Brazilian historiography and the environment: contributions by Sérgio Buarque de Holanda and the contemporary environmental history debate

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Abstract

Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, Brazilian historigraphical debate was profoundly marked by Sérgio Buarque de Holanda. The problems of national identity, the occupation of the land, the social organization of Brazil and its civilizatory roots, the cultural exchanges and boundaries in inland parts, the perceptions and forms of appropriation of nature, and other topics covered by the author still echo in contemporary historical research. This article discusses how his main works contribute to environmental history, especially his interpretations of how human societies and the natural environment have affected one another. The role of nature, its metaphors, ideas, or images are the evidence of a history of Brazilian historiography.

Keywords: historiography; environmental history; Sérgio Buarque de Holanda (1902-1982); Brazil; twentieth century.

The narrative forms used by Sérgio Buarque de Holanda offer an unrivaled journey through the writings of the history and the natural and cultural landscapes of Brazil. *Raízes do Brasil* (1995) [Roots of Brazil], *Caminhos e fronteiras* (1994) [Pathways and frontiers], *Monções* (1976) [Monsoons], *Visão do paraíso* (1969) [Vision of paradise] and *O extremo Oeste* (1986) [The far West] are milestones in an intense intellectual life's work and the history of Brazilian historiography in the twentieth century.[1] The journey I have taken through the works derives from two sources: reflections at the Laboratory for History Writing and Theory, at the Federal University of Uberlândia, and recent work undertaken at the Center for Sustainable Development, University of Brasília. The choice of works is designed to demonstrate how lyrical, canonic, and profoundly up-to-date this author is: a classical historian who deserves to be the object of debate, with the power to attract many more contributions to the study of environmental history.[2]

To introduce Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, I call on Dr. Antonio Candido, a sociologist and literary critic, and Dr. Ronaldo Vainfas, a historian, for two short texts of theirs: the 1967 foreword to *Raízes do Brasil* written by Candido (1995), and Vainfas's (2002) chapter about *Visão do paraíso* in the collection of essays, *Introdução ao Brasil: um banquete nos trópicos* (Introduction to Brazil: a banquet in the tropics) edited by Leonardo Dantas Mota and published in 2000. Through them, we are introduced to passages from Holanda's writings, his main themes, the temporal plays at work, the intellectual interchanges pursued, and the potentialities of his narrative options. From these, we can then investigate Holanda's works per se, in which the evidence and plots of a vibrant, eloquent interpretation of Brazilian history emerge, with the natural environment garnering pride of place.

By using Roger Chartier's (1990, p.82) metaphor for plot as an assumption on which "historical comprehension is built in and by the account itself, the way it is organized and composed," a whole host of plausible interpretations can be imparted. Revealing the plot and making it comprehensible constitute the very exercise of writing history and the historian's role. As such, narration and explanation become intellectual processes designed to investigate the evidence and proof that enable the plot to be identified. For the historian, it is dramatization, building a scene that becomes intelligible in what Chartier (1990, p.83) calls the "crossing of accessible evidence." Evidence and proof,[3] which, in a bid for verisimilitude, supply an outlook on the natural environment and help produce "intelligibilities of the historical phenomenon" (p.83).

The two most commonly cited works by Sérgio Buarque de Holanda are *Raízes do Brasil* (Roots of Brazil) – a seminal work in a career that was as long as it was brilliant – and *Visão do Paraíso* (Vision of paradise) – a grandiose, grandiloquent work published in 1959, which the author himself preferred. These works present us with a historian who is a great wordsmith and producer of documents.

Sérgio Buarque de Holanda's entire oeuvre constitutes a monument. As Jacques Le Goff (2000, p.115) teaches us, documents cannot be isolated from the sets of monuments of which they are part. Respecting this lesson, I will here follow a plan that leads from the general to the particular. The general understood here as the broadest perspective on Holanda's work, the narrative and the time, and the particular understood as the experience of nature lived by those who informed the historian. This is what takes us to his "frontier

works" – *Caminhos e fronteiras*, *Monções* and *O extremo Oeste* –, where the relationships between individuals and the natural world form the body and soul of the historical work.

In order to identify Holanda's plots and the evidence of nature in his work I have divided this text into four parts. First, we need to reflect on the narrative and historical nature of Holanda's work, the main topics he covers, the authors and documents he analyzes, and the contemporary plots he reveals. To do so, we must: (1) characterize the author's description of Brazilian society in *Raízes do Brasil*; (2) reflect on how erudition and travel continued to mark the interchange between the author of *Visão do paraíso* and other intellectuals; (3) identify how *Raízes do Brasil* and *Visão do paraíso* could be interpreted from the perspective of environmental history; and (4) analyze *Monções*, *Caminhos e fronteiras* and *O extremo Oeste*, and investigate the development of a critical, scholarly, historical perspective that takes nature as its inspiration and essence. The idea is to investigate the ways Brazilian historiography has been written from the perspective of one of its most important authors and the presence of the natural world in his works. It is hoped that these interpretations may inspire new historical writings, especially in the area of environmental history.

The *Roots* of the plot

A political message of a radically different tone is how Antonio Candido refers to the dialogue Sérgio Buarque de Holanda established with Latin American thinkers. For Candido, the "method of opposites" Holanda adopted in *Raízes do Brasil* was proof of this dialogue. In the 1986 *post scriptum*, he argues that *Raízes* was a weapon that opened the way for the great democratic movements (Candido, 1995, p.24). Analyzing social and political life in Brazil, both past and present, in the foreword to the second edition (1947), Holanda (1995, p.25) states his political position when he refers to his diversion to examine "those [problems] that are related to the circumstances of the introduction, amongst us, of a regime of personal dictatorship of totalitarian inspiration." In 1947, his will was to understand his work in its own historicity.

In *Raízes do Brasil*, Holanda (1995) weaves a sociopolitical history of the Iberian/European and American modernity that surrounded and gave meaning to the burgeoning Brazilian identity. In the development of the physical territory, the frontier or transition zones constituted bridge-territories that sparked reflections about the experiences of the cultural, mental, and human development and the formation of traditions, innovations and metaphors that mark Holanda's landscapes. The organizing principles of society, like cohesion, hierarchy, the setting of rules and regulations, and the way men and women reacted to them as they adapted to the new possibilities/limits of existence are the guiding threads of the work. The characterization of the national/Brazilian man in his relationship with labor, or more with indolence; the random and adventurous nature of urban development processes; the strength and energy needed to build the society; these were not felt effectively in these parts, he states. Blatant interracial breeding, the tortuous, numbing slavery, opulence and tragedy were what marked the continuum of the nation's history. In this continuum, bachelorhood, Portuguese-inspired urban architecture, patriarchy, and big land ownership formed the backbone of the society.

Holanda describes the transformation of the old rural nobility into a town-dwelling, lettered nobility as an event from imperial times, when Dom Pedro II, like others, was a pioneer. He tells that the emperor, like so many learned men, was more enamored of books than of the exercise of power. The historian – or revolutionary – perceives that the exercise of power during the monarchy was only possible because of the people's lack of political experience. This is worth dwelling on. If the people are inexperienced, they are victims, and in the order of the structures of society they are, according to Holanda, the most insulted, humiliated, affronted, censured, despised, impoverished collection of human beings. The rejection of Latin peoples by the rational hierarchy was the first feature prompted by this structure. Two others were the ineffective resistance to cosmopolitan and urban influences, and the lack of consistency of racial prejudices. Let us hear Holanda's (1995, p.186) own words:

> Those pioneers of our Independence and Republic, who in 1817 had no wish to modify the state of the black slaves, even though they did not understand the rights of this situation, were of a sincerity that has never again been seen in the course of our nation's life. Since then, the most prudent politicians have preferred not to mention the weak point in an organization that has aspired to internal perfection and coherence, even if only on paper. They did not doubt for a single moment that political health is the offspring of morality and reason. And thus they preferred to forget ugly, disconcerting reality and took refuge in an ideal world whence the indoctrinators of time waved to them. They grew wings rather than see the vile spectacle the country offered them.

This passage contains an earnest criticism of the social organization in the author's day and the social organization of the empire. In speaking of the empire, he addresses some of the biggest subjects in Brazilian social thinking: slavery and political blindness. Elitism and cordiality constituted means of escape. He argued that "the principles of liberalism have been a useless, onerous numbing agent" (Holanda, 1995, p.187), he wished to "try to organize our disorder using wise schemes and proven virtues" (p.188), but he was aware of the wealth of sensibilities and "private essences" that had to be recognized. For this, he used one of the most important laws of science – the law of flow and backflow, the mechanical compass – and one of the most significant exercises of art – the construction of literary verisimilitude (Pesavento, 2005, p.75). He criticized the "poor lamentations of neurasthenic intellectuals" (Holanda, 1995, p.187), warning of the existence of a perfidious demon keen to obscure people and their vision.

With this narrative construct, Holanda's discourse – initially of a sociological ilk – gives way to historical discourse per se, as Evaldo Cabral de Mello (1995, p.192) notes in the epilogue entitled "Roots of Brazil and afterwards." But he also constructs a profoundly political and exceptionally cogent historiographical discourse. He surpasses, as in Astor Diehl (1998, p.204), the "official, episodic, personalized historiography ... adding to the forms of structural analysis those of the mindsets in modernization." He makes reference to the intellectual expressions of his time.[4] A shrewd intellectual who knows how to "differentiate times and objects" (Pécora, 2008, p.27), he puts history at the service of the problems of national identity.

Holanda's colloquies about history

It is through the observations of documental sources, as presented and analyzed in *Visão do paraíso*, that Holanda (1969) creates a history of ideas and meanings, the conceptions of paradise and hell, the experience of living along the inland rivers, and the role of the natural environment in setting its limits and potentialities. It is a detailed study into the most profound Brazilian cultural references. From the brave female Amazonian warriors who inhabit Friar Gaspar de Carvajal and Father Cristóvão de Acunha's descriptions to the in-depth reading of the letter of June 18, 1552, from the governor, Thomé de Souza, informing the Portuguese king about the progress and setbacks of his mission of conquest, Holanda conjures powerful images that lasted in Brazilian historiography throughout the twentieth century to reach the present day.

The detailed choice of passages to quote about the division of the Americas and the drawing of borders immediately brings into play the role of the cosmographer-vassal, the conquistador, the voyager, the memorialist writer, informers of plots – individuals whose evidence can be seen in accounts, journals, memoirs, and an assortment of other documents carefully selected by the author. Sérgio Buarque de Holanda is a scholarly demiurge, in Vainfas's (2002, p.25) words. He tracks down myths, identifying their roots, picking up the reappropriations of ancient stories in the texts of voyagers and chroniclers. His is a history of attitudes even before this was accepted in the field of historiography; or a history of mental representations, located on Pierre Chaunu's third level of social structure (Vainfas, 2002, p.28). Here, I add another third-level phenomenon, namely the analysis of environmental history by Donald Worster (1991). In it, the mental and intellectual world constitutes an exclusively human domain that nonetheless links individuals to nature inside the processes of its representation, imagination, and signification. Therein lies the importance of rereading Holanda's writings while drawing on new historical references.

Holanda investigates long periods of time and draws on the work of European, American, and Brazilian scholars of his own generation, such as the Annales school in France, the German historiography of Ernst Curtius, Gustav Droysen, and Wilhelm Dilthey (Pesavento, 2005), and the Italian historiography of Arturo Graf (Vainfas, 2002). In his writings he uses texts by other classical or contemporary historians. The list includes Varnhagen, Capistrano de Abreu, Caio Prado Júnior, Alfred Métraux,[5] Irving Leonard,[6] Lucien Febvre, Fernand Braudel, Pierre Chaunu, Ronald Hepburn,[7] Serafim Leite, and Leopold von Ranke, with whom he a established contemporary dialogue that was also informed by his reading of British and American history periodicals.[8]

The plot thickens. In Sandra Pesavento (2005, p.157) we meet an Holanda for whom the normality of the experiences described could demonstrate prohibitions or those dictates that are proffered at the frontiers and in spaces of specific cultural expression. These are the documents analyzed by the author alongside his own research.

The contours of *Visão do paraíso* reveal the fantastical and rustic pathways by which lands and souls have been conquered throughout Brazilian history. These pathways could be read of in the "fame of the sparkling mountains of the hinterlands" (Holanda, 1969, p.37). Holanda agreed with Teodoro Sampaio, demonstrating at least two major disputes in the field of ideas.

The first takes place inside the travel accounts, reports, journals, and scientific and literary texts; this dispute is symbolic and resides in the universe of the imaginary of the documental sources; it is a dispute of perspectives and experiences. The other is truly historiographical: how, based on these reports, the historian builds his discourse, or whatever it might be called: his interpretation/articulation/practice/version of the past.

Holanda investigated the ideas of paradise, of the medieval, religious, harmonious, bucolic, delightful, and frugal paradises lost that appear in the accounts of Fernão Dias, Gabriel Soares de Souza, Aleixo Garcia, Cabeza de Vaca, Cristóvão Jacques, Bartolomé de las Casas, Hans Staden, André Thevet, and Cristóbal de Acuña, as well as the ideas of their infernal counterparts.

Sandra Pesavento (s.d., p.3) argues that Holanda retraced Herodotus's steps when he ranged over all that had already been reported. He gave voice to both what had been and what had not been seen. In Holanda's case, the accounts wax on the "soul of the land" and the country's Portuguese roots. His contextualized, novelistic writings likewise bring to mind the fifth century historian.

Once more, the plot and the descriptions of specific types of social players in themselves incarnate the theatricality of a history in which complex characters feature in a variety of environments and times. Holanda casts different gazes on the unfolding experiences, but he handles his documents so skillfully that he does not rank them in hierarchical or value terms. He treats the testimony of Cortez's letters with as much care as the testaments of Pero Magalhães Gandavo, Antônio Vieira, and even the royal decrees. He gives the reader a real taste of the history of the documents, considering them in relation to their thought systems while probing their inner content. He puts history in Roger Chartier's (1990, p.64) vertical diachrony and horizontal synchrony, a lesson that is still valid and worthwhile.

Holanda's engagements with the different schools of thought of his day and their predecessors are just as vibrant as the work that contains them. The aesthetic realism of his narrative and the way the topics and images are unfurled produce an unequivocal temporality for the reader. The quality of the narrative draws the reader into experiences that took place in distant times and places and a mental world imbued by novelty but also by routine. The process of routine formation in societies in general and Brazilian society in particular results – in the author's interpretation – from a combination of laziness, carelessness, lack of objectivity, pragmatism, and silencing. The taxing task of colonialization, as represented in the Portuguese or Spanish imaginary, the structuring of the country's social and political ideas, and the careful reporting of documents thus create distinct time frames.

The works cited by Holanda cover an extensive period of time: modernity from colonization to the republic. He follows the ideas, but above all he follows his informants. Even so, he does give precedence to certain moments in the narratives, a detail in the course of the legends, images collected from the selected discourses, and images he himself constructs to identify the forms of being, living, and thinking about and in Brazil. Some examples of these are "crude realism," "the harvester and the tiler," "the vice of bachelorhood," "the pedagogues of prosperity," "the dictatorships of the rural domain," or even one image of notable synthetic and critical force, that of "the people evicted from their own land."[9]

These images and ideas have been cited so often in the realm of academia that they have virtually entered the public domain.

In 2000, *Raízes do Brasil* was published in the "Great Brazilian Thinkers" (Grandes nomes do pensamento brasileiro) collection brought out by Topbooks/Publifolha, and in 2005 its 26th edition was launched. Meanwhile, Editora Brasiliense published seven editions of *Visão do paraíso* until 1995, then in 2010 it was brought out in a new edition by Companhia das Letras. Publishing success, academic canon, the kernel of the discussion proposed here, Holanda's thoughts always spark new and different interpretations.

Holanda's colloquies about nature

One question arises about the need to read Holanda: how can interpretations of his writings contribute towards the contemporary debate on environmental history? Clearly, it is impossible not to consider the author from the more general perspective of Brazilian historiography. One of the greatest interpreters of the root causes for the historical evolution of Brazil, Holanda has been canonized, read as a veritable masterwork, created a series of interpretative exercises, devised concepts, described pasts and individuals, and unfurled histories that have excited the imagination and explained different pasts to many generations of historians, intellectuals, and readers keen to understand the country in its historical and social configurations.

Defending the particular thought processes of the "inventors of Brazil" in their converging concerns, Ana Maria de O. Burmester (1997, p.98) opines that Holanda wrote an open history in which "method is given precedence as a form of access to the subject," but never as a model.[10] Open works tend to remain up-to-date because new questions and reflections can always spring from them. Texts that take the contemporary world – and especially the natural world – as their starting point can be approached in many ways: (a) the description of the routes forged throughout Brazil and the Brazilian-Portuguese civilization's use of and dependency on tame animals (Holanda, 1994, p.129); (b) the description of the gradual, systematic destruction of the giant, age-old forests and trees in central Brazil (Holanda, 1976, p.37); (c) the landscapes and intense heat followed by the cold spells and winds in the southern grasslands (Holanda, 1986, p.47); (d) the descriptions of butterflies and humming birds by the old chroniclers (Holanda, 1969, p.131).

Ultimately, Holanda investigates the impact of individuals' extreme experiences with nature as reported in journals about travels by land and water in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Holanda, 1976, p.37). Indeed, the use of this type of source for environmental history has been recommended by José Augusto Drummond (1991, p.184). All the images described above raise the issue of nature and the ideas that historians and social scientists produced about it. These have to do with the impact of the travels and frontiers in the construction of Brazilian history. As Chiara Vangelista (2005, p.138) puts it, "the frontiers do not produce an organized space, but itineraries for penetration, permanent inroads on maps due to the geological overlapping of modern routes over ancestral ones." Frontiers overlying frontiers woven in the layers and empty spaces of the discourses of history.

From reading Drummond (1991, p.181), I was able to question – while hazarding the risk of anachronism – whether Holanda, as a social scientist, gave the natural environment a role as a "conditioning and modifying agent of culture." It is clear that environmental concerns are not part of the author's agenda either in the late 1930s or the mid-1950s. However, what status did nature gain in this profound view of the experience of territorial occupation and the developments of the Brazilian human groupings across this vast, rich, and alien nation?

Conflicts dog this history, sometimes subtle, sometimes less so. Nature may be idyllic, but it is also treacherous (Holanda, 1986, p.44). It is this latter case, in the author's explanation, it is responsible for the insalubriousness of many places and the traits of many indigenous peoples. Here, it is essential to perceive the limits of the interpretations of Brazilian society and peoples imposed by time. The good/evil dichotomy expressed in this explanation has dogged the author's interpretation without, however, simplifying it. Epidemics and floods disturbed the public order that should have been assured by the introduction of the first towns. Society was replacing the natural environment and suffering the consequences of its occupation and proximity. Although Holanda describes this process with all his characteristic detail, it is interesting how the interpretation of the social system prevented him from clearly perceiving the ecology of the towns, landscapes, or even human beings. That was not his goal, but his description allows us to analyze how, from the natural landscapes, identity perspectives were constituted for modern Brazil. I applaud João Kennedy Eugênio (2008, p.425) in his description of Holanda as the tribe's totem, to whom all should pay homage.

Turning now to some other texts published in his day, we can see in Gilberto Freyre (1987, p.131) an emphasis on the Brazilian baroque relationship/presence in the natural environment. Meanwhile, in the 1940s, Paul Arbrousse-Bastide (1960) recognized in Freyre the use of the term, "ecology." Engineering was a subject that led him to perceive the problem of water. By incorporating considerations of the biophysical situation of the tropics and subtropics, pollution, agricultural development, and quality of life into the social sciences, he was drawn into dialogue with the present and the past. I will not analyze Freyre here;[11] I merely make reference to him to point out the limits and time frames of the influences[12] that impinge on interpretations of men from related generations.

The romantic authenticity of Holanda in his organic-inspired perception of society lay in the pendular motion that swung him from monarchist sympathy to modernist engagement (Eugênio, 2008, p.453). Brazilian originality and authenticity were embedded in a nationalism in which rationalism and individualism were strengthened in a history of progress. Holanda's perspective was future-looking, full of disenchantment with the present and marked by the surrealistic perspective of a distant paradise, as Eugênio demonstrates in his analysis of the controversies that involved him with modernism. Here, I would like to expand on this idea, because at the end of the day the author's paradises are many. His criticism of civilization through the criticism of history goes beyond the cliché. Art, thinking, and politics could be the antidotes for a time that was already medicating itself to stand up to the pressures of modern capitalism. Even in the early 1920s, Holanda was indicating this malaise in Brazilian civilization.

In the historical texts, this malaise made nature a wild environment, sometimes overflowing with riches and possibilities, but nonetheless hostile; inhabited by imagined riches, a *locus*

for the desire for never-ending resources, but not always of real prosperity. The descriptions of the Eden-like landscape[13] would always fascinate new generations and withstand the test of time, Holanda said (Holanda, 1969, p.169), and he was right. Since the sacred writings, the symbolic descriptions of nature, with its flowers, animals, and adornments, all allegorically interpreted, marked what he called a psychosis of the marvelous (p.178). The immanence of nature in modern thinking is highlighted against a fundamental pessimism with regard to the present (p.181). The idyll inhabits the past, the texts from the 1500s to 1800s by learned Ibero-Americans, in *Visão do paraíso*. The mystique that surrounded this idyll and its conceptions took on contours that linked Plato, St. Augustine, Columbus, Gândavo, Cardim, Vieira, and countless other chroniclers and informants.

Science and technology also tamed nature and played their part in its transformation. From a perilous jungle, productive pasture could be produced. The study of the cultivation of the land and improved productivity already took place in the country's farms and rural lands. Nature was the heart of the economy that had sustained the colony and empire in Brazil, constituting the basis on which slavery also stood – coffee, gold, and timber.

In the author's view, the rural roots of Brazilian civilization were the key to understanding the ways of life that transformed sugar mills into separate entities in the world – self-sufficient islands where the administration of justice, policing, and religious observance were exercised autonomously. The colonization of the inland parts of the country was a hard undertaking and the transformation of nature was part of the process of pushing back frontiers that marked the national experience continuously, if not linearly.[14] The abolition of slavery annihilated the agrarian dominion, marking the beginning of the end of the old mills. As Holanda put it, economically speaking it was a catastrophe. Free workers, modern production units, and urbanization processes changed the face of Brazil. It was a slow revolution of modernity in which the abolition of slavery was the tangible watershed that separated the two periods.

A democratic crop, coffee, would be the bringer of good for all, through free workers and liberal stability – that was the discourse of the ruling classes of the day and many of the men of letters studied by Holanda. If it was not good for all, coffee would at least enrich a few and thereby generate the capital needed for the country to be modernized. The rural world was sponsoring its supplantation by the modern world – mechanized, industrial, and urban. This process, Holanda explains, was the "course of our evolution" (Holanda, 1995, p.176).

The so-called evolutionary modernization process came about in the midst of an intense and often unspoken conflict between societies, individuals, and the natural environment. These conflicts took place in the fringes of civilization, where individuals and nature interacted, creating either modern societies or outdated settlements. Rationalism, which since the Renaissance had stripped individuals of their moral view of nature, according to the author, developed a secular, temporal reduction in western society. Holanda judged this by observing the degree of utility of a social standard or a bourgeois mindset. To exemplify this process, he pointed out the "societies" of ants and bees, drawing on the fables of La Fontaine. Even so, until the nineteenth century, ideas about supernatural or monstrous phenomena still inhabited modern thinking.

Holanda's text follows these ebbs and flows in the documents it analyzes, which is why it is neither linear nor chronological. He puts the beginning and end of modernity into

contact with each other, like the mythical serpent, which has to do with enabling feedback between beginning and end.

Reading Holanda somehow brings to mind the writings of Fernand Braudel about the landscape of action in time and the aim of the social sciences. In a text published in *Annales* in 1958, Braudel (2009, p.81) states that "reality in its crude state is nothing but a mass of observations to be organized." In this purely historiographical process, nature and the attempt to tame it are metaphors, and the French historian makes his model "float like a ship on the particular waters of time" (p.86). In Holanda, there is a principle of uncertainty to be observed: upon reaching deep, open sea or uncharted lands, the sailor, the fisherman, and the conquistador fear they will never get home and mistakenly stake their luck and their lives on the hope of finding riches. But many only fulfilled their duties and the missions they believed were theirs.

Like Braudel or Marc Bloch, Holanda knew that some habits were so ingrained that they constituted veritable thought systems and forms of action. Nature, whether in abundance or on the fringes of human use, whether utilitarian or romantic, constitutes a substrate for the nation's culture. Like the Naples of Belarmino, a character by Holanda (2008, p.52) in "A viagem a Nápoles" (Journey to Naples) written in 1931, nature is another place, a space for escape, imaginary; a space for memory and torpidity that demands a new perspective on life and which may be both inside and outside individuals at the very same time.

At the frontiers of thought... a place

The world of nature is part of the essence of the history told in *O extremo Oeste* (The far West) and *Monções* (Monsoons). For José Augusto Drummond (1991, p.193), in these works the author deals "easily with environmental variables, like flora, fauna, topography, soils, navigability of rivers, means of transport, availability of food." The idea of the conquest and the constitution of frontiers, the rudimentary lifestyles, the rains that would inundate the roads, and the instruments that societies used in these processes, are the formative elements of the march of these everyday heroes in Holanda's texts. The perception of parallels between the occupations of the Brazilian and American frontiers brings the historian closer to the kind of reflection that lies at the heart of environmental history.

Holanda cites Walter Prescott Webb (1979) to reflect on the armaments the Texans needed to occupy the land and establish their domain over nature. *The great frontier*, published in 1951, also reveals the imaginary in the formation of the institutions that accompanied the frontier expansion processes. Webb draws on four elements to make his analysis of American history in particular and modern history in general: (1) population, (2) land, (3) gold and silver, and (4) things and commodities. These were the elements that combined to form a wholly distinct society organized in the transitory space where farms were formed and towns sprang up in the far west. With this, he enriched the reflections about frontiers in US historiography, beginning with Friedrick Jackson Turner (1990) at the turn of the twentieth century.[15]

The radical experience of individuals at the frontier and their adaptation to the harsh environmental conditions is one of the points of contact between Holanda and Turner's writings investigated in Robert Wegner's (2000) thought-provoking *A conquista do Oeste:*

a fronteira na obra de Sérgio Buarque de Holanda (The conquest of the West: the frontier in the work of Sérgio Buarque de Holanda).[16] In his study of Holanda's essays, Wegner finds several areas of common ground with Turner. Three of these are: (1) the situational explanation that blends a slow-paced adaptation in the Portuguese tropics, adopted as a metaphor by Holanda in the animal hide whose shape changes as it is worked, but which still bears the marks of its originality; (2) the safety valve that was the existence of free lands – frontier areas – yet to be occupied by a people who hailed from highly populated areas; and (3) the serene bravery of the explorers, who, between downtime and business-time, set a special pace for that civilization and society. There is an explanatory naturalization that combines the so-called free lands, the apparently easy-going adventurers, and the mix of business with the pleasures of idleness. A fertile image for voracious colonization.

Accounts written by travelers and other frontier-dwelling men and women about their contact with the natural environment have been widely used to build a history that picks out individuals who exemplify certain regions and nations. It is with this historiographical/memoir-oriented tradition that Holanda interacts. Drawing on a wealth of 17th and 18th century texts, he reveals the devastation wrought by the invading *bandeirante* explorers in São Paulo and demonstrates the "visible signs of destruction and burning" (Holanda, 1976, p.44) along the old inland routes, and in so doing traces an equally particular history of Brazil's frontiers and landscapes.

In *O extremo Oeste*, there is an ever-lurking sense of threat. Amerindians are taken for barbarians, they "infest" the roads, and castigate the explorers who risk their lives in unequal battle, for, as Holanda describes it, based on travelers' accounts, few Amerindians were capable of doing away with a troop of five hundred firearms. He cites documents – almost always official ones – such as the 1730 communiqué written by Captain Antonio Pires de Campos, which states that some Amerindians already tamed horses and, armed with powerful spears, would ride into battle, strong and lithe. Their arrows, produced locally using local techniques, were more effective than the heavy, cumbersome European weapons (Wegner, 2000, p.151).

According to other descriptions cited by Holanda, the Amerindians almost wiped out the Spanish in Paraguay. He builds up a hero who is European or of European ancestry, who initially adapts to the conditions in the natural environment and later turns it to his own social needs. The antihero in his history is the Amerindian, either fine but rough, or fierce but civilized. The informants of his history speak of a similar universe of interpretation and experience, a universe of shared perceptions and expectations. In it, the complexity of the nation in formation, always observed by the historian, gives way to a battle for occupation that pushes back the frontiers of the Portuguese and Brazilian state and demonstrates the distances and violence inherent to this space of conflict. In *O extremo Oeste*, Holanda maps out the conquest of the hinterlands by the Portuguese as a culture in movement.

In *Monções*, this same culture moves through the hinterland, which is described as remote, distance, and rustic. Travel into inland parts was grueling and dangerous, the strong currents of the rivers would capsize boats, the waterfalls were hard to cross, and the labyrinths of channels hindered navigation. The accounts Holanda cites describe the people and their cultures, as well as the flora, fauna, and natural bounty of the places visited by the chosen informants.

Holanda highlights how overjoyed the travelers were when they came across a profusion of animals and birds available to be hunted. The expeditioners travelling up the frontier rivers would feed off monkeys, caimans, armadillos, guans, tinamous, and curassows. Turner (1990, p.239) immediately comes to mind, as for him the margins of the chroniclers' lists reveal the animals present in the continent, "a world that took millions of years to form," which "vanished into the famished, insatiable stomach of a foreign civilization." The non-human animals at once sated and bothered the expedition members. Holanda describes the bane of mosquitoes and the danger of piranhas, which, according to the accounts, "could be heard talking," and would castrate any man who ventured into certain rivers.

There are four documents annexed to this work. Two of them contain the orders given to 18th century expeditioners; the third is an official letter explaining how the Mato Grosso captaincy could be reached by river from the other captaincies, in particular for the extraction of quinine bark;[17] and the last is an 1802 treatise sent to the Royal Academy of Science in Lisbon about the three mining captaincies, their metals and forms of extraction.

As for the travelers' descriptions of the wildlife, a topic of particular interest, *Visões do paraíso* arguably constitutes a point of reference in its wonderful universe of circulating ideas. In it, attention is again given to certain animals and their symbolic power, such as snakes. In the western mind, serpents are the symbol of wisdom, good sense, and old age, but they can also serve the devil. They are a symbol of cosmic order, devouring their own tail – prophetic animals that marked baroque and renaissance thinking. There are snakes in the desert, snakes that carry human souls, and snakes that are the all-powerful himself. These are some of the images described by Holanda. The animal metaphors involved not only serpents, but also dragons, which designated the measure of the sublime in terms of grandeur and beauty. They terrified and captivated the western mind, and left an indelible mark on the observations and experiences of individuals in the environment. So rare were these anomalies of nature that modern men were keen to describe the colors, sounds, and forms of the animals that inhabited this frontier space between the real and the imagined. In some cases, real animals, like snakes, which stirred fear in the imaginary, proved defenseless against the all-too-real famished attacks of the travelers and pleasing to their palate. For their exoticism, parrots and other birds also became the target of hunters.

In the author's ideas, paradise was filled with parrots and other birds that lived in the all-powerful tree of life. Humming birds, unicorns, and anteaters are part of the scene described by Holanda (1969, p.217); for him, nature was "impregnated with mysteries and hidden meanings," divine reason, or human sentiments. Animals served to manifest cultures; they were metaphors for human ethics, representing the harmony and dissonance of the known and dreamt universes. Alongside the idea of discovery, this vision of paradise promoted a naturalization of Brazilian history (Oliveira, 2000, p.40), while in Holanda's thinking, the worship present in the religious symbolic construction was also present at the heart of scientific thinking, because it pervaded the whole of modern thinking. If we turn to one of Holanda's early texts in the modernist journal, *Estética* (Holanda, 1996), we find a construct that says a great deal about the forms of thought and critical writing that accompanied him throughout his life. In this essay, he talks of the need to seek out Brazil's history in the armed expeditions into the uncharted regions of its many paradises, and constructs an interpretation where

poetic art is understood as a declaration of the right to dream. And, playing with surrealism,[18] Holanda (p.215) writes that only "at night" do we see "clearly."

Final considerations

Since Droysen in the nineteenth century, history has been the comprehension of the human passage through the world.[19] Reflections about how human beings interact with the other elements and entities in the natural world are relatively recent. One work that could be seen as a watershed in this respect is *Silent spring* by Rachel Carson (1962), which, by introducing the silence of the animals in a fateful springtime, reveals the impact of herbicides and other poisons produced by human science and technology, which, as Regina Horta Duarte (2005a, p.20) puts it, had a "powder-cloud effect in the fan of developmentalist optimism." The burden of human actions, experienced and documented for centuries and covered by other sciences, has become a topic for historians and scholars working in other humanities. Sérgio Buarque de Holanda is part of this movement. In him, Brazilian social thinking, history, and nature (real or imagined) are intertwined.

In reading Holanda's works, cosmopolitanism and contemporaneity form a well-structured historical narrative. Rooted in a broad, diverse, revolutionary intellectual trajectory, he does not fall into the trap of making deterministic explanations. The multiple dialogues in which he engages cover several fields of knowledge, especially history, literary criticism, anthropology, geography, and sociology, representing knowledge that is both diverse and complex, bringing into the field of the humanities his naturalist informers – individuals whose lives coincided with the frontiers of knowledge and who revealed the ideas circulating in their worlds with great clarity and wisdom, and, in Holanda's case, offer their criticism with well-judged irony and decided political disquiet. As discourses, analyses, interpretations, and accounts, his books and texts have become indispensable references for contemporary thinking. In them, we seek out the presence of the natural environment, we encounter the experiences and frontiers of the country, its species, and the violent yet naturalized uses and abuses of nature.

Holanda's histories, read heuristically, critically, and hermeneutically, stand out from the literary canon. By taking them as a synthesis of a history of ideas and social thinking, shedding light on the natures that have occupied the imaginary and the related concerns now so apparent in this 21st century, we hope to stir a desire to read more of this author.

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NOTES

[1] These works were released in 1936 (*Raízes do Brasil*), 1945 (*Caminhos e fronteiras*), 1956 (*Monções*), 1958 (*Visões do paraíso*), and 1986 (*O extremo Oeste*).

[2] Since the late 1970s, historiographical experiments have forged the institutionalization of environmental history through the organization of associations (American Society for Environmental History, 1977; European Society for Environmental History, 1979; Sociedad Latinoamericana y Caribeña de Historia Ambiental, 2004), the publication of journals (*Environmental History Review,* 1976; *História ambiental latino-americana e caribenha,* 2010), and the rallying cries of Donald Worster, William Cronon, Warren Dean, Joan Radkau, Manoel Gonzáles de Molina, Reinaldo Funes, José Augusto Drummond, Stefania Gallini, Regina Horta Duarte, Paulo Henrique Martinez, Guilhermo Castro, and others. See Drummond (Jan. 2002); Duarte (2005a); Martinez (2006), and Pádua (2010).

[3] For more on evidence and proof in history, see Ginzburg (2002).

[4] See Gomes (1993) and Vainfas (1998). For more on the topic, the film biography directed by Nelson Pereira dos Santos (Raízes..., 2003) reveals a great deal of evidence about the author and his areas of circulation and thinking.

[5] Swiss anthropologist Alfred Métraux (1902-1963) had a very intense career, working in universities and museums in Latin America and Europe, and collaborating with the United Nations in the defense of human rights.

[6] Irving Leonard (1896-1962) was an American historian and translator specialized in art. His publications include *Books of the brave* (1949) and *Baroque times in old Mexico: seventeenth-century persons, places and practices* (1959).

[7] Ronald W. Hepburn (1907-2008) was a British philosopher and professor. He worked at the universities of Nottingham and Edinburgh and investigated the areas of phenomenology, literature, aesthetics, religion, and moral experience.

[8] *Journal of the History of Ideas*; *Science, Medicine and History* and *The New Cambridge Modern History.*

[9] The idea that the Brazilian identity was marked by a kind of experience of being expelled, removed, or exiled already appears – albeit in a different form – in Euclides da Cunha – "expatriation inside the homeland," as can be seen in Elias Thomé Saliba (2012, p.259). For more on reflections about exile in the work of Holanda and its relationship with Brazilian literature, see Rocha (2008).

[10] In this same sense, Arno Wehling (2008, p.391) warns that readers should not expect a methodological treatment of the topics: "one has to make an analysis of the work to then extract the methodological and theoretical principles that form its basis."

[11] For more in-depth reflections, see Froehlich (2000) and Duarte (2005b, p.125-147).

[12] Anthropology and cultural studies have opened more new perceptions on human relations and the natural environment than history itself; this is left for the next generation of historians to do. See Duarte (2003).

[13] For more on this topic, see Carvalho (1998, 2003). Ulpiano Bezerra de Meneses (2002, p.41) states that it is in the realm of "identities and identity processes that the landscape has been most galvanized, and the role it has played in setting national identities is extraordinary," symbolically filling the voids left by the devaluation of human societies in Brazil.

[14] In a study published in the United States in 2006, David McCreery refers to "hollow" frontiers and "Swiss-cheese" frontiers to designate the structures that frontiers take on, especially the coffee frontier in the central southern part of Brazil throughout the nineteenth century.

[15] *The frontier in American history* (1920). Other contributions to this historiography are: Roderick Nash (1967), with *Wilderness and the American mind*, Alistair Hennessy (1978), with *The frontier in Latin American History*, and, also in the 1980s, Richard Slatta, with *Historical frontier imagery in the Americas*. I thank José Augusto Drummond and José Luiz de Andrade Franco for recommending this literature. For more on Turner, see Bougue (1988).

[16] I thank the referee of this journal for the suggested reading.

[17] This has to do with the quest for species like the Peruvian *Chinchona officinalis*, most likely *Strycnhos pseudoquina* described later by August de Saint-Hilaire, which is found in *cerrado* regions, but could also refer to the *Coutarea hexandra* and other pseudo-quinas (*Solarum pseudoquina*), which are dispersed around Brazil in rainforests and floodplains. These species and *Cinchona ferruginea* described by Martius were the object

of great scientific interest. See Santos, Pinto (2012). Their medicinal use made these species the object of considerable trade in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. See Marques (1999).

[18] See Ponge (2004).

[19] See Rüdiger (2010).

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