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**Ecocritical Thought in Euclides da Cunha's  
Correspondence and Writings about the Amazon**

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“Realmente, a Amazônia é a última página, ainda a  
escrever-se, do Genesis.”  
—Euclides da Cunha, Preambulo (10)

(Truly, Amazonia is the final page, still being written, of  
Genesis.)

Global and regional environmental crises—pollution and environmental degradation, the dumping of chemical wastes, and strip-mining and deforestation, which have led to flooding, erosion, and land sterilization—have undeniably motivated the recent surge in scientific and humanistic inquiry into human relationships with the environment. Although those working in the hard sciences have typically led these efforts, scholars in the humanities, and namely ecocriticism as a humanistic discipline, are making a significant contribution to the conservation movement by helping both reframe and historicize human relationships with nature. The influence of ecocriticism extends widely through Anglophone literary and cultural studies today, yet it remains an undertheorized field of inquiry within Luso-Brazilian studies. The fundamental premise of ecocriticism—namely, the interconnectedness of nature and human culture—does not constitute *alguma novidade* for Luso-Brazilian literary studies, which boasts a rich tradition of cultural production concerned with the nuanced interrelations between nature and human experience. Nevertheless, ecocriticism presents a

series of possibilities and challenges in the context of Brazilian literary studies as a theoretical discourse that negotiates between the human and the nonhuman—that is, between the human and its others. Yet it is a discourse with its own particular history and evolution, and critics of Brazilian literature should take care in how they appropriate ecocriticism to avoid committing anachronistic or otherwise erroneous readings.<sup>1</sup> Even so, ecocritical modes of reading can reopen the Brazilian canon in new and significant ways by revealing an ignored or misunderstood ecological imagination latent in Brazilian literature. Euclides da Cunha's writings on the Amazon offer an exceptional example of such imagination.

Understanding the relevance of ecocriticism for Brazilian studies depends in part on considering its disciplinary history. Ecocriticism is a relatively new field of academic study—the term was coined only in 1978—yet it has deep historical and even ancient origins extending back to Aristotle, Plato, and Vergil.<sup>2</sup> Typically, however, the roots of ecocriticism are traced both to the 1790s and late romanticism in British literature or to the 1840s and transcendentalism in the United States. Various writers from these periods produced works that constitute the first within a now established English-language canon of nature writing (sometimes called landscape writing)—a somewhat amorphous genre of fictional and nonfictional writing that at times is scientific and informational, elsewhere personal and reflective, and often philosophical. Anthologies such as the *Norton Book of Nature Writing* frequently include a varied array of authors ranging from the poet Wordsworth to the naturalist Darwin, along with Thoreau and Emerson, John Muir, Aldo Leopold, Wendell Berry, Rachel Carson, Michael Pollan, and Bill McKibben, to name only a few.

Ecocriticism gained institutional recognition as an academic discipline in 1992 with the foundation of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment, an organization that holds an annual conference and has more than 1,300 members. And 1993 saw the founding of *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, a peer-reviewed journal that as of 2009 is published quarterly by Oxford University Press. A host of other journal articles, monographs, and anthologies, not to mention university courses in ecocriticism and new degree programs in environmental studies, all further attest to the academic impact of this discipline in the United States and United Kingdom.<sup>3</sup>

Within literary and cultural studies, ecocriticism is useful as a theoretical discourse for addressing how representations of nature are constructed in “the cultural artifacts of language and literature” (Glotfelty xix). Ecocriticism demonstrates the way that nature—the physical world—has variously been cast in narrative as Eden, Utopia, El Dorado; as artifice, commodity, naïve reality, moral impetus, demonic other, contested terrain. Nature can appear as pastoral and domestic, as well as apocalyptic, wild, and sublime. Ecocritics demonstrate the way that competing ideologies and

discourses have attempted to use nature to naturalize, or in other words to hide, political and social issues behind an essentialized view of the environment (Glotfelty xix). For example, as Marilynne Robinson notes, wilderness is alternately conceptualized as both wasteland and promised land, concepts that reflect specific political and commercial interests. Robinson argues that we must disabuse ourselves of the notion of wilderness as an escape from civilization, that “we must surrender the idea of wilderness, [and] accept the fact that the consequences of human presence in the world are universal and ineluctable” (253).

Some critics have approached nature as pure human construction, in line with Robinson's point that “every environmental problem is a human problem” (253). Such a view stems from the twentieth-century traditions of structuralism and post-structuralism that are premised on the idea that everything is linguistically or socially constructed—or, as Derrida radically put it, “There is nothing outside of the text” (158). However, while an important practice of ecocriticism is to read texts in order to discover the ideologies and mythologies embedded in cultural representations of nature, ecocriticism is more than mere post-structural analysis directed toward the environment. In fact, as Peter Barry states, “Ecocriticism . . . repudiates the foundational belief in ‘constructedness’ which is such an important aspect of literary theory” (252) by turning to ecology—that is, by stressing the complex mesh of relationships that exist in the natural world apart from human projections.<sup>4</sup> This emphasis on ecology constitutes a radical critique of anthropocentric worldviews, and ecocriticism therefore offers an ontological argument that redefines what it means to be human vis-à-vis the physical world.

Nevertheless, though ecocriticism insists on the way that ecology exists outside of human projections and human experience, one cannot speak of nature, especially in the context of Brazil and the New World, without addressing the way that human history is intimately connected with geography. As Raymond Williams observed in a notable essay, “Ideas of Nature,” “The idea of nature contains, though often unnoticed, an extraordinary amount of human history” (47). In the history of the New World, and especially in the context of Brazil and the complex history of the Amazon, it can become very difficult to separate ecology from culture given the ways that the history of plantations and colonial agricultural practices literally altered the landscape. To reference just one account of the impact of human activity on the land, in 1901 Euclides da Cunha published an essay in the newspaper *O Estado de São Paulo* entitled “Os fazedores de deserto” (The desert-makers) in which he decries wasteful agricultural practices in São Paulo that had led to land sterilization and desertification of the rural interior.<sup>5</sup> The essay's thesis was both revolutionary and prescient for its day: environmental degradation is a social problem.<sup>6</sup>

Given the complex relationship between human activity and nature, George B. Handley cogently argues that an ecocritical practice useful to New World Studies must share the aims of postcolonialism in considering “the historical processes by which cultures have emerged in their present and contingent form” (“Postcolonial Ecology” 119). In their introduction to *Caribbean Literature and the Environment*, Elizabeth DeLoughrey, Renée K. Gosson, and Handley criticize the tendency of North American ecocriticism to treat lightly or even ignore completely the historical dimensions of human behavior upon the environment by looking backwards to a static idealized landscape “that is devoid of human history and labor” (2). In a separate volume, *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment*, DeLoughrey and Handley propose instead that the environment be considered in terms of both human history and ecology through a synthesis of traditional environmental and postcolonial approaches. They caution, however, that this approach would be

more than a simple extension of postcolonial methodologies into the realm of the human material world; it must reckon with the ways in which ecology does not always work within the frames of human time and political interest. As such, our definition of postcolonial ecology reflects a complex epistemology that recuperates the alterity of both history *and* nature, without reducing either to the other. (4)

This conception of ecocriticism suggests that our understanding of nature should stem from the complex and mutually constitutive relationship between ecology and the discursive representations of nature.

In the context of Brazilian literary studies, ecocritical practice must emerge from a combined awareness of human history and discursive traditions as they have developed in specific—real and imagined—locations within Brazil’s geography. In other words, ecocritical readings of Brazilian literary texts that rely wholly upon the history and narratives of Anglophone ecocritical discourse stand in danger of eliding the complexities of Brazilian intellectual history and human experience in relation to the environment. Despite the centrality of Wordsworth, Emerson, and Thoreau in Anglophone ecocritical theory and the extent to which the history of Anglophone ecocriticism has already been mythologized, scholars of Brazilian literature should be careful in citing or applying texts and ideas that have had little to no direct relationship with either Brazil’s geography or its literary traditions and environmental imagination.<sup>7</sup> In saying this, I do not mean to discourage comparative readings of Anglophone nature writing and Brazilian texts. Comparative analyses of these two traditions will continue to yield fruitful insights into our understanding of man’s relationship with the environment.<sup>8</sup> My intention is in fact quite the opposite: to identify key insights within Brazil’s literary and intellectual history—without merely defaulting to

Anglophone theoretical traditions—that in turn might contribute more broadly to a deeper understanding of ecocritical thought.

This is the challenge extended by DeLoughrey and Handley, who call on critics to imagine variant histories of ecocriticism that more closely correspond to particular geographies and cultural traditions. While Brazil cannot claim a canon of nature writing as exists in the United States and the United Kingdom, an ecologically conscious thread certainly runs through Brazilian literature that includes works—fictional and nonfictional alike—that do not anthropomorphize nature or fall into Ruskin's famous pathetic fallacy of ascribing human emotion to the natural world but acknowledge, whether consciously or not, nature's otherness. Brazil's literary tradition comprises numerous texts that suggest a contingency between our own existence and that of ecology. In these instances nature is not merely backdrop or theater but emerges as a presence that must be responsibly acknowledged. Thus, in imagining a genealogy for ecological writing from Brazil, I refer to writers who either intentionally or unintentionally foreground nature in a way that provokes reflection about our mutual dependency.

### **Euclides da Cunha's Environmental Imagination**

Within the Brazilian canon, Euclides da Cunha's posthumously published collection of essays on the Amazon, *À margem da história* (1909), serves as a fascinating text that illuminates the complex interrelation between nature and culture. Da Cunha was trained as an engineer at the military academy in Rio de Janeiro and was a keen observer of both society and the natural world. He wrote frequently about the Brazilian landscape in newspaper articles and essays, and most readers of Brazilian history and literature are no doubt already familiar with his monumental work *Os sertões* (1902), which chronicles the late nineteenth-century military expeditions that destroyed the frontier religious community of Canudos and ultimately massacred upwards of 30,000 people.<sup>9</sup> Though da Cunha wrote his essays on the Amazon several years after *Os sertões*, da Cunha's experience in Canudos conditioned his later experience in the Amazon and warrants some consideration.

Da Cunha was an ardent and idealistic advocate of the fledgling Brazilian Republic, which was founded in 1889. When reports reached Rio de Janeiro in the early 1890s of a hostile and rapidly growing population in the backlands of the state of Bahia, da Cunha fully supported military action to quell the rebellion. He even wrote a passionate newspaper article entitled "A nossa Vendéia" (Our Vendée) (1897), in which he compared the Canudos rebellion to a rural monarchist backlash in France against the

French republican revolution of 1798. In 1897 da Cunha was commissioned by the newspaper *O Estado de São Paulo* to travel with the army and report on the military action firsthand from the field. To his great astonishment, upon arriving in the backlands of the northeastern state of Bahia, da Cunha encountered both a landscape and people that were far more complex than what he had imagined.

Although Canudos ostensibly represented a threat to the Republic, da Cunha's descriptive report of the military victory is filled with admiration and respect for the misunderstood dissidents of Canudos. *Os sertões* expresses da Cunha's patriotic fervor and celebrates the new Brazilian Republic, yet at the same time the work paradoxically expresses disillusionment regarding the appalling massacre that ended the military campaign. One of the enduring aspects of *Os sertões* is the connection da Cunha draws between collective identity and landscape. In fact, *Os sertões* opens with an extended geographical analysis of Canudos entitled "A terra" (The land), in which da Cunha argues that the character of the inhabitants of Canudos was formed by the demanding and difficult geography in which they lived.

Several years later, da Cunha extended his ecological imagination, building on a theoretical framework from *Os sertões* that linked culture and landscape, in a series of essays about the Amazon, posthumously published under the title *À margem da história*. As an example of autochthonous Brazilian ecocriticism, this collection represents an important contribution to what DeLoughrey and Handley might call a variant history of ecocritical thought apart from traditional Anglophone narratives. *À margem da história* stands as an intriguing text whose strength lies in its expression of the interdependence of human experience in the Amazon and ecology.

The genesis of the essays in *À margem da história* can be traced to 1904 when da Cunha traveled to Manaus and the Amazon river basin as part of an official joint expedition between Brazil and Peru organized for the purposes of surveying the Juruá and Purus rivers, correcting and completing maps made by the English explorer William Chandless in the 1860s, and verifying the current geographic nomenclature in use.<sup>10</sup> As the head of the Brazilian commission, da Cunha was sent to protect Brazil's national and political interests against the encroachment of Peru. After spending a little more than a year (from December 1904 to December 1905) working throughout the lower and upper sections of the Amazon and Purus rivers, da Cunha returned to Rio de Janeiro to report on his findings. This experience in the Amazon profoundly marked him, and he immediately began plans to publish a comprehensive account similar to *Os sertões*. This project was never fully realized, however, due in part to the tragedy of his premature death in August 1909.<sup>11</sup> Yet the fragmented character of the collection of essays also suggests the way da Cunha struggled to synthesize into a single narrative his republican ideals and the realities of the complex land he encountered.

Much as he had with his experience in Canudos, da Cunha began his journey to the Amazon full of idealism and optimism but quickly found that the reality of the landscape was quite different from what he had expected. In a letter to Manuel de Oliveira Lima dated 16 January 1905 and addressed from Manaus shortly after his arrival, da Cunha writes:<sup>12</sup>

Falta-me o tempo para a felicidade de uma longa conversa consigo. Quanta coisa a dizer!—o desapontamento que me causou o Amazonas, menos que o Amazonas que eu trazia na imaginação; a estranha tristeza que nos causa esta terra amplíssima, maravilhosa e chata, sem um relevo onde o olhar descanse; e, principalmente, o tumulto, a desordem indescritível, a grande vida à gandaia dos que a habitam. . . . Estou numa verdadeira sobrecarga de impressões todas novas, todas vivíssimas e empolgantes. (*Correspondência de Euclides da Cunha* 254–55)

(I lack the time for the happiness of a long conversation with you. There is so much to say!—the disappointment that the Amazon has caused me, less than the Amazon I held in my imagination; the strange sadness induced by this expansive, wonderful, and boring land, where there is no relief for the eye to rest; and especially the tumult, the indescribable disorder, the great idle life of those who live here. . . . I am truly overwhelmed by the impressions, which are all new, all teeming with life and exciting.)

In this letter and others from the same period, da Cunha's first impressions of the Amazon are characterized by a mixture of awe and dismay. By the early 1900s, the Amazon had long been mythologized as both Eden and El Dorado—an idyllic landscape on which the nation could inscribe its utopian desires—but the natural reality da Cunha encounters differs so drastically from the idealized Amazon of the national imaginary that he initially feels overwhelmed and disappointed. As opposed to an inviting landscape ready for the domesticating projects of the Republic, the Amazon da Cunha confronts is “indescribably disordered” and overwhelming in its sheer scale. In several letters, da Cunha chafes at the description provided by the English explorer Henry Walter Bates in 1863, who famously described the region, stating, “the climate is glorious” (176).<sup>13</sup> Instead, da Cunha writes that the oppressive humidity and natural tumult make the whole landscape “incomprehensible” (*Correspondência* 255) (incomprehensible).

In a letter to Artur Lemos, da Cunha further details his impressions of the Amazon's chaos:<sup>14</sup>

Se escrevesse agora esboçaria miniaturas do caos incompreensíveis e tumultuárias, uma mistura formidável de vastas florestas inundadas de vastos céus resplandecentes.

Entre tais extremos está, com as suas inumeráveis modalidades, um novo mundo que me era inteiramente desconhecido . . .

Além disso, esta Amazônia recorda a genial definição do espaço de Milton: esconde-se em si mesma. O forasteiro contempla-a sem a ver através de uma vertigem.

Ela só lhe aparece aos poucos, vagarosamente, torturantemente.

É uma grandeza que exige a penetração sutil dos microscópios e a visão apertadinha e breve dos analistas: é um infinito que deve ser dosado. (*Correspondência* 269)

(If I were to write now, I would sketch out miniatures of the incomprehensible and tumultuous chaos, a formidable mixture of vast flooded forests and vast resplendent skies.

Between these two extremes lies, in its innumerable modalities, a new world that was entirely unknown to me . . .

Furthermore, this Amazon reminds me of Milton's genial definition of space: it hides inside itself. The outsider swoons and contemplates it without seeing it.

It appears to him little by little, slowly, tantalizingly.

It is a greatness that demands the subtle penetration of microscopes and the narrow and concise vision of specialists: it is an infinity that must be dosed.)

This expressive piece of correspondence illustrates da Cunha's powers of observation and ability to synthesize and extrapolate general principles. Note that da Cunha does not merely stop with a declaration on the expansive complexity of the Amazon but also signals a humble and measured response. Da Cunha acknowledges his own inability to comprehend the Amazon's totality; he describes the Amazon in terms of its indefinability and recognizes the need for greater education and specialized knowledge. This key passage also foreshadows the poetic dimension in da Cunha's published essays on the Amazon in which in the midst of his scientific analysis he marvels at the Amazon as an entity that can never fully be known, harnessed, or conquered.

A related quality that emerges in da Cunha's correspondence from this period is that he is not only amazed by the forest's scale and complexity but also intimidated. In a letter from Manaus addressed to his friend José Veríssimo, dated 13 January 1905, da Cunha writes, "A natureza, aqui, soberanamente brutal ainda na expansão de suas energias, é uma perigosa adversária do homem. Pelo menos em nenhum outro ponto lhe impõe mais duramente o regime animal" (*Correspondência* 252) (Nature, here, sovereignly brutal even in the expansion of its energies, is a dangerous adversary of man. At least nowhere else does it more forcefully impose an animal regime). It is interesting to note da Cunha's choice of words here:

nature is “soberanamente” (sovereignly or supremely) brutal and imposes its own animal regime, as if it were a sovereign political power resisting the neo-imperial activities of the Brazilian Republic by enforcing its own natural laws. In another letter dated 22 January 1905, written just before departing Manaus on his way to the upper Purus River, da Cunha addressed Edgard Jordão, writing, “Estou a dois passos do deserto e nas vésperas de uma viagem, inçada de tropeços, dessas em que a gente leva carta de prego para o Desconhecido. Talvez, não volte. Falo, portanto, como quem se confessa” (258) (I am two steps from the wilderness and on the eve of a journey filled with obstacles, the kind for which one writes a will. Perhaps I will not return. I speak, therefore, as one confessing). Here da Cunha expresses concern over his personal safety—a fear that is notably absent from his few letters written during the Canudos military campaigns.<sup>15</sup>

Later, after leaving Manaus and beginning his ascent toward the Purus River, da Cunha wrote to his friend and fellow writer Alberto Rangel:<sup>16</sup> “Chegaram ontem as instruções [e] iremos rumo eito para o desconhecido. A minha frota: duas lanchas (uma ainda problemática), um batelão e seis canoas . . . e teve ontem o batismo de uma tempestade. Nunca imaginei que este rio morto escondesse, traiçoeiramente, ondas tão desabridas” (*Correspondência* 278) (Our instructions arrived yesterday [and] we are headed toward the unknown. My fleet: two riverboats (one that is still problematic), a barge, and six canoes . . . and we were baptized yesterday by a thunderstorm. I never imagined that this dead river could hide, treacherously, such rough waves). Throughout his record of the trip, da Cunha couples the threat of nature with the danger of underestimating the Amazon and failing to see below the surface. It is interesting that despite da Cunha's own consciousness of this need, the Amazon continuously surprises him.

During his year living in Manaus and directing the official Brazilian surveying commission of the upper Purus River, da Cunha was able to collect more than enough material for a book, and after returning to Rio de Janeiro he began writing and making plans for publication. In fact, the idea of writing a book about the Amazon similar to his account of Canudos had occurred to him shortly after arriving in Manaus. In a letter dated 10 March 1905 and addressed to his friend and fellow writer Coelho Neto, da Cunha first references his plans for a book entitled *Um paraíso perdido*. During that same month, he writes to José Veríssimo: “Acha bom o título *Um paraíso perdido* para o meu livro sobre a Amazônia? Ele reflete bem o meu incurável pessimismo” (*Correspondência* 268) (What do you think of the title *Paradise Lost* for my book about the Amazon? It reflects my incurable pessimism). As mentioned above, da Cunha's premature death prevented him from producing a lengthy narrative about the Amazon similar in scope to *Os sertões*, and the projected title suggests his intention to deconstruct the Amazon's paradisiacal tropes.<sup>17</sup> Yet, though he never completed this

cohesive work, da Cunha had begun to collect and organize some of his Amazonian essays under the title *À margem da história*, which were already at the proof stage when he died and which were published shortly thereafter in the latter part of 1909.<sup>18</sup>

Much like his first letters written from Manaus, da Cunha opens the initial essay of *À margem da história*, entitled “Impressões gerais” (General impressions), with an expression of disillusionment regarding the chaotic and wild forces of the Amazon. He states:

A impressão dominante que tive, e talvez correspondente a uma verdade positiva, é esta: o homem, ali, é ainda um intruso impertinente. Chegou sem ser esperado nem querido—quando a natureza ainda estava arrumando o seu mais vasto e luxuoso salão. E encontrou uma opulenta desordem . . . Os mesmos rios ainda não se firmaram nos leitos. . . . Depois de uma única enchente se desmancham os trabalhos de um hidrógrafo. (25–26)<sup>19</sup>

(The overwhelming impression I conceived—perhaps corresponding to a positive truth—is this: humankind is still an impertinent interloper here. We have arrived uninvited and unprepared for, while nature was still in the process of setting up this vast, magnificent salon. Here we encounter disorder on a lavish scale . . . the rivers are still not fixed in their courses. . . . A single flood season would completely destroy the work of a hydrographer. [*The Amazon: Land without History* 4])

This opening confession foregrounds the tension that characterizes most of da Cunha’s Amazonian writings between the ambitions of Brazil’s neo-imperial project and his acknowledgement of nature’s resistance. On the one hand, he advocates an imperial approach to conquering the Amazon, including dispatching scientists, hydrographers, engineers, and even military personnel—given the competition and encroachment from other countries—as well as colonies of *sertanejo* laborers. Lúcia Sá aptly notes that in *À margem da história*, da Cunha’s “imperialist nostalgia seemed to give way, almost entirely, to straightforward imperialism” (xiv). Nevertheless, at various moments throughout the essays, even while reporting excitedly on the Amazon’s possibilities for the nation, da Cunha simultaneously expresses an acute consciousness of some of the problems of imperialism.

The Amazon is not a tabula rasa waiting for a national, political, or commercial narrative to give it meaning. It is not Eden or a paradise of wealth ready to be exploited. Despite his own subtitle, da Cunha does not represent the Amazon as a land *without* history. On the contrary he has a keen sense of both human and natural history—one that reveals how desire has been projected onto the landscape over time. Furthermore, da Cunha demonstrates in this essay a fundamental understanding of ecology—hardly

a surprise given his scientific training. An example of this is found in the chapter “Rios em Abandono” (“Rivers in Abandon”), where da Cunha describes in detail the complex tributary system of the Amazon basin before concluding,

Assim, em toda aquela planura, o notável afluente amazônico, serpenteando nas inumeráveis sinuosas que lhe tornam as distâncias itinerárias duplas das geográficas, inclui-se entre os mais interessantes “rios trabalhadores”, construindo os diques submersíveis que o aliviam nas enchentes—e lhe repontam, intermitentemente às duas bandas, ora próximos, ora afastados, salpintando todas as várzeas ribeirinhas e avultando maiores e mais numerosos à medida que se desce, e se amortecem os declives, até a larga baixada centralizada em Canutana; onde as grandes águas tranqüilas derivam majestosamente, equilibradas, sulcando de meio a meio a vastidão de nível de um mediterrâneo esparso. (46)

(Thus, across that entire plain, this remarkable Amazonian tributary, twisting and turning its way in the innumerable serpentine that make its itinerary length twice its geographical length, is one of the world's most interesting “working rivers.” It builds the submersible dikes that relieve it in high water—and intermittently rechannel it on both banks. Be they near the river or distant, they dot the *várzea*, becoming larger and more numerous as the river descends and the slopes decline, until the large basin located as Canutama is reached. There the great tranquil waters flow majestically in balance, dividing in half the flat immensity of a sprawling Mediterranean. [*The Amazon* 25])

This passage underscores da Cunha's understanding of nature and natural processes. The forest and its rivers are not stagnant but living and breathing and very much subject to change. The river and its tributaries rise and fall, build banks, rechannel themselves, draw near and far, and all in unanticipated ways. Ecology emerges in da Cunha's writing “as a space of indeterminacy and instability; . . . the world of ecosystems and their myriad complexes of interdependencies; [ecology as] a dynamic space of change, imbalance, and even chaos” (Handley 119). The Amazon is not merely an impassive natural resource ready to be harnessed and made to serve the nation's commercial and imperial interests. As da Cunha says, “uma única enchente se desmancha os trabalhos de um hidrógrafo” (a single flood season would completely destroy the work of a hydrographer), whom he calls “um intruso impertinente” (an impertinent interloper). While da Cunha's report begins ostensibly with disillusionment, it also expresses deep respect for nature's alterity, its fundamental otherness and power. The passage cited above furthermore reveals da Cunha's understanding of what

ecologists refer to as deep time: a macroscopic view of biological history whose scale dwarfs the relatively fleeting impact of human labor.

And the work of the boundary commission to which he is attached is shown to be equally tenuous. After describing the complex and constant way the river displaces its own banks and reshapes itself, da Cunha observes 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” (“Impressões Gerais” 30) (For this river that more than any other defies our lyrical patriotism is in fact the least Brazilian of our water-courses. It is a strange adversary, given over day and night to the task of wearing away its own land [*The Amazon* 8]). Here da Cunha explicitly identifies how the river challenges the very purposes of his official commission to survey and identify the political boundary between Brazil and Peru. How can such a line be drawn when the river itself is mobile and not fixed?<sup>20</sup> The river emerges in this passage as an adversary much like Peru—a competing sovereign entity challenging Brazil’s claims. In fact, in this same section of the text da Cunha notes the absurdity of attempting to confine the Amazon to the imaginary political boundaries superimposed by nations endeavoring to regulate movement through and access to the region. In an insightful passage, da Cunha describes the far-reaching influence of the Amazon’s complex hydrographic system:

Aquele originalíssimo sistema hidrográfico não acaba com a terra, ao transpor o cabo Norte; senão que vai, sem margens, pelo mar dentro, em busca da corrente equatorial, onde aflui entregando-lhe todo aquele plasma gerador de territórios. Os seus materiais, distribuídos pelo imenso rio pelágico que se prolonga com o Gulf-stream, vão concentrando e surgindo a flux, espaçadamente, nas mais longínquas zonas: a partir das costas das Guianas, cujas lagunas, a começar no Amapá, a mais e mais se dessecam, avançando em planuras de estepes pelo mar em fora, até aos litorais norte-americanos, da Geórgia e das Carolinas. . . .

Naqueles lugares, o brasileiro salta: é estrangeiro, e está pisando em terras brasileiras. Antolha-se-lhe um contra-senso pasmoso: à ficção de direito estabelecendo por vezes a extraterritorialidade, que é a pátria sem a terra, contrapõe-se uma outra, rudemente física: a terra sem a pátria. É o efeito maravilhoso de uma espécie de imigração telúrica. A terra abandona o homem. (“Impressões Gerais” 30–31)

(This most original of hydrographic systems does not stop with the land but passes Cabo do Norte and continues on without banks far into the sea in search of the equatorial current, which it joins, turning over to it that huge load of matter capable of generating lands. That matter, distributed by that immense ocean current which ends up in the Gulf

Stream, emerges in concentrated doses in far-flung places from the coastlines of the Guianas, where lagoons are created, beginning in Amapá, that progressively dry into steppes advancing inland from the sea to the coastal regions of Georgia and the Carolinas in North America. . . .

In such places the Brazilian, albeit a foreigner, would be treading Brazilian land. Which leads to an astounding perplexity: to the fiction of extraterritorial law—country without land—is counterposed another basic concept—land without country. Such is the marvelous effect of this other kind of telluric migration. Land abandons man. [*The Amazon* 9])

Recognizing the complex interrelatedness that defines ecological systems leads da Cunha to acknowledge the limitations of viewing the environment through the frames of national political divisions. In spite of the neo-imperialist impulse that appears elsewhere in his work, this passage reveals an impressive hemispheric imagination that critiques the fiction of national borders while underscoring Brazil's ecological relationship with the rest of the Americas.

Indeed perhaps one of the reasons da Cunha's work has had such a powerful influence on Brazilian culture and continues to be read is the poetic quality of his scientific analysis. Commenting on da Cunha's poetic imagination, Luiz Fernando Valente notes, "Não há dúvida que a intenção de Euclides é buscar a verdade. Entre tanto quanto mais essa busca se aprofunda, tanto mais o autor vai abandonando as certezas do pensamento científico, localizando-a, antes, numa zona de fronteiras indefinidas, acessível somente nos interstícios entre a ciência e a ficção" (139) (There is no doubt of da Cunha's intent to seek truth. Nevertheless, the deeper his search goes, the more he abandons the certainties of scientific thought, locating truth instead in a zone of undefined borders, accessible only in the gaps between science and fiction). This statement aptly applies to da Cunha's consideration of the Amazon, which he struggles to define in purely scientific terms. He believes in the importance of science and argues for the need for more scientific understanding of the Amazon so that man's relationship with nature might remain as positive as possible. In one of his more understated moments, he summarizes, "Precisamos ao menos conservá-lo" ("Rios em Abandono" 50) (We need at very least to preserve the Purus [*The Amazon* 29]). Nevertheless, his writing also exhibits a remarkable poetry as he seeks a language capable of expressing his experience there. In these moments, the Amazon emerges in da Cunha's writings as a power and presence that commands respect and understanding.

Broadly speaking, da Cunha's Amazonian writings constitute an important and early contribution to ecocritical thought, and they specifically represent an autochthonous tradition of ecocriticism in Brazil. Furthermore,

his work serves as a model of ecocritical focus and methodology. Grounded in positivist scientific inquiry and conditioned by a poetic impulse, his work draws our attention to the contingencies of human experience and ecology while exposing Brazil's neo-imperial desires at the beginning of the twentieth century. Da Cunha's work exhibits a fundamentally ecological ethic—that is, it offers “a persistent reminder that human political and social inequities cannot be successfully and sustainably resolved without some engagement with the more-than-human world and with deep time” (DeLoughrey and Handley 25). Da Cunha's writings thus continue to offer an important perspective on the issues facing the Amazon and its relationship to Brazil's indigenous peoples and other population groups, whose existence, population centers, livelihoods, migration patterns, and so forth, are intricately connected with geography.

## Notes

1. See, for example, Schwarz's landmark essay, “As idéias fora do lugar,” translated and published in English under the title “Misplaced Ideas: Literature and Society in Late-Nineteenth-Century Brazil” in the volume *Misplaced Ideas*. In this essay, Schwarz analyzes the intellectual history of Latin America and the problematic way that nineteenth-century European liberal ideologies were applied to a Brazilian context that still upheld slavery. In a broader sense, his essay warns against the unintended and even damaging effects of appropriating ideologies into a context in which they were not produced.
2. Most histories of ecocriticism, including those by Mazel and by Glotfelty and Fromm, cite an essay by Rueckert as the published origin of the term. See Rueckert.
3. See the official website of the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment for extensive details on conference activities, journals and other publications, and bibliographies of ecocriticism: [www.asle.org/](http://www.asle.org/).
4. Rather than referring to the commonplace “web” of nature, I have opted for Timothy Morton's term “mesh,” a term that recalls Darwin's “tangled bank” from the last page of *On the Origin of Species* (I express thanks to my colleague Professor Dale Pratt for suggesting this connection). Morton writes, “The ecological thought imagines interconnectedness, which I call *the mesh*. Who or what is interconnected with what or with whom? The mesh of interconnected things is vast, perhaps immeasurably so. Each entity in the mesh looks strange. Nothing exists all by itself, and so nothing is fully ‘itself.’ There is curiously ‘less’ of the Universe at the same time, and for the same reasons, as we see ‘more’ of it. Our encounter with other beings becomes profound. They are strange, even intrinsically strange. Getting to know them makes them stranger. When we talk about life forms, we're talking about *strange strangers*. The ecological thought imagines a multitude of entangled strange strangers” (15).
5. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.
6. Three studies worth considering in this regard are Richard Grove's *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600–1860*, Shawn Miller's *An Environmental History of Latin America*, and Warren Dean's *With Broadax and Firebrand: The Destruction of the*

*Brazilian Atlantic Forest*. These well-researched volumes provide countless examples of the impact colonial endeavors had on plant and animal populations—in many cases dramatically changing landscapes through deforestation and desertification as well as other large-scale infrastructural projects. For an excellent and more expansive list of studies on the environmental history of Latin America, please see the “Online Bibliography on Latin American Environmental History,” edited by Lise Sedrez. The bibliography is hosted by California State University Long Beach and can be accessed at [www.csulb.edu/projects/laeh/index.html](http://www.csulb.edu/projects/laeh/index.html).

7. An interesting case in point is do Couto's essay “Ecocrítica,” which is included in his monograph *Ecolingüística*. In this text, do Couto carefully rehearses the New England tradition of ecocriticism beginning with the transcendentalists Emerson and Thoreau. He summarizes the Anglophone history of ecocriticism for his Lusophone audience but stops short—apart from a brief mention of Mário Palmério—of drawing connections between that history and the intellectual history of Brazil.
8. See, for example, the recent study by Barbas-Rhoden that serves as an insightful model of the international expansion of ecocriticism.
9. For an excellent study on the Canudos massacre, see Levine.
10. To read the official governmental commission, see “Instruções para as Comissões Mistas Brasileiro-Peruanas de Reconhecimento dos Rio Juruá e Purus nos Territórios Neutralizados,” *Um paraíso perdido* 271.
11. Da Cunha died tragically in a dramatic duel with an army officer who was having an affair with his wife. See Trovatto 65. See also Kadir 153.
12. Manuel de Oliveira Lima was a prolific Brazilian writer and diplomat. He held diplomatic positions in Lisbon, Berlin, Washington, London, Tokyo, Caracas, Brussels, and Stockholm. He was a founding member of the Brazilian Academy of Letters and was also a member of the Brazilian Historical and Geographical Institute. He held a visiting professor position at Harvard University and lectured on Brazilian history at universities throughout the United States and Europe. His books include *Dom João VI no Brasil* (1908), *La littérature brésilienne* (1909), *Machado de Assis et son oeuvre littéraire* (1909), *Formation historique de la nationalité brésilienne* (1911), and *The Evolution of Brazil Compared with that of Spanish and Anglo-Saxon America* (1914). At the time of his correspondence with Euclides da Cunha, he was serving as Brazilian Ambassador to the United States in Washington, DC (Da Cunha, *Correspondência* 23).
13. The English naturalist Henry Walter Bates spent eleven years exploring and investigating the Amazon river basin, from 1848 to 1859. His narrative of the experience was published in 1863.
14. Born in Maranhão, Artur Lemos was a lawyer, law professor, and public intellectual who also worked as a poet and journalist.
15. This fear was not unwarranted either. There is no shortage of tragic stories of Amazonian explorations gone awry. From his correspondence while in Bahia during the Canudos military campaigns, da Cunha's greater fear was that he would arrive too late to witness the destruction of Canudos: “temo não ir a tempo de assistir a queda do arrayal maldito” (Letter to Porchat, Bahia, 20 August 1897, *Correspondência* 108) (I'm afraid of not arriving in time to witness the end of that cursed outpost).
16. Alberto Rangel was born in Recife on 29 May 1871, but his family moved to Rio de Janeiro when he was still a child. At the age of seventeen, Rangel enrolled in the military academy in Rio de Janeiro, and it was there that he met da Cunha. From 1901 to 1905, Rangel worked for the government of the state of Amazonas as a civil engineer, and it was in this capacity that he became familiar with the geography and

culture of the Amazon. Rangel is the author of the collection of descriptive stories *Inferno verde: (Scenas e scenarios do Amazonas)* (1908). Rangel also published *Sombra n'água* (1913), a second collection of stories set in the Amazon. Rangel later published other collections of stories along with works on Brazil's history and also plays. He died in Nova Friburgo, Rio de Janeiro, on 14 December 1945.

17. This is a belief shared by many scholars including Afrânio Peixoto and Leandro Tocantins. For example, see the introductory essay written by Tocantins in *Um paraíso perdido*, a volume published in 1986 that collects all of the essays, studies, and other writings Euclides da Cunha produced on the Amazon.
18. *À margem da história* (roughly translated as “On the margins of history”) was originally divided into four parts: 1) “Terra sem história (Amazonia)” (*The Amazon: Land without History*), which was composed of seven chapters about the Amazon; 2) “Vários estudos” (Various studies), which was composed of three chapters dealing with inter-American issues; 3) “Da independência à República” (From independence to the republic), a long essay on Brazilian history; and 4) “Estrelas indecifráveis” (Indecipherable stars), a sweeping *crônica* touching on ancient and modern history, classical and religious texts, mythology, astronomy, and cosmography. The first seven chapters of *À Margem da História* have been ably translated by Ronald Sousa under the title *The Amazon: Land without History*, with an introduction by Lúcia Sá. The three other original parts of *À margem da história* remain untranslated into English.
19. I have taken all Portuguese citations from *À margem da história* from the edition prepared by Tocantins.
20. This is a point that fascinates da Cunha, and he returns to it on more than one occasion. See, for example, his preface to Rangel's study on the Amazon *Inferno verde*, where he writes, “E, ainda sob o aspect seccamente topographico [do Amazonas], não ha fixa-la em linhas definitivas . . . como se no quadro de suas planuras desmedidas andasse o pincel irrequieto de um sobrehumano artista incontentavel” (11; spelling and grammar as in the original) (And, to speak further of the dryly topographical aspect [of the Amazon], it cannot be fixed in definitive lines . . . as if the restless pencil of a hard-to-please superhuman artist had wandered over the painting of its immeasurable plains).

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