

# **A** **Contra** corriente

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## **Review / Reseña**

Martínez-Pinzón, Felipe and Javier Uriarte, eds. *Intimate Frontiers: A Literary Geography of the Amazon*, Liverpool University Press, 2019.

**Amanda M. Smith**

University of California—Santa Cruz

The vast and diverse geographic region formed by the drainage basin of the Amazon River has been an object of western literary aesthetics since the colonial period, when Spanish Dominican Friar Gaspar de Carvajal penned his account of Francisco de Orellana's 1541 expedition down the entire length of the river. Though the manuscript was not published in full until 1855, as the editors of *Intimate Frontiers* note, with Orellana's voyage, "lasting images of the region as a promise of riches and a purveyor of death would start feeding western fantasy" (7). Representations of Amazonia as El Dorado and/or Green Hell have been productively analyzed in Latin American literary studies at least since Lydia de León Hazera's 1971 *La novela de la selva hispanoamericana: nacimiento, desarrollo y transformación*, which traces the origins of the *novela de la selva* from the writing of 18<sup>th</sup>-century European explorers to the works of the French Romantics. Since then, numerous authors have engaged with the appearance of common paradise/hell tropes in literary texts, film, and other forms of art. In recent years of greater attention to and anxiety about climate change, Amazonia has figured prominently as an object of the western discourse of environmentalism. At the same time, artists, activists, and knowledge producers from the basin have begun challenging that discourse and demanding human and more-than-human rights in the face of

threats from national and transnational capitalist interests. The increased presence of the Amazon in the political sphere has emerged alongside a surge in interest in cultural production about and from the region. Given the stakes of the current ecological crisis, the need to revisit and meaningfully deconstruct the enduring colonialist projections that shape the world's understanding of Amazonia is pressing.

Felipe Martínez-Pinzón and Javier Uriarte have undertaken such a project with their compilation of engaging essays in *Intimate Frontiers: A Literary Geography of Amazonia*. The well-crafted introduction succinctly outlines a representational history of Amazonian aggrandizement and mythification in order to propose a focus on “everydayness” as a productive point of departure from the now commonplace tropes of a colossal and exoticized land of epic feats (3). Central to Martínez-Pinzón and Uriarte's framing of these “intimate frontiers” is the ambiguous concept of home and the (un)homely, for, as they provocatively suggest, “the Amazon as Green Hell would not exist if it were not also conceived of—and often at the same time—as a possible home” (18). Twelve essays, organized chronologically by the objects of analysis, explore twentieth-century representations of Amazonia, engaging to varying degrees with the framework outlined by the editors. The essays also inevitably address the way El Dorado and Green Hell operate in a fertile discursive field where themes of human versus nature, frontier and diplomacy, and virginity and hypersexuality construct frequently contradictory ideas about the Amazon. The selection of contributors from both the humanities and the social sciences allows for a diversity of perspectives that expose the fissures in hegemonic discourses about the region.

The editors summarize their aim as follows: “This book...proposes to rethink topics such as the Green Hell from the perspective of the (un)homely and, in so doing, invites readers to complicate and thus better understand the representational traditions connected to the region” (34). Additionally, the introduction advances a need not only to recover the way writing, film, and photography have challenged established stereotypes, but also to work against their effect, namely, the rendering of the region and its human and non-human entities, as an irreconcilably strange, illegible other to the western worldview. By highlighting a diversity of archives that have informed discourses on Amazonia, the collection seeks to release some of the hold of popular (mis)conceptions on the interpretation of the region and formulate alternative representational frameworks.

Several salient topics emerge across rich discussions of everyday scenes impacted by the forces of modernization. Essays by Martínez-Pinzón, Cristóbal

Cardemil-Krauze, and Cinthya Torres describe rhetorical strategies used by Latin American intellectuals to argue for the geopolitical integration of the Amazonian regions of Colombia, Peru, and Brazil, respectively. In “The Jungle Like a Sunday at Home: Rafael Uribe Uribe, Miguel Triana, and the Nationalization of the Amazon,” Martínez-Pinzón develops an elucidating comparison of the writings of two Colombian intellectuals from the early twentieth century, contrasting *criollo* approaches to imagining the nationalization of the Colombian Amazon. Martínez-Pinzón’s focus on language politics in the Colombian frontier reveals that, whereas Rafael Uribe-Uribe conceived of language theoretically as a colonizing tool, Miguel Triana observed language used practically in the Putumayo “not only to give orders but also to answer them or ignore them” (41). Cardemil-Krauze’s “Hildebrando Fuentes’s Peruvian Amazon: National Integration and Capital in the Jungle” convincingly proposes that the arguments used by Iquitos politicians to persuade Lima of the modernizing potential of the Amazonian department of Loreto ultimately exposed the state’s weakness in the area. His analysis attends to the ways in which the discourse of economic modernization openly condoned genocide in the region. Cinthya Torres’s “Contested Frontiers: Territory and Power in Euclides da Cunha’s Amazonian Texts” reveals how the Brazilian author and engineer spatially justified Brazil’s claims to the territory of Acre by narrating its national history through a cartographic archive that linked Acre to the Brazilian state. In each of these contexts, the impetus for the geopolitical incorporation of the Amazonian frontier relates directly to the region’s perceived economic potential.

Other essays bring economics to the forefront in their consideration of the work of modernizing institutions to develop Amazonia and exploit its biodiversity. Leopoldo Bernucci scrutinizes the archetype of the rubber baron across a variety of texts. “A Wolf in Sheep’s Clothing: The *Cauchero* of the Amazonian Rubber Groves” underscores the depiction of rubber barons as Janus-faced entrepreneurs, able to offer hospitality at home while Indigenous laborers were tortured and killed in rubber camps. “Filming Modernity in the Tropics: The Amazon, Walt Disney, and the Antecedents of an Amazonian Foundational Myth” by Barbara Weinstein explores the 1944 documentary *The Amazon Awakens* to boldly situate the beginnings of modernization theory before the Cold War in the policies and practices of Nelson Rockefeller’s Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs and Disney Studios. Both essays highlight the appeal to fantasy necessary to promote economic modernization in the Amazon basin and disguise its fictions both at home and abroad.

Three contributions on Amazonian novels bring into stark relief the ways in which literary discourse has sometimes functioned to imagine alternatives to the logic of capitalism. Lesley Wylie's "The Politics of Vegetating in Arturo Burgos Freitas's *Mal de gente*" and André Botelho and Nísia Trindade Lima's "Malarial Philosophy: The *Modernista* Amazonia of Mário de Andrade" both showcase instances in which authors seized upon Amazonian stereotypes—unproductive vegetation and tropical disease madness—to recast them as critical positionalities from which to contest, ignore, or retreat from what Wylie calls "the ills of modernity" (192). Charlotte Rogers's detailed close reading in "Nostalgia and Mourning in Milton Hatoum's *Órfãos do Eldorado*" emphasizes the author's "expressive, critical nostalgia as an aesthetic stance" on the persistent presence of the externally imposed myths of Amazonia as a lost city of riches (250). These literary perspectives underscore creative and unusual confrontations with prevailing representations of Amazonia in works of fiction.

The recurring theme of Amazonia as a potential site of resistance to hegemonic narratives of frontier backwardness and chaotic depravity emerges in two paradigm-shifting interventions by Lúcia Sá and Javier Uriarte. Uriarte reads sexual encounters in the Putumayo from Irish diplomat Roger Casement's *Black Diaries* through the lens of gay cruising. In so doing, he interprets—against the grain of other Casement studies—that Casement's accounts of sexual experiences constitute an effort to construct a "space of pleasure" within the Green Hell of rubber extraction abuses in the Putumayo (93). Lúcia Sá investigates the narrative form of Indigenous shamanic tales in dialogue with Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's perspectivism to develop a narrative theory that explains the Amazonian logic of plot elements that, from a western literary perspective, may seem arbitrary. According to Sá, the key difference between the two traditions is that western narratives of marriage and union tend toward conflict resolution whereas Amazonian ones celebrate irresolvable conflicts and differences as catalysts for productive changes. While Uriarte and Sá approach unions in Amazonia from vastly different perspectives, both provide fresh interpretive frameworks.

Essays by Rike Bolte and Alejandro Quin formulate important critiques of Amazonia's place in literary and visual archives. In "The 'Western Baptism' of Yurupary: Reception and Rewriting of an Amazonian Foundational Myth," Bolte traces the translation of the Yurupary from oral tradition into a foundational text for Colombian letters, arguing that, as rendered, the original myth of Yurupary is both dehistoricized and inaccessible in Colombian literary history. Quin discusses US photographer and filmmaker Sharon Lockhart's "Amazon Project," which engages

with the familiar genre of travel literature while deliberately eschewing its most common themes. “Photography, Inoperative Ethnography, Naturalism: On Sharon Lockhart’s Amazon Project” interprets the images of interior spaces of mundane scenes and pictures of family photographs as an effort to center Amazonian people and showcase them as travelers themselves. While Quin recognizes the important critical demystification of Amazonia in Lockhart’s photography, he crucially recognizes the need to reflect on the limits of outsiders’ abilities to visualize other people’s lives; Bolte similarly indicates a failure by Colombian literary critics to fully grasp the complexities of Indigenous oral tradition.

A clearer discussion of the meaning of the (un)homely in Amazonian contexts may have strengthened the cohesiveness of the collection. Some of the essays respond directly to the volume’s call to complicate the representation of Amazonia around the theme of home—Martínez-Pinzón’s emphasis on Triana’s boredom in the Putumayo, Bernucci’s study of the characterization of rubber baron hospitality, Sa’s articulation of human-non-human unions in Indigenous texts, Wylie’s portrayal of *Mal de gente* as a novel about not feeling at home in modernity, Quin’s tracing of Lockhart’s domestic scenes. However, some essays leave it up to readers to determine how the analysis may illuminate the idea of the familiar and domestic. Perhaps efforts to economically integrate Amazonia (Cardemil-Krauze, Torres) can be thought of as making the frontier part of the national home. The contraction of a tropical disease (Botelho and Lima) could indicate that a part of the forest has made a home inside a foreign body. A Good Neighbor-era documentary may be understood as an effort to make Amazonia familiar to what Weinstein rightfully describes as an ambiguous audience. While not all of the essays correspond clearly to the volume’s framework, as a body of work, they do successfully complicate monolithic representations of Amazonia.

One minor criticism of this enriching volume might be the editors’ tendency to frame canonical Amazonian texts—colonial *relaciones*, 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century naturalist treatises, early 20<sup>th</sup>-century *novelas de la selva*—as unproblematic reproductions of the paradise/hell paradigm. The corpus of essays in *Intimate Frontiers*, however, seems to suggest that any close analysis of Amazonian texts will reveal inconsistencies and contradictions in the discourses that construct such paradigms. Perhaps lacking are more essays considering cultural production coming from within Amazonia to fully grasp the stakes of the western gaze for the creation and circulation of representations of the region.

Aside from the practical limitations posed by any project as ambitious as this compilation of multi-disciplinary perspectives on Amazonian representation, the book is a much-needed updated contribution to the fields of Amazonian literary and cultural studies during a time of increased global interest and concern for the region. The essays promise to be of value to the work of literary and film critics, scholars of visual culture, and historians, and will inspire further studies that serve to diversify approaches to understanding Amazonia as a literary geography.