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The scramble for the Amazon and the “lost paradise” of Euclides da Cunha, by Susanna B. Hecht, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2013, xv + 612 pp., US\$45 (hard-cover), ISBN-13: 978-0-226-32281-0

‘Sometimes a wind comes out of nowhere’, the Canadian singer/songwriter Bruce Cockburn puts it, ‘and knocks you off your feet’. Such is the case with this stunning book, in which the creative genius of Susanna Hecht, a multi-talented geographer in full-flowing prime, is a match for her teeming subject matter. Superlatives abound, be they related to the scale of inquiry, the scope of vision, the range of knowledge, the command of sources, the power of imagination, the scrutiny of analysis or the ability (in the final scheme of things) to put eloquently, and at times poignantly, into words – Hecht’s own as well as those rendered in translation from the pen of the man at the heart of the story, Euclides Rodrigues Pimenta da Cunha (1866–1909). His fate was as tragic as that of the forest whose frontiers he reached, whose territory he surveyed, whose settlers he dignified and whose incorporation he advocated as pivotal in the search for Brazilian identity and nationhood. Shot and killed in self-defence by his wife’s lover, an army cadet half her age, before he was able to finish work on his *magnum opus* of the Amazon, ‘O Paraíso Perdido’, da Cunha and his role in the making of modern Brazil have found, in Hecht, a researcher and writer the stature of the individual and country themselves. The ‘paradise’ that the Amazon once was is now most decidedly ‘lost’, gone forever in colossal acts of greed, folly, ignorance, international rivalry, misguided development and the illusion of progress. Fragments of it, however, in the form of da Cunha’s writings, have been unearthed by Hecht to riveting effect.

What a tale. Hecht begins her telling of it in an opening foray, ‘A short prelude’, that is the epitome of focused precision. She discards convention at the outset by seducing her readers not just by intimating what to expect in the 23 chapters (almost 500 pages) of gripping exposition ahead but by furnishing them with 10 vignettes that distil the essence of time, place and episode – reminiscent of how Eduardo Galeano fuels his ‘New world’ trilogy, *Memory of fire* ([1982] 1985, [1984] 1987, [1986] 1988). Like so much else she tackles, having a semblance of conclusion serve by way of introduction is a narrative ploy that Hecht pulls off admirably, embellishing and elaborating, not merely setting the stage. First up is ‘Euclides who?’, the mercurial da Cunha whose experiences ‘as a rebel firebrand, as an Amazon explorer, as an intimate of Brazil’s greatest diplomat, the Baron of Rio Branco, and as a central ideologue and field surveyor in Brazil’s “Scramble” for western Amazonia, are largely forgotten’ (3) – at least by English-language scholarship and historiography. He takes his place, and quite rightly so, instead in the world of letters, Latin American literature in particular, on account of his epic *Os Sertões* (1902),

translated and relayed to an English-reading audience as *Rebellion in the backlands* (1944). A masterpiece of creative non-fiction that flows like a novel, the book documents a millenarian uprising and its brutal suppression, which da Cunha covered as an ‘embedded reporter’ (4) cum war correspondent for the newspaper *Estado do São Paulo* in 1897. Decades later, a fictionalized da Cunha would appear as ‘The Journalist’ in Mario Vargas Llosa’s *The war of the end of the world* ([1981] 1984). The triumph of civilization over barbarism, ‘necessary if Brazil was to position itself as an enlightened state rather than a backward nation’, is *Os Sertões*’ point of departure; by the end of the book, ‘these received ideas [are] in rubble, just like the rebel city’, Canudos, the stronghold of ‘a motley group of peasants, natives, ex-slaves, and devout followers of the backland prophet Antonio Conselheiro’ (4–5), with whom da Cunha sways his readers to sympathize. He writes (courtesy of Hecht): ‘What we know of the [backlands] is little more than its rebarbative etiology. We could easily inscribe on large swathes of our maps our searing ignorance and dread: Here be Dragons ... Our geography remains an unwritten book’ (6). Having crafted a Brazilian *Iliad*, set in the devastated northeast of Bahia, da Cunha took it upon himself to fill in the blanks by composing a Brazilian *Odyssey*, the action of which unfolds in ‘As Selvas’, the Amazonian rainforest.

As ‘explorer, scholar, and paladin of the Amazon’, in 1905, da Cunha was dispatched to its far western extent to stake out a vast domain that was ‘the source of one of the most valuable commodities of the time, rubber’. The trusted confidant of José María de Panhanos, the mighty Baron Rio Branco, da Cunha ‘mapped one of the longest tributaries of the Amazon, the Purús, and developed the nationalist/imperial narrative that would shape the boundary mediations between Brazil, Bolivia, and Peru’ (6). His disparate writings embrace ‘topics a century ahead of his time’, including “‘everyday” forms of state formation, environmentalism, political ecology, comparative imperialisms, social history “from below”, [and] political cartography’ (7). Hecht salvages da Cunha’s oeuvre from oblivion and places it in global context, recounting a drama that saw Brazil take on, besides Bolivia and Peru, imperial heavyweights like Belgium, France, the United Kingdom and the United States as the nineteenth century made way for the twentieth.

If da Cunha commands front stage center, right behind him, or orchestrating before him, is Baron Rio Branco, ‘Brazil’s greatest diplomat’ who ‘incorporated an area the size of France into the young republic and secured the Brazilian boundary of more than twelve thousand miles, most of it in Amazonia’. In the ‘Scramble for the Amazon’, which took place ‘at the same time and involved many of the same actors as the Scramble for Africa’, da Cunha (as Rio Branco’s agent) conducted ‘remarkable feats of physical exploration, political maneuverings, and discursive construction’ (8) to champion ‘an imaginary of a new tropical, Brazilian civilization to defy other colonial ambitions’. In less than two decades, Rio Branco forged for Brazil ‘formal sovereignty’ over most of the Amazon basin, ‘thus ending four centuries of contest’ (9) and creating the giant of South America we know today.

It was anything but easy sailing as da Cunha made his way upstream to ‘the remote headwaters of the Purús River’, there ‘to map the “unknown heart” of the Amazon’. His commission was ‘to ascertain where and what were the lands that should be handed over to Brazil’, a charge he accomplished on the basis of ‘patterns of discovery, settlement, treaties, historical cartography, the nationalities of current settlers, and a huge diplomatic dossier’. The expedition suffered all manner of calamity, ‘shipwrecks, humiliating penury, disease ... and near starvation’, as it ‘ascended the Purús under the worst possible conditions’ (9). Da Cunha’s task was made all the more difficult by the ‘bitter rivalry’ and ‘personal animosity’ between him and his Peruvian counterpart, Captain Alexandre

Buenaño. As the two locked horns, Buenaño's position on the disputed boundary 'was essentially a bureaucratic one based on administrative domains in the earlier Viceroyalty of Peru'. Da Cunha, on the other hand, 'recast the debate in idioms that reworked frontier Amazonia away from treaty histories or conquest by the transient mixed-blood slavers from São Paulo known as the *bandeirantes*, to settlement rooted in the less glamorous but courageous every day actions of the *sertanejos*' (10). For him, 'Amazonia's true conquerors' were 'the modest, impoverished, and beaten-down *sertanejos* he first saw in Canudos, who incarnated the "everyday forms" of nation creation, transforming an "unknown swamp" into an economic engine of the new Brazilian republic'. They pioneered and made their homes in what was for da Cunha a 'vibrant humanized countryside'. His slant 'was completely at odds with the northern European tropicalisms that favored an "empty" world, a largely natural wild place inhabited by indolent primitives, a *tabula rasa* waiting for the industrious enterprises, colonists, and civilizing missions of the imperial north and whiter races' (10–1). The great Carl Sauer ([1938] 1963, 147) said it best: 'There is a dark obverse to the picture,' he lamented, 'which we have regarded scarcely at all'. What it meant for the indigenous lot is not what Hecht signed up to research and write about. If, however, there is a presence in her book that might have been fleshed out more – albeit a presence destined (indeed doomed) to vanish – it is that of autochthonous Amazonians.

Textual infelicities are rare. One I caught (91) pertains to Hecht's absorbing treatment of 'An island called Brazil', in which the work of Antonio de Herrera (1549–1625), official chronicler of the Spanish Crown, is drawn upon incisively. He depicts 'a huge lake they call the Xayaros, formed of many rivers that arise from the heights of the Andes', but is cited incorrectly and does not appear in Hecht's 55-page bibliography. And Herrera, in his maps and discussion of South America, must have had more at hand to inform his four-volume *Historia general* (1601–1615) than 'essentials' lifted from the *Naufragios* of Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca (1555), as he did when dealing with Central America (Lovell and Lutz 2011). It would also be useful to have further information on the bounty of maps and photographs that Hecht assiduously searched for, and deploys strategically throughout. Here she pares down perhaps too minimally, as is her wont on occasion with respect to the challenge of translation, in which regard she sides more with stylist Jorge Luis Borges than purist Vladimir Nabokov, though it is Gregory Rabassa (2006) with whom she aligns and identifies most as go-between. Anyone who has grappled with giving a voice in English to a non-English body of work will recognize the enormity of Hecht's labors, and appreciate her ear, touch and passion in affording us access to da Cunha. The writings of da Cunha that she consulted include an impressive array of published works and unpublished correspondence, 24 selections of which (some lengthy and substantive) are translated and integrated into the text.

A unique hybrid its resolute own, this cornucopia of a book warrants attention and engagement in fields of study across the social sciences and humanities. It is a singular achievement of which Susanna Hecht should feel deservedly proud.

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China's disappearing countryside: towards sustainable land governance for the poor, by Yongjun Zhao, Farnham, Ashgate, 2013, xii + 161 pp., US\$98.96 (hardcover), ISBN 978-1-4094-2821-3.

In the prevailing narrative of market transition, China appears to be moving inexorably toward privatizing land resources. Yet each time central authorities issue a major policy document, while they invoke the necessity of deepening reforms and call for more circulation and amalgamation of farmland resources, they affirm the inviolability of collective ownership of farmland. Neoliberal critics bemoan the inefficiency of fragmented plots and individual tenure rendered insecure by collective fiat, giving farmers poor incentives to invest in farming or environmental protection. Others argue that hybrid land rights provide a safety net that has limited landlessness and tempered the proletarianization of China's farmers. The debate rolls out amid a paucity of nuanced, comparative examinations of tenure institutions and their consequences.

In *China's disappearing countryside: towards sustainable land governance for the poor*, Yongjun Zhao essays to make such a contribution. The book begins by presenting a picture of rural China beset by inequality, lingering poverty, increasing landlessness, degradation and loss of farmland, and threats to food security, posing this question: 'Will the ongoing land tenure reform focusing on the strengthening of landownership and use rights under market principles and mechanisms, preconceived as essential to create the right incentives for peasant households, help solve the above problems' (2)? The answer provided is no. Market-oriented tenure reforms make rural residents vulnerable, and efforts to organize collectively through cooperatives are susceptible to capture by local elites. Instead, sustainable development for China's rural poor might best be realized through rural governance reform that establishes participatory grassroots decision-making about tenure.