

# The hypertext of the Amazon: reading Euclides da Cunha's unfinished book

Marcia Caetano da Silva Caetano Langfeldt

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# The hypertext of the Amazon: reading Euclides da Cunha's unfinished book

**Marcia Caetano Langfeldt**[1]

*Falsehood is never in words; it is in things.*
Italo Calvino

In the early twentieth century Brazilian government sponsored several trips to the country's interior. At that time, the main interest was to incorporate these areas into the larger national project begun during the Brazilian Empire and that continued when Brazil became a republic in 1889. It was in this context that the military engineer, journalist and writer Euclides da Cunha (1866-1909) went to the Amazon, commissioned by the government of the Brazilian First Republic (1889-1930). In 1904, the Brazilian Foreign Relations Ministry and the Peruvian government agreed to constitute a binational commission in order to collect data in the region of upper Purus river. Euclides da Cunha headed the Brazilian team of the Commission. The Commission's purpose was to collect measurements of the geographical limits of the Purus River region to provide detailed information to the boundaries negotiations between Peru and Brazil. The agreement between the two countries happened only in 1909, with the Treaty of Petropolis.

In 1902, Euclides da Cunha had published the book *Os Sertões*, translated into English in 1944 by Samuel Putnam as *Rebellion in the Backlands* and in 2010 by Elizabeth Lowe as *Backlands: the Canudos Campaign*[2]. The book, a mix of science and literature, brought fame and success to the author, who became a member of the Brazilian Historical and Geographical Institute and the Brazilian Academy of Letters. However, although recognized, Euclides da Cunha found himself without a job. As happened in Canudos campaign, he wrote about the Amazon before even landing there. In order to be appointed as an engineer of the commission, he wrote four articles on the subject. These articles were published in newspapers of Sao Paulo and were later published in the book *Contrastes e Confrontos* (Contrasts and Confrontations), in 1907.

In addition to these articles and the Comission's reports, Euclides da Cunha also wrote a book of essays, *À margem da história* (1909) (At the margins of history), translated into English as *The Amazon: land without History* (2006) and a foreword in a friend's book[3]. He also gave

[1] PhD Candidate in Brazilian Literature at Sorbonne Nouvelle University
e-mail : marcia.langfeldt@gmail.com
[2] The author narrates the story of the Canudos war (1893-1897) in Bahia, Brazil, where a community formed around a messianic leader fought against the republican army.
[3] *Inferno Verde* (1908) (Green Hell), by Alberto Rangel, a short stories book about the Amazon.

interviews and made speeches and produced a correspondence during the period, as well as travel notes, marginal notes of other people's writings and made commented maps. This set is known today as the "Amazonian writings of Euclides da Cunha". As it happens in his other writings, he blurs the delimitations between essay, fiction and journalistic discourse. His original intention was to make a book about the Amazon, similar to the one he produced about the Canudos war. This second book would be titled "Lost Paradise", in reference to the work of the English poet John Milton, from the seventeenth century. But the project was never finished, as he was killed in self-defense in 1909 by his wife's lover.

The wide range of Euclides da Cunha Amazonian writings is divided between the Brazilian Historical and Geographical Institute, the Brazilian Academy of Letters, the newspaper O Estado de São Paulo, the Itamaraty (Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Affairs), the National Library and the Army's archives. As reference works, there are *Obras Completas*, a two-volume book with the complete works of Euclides da Cunha, published under Afrânio Coutinho direction in 1966 in Portuguese, with two reeditions in 1995 and 2005, the book of Leandro Tocantins *Euclides da Cunha e o Paraíso Perdido* (Euclides da Cunha and the Lost Paradise) in 1966, the author's correspondence, published by Francisco Venâncio Filho in 1938, and by Walnice Nogueira Galvão and Osvaldo Galotti in 1997 and the book of Euclides da Cunha's poetry, organized by Francisco Foot Hardman and Leopoldo Bernucci, published in 2009.

In order to write about the Amazon, Euclides da Cunha surrounded himself with the opinion of foreign naturalists such as the Germans Alexander von Humboldt and Carl von Martius, Swiss Botanic Louis Agassiz, British explorers Henry Walter Bates, Alfred Russel Wallace and William Chandless. In his writings, he also dialogs with English poet John Milton and French writer Victor Hugo, among other, mixing scientific discourse, journalism and poetry. Impressed by these readings, Euclides da Cunha finds in the Amazon the inspiration to write his next book, the one that remained unwritten, but that comes to us today, through this set of writings and the readings that the author made, in order to build his project.

In the book *A imitação dos sentidos* (1995), Leopoldo Bernucci discusses the mimeses in *Os Sertões* in a different perspective: taking mimesis not as a representation of the similarity, but the representation of difference. As he argues that the myth of artistic originality was created by Romanticism, Bernucci points out the presence of other authors in Euclides da Cunha writings, approaching him to authors, such as Victor Hugo, Domingo Sarmiento, Graciliano Ramos etc.

The purpose of this communication is to analyze the mimeses in the Amazonian writings of Euclides da Cunha, based on Roland Barthes' concept of interpretation in the book S / Z: "to interpret a text is not to give it a (more or less justified, more or less free) meaning, but on

the contrary to appreciate what plural constitutes it."[4] The permanent unfinished work that Euclides' "Lost Paradise" will always be – would this have really been the book's title? – gives us the opportunity to approach the vision and the method of the writer and the intellectual that contributed to build not only the Amazon region as we know it today, but also Brazil, as an emerging nation in the local and global arena, a country full of possibilities, shaping its geographical and ideological limits.

Finally, we will connect Euclides da Cunha with some of the authors quoted by him in this Amazonian writings, we will consider the ideas and opinions that interested him, in order to determine the guidelines for the national project he wanted to be part of. This purpose of this paper is not to make an exhaustive analysis, as we don't have the necessary time to do it, but to point out some of these topics that can introduce the subject.

## Around the book

As we have said before, *Os Sertões* was well received both by the public and the critics, granting recognition and admiration to its author from some of the most important institutions and influent intellectuals from the national scene. Among others, we can mention the writer and member of the Brazilian Academy of Letter José Veríssimo, the most influent literary critic of the time, that published a positive review the following day of the book's publication at the most influent newspaper of the time, Correio da Manhã, in December 3, 1902, in Rio de Janeiro. Soon afterwards, in February and March of the next year, the reviews of Araripe Junior, Medeiros e Albuquerque and Coelho Neto were published and they highlighted the qualities of the author. Regarding the public reception, we can mention the fact that when he died, in 1909, the author had already seen three editions of his book, in 1902, 1903 and 1905 and left another revised edition to be published posthumously by another publisher, Francisco Alves, who had already published a previous edition soon after the author's death, in 1911.

The highly positive reception of the book instilled a desire in the author to abandon the engineering career to devote himself exclusively to literature, his "real vocation", as he states in a letter to the president of the Brazilian Academy of Letters Machado de Assis. This explains why he quits his job as a responsible for public works for the state of São Paulo, but soon after that he changes his mind and starts to look for a commission in the upper Purus river in the Amazon.

[4] Translation made in 1974 by Farrar, Straus and Giroux, published by Hill and Wang, New York.

Reading the correspondence of the writer, we can see that his main intention was to write a second relevant book. In a letter to his father, announcing his appointment to the Upper Purus Commission on August 8, 1904, he says:

> I have just received a telegram from Mr.Oliveira Lima[5] announcing my name to the commission of engineers to the limits with Peru. I still don't know what my function will be, but I will accept it anyway. I can only see benefits in doing this – as a Brazilian, in order to provide a service to my country, as an engineer, as it is a decent work , and as a writer, who could not have a better subject.[6]

On March 10, 1905, in a letter to his friend, writer Coelho Neto, while Euclides was living in the city of Manaus, Amazonas, where he was doing the preparations for the trip to the Purus region, he said:

I have been living without light in my spirit, half unconscious. I will tell you nothing here about the people and the land, but later, in a book: the "Lost Paradise", where I will revenge the amazing nature of all brutalities committed by the irrational people that have been destroying it since the eighteenth century. What a mission and what a dream!

And on the same day, he asks to José Veríssimo (member of Brazilian Academy of Letters): "Do you think "Lost Paradise" a good title for my book about the Amazon? It reflects well my incurable pessimism. But how true it is! In another letter in the same month to his friend Arthur Lemos:

> If I would write now I would draw an unintelligible and turbulent miniature of chaos, a perfect mixture of flooded forests and vast brilliant skies. Between such extremes, there is a new world, with its infinite forms, that was entirely unknown to me. Furthermore, this Amazon reminds us the genial space definition of Milton: it hides in itself. The foreigner contemplates it without seeing it, through a vertigo. It only partially appears to him, slowly, anxiously. It is a greatness that demands the microscopic subtle penetration and the extremely precise and short observation of the analysts; it is an infinity that demands to be measured.[7]

The problem of Euclides influences is an issue the permanently occupies the author's mind, as we can see when he writes about Theodor Roosevelt's book *American Ideals (1904)*, in which he quotes the American ex-president on this matter:

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[5] Worked at the Itamaraty, was later the Brazilian Ambassador in Washington.
[6] Cunha, *Correspondência de Euclides da Cunha*, p. 219.
[7] Cunha, *Correspondência de Euclides da Cunha*, p. 268-269.

> Those severe and strongly ironic pages seem to have been written for us – because among us it shall be constantly, even exhaustively said that 'it is better to be an original than an imitation, even when the imitation is something better than the original'. Moreover, to be a first-class Brazilian, however modest the title were, 'is fifty-fold better than to be a second-class imitation servile copy of a Frenchman or Englishman.[8]

Thus, with the design of being a "genuine Brazilian", Euclides da Cunha finds in the Amazon his main *raw material*: the rubber tapper, original from the migrations flows from the Northeast. He was the logical continuation of Canudos's victims, killed by the government army, described in *Rebellion in the backlands*.

The Lost Paradise of Euclides da Cunha

The literary work mentioned by the author as the source of inspiration for his future book on the Amazon, the poem in ten books of John Milton, Paradise Lost, is about the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Paradise and their adaptation to their new life on Earth. If we replace the God of Milton by the Brazilian government that was expelling unwanted people from the coastal areas to send them to the Amazon, it becomes clear the analogy Euclides intended to establish between divine punishment that marked humanity forever and the public abandonment that was determined to those internal immigrants.

> Such place Eternal Justice had prepar'd
> For those rebellious, here their Prison ordain'd
> In utter darkness, and their portion set
> As far remov'd from God and light of Heav'n
> As far from the Center thrice to th'utmost Pole.
> O how unlike the place from whence they fell![9]

It is interesting to compare this excerpt from the poem with the Euclides da Cunha's account of the immigrants who had followed for the extraction region of the rubber in the article " This accursed climate ", from the book *At the margins of the History*:

> When the great droughts of 1879-1880, 1889-1900, 1900-1901 scourged the arid sertões (backlands) and in a few weeks the coastal cities filled with a population of refugees, starving, overcome with fever and smallpox, the single concern of the public powers consisted of liberating the cities as soon as possible from that invasion of moribund barbarians infesting

[8] Obras Completas, p. 195.
[9] Milton, *Paradise Lost:a poem written in tem books*, p. 5.

> Brazil. Steamboats were quickly crammed full of those troublesome cargoes consigned to death. They were sent to the Amazon - vast, unpopulated, almost unknown –, which amounted to expatriating them within their own country. That martyred multitude, all rights lost, family ties severed, torn apart in the tumult of forced departure, in effect set out bearing sealed marching orders to the unknown. And it went with its starving, its fever victims, and its pox infected, in conditions that would contaminate and corrupt the healthiest locales in the world. And once this purgative task was performed, no further attention was paid. Government intervention ceased. Never, down to our own days, has a single government agent, or doctor, been involved in the case. The banished bore with them the single, sorrowful mission of simply disappearing.[10]

## We and the others

In the early twentieth century, there was a long list of travel writings produced by adventurers, foreign scientists and naturalists who helped to shape the image we had of the Amazon. Euclides da Cunha read a large volume of these texts, both in his articles and in his letters, he quotes and comments the observations made by his predecessors, such as Wallace, Bates, Humboldt and Agassiz. Many of these travelers, if not all, tended to see the native populations, both indigenous and mestizos, as individuals without the necessary qualities for the development of the region, due to the important biological determinism that prevailed in the scientific writings of seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The Brazilian historian Gilberto Freire dressed a portrait of Euclides da Cunha that is now a reference work in the author's critical work, where he points out the issue of biological determinism in many of Euclide's writings. As an important interpreter of the social-cultural mechanisms of Brazilians, Freire seems to be disturbed by some of the propositions stated by Euclides da Cunha, under a biological bias. In fact, biological determinism was an important factor in the interpretation of the world made by travelers that had come to the Amazon before the beginning of the twentieth century. We can find traces of this even in the work of the more enlightened scientists, such as German naturalist Alexander von Humboldt, named as the "second discoverer of America" and an important presence in Euclides da Cunha's writings. Humboldt traveled to America from 1799 to 1809 and published an extensive scientific work, as well as a personal account of these trips, such as the Scientific Report, which he wrote and published in Paris, between 1814 and 1825. Although Humboldt was against the slavery system, we can find statements on biological determinism in his writings.

As we can see, the issue race, biological determinism and evolutionism were important keys to understand these European naturalists who visited the Amazon and Humboldt is an

[10] Da Cunha, *The Amazon: land without History*, p.36.

example of that ideological environment. It is also important to mention Swiss Louis Agassiz, who visited the region accompanied by his wife, between 1865 and 1866, collecting numerous photographs of human samples of different races, constituting what at the time was considered an important anthropological collection, but that now constitutes an unfortunate example of an ethnocentric and racist science.

Taking Euclides da Cunha, we could mention many examples that he was trying to adapt to this ideological landscape, but we will mention only the article "Between Madeira and Javari", published in the newspaper O Estado de São Paulo on May 29, 1904, before the author traveled to the Amazon:

> In reality, what happened here (in the Amazon) and still happens is the natural selection of the strong. As it is not enough to be rich to adventure in the unknown. It requires, above all, a strong will, an obstinacy, a fearlessness and even a privileged physical constitution.[11]

In fact, as pointed out by American geographer Susanna Hecht[12], the three pillars of scientific racism – environmentalism, scientific anthropology and social Darwinism – had justified slavery in Brazil and the social inequality that prevailed after the abolition of slavery. According to Hecht, Euclides da Cunha was based on environmental evolutionary theory, which claimed that Brazilian miscegenation had generated a race that was best adapted to the region. Gilberto Freire had already observed that event impregnated by this biological determinism of the Brazilian intellectuals of the period, Euclides da Cunha never advocate for a superiority of race, seeking a quite unique way of analysis for his time, rather taking historic-social elements to explain the places he visited.[13]

In addition to that it is important to note a clear contradiction between Euclides's statements and the determinism, that helps to understand the mission he had assigned for himself: the nationalization of the Amazon. Now, within this perspective, combined with a certain sympathy for the people who immigrated to the region, the author clearly overlaps the determinist theories of his time, as we can see at the end of the article "A accursed climate", where he narrates his meeting with a perfectly adapted German in the middle of the Amazon forest, comparing him with the mestizos:

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[11] Cunha, *Um paraíso perdido*, p. 18.
[12] Hecht, *The scramble for the Amazon and the* Lost Paradise *of Euclides da Cunha*, p.427.
[13] Freire, *Perfil de Euclides*, p. 48.

> [...] Those strong mestizos and this exceptional Saxon are not effects of the environment; they arise in spite of it; they triumph in a final fight, in which succumbed in a great number, those not gifted with the same strength, energy and persistence.
> In this case we must throw away at once a sterile sentimentalism and recognize in the climate a superior function. [...] It ruled, moralized. It elected and reelected for life the strongest. It eliminated and eliminates the unfit, that has to leave or to die. And it is certainly this admirable climate that prepares new steps for the strong.

## Final considerations

If the correspondent journalist who went to Canudos war was not entirely aware that he would become a successful writer in the Brazilian intellectual scene, the engineer who headed the Upper Purus Commission knew exactly that his observations were going to be published in a book that everybody would read. Thus, his role as an engineer in the process of the integration of the Amazon in Brazil cannot be dissociated from the project of the writer that wanted to produce his masterpiece and of the man of ideas, that desired the recognition of his effort.

The comparison between Euclides da Cunha and other authors highlights that the author of Rebellion in the Backlands appropriates ideas and aesthetic elements of others, in order to support his own views and to constitute himself as a “tropical intellectual”, as Gilberto Freire says. A tropical ideology that combines a wider and more social approach in the analysis of Brazil of his time.

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