

Whence Amazonian Studies

by TRACY DEVINE GUZMÁN | University of Miami | tdguzman@miami.edu

“In peace as well as in war we need Amazonia,” penned the Columbia-trained natural historian, travel writer, and U.S. spy, Williard Price in a 1952 treatise cheerily titled *The Amazing Amazon* (3). One of many thousands of books on the region published after the outset of the 1870s rubber boom, Price’s tome exemplified the hyperbolic prophecies for “development” that have characterized dominant accounts of the rainforest and its peoples into the twenty-first century. As critic Candace Slater argued in her 2003 study, *Entangled Edens*, the most widespread and enduring representations of the Amazon have for centuries come from “outsiders” who tend to romanticize Native peoples and ignore the diverse histories and ways of life of the more than 30 million people who across nine countries call Amazonia their home (García 2011: 29). From among this population, over one million individuals identify with one of the 386 indigenous peoples who reside in the Amazonian regions of Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, French Guiana, Peru, Surinam, and Venezuela (OTCA 1997: 184). Over half of them live in Brazil, which alone lays claim to 63 percent of Amazonian territory. Ecuador and French Guiana bring up the rear with 1.5 percent each (García: 2011: 24).

Wealth and Geopolitics

In the context of the Cold War, it was not the human population, of course, but the wealth and strategic location of the Amazon that provided the conditions of possibility that allowed Price and countless others who shared his vision to imagine Amazonia as “the world’s last great frontier” (1952: 190)—a bottomless piggy bank for the industrialized nations that were burning too quickly through their own resources. Such imaginings helped lay

the groundwork for the two overlapping discourses that framed scholarly and popular considerations of the region for years to come: first, state-backed initiatives to “harness” the abundance and power of the rainforest to fuel the “modernization” of the Amazonian countries; and second, deep skepticism over the neo-imperialist policies and processes that would pave the way for such “progress.” Price declared not only that the Amazon was “practically empty,” but that its development was “urgent” ... “if the free nations [were] to defend themselves, if the world [was] to feed itself, and if this heedlessly breeding human race [was] to find room for its multiplying millions” (1952: 6).

Two years later, Brazilian President Getúlio Vargas, who had led a national effort to “open up” the interior and conquer its wealth while professedly seeking to free his country from the grip of foreign capital ranted against “domination and plunder by international economic and financial groups” before taking his own life. His death exacerbated an extended political crisis that culminated one decade later in the installation of a U.S.-backed military dictatorship that made the development of the Amazon—understood both as a metonym and motor for the country—its *raison d’être*. Among the many human rights abuses that stained military rule was the “collateral damage” of modernization: massive devastation of Native lives and livelihoods. New thoroughfares sliced through the Amazon¹ and elaborate plans were drawn for dozens of new hydroelectric dams—most of which remained incomplete when Brazil began its return to democratic rule in 1985 (Chernela 1988; Andrade and Santos 1990).²

A prized gem in the crown of the architects of “Amazonian development” was

Kararaô—a massive dam project branded with a name of a Kayapó community who pledged their very lives to combat its construction. The initiative was re-baptized Belo Monte³ after the 1989 Encontro dos Povos Indígenas do Xingu, when a coalition of indigenous, national, and international opposition threw a wrench into the project that would help stall it for over a decade (Fearnside 2006). A revised and allegedly less prejudicial plan later became a cornerstone of the Lula administration’s Programa pela Aceleração do Crescimento (PAC), which was spearheaded post-2005 by then Minister of Internal Affairs, and now president, Dilma Rousseff.⁴ Despite the many and mighty arguments against Belo Monte, including those that look beyond economics and environmental science to human rights—an issue about which the President has otherwise been outspoken⁵—Rousseff’s defense of Belo Monte has only become more entrenched. In May and October 2011, her government cut off relations with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and refused to participate in Commission hearings on the rights of indigenous peoples affected by the dam.

Deconstructing Regional “Progress”

Such is the fraught geopolitical context in which recent scholarship on Amazonia is carried out and contextualized—not only in Brazil, but across the region. In Peru, Bolivia, and Ecuador, for instance, public and private development initiatives continue to threaten fragile and already damaged ecosystems and those who live in and off of them. Reminiscent of 1970s developmentalism, foreign capital—now hailing from North America and Europe as well as from China—promises economic growth and much-desired infrastructure, while those who embrace it frequently

ignore the high and sometimes irreparable social and cultural costs of the much-coveted “progress.” As in decades past, indigenous peoples and their labor are expected to fuel the development of nation-states that treat them as second-class citizens, and in the cases at hand, boast a checkered record with regard to indigenous rights in recent years. Irked in mid-2011 by the outspokenness of her Defense Minister, Nelson Jobim, President Rousseff revived Price’s vision of Amazonia as a *terra de ninguém*—no-man’s land—remarking that if she could, she would “orchestrate a job for him in Amazonia and leave him there” (Savarese).⁶

In the wake of the deadly 2009 protests in the northern province of Bagua, Peruvian President Alan García accused the Native peoples of the Amazon who were manifesting in defense of their lands against international oil and gas interests of dragging the country toward “irrationality and primitive backwardness.”⁷ Many of the indigenous organizations favorable to Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa in the 2007 elections have come to oppose his government in protest of new policies that tip the balance of control over land, resources, and legal jurisdiction away from communities and in favor of the state. In September 2011, riot police in Evo Morales’s Bolivia violently suppressed indigenous protest against a proposed road—financed by Brazil and aimed to facilitate trade with Asia—through the *Territorio Indígena y Parque Nacional Isiboro Sécuré* (TIPNIS), leading to calls for the president’s resignation. These examples show that even in an age when many indigenous peoples have access to communication technologies, they tend not to be met with dialogue, but with force. International human rights organizations and NGOs that rally against state violence confront accusations of impinging on

national sovereignty, conspiring to inhibit the development of the global south, or plotting to take over the Amazon.

Challenges for Researchers

These questions over rights, resources, and ethics—each of them always already political, pose challenges for scholars. Many researchers might seek, or be pressured by funding agencies and the exigencies of academic publishing, to present them with some degree of objective scrutiny. No one wants to be accused of simplifying complex situations, or to etch her contributions into the wrong side of history. We have known for a long time that the Amazon is not only about indigenous peoples; that indigenous peoples are infinitely diverse; that not all of them live in rural areas or embrace ancestral ties to particular territories; that many non-indigenous peoples also have historical and affective ties to land; that state policies are uneven and inconsistent, serving in some ways to “protect” at the same time they neglect or punish. As we see in the struggle against Belo Monte and elsewhere, thousands of them *do* occupy traditional lands and there wish to remain—never outside, but on the fringes of the capitalist modernity that encroaches on them from various directions. Defending non-Western notions of sovereignty and advocating for ethno-development, many Native communities thus aim to make their priorities compatible with those of the dominant majority rather than antithetical to them. In doing so, they oppose the frequent rendering of indigenous rights as prejudicial to those of everyone else—particularly the non-indigenous poor.

In 1979, during a particularly dark period for Brazil’s indigenous peoples and on the eve of the unveiling of the Kararaó

initiative, the polemical anthropologist Darcy Ribeiro lamented the tendency he observed in academia to study indigenous cultures and societies with “scientific objectivism,” likening such an effort to an analysis of the German family in the besieged Berlin of 1945 (Martins). His point, of course, was to highlight the urgency of the ethical commitments that are, for better and for worse, inherent in each of the choices we make about our research. Nearly twenty years later, many scholars in and of the Amazon continue to work in keeping with this notion and to institutionalize it across disciplines—in the social sciences, the humanities, the environmental sciences, and the overlapping areas of concern that they inevitably share.

In the North American context, one recent case-in-point is the 2010 formation of the Society for Amazonian and Andean Studies—an initiative that draws on the expertise of scholars who have been working in the Amazon for several decades.⁸ Together with the institution of new interdisciplinary degree programs such as the minor in Andean and Amazonian Studies at Ohio State University, these collective efforts complement the already significant and growing interest in the field of Amazonian Studies from inside Amazonia—at the Núcleo de Altos Estudos Amazônicos of the Universidade Federal do Pará, for instance—as well as from institutions of higher learning in the south of Brazil and across South America, including the Universidade de São Paulo and Universidade Estadual de Campinas; the Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos in Lima; FLASCO-Ecuador, in Quito; and the tripartite Universidad Indígena de Bolivia (UNIBOL).

While Brazil’s 2010 Statute of Racial Equality did not include affirmative action

provisions for indigenous students to attend institutions of higher learning, over a dozen public universities nationwide have taken it upon themselves to do so. Three of these are in the Legal Amazon: Universidade Federal do Pará; Fundação Universidade Federal de Rondônia; and Fundação Universidade Federal de Roraima (FUNAI). Additionally, the state of Mato Grosso do Sul, which is not located in the Amazon but in the adjacent Pantanal region, has more than 700 Native students in its institutions of higher learning, and is a burgeoning center of indigenous scholarship and cultural production (Rede de Saberes 2011).

Although many Native students continue to face major financial and logistical challenges when pursuing a college degree (Macedo 2011), their increasing enrollment in programs of higher education at home and abroad gives us cautious hope that they will continue play an ever greater role in shaping both the future of Amazonian Studies and that of the Amazon. Many might agree with Sônia Guajajara, Vice-Coordinator of the Coordenação das Organizações Indígenas da Amazônia (COAIB), who in opposing the still powerful legacies of Williard Price's thought, argues for an alternative path to development on which indigenous peoples can contribute with autonomy, auto-determination, and recognition of the value of their ancestral knowledge, as well as with prior and informed consent regarding the occupation and use of protected territories. As she put it to an audience at the University of Chicago in 2009: "We are not against national growth. We are against the [model] that doesn't work for us. Brazil needs to grow, [but also] to take its people along...."

Endnotes

- ¹ These included BR-230, BR-210, BR-319, BR-174, and BR-163.
- ² The majority remained incomplete when Brazil returned to democratic rule in 1985.
- ³ The name used by the anti-Republican community of Canudos that perished at the hands of the Brazilian army in 1897.
- ⁴ Rousseff had previously served as Minister of Energy and Mines.
- ⁵ This is due, in part, to the torture she suffered for her resistance to the dictatorship.
- ⁶ Thanks to Idelber Avelar for this reference.
- ⁷ Ollanta Humala has initiated changes in state-indigenous relations, including the approval of the Ley de Consulta Previa, which in keeping with Article 169 of the ILO requires consultation with Native peoples regarding the use of traditional lands (effective December 2011). The fact that Brazil is also a signatory has been a key argument in opposing Belo Monte. The Brazilian government counters that FUNAI, a state-run bureaucracy with non-indigenous leadership, signed off on the project.
- ⁸ See: <<http://conferences.dce.ufl.edu/SAAS/>>.

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