

Changing Narratives of Race and Environment in the Nineteenth-Century and early-Twentieth-Century Brazilian Amazon

Silvia Espelt-Bombin, University of Exeter

Mark Harris, University of St Andrews

Keywords: Amazon, Brazil, race, environment, identity, nation-building

Abstract

The Amazon has been the object of numerous reflections upon the relationship between the natural environment and the categories of human society. This article analyses Brazilian writers who considered the relations between space and race over the course of the nineteenth century and early-twentieth century. It focuses on João Henrique de Mattos, José Veríssimo and Euclides da Cunha, placing them in relation to each other and within local, national and international discourses on race, nature and development. Its aim is to examine how a racialised geographical understanding of the Amazon changed over the course of the nineteenth century and was tied to Brazilian nation-building.

This article examines the different ways in which three Brazilian writers have understood the mutual influence between the Amazonian environment and the kinds of people who live there. Our purpose is to show that these writers reflect a changing racialised view of the geography of Brazil. The divide between a poor and backward north and a

prosperous and modern south of Brazil is well known. Much less has been said about the participation of regional elites in these nation-building efforts and about how the Amazonian elite's accounts produced variations on the theme of race, modernity and resources (Guzmán 2013). Since the early colonial chronicles, outsiders have marvelled at what they perceived as the natural abundance of the region. Yet colonial officials failed to control these resources to produce the much hoped-for profit. Generally, they blamed the indolence of the workers – the indigenous and mixed-race peasants who were forced to work for private and state enterprises. This narrative continues into contemporary times, as frustrated local elites claim that 'nature makes them lazy' (Harris, 2005: 461). In this view, the environment produces a particular work ethic: it discourages industriousness. From the mid-nineteenth century, these concepts came to be more systematically developed by Brazilian writers, keen to influence discourses on their country and to develop prosperity in the Amazon. About this time, the very idea of 'Amazonia' came into being (Slater, 2002). Narratives of place therefore came to inform race and ethnic character in new ways and became tied to nation-building: the Amazon became distinctly Brazilian, a separate but connected entity. It is the different but related versions of these understandings that we examine here, for they are versions of nation-building through territorial integration and social inclusion.

David Cleary (2001) has argued that, throughout the nineteenth century and particularly by the turn of the twentieth century, two simultaneous ways of conceptualising the mutual influence of the Amazonian environment and its people had developed: on the one side utopian and on the other dystopian. Examples of the former were the writings of early- to mid-nineteenth-century European travellers and scientists Johann Spix, Karl Martius, Henry Bates and Alfred Wallace, who spoke of abundant biodiversity, fertile land, able indigenous people and great prospects for the country, with high expectations placed on its inhabitants. As an exponent of the dystopian version, Cleary singled out Brazilian Euclides da Cunha,

whose perception of the Amazon in the context of the rubber boom was influenced by some of its darker notes. For Cleary, da Cunha described an uncivilised, empty land without history, in which the ‘limitations imposed by the natural environment make the development of settled society and higher society impossible’ (Cleary, 2001: 288). This dualistic approach has been questioned by Hecht (2004, 2013), who has reviewed da Cunha’s writings (including his essays and correspondence) and argued that ‘throughout various sections of his Amazonian works, da Cunha analyses how the myth of emptiness obscured the density and richness of native occupation, and how that idea shaped the understanding of Amazonia’ (Hecht, 2004: 54).

In the light of Hecht’s analysis, we take a fresh look at nineteenth-century writings to develop Cleary’s dystopian/utopian analysis. We analyse some of the writings of João Henrique de Mattos (c.1845), José Veríssimo (c.1887) and Euclides da Cunha (c.1909). Focusing on Brazilian elites allows us to see locally produced and informed understandings of developments in Amazonia while simultaneously tracking influences from visiting chroniclers and travellers -- Brazilian, American and European -- who blurred scientific, racial, environmental and cultural conceptions of Amazonia and its peoples. Through our analysis, we show how perceptions of race and natural resources change in relation to wider debates on the self-understanding of the new nation of Brazil.

The selection of these authors is not random. Da Cunha is one of the best-known Brazilian authors writing on the Amazon. He and Mattos participated in expeditions and wrote texts that addressed Brazil’s presence in remote areas bordering other South American countries, while considering the reasons why these regions had remained undeveloped. Veríssimo, chronologically between da Cunha and Mattos, bridges their writings, articulating a Brazilian version of Louis Agassiz’s polygenist theory (which had arrived in Brazil in the 1860s) and anticipating the work of da Cunha, with whom he maintained a fluid

correspondence (Hecht, 2013: 213-214, 227, 335-336). The three authors were evidently concerned with the developing Brazilian empire and later republic, and the ways in which remote and uncontrolled areas and people could be incorporated.

An analysis of the work of these three authors demonstrates a development of nineteenth-century thought, an understanding of the Amazon and the connection between race, nation, labour and environment. They are all centrally concerned with what was called the *sertão* during the colonial period: the backlands, seen as replete with wild and dangerous Indians. Following independence and the Cabanagem rebellion in the late 1830s, the *sertão* became a space whose integration into the Brazilian state was critical to the successful building of the nation from its core to its peripheries (Russell Wood, 2002). The three authors discuss how the Amazonian interior was perceived and how it could be incorporated into the new nation of Brazil. They develop a notion of an autochthonous Amazonia that is an integral part of Brazil. These authors track the changing meaning of the Amazon outside of its urban core, where a minority of people lived. They demonstrate the transformation of elite understandings of the rural population, from recalcitrant labour force (at the beginning of the nineteenth century) to skilful peasant river dwellers (Veríssimo) and architects of the nation in the remote western Amazon (da Cunha). We see a progressive appreciation of ethnic diversity and of the possibility for human advancement in disadvantageous conditions.

The early-nineteenth-century Brazilian Amazon was characterised by a series of political events and economic developments that radically transformed it. These include the emergence of a peasantry along the riverbanks (Harris, 2010); independence from Portugal and incorporation into the new Brazilian empire, a transition questioned by the Cabanagem in the 1830s (Ricci, 2003; Harris, 2010); repressive legislation to control the peasantry (Moreira Neto, 1985); and the influx of migrants from abroad and other Brazilian regions – especially the Northeast – parallel to the growth of rubber production and export (Hecht, 2013). Along

the way, narratives on how race was connected to the natural environment were transformed. Was the shift associated with a change in the perception of the Amazon as a place to be developed and of its people as capable of carrying out these changes? Who or what was responsible for the change? Despite extensive participation of peasants in markets and society, their political contribution was generally overlooked or marginalised by elites. What gives these three authors' contributions continued intellectual value today is their expression of the character of the Amazon as caught between its regional specificity, its shaping by global demands and the multicultural influences to which it was subject. Their work was part of an intellectual colonisation of the Amazon by a Brazilian elite. Thus, the Amazon was subject to nation-building designs, like other parts of Latin America at this time (Mallon, 1995; Larson, 2004; Guzmán, 2013). The difference for the Amazon was its commercial development as a result of rubber extraction and its importance, from the mid-nineteenth century, to the industrial development of North America and Europe, while it remained politically and economically marginal in Brazil.

João Henrique de Mattos, c. 1845.

João Henrique de Mattos was born in 1784 in the town of Barcellos on the Rio Negro (Reis 1979: 141). An experienced army man who had travelled extensively along the Amazon River and its tributaries since the 1820s, Mattos felt he had a clear understanding of the transformations the Lower and Middle Amazon had undergone and what was needed for their development (Mattos, 1845: 143). During the Cabanagem (1835-1840), he had fought against the rebels as the military commander in the Lower Amazon (Harris, 2010: 82, 264). At the time of completing his *Relatório do estado da decadência em que se acha o Alto Amazonas*, signed in Belém do Pará on 25 October 1845, he was a colonel in the Brazilian Army. The *Relatório* was the result of two years of travel (1841-1843) along the rivers of the Comarca do Alto Rio Negro, and was one of several reports requested at the time by the Brazilian

state, which was concerned with the demarcation and stability of its frontiers and the incorporation of the space and its people into the Brazilian state. Sovereignty over this region was threatened by incursions of European scientists and travellers and, most importantly, by British claims from neighbouring Guyana (Reis, 1979: 141; Mattos, 1845: 143).

Hence, Mattos's *Relatório* is a report written by a military man giving practical details on what should be improved to transform the Alto Amazonas into a well-managed, well-provisioned and fruitful territory. Through a consideration of economic, political, social and cultural realities, Mattos argued for the need to elevate the political status of the Alto Amazonas from a *comarca* (county) to a *provincia* (province) to regain control of the region and develop its economic potential (Mattos, 1845: 144, 178). The change he recommended would take place five years later, in 1850, when the Alto Amazonas became the Provincia do Amazonas.

The general tone is catastrophist: 'the Alto Amazonas, that almost dying fainting giant', found itself in an 'abysm' (Mattos, 1845: 168 and 178 respectively) from which it could still escape if the right measures were implemented:

'Owing to the lack of a strong government to rule it since 1822, the county has been subject to the scourge of revolutions and the assassins' blade, and many have been killed or forced to leave. Men feel little inclined to agricultural labour, their true interest being short-term enterprises that falsely promise happiness and instead lead them to a miserable future. There is an absence too of religious ministers, zealous of the service of God, and for whom morality is the Gospel. Also, there are no virtuous Magistrates to implement the Law, protect the good and punish the evil. This absence has caused the Law to be despised, and immorality to take over the miserable people of the county; this is one of the main reasons for the current decadence of the county. The harm is not beyond repair, and it could even be easily fixed if the Government

wanted to solve it. (Mattos, 1845: 177, all translations are ours unless otherwise stated).

For Mattos, it is evident that bad administration, corruption, lack of respect for the law and a significant depopulation were the causes of the region's decline. In the past, the Alto Amazonas had been prosperous and it could be so again. Mattos proposed measures to promote farming, trade and the breeding of cattle as fundamental for prosperity, and aimed to tackle corruption. His text showed no trace of a deterministic vision of the environment as limiting the possibilities of development; for him, the Alto Amazonas's parlous state was due to negligence from higher up the administrative hierarchy. Yet Mattos's general perspective on nature, culture and people is, contrary to the desolate picture he paints, positive. One might even consider it utopian, in line with the perspective of scientists and liberal humanists.

To be sure, the *Relatório* has an agenda for developing the upper Amazon, which emerges from the author's background as a native-born member of the elite. Although we know nothing about his parents, we do know that his Portuguese grandfather married an Indian woman. Mattos was likely to have been educated in the regional capital of Belém, where he trained as a soldier and an officer. It is probable that he spoke *lingua geral*, as his frequent travels to indigenous communities along the Rio Branco and Rio Negro would have necessitated. In sum, Mattos was the embodiment of ideals of Pombaline Amazonia: of mixed race background, both local and cosmopolitan, and with an enlightened grasp of the Amazon's usefulness for the Brazilian empire. As such his recommendations were in line with the eighteenth-century reforms, which focused on settlement, integration and economic advancement.

It is significant that Mattos possessed insider knowledge and was able to differentiate among indigenous groups and their internal quarrels, habits and locations. He names peoples, rivers, creeks, alliances, and the type of trade carried out between groups and with the British,

and he knows which *principais* or *capitães* (principals or captains) are respected both by indigenous groups and by *brancos* (whites) (Mattos, 1845: 150). Such insider knowledge of the Amazon River, its peoples and its tributaries is present in European travel accounts predating and contemporary to Mattos, but is less apparent in da Cunha and entirely absent from Veríssimo.

Mattos identifies the population as one of mixed descent, in which ‘*Brancos, Mamelucos, Tapuias, Mestiços e Pretos*’ along with *escravos* (‘Whites, Mamelucos, Tapuias, Mixed-blood, Blacks’ and slaves - the capitals are Mattos’s) lived in towns and settlements. Mattos’s emphasis was on the *indios aldeados* (indigenous people living in villages), whose numbers had declined significantly since the end of the eighteenth century (Mattos, 1845: 147). While he argued for a repopulation of the upper Amazon by soldiers settling in frontier towns and marrying local women, as well as by the provision of incentives for migration into the area, he saw the most promising strategy as being to focus on indigenous people. He suggested measures to attract them back to the riverbanks and to entice new indigenous groups to live in settlements and missions:

‘To relocate these different “tribes”, uprooting them from the forest where they, in their own way, live more comfortably than they would amongst us, it is first necessary to persuade them of the advantages of our friendship, to support them, to dress them, not to exhaust them requesting more services than they can provide, to pay them promptly and without usury whatever was promised to them, whatever is owed to them and that they have earned with the sweat of their brow and sometimes risking their lives. Their subsistence must come from agricultural labour in the fields [...] These fields must be allocated to all the families that relocate so that each has the same amongst us they had before, as well as a home that is convenient to them [...]. To make sure they love the settlements and have a good perception of our friendship

and protection, it is best to avoid drafting into service those who “resettled” first, so that they have time to tend their fields, establish themselves, and to report to others the warm welcome they received from the Government of His Imperial Majesty, so that the nation and the state earn the useful and well-directed labour that will add extraordinarily to the richness of this part of the Brazilian Empire. The heads of families should not be diverted from their livelihood making, and only in families where there is more than one child should men contribute to public service work’ (Mattos, 1845: 175-176)

Mattos is writing about the continuation of a long-held practice in the conquest of territory involving native resettlement (the *descimentos*, literally ‘descents’, meaning a ‘coming down’ from a remote place to a centre of civilisation) in missions and indoctrination with Christianity. His approach to labour, habits (dress) and culture is paternalistic; the aim is to use ‘the natives in the Service of God and the Nation’ (Mattos, 1845: 174), through agriculture on the lands they occupy and, as shown in other passages of the *Relatório*, their labour and trade in forest products. Even those considered *indios ladinos*, who had been living within ‘civilised society’ but had escaped abusive labour at the hands of the *brancos* and had sought refuge amongst *indios salvagens* (savage indigenous people), should be encouraged to come down to the riverbank villages, as should the *nações desconhoidas* (unknown nations) (Mattos, 1845: 170-171). It was only by incorporating into society the many Indians living on the main rivers and their tributaries that the population of the region would recover. This approach was much the same as pre-Pombaline Portuguese colonial policy, in which missions and forts were key to territorial and population control (Sweet, 1974; Boxer, 1962; Barriga, 2014). Mattos is aiming at homogenisation, acculturation and a strong centralised control over indigenous lives. He calls them *nações* (nations), while the

Brazilian Empire is the *Nação* (Nation); both words are the same, but the former is subordinate to the latter (Mattos, 1845: 169, 174).

It was, nonetheless, important that indigenous people be paid salaries and not abused or overworked, and that cultural differences be respected, at least in the beginning, considering their preference for *mandioca* (manioc) and the rhythms of their life (Mattos, 1845: 174). This acknowledgement of difference and tentative respect might be linked to the fact that Mattos valued indigenous groups for their knowledge of forest and river products that could be traded, and of navigation, trade routes and fishing skills. Men, more useful than women, should receive higher salaries, but both should be integrated and looked after (Mattos, 1845: 164, 166, 168-169, 177).

Population relocation would solve the problems of this currently underpopulated space which, nevertheless, had abundant natural resources that only needed to be well managed. Along the rivers and in the lakes, animals and fertile soils for cultivation were to be found, and forest goods were abundant (Mattos, 1845: 170-174). For Mattos, the territory had to be properly managed, as the current indigenous (mis)use of land and products did not contribute to its development.

In sum, Mattos provides an insider view of Amazonian development, suggesting that the errors that had led to the decline of the Alto Amazonas did not come from its essential nature, its indigenous or mixed races, but from mismanagement at the hands of externally appointed, corrupt, administrators and from noncompliance with the law and the Brazilian state. His criticism of errant administrative appointees only interested in their own enrichment was typical of the period from independence to the Cabanagem, a rebellion that he considered a major cause for the region's depopulation and economic decline. His hope was that appointment of the right administrators and the incorporation and proper treatment of mixed blood and indigenous peasants along the river banks would lead organically to

development. Only then would the upper Amazon take its proper place in the emerging nation of Brazil, then just over twenty years old. In Mattos's 1845 writings there was no sense of a Brazilian Amazonia somehow different from or almost incompatible with the rest of Brazil. Nevertheless, there was a consciousness of its specificity when compared to other regions in Brazil, in relation to its forms of labour and modes of economic organisation, which at the time were mostly extractive.

José Veríssimo, c. 1887.

In the 1860s and 1870s, Brazil saw the advent of racial determinism and Darwinism, which in the following decades provided the new context within which many Brazilian intellectuals addressed the configuration of the new nation, its varied environment, the end of slavery and the birth of the republic. Confronted with the reality of a Brazil *mestiço*, intellectuals reacted in different ways. It is not our intention to survey the ways these intellectual trends affected Brazilian thought, for other researchers have already dealt with this topic comprehensively (Skidmore, 1990, 1993; Schwarcz, 1993). Through Veríssimo's writings, we seek to uncover, rather, how the intertwining of these theories led to a rethinking of Amazonia.

José Veríssimo Dias de Matos (Óbidos, Pará, 1857 – Rio de Janeiro, 1916) divided his time between the state of Pará and Rio de Janeiro for most of his life. An active member of learned circles in both Belém and Rio, he worked as a teacher and a journalist, and founded several journals (Araújo, 2007: 20-24). His writings dealt with pedagogy, history, literature, ethnography and economics, and he was one of a group of thinkers concerned with the conceptualisation of a Brazil as a nation made up of different *raças* (races) (Araújo, 2007; Lima Ayres, 1992). He was not the only local person writing on the Amazon at the time; there were others, like Couto de Magalhães (1837-1898) (Henrique, 2003).

Veríssimo's *As populações indígenas e mestiças na Amazonia. Sua linguagem, suas crenças e seus costumes* was a thorough revision of his earlier work, *As raças cruzadas do*

Pará, published in 1878 in *Primeiras Páginas*. He might have written a first version around 1880 and revised it around 1883. The text as we know it today was first published in 1887 in the *Revista do Instituto Histórico e Geográfico Brasileiro*, a journal that was key to developing understandings of culture and nation in late nineteenth-century Brazil, as it published texts that promoted discussion amongst Brazilian intellectuals -- in particular, about *raça* (Barbato, 2014). As a learned man in dialogue with other intellectuals, Veríssimo peppers his discussions with references to and critiques of European travellers writing about Brazil and the Amazon, such as Louis Agassiz (*A journey in Brazil*, 1868), Henry Bates (*The Naturalist on the River Amazons*, 1864) and James Orton (*The Andes and the Amazon*, 1870).

As populações undertakes an analysis of the inhabitants of Amazonia, describing the – for him – different *raças* and their offspring, to develop a cultural, religious and linguistic appraisal of the characteristics of each of them and of riverine culture. It is essentially a counter-argument to Agassiz’s racist theory that Brazil, and the Amazon specifically, was degraded by racial mixing. Whereas Veríssimo ended his essay by stating, like Agassiz, that ‘The mixed races of Pará are deeply degraded’ (Veríssimo, 1887: 387), the key difference is that this ‘degradation’ was not in his view the result not of a single cause but of a combination of environmental, social, political and religious factors (see Lima-Ayres, 1992: 89).

While Veríssimo is fascinated by the Amazon River and its exuberance, he believes that the degradation is due to ‘a climate so enervating that it defeats and subjugates men, a nature so extraordinarily lavish nature that it comes close to putting an end of the fight for life’ (Veríssimo, 1887: 310). It is a Garden of Eden (here Veríssimo references Orton’s *The Andes and the Amazon*) where everything needed is within reach and where people are not driven to work more than necessary or to store foods. At the same time, the Amazon valley’s climate prevented European women from migrating to Amazonia (Veríssimo, 1887: 297),

leading to mixed-race descendants of European men and indigenous women (pointing to a regional difference, as in the Amazon there were more indigenous women and in Southern Brazil more women of African descent). Still, Veríssimo argues that nature alone does not determine the development of a region. He cites *Les peuples de l'Afrique* by Robert Hartmann (1880), who argues that while the environment has an initial input into shaping human life, it is the *modus vivendi* ('*modo de viver*') that most strongly determines what people become (Veríssimo, 1887: 300). For Veríssimo, incorporating indigenous people successfully into 'civilisation' (dress, moral guidance, education) would overcome environmental determinism and racial characteristics.

Veríssimo believed in the psychological inheritance of lifestyles and culture. Hence, nature's partial determination explains – according to Veríssimo – the indolence of the *indio* (Tupi Guaraní or *selvagens*, as he also called them), a character trait passed on to their mixed-race descendants, the *mestiços*, who made up two thirds of the population and included the *tapuios*, *curiboca* and *mamelucos*. For him, this explains why the *mestiços* live as their *indio* parents did: simple housing, few clothes and possessions, and an attitude towards life marked by a lack of energy and drive (Veríssimo, 1887: 308-3010). Were the *tapuios*, *curibocas* and *mamelucos* equal to *indios*? For Veríssimo, the *tapuio* was the most degenerate of the mixed races while the *curiboca* and *mameluco* were the intellectual elite, if only they could be told apart. *Tapuios* and *mamelucos* were willing to take on the heaviest work in the forest, like collecting rubber, *salsaparilha* or *copaiba*: the tasks that would be 'difficult and nearly impossible for an individual of superior race' ('*um individuo de raça superior*') (Veríssimo, 1887: 308-311).

Why was the *indio* degraded? Veríssimo (1887: 299) states that the *indio* 'called into civilisation' changed and adopted new morals, dress, language and religion, and became a

different person. However, before these changes happened, the *indios* were not completely uncivilised:

‘The natives of Brazil, or at least those who lived in Amazonia, must have had a more perfect form of civilisation than the remnants of the “tribes” scattered in our backlands and even, in some respects, their present-day descendants’ (Veríssimo, 1887: 302).

What went wrong, according to Veríssimo? First, Portuguese colonisation. Although the colonisers were white, Portugal was an intellectually backward nation (*‘atrazada’*), unfit to educate *‘a raça selvagem’* (‘the savage race’) (Veríssimo, 1887: 305). They were uneducated and unskilled and, while looked on favourably by Veríssimo because they gave birth to the mixed races, they not only became a worse version of themselves on arrival in Brazil, but also fell prey to the general spirit of the country, ‘a spirit of self-indulgence, laziness and negligence’ (Veríssimo, 1887: 306-307). The Portuguese enslaved and abused indigenous people, destroying families and their descendants’ morality (Veríssimo, 1887: 302-304, 308-309). Hand in hand with Portuguese abuse was the harm inflicted by religion and the missionaries’ catechism and teachings, which lead *indios* and their offspring to hate and distrust the Portuguese (Veríssimo, 1887: 305-306, 348).

Second, the small number of Africans and their descendants arriving in Amazonia had a negative impact. Veríssimo thought that the indigenous *raças* were superior to Africans (Veríssimo, 1887: 312). Veríssimo argued that a permanent hatred between the two *‘raças, africana e indígena’* prevented them from siding together in the Cabanagem, with blacks always siding with the elites. For him, the Cabanagem was consequence of the abuse that the indigenous peoples had suffered at the hands of the colonisers (Veríssimo, 1887: 324).

Nevertheless, Veríssimo is positive about the mixing of races that makes the Amazon and Brazil unique: the homogeneity of the Brazilian people, who are not ‘Brazilian-Guaraní’,

Portuguese or African, but everything and nothing at the same time (Veríssimo, 1887: 315-16). In comparison with the USA, Veríssimo finds that Brazil has been more successful at overcoming its racial divisions thanks to its exceptional character, and particularly the character of Amazonia and its population, with *tapuios* playing central roles in riverine communities: the ‘*tapuias* are the people living on the margins of the big river and its many tributaries, living our life, contributing to our income, working in our industries’ (Veríssimo, 1887: 299). Their contribution is fundamental not only in socio-economic terms, but also in cultural terms, as evidenced via the incorporation of Tupi-Guaraní words in the Portuguese used in the Brazilian Amazon and parts of Brazil. For him, it is significant that the language spoken in Brazil is a mixed one, a modification of traditional Portuguese which incorporates foreign words and, significantly, Tupi-Guarani (Veríssimo, 1887: 316-347, list of words at 328-347).

The *tapuias* were at the core of Brazilian Amazonian identity and civility, and Veríssimo hoped to find a solution to save them. Veríssimo concludes his essay by acknowledging that he does not know how to solve the problem, but exhorts his readers to act. In 1890, three years on from the publication of this article, he argued for an organised system of public education as the way forward for the region (Araújo and Prestes, 2007: 145; França, 2007: 171-172). This was a shift in his views on racial characteristics, as his 1887 text only pointed to the poor (or lack of) education that indigenous peoples had received (Veríssimo, 1887: 304, 310, 380).

Both Mattos and Veríssimo were natives of Amazonia but Veríssimo brought in new ideas drawn from the scientific racism of the day. He was an insider who moved to the outside to understand what he observed in the provinces of Pará and Amazonas. Like Mattos, his proposition was to nationalise the Amazon, but it was a suggestion imposed from the outside and fused with local elite perceptions of an indolent and unambitious peasantry and

workforce. For Veríssimo, the problems of the region were a complicated mix of local racial characteristics, an extremely fertile natural environment and a lack of education, rather than political or economic institutions.

Euclides da Cunha, c. 1909.

While Mattos and Veríssimo were born and lived in the Amazon for lengthy periods, Euclides da Cunha (1866-1909) was an outsider who was transformed by his experiences in the Amazon. Living in the state of Rio de Janeiro most of his life, he was to become one of the best-known writers addressing the Brazilian North East and Amazonia of his time. *Os Sertões* made him widely popular, with a literary style that mixed history, politics, sociology and science. In his analysis of northeast Brazil and the Canudos rebellion, he provided uninitiated Brazilians with a glimpse of the intertwining of race and place in the *sertão*, the drought-ridden backlands of northeast Brazil, where the environment shaped the world of the *sertanejos* (inhabitants of the *sertão*) and, in turn, these people took on the characteristics of the places they inhabited (Hecht, 2013: 422). Familiar with da Cunha's talents, Veríssimo had recommended him as a candidate for the boundary demarcation expedition charged with demarcating Brazil's frontiers with Peru. Before da Cunha left, he wrote to Veríssimo that he did not 'want Europe, the boulevards, the glories of position'; instead, he yearned for 'the backlands, the rough track, and the hard and sad life of the pioneer' (Hecht 2013: 214). This evocation of the Amazon succinctly conveys the way the personal and the political had converged for da Cunha.

Da Cunha's trip to the Amazon in 1905 was part of an expedition to settle a frontier dispute between Peru and Brazil, much as Mattos had been concerned with frontier occupation along the then-unsettled Brazilian border with the European colonies in the Guianas. Da Cunha's aim was to determine the degree of Brazilian occupation of a remote Amazonian region, the Upper Purus, and claim it for the Brazilian Republic. The writings

produced after that trip were nationalist to the core, claiming the Upper Purus for Brazil thanks to the exploitation of the region by Brazilian rubber tappers. The extraction of and trade in rubber had started to integrate the Amazon into the world economy from the end of the nineteenth century.

The texts we engage with are the seven essays Da Cunha assembled in *À margem da história* in 1909, along with an analysis of his correspondence, articles and other Amazon-related essays undertaken by Hecht (Hecht, 2004, 2013). Da Cunha's tragic death at the hands of his wife's lover in 1909 prevented him from publishing the equivalent monograph to *Os Sertões* for the Amazon: *O paraíso perdido* (Sá, 2006, xi). While we quote from Hecht's translation from the original Portuguese to acknowledge her wide reading of da Cunha's writings (Hecht, 2013), we also provide additional reference to the 2006 Oxford University Press edition, translated by Sousa and edited by Sá (cited as da Cunha, 1909). The OUP edition is the only complete English version of da Cunha's essays on the Amazon.

In his trip to the Upper Purus, da Cunha met again with migrants from Paraíba and Ceará, this time subjugating themselves to a lifetime of forced labour and debt as rubber tappers in Acre, from which only malaria would free them. This deeply affected him (da Cunha, 1909: 14, 33), bringing da Cunha close to Mattos's criticism of corrupt elites, in this case elites keeping small-scale rubber producers in perpetual debt by providing credit that could never be repaid.

The *sertanejos* and *caboclos* (defined here as people of mixed Indian and Portuguese descent) who went to Acre (and were later followed by Europeans and Arabs) to become *seringueiros* (rubber tappers harvesting the *seringa*, rubber from a specific rubber tree) led a non-state-sponsored colonisation from below, at the colonisers' own risk, as drought had driven them away from their homeland (da Cunha, 1909: 35-37). Da Cunha interpreted their struggle in Darwinian terms –the survival of the fittest – and this recognition made *sertanejos*

and *caboclos* champions of an inhospitable place, of a land and climate that resisted colonisation:

‘The transplanted populations settled, sank their roots to the soil, in an astounding demographic advance [...]. What a contrast to the traditional colonial pattern! What a blow to the myths of its fatal climate! The story of Acre, a story that is still unfolding albeit at a slower tempo, is that telluric selection that Kirchhoff speaks of, a sort of natural triage imposed by nature herself on those who seek her out, and conceding the right to live only to those she favours. [...] Those who survive are those who best balance their personal characteristics with climatic factors’. (Hecht, 2013: 446-447; da Cunha, 1909: 37)

The migrants had tamed the powerful forces of nature that had defeated previous colonisers. According to Hecht, with this argument da Cunha turned ‘racial environmental determinist discourse on its head’ (Hecht, 2004: 60). Throughout his essays, da Cunha assigned the leading hand to the Amazon River, whose ‘Nature, dominant and brutal in the full expression of its energies, is an adversary of man’ (Hecht, 2013: 247; da Cunha, 1909: 13). He saw the Amazon and its history as ‘always insurgent, always incomplete’ (Hecht, 2013: 245; da Cunha, 1909: 11), observing that: ‘It was symbolic: everything fluctuates, everything is ephemeral, everything is paradoxical in the strange outposts where even the cities, like men, are nomads, perpetually moving from one place to the next, just as the land shuns them in the roiling current, or in its collapsing embankments’ (Hecht 2013: 246; da Cunha, 1909: 12). The *sertanejos* and *caboclos* were ‘selected by nature’ to ‘construct’ a civilisation in that remote region, but were at the same time enslaved to the land and to the intermediaries of the rubber trade. The contradictory character attributed to the rubber tappers emerges throughout da Cunha’s description of the region (see also Sá, 2006: xx-xxi).

On the other side of the Brazilian-Peruvian frontier and in striking contrast to the *sertanejo* and *caboclo*, that is the *seringueiros*, da Cunha described the *caucheros* (rubber tappers operating in the Spanish-speaking part of the border) as ‘a nomad and a devotee of combat, of destruction, and of a wandering and chaotic life’ (Hecht, 2013: 433; da Cunha, 1909: 46) because the rubber tree (Castilla, as opposed to Heveas in Brazil) did not allow for sedentary settlement. While da Cunha does not elaborate on the selection undertaken by nature on the Peruvian side, he states that nomadism is the condition for the *caucheros*’ success, and arrival, destruction and departure is the way they live it (da Cunha, 1909: 46-47). They are a civilisation linked to barbarism, and alternate between these extremes, such that the *cauchero* ‘is both a gentleman and a brute, according to circumstances’ (Hecht, 2013: 439; da Cunha, 1909: 52). Hence, settlement on the Peruvian side of the disputed area is not permanent and, consequently, would not substantiate a territorial claim. *Caucheros* only bring destruction and barbarism; their initial settlements are quickly abandoned and reclaimed by the forest when the surrounding nature has no further extractive value. This, according to da Cunha, stands in stark contrast to the settlements established by the *seringueiros* on the Brazilian side, which show evolution and rebirth (da Cunha, 1909: 40-41; Hecht, 2004: 61-2).

It is mostly in discussing the *cauchero* that da Cunha reveals how the area located on the Peru-Brazil border is, in fact, also inhabited by indigenous peoples, and notes what is happening to these groups due to the advance of the rubber tappers (da Cunha, 1909: 45). First, he uncovers how ‘Below the exalted stated of our opulent baron [the *cauchero*] is, at a deplorable level, the mestizo from Loreto who goes to the jungles in search of his fortune, or the gloomy Quechua brought in from the Andes [...] indeed, there is an unlimited procession of the dispossessed’ (Hecht, 2013: 438; da Cunha, 1909: 51). The lowest of all, the exploited, subjugated and enslaved work force are mainly indigenous people or their mixed descendants. Furthermore, *caucheros* systematically locate and destroy indigenous groups,

even though they first try to deal with them, offering gifts. They kill them and occasionally enslave the men and abuse the women. As da Cunha wrote,

‘The narrator of these last days arrives at the end of a drama, confused and disoriented, contemplates the very end of the last scene, “Civilization”, savagely armed with repeating rifles, thoroughly besieges this savagery at the end of the world: the Peruvians from the west and the south, Brazilians from the northeast and southeast, and finally, closing in from the valley of the Madre de Dios, the Bolivians’. (Hecht, 2013: 433; da Cunha, 1909: 45-46).

This kind of writing is unashamedly nationalistic, peddling what can be considered propaganda for nation-building. It acknowledges that the people who have won the territory for Brazil – the midwives of Amazonian Brazil according to Hecht (2013: 212) – are the marginals who have made the paths and followed the stands of *seringa* spread through the forest. So rubber tappers, the pioneers from the northeast, are the ones who have built the nation of Brazil in this empty land and made the land theirs and at the same time claimed it for Brazil.

With Hecht’s work and translation of da Cunha and his understanding of the Amazon, it is possible to return to his writings with fresh eyes and to see them in context in a lineage of Brazilian and Amazonian visions of this space, a colonisation which is both mental and physical. Rather than seeing da Cunha’s writing as dystopic and incomplete, Hecht has shown that it is critical to see his work in the context of his boundary commission experience in Acre. Mostly, he encountered poor *caboclos*, rubber tappers, who had come from the northeast to escape drought and, at the mercy of abusive merchants, had succeeded, bit by bit, in making a new life in this rubber-dominated world. We can instead see his Amazonian writing as a positive integration within the Brazilian historical context of the remarkable achievement of marginal and invisible people in remote locations. Da Cunha’s writings on

the Amazon and Brazil were to become influential in the following decades for authors who would come to define Brazilian thought, nationalism and politics, such as Gilberto Freyre or Getúlio Vargas, whether they agreed with or criticised his ideas (Hecht, 2013: 201, 422, 514 note 12 citing Garfield; Nicolazzi, 2010).

Conclusion

Here we have examined three views over approximately fifty years in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. These views pertain to the links between a region, its people and its central character, qualities and identifications. Quite rightly, the connections are multidimensional and complex, because the Amazon was not only one of the most racially and ethnically mixed places, but also one of the most challenging environments in South America. This does not mean Amazonia was an untouched frontier awaiting colonisation. Above all, these three authors are concerned with incorporating Amazonian territory into the Brazilian nation.

For Mattos, who wrote soon after a civil war, the dominant themes were recovery and unity. Decadence was a result of centuries-long abuse and misappropriation by elites and, with fair development imposed from above, the intrinsic good character of all its people would lead to progress. Critically, agriculture was needed, for this would not only fix people to the land, but also generate more capital than hunting and fishing.

For Veríssimo, social unity was of much less interest than agriculture, fishing and the best economic practices (on fishing, see Veríssimo, 1895). He, like others, saw food as plentiful and easily accessible with primitive methods, so there was no incentive to work hard and develop the economy. In Veríssimo's view, the absence of material necessity prevented the development of civilisation. It was not only race that impeded development, but a combination of environmental, social, political and religious factors. Unlike Mattos, he did not identify the administrative structures in the region as an obstacle to progress.

At base, these two Amazonian writers grappled with the consequences of the haphazard colonisation of the region, and their work can be seen as an attempt to bring the Amazon and its inhabitants into line with national interests. Both writers were concerned with territorial unification and the integration of Amazonia within Brazil, as part of the nation-building project.

By the time da Cunha came to the Amazon, the region was submerged in a massive economic expansion through the small-scale extractive activities of thousands of rubber tappers. Never mind agriculture! His message is at once a continuation of the nation-building discourse and an aid to Brazilian statecraft, supporting boundary adjudication and negotiation with neighbouring states (Hecht, 2013: 425). Yet da Cunha implies that the Amazon cannot be tamed by external developers. Although its frontiers can be demarcated and the Brazilian state can administer the remote territory, it is not a place to realise dreams or find prosperity. Here da Cunha does have a dystopic vision of the Amazon as placing negative limits on human life, as Cleary (2001) indicates. On the other hand, there is also a more positive, though hardly utopic, tone in his writings. If anybody has managed to survive in the Amazon and make the most of very limited opportunities in testing colonial and national conditions, it is the rubber tappers who through their own efforts have permitted this global industrial growth. If da Cunha had lived to articulate his thoughts more fully, he may have made a similar argument for the other marginal and invisible people who make a living in disadvantaged situations. That is, as others argued later in the twentieth century, that their political and economic contribution is valuable to the nation-building aspirations of elites. Despite his efforts, a racialised geographic divide separated the north from the south, which meant repressing elements of the Amazon's history. Without their full inclusion in the story of nation, the resilient inhabitants of the riverbanks and forest clearings would continue to be

perceived as lazy and their environments seen as a natural frontier and an obstacle to development for the southern-centred nation.

Acknowledgements

This article was written thanks to funding from the Leverhulme Trust, the British Academy and the Sir Ernest Cassel Educational Trust Fund.

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