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ON CIVILIZATION AND SEVERED HEADS: SOUTH AMERICAN *SERTÕES*

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This article will explore how Brazilian thinker Euclides Da Cunha's 1902 *Sertões* critically rewrites Argentine writer and statesman Domingo Faustino Sarmiento's 1845 *Facundo, o civilización y barbarie*.¹ The literary dialogue will serve as a springboard for considering Brazil—which in 1889 had overthrown the Hemisphere's last monarchy and embraced republican government under a president—in a South American context during the region's uneven process of political, social, and economic modernization during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While the parallels between *Civilización y barbarie* and *Os sertões* are well-known, scholars have yet to consider how and why Da Cunha uses Sarmiento's text as a palimpsest—an unusual strategy, given the rivalry that characterized Argentine-Brazilian relations during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. I argue that Da Cunha mobilizes Sarmiento's canonical dichotomy between civilization and barbarism to reflect critically on the adaptation of the bourgeois-republican nation-state model to the racially heterogeneous states of Latin America, which were simultaneously postcolonial and subject to the imperial gazings of various Northern countries. The South-South dialogue between the two texts draws attention to the aporias at the heart of the nineteenth-century liberal project in South America.

Domingo Faustino Sarmiento's canonical polemic *Facundo* analyzes the cultural conditions that made possible the 1835-52 dictatorship of Juan Manuel de Rosas in Argentina. The author argues that the country's political, economic, and cultural "backwardness" are results of the survival of colonial lifeways in the Republic. Traditional Hispanic culture, he feels, has failed to promote the respect for labor and the law upon which bourgeois-republican government is based. Rather than orderly citizens, this system has produced the gauchos, mixed-race rural subalterns that Sarmiento deems unfit for self-government. The country soon descended into a civil war between the traditionalist *federales* and modernizing *unitarios*. The author represents this conflict as a clash between the "barbarous" Argentine countryside and the European "civilization" that he sees embodied by the port city of Buenos Aires.

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Euclides Da Cunha's *Sertões* is organized around a similar civilization/barbarism axis. The self-proclaimed "livro de ataque" tells the story of a group of mostly Afro-descended sugar workers who flee the coastal plantations of the Northeastern State of Bahia in the decade following the 1888 abolition of slavery for the region's interior desert, known as the *sertão*. There, they join a millenarian cult of *sertanejos*, or mixed-race backlands peasants, led by folk preacher Antônio Vicente Mendes Maciel (1830-97), popularly known as Antônio Conselheiro, and found a community called Canudos. Accused of supporting a restoration of the recently deposed Brazilian monarchy and resented for pulling labor away from the region's latifundia, the Canudos settlement was besieged by the Brazilian army, eventually falling on October 7, 1897. Like Sarmiento's *Civilización y barbarie*, Da Cunha's *Sertões* juxtaposes the "barbarism" of rural Northeastern populations with the positivist civilization of Rio de Janeiro's and São Paulo's Europeanizing republican elites.

A dialogic reading of *Os sertões* with *Civilización y barbarie* reveals that Da Cunha reappropriates Sarmiento's famous civilization/barbarism binary as a counterdiscourse to the development of republican government in Brazil. A fervent believer in republican ideals, Da Cunha has misgivings concerning the way that the model has been implemented in Latin America. *Os sertões* expresses his fears that, after three generations of supposed political stability under the Brazilian monarchy, the newly formed Lusophone republic's violent reaction to the War of Canudos—metonymized through the trope of beheading—signals a descent into the "barbarism" of Spanish American republicanism that Sarmiento describes in *Civilización y barbarie*. Like other Brazilian elites of the time, Da Cunha feels that Argentina, by investing in its racialized human capital, has overcome this barbarism while the oligarchic Brazilian Republic has fallen further and further behind on the path to civilization.

Historical Background

For most of the nineteenth century, the politically turbulent republics of Spanish America, particularly Argentina, had functioned as a constitutive other for Imperial Brazil. The situation changed, however when the country proclaimed itself a republic in 1889. The *República Velha*, as the First Brazilian Republic (1889-1930) is known, suffered much of the same political turmoil that Brazil previously had condemned in Spanish America, of which the War of Canudos (1896-97) is the most famous example. At the same time that Brazil's status as a regional leader was coming into question, Argentina would begin to rise in international esteem. Upon assuming the presidency in 1868, Sarmiento embarked upon a modernization program that would involve the development of the country through foreign investment, the opening of the Patagonia region to commercial agriculture, the elimination of the indigenous and Afro-descended populations, the courting of European immigrants in an effort to whiten the population, and the passing of compulsory education laws. Morally dubious though many of them may seem to a contemporary audience, these reforms set Argentina on a path that, by 1895, would give the country the world's highest per capita gross domestic product (Maddison Project). One of the few examples of a stable bourgeois-republican state in Latin America, "by 1900, [...] Argentina—once perceived as an empty land of caudillo barbarism—had become a sound model of civilization" (Pruess, *Transnational* 79). The country would rival Brazil to be "el centro de la modernidad

latinoamericana” (Garramuño 8n2)—a competition would move off of the purely symbolic plane as the two countries, along with Chile, began an arms race in an effort to assert military dominance in the region (Veber).

This new geopolitical situation plunged Brazilian elites into an identity crisis, with some continuing in the triumphalist spirit of country’s nineteenth-century nationalist discourse even as others fretted over the nascent republic’s place in the new South America. On the one hand, texts such as Afonso Celso’s 1900 *Porque me ufano do meu país* continued to boast of Brazil’s natural beauty and chivalrous past while locating the country’s strength in its racial diversity and supposedly egalitarian culture in which “negros, brancos, peles-vermelhas, mestiços vivem [...] em abundância e paz” (Celso III). In contrast, Manoel Bomfim’s 1905 *América latina: males de origem* articulates the rising misgivings among the Brazilian intelligentsia regarding the country’s place in the South American geopolitical order by heretically insisting on the unflattering parallels between the histories of Brazil and *a América hispânica*, as the region was called in the Portuguese of the period. The fraught question of Brazil’s regional identity at which the divergence between Celso and Bomfim gestures is central to Da Cunha’s critical adaptation of Sarmiento’s *Civilización y barbarie*, as I will show.

Sarmiento’s Influence

Latin Americanists long have realized the parallels between *Facundo* and *Os sertões*, both of which seek to define a white, capitalist, and republican coastal “civilization” against the precapitalist and semicolonial “barbarism” of the mixed-race peoples of the interior, which they present as simultaneously constitutive of and extraneous to the national project. These thematic similarities have led scholars such as Renata Wasserman, Luiz Costa Lima, Berthold Zilly, and Miriam Gárate, among others, to undertake comparative analyses of the two texts.

Some critics, such as Carlos Maul and Roberto González Echevarría, have gone so far as to suggest a genealogical relationship between the two works. Leopoldo Bernucci, for his part, observes that both texts feature a tripartite structure that proceeds from analysis of the land to analysis of the people living on that land to a narration of violent conflict between those people and bourgeois-republican civilization. He joins González Echevarría and Maul in arguing that the “A terra” and “O homem” sections of *Os sertões* share enough parallels with the famous opening chapters of *Facundo* (also on the *tierra* and the *hombres* who inhabit it) to indicate that the Brazilian work was inspired by its Argentine predecessor (64). The critic sets out to prove this point once and for all by performing word-for-word comparisons of key sections of the two texts, revealing linguistic similarities difficult to dismiss as mere coincidences (47).

There is thus substantial evidence suggesting that Da Cunha was familiar with the canonical Argentine text when he penned his own book. The Brazilian writer’s admiration of Sarmiento—who, he feels, led Argentina away from the barbarism of the civil wars described in *Facundo* and into the triumphal bourgeois-republican modernity that characterized the country by the early twentieth century—is evident throughout his oeuvre. In his 1909 collection of essays *À margem da história*, for example, the Brazilian would claim that

“Domingo Sarmiento sobressaía nas crises da sua terra despedindo os clarões de suas grandes esperanças, pressagos de um próximo amanhecer depois de uma noite nacional de vinte anos” (229). Similarly, in his acceptance speech to the Academia Brasileira de Letras, da Cunha laments that Brazil lacked a “Domingo Sarmiento [...] que nos abreviasse a distância do passado e, num evocar surpreendente, trouxesse aos nossos dias os nossos maiores com os seus caracteres dominantes, fazendo-nos compartilhar um pouco as suas existências imortais” (*Contrastes* 117). In these texts, Da Cunha points to Sarmiento’s nation-building project in Argentina as an example for Brazil to emulate. Da Cunha’s acceptance of Sarmiento’s literary influence in *Os sertões*, a work on the misadventures of the bourgeois-republican project in Brazil, thus may be read as the literary expression of a desire to replicate the success of the Argentine nation-state project laid out in *Facundo*.

Yet, despite the indications of Sarmiento’s influence on Da Cunha, there exists a long tradition in Lusophone letters of denying that the Brazilian writer was familiar with the canonical Argentine text at the time that he drafted his most famous work.² In his 1940 *Glória de Euclides da Cunha*, Francisco Venâncio Filho, one of the first serious scholars of Da Cunha’s work, would somewhat contentiously observe that “seria estranho entre todas as citações de obras e autores que se deparam n’ ‘Os Sertões’, que, inspirado em Facundo, não aparecesse uma vez sequer o nome de Sarmiento” (183). He explains this absence by claiming that, “de Francisco Escobar, autoridade intelectual e moral sem contraste, que acompanhou de perto a elaboração d’ ‘Os Sertões’, colheu-se o depoimento pessoal, infelizmente não documentado por escrito, que Euclides desconhecia o grande livro argentino, quando da elaboração do nosso” (183-84). Despite the—by his own admission—unsubstantiated nature of this information, Venâncio Filho uses the lack of obvious references to *Facundo* in *Os sertões* to assert that any claim regarding the former’s influence on the latter represents an “accusação” made in “má fé” (180).

This questionable stance may be explained by what more contemporary literary scholars such as Antonio Candido, Jorge Schwarz, David William Foster, and Robert Patrick Newcomb, as well as the historian Ori Pruess, have identified as a tendency among Latin Americanists to consider Brazilian and Spanish American letters as two separate, noncommunicating cultural systems. Heeding Candido’s call to “pensar de que maneira os dois grandes blocos linguísticos da América Latina têm pensado um no outro e têm visto um ao outro” (143), Newcomb has suggested that “Luso-Hispanic studies should [...] ultimately concern itself with questioning the deeper ontological value of categories such as *Latin America*.” A “comparative Luso-Hispanic project” with a “reflexive, historicizing orientation,” he argues, could “challenge received notions of national and supranational identity” (4).

In the rest of this article, I will use the relationship between Sarmiento and Da Cunha to consider the interplay of “national and supernational” concerns in the particular formulation of Brazil’s regional identity that Da Cunha articulates. I will analyze the Argentine writer’s influence on the Brazilian author in order to resituate *Os sertões* within a “transnational South American” (to adopt Preuss’s term) context. More than a nationalist treatment of *brasilidade*, *Os sertões* dialogues with the Argentine *Facundo* to offer a

² For a summary of this debate, see Gárate.

pessimistic rereading of the racially heterogeneous Lusophone nation's place in the New-World republican order.

Race in Sarmiento and Da Cunha

Both *Facundo* and *Os sertões* paradoxically consider the mixed-race peasants of the interior to be obstacles on the Republic's path to civilization while, at the same time, portraying them in Romantic terms that celebrate the place of the subaltern *volk* in the South American nation-state. Sarmiento's text in particular functions as a discursive effort on the part of Eurocentric Argentine bourgeois-republican elites to discipline the heterogeneous national body. The author views Juan Manuel de Rosas's protectionist and cultural-nationalist dictatorship --which upset the Europeanizing urban bourgeoisie's design to integrate Argentina into world markets—as a “barbarous” racial legacy of the country's colonial past. He concludes that the “backwardness” supposedly represented by Rosas's resistance to cultural and economic assimilation by the Global North is due to the persistence of what he sees as the premodern Spanish colonial model in Argentina, that is, “la falta de hábitos de trabajo, la pereza del pastor, la costumbre de esperarlo todo del terror” (120). Feeling that mixed-race Argentines lacked the cultural values necessary for republican self-government and capitalist economic productivity, Sarmiento's life-long project was to bring Northern “civilization” to the racialized inhabitants of the nation's hinterland through public education, tripling the number of public-school students between 1856 and 1872 (Avellaneda 8) and even inviting a group of North American teachers to establish residency in the country and train its educational workforce.³

At the center of both the Argentine and the Brazilian texts is the issue of to what extent South America's mixed-race popular classes could be incorporated into the newly formed Europeanizing bourgeois-republican nation-state. The works seem to suggest that, while of some value, the South American popular classes are ultimately disdainful of the “rituals of power, discipline, and association that characterized civilized societies” (Conway 8). Sarmiento's gauchos are “hostiles a la civilización europea” and to “toda organización regular,” as adverse to “monarchy” as to “the republic” (36), much as Da Cunha's sertanejos are “tão inapto[s] para apreender a forma republicana como a monárquico-constitucional” (*Sertões* 130).

Articulating ideas that Da Cunha later would echo, Sarmiento attributes this political “ineptitude” to Argentina's deep history—the “razas,” “tendencias,” “hábitos nacionales,” and “antecedentes históricos” that he criticizes the Francophile liberal expresident Bernardino Rivadavia for not taking into account in his failed modernization programs (67). Of these considerations, race is an especial issue. Sarmiento feels that “el pueblo que habita [la pampa] se compone de dos razas diversas,” which mix to form “medios tintes imperceptibles, españoles e indígenas” (14-15). Meanwhile, “la raza negra [...] ha dejado sus zambos y mulatos, habitantes de las ciudades, eslabón que liga al hombre civilizado con el palurdo” (15). These “medios tintes imperceptibles” prove problematic to the inauguration of bourgeois-republican modernity in Argentina. As Sarmiento claims at the beginning of his

³ On the *maestras de Sarmiento*, see Luigi, Genova, and Tosso.

book, rather than the proto-Europeans at whom Rivadavia's liberal reforms mistakenly were aimed, "la fusión" of Europeans, Amerindians, and Africans "ha resultado un todo homogéneo, que se distingue por su amor a la ociosidad e incapacidad industrial, cuando la educación y las exigencias de una posición social no viene a ponerle espuela y sacarla de su paso habitual" (15). This leads to what the author at another point calls "a system of murder and cruelty" by beheading "tolerables tan sólo en Ashanti y Dahomai, en el interior de África" (67-68). In sum, the mixed-race gaucho represents a problem for the rational, orderly self-government and capitalist production upon which the bourgeois-republican model is predicated.

Da Cunha, too, sees racial heterogeneity as a constitutive feature marking Brazil's difference from the Global North and complicating the country's progress in republican government. Like Sarmiento in his description of the Argentine popular classes, Da Cunha notes that the *canudenses* represented "a fusão perfeita de três raças" [...]. Em roda, vitoriosos, díspares e desunidos, o branco, o negro, o cafuz e o mulato proteiformes com todas as gradações da cor." Bright though this polychromatic image may seem at first glance, Da Cunha feels that this sort of *mestiçagem* results in degeneration. Much as Sarmiento worries about the effects of racial "fusion" on the national body, Da Cunha laments the "contrast" of "a raça forte e íntegra abatida dentro de um quadrado de mestiços indefinidos e pusilânimes" (396-97).⁴

Da Cunha's attitudes contradict a particularly Iberoamerican school of anthropology that at the time was working to rehabilitate race mixture. While this "invenção brasileira como adaptação à teoria racista" (Pereira 102) would rise to international prominence in the 1930s with the studies of Gilberto Freyre, the vindication of Peninsular and Latin American mestizaje/mestiçagem can be traced to the 1892 Congreso Geográfico Hispano-Portugués-Americano in Madrid (Blanco 85).⁵ Eight years later in Brazil, Celso would assert that "o mestiço brasileiro não denota inferioridade alguma física ou intelectual" and is "susceptível de quaisquer progressos" (Celso xxi). João Baptista de Lacerda was more direct in his *Sur les métis au Brésil*, originally delivered as a lecture in French at the 1911 Universal Race Congress, in which he postulates that blacks can assimilate and "improve" through intermarriage, going so far as to suggest that mixed-race individuals are intellectually superior to both parents (14). He argues that, through a well-planned program of European immigration, Brazil's populations of color eventually will disappear, yielding to a whitened nation (22-31). The lecture was published with an image of Modesto Brocos's 1895 *Redenção de Cam* on the frontispiece. Representing the "miraculous" whitening of a mixed-race family over three generations of intermarriage, the painting serves as an allegory of Lacerda's ideas.⁶

⁴ On the influence of nineteenth-century European racial thinking on da Cunha, see Brandão: Costa Lima, *Terra ignota*: and Barber.

⁵ Historian of science Nancy Stepan notes that these thinkers discounted the rising influence of Darwinian evolution, instead focusing on Jean-Baptiste Lamarck's theory of the inheritance of acquired characteristics.

⁶ Mexican thinker José Vasconcelos would popularize similar ideas for a Spanish-language readership in his 1925 essay *La raza cósmica*. For a discussion of Lacerda, see Schwarcz. For an overview of racial attitudes during the República Velha, see Carrizo.

Da Cunha takes a less sanguine view on race mixture and focuses on the supposedly negative psychological effects of *mestiçagem*.⁷ Using the then-official term for any person of mixed race, he states that “o mestiço—traço de união entre as raças, breve existência individual em que se comprimem esforços seculares—é, quase sempre, um desequilibrado.” This “lack of balance” consists of “casos de hibridez moral extraordinários [,] uma moralidade rudimentar, em que se presente o automatismo impulsivo das raças inferiores” (71). Acting without a moral compass, the “unbalanced” mestiços, according to Da Cunha, give themselves over to the same sort of “atavistic” “barbarism” that Sarmiento attributes to the gauchos. For example, Da Cunha provides a graphic description of the death of the Republican war prisoners at the hands of the canudenses: “Os jagunços reuniram os cadavers que jaziam esparsos em vários pontos. Decapitaram-nos. Queimaram os corpos. Alinharam depois, nas duas bordas da estrada, as cabeças, regularmente espaçadas, fronteando-se, faces volvidas para o caminho” (232). Da Cunha does not hesitate to qualify this violence in the same racialized terms that Sarmiento had used to condemn the gaucho Federales almost seven decades earlier, calling it an “espécie de divertimento sinistro, lembrando a religiosidade trágica dos Achantis” (232).

Thus, rather than the bold march into a whitened future that Lacerda had predicted, Da Cunha presents *mestiçagem* as atavism. This can be seen in his description of the Republican army’s “convergencia para o seio da antiga metropole,” the Bahian city of Salvador, a former slave port that had been the capital of Brazil from 1549 to 1763. In this journey back to the racialized source, “o paulista, forma delida do bandeirante aventureiro; o rio-grandense, cavaleiro e bravo; e o curiboca nortista, resistente como poucos—índoles díspares, homens de opostos climas, contrastando nos usos e tendencias étnicas, do mestiço escuro ao caboclo trigueiro e ao branco, [...] se agremiavam sob o liame de uma aspiração uniforme.” The colonial capital “agasalhava-os no recinto de seus velhos baluartes, rodeando pois de longamente dispersos os vários fatores da nossa raça volviam repentinamente ao ponto de onde tinham partido, tendendo para um entrelaçamento bellissimo (327). Here, maternity in the form of the former capital is figured as a regressive force, wrapping the mixed-race nation in the veil of its colonial past. At another point in the text, the mestiça mothers of Canudos are described as “velhas espectrais, moças envelhecidas, velhas e moças indistintas na mesma fealdade, escaveiradas e sujas, filhos escanchados nos quadris desnalgados, filhos encarapitados às costas, filhos suspensos aos peitos murchos, filhos afastados pelos braços, pasando; crianças, sem número de crianças” (395-6). Withering the breasts that nourish the nation’s future citizens, *mestiçagem*, for Da Cunha, seems the opposite of republican modernity. Rather than harbingers of Lacerda’s whitened millennium, Da Cunha’s mestiços “desequilibrados” appear as a metonymy of the problems afflicting the Brazilian Republic, manifestations, the author feels, of the country’s demographic and geographic peculiarities.

⁷ Lacerda, too, associates mestiços (“métis” in his French), with immorality (14-15), but nonetheless has an overall positive attitude towards race mixture.

Argentina Contrasted with Brazil

Sarmiento, for his part, has equally strong—though divergent—opinions regarding the place of the racialized popular classes in the bourgeois republic. On the one hand, he shares the Unitarios' disdain for the non-Western elements of the Argentine national body, the indigenous and Afro-descendants critiqued and caricatured by Esteban Echeverría—widely considered the initiator of Río de la Plata Romanticism—in his narrative poem *La cautiva* (1837) and short story “El matadero” (1838). Imbued with these attitudes, Sarmiento in his presidency would promote the ideologies that led to the genocidal campaign against the native peoples of Patagonia known as the Conquista del Desierto (1878-85) under presidents Nicolás Avellaneda and Julio Argentino Roca and the supposed disappearance of the Afro-Argentine population during the closing decades of the nineteenth century. Though this whitening process often is understood as a replacing of vanishing populations of color with European immigrants—what Argentine statesman Juan Baustista Alberdi would call government through population—the historical record is more complicated than commonly is believed. While received wisdom dictates that Argentina's nonwhite populations were almost entirely killed by calamities such as the Paraguayan War (1864-70), the yellow fever epidemic (1871), and the Conquista del Desierto, historian George Reid Andrews has demonstrated the importance of *mestizaje* to the whitening of the Argentine population. Rather than dying, a substantial number of Argentines of color intermarried with European immigrants. The children of these unions were counted as white on government censuses (Andrews 64-92).⁸ In many ways, then, Argentine racial history embodies the whitening fantasy that Lacerda later would elaborate for Brazil, in which populations of color are not eliminated as much as erased.

Though Sarmiento often is associated with the virulent opposition to race mixture that he espoused later in life, his *Facundo* displays the complicated relationship to the racialized popular classes that, as Matthew Karush has shown, would come to define Argentine racial reality. Degenerate though he may find them, Sarmiento in his foundational text presents the mixed-race rural people of the Argentine countryside as a resource for the modernizing nation. Numerous commentators have pointed out that, despite his repeated condemnations of the lifeways of Argentina's rural population, Sarmiento, a member of the Romantic Generación de 1837, sees the gauchos as representatives of the nation's folk.⁹ The writer oftentimes betrays a reverence for their noble virtues, a “secreta admiración por un mundo bárbaro que a la vez desea suprimir” (Errázuriz). In this way, Sarmiento's nationalist discourse harnesses the racially and culturally suspect gauchos to the bourgeois-republican state.

The author's view of the mixed-race popular classes of the Argentine interior as essential to the national project is made clear in the often-anthologized descriptions of the “caracteres argentinos” that appear near the beginning of *Facundo* (21-29). Able to pursue and capture criminals by recognizing their footprints, the *rastreador* collaborates with the law (24-25). Meanwhile, the *gaucho malo*'s knowledge of the distinguishing traits of all the

⁸ For the continuing legacy of this complex racial history, see Alberto and Elena, eds.

⁹ On the Generación de 1837, see Katra.

horses in a region aids commerce and the *cantor*'s verses will be "recogidos más tarde como documentos y datos" (28) at the service of national historiography. The *baquiano*, for his part, "está en todos los secretos de la campaña; la suerte del ejército, el éxito de una batalla, la conquista de una provincia, todo depende de él" (25). The importance of this knowledge to the Argentine national project is at the ethnographic heart of *Facundo*, which aims to "revelar las costumbres nacionales, sin lo cual es imposible comprender nuestros personajes políticos, ni el carácter primordial y americano de la sangrienta lucha que despedaza a la República" (29). The *baquiano* and his fellow gauchos may belong to barbarism, but their knowledge of the New-World environment renders them indispensable to the cause of civilization in Argentina. For that reason, seeking to incorporate the "Argentine characters" into the bourgeois-republican project, in 1884 the national Congress, largely as a result of Sarmiento's efforts, would pass Law 1420 requiring the State to provide Argentine youths with free and secular education. Aimed at all the nation's children regardless of their social origins, the educational law complements the discursive efforts undertaken by the census takers, bringing the mixed-race popular classes into the intellectual-ideological fold of the nation-state as it strove towards North Atlantic models of modernity.

Argentina's civilizational achievements under Sarmiento and his successors, particularly in the field of public education, fast became a reference for all of Latin America.¹⁰ Da Cunha's friend, the diplomat Manoel Oliveira Lima, for example, dedicates a full chapter of *Na Argentina* to public education (111-25). Argentina's educational advances, he feels, have preserved the country from the populist phantom that Imperial Brazilian politicians saw as haunting the Spanish American republics (185). Equally impressive was the "grão de perfeição da sua organização de serviços socais" found in the country. In terms of "public assistance," for example, Argentina offered lessons to "qualquer das mais progressivas nações do mundo" (93).

Argentina's rapid social development represented the direct opposite of what had happened in Brazil, where "nineteenth-century economic liberalism" translated into "efforts designed to stifle popular expression and block social mobilization." Agreeing "to ignore social problems by keeping power in the hands of the traditional landed oligarchy and its clients" (Levine, *Vale* 12), the architects of the República Velha limited suffrage to literate landowners (Johnson 29), who, in Bahia, only represented 2.4 percent of the total population (Levine, *Vale* 36) – a figure that excluded most of the recently emancipated slaves. Despite Celso's claim that "não conhecemos proletariado, nem fortunas colossais que jamais se hão de acumular entre nós, graças aos nossos hábitos e sistema de sucessão" (Celso xiii), the República Velha's exclusionary ideology represented "a bland and asocial liberalism, an imitation of the political system of the United States without meaningful defense of individual rights or any commitment to public education or other mechanisms to prepare the population for citizenship. [...] Real change was blocked by the continued preeminence of the landed elite" (Levine, *Vale* 15). In contrast to the national effort to improve education in Sarmiento's Argentina, for example, only 700 primary schools operated in the entire Brazilian Republic during the period (43).

¹⁰ In addition to the sources quoted here, see, for example, Bruno V. Miranda's article on Argentine progress in the nineteenth-century Cuban pedagogical journal *La enseñanza*.

Thus, if, for Brazilian intellectuals of the time, Argentina had transformed itself into a regional leader after overcoming its mid-nineteenth century internecine conflicts and investing in the human capital of the mixed-race popular classes through education and public works, Brazilian development had been blocked by the elitist orientation of the country's post-Imperial politics. This has produced what Da Cunha would condemn as a Europeanizing "civilização de empréstimo" that leaves "na penumbra secular em que jazem, no âmago do país, um terço da nossa gente" (*Sertões* 131). In a March 15, 1908 letter to Oliveira Lima, da Cunha considers what this underdevelopment of Brazil's mixed-race masses—"one third of our people"—relative to Argentina's rapid social progress might mean for the security of the young Lusophone republic:

É uma rivalidade a decidir-se no jogo das competências e em conflitos industriais e agrícolas. Os que tanto se impressionam com os soldados argentinos, esquece-lhes o operário, o lavrador, e o industrial argentinos—esses, sim, terríveis antagonistas diante da nossa pobreza orgulhosa, da nossa inaptidão e da nossa preguiça. Para vencê-los não precisamos de sorteio, que tantas controvérsias agita—precisamos de uma política sadia, que restaure as esperanças dos fortes e dos bons, estimulando a lama nacional pelo regime franco do triunfo das competências...e nós continuamos, numa assombrosa seleção invertida, a guiar-nos as todas as alturas os espertos felizardos rezados à lisonja, aparelhados da ciência difficilissima dos cumprimentos em tempo e dos laços de gravata, impecáveis. (qtd. in Oliveira Lima, "Argentina X Brasil")

For certain turn-of-the-century thinkers, then, the aristocratic Brazil of "perfect tie knots" has failed to deploy a "healthy politics" to develop the hinterland's people—mired in "poverty, inaptitude, and laziness"—into a strong citizen body even as Argentina has molded its own masses into a military and industrial army, "terrible antagonists" menacing Brazil both territorially and economically. (And, lest we forget, this process entailed waging genocide against the indigenous and Afro-descended populations, a detail into which Oliveira Lima and Da Cunha do not delve in the passages cited).¹¹ This envious view of Argentina breaks with the Brazilian tradition of regarding the "anarchic" and war-torn Spanish American republics as constitutive others to the Lusophone empire's supposedly ordered existence.

Da Cunha laments that Brazil has been unable to harness the potential of the sertanejos in the same way that Sarmiento's Argentina incorporated the gauchos into the national project. "Primeiros efeitos de variados cruzamentos," the sertanejos, he claims, "destinavam-se talvez à formação dos principios imediatos de uma grande raça." However, "faltou-lhes uma situação de parada, o equilibrio, que les não permite mais a velocidade adquirida pela marcha dos povos neste século" (*Sertões* 1). Stated on the first page of the book, the ambiguous sentence declares the work's purpose: to explore what could have been ("talvez"), given the proper conditions of racial "balance." Da Cunha's convoluted Portuguese syntax is important here. The author writes that "a stopping point, or a balance [...] lacked to them," placing the grammatical agency for the "lacking" not on the sertanejos

¹¹ For a different interpretation of the "incorporation" of the canudenses "into a modern state," see Johnson 136-7. For a discussion of the effects of nation-building on the Mapuche people of Argentina and Chile, see Calfío.

themselves, but on the “stopping point,” or, rather, on the unnamed forces that should have provided that “balance.” The rest of the work, then—racist though it most certainly is at times—may be read not as a condemnation of the sertanejos’ “backwardness,” but of the unnamed conditions that have rendered them “retardatários” (1).

Importantly, while, as I explained above, Da Cunha repeats and reiterates the ideas of European race scientists concerned about “a mestiçagem extremada” (71), he also notes that Brazilian demographic reality, in which mixed-race people have intermarried with one another over the course of multiple generations, creates “uma situação nova e inédita, que as categorias da antropologia européia mais moderna e respeitada, no século XIX, jamais poderiam definir” (Brandão 106). For Da Cunha, mestiçagem among mestiços is less prejudicial than the mixtures over which European scholars have fretted, and, through the blessings of civilization, its products can be brought into “um estágio cultural superior” (Brandão 124). Himself a mixed-race *caboclo*, the writer does not see mestiços as inherently inferior, but as “lacking” the conditions needed to develop.

The mixed-race sertanejo, then, is “um retrógrado,” but not “um degenerado.” Though currently unable to conform to the “exigências desproporcionadas” of the Southern littoral’s Europeanizing “cultura de empréstimo,” Da Cunha is sure that the sertanejo will “conquistar um dia” (73) and become “um possível berço de um futuro Estado brasileiro” that will include those who have been marginalized by the oligarchic project of the República Velha (Zilly, “Constuição” lxxvi). “Desequilibrados” though they may be, the mestiços—like Sarmiento’s gauchos—are the “rocha viva” of the national race. Yet, written not to consolidate the bourgeois state, as Sarmiento does in his *Civilización y barbarie*, but to “denounce” the República Velha’s depravities, *Os sertões* puts on display the ravages of modernity and modernization—the paradoxical imperative to destroy the nation in order to develop the nation-state—in Brazil and in South America as a whole and in this way functions as the sertanejos’ contribution to world civilization (1).

Decapitation

Thus, even as, breaking with thinkers such as Celso and Lacerda, Da Cunha regrets Brazil’s failure to emulate Argentina’s success, he does not share Sarmiento’s enthusiastic attitude towards “civilization.” Instead, the Brazilian’s rewriting of *Facundo* suggests the irresolvable contrast between Sarmiento’s romanticization of the volk and the positivist social hierarchies upon which bourgeois-republican modernity rests (Costa Lima, “Euclides e Sarmiento”). Declaring the War of Canudos to be “o maior escândolo da nossa história” (*Sertões* 342), Da Cunha’s simultaneous critique and defense of the mestiço volk serves as an indictment of “the problematic implementation of the concept of nation within the historic conditions that Brazil,” like the rest of Latin America, “experienced during the transition from colony to republic” (Ayala-Martínez 59).

As numerous commentators have pointed out, Da Cunha questions this “problematic implementation” of bourgeois-republican modernity in Brazil by systematically undermining the binary opposition between civilization and barbarism that he shares with Sarmiento and that, at first glance, seems to prevail in *Os sertões*. Much as Da Cunha condemns the canudenses as atavistic throughout his text, he also—on the very first page—is sure to state

that the government's campaign against them represents not "order and progress," but "um refluxo para o pasado" and "um crime" (1). Similarly, though he laments Brazil's lack of "unidade de raça," he does not blame that "problem" exclusively on rural mestiços, but also condemns the littoral elites as "etnologicamente indefinidos, sem tradições nacionais uniformes, vivendo parasitariamente à beira do Atlântico, dos princípios civilizadores elaborados na Europa, e armados pela indústria alemã" (1). The binary logic of civilization and barbarism cleaves particularly sharply around the figure of Colonel Antônio Moreira César, commander of the Republican troops at Canudos. "A manic-depressive military commander of brutal stripe" (Levine, *History* 79), Moreira was, according to Da Cunha, possessed with an "energía selvagem" (*Sertões* 195)—an adjective that, historically, has not been applied to the white elites that the officer is meant to represent, but to the peoples whom they conquered and dominated.¹² The author attributes to Moreira César the same moral laxness that mestiçagem supposedly has produced in the sertanejos and, in his "individualidade singular entrechocavam-se, antinômicas, tendencias monstruosas e qualidades superiores, unas e outras no máximo grau de intensidade. Era tenaz, paciente, dedicado, leal, impávido, cruel, vingativo, ambicioso." A contradictory collection of virtues and vices, like the mixed-race people of the sertão, Moreira César is, in Euclides's words, "um desequilibrado" (194). His "mistura de gênio, louco e epiléptico gerado pela civilização" (Lemos 187) pushes against the racial hierarchy that Euclides appears to erect at other points in his text.

The civilization/barbarism binary collapses in the book's closing pages when the national army, finally victorious, sets fire to the remains of the Canudos settlement. Da Cunha encapsulates this Republican barbarism in the horrific image of the "mulheres fugindo dos habitáculos em fogo, carregando ou arrastando crianças e entranhando-se, às carreiras, no mais fundo do casario; vultos desorientados, fugindo ao acaso para toda a banda vultos escabujando por terra, vestes presas das chamas, ardendo; corpos esturrados, estorcidos, sob fumarentos." The "rocha viva da nossa raça" was under attack, the author claims as he metaphorizes the destruction of Brazil's future progress through the self-immolation of the nation's would-be mothers (390)—"mulheres precipitando-se nas fogueiras dos próprios lares, abraçadas dos filhos pequeninos" (400)—as the Republican troops raze their city. In another section, he relates the beheading of a canudense woman by Republican soldiers (371).

Rebel leader Antônio Conselheiro suffers a similarly grisly state. Upon finding his cadaver—"hediondo," "tumefacto," and "esquálido"—abandoned in a hut after the fall of Canudos, republican soldiers cut off the head (400) and "displayed it on a pike in parades held in several coastal cities" (Levine, *History* 83). The head subsequently was sent to a group of phrenologists for scientific study. Importantly, the beheading of Antônio Conselheiro resonates with South America's deep (neo)colonial history. After all, Canudos "in many ways was not that unique. One could draw up a catalog of comparable rebellions and revolts in Brazil around the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, all tied to the same hybrid and uneven process of modernization that ushered in the republic in 1889" (Johnson 3). Canudos's reverberations with other rebellions and the reprisals against them is not lost on Brazilian readers. In a 1997 article in the popular magazine *Veja*, journalist

¹² Johnson, for her part, offers that César was epileptic (74).

Roberto Pompeu de Toledo would contemplate the bloody conclusion of the War of Canudos in historical terms, writing that:

O caso do Conselheiro é apenas um entre muitos, na História do Brasil, em que se adota a prática de cortar cabeças. Zumbi dos Palmares teve a cabeça cortada, depois de morto, assim como Tiradentes, é o líder da Revolução Federalista no Rio Grande do Sul, Gumercindo Saraiva. Idem o cangaceiro Lampião, idem os crentes da comunidade do Caldeirão, um fenômeno parecido como do de Canudos, ocorrido no Ceará nos anos 30 deste século. De certa forma, a galeria dos vencedores da História do Brasil confunde-se com uma galeria de astros da degola. (Pompeu de Toledo 87)

In this meditation, Pompeu de Toledo presents beheading as a violent trope that recurs rhizomatically throughout Brazil's transhistorical struggle between the forces of (neo)colonial civilization and subaltern barbarism. In particular, the Conselheiro's death by beheading—a gruesome detail that did much to turn public opinion against the Republican army (Galvão 75)—would have reminded early-twentieth century Brazilian readers of that of Zumbí, who led another group of racialized rebels, a maroon community, against the colonial government in rural Bahia during the late 1600s. In its efforts to crush opposition to Brazilian modernity, Da Cunha suggests, the republican state has reverted to the practices of colonial tradition.

In addition to these colonial connotations within Brazil, the beheading of the Conselheiro would have echoed transnationally in turn-of-the-century South America. After all, the Lusophone country was not the South American state most closely associated with political decapitation in the popular imaginary. Rather, Rosas's Argentina had become almost synonymous with beheading, thanks in large part to the attention that Sarmiento pays to the practice in his canonical *Facundo*. As I noted earlier, referring to beheading as “un sistema de asesinatos y crueldades, tolerables tan sólo en Ashanti y Dahomai, en el interior de África,” the Argentine author famously racializes the practice as an emblem of gaucho barbarism (67-8). This image would be projected around the world through the canonical text's multiple nineteenth-century Spanish-language editions, as well as the translations into English, French, and Italian rendered during the author's lifetime (Dottori and Zanetti liv). The cosmopolitan Da Cunha was well-aware of Sarmiento's representation of political beheading as an emblem of New-World “barbarism,” and, in *À margem da história*, the Brazilian author praises the Argentine statesman's success in revivifying his country's “nacionalidade dessangrada pela *Mashorca*,” a reference to Rosas's sanguinary henchmen, notorious for beheading the dictator's opponents (229). Federal Argentina also appears as a reference in Da Cunha's more explicit reflections on Brazil's difficult transition to republican government. In a June 22, 1892 journal entry describing the frustration of revolts in Rio Grande do Sul and Pernambuco, he writes that “não é desta vez ainda que o ideal *mazorca* irromperá triunfante sobre a ordem dismantelada,” again referring to the Argentine dictator Rosas's violent henchmen (“Dia a dia” 620). Clearly, then, Da Cunha associated decapitation with the Argentine “backwardness” that Sarmiento opposed.

However, while Sarmiento mobilizes the trope of decapitation to cast the Federales as anti-brain barbarians, in da Cunha's text, the beheading is carried out by the forces of republican *ordem e progresso*. If *Facundo* looks forward to a hero who will “vengar la República, la humanidad y la justicia” and consolidate the Argentine bourgeois-republican

state (161), *Os sertões* narrates “um crime” (1). For Da Cunha, the Brazilian republicans have achieved the very opposite of the civilized rule of law that Sarmiento had sought to impose upon the barbaric anarchy of the Argentine interior.¹³ In this way, the forces of bourgeois-republican civilization render themselves barbaric, perhaps more barbaric than the supposed barbarians themselves. As Da Cunha writes, “a pesar de três séculos de atraso, os sertanejos não lhes levavam a palma no estadear idênticas barbaridades” (*Sertões* 368). By inverting the terms of Sarmiento’s famous binary, Da Cunha’s intertextual reference to *Facundo* equates Brazil’s new positivist republic with the Argentine dictatorship that the Lusophone giant for long had taken as its constitutive other, questioning the very legitimacy of Brazil’s engagement with South American liberalism.

Hispanicization

Da Cunha’s text, then, can be read as a condemnation of the way in which Sarmiento’s bourgeois-republican model had been implemented in Brazil. As the author writes in a section that he later decided to omit from *Os sertões*, “a República poderia ser a regeneração,” but, “não o foi.” Failing to invest in the citizen masses in the way that Argentina supposedly had, “a velha sociedade não teve energia para transformar a revolta numa revolução fecunda” (qtd. in Ventura xcxviii). If, after Argentina’s mid-century internecine conflicts, “poucos anos de paz vão transfigurando” the country into a regional leader, Brazil appears to have traded the supposed stability that had rendered it exceptional in South America during the monarchical period for a sort of republican chaos that its intellectuals traditionally had associated with Spanish America (Da Cunha, *Margem* 85). Da Cunha’s deployment of the decapitation trope made famous by Sarmiento suggests his belief that, through the Canudos conflict, Brazil suddenly was losing ground to Argentina in the contest to be the most modern country in Latin America.

Da Cunha’s constant intertextual dialogue with Sarmiento—former president of Argentina and, for many, ideological author of the modernizing reforms that would place the Spanish American nation ahead of its traditional Brazilian rival—thus serves to transform the Lusophone author’s narration of the misadventures of the República Velha into a meditation on the place of newly republican Brazil in the continental order. As I explained earlier, Celso’s *ufanismo* and Lacerda’s racist optimism aside, concern for Brazil’s regional status was common during the República Velha, as “radically new circumstances of a military government, political instability, fratricidal violence and repression, unknown in Brazil for decades, were all seen and described as signs of Hispano-Americanization, giving rise to outright expressions of belonging, albeit unwillingly, to an entity called ‘Latin America’” (Preuss, *Transnational* 133).¹⁴

In *Os sertões*, this fear of Hispanicization is reflected metaphorically in the canudenses’ Sebastianist religious practice. A form of folk Catholicism traditionally associated with the Brazilian Northeast, *Sebastianismo* is dedicated to the messianic return

¹³ On the conflict between rule of law and anarchy in Sarmiento, see Bunkley.

¹⁴ On the fraught question of Brazil’s Latin Americanness, see Gobat and Tenorio-Trillo, in addition to Preuss.

of Portuguese King Sebastião, whose 1578 disappearance during a crusade in North Africa precipitated the brief incorporation of Portugal and its empire into Spain, a period known in Spanish as the “Unión Ibérica” and in Portuguese (tellingly) as “o Domínio da Espanha” (1580-1640).¹⁵ The hauntingly protagonic presence of the Sebastianistas in Da Cunha’s account of the War of Canudos functions as a rhizomatic recurrence of an earlier period in which “African” “barbarism” forced the Lusophone empire to join the Hispanic world—a period to which Da Cunha was reluctant to return. This is made clear in the author’s comments on the 1838 Pedra Bonita massacre, in which a group of Sebastianistas in Pernambuco killed 87 people as human sacrifices to speed the second coming of the Portuguese King and bring about “the inversion of the worldly order” in which “multattoes and blacks would be transformed into whites, and the poor would be granted riches and eternal life”—a threat to the heavily racialized social and economic systems of the Brazilian Northeast (Levine, *Vale* 219). Echoing Sarmiento’s description of the gauchos, Da Cunha compares the movement to “as sinistras solenidades religiosas dos Achantis” (*Sertões* 92), once again linking the ideas of Africa, racial marginalization, religious atavism, and (through the figure of fallen King Sebastião) Hispanization.¹⁶

The author would express this existential Hispanophobia more directly in later years, after joining the Brazilian diplomatic corps. In his 1907 article “Solidariedade sul-americana,” later reprinted in *Contrastes e confrontos*, he writes that, under the Empire, “na actividade revolucionária e dispersiva da política sul-americana, apisoada e revolta pelas gauchadas dos caudilhos, a nossa placidez, a nossa quietude, delatavam ao olhar inexperto do estrangeiro o progresso dos que ficam parados quando outros velozmente recuam” (84-5). Here, the term “gauchadas dos caudilhos” represents a clear and condescending reference to the Argentine civil wars documented in Sarmiento’s *Facundo*. Despite this proud past, Da Cunha feels, the dictatorial Brazilian Republic has fallen into the same “desordens tradicionais de caudilhagem” that it previously had criticized in its Spanish American neighbors (85). That is to say, the traditional relationship between Brazil and Argentina has become inverted, with Brazil sinking into barbarism at the same moment that, in the conception of Da Cunha, Oliveira Lima, and other thinkers of the period, Argentina overtook the Lusophone nation on the road to bourgeois-republican civilization. If the Spanish American country seemingly has overcome its violent political history by incorporating the anarchic gauchos of the subaltern sectors into a prosperous and stable nation-state, Brazil has sought to cut the country’s “barbarism” off at the head in the form of the supposed monarchist Antônio Conselheiro. Rather than “civilize” the heterogeneous popular classes, Brazil has converted them into collateral damage in a misguided quest for a Eurocentric vision of republican modernity.

Though they will strike most contemporary readers as reprehensible, elite fears of “Africanization” and “Hispanicization” responded to practical geopolitical concerns. “Brazil was [...] poorly prepared to argue with the powerful, racially conscious nations. [...] Brazilian leaders [...] knew well that [the] country was looked down on as an African potpourri by Argentines, who were far more successful, in relative terms, than Brazil in

¹⁵ I am indebted to Mary Anne Junqueira for this observation (in conversation).

¹⁶ Levine, for his part, suggests that the Conselheiro conflated the second coming of King Sebastião with a millennial return of Brazilian Emperor Dom Pedro II (*Vale* 198-9).

attracting European immigrants” (Skidmore12). Even more dangerous than Argentina, however, were the countries of the Global North. For example, in his 1906 *Allemanismo no sul do Brasil*, Brazilian intellectual Sílvio Romero expresses concerns over what he sees as Berlin’s imperial designs on the South American nation. On more than one occasion, he compares German immigrants in Southern Brazil to German colonists in Africa (24 and 36), suggesting that both groups demonstrate a disdainful disregard for the racialized Southern territory in which they find themselves. In addition to a manifestation of Da Cunha’s elite racism, then, *Os sertões*’s preoccupation with Brazil’s Africanity registers an awareness of the colonization to which nonwhite nations across the world were falling victim at the time.

Brazilian proximity to the Hispanic world would provoke similar anxiety over imperial domination. After all, “ever since independence, North Americans perceived South America as a land of *caudillos*, incessant civil warfare, banditry, and political fragmentation” (Salvatore 83). Brazilian elites were aware of the broader geopolitical implications of their supposed South American exceptionalism, as Da Cunha makes clear in his comments on the “olhar inexperto do estrangeiro.” Moreover, they were keenly cognizant of the potential consequences of being confused with Spanish Americans, as writers such as Oliveira Lima and Eduardo Prado demonstrate in their extensive comments on U.S. imperial incursions in the Caribbean. To lose ground to the Europeanized Argentina, they felt, was to risk becoming another Cuba or Venezuela, countries in whose internal affairs the U.S. would meddle repeatedly in the early years of the twentieth century and whose political woes Brazilians of the period would attribute to their large Afro-descended populations (Preuss, *Bridging* 176-7). In this way Da Cunha’s meditation on mestiço “degeneracy” can be understood as concern for Brazilian sovereignty, tying racism to nationalism in a way that (rightly) proves uncomfortable to twenty-first century readers.

Conclusions

Da Cunha never resolves the tensions between racism and nationalism—the paradoxical subordination of the nation to the survival of the nation-state—that manifests itself in *Os sertões*. On the one hand, he criticizes Brazil for failing to imitate the success of Argentina’s bourgeois-republican government. On the other, however, he condemns the ravages that that model has wrought on Brazil’s racialized subalterns. By implicitly implicating Argentina in the same crimes through the trope of decapitation, Da Cunha suggests that the problem lies not simply with how bourgeois-republicanism has been implemented in Brazil, but in the model’s suitability to the larger South American context, characterized by racial heterogeneity. By tracing the dialogue between critical meditations on New-World republicanism from two deeply different historical and linguistic traditions, this reading of *Os sertões* as a critical commentary on the model of peripheral modernity inaugurated by *Facundo* begs broader questions about race and politics in the Latin American republics of the long nineteenth century. How can the republican model, predicated on equality among citizens, be adopted by and adapted for heterogeneous former colonies in

which, for centuries, demographic differences have structured political-economic reality?¹⁷ How can the premodern, racialized *volk* simultaneously undermine and underpin the bourgeois-republican nation-state? In the face of Northern imperialism, how possible are alternative racial configurations in the Global South?

These questions would have seemed crushingly pressing to the intelligentsia of the República Velha—and to contemporary readers in a hemisphere in which populism and plutocracy clash and come together in increasingly confusing configurations. In a world in which the limits and possibilities of the bourgeois-republican order are being scrutinized by both the left and the right, a rereading of its earliest architects may shed light on just what our New-World political-economic systems were and were not designed to do. It forces us to ask, like Da Cunha, if the problem lies not with the various manifestations, but the model itself.

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¹⁷ On the importance of difference to political economy before the birth of the nation-state construct, see Gellner.

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