

INVENTION, SUSPICION, AND THE AMAZONIAN IMAGINARY

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There are those who prefer to succumb to the fascination of the Amazon as myth and metaphor rather than consider the realities that lie nestled within its territory. The fictional and scientific “invention” of the Amazon — be it through pre-colonial records, Indian mythology, Greco-Roman historiography, or, as Neide Gondim (1994) describes, the clash of the medieval mentality with the “Century of Lights” — denotes an almost generic tendency to embrace the Amazon as a permanent locus of mystery and reverie, of the chimeric and the oneiric. In this vision, the tension between man and nature (read “nature and culture”) is never resolved, and the region continually recreates and relives a never-ending story of submission to the domination of natural forces.

However, now more than ever, the paradoxical character bestowed on the Amazon over the centuries requires interrogation. This essay’s title alludes to the dubiety of the region’s association with the idea of paradise. For some, such as the writer Alberto Rangel (1919/2024), who referred to the Amazonian forest as a “green hell,” it is the very antithesis of paradise. Indeed, the exceptional nature of its geography has provoked a counter-imaginary that offers instead a portrayal of the struggle of “civilized man” to survive in the humid tropics, where disease and a hostile climate condemn to death all who endeavor to live there.

These conflicting visions — oscillating between paradise, hell, and frontier — are not merely symbolic constructions. They have shaped, and continue to shape, the frameworks through which the Amazon is interpreted, governed, and exploited. To understand how these narratives gained such durability, and how they continue to distort the region's political and ecological realities, the discussion now turns to the historical and geopolitical conditions that allowed these imaginaries to take root and endure.

This “suspect paradise”, which as Mario Higo (2018) shows, Leopoldo Bernucci captured so well, is a vortex of continuous natural destruction: slowly, tirelessly the place devours itself — not only its vegetal world, but also its animal kingdom, and even the people who live there. An ecocritical reinterpretation of Bernucci (2017) stresses how the hostility of this natural environment is aggravated by the hostility of its human invaders, whose greed either destroys it or transforms it into “agrodollars” through a process that Rob Nixon (2011) describes as “slow violence.” The concepts of a “green hell” and a “suspect paradise” can be found across literature and history, science and art, and reveals the close relationship between these apparently independent fields. That is why the social and historical processes are both imaginary and real; they follow the development in each literary canon or scientific episteme of attempts to refashion Amazonian reality. The fictional and scientific contexts of these interpretations belong to the same sphere and are driven by the same logic of (re)creation.

Poised on the border between fiction and reality, the Amazonian region has thus become an interpretive bundle of mythical, redeeming, fantastical, sacred, and profane fabulations, which portray its important regional transformations with imaginative autonomy. Hence, in the opinion of Marilene Corrêa da Silva (1996), the “voices” of fiction mirror the ruthlessness of the scientific discourse.

In the “disenchantment” of the Amazon, the region continues to be seen as a metaphor for the mythical and the astonishing. This does not involve a dissolution of reality — that would be to underestimate the weight of the concrete on the imagination — but it highlights the multiple representations and meanings that these diverse disciplinary approaches, and scientific and artistic narrations invest in the Amazon. This is why the scientific voices, frequently associated with arbitrary reconstructions of the region, can be as unrelenting as the voices of fiction, and can radicalize perceptions of the Amazon even more powerfully than fictional composition. In the latter, the autonomy of the artistic imagination also dissolves and reconfigures frontiers, subjects, spaces, and the nature-culture relationship in a process of “creative invention.” It transforms living beings (humans and non-humans), the sacred and the profane into hybrid phenomena, and recreates the

relationships between them according to the author's own imaginative impulses, as Mario de Andrade (1928) does in *Macunaíma*.

According to Ana Pizarro (2009), the Amazon, as a physical and cultural space, contains elements that act as symbolic devices for the writer, instigating semiotic connections in the imagination that enable comparisons with what they then encounter. The Amazon becomes a mythical universe that responds to their own shortcomings, expectations, and physical and spiritual needs in a way that is subsequently confirmed in their fictional narratives. And if the literary voices grow more merciless, it is because their narratives become a conduit for the intensity of the conflict between the forest peoples and invaders, a conflict that emerges with increasing visibility in their writing. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that both the scientific and literary narratives are not autonomous but are forged within an intentional political context that justifies their discursive purposes.

During my last journey through Tabatinga, a city situated on the Brazilian border with Colombia and Peru, I observed a highly symbolic inscription on a memorial to the city's foundation, which proclaims: "Here starts Brazil." But this phrase also encourages an opposite reading, in which the border signifies the end of the civilized world: here starts a remote, uncivilized, and barbarous realm that has been left to its fate. This foundational maxim has given rise to a discourse justifying authoritarian control of the region, resulting in the predatory exploration for and plunder of its resources. It is another facet of the narrative of the Amazon as a "green hell," which has led to the imaginative and political exploitation of a region designated as an empty space, a "terra nullius," open to the violent imposition of civilization.

As sociologist Octávio Ianni (1979) relates, to begin with there is only nature. Then comes man. Nature and human culture struggle, and one is imposed on the other: equal, unequal, non-compliant. Soon man emerges as the "lord of nature." After its appropriation, nature is transfigured. Man is also no longer the same. Both have lost their innocence and become a part of History. Now, the "slow violence" of yesterday is no longer so slow; it has permeated the entire region, leaving the future of both humans and non-humans in doubt.

The Brazilian authorities' indifference to and abandonment of the Amazon during the Covid-19 pandemic (2020-23) appeared to be novel. But, as Corrêa da Silva (2012) argues, the region has always been regarded as the most imperfect feature of the nation-state, one that merely serves as a currency of exchange. It represents a social formation (directly contrary to the social formations of the indigenous Amazon) whose relationship with the larger Brazilian nation is guided by the prevailing order of the colonialist state. The hardships in the region, which were exacerbated by Covid-19, clearly

show the heavy price the Amazon pays to be part of Brazil: it receives less than it gives both in taxation and in political terms, yet it fails to figure in the state's national priorities. As the authors Samuel Benchimol (1999) and Arthur Cesar Ferreira dos Reis (1965) show, indifference and neglect are also strategies for clearing the territory. As a result of such indifference, many in the region will die and nature will again be free of anthropic interventions.

The traditional literary vision of the indigenous peoples of the Amazonian region is a romanticized one, oscillating between images of innocence and perfection. This is their price for inclusion in the national imagination. The scientific vision has focused on their "otherness" and the uncertainty of their humanity. Meanwhile, the economic vision has been a more overtly brutal one, relegating them to the condition of animal, slave, or inferior subject. The literary narrative of Amazonian Indian innocence/perfection, however, is closely connected to the latter idea of "uncivilized barbarians." That is why so few appear to find it strange that this "suspicious paradise" consumes millions of lives. It is important to emphasize that, in the Amazon, the political materiality of suspicion, as Bruno Malheiro (2019) points out, emerges from the idea of the region as a risk to the nation-state's sovereignty. If this seemingly aberrant "difference" is juxtaposed to what is meant by a "nation," it is but a short step to the normalization of violence and the acceptance of the exception as the rule. The suspicion that invented the idea of Amazonian risk and Amazonian emptiness has been materialized, historically, in the state's use of force and violence: it appears that the only possible response to these (human and non-human) suspects can be the use of force.

Conjunctions between the "suspect paradise" and the "green hell"

Contemporary narratives of the Amazon also reflect the historical contest between western literary and scientific discourses, and their attempts to describe or transfigure reality. It is important to note that both the scientific and literary approaches to the Amazon register the famous intellectual and political disputes that have taken place over more than three centuries of attempted rationalization. A growing dread of intellectual contamination led to the increasing distinction between religion, science, and art, and the formation of rules for a republican "scientific spirit" and separate institutionalized disciplines. These contests have placed western literary and scientific thought at one moment in opposition and, at yet another, in conjunction.

The Amazon is part of this historical invention of intellectual approaches and narrative canons, since, from the moment of the meeting between the Americas and the "old world," its physiography, its peoples, and its territories came to signify the "anti-world." It represented the "unknown," and

there were no existing parameters for its description; it lay outside the logic and rationality of fifteenth-century art and science. These circumstances meant that its inclusion in the artistic creations of the fictional imagination and the discourses of various scientific disciplines forced it to occupy the same mental framework in which, despite their contests, these creations and discourses exist.

In turn, the presence of this unusual and unexpected American world of “almost humans,” and their equally strange, distant territories and cultures, profoundly altered the west’s scientific and artistic narratives. One drew upon the other to describe and produce explanations that adhered, to a greater or lesser degree, to facts. Thus, science and literature assisted each other, reciprocally, in the “invention of the Amazon” (Gondim, 1994). Even today, scientific reports describing the dynamics of the region often acquire literary features, while the images expressed in literary productions sometimes take the form of scientific descriptions. Both, however, in spite of the disputes that attempt to dissimulate this “intellectual contamination,” are equally surprised by the reality of the nature and culture of the region, and by the challenges that its historical and environmental conditions present to the contemporary world.

During the course of colonization and nationalization, the literary and scientific narratives invented the Amazon for rest of the world. The exercise of their considerable influence attracted further narrative disputes over what is known. During the pandemic, we saw the rebirth of earlier metaphors of distancing and estrangement in the descriptions of the region and of its interpreters — that is, of the indigenous peoples that have lived there for over 10,000 years. The “green hell” and “suspect paradise” are simultaneously factual and imaginative syntheses of the tropical, humid, natural world that is being devastated by the voracity of invaders and the trajectory of their exploitation of its peoples, biomes, and ecosystems. This “paradise lost” has acquired the condition of a cruel reality for the Amazonians of today. Lacking citizenship, they are orphans of the Brazilian nation-state. The state that the indigenous inhabitants of the Amazon encounter is not one that generates opportunities and guarantees rights, but one that generates violence through its monopoly of the forces of “law and order.” The Amazon’s condition as a region inhospitable to outsiders has not impeded the penetration of capitalism: its hydrography cuts through indigenous territories and environmental reserves, and creates municipalities that depend on the circulation of extractivist merchandise and products.

This “suspect paradise” conceals the twin barbarities of abandonment and expropriation. Under the complicity of silence, millions of human lives are sacrificed, denuded of their cultures and their historical adaptability to sacrosanct environments, through which they humanized nature. The scientific and literary narratives converge on signaling, in denunciation and reflection, the conflicts

and contradictions of the predatory interventions and their effects on the humans, non-humans, and resources of the Amazon over the centuries.

The pandemic aggregated the centuries-long impact of the disappearance of hundreds of peoples, cultures, and even civilizations through epidemics, genocidal territorial disputes, slavery, and servitude to the logic of capitalism. Will the exuberance of the forest conceal this latest politically driven, sanitized massacre? Will solidarity journalism be within the reach of the intellectual whose duty it is to record the region's self-awareness of the crisis?

The history of the Amazon is full of brutal episodes of the conquest of “new pioneering fronts,” and the problems of yesterday continue to be reiterated today. But it is the political exclusion of the Amazonian peoples from their constitutional rights, and their physical and cultural heritage, that awakens the most contradictory responses. These include the most recent deployment of shameful intellectual justifications of government power that attempt to “explain” the abandonment of the Amazonian populations to the ravages of a pandemic that the “civilized world” itself produced.

Once again, the literary records and scientific narratives have been at work interpreting the spread of the pandemic in the region. The conjunction of these reports may help to unveil the deceptions of the “suspect paradise” hiding in the depths of the forest, and portray it as yet another tragic episode in the nature-culture opposition created by the human lust for riches and power.

The Amazon of today, however, cannot continue to be enshrouded in myth, much less metaphorized by fables that reinvent the forest according to the Eurocentric imagination. What is at stake is our very existence — that is, the life of all people, whether individuals or groups, whether urban, rural, or indigenous. The remaining biomes and ecosystems have been threatened by economic predation during and after the pandemic (Thomaz, 2020), due to the diminishing amount of merchandise available to the central cities of the Amazon's municipalities and the stripping of opportunities from the region's peoples by the public policies in education, health, and labor.

Beyond the western scientific and literary narratives on the Amazon, however, can be found — with “slow seeing” (Colón, 2018) — the imaginary narratives and representations belonging to its native peoples. These offer a new repertoire of ideas to help us contemplate the post-pandemic world. The Amazon occupies around 61% of Brazilian territory. It contains 25 million inhabitants, with around 300 ethnicities and 180 languages, all of which are expressions of different ways of living, experiencing, feeling, and imagining the world. This world needs new solutions that will enable all of humanity to partake, finally, in some share of well-being. After all, capitalist civilization's promise of universal well-being never arrived. Yet who continues to pay the bill for this civilization, which has

from the first configured the image of the “indigenous” out of a radical alterity, and who may now be silenced forever? At stake is the survival of us all (Vitkin, 1995). By neglecting other ways of reading the region, we are sacrificing the ancestral contributions of the peoples of the forest and, with them, other horizons and perspectives, different to those we have so far been given.

The end of the Amazon is the end of the heart of humanity. The heart, not in in the biological, but in the ecological sense (analogous to the oft-presented image of the Amazonian forest as the “lungs” of the world), and in the poetic sense. The heart in the sense in which both the poetic and scientific imagination can become forces that guide the dialog between public policy and the peoples of the forest.

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