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# Tales of the Transamazonian: Hope and Disillusionment on a Route of Ecological Migrations<sup>1</sup>

Tales of ecologically driven migrations have populated Brazilian culture since the existence of writings about national identity. Whether describing the extension of the agricultural “frontier” or the “adventurous” search for precious natural resources, they construct the myth of a country realizing itself through a march from the coast to the interior. This article examines the update, reinterpretation, and contestation of this national narrative in the context of the country’s industrialization and growing awareness of its environmental problems.

We focus on narratives of ecological migration between the two poorest of Brazil’s five administrative regions: the Northeast and the Amazon. While the Amazon’s rainforest biome is home to the world’s richest biodiversity, drought is a feature of the Northeast semi-arid climate, and ever since the beginning of colonization there have been complaints about its consequences. These representations of an ecologically doomed region, reinforced by the perception of peasant masses as a threat to political stability, fueled the idea that these populations needed to be “transferred” toward a more fertile environment. Subsequently, the rebirth of the rubber economy during the Second World War, major mineral discoveries in the 1950s and 1960s, and the expansion of communication and road networks rekindled the Amazon as the nation’s everlasting Eldorado.

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What we specifically discuss here are the multiple discourses that participated in constructing and deconstructing a route of environmental migrations traced by the military dictatorship in Brazil: the Transamazonian Highway, built in the early 1970s, was supposed to span from the northeastern coast up to the Peruvian border and thus cross the entire Amazon. The highway's launching was underpinned by governmental propaganda stressing ecological contrasts between the Amazon and the Northeast: "men without land" facing a "land without men," scarcity as opposed to abundance. The Brazilian state used the (acute) climatic crisis in the Northeast to attract hundreds of thousands of families toward a (fantasized) green paradise in the Amazon. This propaganda dialogued with popular culture for a while. Yet, in the context of the rise of the rainforest to a global ecological symbol, literature, cinema, and songs started to deconstruct the tales of abundance.

Representations of the Amazon by the mid-1970s already tended to converge toward a storytelling of vanishing nature, fed by the migrants' encounters with decaying Amazonian native villages, eroding soils, land conflicts, and forest burnings all along the road. All in all, tales of the Transamazonian testified to how Brazil as a migrant nation redefined itself, its territorial equilibrium and its relation to local ecosystems under the pressure of increasing awareness of its ecological fragility.

## 1. The Transamazonian as Ecological Epopee

### **A narrative of decline in the Northeast**

Ever since the beginning of Portuguese colonization, the Northeast has been portrayed as a region ravaged by drought. Certain droughts became particularly memorable in popular and scholarly imagination, such as the 1915 drought, immortalized in the novel *O Quinze* by Rachel de Queiroz. On that occasion, around 100,000 northeasterners died and 250,000 were forced into displacement. Another significant episode was the mass migration of northeasterners to the rapidly developing Southeast in the 1950s. These movements coincided with two periods of severe water scarcity: from 1951 to 1953 and again in 1958.

Scholars agree that it was the great drought of 1877–79 that, for the first time, raised the issue to the status of a national problem. For Albuquerque Jr., the particularity of this drought was not so much its intensity, but rather economic and political conditions in which it happened (111–13). During this period, the region experienced an economic crisis, due to the decrease in prices and exports of sugar and

cotton, while slave workers were fleeing to the South. Mike Davis places this and other nineteenth-century Northeast's droughts in a global perspective, pointing out the role of the *El Niño* phenomenon in massive drought events in South America, Asia, and Africa. Like Albuquerque Jr., he argues that if the consequences were so tragic, it is because of the commodities' market rise, and not only because of the severity of climatic events (19–23). Deaths, migration, and famine were mostly the result of a political and social context that prevented most of the population from having access to resources and land.

Brazilian intellectuals have often examined drought as a problem for Northeast's development. Cunha described these drought cycles as "an eternal and monotonous novelty" (38), and, since it was so predictable, he defended a perennial governmental strategy to fight it. In his book *Nordeste* (1937), Gilberto Freyre presented an ecological study of the impact of sugarcane slave plantations that impoverished the soil around the bay of Salvador, which he wrote prevented a healthy economic development. Likewise, Celso Furtado and his governmental Workgroup for Northeast Development in the 1950s portrayed the region as a technical and political problem that required state intervention. Since Nilo Peçanha's presidency (1909–10) and his Inspectorate of Works Against Drought (IOCS), the federal government tried to manage and propose solutions. However, these policies were promoted and then channeled by local elites in order to benefit from donations, tax remissions, and debt relief (Albuquerque Jr. 118). As drought triggered massive migration, the region also became a cellar of cheap labor for other regions (Ab'Sáber 27).

In June 1970, the President of Brazil and military dictator Emílio Garrastazu Médici traveled in the Northeast after a severe drought episode, described by the weekly magazine *Veja* as having the "voracity and precision of mythological calamities" ("A seca chegou" 36)<sup>2</sup>. With both the chronic vulnerability of northeastern peasant classes and the "problem" of "Amazonian emptiness," in view, Médici idealized the project of a massive stream of human migration from the Northeast to the Amazon. A few weeks later, the Transports Minister, Coronel Mário Andreazza, announced the construction of the Transamazonian, a highway of nearly five thousand kilometers that would cross Brazil's north from east to west. A margin of one hundred kilometers on either side of this road was reserved for agricultural colonization. The *National Institute of Colonization and Land Reform* (INCRA), created for the occasion, would distribute small plots of land to about 100,000 migrant families until 1975 (or so they stated at the time) alongside the highway axe (Kohlepp 79–80). A road of migration toward the

Amazon thus emerged as the military regime's solution to the Northeast's problems.

### The Amazon as Eldorado

The Amazon as an Eldorado is an old trope. Portuguese colonialism granted great value to the *drogas do sertão*, mainly herbs, medicinal plants, nuts, and guaraná, which colonists would collect in the forest (Chambouleyron 83, 93). International travelers regularly issued reports that depicted the region as a reserve of precious natural riches, at least since the early nineteenth century, when the German naturalist Alexander von Humboldt suggested that the Amazon was the "world's granary" (Onís 24). Yet, as Campbell underlines, Brazilian elites and governments never showed serious interest in the region until the second half of the twentieth century (27). They perceived it as nothing but a backward counter-model to their positivist vision of a modern nation-state and as such, largely excluded the Amazon from the narratives of national construct. For geographic and ecological reasons, the region also lay far away from the interest of the coffee, sugar, and milk producing oligarchy that dominated the imperial (1822–89) and so-called "old republican" (1889–1930) periods.

Tales of Amazon abundance emerged as a nation-building theme during the 1940s, when the dictator Getúlio Vargas started to promote the colonization of the interior, rural parts of Brazil to accelerate the extraction of natural resources and feed the industrialization process (Secreto, 115–35). As the least populated and most forested part of the country, the Amazon appeared as the future and ultimate step of this great "March to the West." In the following decades, crucial mineral discoveries rekindled the myth of a region bursting with natural riches. The oil refining company Petrobrás found oil and gas ores, notably around 1955 in the state of Amazonas (Santos 12–13). In the late 1950s and early 1960s, gold-seekers found new gold and cassiterite ores in the Tapajos (state of Pará), where some private companies also discovered reserves of manganese and bauxite. The ever-enlarging inventory of mineral riches sharpened the appetite of politicians to exploit the resources of the forest.

The Transamazonian highway project emerged as a continuity of this vision. Starting immediately and lasting for years after Médici's announcement, almost all daily reports in the Brazilian press, radio, and television, as well as a long series of official speeches, praised the road in accordance to an imaginary of abundance that brought back the colonial myth of the Eldorado. A case in point was an August 1971 report by Brazil's main daily newspaper *O Globo*, describing the

Transamazonian as the road to the “land of milk, honey and gold” (Veltman 10). This image did not only idealize the ecological potential of the Amazon, but also placed northeastern migrations in the lineage of the exodus to Canaan as described in the Bible, with God leading the Hebrews to “a land flowing with milk and honey” (*New American Standard Bible*, Exod. 3.17). Biblical metaphors were omnipresent in all programs to colonize and develop the rain forest ever since Vargas (Guillen 73–75). These comparisons elevated the Amazon to a “promised land.” In fact, the daily *Correio da Manhã*, in March 1972, presented the Brazilians as a “people of pathfinders,” the only one in the planet able to overcome “immense swamps, virgin forests, deep and mysterious rivers . . . with so much faith” (“Urbanização Apoiará Transamazônica” n.p.). This definition of Brazilians as chosen people, on their way toward a mystical destiny of conquering the Amazon, laid ground for the representation of Brazil as a migrant nation struggling against natural forces. The Transamazonian, according to a poem written by the state prosecutor and law professor of the University of Brasília, Arnaldo Setti, would validate the “historical predestination of the country” to “occupy the huge demographic void” of its interior (*Tempo de Estrada* 41–45).

### Pushing for environmental migrations

In the *cinejornais*, the movies produced by the National Agency of News and shown all over Brazil, the Transamazonian highway was presented as the connecting link between the suffering Northeast and the undeveloped Amazon. The fourth episode of the cinejornal *Brasil Hoje*, in 1971, displayed the road conquering its kilometers against the forest as “a scream of independence of a vast region enslaved by the lack of means of transportation and communication.” However, the opening of the road did not suffice: it was also necessary to fill it with people. For that purpose, different short films between 1970 and 1974 emphasized, almost like a mantra, how good and fertile Amazonian land was. They showed settlers who were offered a home and land “producing in abundance,” as well as schools, medical services, and agricultural assistance, conveying the idea that settlers were not left alone, but closely accompanied by INCRA. According to government propaganda, the settler’s travel to the rainforest was a mission for the greater good of the nation. The film *Transamazônica: o caminho do Homem* (1971) paraded a series of images of the forest intercut by the road while the narrator heralded: “The road that leads to heaven must be an extensive and great Transamazonian, torn by God into the hearts

of men who know to sacrifice themselves for the greater good of humanity.”

It is possible to talk of “sublimation,” notably through propaganda, of the path of small, landless farmers from the Northeast to the Amazon. Their *environmental* migration, incited by drought and mobilized in search for better soils and climatic conditions, was transformed by state discourses into an epopee of courageous human beings freeing themselves from the chains of nature. To be sure, this storytelling commenced with a vision by the Brazilian elites that classified the Northeast as a region where people lived under the yoke of nature, not unlike the image reflected by Cunha in the early twentieth century. Indeed, his impactful novel *Os Sertões* underlined the demeaning impact of the region’s coarse environmental conditions over the moral character and physical stamina of the people. In the same spirit, the senator Benedito Ferreira, in 1971, depicted the *sertanejos* (dwellers of the rural interior, the *Sertão*) of the Northeast as perpetual victims of the “drought’s scourge,” diminishing “those who remain” (i.e. do not emigrate) as “the most fragile, deficient, suffering and desolate people” (Brasil 181). Obviously, these representations were part of a narrative that erased the phenomena of social oppression to explain all problems of poverty and misery through the unfortunate relation of peasants with their habitat. This way, the exodus toward the Amazon, many times due to land inequalities, widespread forced labor, practices of patronage and quasi-inexistent health and education policies in the countryside, could be re-written. It appeared as an act of liberation, through which the *sertanejos* would leave the dominion of nature to colonize a new region where they would no longer yield to wilderness, but master it.

Next to the promotion of this human epopee, which in many occasions took the features of a national war against nature, deforestation was presented as a highly positive, and even as an esthetically enjoyable act. Photographs in popular reviews showed massive bulldozers that evoked the arrival of modernity in the countryside, while poems celebrated “giant trees falling/progress smiling” (Sousa 4–5) or the “federal government/with strong machines and men/who are cutting the woods” (Gomes 2). In all governmental movies promoting the Transamazonian, tractors paraded in the muddy brown of the road, contrasting with the surrounding green of the forest. Significantly, the noise of machinery seemed to heavily compete with the voice of the narrator.

The destruction of nature, in sum, became attractive through state propaganda. The government even launched a big national poetry contest, announced by the country’s major media, a few months after the



beginning of the new highway's construction (Olinto 11). Staged in a ceremony in the presence of Minister Andreazza, the contest resulted in an edited volume containing a selection of the twenty poems judged best by a jury composed of nationally reputed writers (*Tempo de Estrada*). There was little originality in these literary texts, which reproduced the clichés of abundant land, blessed by the Lord and waiting to be conquered by courageous northeastern pioneers. The book was a way for the government to propagate these images within society by celebrating colonization policies through poetic literature.

### From state propaganda to popular culture

To a certain extent, the attempt by the state to disseminate its propaganda patterns within the vehicles of expression of popular culture proved itself effective, as shown in the following testimony collected by the historian Maria Ivonete Coutinho da Silva: "My husband found out about the Transamazonian in the newspaper . . . when he saw the article about the Transamazonian on the *Manchete* magazine he became crazy" (110). In her bestseller, *A Transa-Amazônica*, first published in 1973, the children's writer Odette de Barros Mott depicts how state propaganda found its way within (mainly illiterate) rural populations of the Northeast. Her novel was originally inspired by the author's fascination for, and her faith in, the Transamazonian highway as a lever for disadvantaged people to obtain a better life. It is based on several months of observation and interviews among settlers who migrated from the northeastern state of Ceará to an *agrovila* (an INCRA farming village) in the Amazon, as well as the reconstruction of a true family story. The book shows that northeastern peasants came to know through different means about the Transamazonian project, and above all that the state was distributing farming lots along the road as well as small subsidies to facilitate migrations. One of Mott's characters manages to glimpse at some TV propaganda on the matter while delivering a service at his patron's house (64–66). More often, potential emigrants would receive INCRA advertisement material distributed in villages. This material consisted essentially of a map, tracing the migration road and showing the way towards what became increasingly perceived by the peasants as a green paradise, land of many opportunities (73). The "manifest destiny" of the road appeared in many poems written at the time:

I see a link  
between a thirsty Northeast  
and an Amazon with abundant water  
to compensate each other in these opposed desires.  
(*Tempo de Estrada* 143)

The Transamazonian was also featured in the small, abundantly illustrated poetry books, very popular in Northeastern states and called “*cordéis*” because they were exposed in series, tied to long cords, to be sold in the street. In these works, the *sertanejo* played an important role as the brave settler that would “push through the Amazon/the darkness of the continent” (J. R. Silva 7). Besides the road as a main character, it is interesting to observe that some poems used the same technical discourse as the government, showing how state propaganda contaminated popular imagination, as “big machines/will pass in the lands/never before removed” (*Tempo de Estrada* 155) or:

Topography, engineering  
agrimeasure, architecture,  
in the harmony of exact sciences  
that preside these works without precedent. (42)

The way popular culture, produced or consumed by rural populations, responded to governmental propaganda was a decisive matter to trigger and consolidate migration chains. The road came to be part of daily conversations, feeding the hopes for the future of many farmers in the Northeast and beyond. Successful and well-sold publications praising this project appeared, such as the book of Sérgio D. T. Macedo, a popular author and illustrator. His work, like many others, conveyed the idea that the Transamazonian would complete and integrate Brazil, elevating it to the rank of a powerful country. Homero Homem, a modernist poet and journalist, celebrated the highway in his well-known poem “Abecedário da transamazônica”:

And it comes Transamazo, Transamazonia  
plaque of pavement, strip that unveils  
this Brazil eternally swimming  
with Lusitanian vocation for marching  
blackamerindian construction of Love. (n.p.)

In turn, the Brazilian government, its economic partners, and the pro-regime press used popular reactions to further promote their official message pushing toward migration. The media massively staged and circulated the exemplary case of Joaquim, a farmer from the state of Rio Grande do Norte who traveled to a settlement near the city of Altamira. His child, born during his trip, was the first of many in Brazil to be christened “Transamazônico” (Souza 12). The constructing company Queiroz Galvão, contracted by the government to build the Transamazonian, even drew from this story in its commercials, which celebrated Transamazônico as the first “pioneer-baby” of the highway (Torres 275). Many other private companies would use the



Transamazonian imagery to advertise their products, such as General Motors and Ultramaz in the magazine *Veja*, or Volkswagen with its beetle on national TV (Netto 7). This way, commercial advertisement expanded the reach of State propaganda.

The Transamazonian even appeared in 1974's Carnaval's parades in Rio de Janeiro. That year the road was featured on the parade song of Beija Flor, one of Brazil most popular samba blocs:

It is the road cutting  
the forest in the middle of the *sertão*  
...  
Those who live will see  
Our land different  
It is order and progress  
Pushing Brazil forward. (Alonso 59)

Its rival, the Vila Isabel's bloc, added: "The big road that pass royally/ between rocks, hills and *sierras*/taking progress to the distant brother" (qtd. in Alonso 59). As in the Carnival rhymes, many popular songs also praised this project, as in the song *Transamazônica* interpreted by Adolfo: "Transamazonia . . . it's north, south, east and west, in sum it sums up it its path the cardinal points/ . . . Men of steel that go and trace the destiny by hand/this long road live snake meandering the *sertão*" (qtd. in 61).

The dream of leaving an ecologically inhospitable region to become the conqueror of a generous nature in the Amazonian "promised earth" could thus take seed and grow through a dialogue between the state and popular culture. This dialogue was, evidently, unequal by the fact that it was underpinned by heavy official propaganda carrying the patriotic narrative and idealizing this migration path. In the end, the Transamazonian highway was a pretext for a geopolitical plan by the government: on the one hand, occupying this vast region where the federal government had little control; on the other hand, transforming the potentially revolutionary landless peasants of the Northeast into a cheap workforce for big infrastructure, farming, and mining projects in the Amazon.

## 2. The Road of All Disillusions

### How the Transamazonian failed

From its conception, the Transamazonian highway was under a lot of criticism. During the construction, the workers would remain isolated in the forest for months, connected only through very precarious airstrips. There were constant complaints about small salaries and

many accidents were registered, engendering several cases of death. In 1971, the fear of epidemics led INCRA to conduct precautionary sanitation and vaccination. Even under the regime of censorship maintained by the military government, news of health problems along the construction site appeared recurrently in the media ("Medicina Tropical" 19). There were concerns about the absence of previous studies (those that were done were carried on by the construction firms themselves) and the extreme rush to build the highway (Tamer 39). Other issues that rose to the surface during the construction were the effects that the Transamazonian would have on the environment and indigenous people—specialists feared for the ecological balance of the forest ("Destruição Ameaça Amazônia" 1) and even its transformation into a desert due to the slash and burn techniques of deforestation ("Brasil Poderá Virar Deserto" 44).

The absence of pavement was also pointed out as a major problem; the road could not survive the rainy season without it. Finally, many also wondered about the real possibilities of colonization because of the distance between the already existing villages and doubts about land fertility ("Transamazônica" 9; Pinto 181). Only a few years after opening, the road was already considered a failure: there was excessive spending and many tracks of the road were destroyed ("Penúria e drama na Amazônia" 3), not to mention that the colonization programs quickly proved disappointing. By 1975, only 6,500 of the planned 100,000 families were exploiting land in the Amazon in the context of the INCRA colonization scheme. State propaganda did attract hundreds of thousands of northeastern migrants—but most of them came on a spontaneous basis, outside the control of the INCRA and elsewhere rather than in the *agrovilas*. The failure of the INCRA programs was not because of a low number of incoming migrants, but rather because of the high rate of families leaving after a few months of residency (Kohlepp 194). Bad harvests, geographic isolation of the plots (often too far away from water points or badly connected to the secondary road networks), the lack of access to consumer markets, and the spread of tropical infectious diseases were some of the main causes of these abandonments (194–97). In an article published two years after the opening of the road, an INCRA worker admitted that it was not possible to tell the truth about the colonization situation to the settlers or they would not come ("Falhas na seleção" 168).

Not only did the road and the colonization programs reveal themselves to be an illusion, the myth of the conquering migrant from the Northeast also appeared to be nothing but a fantasy. Contrary to what appeared in official propaganda, there was no straightforward road leading from the northeastern coast to deep into the Amazon. The

Transamazonian remained an unfinished, irregular, and dysfunctional road, and most of the state-sponsored settlers actually did not arrive to the *agrovilas* by taking the highway. They came via airplane trips arranged by INCRA, as one settler's testimony confirms: "The government saw that it could not colonize the Transamazonian without bringing in families . . . [the airplane] came here and would drop 300 settlers. It would come two times a day" (M. I. C. Silva 48). Furthermore, the geographic distribution of the migration flux was much more complex than a homogeneous stream spanning from east to west. Many of the new settlers came in fact from the states of Paraná and Rio Grande do Sul, situated in the extreme South of Brazil.

Moreover, there was an important gap between how the media and governmental discourse glorified the figure of the brave northeastern farmer, and the environmental discrimination, which northeasterners were subjected to along the Transamazonian. In the INCRA settlements, the government often allocated the most fertile lands to migrants from the South, lots of them of German descent, while northeasterners were mostly left with the poorest soil typologies (Fearnside 551). Southerners' settlement was encouraged by INCRA, which considered that these migrants had more agricultural knowledge and would serve as an example in a "demonstration effect" (M. I. C. Silva 143). After 1974 the government slowed down investment in small settlers' agricultural projects, which led to further abandonment of lands, as many as one in three (Hecht and Cockburn 128). Obviously, there are also examples of individual success stories among the northeastern families which settled there, but people's experiences, in general, remained far away from the optimistic representations that had brought them to the Amazon.

### Cultural narratives of disillusion

The socio-environmental disaster of the Transamazonian caused enormous deception, especially among the farmer migrants themselves. This situation translated into several personal tragedies. While journalists started to describe the Transamazonian as a "road linking nothing to nowhere," settlers called it the "Transmisery" highway (Branford 64). Joaquim, Transamazônico's father, once glorified by the Brazilian media, became a symbol of this decadence. After only a year spent in an *agrovila*, his two daughters ended up as prostitutes in the nearest city, Altamira. The latter's dramatic growth, boosted by an influx of settlers from all over Brazil after the inauguration of the highway, had created an urban platform for various types of traffic.

Joaquim's reaction was to return to his native village of Rio Grande do Norte (Souza 12).

Joaquim was not the only one to review his judgment. Authors of literary works that had praised the Transamazonian project did as well. After the success of her book *A Transa-Amazônica*, Odette de Barros Mott followed the development of the *agrovilas* and recognized that the results did not match her expectations. She admitted that she had been ingenuous during her first travel to the Amazon: "I liked to see the highway, the *agrovilas*, and I believe that because of this, I came back to seeing the world with the eyes of a child, with an open and naive heart" (R. A. Silva 357). During her frequent visits to middle-schools in her state of São Paulo, she had conversations with students in which she shared her deception, and one teenager suggested that she change the title of the book to "The Great Humbug" ("A Grande Tapeação" in Portuguese). Although she decided to revise the novel and adapt it to the negative experiences occurred in the Amazon over the 1970s, her publisher, after telling her that the optimism of *A Transa-Amazônica* "transmitted a mistaken vision of the Brazilian reality," chose to no longer re-edit the book by 1980 (R. A. Silva 357).

An even more striking example is that of the famous journalist Fernando Morais, who in 1970 published an award-winning reportage on the Transamazonian and the new world which he believed the road had opened for Northeastern migrants. Four years later, he came back to the region and wrote a new series of articles showing a national dream fading away, underpinned by representations of ecological decay. "In 1970," he wrote, "we logged 5,296 kilometers over the promise of a project that only existed on maps . . . We saw Indians, jaguars, coatis, birds in profusion. Four years later . . . the birds had taken refuge inside the woods, the road had frightened wild animals away and the Indians were confined into their reserves" (Morais 434). To make matters worse, the depressing landscape which he described was inhabited not by successful pioneers made rich by nature's exploitation, but by pauperized and abandoned settlers: "The burnings gave the landscape a grim aspect: in the middle of the dark-green forest, an entirely grey glebe, made of stubs of burnt trees, and shrubby grass that was still smoking. And, in the middle of this brazier, the settler's house, isolated with his wife and kids" (503). Morais also presented the whole Transamazonian project as a huge ecological miscalculation, recording that the government had promised that the Amazonian earth was "the most fertile in Brazil" despite the absence of scientific study that proved it. When the teams of the governmental Institute of Farming and Livestock Research (IPEAN) found out that only 3.6% of the lands around the Transamazonian had a high rate of fertility, it was

too late to step back: "The road was already built, and thousands and thousands of settlers from entire Brazil had been displaced to the glebes that hedged it" (643). The belief in unstoppable progress and the idea that nature could be subjugated and modeled according to human wishes had made the nation blind and massively misled rural Brazilians towards an Eldorado that did not exist.

### Transamazonian road-movies

The critique of the Transamazonian also became salient in cinema, with successful road-movies that portrayed a common destiny between nature and rural populations on the grounds that both suffered the violence of the policies of agricultural colonization and modernization. *Iracema, uma transa amazônica*, shot in 1973 by Jorge Bodanzky and Orlando Senna, dives into the social misery of a young prostitute born in a riverside village of the rainforest. During her journey on the Transamazonian, she is victim of contempt and exploitation by actors involved in the economy of deforestation. The other central character, "Tião Grão Brasil," a truck driver from Rio Grande do Sul, incarnates the voice of the military regime, whose developmentalist slogans he constantly repeats. Tião, who attempts to make a fortune in the timber trade, assimilates the Amazon to Brazil's Eldorado and Iracema to a useless and dumb "Indian," whom he can manipulate and abuse as he wishes. He peddles a grotesque nationalist discourse rooted in the myth of a nature that is unlimited and exists only to be exploited. *Iracema* is remarkably innovative in its message, given that it was shot only three years after the government announcement of the Transamazonian. It is also innovative in its form, which mixes fiction and documentary, as it incorporates interviews of people (many of them recent settlers) living along the highway. By reflecting real stories of broken lives, deluded promises and social exploitation (including forced labor) the film offers to see the full dimension of the disastrous socio-environmental effects of the Transamazonian.

The mixture of silly and tragic which characterizes *Iracema* is also a trait of Carlos Diegues' comedy *Bye Bye Brasil*, released in 1979. With a cruel sense of humor, the movie depicts the travel, across Brazil's northern half, of a small circus company called "Caravana Rolidei" (for "Holyday," as an ingenuous attempt to imitate a standardized ideal of Western modernity). It is a parody of environmental migration, starting in the desolate, drought-ravaged context of the Northeast's interior villages, whose lifelessness contrasts with the possibilities of entertainment offered by the Caravana. The dream of fleeing away from this inauspicious environment is personified by the character of Cico, a

young peasant who decides to follow the company on the road. Just before leaving his native land, he is shown standing on a bare and dry field, where he addresses his farewells to his mute and exhausted father. His declaration ("I don't wanna die here, dad, I don't wanna end up buried, pulling roots out of the stones"), underlines once again the ingratitude of the region's soils, singling out the ecological factor as the main motivation for going away.

*Bye Bye Brasil* also mocks the misleading propaganda of the Brazilian state and how it is naively consumed and grotesquely amplified by popular rumor. The episode that convinces "Lorde Cigano," leader of the circus, to head the Caravana toward the rainforest is a random beer chat he has at a gas station with a truck driver (a wink to *Iracema's* Tião). The latter boasts about the Amazon's allegedly infinite opportunities in the following words: "There, pineapples are as big as jackfruits and trees equal the size of skyscrapers. There are mining treasures, precious stones, everything just there, right under the earth. Everyone is rich up there, but nobody spends anything because the forest already offers all you need. Transamazonian, never heard of it?" Later, Lorde Cigano describes the forest to his companions in the same words, which he repeats like a parrot, adding exaggeratingly enthusiastic gestures and mimics.

About half of the movie takes place on the highway and surrounding localities. Just like in *Iracema*, this central part of the story contrasts dramatically with the exuberant descriptions of the Amazon, with which some of the first scenes are ironically filled. After a highway board signals the beginning of the "legal Amazon's" administrative territory, there is a long shot of a dead armadillo. The exotic animal, typical of the rainforest area, lies in a pool of blood on the asphalt road, as if to highlight, in turn, the destructive effect of the Transamazonian on life in the region. Pans filmed from the perspective of the vehicle also show continuous landscapes of sparse and stunted trees, leafless and barely standing on fields of ashes. This makes the former description of the Amazon as a place where trees are "as tall as skyscrapers" resonate tragically. A later encounter with a group of disoriented Indians concludes the movie's deconstruction of the Transamazonian dream, especially as one of them declares: "after white people came, it was over with my village."

*Bye Bye Brasil* thus echoes *Iracema* with a definitive demonstration of the disillusion that the Transamazonian project left behind. During the period between the two movies, the Amazon turned into a national symbol of environmental destruction, with deforestation rates making the press headlines and scientists all over the country warning about fatal consequences for the soils and climate. In this context, *Bye Bye*



*Brasil*, together with other artistic and cultural works, unmade the dream of the Amazon as a green Eldorado. It invited the country to a farewell from the mentality of conquering “pioneerism,” which fueled the propaganda encouraging northeasterners to migrate westwards.

### 3. Conclusion

The Transamazonian example shows how a top-down geopolitical project can exploit environmental features and social tragedies. This project fascinated cultural actors, who dedicated books, poems, and songs to its glorification. Nonetheless, the Transamazonian rapidly became the road of all disillusions. The representation of the region as an Eldorado entered into friction with the new images of a fragile environment that emerged by the mid-1970s.

The two images of the Amazon, the Eldorado versus the burning forest, still coexist, as is evident in recent controversies regarding the building of big infrastructure projects such as dams, roads, and mines. But does Brazil still see itself as a nation of migrant pioneers? And has the dominant national narrative remained that of a people destined for the exploitation of nature? Of course, in certain communities and places, this vision seems to still predominate (Campbell). Nevertheless, it is a narrative that has lost its hegemonic position in Brazilian society and culture. Literary, musical, and cinematographic representations in and of Brazil have come to be marked by a different relation between nation and nature. As several authors have shown, the myth of the triumphal march to the interior has given place to a nostalgia of the vanishing *Sertão*, a pacific search for the nation's essence in its vast and partly abandoned rural areas (Sadlier; Dorsch and Wagner).

Brazil's last major nation-defining movie, *Central do Brasil* (1998), portrays a story of personal introspection and identity search, which is interwoven with a long travel from the crowded southeastern metropolis of Rio de Janeiro into the country's northeastern interior, the *Sertão*. Since the 1980s, TV shows idealizing rural life and transmitting a romantic vision of wilderness have conquered Brazilian television, such as the *Globo* channel series *Lampião e Maria Bonita* in 1982 or *Rei do Gado* in 1996, and, recently, the telenovelas *Amazônia* (2007) and the very successful *Velho Chico* (2015). At the same time, campaigns against deforestation and for nature preservation in the Amazon are countless, such as the Greenpeace sponsored campaign against illegal logging, which started in 1999. Another example is the campaign against the Belo Monte dam, which managed to mobilize grassroots organizations like the Movement of Dam Affected People (MAB), but also *Globo's* TV celebrities. This sense of ecological alarm is conveyed in literature

(especially in the novels of Milton Hatoum, currently one of Brazil's most notable writers) and cinema (like in the movie *Serras da Desordem*, 2006). It has also infiltrated popular culture through, for example, the rise of national environmental heroes such as the former rubber-tapper leader Chico Mendes. The latter, assassinated in 1988 because he opposed deforestation and land concentration in the Amazon, is now the object of a widespread, "Che Guevara-like" appropriation and commodification, with the circulation of t-shirts, mugs and tribute songs praising his memory. Another sign of this tendency is the always more intensive ecological conversion of the powerful Landless Movement, whose success, in addition, has also served as a platform of projections to romanticize rurality (Lagier).

We need more studies that examine these cultural transformations in order to understand the links between the search for an authentic (and possibly, illusory) Brazilian nature, a certain remorse as regard to a destructive past, and the ecological critique facing environmental destruction. Exploring the history of environmental migrations in the country, and how they have been culturally constructed and deconstructed, may be a key in this research agenda.

## NOTES

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2. Most of the press articles cited in this essay resort to anonymous authorship.

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