

The Sociocultural and Political Structures of Space-Time in *Os sertões*, by Euclides da Cunha (1902)

Reflections on Historical Experience

Las estructuras socioculturales y políticas del espacio-tiempo en Os sertões, de Euclides da Cunha (1902)

Reflexiones sobre la experiencia histórica

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This article examines Euclides da Cunha's experience during the War of Canudos in order to reflect on how temporal and spatial dimensions of reality were historically constituted and correlated. The process by which time and space were merged recorded the spatial distance between the inhabitants of the hinterlands country and the coastal urban centers as temporal-historical gaps, thereby obscuring their actual cultural and political nature and re-signifying them as natural in origin because they were linked to the material characteristics of both the environment and of the dwellers' material culture. This phenomenon simultaneously configured those subjects both as the core of national identity and as a hindrance to the nation's sociocultural and political development. The spatial distances between small inland towns and the more complex urban centers along the coast created the possibility of experiencing temporal displacement in travel between them. By examining Euclides da Cunha's book *Os sertões*, this study argues that such experiences of space and time were translated into concrete sociocultural and economic effects that profoundly shaped the lives of Brazilians as they confronted national military forces and police corps at the dawn of twentieth century.

Keywords: time; space; historicity; presence; Brazil.

Resumen

El presente artículo ofrece un estudio sobre la experiencia de Euclides da Cunha en la Guerra de Canudos, con el objetivo de reflexionar sobre cómo se establecieron y correlacionaron históricamente las dimensiones espaciotemporales de la realidad. El proceso de fusión del tiempo y el espacio hizo que la distancia espacial entre los habitantes del interior del país y los núcleos urbanos costeros se registrara como brechas histórico-temporales, desdibujando su naturaleza cultural-política, que se resignificó como naturalmente sesgada por estar relacionada con las características materiales del entorno y la cultura material de los habitantes. Este fenómeno

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*estructuró simultáneamente a estos sujetos como el núcleo principal de la identidad nacional y, al mismo tiempo, como una especie de obstáculo para el desarrollo sociocultural y político de la nación. Las distancias espaciales entre las pequeñas localidades rurales y los núcleos urbanos más complejos del litoral crearon la posibilidad de experimentar desplazamientos temporales al viajar entre ellos. Al examinar el libro *Os sertões de Euclides da Cunha*, descubrimos que esa experiencia espaciotemporal se había traducido en efectos socioculturales y económicos reales que afectaron enormemente al pueblo brasileño al enfrentarse a las fuerzas armadas y a los cuerpos de policía nacionales en los albores del siglo xx.*

Palabras clave: tiempo; espacio; historicidad; presencia; Brasil.

Introduction

From 1889 into the early twentieth century, Brazil was still a relatively young republic. The country remained predominantly rural, with scarcely any factories producing industrial goods. The people were mostly illiterate. Aside exceptions such as the city of São Paulo, the strongest cores of national urban settlement were placed along the coastline. Under the Empire, the Brazilian capital was designated the Neutral Municipality of Rio de Janeiro, and its infrastructure preserved many of its colonial characteristics into the republican period. However, those structures, which were also of a sociocultural and political nature, were fated to vanish or at least be hidden under urban reforms to be wrought on the city's surface.

Pereira Passos served as mayor of Rio de Janeiro from 1902 to 1906. Beginning in 1903, his administration launched a new urban reform project aimed at modernizing the Federal Capital. The model adopted by Pereira Passos' government was inspired by the urban reforms implemented in late nineteenth-century Paris. The *Belle Époque* had finally arrived in Brazil. The overcrowded tenements were disappearing, making way to broad avenues, boulevards, and *Art Nouveau* buildings throughout Rio de Janeiro. In São Paulo, the elites tied to the coffee economy were also reshaping the city by emulating European models of sociability and architecture.¹

Suddenly, it seemed as though the Republic was placing Brazil on the path of civilization and development. Within the semantic frameworks of

¹ Nicolau Sevcenko, *Literatura como missão. Tensões sociais e criação cultural na Primeira República* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2003), 35-94; Emília Viotti da Costa, *Da monarquia à república: momentos decisivos* (São Paulo: Fundação Editora da UNESP, 1999), 232-269; Julia O'Donnell, *A invenção de Copacabana. Culturas urbanas e estilos de vida no Rio de Janeiro (1890-1940)* (Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 2013).

the modern concept of history, structured around the ideas of progress and the evolutionary stages of human societies, the Republic was portrayed as the highest stage to be attained in that process. Since the modern concept of history implies a qualitative understanding of the passing of time, the republican form of government appeared to be the most appropriate one to adopt after the end of the Brazilian Empire. Its proximity to a qualitatively conceived historical present positioned the Republic as the most advanced political form among the sociopolitical regimes then available. Although it is difficult to claim the existence of homogeneous patterns of reception, it is at least possible to maintain that most ideologues of the Republic, philosophers of history, historians, and general readers believed in the real possibility of fulfilling redemptive promises of republicanism as part of a collective historical process. The material equivalence implied by the emulation of contemporary European models of architecture, dress, and social practices in Brazil's largest urban centers—those in which sociocultural, political, and economical capital had also become most concentrated over the previous two centuries—lent concrete reality to philosophies of history and national narratives grounded in the notion of universal history. Because that history was understood to be universal, its progress was expected to encompass everyone and everything.

The official censuses of 1890 and 1900 provide significant evidence of the serious difficulties of communication across the country. Even for the federal government, it was difficult to reach the interior beyond the coastal belt of centuries-old cities. It is also possible, however, that representatives of local political authorities had little interest in collecting information about the municipalities they governed for the benefit of the federal government. In fact, most urban areas functioned as extensions of the domains of powerful rural landowners. The infrastructural and technological deficits perpetuated by economic policies directed primarily toward the production and export of agricultural commodities, especially coffee, did little to encourage a more complex expansion of the national communications system into inland regions not necessarily integrated into that socioeconomic order. Spatial and political distances were reframed, through philosophies of history and scientific theories of historical human development, as a composite form of temporal distance. To travel through space was to travel through time.

According to the historian Margarida de Souza Neves, Brazilians were indeed experiencing an acceleration of time in the late nineteenth and

early twentieth centuries. As noted above, this resulted from the tangible effects of technological development, urban reforms, the appropriation of new cultural practices and customs, and the consumption of new goods. These practical changes in everyday life were understood as signs of civilizational advancement. The sharp contrast between the predominantly rural backlands, still operating according to colonial logics and structures, and the devices and practices of industrial urban society concentrated along the coast strongly suggested an experience of temporal acceleration for Brazilians living during that period. On the one hand, the coastal cities appeared to be moving toward a future that, until then, had been associated only with the United States and certain European nations; on the other, Portuguese America seemed to survive in the interior of Brazil. As the historian Emilia Viotti da Costa noted, travelers moving through the country could easily perceive the stark contrast between the developed coastal cities and the “margins of civilization,” little more than extensions of preserved colonial rural zones.² However, History as a transcendent phenomenon was not yet taken into account in these reflections on the differences between coastal and hinterland settlements. For this historiography, colonial persistence is a matter of social and institutional history rather than of the experience of historical time, which means that the persistence of the past is not perceived as the experience of spatiotemporal rupture.

Shaped by that context, a Brazilian engineer was able to register the disruptive experience of time lived by inhabitants of the major urban centers when they came into contact with the distant, arid, and supposedly wild regions of the nation’s hinterlands. His name was Euclides da Cunha. He graduated from the Military School of Praia Vermelha in Rio de Janeiro and worked both as a public works engineer and as a journalist for *O Estado de S. Paulo*. The newspaper sent him to cover the military campaign that unfolded around the small settlement of Canudos in the backlands of the state of Bahia, in northeastern Brazil, in the early 1890s. Initially, his articles were published in *O Estado de S. Paulo*, but sometime after his death his letters were organized and published in *Canudos. Journal of an Expedition*. However, the full force of those chronicles and telegrams became apparent

² Margarida de Souza Neves, “Os cenários da República. O Brasil na virada do século XIX para o século XX,” in *Brasil republicano. O tempo do liberalismo excludente. Da proclamação da República à revolução de 1930*, ed. by Jorge Ferreira and Lucilla de Almeida Delgado (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2003), I, 13-44; Emilia Viotti da Costa, *Da monarquia à república...*, 233-234, 241.

only later, when they were published in book form, a work that came to be known as “*Book of Vengeance*.”³

Os sertões was originally published in 1902 with the intention of doing justice to the inhabitants of Canudos, who had been crushed by republican military forces. The title refers to the Portuguese word *sertões*, meaning the backlands. Those who lived in such regions were known as *sertanejos*, a term that may be rendered in English as “backlanders.” Euclides da Cunha’s short essay on related issues, entitled *A Nossa Vendéia*, had already achieved considerable editorial success, but *Os sertões* became an even more immediate bestseller. *A nossa vendéia* had originally appeared as two different articles in the pages of *O Estado de S. Paulo*, the first on March 14, 1897, and the second on August 17, 1897. The former article described the geography of the backlands, while the latter dealt with the military tactics adopted by both the Brazilian Army and the Canudos militia, offering an assessment of each and warning the troops about the mistakes they had committed, as well as the measures they should adopt in order to avoid repeating them. Together, these two articles anticipated the “*Book of Vengeance*” yet to come. The first contained much of what would later become the opening part of *Os sertões*, entitled *The Land*. The second was an embryonic version of the book’s second and third parts, *The Man* and *The Fight*. The remarkably positive reviews the work received helped secure its enduring fame, making Da Cunha’s book a foundational reference for representations on those events and places, as well as for broader interpretations of Brazilian national identity and history.⁴

I would argue that Da Cunha’s formal education, together with his travels through the countryside, enabled him to develop acute understanding of Brazilian history and society. He lived through the events that transformed the Empire of Brazil into a republic. His experiences in the country’s principal urban centers, as well as in the backlands, appeared to the theories of sociocultural and historical development in which he believed.

³ For biographical information on Euclides da Cunha, see Sylvio Rabello, *Euclides da Cunha* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1946).

⁴ Euclides da Cunha, *Diário de uma expedição* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2000), 11-13, 43-61; Euclides da Cunha, *Os sertões. Campanha de Canudos* (São Paulo: Ateliê Editorial, 2002); Celso Castro, *Os militares e a república. Um estudo sobre cultura e ação política* (Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar, 1995); for the reception and editorial success of *Os sertões*, see the remarkable study by Regina Abreu, *O enigma de Os sertões* (Rio de Janeiro: Rocco/Funarte, 1998).

The structural similarity between traditional representations of the set Colony-Empire nexus and the republic Da Cunha lived in suggested that the nation's being and identity were still in the making in the backlands. This process entailed a violent and politically charged struggle to define what Brazilian identity, culture, and society should be. But what transcendental purpose might history, as observed by Da Cunha in the village of Canudos, ultimately have had? Were the Brazilian people in decline, or were they still in the making? As will be discussed below, this question concerns how that unfinished historical process was, or could have been, experienced as something both anticipated and derived from a broader, linear development of world history, one epitomized in Brazil in a particular historical occurrence.

Da Cunha interpreted his own experience of war and of the countryside through conventional modern frameworks of history and science, which were superimposed upon the spatiotemporal conditions of experience and upon their objects. Being in time and space was thereby re-signified in relation to historical time, events, and social structures. Within this framework, the material aspects of reality —charged with spatiotemporal existence, duration, and effects in the present— reinforced the experience of a past being drawn into the future through the lived present. Ruins are not simply the past, since they can be materially apprehended in the present. By the same token, the absence of developed techniques does not in itself mean that their products are ruins or necessarily destined to be perceived as reified remnants of the past, even when they are interpreted in that way because such techniques had not yet been developed. Forms of linear rationalization, intimately bound up with the scientific aspirations of the period and with their lived experience in the world, helped people perceive in reality what books had taught them to see.

This study considers the material aspect of reality to be as important as its linguistic codifications. The direct experience of that past Da Cunha encountered in the hinterlands consisted in the enduring presence of a Brazil that remained deeply colonial, despite having been an empire and already having become a republic. The colonial material dimension of culture continued to weigh heavily on the everyday lives of Brazilians into the first decades of the twentieth century, especially when set against the major innovations visible in the principal urban centers and in the movement between those regions. Under such conditions, it became possible to culturally codify materiality, spatiotemporality, and the ruptures of experience

they entailed. To understand and explain Da Cunha's historical experience, I have drawn on the works of Wittgenstein, Koselleck, Peirce, and Runia. The first offers ways of conceiving reality as a world composed of events whose nature is simultaneously logical-linguistic and ontological. The second provides the tools for understanding the social background through which history is experienced in specific forms. Peirce offers the philosophical instruments needed to grasp logical relations and their complex unfolding. Runia, in turn, provides reflections on how the present historical experience of the past may take place.⁵

In the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein established a set of propositions intended to distinguish his reflections from conventional ontological questions. I draw on his work in order to ground my argument about the importance of materiality as something fundamental to experience in event itself, even though it is represented only afterward. For Wittgenstein, "the world is all that is the case", that is "the totality of facts, not of things." This formulation distances his argument from traditional ontology, even if his thought was later drawn back toward at least its fringes. When he claims that "a state of affairs (a state of things) is a combination of objects (things)," he dispels doubts about the reality of the human world while simultaneously reinforcing its singularity and specific nature. At first glance, this may seem complicated, but it was a brilliant way of moving between logic, metaphysics, and ontology. Wittgenstein states that "the world is determined by the facts" whose totality determines what may or may not be the case in any given situation.

For Wittgenstein, the world is made up of facts, which, "in logical space, are the world" under determinate "states of affairs" or relations. From this perspective, things must stand in relation in order to be the case, even though they are not altered outside such relational states, all else remaining the same. These states of affairs constitute the case, or fact, under consideration; for that reason, they amount to more than mere things in the

⁵ For discussions on the presence of the past, see David Carr, "Reflections on Temporal Perspective. The Use and Abuse of Hindsight," *History and Theory* 56, no. 4 (2018): 71-80, <https://doi.org/10.1111/hith.12086>; Gabrielle Spiegel, "David Carr's Theory of Experiencing Times Past," *History and Theory* 56, no. S1 (2019): S15-S19, <https://doi.org/10.1111/hith.12095>; Anton Froeyman, "Frank Ankersmit and Eelco Runia. The Presence and the Otherness of the Past," *Rethinking History. The Journal of Theory and Practice* 16, no. 3 (July 2012): 393-415, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2012.695065>.

world. Once things become “constituents of states of affairs”, the logical relations that affect them make them more than purely ontological elements, since the relation between the truth of a fact and its existence for the human mind need not be accidental. This, in turn, makes it possible to understand representation and causality as not mutually exclusive, while simultaneously preserving the possibility of truth. Wittgenstein brings this line of reasoning to a close by stating that “a state of affairs (a state of things) is a combination of objects (things),” and that an object “can occur in a state of affairs” only because that possibility “must be written into the thing itself.” Otherwise, we would not truly know it. The central problem, then, is that “it would seem to be a sort of accident, if it turned out that a situation would fit a thing that could already exist entirely on its own,” thereby blurring the relations between human understanding, speculation, and truth.⁶

So, to better understand how Da Cunha may have experienced space-time as historical rupture through the uneasy continuity between European history and the Brazil of his own day, I turn to Koselleck’s work, especially his treatment of the categories of “space of experience” and “horizon of expectation.” The fundamentally anthropological nature of these categories allows us to consider how a subject may experience history in specific ways through sets of relations between historically configured pasts and their corresponding relations to present experiences, themselves historically oriented toward possible futures, at the intersection of agency and structure. However, it still remains to be explained how reflections on the processes through which individual experience of history and historical time may arise from a first-order experience of the material persistence from the past should be framed.⁷

Since we are considering the nature of a world made up of movements through which things become facts, thereby differentiating the world into its constituents and relations, the materiality of historical experience cannot be dissociated from its cultural consequences and representations. For this reason, I turn to Peirce’s concept of the index and to Runia’s reflections on the metonymic persistence of the past in history. An index is the logical modulation of a sign, that directly relates the terms of representation,

⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), 7.

⁷ Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past. On the Semantics of Historical Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 255-275.

linking signifier and meaning in the most immediate semiotic relation. Representation, reference, and meaning can thus produce an overlaid semiotic effect, allowing ruins, for example, to be identified as a form of materialized past time in the present existence of a given object. One might even say that the index logically links thing and meaning along a vertical axis. This makes it possible for an object transformed into a historical document to be perceived as a nugget of consolidated pastness existing in the present. Without this indexical function, we could know that something is charged with pastness only if we already knew, at least in part, the meaning of the thing as something in reality derived from a past world situation. Objects carry time within them. The problem that remains, however, after considering Koselleck's categories discussed above lies in the social dimension of this kind of presence, a question that can best be addressed through Runia's reflections on metonymy. At the level of the object, the relevant logical relation is that of the index; at the level of cultural codification, the relevant linguistic relation is that of metonymy. In this way, it becomes possible to sustain the validity of interpreting the relations between past and space-time as derived from the historical, cultural, and material dimensions of reality.⁸

The condition of the world is one of relations that may be understood as facts, even though the objectual nature of their constituents persists, preserved as material and spatiotemporal relations and phenomena that may still be apprehended as things within human understanding of logical relations. The ontological dimension is therefore preserved alongside its corresponding representational and culturally codified one, making it possible to grasp how the past persists despite of our linguistic representations of it, and how individual experiences of that persistence in the present may be socially configured and endowed with meaning. Runia's reflections on metonymy and on the presence of the past in the present allows us to consider how the historical past, in its apparent absence, could be experienced by Da Cunha through his witnessing of the material persistence of the past within a world of social and technological development still struggling to make sense of factual ruptures. The rupture of experience emerges precisely where the social dimension of metonymy acts upon our historical

⁸ Charles Sanders Peirce, *Semiótica* (São Paulo: Perspectiva, 2008), 74-76; Eelco Runia, "Forum. On Presence. Spots of time," *History and Theory* 45, no. 3 (2006): 305-316; Eelco Runia, "Presence," *History and Theory* 45, no. 1 (2006): 1-29.

experience of the persistence of the past, which may later be linguistically configured and recorded, despite the involuntary memory of a colonial country already transformed into a new republic. Past and future seemed to unfold simultaneously within an opening toward freedom and historical change. The materiality of the world thus became the very condition through which historical movement could be experienced all at once, starting from the human apprehension that a ruin, an old tradition, or different mode of transport might constitute the situation in which history, time, and things converge.

The linearity of world history lands its frontiers

The belief that the small towns of the hinterlands —still fundamentally shaped by the persistent colonial structures of the former Empire, now transformed into a young Republic— would change their nature at the same pace as the principal coastal cities suggests that people at the time assumed the nation as a whole should share the characteristics of its constituent parts. Backlands and coast alike were expected to benefit equally from the development promoted by the Federal Union. However, in Canudos, Da Cunha witnessed and recorded something profoundly different from what had been expected. The body of the nation was in fact so historically extensive that, within the same spatial coordinates, one could find both remnants of the colonial past and elements of the present, already burdened by the economic policies of an indebted future.

The concentration of resources and wealth in the major urban centers, most of them located along the coast, suggested that such societies were being drawn toward epochs no longer associated with images of a persistent colonial past. As symptoms of the physical, economic, cultural, and political distances separating the centers of political power from the country's interior, that persistence came to be configured as temporal gaps within the national body. Those gaps were, in turn, codified as different and multiple levels of historical evolution. Its constituent parts, set apart in time and space, were logically denied the right to persist for the sake of the evolution of the social body as a whole. The tragedy of the *sertanejos* —the inhabitants of the backlands— in Canudos closely resembled that of the republican soldiers, themselves sent into battle in rags. This tragedy embodied the urgent desire for a projected future to become reality,

regardless of the cost. As Da Cunha declared, the ruthless force of History would secure the Republic's victory. Aboard the steamship *Espírito Santo*, sailing from Rio de Janeiro to Salvador, the author wrote that he had “never thought this abstract notion of Fatherland [Pátria] was so vast, and that, being so, it translated in admirable synthesis all our affections,” while expressing the wish that the Republic might “deliver the final blow to those who disturbed it” from their hiding places in the hinterlands. The battles fought in Canudos made it possible, in his view, “to reconnect, beyond several years of apathy, the present day with the days of the struggles for Independence.”⁹ It became necessary to combat the persistence of the past even through actual war, because the insurgents were still perceived as beings too deeply marked by colonial forms, even after the collapse of the Empire. “The old strongholds abandoned long ago”, when closely observed, seemed to make possible the “return of a page of history,” to a moment when the Empire represented, at least, an effort to cast off the colony and embodied “the glorious season of one hundred years earlier,” when Brazil was on the verge of achieving independence and allowing History to move forward.¹⁰

However, the cognitive and ethical difficulty of confronting both the otherness of the backlands and the horrors of war led Da Cunha to revise his own views in the course of his experiences on the battlefield. He first encountered this reality on September 1, 1897, when he arrived in Queimadas, a small settlement at the entrance to the interior of the state of Bahia. There, he gathered information on the biome, flora, fauna, and geology, measured atmospheric conditions, and collected accounts from those involved in the conflict; above all, however, he recorded his own impressions of this complex environment and situation. From that point onward, he began to express his intention to publish a book based on the accounts he had written for *O Estado de S. Paulo*. The days following his return home were probably so deeply marked by reflection on the events of the Canudos war, as well as on their causes and consequences, that Da Cunha gradually transformed his compendium of brief reports into the “*Book of Vengeance*.” He configured those processes and events that had unfolded in the backlands according to a particular sense of historical direction, one implied by a

⁹ On board *Espírito Santo*. Euclides da Cunha, *Diário de uma expedição* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2000), 67.

¹⁰ Bahia, August 10. Da Cunha, *Diário...*, 69.

specific theoretical understanding of reality. The “Preliminary Note” in *Os sertões* allows us to grasp the challenges with which the author struggled.¹¹

According to Da Cunha, “the undaunted *jagunço* [a kind of outlaw, anti-hero, or mercenary], the ingenuous *tabaréu* [young soldier], and the simple *caipira* [country rustic]” would be soon become “types left to fading traditions, or extinct” owing to “the growing demands of civilization.” But how are we to understand and justify the near extinction of the *sertanejos*—the inhabitants of the backlands—if they had previously been regarded as “the vigorous kernel of our nationality”? Were rural Brazilians, hitherto preserved by environmental conditions and by the dense persistence of colonial structures, fated to destruction at the hands of advancing civilization? Was the Republic a remedy or a poison? On the one hand, Da Cunha believed that the genetic properties of *sertanejo* “sub-races” endowed them with considerable physical and adaptive potential; on the other, he thought that these positive traits would gradually be diluted through processes of miscegenation. Above all, however, he believed that civilization and the Republic would naturally subsume Brazil’s “backward” regions through the force of the supposedly necessary laws of universal historical development, a process that was to be achieved through the education and civilization of those deemed “primitive.”¹²

With regard to the very content, nature, and purpose of *Os sertões*, the most fundamental division in its historical analyses lies in the fragmentation of Brazil into two opposing parts: the “backlands” and the “coast.” The so-called Brazilian backlands were being forgotten, failing behind in the flow of history and excluded from projects of the future defined by elites who held the power to determine whether they would survive or disappear. These pressures stemmed above all from the advance of industrial capitalism in Brazil, as can be seen in Da Cunha’s frequent descriptions of the German firearms and shrapnel imported and used by the Brazilian army.¹³

Those *sertanejos* fit perfectly into the theoretical descriptions offered by the European historians and social scientists read at the time. Within those frameworks, material and cultural development were believed to be capable both of generating enough force to propel the social body as a whole and of providing the effective means to destroy its enemies. Hence, the

¹¹ Queimadas, September 1st. Da Cunha, *Diário...*, 132-140.

¹² Da Cunha, *Os sertões...*, 65-66, 190.

¹³ Da Cunha, *Os sertões...*, 217; Da Cunha, *Diário...*, 66.

most suitable theoretical solution to such circumstances appeared to be the amalgamation of that myriad of divergent groups clashing against with one another; otherwise, some of them —especially those in the least favorable economic and political positions— would soon face extinction. That is why miscegenation and acculturation appeared so attractive to those intellectuals and policymakers. The inhabitants of the backlands were described as formidable and resilient warriors, despite their constant exhaustion, but they lacked the civilizational means that had already reached and been adapted by the main urban centers, often located in the more complex and dynamic regions associated with the coffee economy. Their traditional leather armor was no match for bullets or cannon fire.

Da Cunha believed that Brazilian nationality had been formed over centuries in the country's interior, especially in the backlands. Understood as forms of “semi-civilizations” or as “sub-races” supposedly incapable of struggling for their own survival, the *sertanejos* were configured as individuals still in the process of formation and, therefore, not yet fully prepared to adopt the civilizational attributes deemed necessary for their own perpetuation. These racially biased categories were linked to the unfolding process of miscegenation taking place among the “hybrid races”, that is, among the mestizo *sertanejos*. Those intellectuals came close to believing in the systemic unviability of mestizo reproduction. In order to continue existing, mestizos would have to adapt to given conditions and evolve from them. Closely associated with Nature, the *sertanejo* was seen as “inconstant like her [Nature],” a “carved” image of it, and therefore as someone who did not properly fit within the paths of history.¹⁴

Those statements presupposed the necessary disappearance of “archaic” communities, frequently rural and poor, for the benefit of urban centers that concentrated almost all the available capital in the national economy. The advance of civilization generated the kind of radical experiences that can be traced in the writings of Brazilian intellectuals from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The importation of goods, capital, and culture from Europe reinforced prejudices already set in motion by racial theories of sociohistorical evolution. All those conditions surrounding the *sertanejos* seemed to make them empirically suitable to the observation and verification of such theoretical models, which were usually regarded as necessary laws. The backlands were believed to offer the ideal conditions

¹⁴ Da Cunha, *Os sertões...*, 215.

for the operation of natural and historical laws, allowing them to act more directly upon the “autochthonous” races, since civilizational coefficients were thought to be more effective in coastal cities accustomed to functioning according to multiple cultural registers.

Physically segregated by vast distances, deficient communication systems, and natural obstacles, the remote regions of the hinterlands appeared especially suited to provide the necessary time for the operation of historical and natural laws acting upon them. Nor were they yet trampled by the incessant locomotive of history, which was thought to impose a universal sociocultural pattern, since the hinterlands were so far removed from the coastal cities where civilization was believed to act most forcefully. Within that framework, civilization was expected logically to prevail over a future felt to be increasingly near because of the modern experience of the acceleration of time. However, Brazilian history suggested that these ideal conditions of time and space no longer existed in the 1890's, allowing Da Cunha to postulate that “we are doomed to civilization”, “given the velocity already acquired by the march of peoples in this century.” Here, racial theories served as tools for a broader historical reflection on the future and its unfolding. What matters for our purposes is that environment, race, culture, and their historical configurations were intrinsically interwoven within conditioning patterns of experience: the individual, nature, the nation, and the world as subjected to historical movement.¹⁵

The *sertanejos* appeared to undergo processes of degeneration and dispersal across time and space, and thus were thought to need to preserve their constitutive elements in both dimensions. If the spatial dimension could at least be controlled through effective State action, the temporal dimension posed riddles that were more difficult to resolve. How was one to think the permanence and coexistence of human groups through time if their contemporary differences were so pronounced that they persistently kept those individuals apart from one another? The answer may lie in the negation of those differences by subsuming them under universal concepts. Subjects who until then had lived in neglected areas suddenly became more than themselves: they became citizens of a national State, heirs to

¹⁵ Da Cunha, *Os sertões...*, 66, 157. For a better understanding of how Euclides da Cunha engaged with Gumplowicz's theories of collective human behavior, philosophy of history, and the conception of the human sciences, see Luiz Costa Lima, *Terra Ignota. A construção de Os sertões* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1997).

History as an absolute phenomenon, and subjects subordinated to alien cultural forms. Under the incessant action of historical laws, subjects of the present, past, and future were necessarily required to share some general form of identity. This implied that something of their essence —of the nature constituting them and making them who they were— had to remain effectively at work in them across time and space.

Thus, individuals who were so different and so distant from one another in space-time were nevertheless understood to be constituted, to a considerable extent, by the same nature and by the same broader historical processes. This essence was thought to persist, at least in part, in the very physiological materiality of those people. The remnants of the past persisting either in subjects' bodies or in the nation's sociocultural heritage were expected, both logically and imperatively, to be destroyed as time passed. The problem, therefore, lay in the mismatch between larger structures, operated by subjects who could choose their fates only partially, and the application of their resulting patterns to subjects living according to distinct spatiotemporal coordinates. What we usually take to be optimal cultural and civilizational models are always those of groups that, whether violently or not, have been able to impose themselves on others. Intellectuals of the period in question understood the writing of history to consist of successive series of syntheses and generalizations, conceived in advance as necessary, whose corollary was to be the progressive elimination of potential differences among subjects: the more time passed, the more uniform humankind was expected to become. That theoretical postulate was applied to people through government public policies, since many of those intellectuals exercised some form of public influence, held official positions or performed public duties. This essentially ideological operation often took place through an oscillation between official propaganda and the legitimate exercise of State violence, as well as through the writing of national histories and the existence of a public educational system. The concrete examples these structures offered in the present seemed to attest to the powerful action of the historical laws discussed above.

History experience between index and metonymy

Time seemed to attach itself to space, unfolding both dimensions into a myriad of correlated effects that grounded the historical experience of Da

Cunha and his intellectual peers. Not only were people and objects existing in the present reified as historical objects capable of yielding information and knowledge about the past, but political and sociocultural questions were also configured as actual analogues of theoretical, epistemological, and even ontological formulations. The distance between lower and higher stages of historical evolution was understood to have its roots in present material and cultural differences distributed across the surface of the Earth. Such analogies made it possible to associate the *sertanejos* of the early twentieth century with the *bandeirantes*—a kind of blend between frontiersmen and explorers—from the seventeenth century, or simply to regard them as analogous of “primitives”. Native Americans were likewise often represented as analogues of the societies and cultures of the ancient Old World. The still-colonial Brazilian hinterlands reinforced those images. Da Cunha stated this clearly when he wrote that “those extraordinary patricians on partly still unknown ground” were “barely united,” separated from his own world not by space but by “a historical coordinate—time.” The campaign thus “resembles a reflux toward the past,” something that could be experienced through geographical movement from the modern urban centers toward the hinterlands. The violence of this disruptive experience could be synthetized in the “German industry” carried by Brazilian military forces.¹⁶

At the same time, however, the social dimension of the past’s presence in the present could be also experienced metonymically through the persistence of the *bandeirante* in the *sertanejo* and in his practices, as well as through the effects of miscegenation. Da Cunha experienced and rationalized this dynamic when he reflected on the Jesuit legacy as a driving force behind the persistence of indigenous peoples within the Brazilian population. The *bandeirantes* were regarded as one of the principal artificers of Brazilian nationality. Following the rivers, often accompanied by their indigenous slaves, these settlers roamed across the Brazilian interior in search of captives, cattle, and other forms of wealth, including forest products, gold, and precious stones. The *vaqueiro*—the cattle herder—was one of the forms through which older ways of life persisted into the present by reproducing sociocultural practices, transforming the *bandeirante* into the more specific and less warlike figure of the *sertanejo*. The *sertanejos* thus stemmed in part from the *bandeirantes*. Some established small settlements near

¹⁶ Da Cunha, *Os sertões...*, 66-67.

waterways, especially along inland rivers as the São Francisco, the Parnaíba, and the Tietê. From the eighteenth century onward, these villages increasingly came to depend on cattle raising. These were the natural and historical conditions from which the *sertanejos* first emerged.¹⁷

Another determining phenomenon was Jesuit missionary activity. Although the missionaries supposedly meant to help civilize Native American populations and protect them from the harmful greed of the settlers, their work was also believed to have created particular conditions for cultural exchange. Members of the Society of Jesus in the colony were regarded as the “only men disciplined enough in their time,” engaged in an “ennobling task.” While the *bandeirantes* mixed “the blood of three races” all along the colony and the future nation, the Jesuits brought people into History and culture by “penetrating deeply into the backlands”. They were making those regions and its inhabitants “a centenary effort,” with the mission of saving “this factor [the Native Americans] of our race,” that could disappear if it were not integrated in society or had its culture recorded.¹⁸

The importance of the Jesuits lay in their intellectual work and in the narrative records of their travels throughout the world in the service of the Society of Jesus, which made possible a degree of access to the colonial past that would otherwise have remained unrecorded except through the materiality of the very objects of knowledge themselves. The bodies of the isolated inhabitants of the backlands, their ways of life, and their spatiotemporal extension preserved part of colonial history and its structures. The incorporation of Africans and Native Americans into European communities of blood, language, and culture was thought to be inescapable, since civilization and the geographical environment were supposed to assimilate them with the assistance of time. The Jesuits and the national State were seen as agents of this process of civilizing non-European ethnic elements. For those subjects deemed incapable of incorporation into the civilized society, only the extinction already foretold by Da Cunha remained.

Most Brazilian intellectuals and historians were predominantly of European descent. Despite their different European cultural origins, and thus their different histories and pasts, they shared a common background.

¹⁷ Da Cunha, *Os sertões...*, 168-178.

¹⁸ Da Cunha, *Os sertões...*, 179.

Hence, the history of Brazil was also understood as part of European history, insofar as the former was seen as, in some measure, an effect of the latter. In that sense, the European past of those intellectuals and historians could be meaningfully inserted in universal history, which had long been conceived primarily in European terms. All those partial histories could therefore be correlated either with the history of Europe or with the general history of Brazil as a whole. The narrative representation of those cultures, events, and societies would thus preserve the histories of the process of national formation from the corrosive action of time. According to Reinhart Koselleck, “the prognosis implies a diagnosis which introduces the past into the future,” a formulation that in turn implies the effective subsumption of particular ideas of future under correlated presents historically shaped by presupposed collective pasts. As he also notes, “the prognosis is a conscious element (*Moment*) of political action. It is related to events whose novelty it releases.”¹⁹

Da Cunha diagnosed the process by which Western civilization was moving into the Brazilian backlands, together with its partially destructive outcomes. By his lifetime, the idea of progress had already acquired clear form and content. The various conflicts of the early Brazilian Jacobinic Republic paradoxically suggested that the logics of social instability associated with past times were being inscribed into the national future. Yet, because that process was understood to be coordinated by universal historical forces, its outcome was thought necessarily to be the accomplishment of national formation, despite its high costs and setbacks. Whether inglorious or not, historians were thus assigned the task of tracing those historical paths that had already unfolded, as well as those still in the course of unfolding.

The years in which Da Cunha lived functioned as a kind of historical laboratory from which it was possible to draw insights for evaluating the becoming of the past and its concrete survivals in the present. The persistence of the colonial past in the present, in the form of structures that had survived the Empire and reached the republican period in much of the country’s interior, made it possible to understand both history and the present temporal dimension as manifestations of a hypothetical national being. This was an unfinished process that posed a problem to be resolved. However imperfectly, Da Cunha perceived the inexorable crises the nation

¹⁹ Koselleck, *Futures Past...*, 19, 22.

had to confront. Too much of the past had persisted within the present, but not in harmonious form. The only feasible way to preserve the unity of national character was to affirm its present condition as only one element among countless other virtually possible ones. Once the problem had been diagnosed, what remained was to offer Brazilians a solution for the future. If history was to be experienced “as the movement of diverse streams whose mutual relations constantly undergo different degrees of intensification, petrification, or acceleration, then its general motion can be apprehended only from a consciously adopted point of view,” the latter had to be shaped by the perspective of national history as articulated by the State and understood as part of the broader phenomenon of world history led by civilization.²⁰

The particular histories of distinct ethnical and cultural groups, though naturally divergent from the broader structure represented by universal history, were expected by force of logic to compose a whole made up of parts, each of which necessarily contained some properties of that universal phenomenon. To clarify the point, one might think of a puzzle and its pieces: every piece has its own function in relation to the whole, as well as to its interconnections with the others. Accordingly, the overwhelming force of the national State and of civilization was thought necessarily to impose their natures upon singular histories conceived and experienced as “the historical potentialities of a common movement.” This feature of philosophies of progress, and of the progressive philosophies of history derived from them, enabled the emergence of “a typical eighteenth-century mixture of rational prediction and salvational expectation,” further reinforced by the process through which history became an academic and scientific discipline over the course of the nineteenth century. The expectation was that “history [would] never convey him [the historian] into unknown regions of the future.” The goal was to attain rational control over national historical realities.²¹

Analyzing the historical prognoses written by Lorenz von Stein in the eighteenth century, Koselleck observed that Von Stein “was able to assess the possible tendencies of the given social classes and the declining *Stände* [the estates of the Ancien Régime] through the theoretical development of enduring structures; he never crossed the boundary into utopianism.”

²⁰ Koselleck, *Futures Past...*, 62, 58-71.

²¹ Koselleck, *Futures Past...*, 21, 62.

“All these elements of history, which Stein subsumed under the then fashionable nomenclature of ‘laws,’ had a limited duration within his theory. They did cover the ‘whole’ of history, but only to the extent that it could be experienced,” recorded, and endowed with meaning through historical narrative or through the immediate experience of the present. With that in mind, we can draw on Koselleck’s assumptions to guide the analysis of how Da Cunha’s experience had to negotiate the indexical function of the past’s persistence in materiality, in its effects on people, and in technical and historical development. Experiencing the past through diagnosis and prognosis makes it possible to organize historical discrepancies in relation to prior historical presuppositions by harmonizing “duration and time” within “a historical ontology.” The past, in its flow and in its mode of being in the present, can thus be rendered intelligible as a future yet to come within an organized historical process endowed with meaning.²²

These are some of the reasons why Da Cunha’s book came to be known as the “Book of Vengeance,” a work that the author himself compared to Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War*. *Os sertões* was also intended as a lasting intervention, one capable of shaping future configurations of the society in which Da Cunha lived, as well as those yet to come. Whether understood as prophecy or as prognosis of national formation, it is important to note how this proposed response to a historical problem was bound up with the conditions of its future realization. If, in the heart of the state of Bahia, “the core of a nationality” was being carved while being violently assaulted by the other half of its own constitutive elements, then it became the duty of *Os sertões* to avenge the violence committed against the national being. Brazilians who remained ignorant of the events that had occurred in Canudos had to be informed by Da Cunha’s diagnosis of the nation, so that such atrocities would never again endanger the process of national formation. In the devastated hinterlands of Brazil, “the living stone of our race was violently struck. Then came the dynamite... It was a consecration.”²³

Therefore, the author positioned himself as the principal fiduciary witness to the experiences related to the war in Canudos, as well as to the meanings attributed to the narrative accounts of those events. Euclides believed himself capable of perceiving, experiencing, and understanding

²² Koselleck, *Futures Past...*, 58-71, 62-63, 66.

²³ See “Notes to the 2nd Edition,” in Da Cunha, *Os sertões...*, 766, 784.

the events of his historical present in their full truth, and of recording them as accurately as possible. It was a “frank attack” on the delusions and abuses perpetrated by the republican troops. “It is not a book of vindication; it is, unfortunately, a book of attack” against the past, which, though essential part of nationality, insisted on persisting and thereby obscuring its development. *Os sertões* sought to avenge the destruction of the fundamental elements of Brazilian nationality caused both by the advance of civilization and by the phantasmagoric ruins of the colonial past still haunting the first decades of the twentieth century. What was alive, operative, and under dispute was the very essence or substance of the national being —that which, in principle, should have made Brazilians the citizens born within the national territory of the Brazilian state. Brazil as a State had yet to be institutionally consolidated. This was a historical phenomenon often understood as an organic process. The colonial past haunted the republican present, generating conflict among Brazil’s constituent parts. That colonial past had to be exorcised by whatever means necessary. It was difficult to determine and experience what, in Brazil’s own being as manifested, experienced, and represented by History, was truly present and what remained absent.²⁴

The metonymic dimension produced by the complex relations among History, the formation of the people through time and miscegenation, sociocultural structures, technical and material development, and material remnants originating in a past temporal coordinate yet persisting across space-time into the present could be assured and intensified only through those very materialities and their cultural codifications, both subjected to history as a common process and as a form of knowledge. In *Os sertões*, we may find an allegory that compares dead bodies to ancient mummies; yet this situation may be better understood as linguistic and metaphorical construction meant to guide interpretation by making the strange familiar,

²⁴ Unlike Edgar de Decca, I argue that Da Cunha sought to intervene and act upon his own historical reality, because denouncing the catastrophic consequences he witnessed in Canudos would help to reassess the paths the nation had followed up to that point and, thus, make it possible to reorient the historical course of human action. Edgar de Decca takes the opposite view: “In this work [*Os sertões*] he also places himself as a spectator of history, seeking to restrain his desire for history and for the future, while contradictorily trying to contain the desire to manipulate historical time.” See Edgar Salvadori de Decca, “Literatura em ruínas ou ruínas na literatura?,” in *Memória e (res)sentimento. Indagações sobre uma questão sensível*, ed. by Stella Bresciani and Márcia Naxara (Campinas, Editora da Unicamp, 2001), 149-173.

rather than as implying any actual presence or indexical function in objects, words, and ideas.

The author believed that, in order to know how to deal with the remnants of the colonial past, it was essential both to understand the present historically and to act upon present reality. Thus, the key to the secret of the nation's history was thought to lie in the history of the Brazilian "ethnic unifier," the São Francisco River. When the republican troops arrived in the backlands of the state of Bahia, Da Cunha witnessed what he described as "the *paulista* [from the state of São Paulo] battalion which, on disembarking here, defined a historical resurrection—the triumphal apparition of the *bandeirantes*, renewing the venturesome assaults in the backlands" of earlier centuries. "This spectacle is very eloquent and somehow justifies those who—optimists in this stormy epoch—see in it the useful and positive feature, if such a thing is possible, of this inglorious campaign." The *paulista* could thus reappear as *bandeirante*, simulateaneously absent from itself and manifesting itself as a new historical version of a similar, or even the same, subject—one that experience showed to be resistant to the changes of historical time.²⁵

However, the material aspect of presence and experience could be reinforced only by those elements capable of surviving beyond a single life or even a century, or of being more readily organized within History, especially in its national or world-historical forms. Da Cunha frequently represented his experience of the otherness of the backlands as a kind of "prodigious reflux of our [Brazilian] history," as though the *sertanejos* were actualizations in the present of the *bandeirantes* from the past, carrying forward configurations of time and historical time from past to future through material existences—in the literal form of a reflux. Even stronger were his apprehensions of the roads of the hinterland as emulations of Roman routes, and of the city of Salvador, Bahia, as if it were a decayed medieval Byzantium. In this way, the author highlighted the incongruity between the temporal order structuring events in the backlands and that of his own historical present, itself embedded in the civilizational progress of the urban centers. In order for something colonial and Iberian to be recognized as part of a whole that made sense when set against nineteenth-century modern societies and their outcomes, it had to be structured as signifying traits associated with Europe's ancient or medieval past.

²⁵ Bahia, August 15. Da Cunha, *Diário...*, 87; Da Cunha, *Os sertões...*, 178, 186.

The colonial was not, strictly speaking, ancient or medieval. Yet ideas, meanings, and their material inscription in bricks and built forms became more intelligible when signified as analogous to models drawn from European History, models that informed what made history and society in America conceivable.²⁶

The problem was that progress seemed to reach only the most dynamic sectors of Brazilian society, those linked to the broader structure of Western society. The gap produced by the adoption of a European civilizational model in the principal urban centers, especially those located along the coastline, created an effect of temporal disjunction that was recorded by many authors of differing intellectual backgrounds. Koselleck considers progress “not simply an ideological mode of viewing the future”, but rather “a new everyday experience which was fed continually from a number of sources: technical development, the increase of population, the social unfolding of human rights, and the corresponding shifts in political systems”. This “labyrinth of movement”, as he defines these relations among life, experience, history, and History, bears directly on our reflections developed from Wittgenstein’s assumptions.²⁷

To state the matter clearly, Da Cunha’s “simple and sincere deposition of a witness little devoted to the banal and vain flattery” suggested that “the *paulistas* [who] ventured themselves into assaults in the backlands” could be configured as nineteenth-century *bandeirantes*, thereby allowing the past to persist in the present. They might even “revive for a moment, on a page of present [Brazilian] history” something analogous to “the tragic episode of Palmares” in the seventeenth century. We should recall that the *bandeirantes* were also regarded as predecessors of the *sertanejo*. Da Cunha employed several metaphors to describe the environment, the people, their warlike actions, as well as to define nationality and the *sertanejo* itself. “An eloquent simile,” the *sertanejo*, understood as “the living stone of our race” was not merely a metaphor carrying meaning, but also an indexical relation grounded in Da Cunha’s experience of the environment, in the persistence of the past into the present through the making of History, and in the sensory effects produced by enduring colonial materiality. It also involved the subsequent representational and experiential relations through which an object is referred to not only by similarity or analogy, but rather through

²⁶ Bahia, August 15. Da Cunha, *Diário...*, 88.

²⁷ Koselleck, *Futures Past...*, 60.

“a dynamic connection (included a spatial one), both with the individual object on the one hand and, on the other, with the meanings or the person’s memory for whom it serves as a sign.” The persistent colonial materialities of the hinterlands —their inhabitants and their objects— directed experience and cognition toward themselves, operating through associations of contiguity rather than through associations of similarity or more complex representational processes.²⁸

Materiality presented forms of persistence that could be culturally codified. Inherited discourses could be assimilated, but History had to be experienced and understood as disruptive. “To put it differently: presence does not reside in the storiness of stories, but in what a story inadvertently has to be—in, that is, the things a story has to present in order to present a story.” The denotational force bound to meaning cannot operate on its own; metonymies must therefore remain connected to “metaphorical connotation, as representationalism implies.” The absence of a stable nation and of its people could be best “kindled by metonymically presenting absences,” which were then further interpreted and represented metaphorically. “It opens a perspective that is almost too disturbing to accept: that the past may have a presence that is so powerful that it can use us, humans, as its material,” thereby making the intertwining of History, history, and everyday life into a kind of consolidation of what times would otherwise dissolve. “The antinomy is caused by the fact that in presence ‘time’ is traded for ‘place’.” “Though very common, and despite the fact that we put a lot of effort into pursuing it, presence—the living on of the past in the here and now—is hard to substantiate.” Thus, the “living rock” also had to be written, so that it might disappear and yield to futures less burdened by the persistence of the past.²⁹

Conclusion

The presence of the past as experienced by Da Cunha could be made meaningful through the ways he interpreted and wrote it down, structurally

²⁸ *The São Paulo Battalion* was originally published on *O Estado de S. Paulo* on October 26, 1897. Da Cunha, *Diário...*, 272-273; Da Cunha, *Os sertões...*, 787-789; Peirce, *Semiótica...*, 74, 76.

²⁹ Runia, “Forum...,” 308-310, 315, 316; Runia, “Presence,” 1-29.

weaving it into history and into History. Miscegenation and State violence were still very much unfolding in the lives of those Brazilians. “Presence is not brought about by stories;” however, their semantic content can interact with the presence of the past in the construction of forms of being. One may not know what it means to be *mestizo* except by suffering that condition in a racist society that had only recently emerged from institutional slavery. Literacy is a necessary tool of citizenship, and the lack of it produces specific effects on one’s condition when it is subjected to the understanding of others. Everyday life can metonymically carry the past forward into the present in several ways. As Runia puts it, “What makes a nation a nation is not its story about itself, but the variety of ways in which its past can force it—and enable it—to rewrite its story about itself.”³⁰

In Europe, the United States, and Brazil, philosophical and scientific theories of the historical evolution of humankind were utilized to explain and give meaning to the novelties of the contemporary world, in which industrialization and urban reforms sharply transformed local realities. Euclides da Cunha’s narrated and recorded experiences of Canudos seemed to align with the understandings he had acquired through both book learning and scientific inquiry. His historical culture and erudition, together with his theoretical background, scientifically codified his understanding of human nature. When the author wrote that the distance between the *sertanejos* and the civilized inhabitants of the cities was not a matter of thousands of kilometers but of three centuries, he was registering and narratively giving meaning to his experience of the backlands at that time as a disruptive phenomenon in relation to his own cultural and cognitive patterns, a corollary of the radical difference between the realities of the backlands and the civilization reproduced in the coastal cities. It was not only vast physical distances that separated the *sertanejos* from civilization. The countryside and the principal coastal urban centers were also fundamentally divided by political distances configured and guaranteed by State authority and by hierarchies of interest. Thus, the closer individuals were to the sources of official authority and power, the more adapted they became to those structures, and the greater the services and favors they obtained from the State.³¹

³⁰ Runia, “Forum...,” 310-311.

³¹ Angela Alonso, *Idéias em movimento. A geração 1870 na crise do Brasil Império* (São Paulo: Anpocs/Paz e terra, 2002), 21-49.

I would argue that this was one of the reasons why Da Cunha struggled to comprehend the incongruities between the theoretical prescriptions absorbed at the beginning of his intellectual trajectory and the experiences he later gathered in the Brazilian hinterlands, as well as between his own prejudices about what Brazilian nationality should be and what the “laws of history” were supposed to yield. He expected to be able to understand the national past and history by seeking out present reminiscences of remote pasts coexisting simultaneously both in earlier times and in his own present. Consciously or not, his refusal fully to understand and articulate all the consequences of what he had experienced as a conflict within his own present led him to configure those social, economic, political, and spatial distances as cultural-historical interfaces.

The process by which time and space were merged recoded the spatial distance between the inhabitants of the hinterlands and the coastal urban centers as temporal-historical gaps, thereby obscuring their actual cultural and political nature. These differences were resignified as natural in origin because they were linked to the material characteristics of both the environment and the dwellers’ material culture: they wore leather armor rather than steel and built earthen versions of Trojan strongholds, as Da Cunha so repeatedly stated. This phenomenon simultaneously configured those subjects both as the core of national identity and as a hindrance to the nation’s sociocultural and political development. The spatial distances separating small inland towns from the more complex urban centers along the coastline created the possibility of experiencing temporal displacement in travel between them, especially when such travel took place by rail or steamship.

Sertanejos, mestizos, Native Americans, Africans, and their descendants came to be treated as a kind of ruins produced by colonial action and its effects: persistent survivals from earlier times whose right to continued existence was repeatedly denied. Positioned as pieces deliberately displaced within a complex conceptual machinery designed to naturalize socio-economic differences under the guise of temporal disparities, non-European ethnic groups were explicitly fated to disappear through the action of civilization, which was supposedly to improve their lives and establish the terms for their evolution. Through an intricate intellectual, political, and ontological construction, the desires, projects, and interests of the traditional oligarchies were naturalized so as to be experienced and understood as identical to those of all other Brazilian citizens. Under such conditions,

history and science seemed to guarantee the supposedly necessary character of current affairs, with past events continually determining the historical present. Intellectuals, especially historians, were therefore expected to work upon the fissures of time in order to act more effectively within their own historical present.

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