

## In-forming the Body of Man in the *Caatinga*

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*Antonio Conselheiro was a crude Gnostic*

[...]

*The Earth is an Unbearable Place of Exile*

—Euclides da Cunha, *Os Sertões*

ONE HUNDRED YEARS AFTER THE PUBLICATION OF *Os Sertões* (1902), after the holocaust of the great World Wars and the innumerable civil wars and massacres that have marked the Twentieth Century in Latin America, how does a reader today interpret the dense and complex structure of the master discourses that Euclides da Cunha's *opera maxima* articulates? No matter how many times one returns to the pages of this essay, the renewed first impression is always a sense of monumentality. Over and over the reader is struck by the presence of greatness in the aspiration and the accomplishment of the work. The sweeping vastness of the enterprise: a history of Brazil that starts with the geological formation of the land, moves through the dynamics of climate and environment, and embarks on a minute description of flora and fauna based on the latest work of foreign and Brazilian scientific expeditions. This physical description is itself posited as a necessary preamble to the historical study of the regional cultures of the nascent republic. This multidisciplinary panoply of knowledges turns out to be the mere stage on which the canvas of an ethno historical-psychological study of the *sertanejo* will be displayed in order to properly situate and narrate the massacre of Canudos. A study of this magnitude and aspirations would have been worthy of Foucault had the French critic of human sciences lived in the nineteenth century. *Os Sertões* should have been, in any case, devoured by the author of *Les Mots et les choses* (1966) had he known of its existence as indeed he should have in view of the shared interest in the maneuvering of the disciplines. Despite the fact that da Cunha believed in the explanatory power of the disciplines and Foucault made his name precisely in questioning the constitution and deployment of the

disciplines, both believed in the location and task of the historian as a geologist. As Euclides da Cunha begins the section on Antonio Conselheiro, he takes a moment to explain his method to the reader: “Just as the geologist, by estimating the inclination and orientation of the truncated strata of very old formations, is enabled to reconstruct the outlines of a vanished mountain, so the historian, in taking the stature of this man, who in himself is of no worth, will find it of value solely in considering the psychology of the society which produced him” (da Cunha 117).

Despite its frequent and perhaps inevitable falls and breaks into the racism of the period, and perhaps in recognition of the fact that such racism is still with us, the force of engagement and interpellation in *Os Sertões* today is not all diminished. It is actually potentiated by theoretical developments and changes in perspective that have occurred in the last forty years. If *Os Sertões*, like the *Comentarios reales* (1609) by Garcilaso de la Vega or *Facundo* (1845) by Jose Domingo Sarmiento, defied the reading demands of the rigid and artificial genre theory inherited from the philology of the nineteenth century, the multiple nature of the work by da Cunha—essay, narrative, scientific treatise, travel narrative, history, chronicle, testimony—resonates with great impact within reception structures of post-modern theory and practices.

There is no question that *Os Sertões* can be read in conjunction with the “novela de la tierra,” *Facundo*, and much of the “literatura de viajeros” as a great foundational discourse on the fatherland (the emphasis is on father not on motherland). In part, I am going to attempt a reading of the landscape in the manner in which Simon Schama, in *Landscape and Memory* (1995),<sup>1</sup> studies the play of imagination that fortifies the bonds between the German forest and its inhabitants. In his long history of landscape metaphors Schama shows that “Inherited landscape myths and memories share two common characteristics: their surprising endurance through the centuries and their power to shape institutions that we still live with. National identity, to take just the most obvious example, would lose much of its ferocious enchantment without the mystique of a particular landscape tradition: its topography mapped, elaborated and enriched as a homeland” (Schama 15). In a Foucaultian manner Schama attempts to recover layers of myth memory buried beneath the surface of the common place (14) in order to show the intimate links between let us say, Nordic tree worship, the Christian iconography of the Tree of Life, and the wooden cross, itself associated with the evergreen fir tree and the architecture of resurrection (14–15). In a not so distant echo of da Cunha’s portrayal of the ailing forest, Schama writes that “the mystery behind this commonplace turns out to be eloquent on the deepest relationships between natural form and human design” (15). In examining the construction of the caatinga as sacred/damned space I will set da Cunha’s scientific intents and objectives upside down. Furthermore, I

will show that it is only when the dimension of the sacred is allowed back into da Cunha's thought that a comprehensive meaning of *Os Sertões* is attainable. In this reading the caatinga emerges imbued with the bi-valence of the sacred and the infernal. This bi-polar conflation is wrought by the deployment of a *sui generis* mixture of scientific and religious perspectives.

Landscape representation and iconography are acutely and expressively tied in *Os Sertões* to a method that entails constant discipline shifting. This cutting and shifting implies a hidden sense of dissatisfaction with disciplinary discourses, for it points to the insufficiency of each of the various sciences which da Cunha brings together in order to approach the phenomenon of Canudos, that is to say the meaning of the history of Brazil. How and where da Cunha makes the cuts, how and where he brings in one discipline only to be forced to abandon it and reach for a supplement, constitutes, for the contemporary reader, a fascinating field of exploration; one that discloses a better understanding of how the nineteenth century naturalized the world into a web of assumptions that have governed many social and political understandings in the twentieth century. Only after years of deconstruction and failure to meet the reality check have some of these assumptions begun to give way in the studies of social sciences and humanities.

In this regard, it is tempting to see *Os Sertões* as an unacknowledged project on the recovery of lost or rather suppressed knowledges and memory.<sup>2</sup> This comes through particularly in da Cunha's return, or rather use of Tupi and Tapuya terms, for it is in the translation of words like *caatinga*, *caatanduva* (the sick forest), *jurema* (desert tree) and *caipiri* that we have a glimpse of the Tupi and Tapuya understanding of the climate and environment of the *sertão*. Of course the entire book, dedicated as it is to narrating the logic of the rebellion from the insurgent's point of view, constitutes from the start an alternative entry and foray into official memory. In the thinking of the Barão de Geremoabo (9) it is better forgotten in as much as it cannot be understood by the reasoning powers of people like him. This latter resignation or will to forget the events of Canudos is drawn out more explicitly in the *La guerra del fin del mundo* (1984) by Mario Vargas Llosa.

The examination of the metaphors that organize the representation of the landscape lead to the exploration of the configuring power of ascetic discourse in *Os Sertões*. The ascetic tradition, it turns out, is central to our understanding of the figure of Conselheiro, as it is also pivotal, although often forgotten, to any assessment of the legacy that the Catholic culture of techniques of the body and the self has established in Latin American political discourse. This is a topic that I have already sketched out in earlier essays on *Os Sertões* and *La guerra del fin del mundo*.<sup>3</sup> Lately I have returned to the ascetic tradition and its long life in Latin American popular and classical letters with an essay on *Cien años de soledad*.<sup>4</sup> In what follows I am not going to make detailed references to my

sources on early Christianity or Medieval texts on asceticism. Rather, I will focus on the dynamics of the text authored by Euclides da Cunha. The references will be in the text. This paper will explore the dynamics of fluids in the *caatinga* and the body of man as the principle metaphor that organizes the flow of knowledges assembled by da Cunha in order to infuse the events of Canudos with a strong degree of intelligibility.

## From the Ground Up

Da Cunha's central thesis is that Antonio Conselheiro and his mindset constitute "a striking example of atavism" (116). He argues that this return of the repressed has occurred in the *sertão* due to the mixing of races and cultures. However, it has gathered special and particular force because the Catholic missionaries in the *sertão* have eradicated neither the Gnostic nor the mystical traditions of the old Catholic, Portuguese religious tradition.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, critical in making this return possible in society as a whole is the deeply layered and racially crossed social formation of the *sertão*. In other words, religion is but the flower, the superstructure. However, what matters for gaining an understanding of the events of Canudos is not the flower, not even the roots of the plant, but the soil that sustains and even determines its life. In a structure of correspondences, what matters is the ground, and the ground upon which the "deranged" Conselheiro bloomed is not to be confused with a mere surface. It is a deeply layered and invisibly drawn topography that demands a hermeneutics of its own. Not unlike Foucault's own geological metaphor, da Cunha conceives of a complex, heterogeneous, and uneven pack of layers of distinct compositions, properties, weights, ages, thickness, and lengths. Beneath the surface there are sandy soils that let the waters through, thick clays that obstruct the passage of moisture and the deepening of roots, and thin soils that give way under the slightest weight only to create cavities where loose stones find a good place to accumulate and produce further blockages. The underground, not unlike the surface, is neither solid nor stable. It is instead wracked by a constant, dark dynamism. Deeply buried layers can at any time show up on the surface. Entrances to caves and tunnels that lead deep into the earth may open onto the surface and in this manner place in contact disconnected, forgotten entities. Such is the case of Antonio Conselheiro, not as an individual, but as the embodiment of a discourse that had lain deep within the lower layers of the underground and one day suddenly, like a cataclysm, was ushered onto the plane of the living. These are terms of the metaphor that allow the flow of the qualities of the landscape into the body of man.

Da Cunha finds the geological metaphor that informs his whole book to be highly productive, most especially in the pages in which he presents Conselheiro. In fact he congratulates himself on his finding:

It is natural that the deep-laying layers of our ethnic stratification should have cast up so extraordinary an anticline [geological term = inclining downward on both sides from a median axis . . . (a pointed rock)] as Antonio Conselheiro. . . . The metaphor is quite correct. Just as the geologist, by estimating the inclination and orientation of the truncated strata of very old formations, is enabled to reconstruct the outlines of a vanished mountain, so the historian, in taking the stature of his man, who in himself is not of worth, will find of value solely in considering the psychology of the society which produced him. As an isolated case, this is one lost amid a multitude of common place neurotics; it could be included under the general category of progressive psychoses. Taken in connection with the social background on the other hand, it is sufficiently alarming. (117–8)

Conselheiro then is not to be considered as an individual whose mental balance is in question, nor is he the expression of his times (this phrase taken to mean the complex web of circumstances and understandings of several generations living together at the “same time”). He is the condensed re-appearance of that which the passage of time and the writing of history have relegated to a past so remote as to be confused or rather located on the other side of the line that separates the opposition human/nature. That is why the meaning of the appearance of this entity on the surface, on the visible plane of history, has to be looked for, both materially and metaphorically, in the very composition of the earth.

Thus this inquiry calls for the geological method in as much as it deals with an inert and most ancient matter with a history that exceeds human time, a history unavailable to human means of recording memory, a pre-history etched only in the ruins of mountains and dry river beds. This is a method that can establish the difference between natural and man-made deserts. It can address approaches to a history that are in fact post-human in the sense in which Foucault argues that at the end of the nineteenth century man finds himself “dehistoricized,” no longer coincidental or homogeneous with the “man” that humanism had invented (*The Order of Things* 369).<sup>6</sup> Canudos, as a “historical” event, demands the hermeneutics of the interminable time of geology. Here things can be understood only from the ground up. This is especially true if we are dealing with what we today would call ethno-history rather than with the political history (*letrado*) of the incipient republics of Latin America. As such, to begin the narrative of *Os Sertões* with the story of Canudos would be a mistake. One would start *media res*. Only the ground can yield the facts on the dynamics of human and post-human that causes the earth to throw up this projectile, this anticlinal.

## Dry and Humid Exchanges

From the first chapter on the land to the last chapter of the first part on Man, just before the narrative of the rebellion begins in the second part of the book, da Cunha's discourse is structured upon one central topic: the presence or absence of water. Is the land dry or irrigated? Are the bodies of the *sertanejos*, *vaqueiros*, *gauchos*, and especially that of Conselheiro dry or well irrigated? Is the body-mind material of the *sertanejos* moist, plump with life-giving liquids or is it squeezed dry, hovering, like Don Quijote, on the limits between life and death, sanity and madness? Ascertaining how much water, its regular or irregular availability, and the myriad consequences of its dynamics constitutes a great many of the facts that da Cunha organizes into a discourse that never tires of describing the shocking landscape of the *caatinga*. The *caatinga* constitutes that "nature in torment" and the layers of socio-historical scenes that once concatenated populate the rich canvas of life in the sertão that da Cunha paints. Just as the rising of the sun, its location during the day, and its disappearance at night appears obsessively in the records of the Aztecs, water permeates—metaphorically—the pages of da Cunha's work. Water, its absence or presence, moves all natural, human, and even spiritual events in the *caatinga*. The capacity to bear thirst, to stand the deprivation of the fluid of life, will explain not only how, but also why an ordinary *sertanejo* finds in himself the power to defy those who suppress and offend him. The uncertainty of water in the desert has made the "odd" forms of vegetation of the *caatinga* as well as forged the ascetic body and spirit of the *sertanejo*.

In the very early pages of the book, in the section "First Impressions," da Cunha begins the imbrications of the ascetic discourse, the Christian discourse of deprivation and martyrdom, with the discourse of geology. The winds, rain, and sun constitute forces that bring about the erosion of the earth's solids. Da Cunha establishes a narrative of erosion and destruction that does not require the reader to understand, neither geologically or meteorologically, the events taking place upon the earth for the semantics of the verbs all translate into ruinous change: "The accumulation of alluvium in the depressions, the dismantling of the hills, the winding of the river beds of intermittent streams, the constriction of the defiles, and the almost convulsive appearance of the deciduous flora lost in a maze of undergrowth—is in a manner of speaking, the martyrdom of the earth, brutally lashed by variable elements which run the gamut of climatic conditions" (13). The play of dilations and contractions brought about by the alternation of drought and rain, by sun and darkness, by cold and scorching heat all made extreme by the paucity of water, set up a process of demolition, of violent disintegration, which in turn expresses sudden shifts from passivity to violence in both the earth and the corresponding character of the *sertanejo*. Events occurring

in the underground drift upward to the surface through the various geological layers of sediment and rock. At the surface, the powers of these malignant transformations are mimetized in the air, affecting homologically the local cultural patterns of behaviors and beliefs. The drift upwards finds its final manifestation in the psyche of the *sertanejo* whose capacity for suffering and deprivation is enlarged beyond measure by the cyclical drought and martyrdom of the earth, his body and soul. This is indeed a ruinous landscape. But it is not the romantic landscape of ruins from long ago that invite contemplation and the expression of the viewer's inner most feelings. The ruinous landscape in *Os Sertões* is not the ruins of history; it is quite the opposite. Precisely because of the geological metaphor, the ruinous landscape is here dehistoricized, almost dehumanized were it not that it also involves the *sertanejo*, a ruin himself.

In the early section entitled "A Geologist's Dream," da Cunha imagines the possibility of what he, after the evolutionist Thomas Henry Huxley (1825–1895), calls a "retrospective prophecy." In this geological dream he brings together images that combine his sense of relentless destruction in the making of the earth with the notion that the culture of the *sertanejo*, although clever, is but a fossil. It is the result of a relentless deterioration and ruination. Da Cunha paints a landscape wrought by "cauldrons" where enormous mastodons became ossuaries of "disjoined vertebra as if the life had been of a sudden assaulted and extinguished by the turbulent energies of a cataclysm" (16). The correspondence of the "retrospective prophecy" with his thesis on the atavism of Conselheiro's movement could not be closer. It is as if the early "descriptive" observations of the book were driven by the thesis advanced at the very end of the chapter on Man, or perhaps it is the other way around. Although attempting to describe flora, that is to say living things, the vision of the landscape constantly falls back into scenes of ruins and destruction as if in anticipation of the calamities left by the destruction of Canudos. Da Cunha writes that the "cruel climate" has "crushed the earth." Before the eye there lies nothing but ruins, the ruins of a great earthquake (Putman 19). The eye of the reader's imagination moves from great fossil ossuaries to an equally extensive human ossuary purified and whitened by the relentless heat of the sun and the naked, cooling atmosphere of the desert night. Not a drop of water appears in this land purified by dry heat. Not the slightest thing moves in the stillness of this dehydrated landscape.

The unbearable dryness is subjected to yet another turn of the screw in the summer. Already beyond all known limits of nature and of the human body, the summer's drought turns into a paroxysm (27), a sudden and most severely violent epileptic attack. The stillness of the air, the profound quiet of the ancient death of the ossuaries, pressed one more degree beyond its own mortal limits gives way to a simulacrum of life—of life simply as movement. With the paroxysm of summer there appears the Goyesque twisting violence that transfigures the living figure into a form of grotesque absurd-

ity. Caught between the call of the final repose of death and one last gasp of life, the entire *sertão* convulses, accelerating and contracting in a few moments the long rhythms of the yearly seasons. Da Cunha's expressionist landscape stands as if it were a huge mural in which the brown competes with the black and the grey gives way to a glaring white. This earthy palette captures the deadly rhythms of the contractions and extensions of the earth and its flora brought about by the presence and absence of water. These "un-natural" dynamics give birth to dwarfish and distorted forms, themselves closer to extinction than to life. The canvas of the *sertão* is drawn with the visual rhetoric reserved for the rigidity that sets in with agony. The agony of the earth is depicted with the language of disease in conjunction with a lexicon that constantly alludes to the suffering and demise of the body of Christ. Both the lexicon and the iconography are framed within a new scientific discourse which pretends to distance itself from the Christological, but which in fact it needs in order to convey its full meaning so that the meaning of the discourse on the land in *Os sertões* is fundamentally affective.

In the section of the *caatinga*, da Cunha sets himself up as "the traveler". He posits himself in the location of the many Brazilian and foreign travelers whose accounts of the *sertão* he avidly read. As the outsider; he takes on the role of the person who sees this forest that is not one, a forest that contradicts its very definition as the proliferation of a green canopy. As a "foreign" explorer he can better marvel at the unexpected and unique character of this contradiction in nature: a desert forest. Contrary to the iconic qualities of forests in European landscape discourse,<sup>7</sup> this forest does not offer sweet scents or refreshing breezes. Instead "The *caatinga* stifles" (30) the traveler. The *caatinga* attacks all his senses. The traveler can not breathe or see. He is stunned by the suffocating heat, he is enmeshed in the "spiny wool" (30). The traveler is disabled. Deprived of his observational apparatus, partially blinded, somewhat deaf, afraid to touch, and short of breath, he scientist nevertheless forges ahead under the relentless sun to conclude that "all this is here reversed" (30).

Contemplation of the *caatinga* is not different from arriving at the entrance of hell itself. The stifling air, the sense of suffocation is reminiscent of the feelings experienced by Abundio as he descends into hell in *Pedro Paramo* (1955). In fact it is the description given by Abundio that alerts the reader to the fictional fact that his route takes him not to Comala, a historical place co-extensive in space and time with our own lives, but rather to Comala as an extended metaphor of Dante's hell. That is why everything is reversed in the *caatinga*. That is the place where the "sun is an enemy, whom it is urgent to avoid, to elude, or to combat" (30). The atmosphere is overheated and the soil is inhospitable. The high temperatures of hell, as promised in all sermons dealing with the place, are relentless. In hell there is no place to escape; all living forms are subjected to the deformity wrought upon

them by the unforgiving heat. Hell is absolute. There is no alternative. This is the imaginary of desert people who in the arid planes of the Middle East knew only too well the transformational impact that the presence/absence of water had upon all living forms including the earth and the atmosphere, themselves “living forms” regulated by heat and moisture.

In the dry heat the otherwise succulent fruits turn stiff like cones. The desiccating heat affects also the sense of color, touch, and volume. The dryness shrinks life in all dimensions producing not only reversals as in the fruits that turn into cones, but it also brings about dwarfism. Not even the cool winds relieve the pain of extreme heat. On the contrary, as in hell, all goodness is turned into greater adversity, for the denial of the pleasure is relentless. Even the benign or neutral is painful in the *caatinga*. The cold northeastern wind does not bring relief. Instead the drought acquires the power of a cauterizing force as the “burning air is sterilized; the ground, parched and cleft, becomes petrified” (31). “The northeaster roars in the wilderness; and, like a lacerating haircloth, the *caatinga* extends over the earth its thorny branches” (31).

As in Dante’s hell, the bodies of the suffering sinners are not just subjected to the unbearable heat that darkens faces and limbs. The flesh is also pierced by pitchforks and all manner of lacerating instruments expertly wielded by the minor, anonymous, dwarfish devils. The same piercing instruments form part of the repertoire of aids used by the martyrs and ascetics in the exercises chosen for disciplining the flesh, that moist and well watered load that keeps the soul from acquiring the lightness necessary to fly upwards to God. As we can see, the imaginary displayed by da Cunha in his unforgettable depiction of the *caatinga* as a strange place produced by abnormal, unsuspected climatic conditions scientifically understood and described does not draw its signifying power from the scientific discourse, but rather from the very old and naturalized discourse on the body of the early Church. Moreover, it is this discourse that he will later attribute to Conselheiro and *blame* for his own “madness” and “fanaticism”.

## The Underground

In da Cunha’s layered set of causes and correspondences, the *caatinga*’s dryness does of course anticipate and even cause the economic, social, political, and psychological make up of *sertanejo* society. In this sense the hydraulic system of the *caatinga* adumbrates the leanness and paucity of the language of the *sertanejo* and the skeletal character of his social and emotional life. It does this work by establishing the architecture of the metaphor that carries the entire book: a hell on earth. Satan is in charge here. His well known devices are all in place as he tortures even the tiniest shrubs which are “lashed by the dog-day heat, fustigated by the sun, gnawed by the torrential rains,

tortured by the winds” (32). Driven by such torment, the plants make a final attempt to stay alive in the underground. For life to exist in the *caatinga*, a layer below the furnace of the surface has to be created where living forms that can, if not escape, at least mitigate the torture of hell. “In this case the plants unite in an intimate embrace, being transformed into social growths” (33). But this life, this clever evolution, comes at an immense cost. For life to exist, it must be motionless. It practically has to dissemble its very living forms and rhythms and appear as if it were inert matter. “And they live. ‘Live’ is the word—for there is, as a matter of fact, a higher significance to be discerned in the passivity exhibited by this evolved form of vegetable life” (33).

If hell, that place right at the surface of the scorching earth is the driving metaphor of *Os Sertões*, the underground as a place where a novel form of life appears—somewhere between life and death—constitutes a second and complimentary driving metaphor. The furnace/underground image brings together the thesis on cultural atavism designed to explain the deformed re-birth of cultural norms and ideals attacked and combated by the secularizing forces of modernity for centuries. Achieving a state of living-death brought on by the insufficiency of water in the organism is the shared goal of the vegetation in the *caatinga*, the *sertanejo* during drought, and the ascetics in the Egyptian desert or the monastic cell. This living-death is also called “the martyrdom of the land.” With this metaphor da Cunha shrouds the terms of his scientific discourse with an effective and thick cover of Christological motifs and iconography.

The piercing and pricking *caatinga* is one of nature’s responses to extreme heat and the absence of water. The *caatanduva* is another, perhaps even more serious response. If the metaphor driving the sense of the *caatinga* is hell and the tortures of the flesh, the *caatanduva* is conceived in another of da Cunha’s preferred registers: sickness, disease, and final demise. This understanding of the *caatinga* appeals to the old Christological cosmo-vision while the *caatanduva* falls within the parameters of the new cosmo-vision: science. However, they are both apocalyptic. Illness is the interruption of health, the breaking of the patterns and rhythms that constitute the order of Nature, the coordination of forms and their orderly transformation in evolutionary or devolutionary patterns. The architecture of order in Nature is itself mirrored in the ordering categories of science. In contrast, the *caatanduva* represents the freighted end of all forms. Taking his insight from the Tupaia in whose language *caatanduva* means “the ailing forest” (35), da Cunha declares it an unmitigated catastrophe. “This is the *caatanduva*, the ‘ailing forest’ in the native etymology, grievously fallen upon its terrible bed of thorns... a shapeless mass of vegetation, the life drained from it, writhing in a painful spasm” (35). Returning to his scientific register and drawing on the scientific accounts of travelers such as Augustin Saint-Hilaire’s *Vooyage dans l’Interieur du Bresil* (1830–1851) and Von Martius’s

*Flora Brasiliensis* (1840–1868), he concludes that: “This is the *silva horrida* of Von Martius” (35).

The repulsive appearance of the *caatanduva* (45), already mentioned in the logs of the early sertanejos, gives way to the images of the *caapuera* (43), which in Tupi means the extinct forest. Da Cunha thus completes the sense of a painfully diseased body on the verge of extinction. The title of the final section of the chapter on the land, “The martyrdom of the earth,” could not condense nor better express the sense of the forest as its own negation. Such a negation is the proper and indispensable prelude for da Cunha’s thesis on the atavistic, fossilized, half-living cosmo-vision of the *sertanejo* as a social being. From the martyrdom of the earth depicted by means of interweaving scientific with religious discourse, it will be but a mere step in a set of layered correspondences to the martyrdom of man. Da Cunha closes the first chapter assuring the reader that what has to be combated in the Northeast is the desert, that negation of the circulating liquids and forces that keeps the natural order in movement. In anticipation of what is to come he flatly states that: “The Martyrdom of man is here reflective of a greater torture, more widespread, one embracing the general economy of Life. It arises from the age old martyrdom of the earth” (49).

## The Body of Man

Well beyond da Cunha’s discourse on race and the detrimental effects of miscegenation based on the anthropology of his day, there is a more powerful discourse of the body/mind that he articulates in his chapter on Man. This discourse weaves together body and culture as an indissoluble amalgam. In spite of the fact that at times he laments the reinforcement that the Tupi and the Tapuya “race” have brought to the melancholy “nature” of the Portuguese, he posits an understanding of Conselheiro as a body/mind squarely within the preaching of the Portuguese missionaries and the Portuguese transference of a medieval Catholicism to the colonies. Although today’s reader cannot but be aware that da Cunha’s theories are themselves racist, it must be stated that he not only does not see himself as a racist, but in fact he takes the time to offer a critical view of the anthropology of white racial supremacy prevalent at the time. Da Cunha differs from these supremacist anthropologists in that they proclaimed and celebrated the extinction of the aborigine in Brazil. They also asserted the secondary importance of the environment. Furthermore, da Cunha disputes the “sterile fantasies” (53) of these racist anthropologists. He especially criticizes them for having “begun by excluding, in large part, the objective data provided by the environmental and historical circumstances and then proceeded to play upon the theme of the three races intermingling them and us-

ing them according to their whims of the moment” (53). Da Cunha believes that some of these mistakes have been due to the national determinant of having to posit “a single ethnic type, when the truth is that there are many of them” (54). Here he makes his now famous assertion regarding the multiethnic characteristic of Brazil: “We do not possess unity of race, and it is possible that we shall never possess it” (54) and yet he asserts that Brazil is “condemned to civilization” (54), thus himself admitting to the common place of “racial homogeneity” as the necessary prelude to nationhood of the last two centuries. The case to be drawn about atavism, the return to the primitive in Conselheiro is then, to use the now worn but still forceful concept, local. It is local in Foucault’s sense of the term. That is to say that it is local from the perspective that one conceives oneself as central, from the perspective that sees the self as different and thus sees the local as limited in scope and impact. It is local in the sense that it may constitute part of what the center thinks has been left behind as unworthy of conservation or memory. For da Cunha the phenomenon of Conselheiro is local in all these aspects, but it is especially local in that, like the *caatanduva* and the *caapuera*, it is marked for extinction. Here the biological understanding of the life cycles of flora extends its power over the historical understanding of cultural forms and the lives that bear and express them. As such, the culture and the person of Conselheiro, an ailing set of beliefs exiled from modernity, went like the *caatanduva*, underground. Once there, having found shelter from the relentless sun of secularizing cultural forms, it has to maintain itself in the waging line between life and death in a sort of permanent agony only to return for one more horrid flowering in the events of Canudos. It is thus not unlike the epileptic paroxysm that interrupts the normal flow of energies in the brain. Da Cunha, an epileptic himself, undoubtedly found the metaphor keenly meaningful.

The historical canvas imagined by da Cunha devolves from the power of the image of the resurrection of the body incorrupt obviously modeled after the body of Christ. The narrative of the resurrection diverges in a forking path as to the meaning of the body’s descent below the surface of daily life. On the one hand, the descent perceived in a botanical register implies a death or near death of a body that descends into the nurturing darkness of the mother earth and ascends back to the surface of the earth for the affirmation of the continuity of life. The other forking path takes the dead/living body into the darkness of hell itself, and having conquered the powers of eternal death, the magical body ascends once more to the surface of daily living in order to assert the power and existence of life eternal. In either case what is being asserted is the power of certain bodies to sustain and overcome the destructive forces of death. In the Christian tradition there are two ways in which a body can achieve the power to overcome death. It is either empowered directly by God with a magical quality or it can engage in a long

and arduous ascetic practice which paradoxically, by the very denial of the body's life necessities and rhythms, can achieve a body less susceptible and more enduring, let us say, to the deprivations of water, food, rest, sexual satisfaction, pleasure in general, and especially sociability. The body of Christ is here the paradigmatic figure. The bodies of saints made magical or holy either by God's grace or by the long and painful practice of asceticism is the model brought back to history by the figure of *Conselheiro*.

In his presentation of all the types from the gaucho in the South to the *jagunço* in the *sertão*, da Cunha emphasizes the heroism of the outlander, his indefatigable will to survive any and all calamities on and by his own wits. As da Cunha's narrative plans get closer to the moment when *Conselheiro* appears in the text, the emphasis on life in the desert and the sheer isolation in which the culture of the *sertanejo* developed rises in a new crescendo until the author writes in a simple and direct sentence: "His first reliance is his religious faith" (107). It is faith that keeps the desperate fugitives of the drought moving along the paths and impossible roads with "their miracle working saints in their arms, with raised crosses . . . walking along with the stones of the road on their heads and shoulders, as they transport the saints from one place to another. . . and for long nights the plains are aglow with the tapers of the penitents as they wander here and there" (107). This (self) image of the *sertanejo* as a penitent in a long and perhaps endless pilgrimage adumbrates the mass movement that Canudos will represent. The *sertanejo's* willingness to undertake pain, to drive his body to extremes, to nurture life in its most minimal expressions, sustained by the unshakeable belief in miracles, constitutes for da Cunha an "extravagant mysticism" (110), which expresses the sense of utter solitude that the *sertanejo* inhabits. This combination of faith, sense of solitude, and dominion over the necessities and frailties of the body is what da Cunha calls historical atavism (111). It is, curiously, also the life goal of the early Christian hermits who chose the Egyptian desert as the last refuge for purity.<sup>8</sup> The recurring appearance of "hair-shirt ascetics, fanatics, sorrowing mad disciples" makes da Cunha "instinctively recall the most critical phase in the spiritual life of Portugal" (111). It is worth emphasizing here the insertion of the term "instinctive" in a discourse that has gone to great lengths to be scientific, for it is obviously plain that the ascetic discourse is intimately familiar to da Cunha, the student of dissident sects in early Christianity. According to da Cunha's reading of Renan, the *sertanejo* is the direct heir of a large variety of "extravagant superstitions no longer dominant in the Brazilian Sea Board" (111). This is a legacy of fierce mysticism, "a religious fervor that vibrated in the brilliant glow of the inquisitorial fires" of the Iberian Peninsula (111), accompanied by the "political mysticism of Sebastianism" (112). Abandoning the modern scientific language of anthropology, da Cunha labels this discursive complex an "atavistic stigmata" (112), one that he quickly connects with the rituals of

child sacrifice in Pedra Bonita (113). But of course the best example of this atavism is Antonio Conselheiro whose ascetic practices and politico-religious beliefs will be labeled, in appealing to yet another scientific discourse of the period, a “progressive psychosis” (117).

As with the *caatinga* and the *caatanduva* (ailing forest), da Cunha deploys a fine weaving of psychoanalytical terms, that is to say science, in combination with the language that the mystics developed to speak of their own states of consciousness, achieved only in constant practice of strict asceticism and mortification of the body. For da Cunha, Conselheiro belongs in a hospital, not in a convent, for the latter would somehow normalize his condition and what matters to da Cunha is to stress the delirious state of Conselheiro in order to discredit his life-style. Da Cunha, relying on the best scientific authorities of the period, concludes that Conselheiro “was in reality a very sick man, to whom one could only apply Tanzi e Rivas’s concept of paranoia . . . he was a rare case of atavism. His morbid constitution led him to give a whimsical interpretation to objective conditions, thereby altering his relation to the external world; and this appeared as basically a retrogression to the mental state of the ancestral types of the species” (119).<sup>9</sup> Tanzi’s theories on paranoia validate da Cunha’s sense of atavism since the Italian neurologist believed that paranoia was an affliction of the mind that constituted a return to primitive thinking. Da Cunha’s discourse here moves seamlessly through several of the layers of his own architecture of correspondences. Starting at the most ethereal layer with mysticisms located in the personal and historical levels, he moves down with psychoanalysis into the chemical, material basis of mind and consciousness to end up with an evolutionary and very material theory of retrogression of the species.

For da Cunha, this “strange mysticism” owes as much to the influence of the “lower races” as to the “critical period of Portuguese life” (119), itself a repugnant repetition of the early days of the Church when Gnosticism was arising as the “necessary form of transition from paganism to Christianity” (119). Although da Cunha’s, or rather Renan’s, brief history of the early Church could be corrected on a number of counts, let it suffice here that it is not in Byzantium but rather in Rome that asceticism grows among the early converts to Christianity. Da Cunha’s views on the “hysterical doctors and hyperbolical exegeses” and their “repugnant cases of insanity” (119) are a quick and veiled reminder of the fact that stoicism and asceticism constitute one of the foundational stones of Christianity and its elaboration of the Christian body as the body in pain. Da Cunha lumps in one single mound several very different tendencies within early Christianity. For instance he states that “As a matter of fact, the Phrygian Montanists, the infamous Adamites, the Ophiolaters, the two faced Manicheans, [stood] all of them in the middle ground between an emergent Christianity and ancient Buddhism” (119).

Da Cunha forgets here that the ascetic tradition has its immediate antecedents in a key aspect of Greek culture, one which of course was alive and dominant during the early centuries of Christianity. Christ himself is, of course, an ascetic and much of what is new in the gospels is his position on the denial of the comforts of the body and even the security of family ties in order to understand and follow in the true footsteps of his message. The body of the God turned into man is a body conceived within a consciousness in which the definition of man itself is the growth in capacity to discipline, by way of denial, the appetites of the body so as to set “one” free to attend to the authentic business of the father that is the observance of the old reformed law and the new ethics of the gospel. In this quest, the body’s appetites are but an impediment, and the true Christian must not heed its calls.

To gain control over oneself one must first gain control over one’s body. To control that beast, as Anthony the hermit put it, one must find his/her limits by denying that which he/she most craves—moist food and all manner of drink. The Christian body in search of purity and in struggle with corruption seeks to limit its contact with the outside—air, water, food, sex, and language. A liquid deprived body becomes less demanding. It allows for greater concentration on subjective matters and it can be led away from the earthly preoccupation with external surrounding into the contemplation of the ethical and the divine realms.<sup>10</sup> A deprived body is, in other words, the portal to altered states of consciousness in which pain can bring on pleasure.

Pain itself can become the portal to another level of consciousness, one in which all of the established norms that make the actual strangeness of the “real” world seem terribly contrived and arbitrary. The body disciplined by the ascetic practice, as in the case of the *sertanejos* and that of *Conselheiro*, does indeed conceive itself and the world external to it in very different ways from the consciousness that arises from a body whose appetites and needs are always already satisfied. What truly confounds da Cunha and all other observers of Canudos is the infinite capacity of the rebels to sustain pain. Losing the fear of bodily and spiritual pain is the objective of the ascetic practices for only when those fears of pain and death have been achieved can the individual begin to think of freedom. This freedom that is God itself does in the hermitic literature sustain “life” as redefined by the ascetic practices. For the ascetic tradition, the body of Christ in its open traffic with death and its denial of death constitutes the paradigmatic body. But according to da Cunha, this is a thinking and a practice that can bring back the most wanton state of primitivism, a throwback to the earliest stages of the species. Da Cunha is not wrong, for a man free of the fear of pain and free of the fear of death is a man truly uncontrollable as some of the Dionysian ascetics proved to be in the Rome of Marcus Aurelius. These were men who defied the corruption and hypocrisy of the imperial Roman state (*pane e circo*) by engaging in “repugnant behavior” in public squares and temples.

## Conclusion

*Os Sertões* can be read today as extended metaphor for the body in pain. The paradigmatic human body is the body of Christ. It is the constant presence of the image of the body as nature at the limits of endurance that allows da Cunha to weave into a single narrative the several scientific discourses that he deploys in bringing Canudos to understanding. The image of the body in pain and the allusion to the denials of asceticism allow him to establish a portrait or rather a narrative in which the madness of Canudos, while it makes no sense, can still be communicated to the reader as if it actually added to a set of significations. This act of communication is possible because the reader's familiarity with the story of the body of man is thoroughly encoded in the metaphors that cut across geology, biology, climacterics, anthropology, sociology, psychology, and hygiene. Although da Cunha attributes this "atavistic" discourse and mind set to Conselheiro and the people of the *sertão*, the discursive location of the "extravagant mysticism" is no place other than da Cunha's own "instinctive memory" of what he calls the Portuguese crisis. This is to say that what we call the popular culture, maintained through the oral, written, and pictorial tradition of the Catholic Church in the Iberian colonies, is in fact the rhetorical complex that infuses the scientific discourses deployed to explain the black hole of history with the power to *make sense*, to offer a degree of intelligibility.

## Notes

- 1 In examining the construction of a wooded Germania by Tacitus, Schama describes the appearance of the sylvan forest. He notes that the description is struck with admiration mixed with a sort of repugnance that reflects the Roman feelings about the forest (83). "On the one hand, it was a place which, by definition was "outside" (foris) the writ of the law and the governance of their state. On the other hand, their own founding myths were sylvan. Classical Greece had venerated groves sacred to Artemis and Apollo and their cults of fertility, the hunt, and the tree-oracle had been transferred to Rome. Arcadia was imagined in both cultures as a wooded, rocky place, the haunt of satyrs, the realm of Pan" (83). As in the case of Canudos, where soldiers of the Brazilian army fought in the *caatinga*, it was the prose of da Cunha that ordered the world, with Rome in Germany, it was "the armies of the Caesars [who] fought the battles but it was the prose of Tacitus that ordained the conflict, for generations, for centuries to come, on and on: wood against marble; iron against gold; fur against silk; brutal seriousness against elegant irony; bloody-minded tribalism against legalistic universalism." (87). See Simon Schama.
- 2 As it is well known da Cunha had read copiously the travel and exploration literature on Brazil. The pages of *Os Sertões* show that he was intimately familiar with the work on both Brazilian and foreign travelers to the "interior" of Brazil. The "Índice Onomástico" that Leopoldo Bernucci prepared for his critical edition of *Os Sertões* provides immediate reference to da Cunha's archive. Let me here just list a few telling examples: Jean Louis Rodolphe Agassiz's *Journey in Brazil* (1867) published in Portuguese in 1865–66 and again in 1938; Joao Mendes de Caixas, *Algumas Notas Geologicas* (1886); Henrique de Beaufort Rohan, geographer and historian, author of *Dicionario de Vocablos Brasileiros*

(1889) and *As Secas do Ceara* (1897); Charles Louise Contejan, *Elementes de geologie et de paleontology* (1874) and *Geographie botanique; influence du terrain sur la vegetation* (1881); Jose Viera Couto de Magalhaes, ethnographer and geographer author of the novel *O Selvagem* (1876); Joao Fernando da Fonseca, medical doctor, geologist and historian, author of *Viagem ao redor do Brazil* (1880); George Gardner, *Travel in the Interior of Brazil* (1846); Charles Fredrick Hartt, a famous naturalist, explored the lower Amazon in 1871, author of *Geology and Physical Geography of Brazil* (1870); Thomas Henry Huxley, *Paleontology and the Doctrine of Evolution* (1879); Henry Maudsley, the psychiatrist author of *Body and Mind* (1870) and *The Pathology of Mind* (1879); Ernest Renan author of *Histoire des Origines du Christianisme* (1863–1899), Marc Aurele et la *Fin du Monde Antique* (1882); Augustine Francois saint-Hilaire the naturalist and author of *Voyage dans l'Interieur du Bresil* (1830–1851); Teodoro Fernandes Sampaio, Bahian ethnologist and historian, author of *O Tupi na Geografia Nacional* (1901); Hippolyte Adolphe Taine, *Essays de critique et d'histoire* (1858) and *Histoire de la litterature anglaise* (1863); and Julio Trajano de Moura, ethnologist, author of *Do Homen Americano* (1889). See Leopoldo M. Bernucci.

3 See Castro-Klarén.

4 In “El caldero de Babilonia: la mistica del espacio de la soledad en *Cien años de soledad*,” I show that the space of solitude developed in the solitary practices of the Buendia family are anchored in a genealogical trace that links directly to the ascetic practices of the early Christian monks who exiled themselves to the Egyptian desert. The discourse of solitude in *Cien años de soledad* has little affinity with the causes or symptoms of modern alienation as conceived by Freud and modern psychiatry. Solitude is desired as a place of refuge rather than experienced as a symptom of maladjustment in need of remedy for better socialization. The literature on the ascetic tradition and the monastic techniques that constitute it is indeed enormous. I offer here a few sources that are especially helpful with the early Christian ascetic tradition and its manifestations in Roman antiquity. See Peter F. Anson, Peter France, Graham Gould, Hugo Magennis, Thomas Merton, Benedicta Ward, SLG.

5 Euclides da Cunha cites the work of Ernst Renan on early Christianity (*Histoire des Origines du Christianisme* 1863–69) and the heretical movements that plagued the Church often. It is well known that da Cunha relied strongly on Renan and his negative portrayal of the leaders of dissident sects to inform his own view on Conselheiro and his vision of a return to the basic principles of early Christianity.

6 In the very last pages in *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (1970) Foucault writes a section on history. There he makes several assertions that have had profound consequences on the way we conceive today of history and its central subject: man. Foucault has shown how “man” has produced himself in the episteme of the West. At the closing of *The Order of Things* he introduces the idea of man as a finished concept in the sense that “the human being no longer has any history; or rather since he speaks, works, and lives, he finds himself interwoven in his own being with histories that are neither subordinate to him nor homogeneous with him. By the fragmentation of the space over which Classical knowledge extended in its continuity, by the folding over of each separated domain upon its own development, the man who appears at the beginning of the nineteenth century is ‘dehistoricized’” (369).

7 See in Simon Schama the section “Arminius Redivivus” for a discussion of the forest iconography and feeling in the German Romantics (100–120).

8 For further discussion on the discipline of the body/mind of the early Christians in the Egyptian desert and its legacy in the Catholic tradition see my “El caldero de Babilonia” cited above.

- 9 Eugenio Tanzi (1856–1934) was an Italian neurologist and psychiatrist. Differing from Freud, he thought that psychiatry ought to be considered a branch of biology. He is best known for his original work on paranoia which he considered to be a return to a kind of primitive thinking
- 10 See above the *The Lives of the Desert Fathers*. St. Anthony or San Antonio el Grande died in 356 A.D. in the Egyptian desert. Atanasius wrote his biography in Greek. Anthony is one of the first hermits. Eremos means desert in Greek. Anthony is known for his graphic depiction of his struggles with Satan and the temptations of the flesh.

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