

# Phytofables: Tales of the Amazon

PATRÍCIA VIEIRA  
*Georgetown University*

---

**Abstract:** *The Amazon has been the repository of myriad stories created as a means to make sense of the proliferation of life in the forest. In this article, I trace some of the narratives—which I call phytofables—that explorers, scientists, activists and governments have superimposed upon the region, from the green hell/earthly Paradise dichotomy to more recent discourses of economic progress and protectionism. In the final section of the article, I turn to literary texts that have attempted to listen to and interpret the voice of the forest, in particular Alberto Rangel’s *Inferno Verde* and José Maria Ferreira de Castro’s *A Selva*.*

**Keywords:** Amazonia; ecocriticism; plant studies; rubber-boom literature; *phytographia*

---

From the arrival of the first Europeans in the Amazon in the 1500s, the region has captured the imagination not only of explorers and adventurers but also of readers and, more recently, of film audiences all over the world. When Euclides da Cunha started writing an account of his travels in the area in the early twentieth century, he complained already that “*todos nós desde muito cedo gizamos um Amazonas ideal*” (*Paraíso* 115), an idealization that often has little to do with the reality of life in the forest.<sup>1</sup> In this essay, I revisit some of these idealizations, some of the most enduring Amazonian tales we tell ourselves, which I refer to as our *phytofables*—stories about the territory’s nature and vegetation. What are, in

---

<sup>1</sup> Cunha traveled in the Amazon in 1904-5 as head of the Brazilian team in the Comissão Mista Brasileiro-Peruana de Reconhecimento do Alto Purus, the task of which was to demarcate the Amazonian border between Brazil and Peru. Cunha’s writings on the Amazon were collected in *Contrastes e Confrontos*, from 1907, and in *À Margem da História*, first published in 1909. All of his Amazonian texts were later published in *Um Paraíso Perdido* (1976). This and all other Portuguese quotes have been changed to conform to present-day orthographic conventions.

broad strokes, the narratives that frame our understanding of this region? In which ways have they determined our attitudes towards the Amazon? Can we move beyond these anthropocentric discourses? In other words, can we lend our ears to Amazonian nature's tales, and can literature play a role in voicing the region's own phytofables?

The Amazon has given rise to a wide variety of travel narratives and fictional writings that testify to the attraction it exerts on the West. Following the often fanciful accounts of early Spanish and Portuguese explorers and missionaries, a new wave of texts depicting Amazonian voyages took shape in the nineteenth century. From accounts of North European naturalists such as Alfred Russel Wallace (*A Narrative of Travels on the Amazon and Rio Negro*, 1853), Henry Walter Bates (*The Naturalist on the River Amazons*, 1863), and Louis Agassiz (*A Journey in Brazil*, 1868), through descriptions of the Amazon sojourn of Theodore Roosevelt (*Through the Brazilian Wilderness*, 1914), who travelled in the area after he left office as American president, all the way to anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss's portrayal of his Amazonian impressions in *Tristes Tropiques* (1955), travelers have penned a vast array of stories that contribute to the imaginary associated with the region.

Alongside travel narratives, fictional texts have further added to the allure of the Amazon by drawing on and complementing the accounts of explorers. Authors affiliated with the Brazilian Modernist movement, for instance, have reworked the mythology of the area and used it to forge a new conception of Brazilian nationality, distinct from the country's European cultural roots. Mário de Andrade drew on Amazonian myths to create his fictional, indigenous character, the lazy, mischievous Macunaíma, acclaimed as "the hero of our people" in the homonymous novel from 1928. Another Brazilian Modernist writer, Raul Bopp, wrote the long poem *Cobra Norato* (1931) inspired by the legends, folklore and language of Amazon inhabitants. The so-called "novel of the jungle" that flourished roughly in the first half of the twentieth century is another example of the fascination of the Amazon for outsiders. Replaying some age-old dichotomies, such as the city versus the countryside, or the man-against-nature divide, many of these texts nevertheless offer a novel perspective on the local environment that anticipates later ecological discourses.

In light of the appeal of the Amazon and its enduring presence in literature and in pop culture, it is worth asking, before we delve into a critical appraisal of

the region's fables, why this territory fascinates us so. The almost ungraspable size of the region is certainly responsible for part of its attraction: it is home to, by far, the world's largest rainforest, covering an area that spans nine nations; the Amazon is the earth's largest and most powerful river and the land drained by its waters amounts to seven percent of the planet's surface; furthermore, the forest houses a treasure-trove of biodiversity, much of which still remains to be discovered (Slater 2).

Impressive as these numbers are, however, they do not account fully for the draw of the Amazon. It is not only the size of the area but the characteristics of its fauna and, especially, its flora, that make it simultaneously attractive and forbidding. In the words of Brazilian writer Alberto Rangel: "Tudo é vida [na Amazônia] por menor que seja o bloco. Não há reduzi-la a um indivíduo. É a solidariedade do infinitamente pequeno, essencial, elementar, inseparável na república dos embriões sinérgicos. O que fica . . . reproduz-se fácil, na precipitação latente e irrefreável de procriar sempre" (201).<sup>2</sup> Rangel's words describing a strangler fig's unrelenting development can be read as a comment on the vegetation of the entire region. The author emphasizes the vitality of the forest and the dissemination of ever-smaller (and ever-larger) life forms, a trope replayed, time and again, in narratives about the territory. This kind of unrestrained growth is typical of the vegetal world: *phuton*, the ancient Greek word for "plant," simply meant a "growing being." Rangel's intuition is, furthermore, backed by recent scientific data, according to which the plant biomass and rate of growth in a tropical forest are roughly five times that of a temperate forest (Hemming). Life not only grows boundlessly in the Amazon but is also interconnected in such a way that it becomes unfeasible to identify discreet individuals in the mass of vegetal proliferation. Portuguese novelist Ferreira de Castro writes about the area's flora in the following way: "Somente a colectividade imperava ali: o indivíduo vegetal despersonalizava-se e era amesquinhado pelos vizinhos" (79). Singularity and community, self and other, become meaningless categories within the sheer excess of entangled life forms, some of which arise out of the death and decay of others.

---

<sup>2</sup> Cunha reproduced a lengthy quote from Rangel, which included this small passage, in his preface to *Inferno Verde*.

It is this propagation of interrelated living organisms noted by Rangel and Castro, among others, that appeals to human beings, since it signifies the breakdown of all processes of individuation, delimitation and demarcation that subtend the modern illusion of a unified, independent subject. It evokes, in psychoanalytic terms, the Freudian death drive, at the liminal point when life and death, being and non-being, converge. In contemporary philosophical language, it could be equated to Deleuze and Guattari's idea of a "body without organs," where all hierarchies and totalizations collapse. In political terms, it would amount to pure anarchy, a state in which various elements converge and diverge without any predetermined rules or stable structures. Tempting as the option to surrender to the collectivity of animated beings in the forest might be, it is understandable that the Amazon would simultaneously be perceived as a peril. The endless dissemination of infinite life forms challenges human attempts to rule over nature, as well as to manage and discipline the forest. Human beings succumb to the power of the "jungle" and are forced to relinquish their sovereign hold over the landscape, which leads them to look upon the area with profound mistrust.

The phytofables that have flourished since the beginning of European colonization of the Amazon go back to the push-and-pull effect that the region exerts on outsiders. As the term phytofables already suggests, my focus here will be on flora, not only because the rainforest is one of the most distinguishing features of the area but also because the tales of Amazonian populations—both of native tribes and of settlers—have been discussed in great detail elsewhere (Slater; Sá). Taking a leaf out of the book(s) of recent ecocriticism, I survey the different—sometimes conflicting or outright contradictory—stories humans have created to make sense of the daunting Amazonian environment. These discourses should not be dismissed as mere figments of our imagination. On the contrary, they testify to Western engagement with the region and constitute a response to an utterly foreign landscape. Still, some accounts provide more adequate interpretations of the Amazonian forest's tales than others. I begin by discussing what are perhaps the two most enduring metaphors used to depict the Amazon, namely, its representation as a green hell or as an earthly Paradise. I will subsequently examine the permutations of these foundational fictions in the narratives of progress and protectionism. In the final section of the essay, I will turn to Amazonian literature set in Brazil, the country that encompasses the

largest portion of the territory within its national boundaries. These literary phytofables put forth one of the possible ways in which humans can approach the life-world of the forest and attempt a translation of what it tries to tell us, in its own silent language.

The notion of phytofables I expound upon here is closely related to the concept of *phytographia*, or “plant-writing,” which I have developed at length elsewhere (“*Phytographia*”). I understand *phytographia* as the encounter between the language of plants, which inscribe themselves physically onto the world—through their growth, photosynthesis, body mass, and so on—and the aesthetically mediated human language of literature. A *phytographic* writing amounts to the literary portrayal of plants that depends both upon the creativity of the author and upon the inscription of the plants themselves in this very process of creation. Amazonian phytofables are thus a kind of *phytographia*, a mode of writing that, through different narratives, attempts to make sense of the vegetal world in the Amazon and that is, in turn, heavily indebted to the inscription of flora in texts. In what remains of this essay, I will discuss the more salient of these phytofables, which illustrate the evolving relationship of human beings to the Amazonian natural environment.

### ***Green Hell or Earthly Paradise: The Enemy-Friend Distinction***

When Spanish Jesuit Priest Cristóbal de Acuña accompanied the Portuguese Pedro Teixeira on his return trip from Quito to Belém in 1639, he found the Amazon to be quite different from the region described by his predecessor, the Spanish Dominican Priest Gaspar de Carvajal.<sup>3</sup> Writing almost 100 years before Acuña, Carvajal had put together an account of the first voyage of exploration to traverse the length of the Amazon basin, in which he describes Francisco de Orellana’s travels in the region in 1541-42.<sup>4</sup> Carvajal focuses on the difficulties experienced by Orellana and his soldiers, including the hostility of the environment and of the local inhabitants, the paucity of supplies, the diseases and

---

<sup>3</sup> Teixeira led the first expedition to navigate the counter-current of the Amazon and the Napo rivers; the expedition left Belém in 1637 and arrived in Quito ten months later.

<sup>4</sup> The first expedition to enter the Amazon through the Andes was that of Alonso Mercadillo; the Portuguese Diogo Nunes, who was part of this expedition, wrote a letter to the Portuguese king in 1553, describing the new lands he had found in this voyage.

injuries suffered by the Europeans, and the lengthy and tiresome journey. Close to a century later, Cristóbal de Acuña would paint a significantly different portrait of the territory in his *Nuevo descubrimiento del gran río de las Amazonas* (*New Discovery of the Great River of the Amazons*, 1641). He highlights the local peoples' friendliness toward and collaboration with the travelers, as well as the fertility and abundance of the forest and the river, a natural wealth that reminds him of the Biblical earthly Paradise (Marcone 132).

Carvajal's and Acuña's competing views reflect the two extremes of Western behavior toward nature and remain powerful arch-narratives about Amazonia to this day. The understanding of the area as a dangerous, inhospitable, and unruly environment is encapsulated in the very name "Amazon." The word goes back to Carvajal's account of the territory and alludes to the mythical, female warriors of Ancient Greece.<sup>5</sup> Reported to have been sighted by the soldiers from Orellana's expedition, the fabled women fighters embodied the European fear of the unknown and the persistent feminization of the American land that lay in wait to be dominated, albeit with considerable effort and hardship, by male *conquistadores*.

The perception of the Amazon as a dangerous place, hostile to outsiders, persisted all the way to the twentieth century. Cunha considered humans to be "intruso[s] impertinente[s]" in the area, facing a "perigosa adversária," a "natureza soberana e brutal" (*Paraíso* 116; 372; 125). Cunha's friend Rangel characterized the Amazon as a "green hell" in a collection of short stories, from which the passage mentioned above was quoted. The last narrative of the book describes the agony of an engineer from the South of Brazil, who goes to the region hoping to acquire wealth and dies of malaria in the hellish jungle. Even Raul Bopp, whose *Cobra Norato* was, as I pointed out, heavily influenced by an Amazonian mythology that does not essentialize "the human" in direct opposition to the surrounding environment, states that "a floresta é inimiga do homem" (10).

Acuña's version of Amazonian nature as reminiscent of the fertility of the earthly Paradise has also lived on.<sup>6</sup> This conception is linked to the legend of El

---

<sup>5</sup> For more details about the legend of the Amazons and its adaptation to the American context see Slater 81.

<sup>6</sup> In his *Notícias Curiosas e Necessárias das Cousas do Brasil* (1668), Simão de Vasconcelos hinted at the fact that Brazilian land, and the Amazon in particular, was

Dorado, a city made of gold that was located, according to some accounts, deep in the Amazon forest. El Dorado instantiates the early association of the territory with wealth and abundance,<sup>7</sup> a promise that materialized during the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century rubber boom, a time when the profits from the sale of latex were so high that it was dubbed a “white gold.” His statements about the enmity of the forest notwithstanding, even Cunha believed that “[r]ealmente, a Amazônia é a última página, ainda a escrever-se, do Génesis” and planned to use *Paraíso Perdido* as the title for his never-completed *magnum opus* on the area (“Preâmbulo,” 9).

The divergent understandings of the Amazon as infernal or paradisiac can easily be inscribed along the lines of the enemy-friend distinction proposed by German thinker Carl Schmitt as the hallmark of politics.<sup>8</sup> For Schmitt, true political life entails the classification of those—and, in this case, of *that*—around us either as our friends or as our enemies, as elements that must be fought against and subdued or as those with whom we should forge alliances. A politicized approach to the Amazon, therefore, would mean choosing between our view of the territory as an inimical green hell or a friendly earthly Paradise. The politicization of the area yielded just such a scenario, as we shall see below.

If Schmitt’s enemy-friend distinction operates dichotomously in the political arena, the stark contrast between an Amazonian green hell and an Amazonian earthly paradise fades when we analyze it through the lens of psychoanalysis. Such contrasts are typical of a fetishized object that is at the same time denigrated (green hell) and highly idealized (earthly paradise). Freud’s classical example is that of the historical role of women, who were defamed as the daughters of Eve and as the origin of all sin and, at the same time, worshiped, in troubadour poetry for instance, for being pure like the Virgin Mary (83). The vilification and idealization of the Amazon, its representation as either an inimical or a friendly space, are but two sides of the same coin. Faced with the proliferation of fauna

---

comparable to the Paradise of Adam and Eve. In an unpublished section of his book, which was censored by the Inquisition, Vasconcelos listed various arguments in favor of his thesis, including the temperate, unvarying climate and the fertile nature of the region (161-63).

<sup>7</sup> For a description of the myth of El Dorado and its relation to the Amazon see Slater 29.

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed analysis of the politicized relationship between humans and flora, see the “Introduction” to *The Green Thread* by Vieira, Gagliano, and Ryan.

and flora in the forest, Western colonizers, intellectuals, and afterward various governments from Amazonian nations, superimposed upon the region the ready-made religious fables of hell and paradise, enemy and friend, good and evil, as a response to their inability to come to terms with the complexity of Amazonian life. The very proliferation of travel narratives and fictional literature about the region testifies to its fetishization as a symbol of wild nature. Have the narratives of progress and protectionism been able to move beyond this double bind?

### ***Progress and Protectionism***

The Amazon has always been closely tied to narratives of social and economic progress. In the second half of the eighteenth century, for instance, the Jesuit João Daniel wrote his *Tesouro Descoberto no Máximo Rio Amazonas* with the intention of teaching the Portuguese and the Spanish to take advantage of the “treasure” that God had placed in their hands, namely, the bountiful Amazon basin. Daniel recommended that the territory be populated and that the land, “o mais fértil torrão de todo o mundo” (vi), be intensively cultivated, making the Amazon a “delícia dos homens, regalo da vida e inveja do mundo” (vi). The idea that the land possessed unlimited resources that lay in wait to be exploited remained a mainstay of reflections on the region. More than a century later, Cunha advocated the need to develop the Amazon by making its rivers navigable and by building railroad lines that would connect the territory to the rest of Brazil (*Paraíso*, 201-04; 325).

The ambition of bringing progress to the Amazon is indebted both to the green hell and to the earthly paradise depictions of the area. While the green hell is a territory that needs to be tamed and regulated so as to welcome the presence of human beings, the abundance of the earthly paradise can likewise be harnessed by the forces of development. In *Through the Brazilian Wilderness*, Theodore Roosevelt resorts to both kinds of imagery when he foretells the future economic expansion of Amazonia. On the one hand, he acknowledges the infernal characteristics of the land—dangerous rapids, deadly animals, and disease-carrying mosquitoes, among others—and regards the subjugation of nature as a precondition for progress: “Yet everywhere man was conquering the loneliness and wresting the majesty to his own uses. . . . Everywhere there was growth and development” (335-36). On the other hand, he turns to Edenic motifs of



abundance and fecundity when he discusses the advancement of the region: “The very rapids and waterfalls which now make the navigation of the river so difficult and dangerous would drive electric trolleys up and down its whole length and far out on either side, and run mills and factories, and lighten the labor on farms” (290-91). For Roosevelt, the very features of a hellish environment—rapids and waterfalls, in this case—can be turned into the engines of economic growth and (Western-style) development in the Amazon.

The Brazilian military dictatorship that came to power in 1964 successfully mobilized the two enduring *phytofables* of green hell and earthly paradise in support of their plan to modernize the territory. The authoritarian government wished to strengthen its presence in the region as part of its national security program, which included a tighter surveillance of the country’s Amazonian border and an effective enforcement of Brazilian law in the area. The guerrilla group established by the Brazilian Communist Party in the late 1960s near the Araguaia river, in the Southeastern section of the Amazon, generated fears that the jungle could become a breeding ground for armed communist opposition to the regime. The Brazilian Army managed to contain the Araguaia insurrection, and by 1974 all of its members were either killed in combat or assassinated. Even so, the perceived anomie of the green hell was regarded as a potential political threat to be eradicated by a more robust occupation of the territory.

The dictatorship’s national security concerns tied in with its economic strategy. The Amazon was classified as a “deserto verde” to be colonized by migrants from the drought-ridden Northeast of the country. The government’s slogan “uma terra sem homens para homens sem terra,” made it clear that, for the authorities, the region was a vast unpopulated wilderness waiting to be shaped by the forces of development. Furthermore, the government’s goal to modernize the nation and to increase its industrial output required a steady supply of raw materials that could be provided by the exploitation of this rich earthly Paradise. The most emblematic expression of the Brazilian government’s program to bring economic growth to the territory was the construction of the Trans-Amazonian Highway that began in 1969 and lasted for approximately five years. Planned as a way to connect the Northeastern coast to isolated sectors of the Amazonian basin, the more than 4,000-kilometer highway is often viewed as a sign of the “environmental blindness” of the dictatorship (Favaro). Extensive stretches of the road still remain unpaved and are impassable during the rainy season. The

economic benefits of the project did not match the government's expectations but the highway brought wide-scale deforestation to the rainforest.<sup>9</sup>

As the twentieth-century wore on, Amazonian *phytofables* underwent a drastic transformation. Not only Brazil but also most other Amazonian nations launched massive modernization programs that included the building of roads and incentives for the establishment of mining, gas and oil companies in the area, the negative outcomes of which became increasingly apparent. The contamination of soils and waterways by industrial waste was accompanied by the cutting down and burning of trees for logging and to give way to agriculture and cattle-raising. In response to the rapid deterioration of large stretches of forest, the paradigm of destruction progressively substituted that of progress and construction as the most common framework for discussing the region. The rise of environmental activism in the late 1960s saw the Amazon jump into the limelight of global public opinion that denounced increasing levels of pollution and the ravaging of nature. The various campaigns to "save the Amazon," often called the "lungs of the world," became a rallying point of the environmental movement both internationally and within Amazonian countries.

While the Brazilian military dictatorship tapped into both the green hell and the earthly Paradise visions of the Amazon in its attempt to tame the perceived anarchy of the forest and to harness its resources, environmental groups emphasized its Edenic fragility. More than a geographic region, it came to be perceived as an emblem of untainted wildness, primeval flora, and so on. The rainforest was hailed as a symbol of pristine nature, and it therefore turned into a battleground for the environmental movement: its destruction has come to serve as a synecdoche for the broader degradation of the biosphere.

Presented as an unspoiled, prelapsarian Paradise, the forest was cast as a fragile ecosystem to be safeguarded from the forces of progress. The well-intentioned goals of protectionism notwithstanding, it created an image of the Amazon as a territory inhabited by feeble animals and plants, always on the brink of collapse and unable to cope with change. The view of the area as an untouched, immutable environment is not congruent with historical data: the Amazon was inhabited by a large number of native peoples during the pre-Columbian period

---

<sup>9</sup> For more on this, see my chapter "Laws of the Jungle: The Politics of Contestation in Cinema About the Amazon," in *The Green Thread*.

(Hemming); nor does it do justice to the adaptability of the region's fauna and flora. It is a view that likewise often clashes with the rights of the indigenous inhabitants of the area. It infantilizes the forest as an ecosystem that cannot take care of itself and that is in constant need of stewardship. While the protection of the Amazon is certainly a desirable goal, humans need to learn how to attend to its biosphere instead of assuming a heavy-handed paternalistic stance with respect to its environment.

The most noxious version of protectionism is the one that goes back to the legend of El Dorado and sees in the Amazon a space replete with natural treasures that should be preserved for human use. According to this view, the forest is nothing more than a repository of biological diversity that needs to be protected not for its own sake or on its own terms but only because it is not yet fully catalogued and explored. The Amazon is regarded as an enormous library or, perhaps more accurately, as a gigantic supermarket. We are still not acquainted with all the products it has in stock, but we know that we should buy them all, since some of them may come in handy in the future.

The challenge, then, is not simply to protect the paradise that is the Amazon but to move beyond the clichés that attribute to it a hellish or a paradisiac nature and attempt to interpret what it has to tell us. Are we prepared to listen to its tales? In the final section of this essay, I analyze fictional texts set in the Brazilian Amazon from the first three decades of the twentieth century. Dating from the time of the rubber boom, a period of enormous social and environmental transformation, these writings offer a frequently contradictory portrayal of the area that brings together infernal, edenic, developmental, and incipient conservationist discourses. I focus on Rangel's *Inferno Verde*, penned during the golden years of the rubber boom, and on Portuguese novelist Ferreira de Castro's *A Selva* (1930), written during the time when Amazonian rubber tapping had entered into an irreversible process of decline.<sup>10</sup> While these narratives frequently fall back into stereotypes, they nonetheless transcend, at times, the formulaic molds for depicting the region and move beyond human prejudices about its flora in an attempt to lend a literary voice to the forest.

---

<sup>10</sup> There is some debate regarding when *Inferno Verde* was first published; however, scholars generally agree that it was written at some point between 1904 and 1908 (Maligo 170n5).

### ***Literary Phytofables***

The literature of the rubber boom was deeply indebted to the vision of the Amazon as a green hell, where all possibilities of moral and material betterment are shattered in the inhospitable forest. Frequently focusing on the plight of migrant rubber tappers from the Northeast of Brazilian, who face both a foreign environment and the rapacity of rubber lords, these texts contrast the newcomers' hope of finding El Dorado with the reality of widespread exploitation, violence and disease in the region. Rangel's *Inferno Verde* is no exception. The infernal flora that gave the book its title features prominently in most of the stories, including the one that opens the collection, "O Tapar," where the portrayal of vegetation is emblematic of the demonization of the forest. In this narrative, the jungle is characterized as a "desordenado entulho" that seems to "lutar consigo mesma" (28), as well as an "organismo monstruoso" that emits a "clamor insano de almas errando num assomo de desespero e de dor" (33). Even the charming tidal lake, "populoso de uma fauna de estampa de Paraso" (40) after the rainy season, soon dries up and becomes "[p]astoso, ptrido, meftico, . . . capaz de dar  conscincia do observador um reviramento de loucura" (42). Beauty is here but a transient illusion in a brutal, pernicious natural setting that corrupts those who venture into its midst.

Rangel nonetheless seems to suggest in "O Tapar," as well as in other stories, that the hellish features of the Amazon do not inhere in the environment but rest rather in the eyes of the beholder. As the protagonist of another narrative succinctly puts it: "A terra  boa, o homem s  que no presta (84). In my own reading of Rangel and Castro, I focus on instances in which the beholder, who tends to separate himself (the protagonists of "jungle narratives" are invariably male) from his surroundings by privileging sight, opts to set aside ready-made images, tries to overcome his ocularcentric bias, and opens himself to the voice of the forest.<sup>11</sup> To be sure, the Amazon "as such" remains ungraspable in these texts. Still, the narratives hint, at times, at an encounter between the language of

---

<sup>11</sup> As Pedro Maligo points out, migrants to the Amazon were mostly male, which helps to explain the paucity of female characters in texts from the rubber boom period. Given that Amazonian land is often equated with Mother Nature, the relationship between the male settlers and the environment often acquires Oedipal undertones (Maligo 59).

the forest and the protagonists' and narrators' limited ability to understand it. The realm of the imagination *par excellence*, literature offers us an entry-point into the lives of non-human beings, sets the stage for a shift in perspective whereby we submit our anthropocentric views to critical scrutiny, and allows us to conjure up the Amazon's own *phytofables*.

For all his bleak portrayal of nature, Rangel considers the hostility of the forest to be nothing more than a defense mechanism against those determined to destroy it. In "Terra Caída," the narrator describes the havoc wrought on the region's flora by the slash-and-burn practices of its settlers: "Setembro é o mês fuliginoso e crepitante das queimadas. Rasgam a floresta amazônica as labaredas de milhares de incêndios. . . . E nada subsistirá. Nem mais uma verde copa de árvore nessa algara de fogo" (94). The vegetation fights back against this destructive force by rapidly reconquering the cleared terrain: "Se o Cordulo fechasse os olhos, quando os abrisse, a floresta pertinaz tornaria a ocupar o lugar de onde fora repelida" (92). As Rangel presents it, the Amazon remains locked in an inglorious, endless battle with humans.<sup>12</sup>

Such an age-old, man-versus-nature plot might indicate that technical and economic progress is the only path towards finally subduing the forest, vanquishing its infernal features and making it amenable for agriculture and other economic activities. Rangel does point in this direction, in particular in the final pages of the book, which function as a conclusion to the collection of stories. In this section, the narrator personifies the Amazon and imagines how it might have responded to the charge of being little more than a "green hell": "Mas enfim o inferno verde, se é a geena de torturas, é a mansão de uma esperança: sou terra prometida às raças superiores, tonificadas, vigorosas, dotadas de firmeza, inteligência e providas de dinheiro; e que, um dia, virão assentar no meu seio a definitiva obra de civilização" (341). Imbued with turn-of-century theories of scientific racism, Rangel claims that the forest will cease being a hellish place once the land is fully civilized by what he deems to be "superior"—most likely a coded designation for Caucasian—races. His outdated racist theories of

---

<sup>12</sup> When the narrator describes the burnt forest, he turns once again to this bellicose motif: "Galhos erectos, troncos gigantes deitados, chamuscados, e no solo as vítimas, como dispostas ainda a repelir a pontacos quem tentasse investi-las. O eriçado das hastes prostradas cantava um motivo de guerra, na desordem das hostes, quando a hora chega da avançada e tudo é desespero na turbamulta raivosa" (89).

development notwithstanding, Rangel recognizes that modern exploration, even if carried out in the name of civilization, does violence to the land. His personified, feminized Amazon is quick to underscore its suffering: “Eu resisto à violência dos esturpadores” (340).<sup>13</sup> Rangel depicts the Amazon not as space that will willingly submit to the putative benefits of progress but as a land abused by those who covet its riches and forced to resist their advances.

In what is perhaps the most environmentally conscious narrative of the book, “Maiby,” one again encounters the link between battered femininity and the forest. The story focuses on a woman gruesomely assassinated by her former husband, a rubber tapper, who tied her to a rubber tree and placed cups throughout her body, which were slowly filled with her blood, just like latex pours into the cups attached to the hevea plant. The narrator comments on this horrifying crime: “O martírio de Maiby, com a sua vida a escoar-se nas tigelinhas do seringueiro, seria ainda assim bem menor que o do Amazonas, oferecendo-se em pasto de uma indústria, que o esgota . . . esse cadáver, . . . dir-se-ia representar, em miniatura, um crime maior, . . . cometido . . . pela ambição colectiva de milhares de almas, endoidecidas na cobiça universal” (266). Unable to move beyond the long tradition of feminizing the Amazon, Rangel is nevertheless reluctant to condone its ruthless exploitation. He condemns those who advocate economic progress at all costs, like the rubber lord in “Maiby,” who calls for the extraction of an enormous amount of latex, even if this leads to the annihilation of the trees that produce it. The narrator, who appears in this instance to speak as Rangel’s alter ego, denounces this as “formidável ignorância” in that it neglects “escrúpulos e cuidados na conservação da riqueza florestal, com que a boa Natureza lhe presenteara” (255-56). Far from an infernal environment bent on the destruction of humanity, nature is here “good” in that it offers humans a wealth that they destroy with their reckless behavior.

Rangel acknowledges that the forest is only inimical if contemplated from the skewed perspective of those who wish to lay waste to its flora in the name of

---

<sup>13</sup> The narrator of the short story “Um Homem Bom” points out that, even though it looks powerful, the forest is, in fact, a delicate environment: “Singular, a floresta amazônica! De alto porte e espessa, não tem força para se aguentar em pé, sendo além disto quebradiça como vidro. Uma de suas árvores, caindo, arrasta as companheiras na queda. Uma lufada prostra-a por bocados. Na sua debilidade, as raízes adventícias, as lianas e as sapopemas amparam-na de balde no cambaleio” (164).

riches and development. Going back to “O Tapar,” the opening story of the collection, the narrator, after denigrating the environment surrounding the fetid tidal basin, recognizes that native Amazonians find generous sustenance in the waters of the lake. The narrative voice goes on to criticize rubber tappers who come to the Amazon, “revolvendo a terra, sacudindo-a para a electricidade e para o vapor, e para os males das sociedades, que hoje se chamam fortes” (50). The newly arrived are described as feverish, with “essa febre que far bater com mais fora o pulso do Comercio, mas no fim estraga e corrompe um dos cantos mais caluniados e fartos do planeta” (51).

At its most perceptive moments, *Inferno Verde* undoes the master narrative upon which it is founded and to which it seems to contribute with its title: the Amazon as an inferno that needs to be tamed by development, the settlers and rubber tappers representing just an intermediary step towards progress. The book places into question the expediency of ushering in economic growth at all costs and contemplates the supposed advantages of modern societies with skepticism. While Rangel sees modernization as a mixed blessing at best, he nonetheless seems convinced that there is no other way but to give in to its inexorable advance, even if this process is accompanied by a feeling of regret. In his short stories, Rangel attempts to place himself in the position of the forest, which persistently resists the unbridled cupidity of strangers, and offers us a glimpse of its tales. Still, the Amazon’s narratives appear as a minor, accompanying melody that plays in parallel with the louder and more triumphant march of civilization. It is up to the contemporary reader to recover these quieter voices, the region’s incipient *phytofables*.

If the tales of the forest led Rangel to question the advantages of modern civilization, a similar shift in values takes place in Ferreira de Castro’s *A Selva* (1930). The protagonist of this loosely autobiographical novel, Alberto, was a young law student in Lisbon when his political views forced him to move to Brazil.<sup>14</sup> He is driven into the heart of the Amazon somewhat by chance and, once in the forest, he witnesses a progressive transformation of many of the principles he had formerly upheld. Perhaps the most obvious sign of this

---

<sup>14</sup> Ferreira de Castro himself immigrated to Brazil from Portugal when he was twelve and, like his fictional alter ego, worked for four years on a rubber plantation in the Amazon, on the banks of the Madeira river.

evolution is the change in his politics. Previously a supporter of the monarchy and a firm believer that the masses require guidance from an enlightened elite, Alberto's direct contact with the plight of destitute rubber tappers eventually transforms him into a proto-communist.

Running in tandem with Alberto's political reversal is a subtler shift in his stance toward the forest. Throughout the text, the narrator reproduces many of the commonplace statements on the Amazon that one finds in Rangel's writings. Nature is described as "implacável" (29); as a "masmorra verde" (120); and as a "mundo vegetal [que] tinha cruéis egoísmos, ferocidades insuspeitadas e tiranias inconfessáveis" (142). As in *Inferno Verde*, however, the hostility of the Amazon toward outsiders is perceived as a punishment meted out to those who wish to "violar o seu mistério" (63).<sup>15</sup> Toward the end of the novel, the region is described as a dead body passed on from hand to hand and stripped of all its riches: rubber, precious stones, agricultural output, etc. (212-13). In another passage, the narrator commiserates with rubber trees, which are compared to wounded human beings: "Estavam perante uma árvore [da borracha] com alto saio de ferimentos e cicatrizes. De tão martirizada, a sua casca desenvolvera-se mais na parte inferior do que em cima, como para se defender; e dir-se-ia posição esse revestimento de rugas negras e de golpes ainda mal sarados" (89-90). In these instances, the narrating voice adheres closely to the viewpoint of the forest in a clear denunciation of those who destroy the trees in their relentless pursuit of natural resources.

The alteration in values that his time in the jungle triggers in Alberto goes even deeper than his growing sympathy for the plight of a natural environment, the destruction of which he witnesses first-hand. The protagonist is in awe when faced with the magnificence of the forest, which dwarfs everything else he has known: "A selva dominava tudo. Não era o segundo reino, era o primeiro em força e categoria, tudo abandonando a um plano secundário. E o homem [era] simples transeunte no flanco do enigma. . . . O animal esfrangalhava-se no império vegetal" (88).<sup>16</sup> The novel reverses here the traditional great chain of

---

<sup>15</sup> The narrator states again, further on: "A selva não perdoava a quem pretendia abrir os seus arcanos" (125).

<sup>16</sup> In another passage, the narrator describes one more time how flora prevails over fauna: "O grãozinho que assassinara [uma formiga, que tinha comido um grão venenoso],



being with humans at the top, followed by animals, and with plants at the bottom. In the forest, plants take center-stage and animals, especially humans, are revealed to be mere appendices, irrelevant adornments when compared to the might of the vegetal world.

This inversion of perspective acquires clear post-colonial undertones when Alberto recalls his native Portugal through an Amazonian lens: “Evocado dali [da Amazônia], Portugal era uma quimera, não existia talvez . . . os que o levavam na memória não estavam certos se viviam em realidade ou se sonhavam com as narrações dos que tinham voltado das descobertas. . . . Eles seriam porventura uma alucinação . . . , como espectros de pesadelo” (65). The foregrounding of the vegetal world and the questioning of Europe’s reality are not fortuitously linked. After all, the denigration of non-European vegetation has gone hand-in-hand with the disparagement of the colonized world and its peoples throughout most of Western history.<sup>17</sup> What we witness in *A Selva* is an inversion of this colonial bias. From the standpoint of the immense Amazon, Portugal appears to be so small that it turns into an illusion, its colonizing aspirations a blip within the much broader *phytofables* of the forest.

Ferreira de Castro opens his preface to *A Selva* by stating that “Eu devia este livro a essa majestade verde, soberba e enigmática, que é a selva amazônica” (11). He further discloses in his short commentary on the history of the narrative, written for the commemoration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the text’s publication, that his intention had been to present the “cenário” as if it were “uma personagem de primeiro plano, viva e contraditória, como são as de carne, sangue e osso” (19). More than the personal tragedies of countless rubber tappers, including the protagonist Alberto, who saw their aspirations for economic emancipation shattered in the region, *A Selva* is about the life *of* the forest. It invites the reader to adopt the outlook of flora and, from this privileged vantage point, to contemplate the folly of those who endeavor to control the Amazon.

Literary works such Rangel’s *Inferno Verde* and Ferreira de Castro’s *A Selva* struggle between an adherence to preconceived views of the Amazon and a novel approach to the area that abandons the empty rhetoric of the green hell or earthly

---

germinava dentro do cadáver e, um dia, uma pequenina liana brotava do insecto morto – primeiro húmus animal de novo triunfo vegetal” (160).

<sup>17</sup> For more on the denigration of tropical nature and tropical inhabitants by Western intellectuals, see Stepan and Arnold.

Paradise, as well as the pitfalls of economic progress and paternalistic protectionism. The most groundbreaking moments in the texts take place when they lend a voice to flora, attempting a necessarily incomplete translation of the rainforest's tales into human language. In these instances, the narratives become places of inscription, where we find traces of vegetal language in the literary rendering of local life. This encounter between the language of the forest and human literary creation results in the Amazon's most faithful *phytofables*: those which do not simply superimpose human narratives onto the region but emanate from our attunement to the rainforest's own tales.

### **Works Cited**

- Acuña, Cristóbal de. "New Discovery of the Great River of the Amazons." *Expeditions into the Valley of the Amazons. 1539, 1540, 1639*. Ed. Clements R. Markham. London: Hakluyt, 1859. 47-134. Print.
- Andrade, Mário de. *Macunaíma. O Herói Sem Nenhum Carácter*. 1928. Belo Horizonte and Rio de Janeiro: Garnier, 2001. Print.
- Arnold, David. "'Illusory Riches': Representations of the Tropical Word 1840-1950." *Singaporean Journal of Tropical Geography*. 21.1 (2000): 7-11. Print.
- Bopp, Raul. *Cobra Norato*. Rio de Janeiro: Olympio, 2001. Print.
- Carvajal, Gaspar de. *The Discovery of the Amazon, According to the Account of Friar Gaspar de Carvajal and Other Documents*. Ed. H. C. Heaton. Trans. Bertram T. Lee. New York: AMS, 1970. Print.
- Cunha, Euclides da. *Um Paraíso Perdido. Ensaio Amazônicos*. Brasília: Senado Federal, 2000. Print.
- . "Preâmbulo." *Inferno Verde. Cenas e Cenários do Amazonas*, by Alberto Rangel. Tours, France: Arrault, 1927. 1-22. Print.
- Daniel, João. *Quinta Parte do Tesouro Descoberto no Rio Máximo Amazonas*. Rio de Janeiro: Régia, 1820. Print.
- Favaro, Thomas. "Transamazônica. 40 Anos de Poeira." *Veja*. September 2009. Web. 4 September 2014.
- Ferreira de Castro, José Maria. *A Selva*. Lisbon: Guimarães. 2002. Print.
- Freud, "Letter to Karl Abraham." *The Complete Correspondence of Sigmund Freud and Karl Abraham 1907-1925*. Ed. and Trans. Ernst Falzeder. New

- York: Karnac, 2002. 82-84. Print.
- Hemming, John. *Tree of Rivers: The Story of the Amazon*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2008. Print.
- Maligo, Pedro. *Land of Metaphorical Desires: The Representation of Amazonia in Brazilian Literature*. New York: Peter Lang, 1998. Print.
- Marcone, Jorge. "Nuevos descubrimientos del gran río de las Amazonas: la 'novela de la selva' y la crítica al imaginario de la Amazonía." *Estudios* 16 (2000): 129-40. Print.
- Rangel, Alberto. *Inferno Verde. Scenas e Cenários do Amazonas*. Genoa: Bacigalupi, 1908. Print.
- Roosevelt, Theodore. *Through the Brazilian Wilderness*. New York: Scribner, 1914. Print.
- Sá, Lúcia. *Rain Forest Literatures: Amazonian Texts and Latin American Culture*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2004. Print.
- Schmitt, Carl. *The Concept of the Political*. Trans. G. Schwab. Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 2007. Print.
- Slater, Candace. *Dance of the Dolphin: Transformation and Disenchantment in Amazonian Imagination*. Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 1994. Print.
- . *Entangled Edens: Visions of the Amazon*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2002. Print.
- Stepan, Nancy Leys. *Picturing Tropical Nature*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2001. Print.
- Vasconcelos, Simão de. *Notícias Curiosas e Necessárias das Cousas do Brasil*. Lisboa: Comissão Nacional para as Comemorações dos Descobrimientos Portugueses, 2001. Print.
- Vieira, Patrícia. "Laws of the Jungle: The Politics of Contestation in Cinema About the Amazon." *The Green Thread: Dialogues with the Vegetal World*. Ed. Patrícia Vieira, Monica Gagliano, and John Ryan. New York: Lexington, 2015. 129-48. Print.
- . "Phytographia: Literature as Plant Writing." *Environmental Philosophy* 12.2 (2015): 205-20. Print.
- , Monica Gagliano, and John Ryan. "Introduction." *The Green Thread: Dialogues with the Vegetal World*. Ed. Patrícia Vieira, Monica Gagliano and John Ryan. New York: Lexington, 2015. ix-xxvii. Print.