

EYEWITNESS TRAVELERS: TORTURE IN AMAZONIAN RUBBER ESTATES

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Resumo: O artigo discute a representação ficcional e não ficcional da tortura nos seringais amazônicos durante o apogeu do Ciclo da Borracha, na década de 1910. Durante esse período, aproximadamente 30 mil indígenas amazônicos escravizados, trabalhando como seringueiros, sofreram abusos e foram torturados e assassinados na região dos rios Caquetá/Juruá e Putumayo/Içá. Viajantes (Euclides da Cunha, Roger Casement, Miguel Triana, Thomas Whiffen, etc.) e ficcionistas (Alberto Rangel, José Eustasio Rivera, e Mario Vargas Llosa) escreveram fortes relatos denunciando essas atrocidades. Entretanto, muitos deles foram desacreditados e o registro fotográfico dos atos e cenas criminosos, descartado como falso. Como prática de tortura, o açoitamento se tornou habitual e às vezes confuso, entrelaçando seu sentido proverbial de punição com outro positivo, quando praticado durante os rituais indígenas. Este artigo problematiza os interstícios desses dois sentidos.

Palavras-chave: Tortura; Amazonas; Fotografia; Ciclo da Borracha; Euclides da Cunha; Alberto Rangel; José Eustasio Rivera; Viajantes; Mario Vargas Llosa.

Recorded accusations against widespread slavery practices in rubber estates in Amazonia can be traced back as early as 1906. The Brazilian writer Euclides da Cunha, who had spent a good portion of the previous year in the Amazonian rainforest, was one of the first to denounce this type of crime. In a published interview in Rio de Janeiro's *Jornal do Commercio* one can read his public outcry as he tries to

define this inhuman aberration as “the most criminal labor organization ever engendered by the most hideous greed... [There] the rubber tapper accomplishes something anomalous: he works to enslave himself.”

The truth is that by observing and denouncing this brutal labor system while traveling along the Purus River in 1905, a system that filled him with indignation, Euclides was only showing the tip of the iceberg to his readers. Hundreds of miles away from where he was that year, in the Putumayo and Caquetá area, a more grotesque tragedy was taking place under the auspices of the Peruvian Amazon Company (PAC). In this remote area of western Amazonia ruled by PAC, where Colombia and Peru also disputed their possessions, torture and genocide were committed at a scale never seen before in the region. Before 1906, accusations of these crimes fell on deaf ears or were met with indifference by Brazilian, Colombian, and Peruvian authorities.

Like Euclides, Benjamín Saldaña Rocca was one of the first to systematically denounce these violent acts in his two newspapers *La Sanción* and *La Felpa* published in Iquitos in 1907-1908. After collecting notarized eyewitness testimonies from people familiar with PAC's rubber estates, Saldaña Rocca wrote several articles that were published not only in his newspapers, but also in Lima's *El Comercio* and *La Prensa*, and the English magazine *Truth*. These first massive denunciations triggered others, which eventually were successful in dismantling the Peruvian Amazon Company.

PAC was founded in 1907 by Peruvian Julio César Arana, who after being a peddler of Panama hats in Yurimaguas (Loreto) on the Huallaga River, Peru, became one of the wealthiest and most powerful rubber barons of his time. Since 1881, Arana had become very familiar with the Amazonian rubber estates, including those in Acre, Brazil. He opened a central office in Iquitos and a branch in Manaus, which lasted eleven years (1903-1914). In 1908 he was joined by members of

his family who helped him manage his business. Arana commercialized rubber internationally, making huge amounts of profit, by selling his products to international markets through the main Amazonian ports: Manaus, Belém, and Iquitos.

Angus Mitchell estimates that in the two largest PAC rubber estates, La Chorrera and the ironically named El Encanto, more than 30,000 individuals were hunted down, tortured, and murdered. Among the victims were Indians from the Huitoto, Bora, Andoque, and Ocaina tribes (Mitchell 183n). Most victims were adult men and women, but some were also children. The main cause of their punishment and death was the Indians' inability to deliver the almost impossible rubber quota that PAC required: "[The] Indians [had] to deliver 14 kilograms of rubber every ten days, and every gram was accounted for; otherwise, they would be suspended by their four limbs and flogged, leaving them almost dead. Their lacerated bodies were then washed with salted water and pepper. This is the medicine that they received" (Olarie Camacho 59).

The most common type of torture used by PAC was flogging, in which a PAC employee chained a victim to the stocks and bound his/her hands and feet. Typically, the executioner flogged the victim 60-100 times, causing severe skin lacerations. Depending on their age and physical fitness, many victims fell unconscious at this point, but a few remained lucid still in the face of the excruciating pain. Roger Casement describes this repulsive practice:

Men and women would be suspended by the arms, often twisted behind their backs and tied together at the wrists, and in this agonizing posture, their feet hanging high above the ground, they were scourged on the nether limbs and lower back. The implement used for flogging was invariably a twisted strip, or several strips plaited together, of dried tapir-hide, a skin not so thick as the hippopotamus-hide I have seen used in Africa for flagellation, but still sufficiently stout to cut a human body to pieces.

Many times, upon bleeding, the victim's wounds developed maggots and his entire body entered a rapid process of putrefaction, causing the victim's death a few days later (*Report and Special Report* 479; Casement, Report 259; Hispano 267).

While it is true that this regime of terror reached its apogee in the first decade of the 20th century, slavery, coercion, and torture in Amazonia were not new phenomena. They go back as far as the 1500s, to the days of Spanish and Portuguese colonization:

The Indian dread of the lash was early recognized by the followers of Pizarro in their first dealings with the population of the Andes, for we read in the records of the Spanish rule that the viceroy, Don Francisco de Toledo, who came to Peru in 1569 and left in 1581, among other laws for civilizing the remnants of the Inca people, prescribed that "any Indian who makes friendship with an Indian woman who is an infidel is to receive 100 lashes for the first offense, that being the punishment they dislike most" (Casement, Report 261).

Friar Samuel Fritz, who travelled through Amazonia between 1686 and 1723, tells us that, in 1710 at Saint Paul Mission, Portuguese soldiers imprisoned and flogged several Ticuna and Omagua Indians who dared to resist colonial occupation (Fritz 110). Another testimonial of similar torture practice, told by coronel A. Codazzi and registered by the Venezuelan traveler Francisco Michelea y Rojas, was committed in the Province of Cayacara, on the Orinoco, in 1838. Michelea y Rojas observes how some rich landlords exploited and abused the Indians:

[...] The impudence of these men was such, that as soon as the head of an Indian family dies, the younger children are removed from the family under the specious pretext that they are now orphans, and that the mother is dishonest or incapable of caring for them. Instead, if it is the mother who dies, something similar happens, and the father is labeled a drunkard, irresponsible, and lazy. Anyhow, if both parents die, it is no longer necessary to have siblings, close and honorable relatives, and the children become an exclusive ownership of the politician, who divides them at his will, without of course forgetting about himself. Thus, on each one of these riverbanks, there are five or

six little Indians who receive nothing, except bad food, the whip, and some miserable clothing. I wish that with this report I could help the 2,000 unfortunate Indians who work so hard to benefit fifteen egotists (Michelena y Rojas 332).

Navy Lieutenant William Lewis Herndon, who traveled extensively through Amazonia, from Iquitos to Belém in the mid-1800s, discovered that some missionaries also engaged torture sessions: “The Indian recognizes in the padre the power to appoint and remove *curacas*, captains, and other officers, to inflict stripes, and to confine to the stocks.” [...] “in the government of the Indians there is nothing like the *santo palo* [sacred cudgel]” (Herndon 213).

In 1907 Rocca’s accusations spurred several others, published by Hardenburg in *Truth* magazine and later on his book *The Putumayo: The Devil’s Paradise* (1912). Many others followed: Vicente Olarte Camacho’s *Las Crueldades en el Putumayo y en el Caquetá* (Bogotá, 1910); Norman Thomson’s *The Putumayo Red Book* (1912); Cornelio Hispano’s *De París al Amazonas: Las Fieras del Putumayo* (1912); G. Sidney Paternoster’s *The Lords of the Devil’s Paradise* (1913), and Justice Carlos A. Valcárcel’s extensive report *El Proceso del Putumayo: Sus Secretos Inauditos* (1915). In 1913, the United States Congress published *Slavery in Peru*. In addition to this documentation, in July of 1910 Sir Roger Casement “embarked for Amazonia with a party of English commissioners representing PAC. He spent the rest of the year travelling to and from the Putumayo, investigating allegations of atrocities” (Mitchel, *Casement* 170). Subsequently, in August of 1911, Casement leaves the U.K. and embarks, again, on a second voyage up the Amazon to conduct now a more thorough investigation. Casement left precious notes in his diaries, which were incorporated in the British government’s Putumayo “Blue Book” in July 1912. His actions forced Prime Minister Asquith to open a Parliamentary Select Committee Inquiry to further investigate

responsibility of PAC's British directors. On November 6, 1912, the U.K. House of Commons created a commission to investigate the matter. Results of this inquiry were published in the *Report and Special Report of the Select Committee on the Putumayo* (White Paper no. 148, 1913).

There can be no doubt that Saldaña Rocca's accusations very early contributed to exposing PAC's crimes against humanity, but it was ultimately Casement who brought PAC down to its knees. Casement was a seasoned investigator with an excellent track record, who had already conducted a similar inquiry in Leopold II's Congo Free State in 1903, and had written also an extensive report (1904) about his findings in Africa. Casement would later prove to be the right man for this type of job in Amazonia. After being named British consul for the states of São Paulo and Paraná in 1906, he was transferred to Belém in 1907. He spent several months in Pará's capital, before being relocated one more time as Consul General to Rio de Janeiro in 1908. Casement's diaries from that period reveal a mixture of indignation and frustration. He asked: "With everything in its [South America's] favor – incomparably ahead of the desolate prairies of the northern America, already peopled by millions of gentle, docile, and industrious beings – what have 400 years of 'Latin civilization' done for it?"

Casement was not the only authoritative investigator in the region. Captain Thomas Whiffen, the author of *North-West Amazons* (1915), and who testified before the U.K. House of Commons, also observed during his Putumayo 1908-1909 travels that every time he visited PAC areas, the company's general managers would send an influential PAC member with him "in order to hide all such atrocities as had or were taking place; in other words, when [he] got to a section house the stocks were hidden, the prisoners liberated, etc.; and it was not until [his] second visit, when [he] found the stocks hidden in the bush with a strong guard, that [he] recognized the true facts of the case"

(*Report and Special Report* 516). Casement corroborates this stratagem and describes the stocks as having nineteen holes, so small to make a big man's leg fit. According to some Indians' accounts, once in the cepo (Fig. 1), the Indian was flogged and left to starve to death (*Report and Special Report* 34).

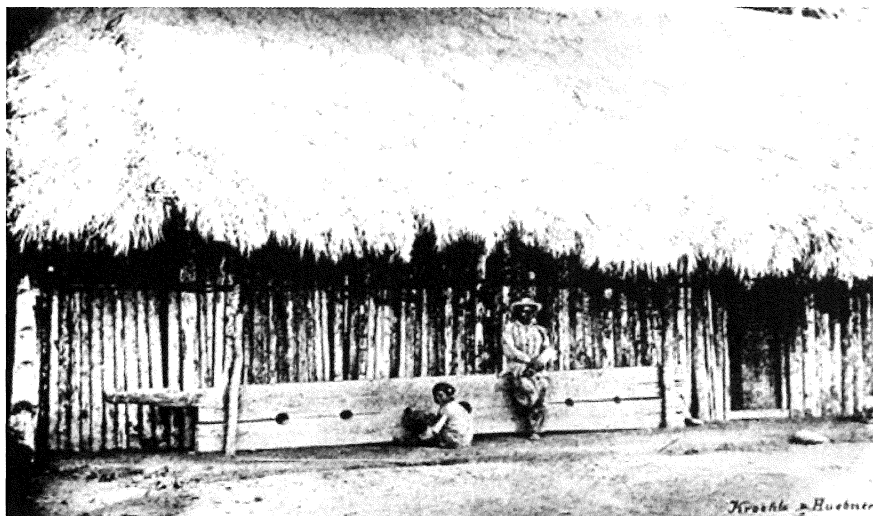


Fig. 1 – Cepo – Stocks in front of the Governor of Samán. Photo by Kroeble & Huebner, 1888. Source: George Huebner (1862-1935): *um fotógrafo em Manaus*. Ed. Daniel Schoepf. São Paulo: Metalivros, 2005.

In contrast to the legal investigations and written reports, now I would like to shift my focus on the representation of the Putumayo atrocities in three Latin American fictional texts. I will begin with a short story by the Brazilian Alberto Rangel from his 1908 book *Inferno Verde* (Green Hell), and will proceed comparing two Spanish-American novels: *La Vorágine* (The Vortex, 1924) by the Colombian José Eustasio Rivera; and *El Sueño del Celta* (The Dream of the Celt, 2010) by the Peruvian Mario Vargas Llosa. Without exception, all these three writers faced the daunting task of how to best represent these atrocities in fictional form. The torture scenes these authors read about were so graphic and grotesque, that they might have feared

readers would dismiss them as exaggerated. Despite this preoccupation, Rangel preferred hyperbole over understatement, a narrative strategy Euclides da Cunha perceived as optimal for rendering Amazonia dystopian. In his laudatory preface to Rangel's book, the author of *Os Sertões* calls *Inferno Verde* "surprising, original, extravagant...strange." And he continues: "precisely, because it was built with the cement of truth, it reveals to us as a phantasy suite." Indeed, Rangel's fictional representation of Amazonia and his strong desire to exacerbate his book's realism create a disturbing natural and human scenario.

Rivera, on the other hand, understood that diluting the visual aspects of this particular type of representation could be effective in *La Vorágine*. Following this, he focused on the torture instruments: the stocks and the whip. Rejecting a direct allusion to the awful tapir-hide lash and using a suggestive language, the novelist tells his readers that the infamous manager of La Chorrera, Víctor Macedo, is lying indecently:

The day he [the Inspector] arrived they took down the stocks and used them as a gangplank. He walked over them without noticing the holes in them, or the blood stains. We went to the patio, where that instrument of torture used to stand. He never saw how the grass was trampled down by the prisoners who rolled over it begging water, begging shade. They even left a lash on the veranda rail—a six-tailed one. The simpleton asked if it was made from a bull's penis. And Macedo, laughing brazenly, said: "Your Honor is shrewd. You ask that to find out whether we eat steer's meat? Undoubtedly, although the cattle are very expensive. On that pole there we tie and flog the little animals" (Rivera 205).

Suspicious naiveté, cynicism, cover-up, irony, and complicity inform this passage of the novel. This passage is also based on Casement's observations (Casement, *The Amazon Journal* 265). Rivera's combination of the imaginary and the real in *La Vorágine* is key to his philosophy of composition. Like Edgar Allan Poe, Rivera is both logical and oneiric. For him, dreams are vital ways to explain the novel's protagonist's

idiosyncratic behavior, the nightmarish quality of life in the region, and the ongoing practices of torture in the rubber stations. Like the prison and the pit in Poe's "The Pit and the Pendulum," the rainforest in Rivera's novel functions as a place of terror that is paradoxically maintained by the hope of a fictional protagonist. And of course, there are still other types of representations of torture and terror, like that admirable one in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, where Marlow complicates any simple formula of Realism. As Taussig puts it:

The formulation is sharp and important: *to penetrate the veil while retaining its hallucinatory quality*. It evokes and combines a twofold movement of interpretation in a combined action of reduction *and* revelation – the hermeneutics of suspicion and of revelation in an act of mythic subversion inspired by the mythology of imperialism itself (Taussig 10).

Aware of the historical record, Rivera adds to it a bit of sardonic irony. He also takes the opportunity to attack two tropical gangsters, Benjamín Larrañaga and Juan Vega:

They were celebrating Carnival on the night I arrived...the mob was lining up, passing jugs and gourds to the guard who was distributing the stuff. A foreman, wanting some fun, poured kerosene into a bowl and offered it to some Indians. As none of them would fall for his trick, he threw the stuff over them. I don't know who scratched a match; but a moment later a crackling flame swept over the unfortunate fellows. Shrieking they dashed madly through the mob, crowned by livid fire, and plunged into a river in agony.

The owners of La Chorrera appeared on the veranda with the cards of their poker game in their hands. What's this, what's this? They asked. The Jew Barchilón spoke: *Hola*, boys, don't be idiots. You'll be setting fire to the thatching of the *caney*s! Larrañaga repeated the order of Juan Vega: No more diversions! No more diversions!

And on smelling the odor of burnt flesh, they spat on the crowds and locked themselves up again (Rivera 187-188).

The crowning irony in this horrific episode is based on a real burning, according to several testimonies, during a Carnival celebration in February of 1903. It was a celebration turned to a tragedy that served Rivera as a point of departure for one of his embedded narratives told by Clemente Silva as part of this fictional character's personal history. To compose this sadistic scene, the novelist used information from either Rocca, Thomson, Hardenburg, Hispano, Olarte Camacho, or Varcárcel combining the February incident with another one that took place on September 24, 1903 (Olarte Camacho 26, 83; Valcárcel 115-116, 454). Precise dates are missing in Rivera's narration; as is information about the eight hundred Ocaima Indians who participated in the celebration and the twenty-five burned Indians. In the novel Rivera merely refers to "Indians from different tribes" and "a foreman." The allusion is possibly to Juan C. Londoño, the person who ignited the fire, under Victor Macedo's orders (Olarte Camacho 31). Rivera also chose to replace the names of other murderers (Fidel Velarde, Víctor Macedo, and Miguel Loayza) with people who did not directly participate in the real incident (Juan B. [Juanchito] Vega, Larrañaga, and Jacobo Barchilón).

Barchilón was born in Morocco and married in Iquitos in 1904 (Segal 241). A Colombian national, Vega was Arana's business partner from 1890 to 1892, facilitating Arana's aggressive incursions in the Putumayo, an area previously under Colombia's control before it was taken by Peruvians (Arana 8, 14). In December 1901 Arana also formed a partnership with Larrañaga, another Colombian rubber explorer. Both Vega and Larrañaga were *pastusos* and severely criticized by Colombians who saw them as traitors to their country for working with a Peruvian company of that kind. It comes as no surprise, then, that Rivera takes this opportunity as well to direct his attack, at these two roguish characters by changing the historical names of the protagonists and

therefore altering this particular aspect of the historical record. Luckily for us, the “truth” surrounding the poor Indians’ incident has not been altered by simply one or two name changes; rather this truth took on a different form, which continues to remain powerful in the fictional world of *La Vorágine* as part of a vivid and enduring representation of a grotesque crime against humanity.

The February 1903 incident has been repeatedly used in denunciations of the PAC Putumayo’s atrocities, both at the time of their enactment and in more recent representations. For example, Vargas Llosa refers to this event in his novel *The Dream of the Celt*:

That and only that was what people like Víctor Macedo and Miguel Loaysa, for example, could be. Both had played a leading role in the most memorable event in 1903. Close to eight hundred Ocaimas came to La Chorrera to turn in their baskets of balls or rubber harvested in the forests. After weighing and storing them, the assistant manager of La Chorrera, Fidel Velarde, pointed out to his superior, Víctor Macedo, there with Miguel Loaysa from El Encanto, the twenty-five Ocaimas who had been separated from the others because they didn’t bring the minimum quota of jebe – latex or rubber – they were responsible for. Macedo and Loaysa decided to teach the savages a good lesson. Indicating to the overseers – blacks from Barbados – that they should keep the rest of the Ocaimas at bay with their Mausers, they ordered the “boys” to cover the twenty-five in sacks soaked in gasoline. Then they set fire on them. Shrieking, transformed into human torches, some managed to put out the flames by rolling on the ground but were left with terrible burns. Those who threw themselves into the river like flaming meteors drowned (Vargas Llosa 119-120).

The passage above is one of many that readers of the two novels could compare and encounter unusual similarities between renditions of other episodes borrowed from the historical record and used by Rivera and Vargas Llosa.

Given the pyramid structure of the PAC rubber industry, with so many rubber tappers exploited and abused by a relatively small number of PAC managers, one might wonder how was it possible that so many victims did not rebel against this cruelty. How were they kept victims of the system without being able to find a way out? These questions are complex, and Casement tried more than once to respond to them by referring to the “fatal obedience” of the Indians, an explanation that has profound roots in the colonial history of the Amazonian native people and the history of slavery in general. Rivera also offers a similar explanation. Although not an Indian himself, Clemente Silva is represented as overly obedient in *La Vóragine*, somewhat resigned, and doomed to be abused. When the protagonist Arturo Cova asks him why he tolerates such violent abuses, he replies: “Ay, señor, misfortune makes a nobody of one” (Rivera 178). Silva’s response strangely echoes that of another unfortunate character, Don Rafo, whose opinion of the land in which they live is no less fatalistic: “It’s that this land encourages one to enjoy it and suffer it...Here even the dying man yearns to kiss the ground in which he is to rot” (Rivera 24).

A passage by Santiago Pérez Triana’s, who traveled throughout the Putumayo in the early 1900s, illustrates one reason why PAC torture was so effective in maintaining its economic system:

“I am going to scare that Indian,” the missionary who was helping us told me. He called a lay brother and gave him this order: “Take this Indian to prison.” The lay brother transmitted the order to the town mayor who personally ordered the Indian to be imprisoned.

“One could apply to this Indian,” he added, “three lashes, according to our customs. Customs here and in the Indians’ notion of it are the only law, as you will have an opportunity to observe. Everything is brought to a halt among the Indians before this phrase: ‘it is not our custom.’”

[Triana:] “But flogging the Indians is a custom, which they would happily reject since humans are the enemy of painful punishments, especially when they are the victims of such punishment.”

[Missionary:] “Not so much. Punishing by flogging is one of the oldest customs and one of the most difficult to eradicate, as I will demonstrate: first of all, pain has a mysterious efficiency that defends him; the victim is then obliged to say ‘God bless you’ afterwards. If he does not say it, the governor orders that he receive three more lashes until the victim’s anger is gone and he demonstrates gratitude. Among Indians, flogging maintains the principle of authority, the docility of character and the purity of customs: they form the basis of these customs. Secondly, the Indians themselves are, like the governors – in order to maintain the social unwritten constitution, which they blindly obey in their governing practices – the ones who make sure that flogging, as punishment, is always effective” (Triana 351).

This disturbing dialogue that Triana reproduces helps explain the culture of terror we are studying. First, the missionary suggests that in the face of repeated torture, victims can become “accustomed” to the abuse. Second, Triana reveals that sadistic torturers can maliciously take advantage of the fact that the Indian lacks full understanding of the white man’s cultural codes by which the Indian is forced to abide. Conversely, in the Indian’s cultural universe there is no such a thing as laws, but customs instead, since these generally regulate the natural life of all individuals. In this perverse zero-sum game, the Indian is always a loser. He is cheated and his cultural codes are shuffled, mistranslated, outrageously violated and manipulated by the so-called “civilized” men and their defense of society’s advancement and progress.

This cultural fallacy, resulting in the immoral, dishonest, and abusive use of cultural codes of the Other to the benefit of the “civilized” and to the detriment, of course, of the Indian, confusing and disturbing his *modus vivendi*, must be further explored. We are dealing with a system whereby the executioner holds the keys to decode the Other. He believes in the Indian’s fatal obedience and also knows how

and when to mix, confuse, and adulterate even the Indian's ritualistic symbols, and how and when to transform them into practical signs at the service of his punishment. Much different and more difficult to denounce, I argue, was the genocide that the Amazonian Indians have suffered throughout their history, when compared to the horrific and better known genocide committed by Nazism. The main difference resides in that during the European holocaust, the cultural codes between executioner and victim were absolutely and mutually comprehensible. Thus, again, following this line of inquiry, my objective was to investigate how the "civilized" manages to invade and disfigure the cultural territory of the Indian and therefore misuse and abuse his ritualistic practices and customs in order to exercise coercion and punishment upon him (Wallace 331; Rice 693; Rivero 253). As a corollary of this most inhumane practice, the primeval and semiological system of meaning of the Indian is reconfigured and at times totally destroyed. Hence, at a micro scale, the dialogue between Triana and the missionary reflects a much larger problem, namely a systematic destruction of the Indian's culture: "[a] tragic accident, itself historical, which the discovery of the New World was for them," as Claude Lévi-Strauss intimates (Santos-Granero 149).

Since 1889 J. C. Arana had been trading rubber, mainly with Colombians, such as Gregorio Calderón and Hipólito Pérez. In 1907, the Amazonian rubber industry in the Putumayo region underwent a significant change, mainly due to the dissolution of the commercial societies between Arana and Calderón (Casa Calderón, Arana y Compañía), and Arana and Pérez (Casa Pérez Arana). Dissolution here meant that both Calderón and Pérez were forced to sell their business share to Arana, who aimed at gaining monopoly of the industry. Calderón, Pérez, and other Colombians, who had been doing business with Arana, continued to work independently with whatever was left

for them, but now in a territory dominated by Peru. In it, not only Arana was the ruler, but also the Peruvian Army was ostensibly and dangerously present. While Peru was aggressively marking its territory, some Colombians were watching it hopelessly; others, who had business interests, consented.

September 26, 1907 marks the beginning of a new phase in the history of Arana's rubber business, when it was registered as The Peruvian Amazon Rubber Company, Ltd., a name, which was later on changed by the omission of "Rubber" on July 23, 1908. This new phase also signified that PAC was ready to expand its business volume and to be a game player on the London Stock Exchange. PAC had sufficient capital and cachet to buy influence from both the Peruvian and Colombian governments. Rivera pointed out the neglectfulness with which some Colombian authorities viewed the Putumayo area and how abandoned its inhabitants were. PAC's re-arrangement and the somewhat friendly relationship between the company and Colombian authorities confused the Indians according to a witness:

The Witoto Indians, who were convinced of the divine nature of their political leaders, remained confused and expected from Colombian authorities punishment for those [the Peruvians] who had committed so many cruelties and crimes. In the Indians' minds, this expectation would be a logical consequence of a guarantee of their most elementary rights. They were surprised because they saw their [Peruvian] executioners in a friendly termination with those [Colombians] who were supposed to be their saviors (Olarte Camacho 67).

We should not take the phrase "divine nature of their political leaders" literally here. Instead, it is a metaphor for the power these leaders exercised over the Indians on the rubber plantations. The question we should be addressing now is not so new since, to a certain extent, Michel Foucault already dealt with it in the 1970s:

The history that bears and determines us has the form of a war rather than that of a language: relations of power, not relations of meaning. History has no “meaning”, though this is not to say that it is absurd or incoherent. On the contrary, it is intelligible and should be susceptible of analysis down to the smallest detail – but this is in accordance with the intelligibility of struggles, of strategies and tactics (Foucault 114).

With Foucault’s words in mind, we should ask some important questions. For example, in the context of two different cultural models, what does the superiority of the white man mean in relation to the Indian for the latter to admit the supernatural nature of the former? What is exactly this docility of character that we mentioned above? In terms of how he perceives reality, wouldn’t the missionary, Triana’s interlocutor in the quotation above, be adhering to his own social group values instead of those of the Indians? How can one apprehend the real meaning of these acts? Is it possible to establish one single meaning? Or, as Foucault intimates, should we always interpret those meanings in a situation of conflict or tension?

Considering that these questions do change our perception about the representation of torture and punishment and leave no room for disambiguation, this ambiguity requires us to ask two more questions: How to interpret the torture practice by flogging as we have seen, if we are to admit, by also contextualizing it, that in certain indigenous societies flogging is used for ritualistic purposes and therefore it is incorporated in their culture, not being so foreign or disgusting as it seems to be to outsiders? Furthermore, would it be self-flagellation, as a self-inflicting practice, inserted in a similar fashion in the religious life of some missionaries in Amazonia? Juan Rivero tells us that Father Rafael Ramírez, who had been sent to a mission in the Orinoco region in the seventeenth century,

was in a constant battle with his body, in order to subject it to his spirit; the iron disciplines with which he macerated his body caused pitiful horror to the observer, and no less astonishment to whoever heard those hard and merciless blows inflicted upon his body; he used to arm himself like a soldier of Christ, who was about to enter a battle, with a barbed sackcloth on to resist to his enemies; his frequent fast was perpetual, his mortification of the senses rare, his penitent life admirable (Rivero 189).

Without deviating too much from our subject, it suffices to mention that the use of stocks by the Church was also not an uncommon practice of punishment in the region, as Taussig reminds us (Taussig 41). Guilt and punishment, as religious forms that the Catholic Church perfected in its mission to establish a controlling regime on its faithful touched deeply the hearts and minds of the missionaries and of those converted Indians who coexisted with them. Likewise, these same flogging practices must have caused a strong impression on European travellers who observed its use during rites of passage in some tribal communities. The literature on this topic is diverse, ranging from accounts by both South and non-South American travelers such as Jules Crevaux, Carl von Martius, Theodor Koch-Grünberg, Alfred R. Wallace, Thomas Whiffen, Tenreiro Aranha, Pablo V. Gómez, and Hamilton Rice. Martius' description is notably photographic:

The ritual is to celebrate the beginning of virility age among young males...They form two parallel lines according to previous choice and flog themselves with long tapir- or manatee-hide lashes until they start to bleed. This type of flagellation is not considered as a hostile practice. It is a proof of love and, according to all information that we were able to collect, a means to prevent any excess of perverted sexual attitude (Martius 121-122).

Whiffen corroborates Martius' account with his also vivid story of this practice:

Among the Bara, after a Jurupari dance, all the youths of pubertal age are whipped, which is considered to be initiation. The whipping instrument, made from the hide of tapir, is sacred. Women are excluded from this ceremony, and they believe when the boys shout that it is the expulsion of demons. The performance is regarded as strictly private, and if a man or boy tells of his experience he is outcast (Whiffen 157).

It is virtually impossible to fully apprehend the entangled net of meanings of such practices by the Indians along centuries of being in contact with lay whites and missionaries, and being influenced by them. My own reading of flogging has purposely delayed any definitive answers, because I believe there are no definitive answers. Symptomatically, however, Whiffen's remarks makes one think in the limited possibility left to them for a rebellion against whipping practices in the rubber stations; and the fact that the Indians still continued to live in this nightmarish environment could find a plausible explanation in the following commentary by Whiffen:

They will bear torture stoically enough when deliberately inflicted, but should they suffer from any, to them, mysterious reason, in their ignorance of natural causes they at once ascribe their affliction to witchcraft. To this possibly may be due the hapless manner in which they will lay them down to die, and actually succeed in doing so by autosuggestion (Whiffen 168).

I will not further insist on this point but it is worth summarizing our discussions built on the travelers' account we have seen thus far. Based on the narratives above, we have considered how flogging practices among Indians are either linked to theirs rites of passage or to a supernatural reason. Of other forms of whipping, whose objectives can be totally different from or contradictory to these two types, we also observed above that the ways for narrating torture are centered around eye witnesses and oral or written sources, which in

most cases are void of hard evidence. It became clear to us throughout our investigation that many accusations lacked proof: questionable body marks or scars, nonresident torture instrument, and surprisingly for such a modern epoch, the absence of efficient or helpful photographic proof that could incriminate the executioners.

Apart from the shocking written accounts on torture and crimes, none of the photos published in English and Peruvian newspapers and magazines are able to transmit, with the same degree of efficacy what these texts do: the horrors committed in the Putumayo and Caquetá. Euclides da Cunha who was in neighboring rubber territory in Acre during those years, where PAC's tentacles had also reached, saw nothing concrete that could have helped him launch a full and open investigation. Like others, who had become aware of a blatant violation of human rights in that part of the world, he heard stories about these crimes and in a moving passage at the end of *"The caucheros"*, he offers his readers this scene:

In one of the better preserved of the outlying buildings, the inhabitant awaited us. Piro, Amauaca, or Campa, his provenience was indistinguishable. His repulsive appearance transformed the very features of the human species: a huge trunk bloated with malaria dominated, in obvious contrast to thin arms and thin withered legs, like those of a monstrous fetus.

Crouched in one corner, he contemplated us impassively. He had next to him all his possessions: a bunch of green bananas.

This indefinable thing, who by cruel analogy suggested by the circumstances seemed to us less a man than a ball of caucho left behind by the harvest and simply tossed there by random chance, responded to our questions in a nearly inaudible croak and in a completely incomprehensible language. At the end, with enormous effort he lifted one arm; he slowly extended it out in front of himself as though signaling something far away, beyond all these forests and rivers. And he stammered, let the arm fall back heavily, as though he had just raised a great weight: "Amigos."

We understood: friends, companions, associates from those busy days of the harvest, who had left for those other places abandoning him there in absolute solitude.

Of the Spanish words he had learned, only that one remained. And this miserable man, murmuring like a touching gesture of nostalgia, unknowingly demolished with deeply pungent sarcasm the wastrel adventurers who at that very moment were carrying on elsewhere their devastating enterprise: opening up with rifle balls and machete strokes new paths for their frenetic coming and going, and revealing other unknown areas, where they would leave behind, as they had there in the fallen-in buildings or the pitiful figure of the sacrificed Indian, the only fruits of their tumultuous undertaking, fruits of their role as builders of ruins (E. da Cunha 55).

In the context of the tragic world of rubber extraction in Amazonia, this scene is meant to be a closing and graphic vignette of that much more vast picture of the dramatic lives of rubber tappers. Its visual effect is definitely the work of a true artist, like no one else could deliver but Euclides da Cunha. Nonetheless, it has an ambiguous meaning. The ambiguity here derives from the impossibility for the reader to verify whether or not the Indian, this “thing,” whose identity has been lost, is a direct victim of the inhumane system that the voracity of rubber barons has created. It would be terrifying to think that it is, but it would also be a mistake to interpret it as a result of pure and simple cruelty, or a gratuitous act, and not as a natural consequence for the aging and perhaps sick Indian, who is no longer capable of contributing to his community and who is, then, abandoned by his “amigos” for the benefit of all others. This natural reason seems to justify a common practice among the Indians that disturbs us. As a native custom, though, it was practiced conventionally and traditionally according to Whiffen:

Should any known infectious disease break out in a tribe, those attacked by it are immediately left, even by their closest relatives, the house is abandoned, and possibly even burnt. [...]

Perhaps the cruel treatment of the sick arises from the fact that all disease is regarded as due to an enemy who essays by such means to procure the destruction of the tribe. [...]

At every point it is clearly to be seen that the survival of the most fit is the very real and very stern rule of life in the Amazonian forests. From birth to death it rules the Indians' life and philosophy. To help to preserve the unfit would often be to prejudice the chances of the fit. [...]

Certainly cases of chronic illness meet with no sympathy from the Indians. A man who cannot hunt or fight is regarded as useless; he is merely a burden on the community. Should he show no signs of eventual recovery, his friends unhesitatingly leave him to die [...] (Whiffen 169-170).

When one considers the large scale of human rights abuses committed in the Putumayo, Caquetá, and Acre region, Euclides da Cunha, Hardenburg, Whiffen, and later Casement "saw nothing" with their own eyes, even though each one of them spent considerable time in the rubber areas of Amazonia. But I would argue that they "saw everything." And what is "to see nothing" when we are fully aware that the physical evidence of the crime scene was destroyed, altered before the arrival of investigators, or heavily masked? The irony here is that although Euclides da Cunha, Saldaña Rocca, Olarte Camacho, Valcárcel, and Rómulo Paredes stood as strong voices against these crimes, none of them were able to present a concrete witness or bring the perpetrators of these crimes to the tribunals. Photographic images of abuses against Indians had no better luck. They were usually absent or poorly printed, showing a high degree of retouching that aroused doubts about their veracity. The following photograph published in Hardenburg's book is a good example:

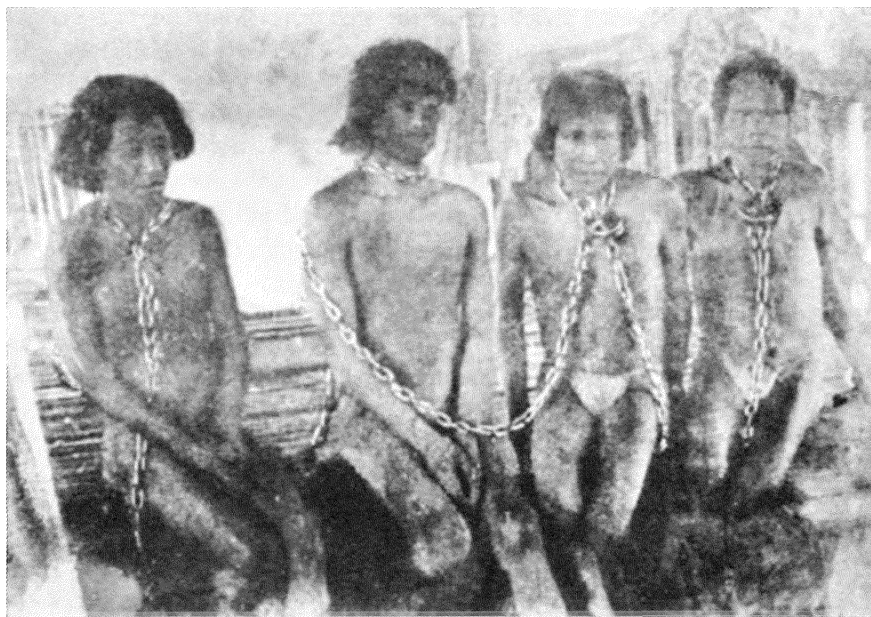
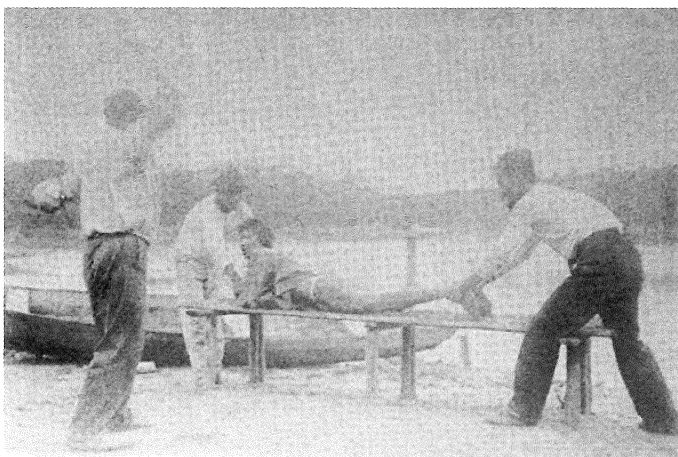


Fig. 2 – Chained Indian rubber gatherers in the stocks: on the Putumayo River. Source: W. E Hardenburg, *The Putumayo: the Devil's Paradise. Travels in the Peruvian Amazon Region and an account of the atrocities committed upon the Indians Therein.* London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1913.

At the time these human atrocities occurred in the Amazon, photography used as proof or evidence had almost reached the same status a DNA test enjoys today. Despite this great reliance on photographic images, neither Euclides da Cunha, Casement, Whiffen, Hardenburg, nor Robuchon – the geographer and photographer from the Société de Géographie (Paris) who traveled twice in the area and mysteriously died in the region in 1906 – were able to leave incriminating photos, except one known to us today, that in all likelihood seriously compromised the defense by PAC's bosses (Fig. 3).

Fig. 3 –
Indian being
flogged by PAC
employees –
Photo by Eugène
Robuchon,
c1906. Source:
Jordan
Goodman,
*The devil and Mr.
Casement*. New
York: Farrar,
Strauss and
Giroux, 2010.



This photo in particular, not published until 1913 in a highly touched version in Paternoster's book *The Lords of the Devil's Paradise*, seems to have escaped the control of the Peruvian Amazon Company. However, a cartoon version of this picture appeared earlier in a 1908 issue of *La Felpa* (Fig. 4). The importance attributed to photography as a mimetizing art of reality and the manner in which photographs were treated as images of physical evidence made those responsible for the massacre of Amazonian Indian groups nervous.



Fig. 4 –
Indian being
flogged by PAC
employees –
Photo by Eugène
Robuchon,
c1906. Source:
La Felpa
01/25/1908

PAC associates became apprehensive about and “interested” in photographs, but in a way they feared that photographic image could be used as crime proof against the company. Crimes committed by PAC were frequently mentioned, but never actually witnessed by the accusers or the victims’ defenders.

People who testified before Roger Casement, like the Barbadians, a group of African-British employees hired by PAC as overseers, felt themselves exploited by the company. However, as they confessed to Casement, they had also been used to intimidate, abuse, and punish the natives. Thus the veracity of the Barbadians’ testimonies was consequently prejudiced (Taussig 38). In the 1913 defense by Pablo Zumaeta, the Iquitos general manager of the Company, against Casement’s declarations, he says the following:

Now, moving to the photograph that Mr. Casement exhibited and guarantees that it is of a woman left dying of hunger [Fig. 5], it is another bad invention, because he has not noticed that next to the rear end of the hammock there are bananas and ration usually consumed by the Indians. Moreover, it is very natural to find isolated people like her in places where they might need assistance, some of them who for a lack of it, die in the most complete state of abandonment. And why should one find it so strange, while in humanitarian England many people die of hunger and it does not occur to anyone to blame somebody? (Zumaeta 53).

Zumaeta’s explanation of this scene calls attention to a startling coincidence between the human destiny contained in its correspondent photograph and the written description of the solitary Indian awaiting his death by Euclides da Cunha in “The *Caucheros*”. In both, the life force of the two abandoned Indians is reduced to a bunch of bananas. The person to be blamed, Zumaeta, perhaps not for being responsible for this death specifically, but for others, does not waste any time to reproach Casement for mistakenly interpreting the scene in Fig. 5. Again, it is Zumaeta who, testing Casement’s credibility, makes this defense:

[...] despite his knowledge of photography (?), [Casement] will not be able to enrich his collection of views and photographs taken by him in the Putumayo with one that equally represents what those represent on a page of the July 2, 1910 illustrated newspaper *Los Sucesos*, published in Madrid (Zumaeta 55).



Fig. 5 – An incident of the Putumayo – Indian woman condemned to death by hunger: on the Upper Putumayo. (The Peruvians state that this was the work of Colombian bandits). Photo Reproduced from *Variedades*, Lima, Peru. Source: W. E Hardenburg, *The Putumayo: the Devil's Paradise. Travels in the Peruvian Amazon Region and an account of the atrocities committed upon the Indians therein*. London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1913.

Here, the morally corrupt Zumaeta is referring of course to two pictures of human skulls and mutilated bodies of natives in the Congo, a country Casement knew too well (Fig. 6) (Zumaeta 82).

PAC's general manager was not alone in his rebuttal. Similarly, with a wise argument in the voice of a villain, J. C. Arana joined in Zumaeta's defense by stating that "[t]he photographs reproduced in the book [Hardenburg's] would be the best proof to discredit its text, because the groups of Indians found in these pictures look good, robust, and healthy and even express happiness and satisfaction" (Fig. 7) (Arana 41).

Martirios y barbarie inquisitorial.



U N viajero recientemente llegado á Francia, refiere verdaderos horrores del Congo. Lo que allí pasa y las barbaries á que se someten á los negros de aquel territorio erizan las nervias. Nunca se vió mayor barbarie ni crueldad en las colonias podiendo decirse tan horribles y tan formidables.

Con la muerte de Leopoldo, rey de los belgas, parece que los negros iban á experimentar las ventajas de la civilización; pero no es así. Allí hoy, como antiguamente, se siguen cumpliendo procedimientos inquisitoriales, bárbaros. Los pobres habitantes de aquel Estado "libre", para que sus atrocidades dieran lugar á nuevas mejoras, se ven tratados peor que peces. Y en persona, proverbial en todo el mundo, se machete cortaban las manos y los pies.

Como la principal riqueza del Congo es el caucho, las autoridades obligan á que cada familia entregue una cantidad proporcional al número de sus miembros. Y, si no cumplen esta obligación, el reino de familia tiene que sufrir la amputación de sus manos. Si refués, se le corta la otra y un pie. Luego, cuando se inutiliza á este hombre, queda ya inutilizado á su mujer, cuando sea ella viva.

Además de estos horribles procedimientos que hacen sufrir á los negros, se les paraliza á los europeos, al-... otros no se dejan escapar, según se ve en las fotos, sino que se les mata por el uso de malos...

Los autores de estas atrocidades y se pasan horas enteras de estos actos de inhumanidad. Con los muchachos indígenas se cometen verdaderas infancias.

Los matrimonios son espoliados de sus esposas, dadas y dadas todas sus cosas. No hay respeto para nadie ni á nadie se tiene compasión. Allí no hay más que un sólo Dios, que son los dioses: explotar á los negros, y se emplea á los niños en serviles. Como no habían fallado los procedimientos inquisitoriales, que produjeron la indignación en toda Europa, el relato del viaje actual y las pruebas que...



Escena de crímenes de indígenas que sufren la última pena y exponen para escarmiento público.

agente, tienen especial importancia. En fotografías, para que los vea todo el mundo, tras las pruebas de los martirios á que se someten á los habitantes del...

Congo. Y estos son tales, que la civilización queda desbordada.

Ya no se puede decir nada en contra. Ahí, con detalles horribles, están esas personas mutiladas. Ahí, presenciando la barbarie, están esos pobres hermanos, que pertenecieron á personas vivas, desamparados ferrocamente. Y ahí, para despreciable eterno de todos, están las pruebas de que el país más bárbaro del mundo no es Marruecos.

Los que protestaban del clamor universal contra las atrocidades cometidas en el Congo ya no pueden alegar nada. Y, cuando se habla de los 8.000.000 de negros muertos en aquel Estado, no defraudan á las autoridades. La realidad es más terrible todavía de lo que se decía. El viajero que trae estas fotografías lo dice á todo el que quiere verlo. Y los periódicos, llevando las noticias á las personas que sueñan con el fruto de la civilización, desprecian las duricias europeas. Porque no lo que parece pensar: si esto hacen los países civilizados, ¿por qué los muchachos de los tiempos modernos y quienes parecen ser más civilizados?

Los martirios que sufren los habitantes del Congo son de los que no tienen remedio, de los que no se pueden aliviar, de los que no se pueden curar. Y esto, que los negros sufren para ellos, es un castigo de civilización.

Para que los europeos vean las atrocidades que sufren los negros, se les exponen los cadáveres de los que han sido mutilados. Y esto, que los europeos ven, es un castigo de civilización. Y esto, que los europeos ven, es un castigo de civilización.

en el Congo Central, los hechos que las cosas del país se elevan en un momento en 30.000 francos.

En que expone en aquella enorme pobreza, no se puede pagar nada de su frasco al día, en cantidad enorme la destrucción de otras tantas familias. Un este modo está visto que civilizaremos el África.



La inquisición colonial.—Indígenas del Congo que han sufrido la amputación de las manos, como castigo brutal impuesto por los explotadores europeos.

Fig. 6 – Martirios y barbarie inquisitorial – Publ. in Los Sucesos, Madrid, July 28, 1910. Source: Pablo Zumaeta, La cuestiones del Putumayo. Barcelona: Imprenta Viuda de Luis Tasso, 1913.



Fig. 7 – Huitotos at Entre Rios and Barbados Negro Overseer. Guamares Indians, of the Huitoto Tribe, in dance costume. Source: W. E. Hardenburg, *The Putumayo: the Devil's Paradise. Travels in the Peruvian Amazon Region and an Account of the Atrocities Committed upon the Indians Therein*. London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1913.

He also added with another *non sequitur* argument against the accusation of the extermination of Indians:

If the Putumayo region is worth something, it is because of its indigenous population: suppressing the Indian, that region would immediately cease to be explored or to be considered prospective. Even with the low wage accepted by the Indian, the rubber that is collected in this region would be useless and, on several occasions, has caused losses, according to the [account] books that Mr. Casement has made available to himself (Arana 52).

If one looks through *En el Putumayo y Sus Afluentes* (1907), supposedly written by Robuchon, it becomes obvious that the photo selection and the choice of language are the result of a sleazy manipulation and editorial work by Carlos Rey de Castro, the then

Peruvian consul in Manaus. In this book, the removal of cannibalism from its original place as a ritual, is an obvious and vulgar expedient. By negatively reassigning it to the spheres of the grotesque and re-signifying its meaning, as Rey de Castro does, his tactic works suitably to an overt denigration of the Amazonian Indians. Rivera, of course, suspected as we do that Rey de Castro fabricated the story to justify the inhuman treatment PAC imposed upon the Indians. The Colombian novelist left proof of his skepticism regarding this type of sensationalized cannibalism among the Putumayo Indians. In a similar distorted account to Castro's in Gaspar de Pinell's travel book, *Un Viaje por el Putumayo y el Amazonas* (1924), Rivera left a marginalia note that indicates his suspicion.

Despite public outcry over PAC torture of rubber tappers in the 1900s and 1910s, PAC's administrators were not ultimately prosecuted or even held legally accountable for their acts. Julio César Arana went on to become a senator in the 1920s before retiring from political life. He enjoyed many years of privacy and died at age of 88. Pablo Zumaeta, Arana's brother-in-law who managed the PAC from its Iquitos office, was elected mayor in 1914. In 1916, after being accused and tried for being a traitor of England and a homosexual, Sir Roger Casement, the Irish tireless defender of African and South American aboriginal people, was humiliatingly stripped of all his honors and hanged. His death, as Andrew Gray describes it, "was conveniently used by the Peruvian government to vindicate Julio César Arana and by the U. S. Department of Foreign Affairs, which decided to close the case" (Gray 26).

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dos Sentidos: Prógonos, Contemporâneos e Epígonos de E. da Cunha (1995), *Hispanic America, Brazil, and the Caribbean: Comparative Approaches* (1998), *Os Sertões* (annotated edition), *Discurso, Ciência e Controvérsia em Euclides da Cunha* (2008), *Poesia Reunida de Euclides da Cunha* (2009), and *Homenaje a Cedomil Goic: Literatura a Ciencia Cierta* (2010). He is presently working on a critical study of the novel *La Vorágine* (1924), by Colombian writer José Eustasio Rivera, and its connections with a corpus of Brazilian ethnographic and fictional texts. Bernucci is the founder and director of the Luso-Brazilian Studies section in Department of Spanish and Portuguese at UC Davis.

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