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Mackey, Lee

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## BOOK REVIEW

# The Scramble for the Amazon and the "Lost Paradise" of Euclides da Cunha by Susanna Hecht

**Lee Mackey, Doctoral Candidate**  
University of California, Los Angeles

"It seems in Amazonia that the magnitude of the questions implies a certain languid discourse: inductions favor flights of fancy. Truths are hidden in hyperbole." So wrote Euclides da Cunha, one of Brazil's greatest writers, at the beginning of the twentieth century as he dissected leading works of naturalist explorers from the United States and Europe who had traveled to the Amazon. In *The Scramble for the Amazon*, Susanna Hecht reconstructs da Cunha's unwritten treatise on the Amazon from his texts and maps as a hired surveyor while a global rubber boom sent this region into the throes of rubber extraction and imperial contests. Meticulous research and elegant translations from the original Portuguese help readers to understand the full force of da Cunha's argument, which reinterpreted settlement in Brazil, inverted colonial narratives, and placed everyday peoples as the agents of nation formation.<sup>1</sup> Hecht's deft touch with the multiple pens of da Cunha—as a "fact-checker of empire," an empathetic voice for social justice, a scientist, a nationalist, and a fallen man—helps to reveal the complexity and evolution of his interpretations. Hecht places da Cunha's Amazonia at the center of complex global processes of imperial claims on the tropics, and in so doing boldly restructures paradigms of scholarship in the field.

As he traveled up the Purus River in a region where naturalist explorers from the United States and Europe had mostly seen empty wilderness, da Cunha's eyes focused acutely on people. He saw a network of human-made shortcuts that connected pristine rivers, waves of inter-regional migration that spread amidst the forest canopy, and relations of debt peonage that tied rubber-tappers to their own trees.

For da Cunha, this represented the struggles, and promise, of a nation under construction in nature. It is Hecht's breadth of intellectual synthesis, as well as her own ability to mark shortcuts for the reader between disparate intellectual streams, that engages da Cunha's work in broader social and environmental theories of the Amazon. With Hecht as a guide, political ecologies explain da Cunha's comparisons of rubber extraction, Foucauldian logics interpret the voluntary entrapment of rubber tappers, climatic disaster and runaway slaves

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<sup>1</sup> Analysts should first jump to the concluding "Note on the Text," which contains a succinct but valuable methodological discussion of translation, texts, and interpretation.

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shape migrations, and competing tropicalisms illuminate da Cunha's territorial maneuvers. At 600 pages in length, this book is rich in empirical detail and expansive in theoretical argument but always marked by enjoyable prose. In his writings, da Cunha declared that he would restore to this region the history that it had been denied. In *Scramble for the Amazon*, Hecht transports da Cunha's Amazonia, as only such a skillful specialist can, from a forgotten resource periphery to the center of our greatest socioenvironmental debates over the global tropics. ■

## REFERENCES

Hecht, Susanna. *The Scramble for the Amazon and the Lost Paradise of Euclides da Cunha*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2013. 632 pp. ISBN: 978-0-226322-81-0