclides da Cunha and his friend Alberto Rangel wrote the Amazon from within this tradition of naturalist travel writing. Like their European predecessors, they searched in the Amazon for the meaning of history; however, they had more modest aspirations. They maintained a somewhat ambivalent stance toward the Amazon's possibilities for holding the keys to universal natural history, with its planetary focus, but they did believe that it could reveal the *telos* of Brazilian history, which they postulated (or at least hoped) to be the evolution of an autonomous, uniform Brazilian subject. In nationalistic naturalism—which, as Pratt and Safier both hint, certainly existed despite claims to impartial scientific universality by its practitioners—the message that nature encoded was the key to the national idiosyncrasy, that is, what distinguished one nation from another.<sup>12</sup> Linked racially and culturally to the colonial powers, postcolonial political elites throughout Latin America engaged local environments during independence movements as markers of cultural difference: their affinities with the New World landscape distinguished them from Iberian colonizers. The Amazon had been appraised by European naturalists from La Condamine and Humboldt to Alfred Russell Wallace as a unique environment whose difference was marked by tropes of grandiose, almost monumental monstrosity. Given this apparently objective recognition of the Amazon's fundamental distinctiveness by the world's most renowned scientists at that time, it comes as no surprise that Brazilian intellectuals desired to put it to work in the service of nationalism. In practice, however, the Amazon's radical difference (monstrosity) was not so easily reconciled with pre-existing narratives of Brazilian identity, which were then based largely on paradisiacal imagery associated with the nature and human history of the coastal Mata Atlântica.<sup>13</sup>

Brazilian authors frequently engaged tropes of personal and historical presence as a strategy for nationalizing Amazonian space in the histories of

the Amazon that they wrote in response to territorial disputes with Spanish American neighbors during the turn-of-the-century rubber boom (Ferreira Reis 43–44). These histories justified Brazilian sovereignty over the Amazon by emphasizing the continuity of residence since colonial times. Despite echoing these tropes in his own work on the Amazon, Euclides da Cunha's patriotism was tested when he first arrived in the upper Amazon's largest city, Manaus. To his surprise, he found the rubber boomtown teeming with foreign people and goods, leading him to describe it as "meio caipira, meio européia" (correspondence with Domício da Gama 312) (half hillbilly, half European). Of course, not only the Amazon's inhabitants seemed foreign to him; despite the meticulous research he had done before departing on his expedition, Euclides was unprepared for what seemed to him a completely alien environment and one that turned on their heads all his notions of science and aesthetics. As he would write upon comparing the Amazon, whose defining characteristic he posits as its ability to overwhelm human subjectivity and, therefore, industry, to the "paisagens cultas" (cultured landscapes) of Europe and Southern Brazil: "Desaparecem as formas topográficas mais associadas à existência humana. Há alguma coisa extraterrestre naquela natureza anfíbia, misto de águas e de terras, que se oculta, completamente nivelada, na sua própria grandeza" (*Amazônia* 126) (The topographic forms most associated with human existence disappear. There is something extraterrestrial in that amphibious nature, mixture of water and land, that hides, completely flattened, within its own greatness).<sup>14</sup> The Amazon's "alienness" did not depend solely on the lack of Brazilian inhabitants to territorialize the wilderness; it was a constitutive ungroundedness, a non-landscape, in which water usurped but failed to replace the foundational function of land in the national imaginary. He captured this paradox eloquently in the opening statement of the speech he gave upon accepting his chair in the Academia Brasileira de Letras (Brazilian Academy of Letters), calling the Amazon "uma espécie de naufrágio da terra, que se afunda e braceja convulsivamente nos esgalhos retorcidos dos mangues" ("Falando aos acadêmicos" 83) (a kind of shipwreck of the land that sinks flailing convulsively its arms, the twisted mangrove stumps). As Rangel echoed in his story "O Tapará," "A floresta, afogada na cheia, é mais própria ao nativo. No dilúvio amazônico o homem trocaria bem os seus pulmões por guelras" (38) (The forest, drowned during the flood cycle, belongs to the native. In the Amazonian deluge, man would do well to exchange his lungs for gills). The aquatic holds sway over the terrestrial in the Amazon, and, even if people are unable to spontaneously evolve gills, they had best adapt to an amphibious lifestyle. Constructing the national edifice on this waterlogged landscape seemed a project doomed to failure.

There was yet hope, however; the dominance of water over land indicated that the Amazon was a youthful landscape with a long future

before it. Playing off William Morris Davis's organismic theories of geomorphology that linked the rise of civilizations to the "maturity" of the landscape, Euclides da Cunha coincides with earlier travelers such as Alfred Russell Wallace and Frederick Hartt in diagnosing the Amazon as the newest corner of the New World—a landscape that is just coming into being ("está em ser"; *Amazônia* 125).<sup>15</sup> Tellingly, both Euclides and Alberto Rangel call the Amazon a "contemporary, unfinished page of Genesis": the land was only just beginning to emerge from the water as in the first days of creation, preparing itself for natural and, eventually, human life.<sup>16</sup> In a positivist worldview that believed that evolution moved progressively toward perfect order, what they perceived as the disorganized, chaotic vegetation and the "singular and monstrous fauna" that existed "imperfectly" as mere links in the evolutionary chain were indicators of an immature geography that was not yet ready for human habitation (Cunha, *Amazônia* 100). The writing metaphor is key: the Amazon is still a blank page in human history.

Arriving in such an unhistoried space, the nation-oriented naturalist "sente-se deslocado no espaço e no tempo; não já fora da pátria, senão arredio da cultura humana, extraviado num recanto da floresta e num desvão obscurecido da história" (*Amazônia* 126) (feels dislocated in space and time; not only outside the nation, but withdrawn from human culture, lost in a hidden corner of the forest and in a darkened attic of history). Yet naturalism once again provides an escape from this nationalistic conundrum of internal spatial and temporal exile: European naturalists had already located the Amazon as an originary space at the dawn of natural history. The complement to the primitivism paradigm used in the anthropology of the time to explain the apparently anachronistic lifestyles of non-Western societies, the Amazon becomes a primitive or prehistoric landscape that holds the key to the evolution of *homo brasilienses*, the Brazilian subject. Thus inscribed as the site of the nation's prehistory, the Amazon could be used in conjunction with Brazil's present (associated with the modern Southern cities of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo) to triangulate its future. At the same time, the nationalization of Amazonian naturalism allowed for the reterritorialization of a landscape that European naturalists had claimed as their own, for they considered themselves (white Europeans) heirs to natural history as the pinnacle of evolution.

Euclides da Cunha and Alberto Rangel hoped to delineate the future of the nation and the national subject by mapping the Amazon River System literally, but also figuratively, deciphering its nationalistic symbolism. This project was by no means novel: the unidirectional motion of rivers has been equated with destiny since antiquity, while particular rivers were often associated with local identities through mythology and ritual (Jones 21, 65). In turn, these fluvial mythologies were frequently turned to nationalist ends during the process of nation building.<sup>17</sup> For some classical philosophers, an

emplaced identity (as poetic inspiration) could even be imbibed through the visceral process of drinking a river's waters (Jones 56–58). Indeed, drinking and immersion in a river's waters have a long genealogy as symbols of communion and baptism, and nationalism has frequently engaged religious rhetoric as a mechanism for legitimation as well as sublimation. In overwhelmingly Catholic, postcolonial Latin America, national waters took on pseudo-religious connotations of purity, communal integration, rebirth, and emergence. On a more earthly plane, rivers came to signify cartographically the arteries and veins that distributed the nation's lifeblood (political culture and commerce) throughout the organic body of the nation. Upon engaging both supernatural and natural metaphors, nationalism married the generative role of water in ancient cosmogonies—agricultural productivity and human fertility—with the function of rivers as geopolitical boundaries and routes for modern commerce.

The wild instability of the Amazon River System, however, resisted incorporation into this taming nationalistic symbolic imagery, which was too romantic for Euclides da Cunha's positivist aesthetic in any case. For him, national symbolism was only acceptable when the sign was not seen as the product of creative (poetic) abstraction but rather as embedded directly in the national landscape, where it could be deciphered through empirical observation in conjunction with scientific theory. In this paradigm, nationalism was not seen as subjective because it arose from nature; the same “natural laws” that governed the land and its denizens were extended to encompass human affairs through environmentally determined behavior. Evolution was the dominant force and it applied to geography as much as biology: the national landscape coevolved with the national subject, who, rather than diversifying through adaptation as most often occurs in Darwinian evolution, consolidated ethnic differences into a single national type through what Euclides, following Kirchoff, called “telluric selection”—that is, the homogenizing process of adaptation of different “racial types” to a single, national landscape (*Amazônia* 130–31). The Amazon, as an environment that appeared radically different from the rest of Brazil, held the key to understanding this process: theoretically, if an authentically Brazilian subject could emerge there on the margins of the nation, the organic unity between the national landscape and its human inhabitants, which was fundamental in theories of nationalism based on environmental determinism, was preserved.

This is why Euclides places such emphasis on the “behavior” of the riverscape. More than simple cartography, his study of the Purus River focuses on its aquatic behavior with an eye to divining its evolutionary history. For this reason, he reads the rapids on the river as clues to the adaptations it has undergone during its evolutionary “struggle” with the land (*Amazônia* 117). Euclides's conclusions frustrate him, however; while European and Southern Brazilian river behavior is constrained and

channeled by mountains and other prominent geographical features, acquiring direction (and, therefore, meaning) through the mediation of the land, this Amazonian river has taken a bizarre evolutionary turn, triumphing over the land and molding it to its ever changing whims (*Amazônia* 118). Clearly, this is not an ideal situation for constructing a nation rooted in the *landscape*. In fact, the river's apparent lack of direction has dire implications for national destiny, for nationalistic naturalism believed that destiny was inscribed in the land, which here is subjected to the vicissitudes of water. As Jones has pointed out, the common symbolism of rivers as metaphors for passing time (and destiny) extends to the concept of the source: traveling up rivers becomes a return to origins, and, in turn, finding the source of a river is seen as a way of acquiring control over it through accessing the origins of knowledge (100). Euclides's mission in mapping the Purus was to follow the river to its headwaters, thus demarcating the Peruvian-Brazilian border, but he also hoped to find there the source of national identity. In his writings, the headwaters of the Purus River became the origin of both natural and human histories, their shared source underscoring their complementarity. Things took quite an unexpected turn, however, as Euclides's hapless journey to the source came to symbolize his coming to know not of the evolution of the national subject but rather of the limits of his own subjectivity.

Mapping the Amazon's topography and essential knowledge was much simpler to plan from afar than to put into practice in the local setting. As Euclides detailed in the essay "As cabeceiras" (The Headwaters) from his official report on the journey, it became increasingly difficult to follow the Purus's trajectory, as it obstinately refused to follow a straight or even permanent path. He reiterated this conundrum somewhat more eloquently in "Impressões gerais" (General Impressions):

Os mesmos rios ainda não se firmaram nos leitos; parecem tatear uma situação de equilíbrio derivando, divagantes, em meandros inestáveis, contorcidos em *sacados*, cujos istmos e revezes se rompem e se soldam numa desesperadora formação de ilhas e de lagos de seis meses, e até criando formas topográficas novas em que estes dois aspectos se confundem. (Euclides's emphasis; *Amazônia* 100)

(The rivers themselves have not yet settled into their beds; they seem to feel their way along blindly toward a state of equilibrium, wandering in unstable meanders, contorted in *sacados*, whose isthmuses and bends break and rejoin in the maddening formation of islands and lakes that last mere months, even creating new topographical forms in which these two aspects confuse themselves.)

The *varadouros*, waterways that link larger rivers in confusing labyrinths (without converging them into a single stream), were disorienting,

but he found the *sacados* (oxbow lakes) most problematic in theoretical terms, for they transformed rivers into circular sites that confounded the linear directionality that endows rivers with the symbolism of destiny. The concept of round rivers has existed since antiquity; the Okeanos played a definitive role in classical notions of geography as a watery boundary that inscribed the known world (Jones chapter 5). However, Okeanos was considered a demarcator, a geographical other that encoded land as the space for human habitation and history. The *sacado* has the opposite effect; it connotes stagnation, the senseless detour from progress, and, rather than defining the limits of land, it undoes them, collapsing riverbanks in tremendous avalanches of mud and vegetation known as *terras caídas*. As Euclides notes forlornly, “Depois de uma única enchente se desmancham os trabalhos de um hidrógrafo” (*Amazônia* 100) (After a single flood cycle, a hydrographer’s work is undone), a situation that is driven home in Rangel’s own story about the “Terras caídas,” in which a man’s lifework is undone in an instant when his homestead collapses into the river. The man’s sole option, barring suicide, is to rebuild and persevere until some fresh disaster erases his progress. In the Amazon, mapping and modernization alike become Sisyphean exercises that mirror the futile circularity of the *sacado*.

This instability has nefarious consequences for nationalistic “telluric selection,” as it reveals that “há no Amazonas um flagrante desvio do processo ordinário da evolução das formas topográficas” (Euclides, *Amazônia* 102) (in the Amazon, there is flagrant deviation from the ordinary evolutionary process of topographical forms). Not only do the Amazonian rivers refuse to follow a set course, constantly changing direction and doubling back on themselves, but they also systematically dismantle the nation, devouring their own homeland. In contrast to other great rivers such as the Hwang-He and the Mississippi, which progressively add to national territories by expanding their deltas, the Amazon is distinguished by its antagonistic relationship with the national landscape: “The enormous torrent is destroying the land” through erosion (103). Lacking a true delta, the Amazon’s waters fall directly into the deep Atlantic, where the silt it carries is whisked off by the Gulf Stream only to deposit what had formerly been Brazilian land on the United States’s shores of Georgia and South Carolina (104). The Amazon is thus guilty of aquatic treachery, undermining its own nation and delivering it into the hands of its northern rival. Waxing poetic, Euclides summarizes that “o rio que sobre todos desafia o nosso lirismo patriótico, é o menos brasileiro dos rios. É um estranho adversário, entregue dia e noite à faina de solapar a sua própria terra” (104) (the river that more than any other inspires our patriotic lyricism is the least Brazilian of all rivers. It is a strange adversary, dedicated day and night to the labor of undercutting its own land). Returning to the metaphor of rivers as writers who emplot nationality within landscapes by endowing them with direction (and therefore destiny) and irrigating them with the lifeblood of the nation,

culture and commerce, here the Amazon unwrites the national narrative, eroding national identity in the same way that its waters dissolve the national soil. The Amazon River System thus becomes an agent of deterritorialization.

Euclides da Cunha and Alberto Rangel were deeply vexed by the challenges that the Amazon posed to projects of nationalistic territorialization as well as to the dominion of instrumental reason and the constitution of the naturalist subject itself. This was not, however, the case with the next generation of Brazilian writers, who reveled in the interpretative freedom left open by the failure of the project to institutionalize Brazilian identity under the sign of an environmentally determined homogeneity. The avant-garde writers associated with the 1922 *Semana de Arte Moderna* in São Paulo did not feel at ease with the essentialist vision of national identity that their precursors had attempted to develop using environmental determinism. Far from following in Euclides and Rangel's footsteps in lamenting Brazil's lack of a racially and culturally homogenous model citizen, *modernista* authors such as Oswald de Andrade, Mário de Andrade, and Raúl Bopp published manifestos, narratives, and poetry that celebrated Brazil's vast cultural diversity by emphasizing political and cultural processes as the factors that unified the nation rather than some untenable underlying national essence. They proposed an inclusive national aesthetics based on collage that would cobble together in a purposefully unstructured way the wide variety of local Brazilian cultural traditions with foreign elements through unabashed postcolonial appropriation and mimicry. Common identity would no longer be dependent on the evolution of the fittest, but rather on what biosemiotician Jesper Hoffmeyer calls "semiotic freedom"—that is, the liberty to interpret codes in a way that is not determined by natural laws.<sup>18</sup>

Oswald de Andrade's seminal "Manifesto da poesia pau-brasil" (1924) (Brazil-wood Poetry Manifesto) rejected outright the literary naturalism of his predecessors. He privileged "aesthetic facts" rooted in cultural practice over naturalism's colonizing "optical illusion" in which "os objetos distantes não diminuíam. Era uma lei de aparência" (43) (distant objects did not diminish. It was a law of appearances), the problem of distance (perspective) alluding to the unquestioning implementation of neocolonial dispositions of knowledge. He shared the criticism that Michel Foucault articulated later in *The Order of Things*: that "natural history is nothing more than the nominalization of the visible" (132). Oswald de Andrade censured naturalism precisely for its paradoxical failure to establish a relationship with the object beyond the abstract: empirical description imposed a sign over an object through nominalization, but meaning was dependent more on the categorical subject/object hierarchy than on any immanent qualities of the object itself. Limited by its uncritical application of European modalities of representation, naturalism failed its own criteria as a procedure for

establishing Brazilian nationalism: it could not reveal the immanence of the nation-state that, according to its own precepts, should underpin all forms that manifest themselves in the nation, whether cultural, ethnic, or geographical, according to natural laws. This is why Oswald de Andrade ended up proposing to “substituir a perspectiva visual e naturalista por uma perspectiva de outra ordem: sentimental, intelectual, irônica, ingênua” (43) (substitute a visual and naturalist perspective for one of another order: sentimental, intellectual, ironic, ingenuous). The contrasting terminology indicated that this “other order” of nationality relied on juxtaposition rather than essentialism. The nation had no inherent meaning beyond shared space—or surface, as Gilles Deleuze would have it—there was no *telos* or transcendental “formula” to endow the nation with depth (O. Andrade 44). In a paradox designed for his times, he proposed a wild, rhizomatic nationalism, free from disciplinary control and hierarchies.

Not surprisingly, given the indeterminacy that the Amazon had come to symbolize in the national imaginary, the Brazilian *modernistas* found it as alluring as had the prior generation of naturalists.<sup>19</sup> Mário de Andrade traveled extensively throughout the Amazon in 1927, eventually making his way to Peru and Bolivia, a journey that formed the backdrop for his novel *Macunaíma: O herói sem caráter* (1928). His picaresque title character, the hero with no (national) character, is born to the Tapanhuma tribe on the banks of the Uraricoera River, a tributary of the Rio Negro that, in turn, flows into the Amazon. Like Euclides and Rangel’s representations of the Amazon River, Macunaíma is a slippery Other who resists empirical nominalization; he undergoes constant, comic transformations (including skin color) and his language is playful, imprecise, and often nonsensical. Ironically, this shape-shifting, impermanent quality is precisely what grants him status as a national icon.<sup>20</sup> Likewise, Raúl Bopp claimed that he wrote the majority of his equally epic poem, *Cobra Norato* (1931), in a feverish haze brought on by an attack of malaria while he was living in the Amazonian city of Belém.<sup>21</sup> *Cobra Norato* narrates in first person the wanderings of the title character, a changeling who is able to take human or anaconda form, throughout the Amazon in search of his beloved, the daughter of Queen Luzia. Again, there is a strong emphasis on the indeterminacy of identity and the tenuousness of its relations to place and history, which is driven home by the poem’s first verse: “Um dia / eu hei de morar nas terras do Sem-fim” (148) (One day, I will live in the land of No-End).

In their use of self-reflexive, ironic exoticism and satire, these authors seem to share Euclides and Rangel’s skepticism toward the possibilities of positioning the Amazon at the heart of the national imaginary, but they do not share their frustrations. The *modernistas* rejected the teleological view of Brazilian identity implicit in Euclides and Rangel’s deterministic visions of national citizenship in favor of free experimentation based on the

unapologetic, creative appropriation of models, whether local, national, or foreign: what Oswald de Andrade so memorably called “anthropophagy” in his eponymous manifesto. And, while Mário de Andrade and Raúl Bopp may have cannibalized their precursors indiscriminately, whether Brazilian or European, they washed them down with Amazon River water, imbibing in the process the river’s indeterminacy and turning it to their own digestive ends.

## Notes

1. For in-depth studies of the concept of the *sertão* and its political uses, consult Nisia Trindade Lima’s *Um sertão chamado Brasil* and Candice Vidal e Souza’s *A pátria geográfica*.
2. The most (in)famous of these spaces of resistance were the Northeastern *sertões* surrounding the town of Canudos, whose inhabitants’ reluctance to recognize governmental and ecclesiastical authority led to the War of Canudos (1896–1897).
3. I choose these two authors because they exemplify this process of constructing the Amazon from without in a process of internal colonialism that novelist and critic Márcio Souza criticizes roundly in his *A expressão amazonense*. During the nineteenth and the early-twentieth centuries, even authors who grew up in Amazônia, like Inglês de Sousa and José Veríssimo, rarely wrote about it when they lived there; they published their literature after travelling southward for more lucrative or prestigious educational and career opportunities, and their works reflect the external narrative position common in regionalist writing (see Maligo 25–26).
4. I follow the Brazilian convention in calling Euclides da Cunha by his first name in homage to his unique position in Brazilian letters.
5. Brazil was by no means unique in wishing to address the problem of marginal geographies within the nation. Many of Spanish America’s most prominent nineteenth-century intellectuals addressed this issue in their writings, among them Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, who postulated in his foundational *Facundo, o la civilización y la barbarie* (1845) that such spaces posed a threat not only to national sovereignty and governance but also to society itself. Sarmiento believed that Argentina’s rivers held the key to urbanizing the rural interior of the country, forming a natural economic infrastructure capable of channeling the flow of goods and ideas that he viewed as so necessary in civil governance. In Sarmiento’s view, not to make use of rivers in the construction of nationality was akin to thwarting destiny. Significantly, Euclides da Cunha cited Sarmiento as a precursor in the speech he gave upon accepting his chair in the Academia Brasileira de Letras (“Falando aos académicos” 87).
6. See Os *sertões* pages 79 and 171–74, among other passages in which Euclides addresses the role of the São Francisco in dividing “os dois Brasis” (the two Brazils), the North and the South.
7. Rolena Adorno and Mary Louise Pratt engage Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin’s concept of semiotic contact zones to theorize colonial power relations in *Guamán Poma* and *Imperial Eyes*, respectively. Jesper Hoffmeyer provides a good overview of biosemiotics in *Signs of Meaning in the Universe*.
8. The variations between collections of Euclides’s writings on the Amazon can be confusing since they were not edited by the author into a single work. Consult

Barreto de Santana's "Euclides da Cunha e a Amazônia" for a clarifying chronology of Euclides's travels and writing on the Amazon.

9. As Coelho de Paiva points out, this tension between emplacement and dislocation may also emerge from the purposing of Rangel's book as a "literary investment" that complemented his insertion into and ascent within the Amazon's political economy (360).
10. Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, Neide Gondim, Mary Louise Pratt, Neil Safier, and Candice Slater have all studied this relationship in depth. I use the term landscape here to describe an environment codified within human culture, what Daniels and Cosgrove describe as "a cultural image, a pictorial way of representing, structuring, or symbolising surroundings" (1).
11. Consult Buarque de Holanda's *Visão do paraíso* regarding the colonial process of analogizing the New World to Old World models. See Pratt's *Imperial Eyes* on the use of scientific naturalism as a universalizing mechanism at the service of neocolonialism, although Safier takes issue with Pratt's position, arguing that "knowledge emerged from a broad narrative interaction involving multiple sites of collection and codification" (14–15).
12. See pages 22–23 and 35–36 of Pratt's *Imperial Eyes* and pages 6–7 of Safier's *Measuring the New World* regarding how naturalism was put to work at the service of European nationalism as an instrument of empire.
13. See my "National Nature and Ecologies of Abjection" regarding the positioning of the coastal Mata Atlântica as a national paradise in contrast to the interior *sertões*, whose differences were represented using tropes of abjection.
14. All translations are my own unless I note otherwise.
15. Wallace and Hart are cited on page 101 of *Amazônia*.
16. See Euclides's introduction to Rangel's *Inferno Verde*, page 27, and Rangel's "O Tapará," page 39.
17. See, for instance, Klaus Plonien's study of the appropriation of mythology associated with the Rhine in the construction of German nationality in "Germany's River."
18. See the fifth chapter of Hoffmeyer's *Signs of Meaning* regarding the concept of "semiotic freedom." He argues that many life forms, not only humans, are capable of interpreting environmental cues and other species' behavior in ways that are not always predetermined by their genetic disposition (a central dogma of modern biology). The concept is pertinent here because Euclides and Rangel insist that the environment determines the disposition of the national subject.
19. In chapter four of *Land of Metaphorical Desires*, Pedro Maligo argues that the *modernistas* extend Euclides's and Rangel's project to nominalize the Amazon in order to control it, substituting myth for empiricism where naturalism failed. I argue, however, that the *modernistas* were more interested in undefining the nation than redefining it through mythical discourse; in this sense, the Amazon served as foil to the nation rather than an object of knowledge.
20. Lúcia Sá discusses in depth the inevitability of reading *Macunaima* within a nationalistic framework as well as the frustrations it presents to such projects (35–40).
21. See the epistolary preface to *Urucungo* (1932), 197.

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