

From Hylaea to Kawsak Sacha: Introduction to the Vegetal Humanities in the Amazon¹

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In the opening paragraph of “Impressões gerais” (“General Impressions”), the introduction to Part I of the book *À margem da história* (At the Margin of History, first published in 1909) titled “Na Amazônia – terra sem história” (“In the Amazon – Land without History”), Brazilian writer Euclides da Cunha (1866-1909)² describes Amazonia as a “prodigious *hylaea*” (“hiléia prodigiosa,” 11).³ Da Cunha, who travelled in the Amazon between 1904 and 1905,⁴ recognizes the land’s greatness, which inspired in him a feeling of terror that evokes Immanuel Kant’s theorization on the natural sublime.⁵ Still, he admits to being disappointed in Amazonia, which does not meet his high expectations, fueled by an idealized conception of the territory based upon his readings on the region.

Da Cunha blames his disappointment partly on Amazonian vegetal life, which, in his words, displays an “imperfect greatness” (“imperfeita grandeza,” 12). He considers that Amazonian flora evokes earlier geological ages of the planet, when human beings still did not roam the earth. For the author, man (gender intended) is an “impertinent intruder” (“intruso impertinent,” 12) in the Amazon, which leads him to regard local nature as “portentous, but incomplete” (“a natureza é portentosa, mas incompleta,” 12). His summary assessment of Amazonia is that “it has everything and

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² Da Cunha wrote various texts about the Amazon, including newspaper articles, reports, reflections, and so on, some of which were drafted before the author had been to the region. Once in the Amazon, da Cunha wrote in letters to several friends that he intended to write a book about the territory, a plan left incomplete due to his untimely death. The volume *À margem da história*, published posthumously in 1909, gathers several of the author’s texts about the region. For a detailed analysis of da Cunha’s writings on the Amazon, including the circumstances of their publication, see Bolle.

³ All translations from an original in a language other than English are mine.

⁴ Da Cunha was head of the Brazilian commission charged with mapping the course of the river Purus all the way to its headwaters. The Brazilian commission was accompanied by a Peruvian counterpart, and its aim was to ease tension between the countries, both interested in that remote region of the Amazon in the wake of the rubber boom. The Brazilian and Peruvian joint commissions were tasked with demarcating the exact borders of the two countries.

⁵ As the author puts it: “The mass of water is, certainly, without equal, and capable of eliciting the terror mentioned by Wallace” (“A massa de águas é, certo, sem par, capaz daquele terror a que se refere Wallace,” 11). For an analysis of the feeling of the sublime as a response to Amazonian nature, see Vieira “Rainforest Sublime.”

it lacks everything, because it lacks that chain of phenomena [...] where the truths of art and science are clearly highlighted, which is like the great and unconscious logic of things” (“Tem tudo e falta-lhe tudo, porque lhe falta esse encadeamento de fenômenos [...] de onde ressaltam, nítidas, as verdades da arte e da ciência — e que é como que a grande lógica inconsciente das coisas,” 13). Da Cunha regards Amazonian nature as monstrous,⁶ since it does not neatly fit into Western artistic, scientific and logical categories. By overflowing these paradigms, the territory is perceived as lost in immemorial geological eras and therefore as inhuman, i.e., as unwelcoming for “man.” Such a view of the Amazonian natural environment as hostile for outside, usually male, explorers has been a staple of writings about the region since colonial times. Significantly, da Cunha wrote the Preface to his friend Alberto Rangel’s collection of short stories about the Amazon, titled *Inferno verde* (*Green Hell*, first published in 1908), where the rainforest is depicted as a hellish landscape.

Da Cunha’s views on Amazonian plants are indebted to a tradition of writings about the region by naturalists from Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859) to Alfred Russel Wallace (1823-1913), both of whom the Brazilian author mentions in the beginning of his text. Da Cunha’s description of the territory as a *hylaea* harks back to von Humboldt, who employed the German term *Hyläe* to designate a “forested plain” (“Waldebene,” 54). The word has since been widely used to refer to the Amazon, which testifies to the enduring influence of early European explorers’ understanding of the territory in contemporary assessments of the Amazon. The German neologism derives from the Ancient Greek word *hylē*, which meant wood or forest. In Aristotelian philosophy, *hylē* came to signify amorphous matter that needed a given form to become a concrete thing.⁷

Von Humboldt’s labelling of the Amazon as *Hyläe* clearly draws on *hylē*’s vegetal meaning, but it also echoes the connotation of the term in Aristotelian thought. As Mary Louise Pratt noted, European naturalists such as von Humboldt used their privileged position to establish a conquering, imperial gaze over Latin American territories like the Amazon, all the while couching their domineering approach in the language of science. By calling the Amazon a *Hyläe*, von Humboldt hints at the fact that it is formless matter in need of structured orientation to be provided by European scientists like himself. This view of the region chimes in, *mutatis mutandis*, with da Cunha’s conception of the Amazonian natural environment as incomplete, lacking the human guidance required for it to achieve its full potential. Depictions of Amazonia as a *hylaea*, an assemblage of trees, or simply a gathering of unstructured matter, undergird present-day extractivist approaches to the territory. The rainforest is reduced to a set of resources ready to be appropriated for the higher purposes of progress and economic development.

⁶ Da Cunha describes Amazonian fauna as “singular and monstrous” (“singular e monstruosa,” 12).

⁷ It is telling that, in the absence of a general term for matter, Aristotle chose the Ancient Greek word for “wood” to designate formless matter, which both speaks to the understanding of vegetal life as the basis for every thing, and to its instrumentalization.

Indigenous peoples, who have inhabited the Amazon for thousands of years, have a significantly different approach to the rainforest. Diverse as their cosmovisions are, Indigenous communities espouse a biocentric view of Amazonia and consider that human life involves a constant process of cooperation with more than humans to guarantee the harmonious coexistence of all beings. They regard the territory as a living entity, composed of myriad sentient, cognizant plants, animals and other forms of existence with whom humans interact on a daily basis. It is in this sense that the Kichwa Indigenous community of Sarayaku, in the Ecuadorian Amazon, call their ancestral land *Kawsak Sacha*, or “living forest.” In a proposal to create protected areas in their land, the people of Sarayaku explain the notion of *Kawsak Sacha*:

Whereas the western world treats nature as an undemanding source of raw materials destined exclusively for human use, *Kawsak Sacha* recognizes that the forest is made up entirely of living selves and the communicative relations they have with each other. These selves, from the smallest plants to the supreme beings who protect the forest, are persons (*runa*) who inhabit the waterfalls, lagoons, swamps, mountains, and rivers, and who, in turn, compose the Living Forest as a whole. These persons live together in community (*llakta*) and carry out their lives in a manner that is similar to human beings. To summarize, in the Living Forest the economic system is an ecological web; the natural world is also a social world.

For the Sarayaku community, the rainforest entails the different beings who inhabit the land *and* the relationships they establish with one another. Each entity has a specific approach to its environment, its own world that interconnects with the world of all others in the territory. Or, to put it differently, each entity’s world entails a specific constellation of the worlds of all of those around it. These more-than-human beings are regarded as similar to humans, in that they have volition, intelligence and the ability to express themselves. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, among other anthropologists such as Tânia Stolze Lima, highlights that, for Amazonian Indigenous peoples, all beings have their own perspective on the world—or their own world—none of which is considered hierarchically superior to the other. He calls this way of engaging with reality “perspectivism,” which presupposes that all more-than-human beings are akin to people, thus making the rainforest a wide interspecies community.

In their text, the people of Sarayaku draw on Western concepts to explain their understanding of the Amazon. For them the “economic system” of the territory is an “ecological web.” Their economy—which etymologically means the norms or management of the home—is an ecology, i.e., a multifaceted discourse about a common home, including the myriad perspectives of all those who comprise the collective that is the rainforest. What is usually called “nature” in the West becomes a “social world” composed of various human and more-than-human peoples. As Déborah Danowski and Viveiros de Castro put it, “every transpecific interaction in Amerindian worlds is an international intrigue, a diplomatic negotiation or a war operation that must be conducted with utmost circumspection. Cosmopolitics” (96). Human life in the rainforest therefore requires constant negotiations with more than humans, an ongoing diplomacy is a cosmopolitical world.

In their statement about *Kawsak Sacha*, the community of Sarayaku emphasize that their understanding of the living forest is “buttressed by recent scientific studies.” To be sure, research in plant science (Chamovitz; Mancuso; Gagliano *et al.*, etc.), to remain only in the field that most directly speaks to the topic of this special issue, has challenged the traditional view of vegetal life as passive and unresponsive and has shown that plants are complex social entities that behave intelligently and communicate with one another and with beings from other species. At the same time, plant studies in the humanities—in disciplines such as philosophy, literary, film and art studies, and related fields (Aloi; Coccia; Hall; Laist; Marder, etc.)—have questioned the traditional role ascribed to flora as a mere background to human action and underscored the centrality of plant life in human culture. Scholars have emphasized human indebtedness to plants from the most basic physiological level of the need of oxygen, to the use of plant life in culturally significant human practices and have sought to determine what humans can learn from vegetal existence.

This special issue follows in the wake of recent scholarship on critical plant studies and is inspired by Amazonian Indigenous understandings of plant life. It draws on research on multispecies ethnography in Amazonia such as Eduardo Kohn’s *How Forest Think*, which builds on fieldwork with the Runa people from the Ecuadorian Amazon to explore the semiotic abilities of more than humans and recognizes the ability to think beyond the confines of the human mind. The special issue is also a rejoinder to Juan Duchesne Winter’s challenge to “amazonize” current plant philosophy and theory by incorporating Amazonian writings and ontologies into plant studies.

The title “Vegetal Humanities in the Amazon” refers to the recent “vegetal turn” in environmental humanities research and foregrounds the contributions of Amazonian Indigenous thought to these debates. It hints at the vegetal substratum of human life, something widely recognized by Amazonian communities that, beyond sources of material sustenance, regard plants as their ancestors, teachers and spiritual guides. It also highlights the humanity of plants as “persons,” as stated in the community of Sarayaku’s explanation of the notion of *Kawsak Sacha*. The ambiguity inherent in the expression “vegetal humanities” points to the porous boundaries separating human and plant existence and emphasizes the links uniting human and more-than-human beings in the rainforest.

The first article in the special issue, Kevin Ennis’s “Narrating in Multinatural Word and Color: Vegetal Vitality in Lastenia Canayo’s *Los dueños del mundo Shipibo*” analyzes Peruvian Shipibo artist Lastenia Canayo’s 2004 work *Los dueños del mundo Shipibo* that includes images of plant *dueños*, or master spirits, paired with descriptions of these entities that include the location of the plant and its significance in Shipibo culture. The *dueños* usually assume a human shape, underscoring the agency of vegetal life. Ennis persuasively shows how Canayo’s work draws on ancestral knowledge to reinforce the Shipibo connection to their territory, in opposition to extractivist claims on their land.

In “Rooted Resistance and Vegetal Life in the Poetry of Ana Varela Tafur,” Cinthya Torres examines the Iquitos-born Peruvian writer Ana Varela Tafur’s most recent poetry collection, *Estancias de Emilia Tangoa* (2022). Torres argues that Tafur’s book draws on Indigenous cosmologies to lend a voice to Amazonian plants and criticize the reification of the rainforest and its systematic destruction by extractive industries. The article homes in on Tafur’s engagement with specific plants— rubber trees, the ayahuasca plant and the shihuahuaco tree—to discuss the legacy of colonial violence and neo-colonial exploitation of Amazonia.

Patrícia Vieira’s “Phytopoesis: Plants in Amazonian Women’s Poetry” analyzes the work of Brazilian, Manauara writer Astrid Cabral (1936-), and of Peruvian, Awajún an Wampis poet Dina Ananco (1985-), focusing on their texts on vegetal life. Vieira argues that these poems reimagine ancestral bonds with plants and recast them as sources of women’s empowerment. Both Cabral and Ananco build upon Amazonian communities’ strong ties to vegetal life to advance a plant infused ontology that defies the categories of mainstream Western philosophy.

The articles in “Vegetal Humanities in the Amazon” reveal how recent cultural productions from/about Amazonia counter stereotypes of the region’s vegetal life as a “green hell” or as an inert *hylaea*. The essays show how Amazonian literature and art incorporate Indigenous cosmologies to present the living forest as a community of human and more-than-human entities where vegetal beings occupy a prominent position as pivotal for Amazonian cosmopolitical existence.

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