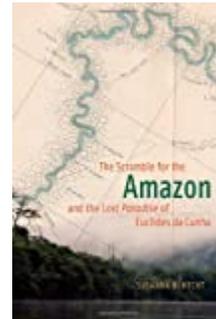


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Susanna B. Hecht. *The Scramble for the Amazon and the "Lost Paradise" of Euclides da Cunha.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013. xv + 612 pp. \$48.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-32281-0.



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Commissioned by Casey M. Lurtz (Johns Hopkins University)

Euclides da Cunha is one of Brazil's most famous literary figures. His foundational novel, *Os Sertões* (*Rebellion in the Backlands*), painted a narrative of the triumph of civilization over barbarism on the tragic backdrop of the Brazilian military's suppression of a millenarian rebellion in Canudos, Bahia, in 1897. This novel established da Cunha as one of the most renowned Latin American authors of all time and the focus of numerous historical commentaries about the creation of Brazilian identity.

Yet, in her new book, *The Scramble for the Amazon and the "Lost Paradise" of Euclides da Cunha*, Susanna B. Hecht sets aside *Os Sertões* to instead examine the critical role that da Cunha's later works played in establishing Brazilian control over the Amazonian region. Her book explores the little-known history of the famous writer's work on the Amazon after he wrote the infamous *Os Sertões*, published in 1902, and prior to his rather infamous death at the hands of his wife's lover in 1909. In search of his next big passion project, da Cunha, a former military engineer and journalist, looked to impose some of the same classic questions of civilization, nation, and Brazilian identity on the Amazonian region. His interest in the region and experience as a surveyor won him time in the field as an official cartographer for a Brazilian-Peruvian diplomatic team. As an envoy of

the state, da Cunha was intimately involved in solidifying as Brazilian what da Cunha called "the largest territory that had ever been contested between two nations, some 720,000 km² in one of the very least known parts of the world," that is, the Upper Amazonian Purus River (p. 348). Hecht's detailed account of the Amazonian conflict links da Cunha's writings and cartographic work to the Brazilian state's broader attempt to "make legible," as James Scott would say, its territorial claim to the region.

Hecht's work makes an important intervention in Amazonian historiography by tying together international diplomacy, literature, and land grabbing in the building of the Brazilian nation during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. She creates a powerful timeline, in which she first shows the most influential diplomat in Brazilian history, the Baron of Rio Branco (José Maria da Silva Paranhos), to be a central mediator in land disputes to finalize Brazil's last undefined borders in the Amazon and then Rio Branco's deployment of da Cunha to solidify the Brazilian claim. Ascending to the post of foreign minister in 1902, Rio Branco deftly negotiated Brazilian control of the highly contested, poorly defined Amazonian boundaries with neighboring Bolivia, Ecuador, and Peru while averting British, French, US, and

Belgian imperial ambitions at the peak of the Amazonian rubber boom. Unlike the violent imperial division of African lands during the Scramble for Africa in the late nineteenth century, Brazilian interests were secured through lawfare and the statecraft of negotiation and adjudication courts (p. 87). As part of this defense, Rio Branco justified Brazil's claim to the region *uti possidetis*, which required proving the rubber tappers occupying the litigious zone of the Upper Amazon were Brazilians. While Rio Branco kept European and American interests out through diplomacy, he directly tasked da Cunha with the ideological project of creating a Brazilian nationalist narrative of the Amazon to thwart border claims by its neighbors, particularly Peru.

Diverging from limited investigations into da Cunha's later work and traditional Amazonian studies that completely ignore the writer, Hecht focuses on how da Cunha's discursive writing and mapping intentionally shaped the ideological connection between Brazil and the Upper Amazon. For example, he built the "Brazilianness" of the region on diverging ecological realities of rubber production in the basin. Rubber extraction from *castilla*, or *caucho*, trees requires complete felling. Conversely, *hevea*, or *seringa*, trees require slow extraction by seeping the latex out of the tree every few days through rubber tapping. As a result, Hecht explains, the former attracted coercive native labor systems and the latter stable migrant settlers. In his travel reports and additional commentary, commissioned by Rio Branco and published in 1906, da Cunha associated Peruvian caucho producers with the destructive production model and the more sedentary, sustainable seringa process with Brazil. The ecological demands that defined the different extraction models became grist for da Cunha's nationalist narrative, in which he tied this settler model to "the story of improvement, of attachment to place, of taming the wild, of an adapted new race, the best promise of a tropical civilization putting down roots and creating a nation and an economy from a swamp in contrast to nomadic Peruvian caucho extraction (p. 362). Thereafter, Rio Branco commissioned da Cunha to jointly produce a map of the region based on the diplomatic mission with a Peruvian counterpart, which da Cunha strategically employed to strengthen Brazil's claim by extensively naming places occupied by these rubber tappers. Thus, rubber tappers became fundamentally Brazilian and the land occupied Brazil.

Hecht works hard to contextualize da Cunha's place in the complex Amazonian struggle. Hecht herself describes the book as "part biography, part social history,

part nature writing, part geographic translation" (p. 488). The amount of context required to engage da Cunha's late writings on the Amazon is extensive, and the reader could get lost in the background details. However, once established, the reader is rewarded. Of this five-part work, the last three sections on the contentious Peruvian conflict, da Cunha's cartographic work, and the lasting impact of his work are the most revealing. By this point, Hecht has provided enough context to then let da Cunha speak through his letters, correspondence, newspaper articles, official and unofficial reports, maps, and other writings in full. Her insightful translations buttressed by the context of his charge reveal the power of da Cunha's written texts, including maps, in defining and shaping the nation's literal boundaries.

Hecht's argument about da Cunha's influence on the Amazonian boundaries provokes deeper thought about the state, nation, and the environment in Brazilian history. Hecht illuminates the unstable building of the Brazilian nation and territory at the beginning of the twentieth century, in which key individuals were central to the advancement of the state project. Her work essentially restructures the way we understand the creation of the Brazilian nation. Indeed, she convincingly shows how the production of cultural knowledge was critical to nation building, and Rio Branco, as a key state actor, very actively employed literary history through one of the nation's greatest writers to create it. Da Cunha was in fact an astute scholar of the Amazon, and the interaction of "locality, culture, race, and livelihoods" guided his formation of this national image (p. 202). Such collaboration between the state official and the writer, imbued with a socio-environmental perspective, was fundamental to the burgeoning republic's diplomatic claim on the Amazon. So successful was the strategy that it permanently shaped the country's identity and its boundaries thereafter.

Hecht subtly guides the reader to the conclusion that da Cunha's less famous work on the Amazon was perhaps as influential as his work on the Canudos Rebellion, if not in Brazilian public memory then certainly for the Brazilian nation-state. Although da Cunha had wanted to create a new epic about the Amazonian people as he had in *Os Sertões*, that project, the intended *Lost Paradise*, would never come to fruition due to his untimely death. Instead, the explicitly political writings and cartographic work he produced as part of Rio Branco's diplomatic contest with Peru defined his Amazonian experience. Though largely forgotten, indeed their own lost paradise of texts, Hecht convincingly conveys how cru-

cial da Cunha's work to entrench the Amazon in Brazilian lore was to Brazil's boundary claims and thus the nation itself.

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