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## Travel-writing on the amazon in the 1990s: Ecological concern or colonial discourse?

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**ABSTRACT:** After the death of the rubber-tapper leader Chico Mendes, occurred in December 1988, many journalists, photographers and film-makers came to Amazonia in order to describe to the “First World” what was happening to the Amazon, the “World’s lung”. Justifying their visit to the region, these foreign professionals usually related that they were worried about the destruction of the forest and wanted to “protect” nature and environment. However, most of the works reveal a colonial and stereotyped view of the Amazon either as hell or paradise. In this work I explore the discourse on the Amazon visible in some North-American and British works published in the 1990s.

**KEYWORDS:** Amazon, discourse, colonialism

### Escritos de viagem na amazônia na década de 1990: inquietação ecológica ou discurso colonial?

**RESUMO.** Após a morte do seringueiro e líder sindicalista Chico Mendes, em dezembro de 1988, no Acre, muitos jornalistas, fotógrafos, escritores e cineastas se dirigiram à Amazônia brasileira para relatar o que estava acontecendo com o “pulmão do mundo”. Muitos desses profissionais vinham para cá com um discurso que revelava uma preocupação com a ecologia, com a salvação da “última fronteira” e da floresta tropical. As representações da Amazônia, elaboradas para uma audiência estrangeira, no entanto, revelam uma prática discursiva classificatória e colonizadora que inventa uma verdade sobre a Amazônia e o povo que ali vive. Neste artigo eu discuto como as obras de literatura de viagem nesse período ainda revelam a crença na superioridade de um povo sobre outro e sugerem que os estereótipos sobre os amazônidas e sobre os brasileiros ainda são muito presentes em autores do “Primeiro Mundo”.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Amazônia, discurso, colonialismo



*Porto Velho, like any large town in the Amazon, is ugly and brazen. Life there is unrestrained and the vices of drink, sex, amplified music and dangerous driving are surrendered to without shame. Its carelessness, born of fresh wealth in the city centre, is mirrored in the poverty in its suburbs. There the huts of migrants ramble loosely a cross miles of broken land, children are barefooted and undisciplined and the cats are skeletons of fur...* (MONBIOT. **Amazon Watershed**, 1991).

*(...) if it is true that no production of knowledge in the human sciences can ever ignore or disclaim its author's involvement as a human subject in his own circumstances, then it must also be true that for a European or American studying the Orient there can be no disclaiming the main circumstances of **his** [emphasis in original] actuality: that he comes up against the Orient as a European or American first, as an individual second. And to be a European or an American in such a situation is by no means an inert fact. It meant and means being aware, however dimly, that one belongs to a power with definite interests in the Orient, and more important, that one belongs to a part of the earth with a definite history of involvement in the Orient almost since the time of Homer (SAID. **Orientalism**, 1991).*

At the end of the 1980s, the discourse on environment reached an unexpected dimension in our country, mainly due to issues in the Amazon, a phenomenon which may be explained partly related to social conflicts in the region. A very grave and shocking occurrence was the death of Chico Mendes, the leader of rubber-tappers in Xapury, in the state of Acre, in the Brazilian Western Amazon. This sad happening brought to the region many foreign reporters, journalists, writers and photographers who intended to portray and write about the Brazilian Amazon. In this work, I investigate some works of travel-writing, mainly American ones, written in this period, published at the beginning of the 1990s. In this time, all over the world papers, radio, television (not internet yet) brought news about the burning and deforestation of the “World’s Lung”, about the “green-house effect”, and the “black hole”. When one spoke about ecology it was almost compulsory to mention the Amazon, this part of the world which was irresponsibly being destroyed by Brazilians. A certain discursive practice was present in works such as **Amazon Watershed** by George Monbiot, **The Burning Season** by Andrew Revkin; **The World is Burning** by A Shoumatoff, among many others. The discourse present in these works, which has as central theme the “Death of Chico Mendes and the destruction of the forest”, deserves to be analyzed.



In 1988 Chico Mendes had received International prizes and awards for being considered the symbol of ecology and a “hero of humanity” as Michael Certeau wrote to **The Globo** in 1989. Mendes’s death caused a series of winds and events which swept the region. We could cite for example “The Meeting of Xingu people” held in Altamira in the end of 1989, which questioned the building of a dam in the region, the “V Ministerial Conference on the Environment in Latin American and Caribbean countries” held in March 1989, which contended the right to sovereignty of the Amazonian Treat over the region. The 1989 **Time Magazine** did not choose the “Man of the Year” to name the Planet Earth, weakened by the destruction imposed upon it, as the “Planet of the year”. All this ecological manifestation eventually culminated in the ECO 92 held in Rio de Janeiro when the theme of Environment reached great relevance.

A great numbers of texts in books, magazines and papers as well as films focused on the Amazon were produced and shown in the media. On some occasions the works reveal that authors are betrayed by a discourse which suggests a belief in the superiority of people “from the First World” in relation to South-American, Brazilian or Amazonian people. The exotic, the weird, the sensual are also explored by authors who reveal that they come to Brazil with many pre-texts and much knowledge about the region acquired from books written in different times. They have read before coming about the “paradise and hell” contrast, about the dangerous animals, about the “lazy people” and so much more, a pre-established knowledge about this region. So, even observing in loco, the authors “see what they want to see”, write about the region that “truth” that they want to divulge to humanity.

The Canadian critic Mary Louise Pratt (1999), now working in California, in her book **Imperial Eyes: Travel-Writing and Transculturation**, states that it is possible to perceive in travel-writing a discursive practice over “distant and exotic lands”. The Canadian scholar argues that one can see in books published in the First World a tendency to classify, put into a frame and judge the other based on colonizing interests. This practice was widely used by writers in the period of the great European Conquests, a Scientific Expedition in order to justify the intervention of the *metropolis* in the colonies, contributing in this way for an expansionist objective. In this way, many works describe the place, the landscape and do everything to minimize the human presence. In the main, what is narrated is a sequence of sights and settings. **Visual details** are interspersed with technical and **classificatory** information: “the tendency is toward a panoramic scope. [...] The travelers are chiefly present as a kind of collective moving **eye**” (PRATT, 1999, p. 59). In this way, the residents are just traces in the landscapes. When writers do



mention people, they are referred to as people with ugly costumes, as dirty beings, lazy creatures without initiative so that they need the presence of “superior” people in order to elevate their level of life. Pratt contains that one can see the “Invention (and re-invention) of America” according to First World’s colonizing interests. In this case, we also see the “invention of the Amazon”, as argues Neide Gondim from the University of Amazon. In her work **A Invenção da Amazônia** (1994) [Invention of the Amazon], she analyses the behavior of the Europeans when they found the “Lost paradise”, the “El Dorado”, the “Source of Youth”. She argues that the first writings on the Amazon were based on the writings about East India and other Eastern lands conquered by the Europeans.

Edwards Said (1991) refers to the European discourse over the Orient also as “an invention of the West”. In **Orientalism** Said discusses some imperial strategies to control other people through the manipulation of knowledge and imposition of a “truth” over the “other”, the colonized, the Oriental, or “the inferior”. Orientalism is then defined as a way to solve the Orient by **making statements** about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, teaching it, colonizing it. It is, Said claims, “a **Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient**” (SAID, 1991, p. 15). The relation between the West and the East is presented as a relation of power and domination in which in a series of possible relations with the Orient the West never loses its relative advantage. David Spurr (1993) states that the colonial discourse or what **we call colonial discourse is neither a monolithic system nor a finite set of texts**, but “every system through which one culture comes to interpret, represent and rule over other” (SPURR 1993, p. 103).

Taking into account the association of the Amazon region with the Environment constructed in the end of the 1980s, this region, Brazil, America and “the others” are re-invented opening the opportunity for other themes to take part in the works, besides the ecological concern. One can perceive, therefore, the existence of a colonial discourse as theorized by Mary Louise Pratt, and Edward Said, among others. Perhaps it is possible to state that, in order to satisfy the necessity of “control” and in order to keep the authority of the “First World” over the Amazon, it is necessary to construct a discourse about the man, culture and behavior of the region. In this way we are subject to looks, gazes, criticism and judgments of “foreigners which guarantee their control and authority over the Amazon. The ecological concerns are not, therefore, the only “motif” in these writings. The writers from Europe and North-America that came to the region after Chico Mendes’s death had many interests. They needed to tell the world what was happening in this far and wild West, in the exotic, violent, strange, and mysterious region of Brazil.



Once working with a photographer of the Philadelphia Inquirer (Kyle Keener), I heard the following explanation about the need to write on the Amazon: “We do not have the Wild West in the States anymore; that is why we need to write about what is remaining in Brazil”. The titles of the books certainly reveal a desire to “discover” the wild, furious, explosive, uncivilized world. **The Burning Season** (1990) by Alex Revkin is an example of this.

**The Burning Season** has, as an epigraph, two statements by two people from the Amazon: one statement is by Chico Mendes done in December 1988 (just before his death). In the text, Chico concludes that funerals will not save the forest and that he wants to live. The second statement is by Osmarino Rodrigues, secretary of the Rubber-tappers’ Council, who says that, those who care for ecology have to be concerned also with the people who live in the forest. These voices from the Amazon at the epigraph give some credibility to the book and its author. The reader also realizes that Revkin (1990) criticizes the attitude of some foreigners in relation to the Amazon:

The assault on the Amazon that now raged in Rondonia and threatened Acre was a continuation of one of the most basic process of civilization: the conquest of the wilderness. Wild regions of the earth have always been perceived by human beings as places to be tamed, settled and then exploited (REVKIN, 1990, p. 102).

This observation may be read as a self-criticism and it seems to reflect the theories of colonialism and travel-writing scholars.

Revkin’s work seems to suggest that the author is aware of his colonial writing and reveal to be very cautious in order to avoid falling into a trap. However, he is not able to stay away from the influence of his environment, his previous readings, his culture and education (as Foucault questions in “What is an author?”). The author ends up transmitting his colonialist view of the Amazon, a lawless and orderless land, where “all sins are possible”. This reflects Said’s theory: the “civilized” sees the “uncivilized region” as a place where everything is possible and permitted. Revkin proposes to tell the Amazonian people’s story, the building of Xapuri (Chico Mendes’s land) and informs us: “In the process, it created one of the strangest and most brutal forms of labor exploitation in modern history” (REVKIN, 1990, p. 44). The author points out this historical moment as the beginning of all atrocities in the region culminating with Chico Mendes’s death. This would be not an unusual happening in this remote place, very different from the rest of the world and even from the rest of Brazil: “the main reason Darly had moved to the Amazon was that it was one of the last places where might



it still made right. [...] In that sense it differed little from the American west [...] the very paradise of outlaws and desperados” (REVKIN, 1990, p. 10). The region and the costumes of the region’s inhabitants are described as exotic and frightening contrasting to the beauty of the landscape, which is always enchanting. The reader realizes that Revkin reproduces some stereotypes about Brazil and the Brazilians who “leave everything for tomorrow. [...] They agreed to it amanhã, tomorrow – a word that is heard often in the draining heat of the Amazon” (REVKIN, 1990, p. 11). Here, unlike in “the First World”, nothing works, there is no truth and no logic:

At first, the American officials in the Amazon tried to set up their own system of boats and warehouses with which to collect the rubber directly from the tappers. The idea was to offer a higher price than the old houses and seringalistas and thus to stimulate the tappers to produce more rubber. It was a logical idea, but logic does not apply to the Amazon (REVKIN, 1990, p 65).

One can see that the author divulges the idea that everything in the Amazon is exotic and illogical contrasting to the “First World.” Laziness, lethargy and illogicality cannot, however, prevent the violence of the man from the Amazon. “In the anarchic atmosphere, the pistoleiros often assume the look of the imagined Wild West predecessors, strutting through town with a revolver stuck in the waist of the right jeans boot heels raising red dust” (REVKIN, 1990, p 19). It seems that the author suggests that this anarchy and lack of focus and perspective in the man from the Amazon needs observation, “protection” and care from someone who lives in a superior place, that is, someone from the “First World”. One can infer that the author believes that only people from outside the Amazon can perceive that the destruction of the forest is an evil. People who live in the region are blind to this danger: “It became clear to the outsiders that the murder was a microcosm of the larger crime: unbridled destruction of the last great reservoir of biological diversity on earth” (REVKIN, 1990, p. 16). This author’s attitude reflects the theory presented by scholars of travel-writing who argue that there is a discursive practice on this region and the world. These places are analyzed, classified and put into an order by someone who comes from a “superior world”. Those who are in the control of the discourse feel the need to affirm the differences between them and the “others”. It is necessary to stress the negative qualities of the observed people in order to justify the authority of the writer. The supposed superiority of the writers over those who are described is visible. David Spurr (1993) reminds us that Darwin attributed the low morality of the savages to the fact that their behavior was guided only by instinct, and at the same time he praised the great



capacity of the civilized man to be guided by reason. This discourse seems to remain in travel-writing on the Amazon in the nineties.

In addition to the lack of reason, exoticism, laziness and violence in this “strange and inferior” land, one can observe that the place is marked by sensuality and sexuality. Here even the animals have an elevated sexual stimulus: “an oversexed rooster liked to start crowing at 3 am and one of his hens had the habit of laying eggs on the floor of the outhouse, then roosting behind the toilet” (REVKIN, 1990, p. 15).

**The Burning Season** is very well-grounded on research that the author developed in Brazil, mainly on the history of the exploration and commercialization of rubber and on the natural resources in the Amazon. And it is important to mention that the author also listened to Brazilians, which reveals his intention to be impartial. However, it is important to note that Revkin also registers what he brings from his own culture and environment and, more than that, he writes what he is expected to write.

In another work, **The World is Burning: Murder in the rain Forest** (1991) by Alexander Shoumatoff, the very title draws our attention: the burning in the Amazon. The book is offered to the Brazilian people who, according to the author, are among “the sweetest and most generous on earth”, but after this homage, the author completes: “but remember your saying ‘He who is in hurry eats raw’” (SHOUMATOFF, 1991, p. 1). The author seems to put himself in a superior position to Brazilians. The epigraph of the book is taken from Shakespeare’s **Macbeth** and it is visible that he is borrowing Shakespeare’s words to address the Brazilian people: “Alas, poor country/ almost afraid to know itself! It cannot be called our mother, but our grave, where nothing, but who knows nothing is once seen to smile” (SHOUMATOFF, 1991, p. 1).

This poor country, Brazil, will be the object of discussion by the author. Only those who ignore everything can smile. At the same time the author tries to show solidarity to the Brazilian people. He suggests that only someone from abroad can see the truth. He states that “truth does not reside in the Amazon, it is not “firmly rooted and lodged, in facts and figures the way it is in the First World” (SHOUMATOFF, 1991, p. 9). One can realize then that the author transmits a dichotomist vision of the world: First World versus Third World. In the First World lies the truth and knowledge and on the other side lies Brazil, Amazonia, where everything is different. As Edward Said argues, to the colonizer it is important to present the idea of the First World in contrast to the “others” who are thrown to an inferior position. The classification of the other, as Mary Louise Pratt argues when she analyses travel-writing, is a tendency of the “Civilizing missions” (PRATT, 1992, p. 4).

One can see a great tendency to generalization of everything which does not belong to the world of the writer as one can see in the following example:





Brazil is the Mecca for the facelifts. It does the most expert dubbing of foreign films. And, most important, it has the best carnival and this four-day spree – in which everyone dresses up and acts out his or her fantasy of being someone else, usually someone better off...(SHOUMATOFF, 1991, p. 273).

Brazilians and mainly Amazonians are, therefore, put into a frame, so they are easily analyzed and defined. Shoumatoff tries an explanation for Brazilian characteristics: “Where did this fascination with illusion and dissembling come from? I think that, like many other elements of Latin-American culture, it’s an Arabic trait that was acquired by the Portuguese during their eight-hundred year domination by the Moors” (SHOUMATOFF, 1991, p. 274).

According to the critic Albert Memmi, the portrait that colonizers make of the colonized ones includes laziness, inaptitude, inaction in contrast to the virtues of the colonizers, who are active, diligent, industrious and who easily perceive what should be done. The portrait the travel-writer makes of the Amazonian and Brazilian people also involves laziness and inaction. Shoumatoff writes: “the first reaction in Latin American is inaction, suspicion, inoperancia” (SHOUMATOFF, 1991, p. 144). The *inoperancia*, the lack of action and initiative seems to be a trade mark of the Brazilian people, according to Shoumatoff. In Xapury, Chico Mendes’s land, “people rarely left their verandas and spent their time running their fingers through each other’s hair, looking for fleas [sic]. Little recalled the climate of tension of a few months before” (SHOUMATOFF, 1991, p. 234). Again we remember Albert Memmi when he writes that “whenever the colonizer claims that the colonized is weak he is suggesting a protection” (MEMMI, 1977, p. 82). Shoumatoff’s work suggests that Brazilians will never be able to understand the grandiosity of things as the First World people can see. The Brazilians are also stereotyped as violent. According to the author, “The nordestinos have their own syndromes of violence, stemming mainly from liquor, jealousy, and slightened honor. A lot of innocent men are blown away on suspicion of fooling around with someone’s woman” (SHOUMATOFF, 1991, p. 18). This violence, which contrasts with people’s laziness and slowness, is mentioned many times throughout the work.

Reading Shoumatoff’s text, written and published in the nineties, one is recalled of works written in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century such as Tomlinson’s **The Sea and the Jungle** (first published in 1913). Tomlinson also saw the world as separated into a civilized First World (pure blood) and the Amazon:

The Paraenses, passing by at a lazy gait - which I was soon compelled to imitate - in the heat, were puzzling folk to one used to the features of a race of pure blood, like ourselves. Portuguese, negro, and Indian were there, but rarely a true





type of one. Except where the black was the predominant factor the men were impoverished bodies, sallow, meagre, and listless; though there were some brown and brawny ruffians by the foreshore. But the women often were very showy and creatures, certainly indolent in movement, but not listless, and built in notable curves. They were usually of a richer colour than their mates, and moved as though their blood were of a quicker temper. They had slow and insolent eyes. The Indian has given them the black hair and brown skin, the negro (TOMLINSON, 1977, p. 89).

One perceives, therefore, that the work that was supposed to discuss ecology proves to be a work which repeats old stereotypes about the Amazon, taking, thus, another direction. Like the two authors discussed here, most of the writers in the 1990s reveal to be more concerned in emphasizing the inferiority of the Brazilian people than in doing something “to save the forest”. Shoumatoff argues at the beginning of his writing that the main purpose was to stop the destruction of the last forest of the world, but ends up repeating old stereotypes about Brazil and Brazilians. For instance, he often affirms that Brazilians and, by extension Latin-Americans, do not know how to preserve:

The prevailing Latin American attitude toward nature has changed little since the conquistadores’ time. Other forms of life are inherently hostile; they exist only to be exploited. There is no love lost on dogs, which are kicked and starved and left out the house. (SHOUMATOFF, 1991, p. 45)

The reader can realize that the conclusions the author draws about Latin American people comes from some previous concept which leads to the generalizing statements about the region. Another example seems to reinforce the author’s attitude, as we see in this statement:

Ilzamar’s brother Raimundo Gadelha drove us out to the cemetery in her black Ford Pampa LX pickup racing through town, scattering people, dogs, chickens right and left. In Brazil the man behind the wheel has the right-of-way. If the pedestrian is too old or slow, ja era, he’s history. (SHOUMATOFF, 1991, p. 287).

As Mary Louise Pratt claims, the initial ethnographic gesture is the one that homogenizes the people to be subjected, that is, produced as subjects, into a collective *they*, which distills down even further into an iconic *he* (= standard adult male specimen) (PRATT, 1994, p. 64). It is a clear tendency to codify, categorize and homogenize everything that refers



to the Brazilian world. Besides indolence, laziness, passivity, inaptitude, inaction and lack of capacity to perceive what has to be done, the Brazilians, according to Shoumatoff, have no care for nature: "I thought how this crazy, magical, wide-open, wonderful country had incredible power now, the power it always wanted, but in a negative way. If it keeps on deforesting the Amazon, it could destroy the planet" (SHOUMATOFF, 1991, p. 138). The Amazon is then like the American Wild West, exotic, with no logic, different, dangerous and under the power of unreliable people. The monotonous Amazon, the slow world mentioned by the British writer Tomlinson in **The Sea and the Jungle** is again, repeated here. To Shoumatoff:

The Amazon has a soporific effect. It's a big part of the inoperancia problem. You need frequent faces of nicotine and caffeine to keep going. So many things conspire against your remaining on schedule and on the ball. It's a constant struggle just to maintain consciousness, to fight off tropical entropy, rachitic, stultified paranoid paralyzes... You start milking mistakes. Accidents happen (SHOUMATOFF, 1991, p. 177).

Eroticism, like in Revkin's work, is always present in Brazilian and Amazonian life. The author seems to be interested in keeping the myth according to which under the tropics you are permitted to experience what you are not supposed to in the North:

I grabbed a tall cinnamon schoolgirl who had just finished her night classes, and she, squeezing my thigh with hers until I could feel her wetness gave me a taste of what it would be like to do with her. Most of pairs were girls dancing together, short tight skirt riding high above their knees (SHOUMATOFF, 1991, p 290).

This reflects Edward Said's notion, as when he refers to the vision the orientalists have on the Orient. Said argues that this position diminishes the Oriental to merely the biological, opening opportunities to erotic adventures to the Westerns. For Shoumatoff there is very little value in Brazilian people besides the hospitality and sensuality.

All these "truths" over the Amazon and the Third World are supported by the power and "authority" the culture to which the authors belong have over the described world. These works were written after the end of the 1980's, a period recognized by many historians, preservationists, environmentalists and ecologists as "the decade of destruction of the Amazon rainforest." Many facts gave raise to this discourse on the Amazon.



Among these works are many others which are not the object of our discussion here, but which deserve to be mentioned when one refers to travel-writing on the Amazon in the 1990s. Works such as Adrian Cowell's, **The Decade of Destruction**, Augusta Dwyer's, **Into the Amazon**, Bob Reiss's, **The Road to Extrema**, among others, are also important books that reveal the foreign look at the Amazon. A very important investigation to be carried on is the extension to which these works repeat the colonial discourse on the Amazon and on American lands in colonial times. The foreigner's look usually oscillates between otherness and authority, "superiority" and "inferiority", "civilization and wilderness", "the wild and the civilized" and so on. Moreover, it is visible that writers and scholars come to the Amazon supported by previous readings and previous concepts on the region. The writers' world will be always the world of the civilized and the Amazon is the uncivilized, the primitive place. As Neneve (2000) writes, "obviously, there is no intention in saying that everything written on the Amazon is written by 'colonial and imperial eyes', with colonizing interests" (NENEVÉ, 2001, p. 56). Many travel-writers have brought good contribution to the knowledge on the region. However, it is important to read travel-writing also from the postcolonial perspective.

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