



**“Gold earrings,
calico skirts”:
images of women
and their role in the
project to civilize the
Amazon, as
observed by
Elizabeth Agassiz in
A Journey in Brazil:
1865-1866**

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The article analyzes the image of the Amazonian woman as represented by Elizabeth Agassiz in *A Journey in Brazil: 1865-1866*, published in Europe in 1867 and based on the diary of the Thayer scientific expedition, led by the naturalist Louis Agassiz. The study concentrates on records of their passage through the Amazon, as retold in chapters IV through XI. For the purpose of this analysis, a few basic points in the divergence between the chronicler’s Western logic and the local population’s lifestyle have been chosen, as evidenced in the text: the clash with Agassiz’s viewpoints on feminine autonomy, aesthetics, temporality, and, lastly, the West’s deterministic conceptions of miscegenation as inherently negative and of the Amazon itself, based on polygenism of creationist inspiration. The article also discusses the era’s outlook as far as the role the Amazon might play in the project of the Brazilian nation.

KEYWORDS: women; Amazon; social thought; modernity; science and literature; travelogue.

English Translation:
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The nineteenth century saw the ultimate affirmation of Western civilization. Transformations in the urban lifestyles of modern men and women introduced new mental and social processes, intensifying the pace at which both information and sensations were received. A cultural industry emerged from the dispute between refined culture and the popular market culture (Ortiz). Fueled greatly by technological innovations that made printing more profitable and faster, the expansion of printing presses and the large-scale marketing of books contributed to the birth of this new industry. The number of readers grew, and the conditions were ripe for reading to spread as a popular habit.

The popular classes' interest in reading encouraged growth of the adventure genre of fiction, which undoubtedly had an influence on the new habits and aspirations of modern man. Likewise of influence were diaries kept by expeditioners or accounts written by people who had ventured through America, Africa, or Asia. Someone who had no way of undertaking a great journey could do so through the pages of a book.

Thanks to the second industrial revolution, and especially the definitive linking of science and technology, scientific theories were refined and the scientific endeavor underwent a process of professionalization. No longer the activity of dilettantes, science became liable to sanctions pursuant to criteria defined by research institutions and communities. Another movement blossomed from this foundation: scientific voyages. The veneration of reason and of the principles of freedom paved the way for cosmopolitanism, one of the driving forces behind the 'culture of travel'.

In the advent of this worship of science, colonies and ex-colonies played a special role, serving as veritable Meccas for expeditionary scientists interested in traveling to locations that were characterized by the 'sign' of nature. There they could check the validity of theories by scholars like Darwin and Spencer—seeking answers where civilization had not developed according to Western tastes and where they could observe 'original' features of the formation of animal species, geology, botany, and human 'races'. The New World, and within it the Amazon, was the extreme paradox of the urban-industrial civilization and thus a perfect place for a second era of discoveries.

For some time, European nations were so busy competing to gain possession of New World territories that visits of a scientific nature were avoided, or at least kept to a minimum, mainly for economic reasons. According to Quintaneiro (1995), during the seventeenth century the Portuguese metropolis barred people who were not of Portuguese origin from freely traveling about most of the colonial realm. The reasons behind this policy can be traced to the disputes over colonial territories engaged in by European

nations; this is apparent in Holland's and France's insistence on establishing colonial settlements in Brazil during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It was no different with the Amazon. Given the ongoing threat that Spain might take over Portuguese territories, the metropolis set up a network of fortifications along the country's northern borders and maintained direct control over the region even after the Portuguese royal family moved to Brazil (Fortes).

During the first industrial revolution, the need to expand consumer markets once again made the colonies the target of Europe's emerging powers. Add to this the decay of the colonial structure of Iberian nations, whose colonialist economy had not prepared the colonies for the transformations capitalism would bring as it took root. Other factors would later contribute as well to the gradual opening of Brazilian lands to foreign visitors: Brazil's Independence from Portugal (1822); Dom Pedro I's marriage to Dona Leopoldina, Archduchess of Austria, which made it possible for a number of European scientists to visit; and in 1866, under the rule of Dom Pedro II (1840-89), the opening of Brazilian ports to international navigation. During the late eighteenth century and throughout the twentieth, the lands of Brazil were therefore the destination of travelers from a number of European countries and from North America.

The professionalization of science was part of the same process by which empiricism established itself as a criterion for legitimizing scientific accounts. Common in the sixteenth century, for example, texts written on the basis of third-party testimony were increasingly discouraged. The belief that there exists a truth attainable by the human senses became a criterion for verifying the authenticity of an affirmation. At the same time, technological innovations in the areas of transportation and communication were propitious to long-distance travel. With the invention of the steamship, great stretches of space could be traversed in a shorter time, especially in places like the Amazon, where the river was the main access way.

The scientific controversy behind the expedition

The Thayer expedition, which journeyed through a large area of the Brazilian territory between 1865 and 1866, from Rio de Janeiro to the Amazon, was a typical nineteenth-century scientific adventure. It was led by Louis Agassiz, the famed Swiss-born naturalist who had earlier worked with Spix.¹ He took with him a team of twelve (in addition to himself and his wife Elizabeth), comprising geologists, a draftsman, an ornithologist, a taxidermist, and a group of assistants. For one year, they divided into different groups so they could cover as much ground as possible. Other

¹When she arrived in Brazil in 1817, Dona Leopoldina's retinue included, among others, the zoologist Johann Baptist von Spix and the Bavarian physician and botanist Karl Friedrich Philipp von Martius, who spent three years together traversing Brazil to collect plant and animal specimens (Carvalho). Still a young man, Louis Agassiz was responsible for the inventory of the fish collection that these naturalists brought back from their journeys around Brazil, following Von Martius' death. This experience stirred his desire to visit Brazil, a dream that was realized thanks to the financial backing of Boston millionaire Nathaniel Thayer, after whom the expedition was christened (Agassiz and Agassiz, 1976).

²Agassiz had founded the Museum of Comparative Zoology in Boston in 1859. While raising funds for construction of the museum, Agassiz turned his attention to more political activities and rather distanced himself from academic life throughout the 1850s. Yet his reputation as a naturalist ensured his status as a reference in scientific circles; in fact, Charles Darwin sent him a copy of *Origin of Species* in 1859 as a way of asking for the eminent scientist's approval. Agassiz nevertheless paid a high price for his relative absence from academia. Out of touch with the transformations engendered by scientific thought at the dawn of the latter half of the nineteenth century, Agassiz refused to perceive the evidence in Darwin's theories and made it his personal crusade to discredit them. His trip to Brazil was one last great effort to prove his creationist-based theories and refute evolutionism once and for all.

³On December 27, 1831, a 22-year-old Darwin embarked on a sea voyage as a naturalist. During the five-year trip, his observations on the changes that animal and vegetable species displayed as the environment changed were painstakingly written down in a diary, and would eventually lead to his development of the two theses that underlie *Origin of Species*.

people joined up with them during the course of the expedition, like Brazilian National Guard Major João da Silva Coutinho, whose vocation as a naturalist caught the eye of Agassiz himself, who was highly impressed with Coutinho.

At least three years earlier, the scholar's friends and allies and Agassiz himself had worked patiently to win the support of Emperor Dom Pedro II. The basic justification for the trip was to gather a vast collection of natural specimens of Brazilian flora and fauna, as well as to observe the territory's geology. But Agassiz's true motivations lay elsewhere. A fierce opponent of Darwin's theories, Agassiz had attacked the evolutionist's ideas on the evolution of species during his classes at Cambridge.² The goal of his trip to Brazil was none other than to prove Darwin wrong, and he intended to use arguments grounded in the same type of observations that Darwin had used following his trip on the *Beagle*.³

As defended by Darwin, evolutionism asserts that changes to the Earth and to living creatures are tied to the dynamics of nature itself and governed by natural selection, which guarantees the survival of those individuals best fit to adapt to their environment and the changes it undergoes. Darwin understood the significance of his thesis and the controversy it would create by so profoundly disturbing scientific paradigms with strong roots in theology—to the point that he did not go public with *Origin of Species* until twenty years after writing it.

Evolutionism was a direct attack on the concept of a God as the mentor of nature and of man as the center of creation, according to creationists. As a result of the heated controversy fueled by these creationists, evolutionism was expanded—mainly by its opponents—from a scientific theory to the buttress of a philosophical system for interpreting the world and history. When Darwin stated that nature is the product of a series of random transformations and that man is merely one more of the many species that have emerged and have yet to emerge on the face of Earth, he set the stage for new ways of viewing the human condition within the world and man's role in all fields of biological, social, and political life.

Agassiz and Darwin represented the catastrophists and the evolutionists, the two large opposing camps of the nineteenth century's greatest scientific controversy: how to explain the origin of species. As a catastrophist, Agassiz was influenced by natural theology and idealism. This view posits that natural history is a reflection of the Creator's will, towards which everything flows, following a timeless, infinite plan. For Agassiz:

Every living creature was a unique creation and therefore every catastrophe that has occurred in the history of the earth—the floods, or the glaciers of the Pleistocene Age, for example—destroyed all of life, leaving no links that would tie those forms of life with later ones (Freitas, p. 38).

Life forms had emerged on Earth following each catastrophe and were merely divine instruments, responsible for the appearance of new species wholly independent from those that existed earlier. This view of natural history excluded any possibility of continuity and therefore of a linear cyclicity that would manifest itself in a true sense of transformation; instead, it imbued nature with an image of stability and immutability that was inevitably reflected in a philosophical view of history.

To prove Darwin wrong, Agassiz clung to the hope that he could demonstrate the presence of drift in the geological layers of certain Brazilian lands. The term 'drift' was used to refer to superficial layers present in a given region that bear no relation to underlying rocks. The absence of any relation between surface drift and local mineral formation would mean that the upper material was not formed through decomposition of the soil where it was found. The explanation would be that the material had been transported from other areas by means of some major natural event, for instance, the movement of large blocks of ice during the Pleistocene Age. According to the theory, this movement is easily visible in the scratches and marks left on valley slopes by glaciers. In short, this was the basis of Agassiz's hypothesis, raised some years earlier to explain the formation of the Swiss Alps—a hypothesis that had earned him recognition as a naturalist. Agassiz fervently hoped to prove the same phenomenon in Brazil.

Just as the action of glaciers affected the formation of life on earth, so too did it make itself felt in the formation of the human races. While Darwin saw glaciation as further evidence of evolution, with species adapting to radical changes in their environments, Agassiz saw it as another way of proving that natural catastrophes were responsible for generating new, isolated species, with no connection to any other.

Early into the trip, while still in Rio de Janeiro (where the team spent three months), Agassiz convinced himself that this phenomenon had taken place in Brazil based on his observations of the city's natural relief. Today, however, we know that what Agassiz interpreted as drift were really layers of laterite soil, extremely common in Brazil (Freitas, p. 38).

A female chronicler

During the Thayer expedition, recordkeeping was as important as the observation of nature and of Brazilian human types. A number of documents were produced by the expeditioners during and after the trip, including countless articles published in the scientific journals of the day. Of special note was Charles Hartt's "Geology and physical geography of Brazil," a milestone in geological studies. But without a doubt the most popular of them all is *A Journey in Brazil*.

A Journey in Brazil is in point of fact Elizabeth Agassiz's field diary, while Louis contributed much less to its writing, mostly through observations on the natural history (particularly geology) of the areas they visited, as well as letters written to Emperor Dom Pedro II and other scientists during the trip (transcribed by Elizabeth in the body of the text) and explanatory notes added for the European edition, where Louis is identified by the initials L.A. But the one who made the daily entries to the travelogue was actually Elizabeth, and this is inarguably what makes it one of the most interesting among the various accounts available on the Amazon. Elizabeth's sensitivity regarding the habits of human groups, their ways of thinking, and their ways of life, along with her observations about the female condition, have bequeathed us an account rich in references to local sociability, even while we must bear in mind the deterministic underpinnings of these writings.

It is interesting to note that in article and book citations and other references to *A Journey in Brazil*, the work is usually attributed to Louis alone, even when a quotation was obviously penned by Elizabeth. This leads us to ponder women's status as authors within the literary canon, a debate that was well framed in a 1997 paper by Duarte, where she cites numerous examples of writers whose work was simply merged with that of her spouse's or some relative's. Using quotations from Elizabeth, I will argue for the unique nature of her authorship; sharing her husband's theories and values as a scientist, Elizabeth develops her own particular view of the region through her distinct experiences of contact as a woman.

Much as we might tend to think the nineteenth-century accountings of a woman chronicler would be something unprecedented, this was not actually the case. Between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, at a historical moment in which women had achieved some degree of autonomy in urban centers around the U.S. and in Europe, a number of travelogues were written by women: Flora Tristan, a French woman who traversed Peru (1838); Maria Graham, who traveled through Chile and Brazil (1823); Lady Florence Dixie (1878-79), who wrote about

Patagonia; and Marion McMurrrough Murphy (1881), who journeyed throughout all South America, to name just a few. With its informal style, in the form of remembrances, the travelogue was much like a letter or diary—literary forms familiar to the female universe; it suited these women, who appropriated the style and gained recognition through it (Buck).

In this sense, Elizabeth Agassiz, or just 'Lizzie', was a woman of her time. An American from Boston, born in 1822, she had no formal schooling but she did have a thorough at-home education, something common among the well-to-do back then. In April 1850, she married the Swiss-born naturalist Louis Agassiz and took an active part in her husband's professional life. She helped with the organization of expeditions and the publication of much of his material, while also engaging in initiatives in the pioneer field of women's education.

In addition to the Thayer expedition, she joined her husband on the Hassler expedition to the Straits of Magellan (1871-72), and before these trips founded the School Agassiz for Girls in Boston, which kept its doors open from 1856 to 1865. Besides *A Journey in Brazil*, her bibliography includes a biography of her husband, published after his death under the title *Agassiz, his life and correspondence* (1885), as well as *Seaside Studies in Natural History*, published in 1865 with her stepson, Alexander Agassiz (*Encyclopedia Britannica*). Elizabeth was also the first president of Radcliffe College, a women's institute of higher education founded in 1894 as an annex of Harvard University; she held this office until 1899.

Elizabeth's writing style displays a pleasant feel for simplicity, making it more readable than the treatises most generally produced by naturalists. Any reader will find that the greatest wealth of material on social aspects, particularly concerning women, comes in the section on the Amazon. These observations constitute one of the few sources of information on women's life in this region of Brazil—a question usually relegated to second place in other accounts. Because of the importance of these records, I will focus in this article on chapters IV through XI of *A Journey in Brazil*, which document the Thayer expedition's travels through the provinces of Pará and Amazonas.

The "Amazons" unveiled

The dawn of the nineteenth century finds an Amazon somewhat different from the one portrayed by the first expeditioners, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As a construct of the West, the image of the Amazon was traditionally associated with the exotic and with lushness. While three centuries of colonization had not been long enough to demystify this image of the region, it

had been long enough to bring new changes to what remained of the lifestyle of its original inhabitants. A number of Amazonian peoples were socially and physically destroyed in the nineteenth century; the ones who survived found strategies for coexisting with ‘whites’, producing a society characterized by a diversity of cultures and colors. Travelogues on the Amazon were important above all because they cast light on the region, both inside and outside Brazil; as such, they contributed to reflection about the region’s role within the nation then gaining shape.

The rubber boom⁴ had not yet swept the Amazon, nor had the region felt the effects of the urbanist explosion set off by urban reforms that began in 1880. In 1865, Elizabeth narrates her impression of the small town of Manaus: “a small collection of houses, half of which seem going to decay” (Agassiz and Agassiz, 1871, p. 190). Its regional isolation made northern Brazil a territory apart, with its own unique characteristics, excluded from the political mobilizations of Rio de Janeiro, capital of the Empire.

Lizzie spent most of her time with women from the towns and cities visited by the expedition, which gave her a privileged vantage point. The book’s descriptions of women’s daily life and the vivid impression that the Amazon’s luxuriant nature left on the senses are hers. In the following bit of pure poetry that synthesizes the nature of her writings, Elizabeth describes her enchantment with the new world unfolding before her eyes—that is, the foreign eyes of someone who sees the people of the Amazon from the river, passing by, and who tries to grasp the meaning of life in the forest:

We have sometimes heard it said that the voyage up the Amazons is monotonous; but to me it seems delightful to coast along by these woods, of a character so new to us, to get glimpses into their dark depths or into a cleared spot with a single stately palm here and there, or to catch even the merest glance at the life of the people who live in the isolated settlements, consisting only of one or two Indian houses by the river-side (Agassiz and Agassiz, 1871, pp. 155-6).

A written text or a discourse transformed into text is a powerful tool for transmitting values and shaping opinion, as it serves to mediate between two realities: the text wants to take the reader to a reality unlike her own. The subject-object relation is inverted—the ‘civilized’ being rethinks her own identity through the Other; questioning the social bases of the institutions she describes, she returns to her own, re-affirming her beliefs and values. This is what Paul Ricoeur (1977) calls “*se comprendre devant le oeuvre*” (understanding oneself in front of the work). This understanding at a remove implies a complex process of appropriating the text

⁴ At the close of the nineteenth century, one product boosted Brazil to the top of the world market, along with coffee: rubber. In northern Brazil, the tapping of the Amazon forest’s rubber trees drew tens of thousands of migrants and the interest of large extractive companies, especially from Europe and the U.S. The economy enjoyed sharp growth through the end of the century, and Manaus, capital of the state of Amazonas, as well as Belem do Pará, took on European airs, expressed in urban reform in both cities. In the first decades of the twentieth century, with competition from Asian rubber, the Amazonian product lost markets and the region’s economy went into a rapid decline. It was only to recover in the mid-twentieth century, during World War II, but without returning to its old glory.

into the reader's own reality and, above all, a process of understanding and interpreting.

My analysis of Elizabeth Agassiz's writings on the Amazon will explore the interactive process by which she portrays the world around her through her text: her appropriation of the images of local women—Indian and mestizo, inhabitants of a different and unknown world—in constant contrast with her own condition as a woman and a 'civilized' person. Transcending the individual realm, this encounter holds within it a gamut of significances that transit between the polarities of nineteenth-century scientific discourses: the symbolic fields of rationality and of atavism, of nature and of culture, of modernity and of tradition.

Women of the Amazon: the female condition, autonomy, morality, and civilization

The Thayer expedition reached Pará on August 11, 1866, and Amazonas on September 5, 1865, coming by way of Rio de Janeiro, Minas Gerais, and the entire Northeast of Brazil.

Wherever the expedition went, Elizabeth saw women taking the lead in family affairs and local endeavors. The absence of men because of the War of the Triple Alliance (1864-70) had forced women to occupy leadership positions traditionally meant for men, like the administration of business and of *fazendas*. The women of the Amazon in fact enjoyed a recognized freedom unthinkable in other regions of the country, as demonstrated in studies like Costa's (2000).

In the pages of the couple's travelogue, at a time when control over the human body and intimacy were the rule, the Indian and mestizo women of the Amazon appear to enjoy a distinct degree of autonomy, working the crops alone during the day, traveling by canoe about the *igarapés* (narrow channels of water through the forest, which Elizabeth dubs "boat-paths," Agassiz and Agassiz, 1871, p. 181), and moving about and working without the supervision of men.

Of course, this situation did not translate into the institutionalization of a sense of gender equality. In various moments of the narrative, we perceive that women are still the submissive element in Amazonian society, no matter that this submission may have distinct nuances. Their autonomy is more visible in the attenuation of social constraints regarding sexual behavior, in the case of single mothers, for example. While having a fatherless child might be a cause for a scandal that could jeopardize a whole family's reputation in the cities, among the native women—the chronicler is amazed to observe—there is apparently no awareness of the "common rules of morality" (Agassiz and Agassiz, 1871, p. 266). Elizabeth goes on to stress that this attitude is

characteristic of mestizo women: “It is the way the Indian or half-breed women here always speak of their illegitimate children [...] apparently as unconscious of any wrong or shame as if they said the father was absent or dead” (Agassiz and Agassiz, 1871, pp. 266-7). Elizabeth is scandalized by how comfortably these women deal with their “daughters of chance” (Agassiz and Agassiz, 1871, p. 266).

At various moments in her account, the Western sense of morality that underpins the observations made by this lady from Boston is presented as a condition *sine qua non* for the success of the civilizing project in the tropics. In her entry dated October 21, Elizabeth cites Louis, who calls attention to two things that are missing from life in the Upper Amazon and that, in his opinion, must be remedied: “a larger population” and “a better class of whites” (Agassiz and Agassiz, 1871, p. 246).

Along with this moral criticism, one senses a marked dislike for the colonization model enforced by Portugal and, consequently, by Iberian nations in general. In Elizabeth and Louis’s travelogue, the Portuguese come across as representing a huge barrier to the region’s development. The images presented are of an anachronistic policy that should be abolished to make room for a true civilization. In their opinion, this could have been accomplished through Anglo-Saxon colonization, which would have led the indigenous peoples to more advanced stages of civility and banished the curse of slavery, another obstacle to building a modern nation. Although prohibited in the Amazon since 1830, the enslavement of natives took place openly. Government servants mixed freely with the Indians, and Louis attributed this to their inability to deal with the situation:

A better class of emigrants would suppress many of these evils. Americans or Englishmen might be sordid in their transactions with the natives; their hands are certainly not clean in their dealings with the dark-skinned races; but they would not degrade themselves to the social level of the Indians as the Portuguese do; they would not adopt his habits (Agassiz and Agassiz, 1871, p. 247).

Later on, during their visit to Maués, in Amazonas, Elizabeth declares that this place has a promising future, given its “better moral tone” (Agassiz and Agassiz, 1871, p. 305). One of the things that most strikes Elizabeth during this meeting with the Mundurucu Indians is the fact that they are “decently dressed” (Agassiz and Agassiz, 1871, p. 309).

Things dear to the era’s so-called civilized society — symbols like clothing and institutions, like marriage as a way of producing legitimate offspring — did not appear very relevant to the Amazon’s population. The chronicler’s indignation about what she deems a

lack of morals suggests that the colonial project had not met with much success when it came to making individual behavior in the Amazon conform to certain norms.

At the same time, Elizabeth is truly impressed by the independence of women in their daily lives. At the home of Major Estolano, in the Solimões, Elizabeth is amazed by the strength and vigor of her hostess Dona Maria, who helped the men cut a pathway into a thick woods with a large knife. Deterministic explanations fail to account for what Elizabeth sees:

We imagine all the ladies in this warm country to be very indolent and languid; and in the cities, as a general thing, their habits are much less vigorous than those of our women. But here, in the Upper Amazons, the women who have been brought up in the country and in the midst of the Indians are often very energetic, bearing a hand at the oar or the fishing-net with the strength of a man (Agassiz and Agassiz, 1871, p. 232).

While the standard of a woman's beauty lay in her delicate, fragile nature, Elizabeth's encounter with autonomous women surprises her. Her only alternative is to strip these strong women of their femininity. By comparing them to men, Elizabeth is searching for an interpretive solution to describe what she has found.

The contrasting aesthetics of the female body

Elizabeth's expectations about the Indians are always the worst possible from the standpoint of our 'politically correct' modern logic. Representations concerning body aesthetics are another place where Western conceptions of beauty clash with the reality of the region.

Even while showing surprise over the beauty of the indigenous women of Teffé, in Amazonas, Elizabeth simultaneously writes of the recurrent diseases to which the Indians are susceptible, especially in their eyes and skin. Despite her perspicacity, Elizabeth cannot imagine that these indigenous people's precarious state of health might stem from contact; she even says that "the natives seem more liable to the maladies of the country than strangers" (Agassiz and Agassiz, 1871, p. 226), demonstrating that she believed the indigenous people were members of a fragile race.

For Elizabeth, beauty most certainly was not an attribute of Indian women. When she met a Mundurucu woman in Maués who she considered quite pretty, she stressed certain adjectives typical of European standards, like 'physiognomic mobility' and 'sweet and gentle' facial expressions. She immediately went on to justify the Mundurucu's beauty, turning to the comments of a member of the expedition, the Brazilian Major Coutinho, who was

extremely familiar with regional habits; he explained that there were strict marriage laws among the Mundurucus that expressly banned endogamy. This led Elizabeth to state (ironically enough within an evolutionist framework):

“Their fine physique, for which they are said to be remarkable, is perhaps owing to this. They are free from one great source of degeneration of type” (Agassiz and Agassiz, 1871, pp. 320-1).

This explanation clearly bears relation to how foreigners perceived the role of morality in the development of civilization, as it assumes incest is a common practice among the local populations, whereas populations who replace this model with exogamy—presumably resulting in a moral ethic that governs sexual relations—would produce improved human types. The incest taboo finds support in the Biblical text, and its tie to morality is endorsed by Victorian thought, which links morality to prosperity.

Implicit to these observations is a concept of female beauty in tune with Victorian standards, where a woman with a healthy physique was seen as a ‘plebe’ (Quintaneiro), while femininity resided in a fragile, weak appearance. This norm meshed well with the physical suffering to which women were submitted in order to achieve their ‘wasp waists’, through the perverse use of suffocating corsets and with their habit of keeping out of the sun so their skin would maintain the pale tone of a porcelain doll.

Alexandrina was a mestizo servant with the expedition. Her hair must have made a deep impression on the entire group of naturalists, because Elizabeth takes pains to describe it in great detail and even convinces Alexandrina to let herself be photographed, despite some reluctance on the part of the ‘model’. Her hair offered ample proof of miscegenation, and merits detailed notes: “[Her hair,] though it has lost its compact negro crinkle, and acquired something of the length and texture of the Indian hair, retains, nevertheless, a sort of wiry elasticity” (Agassiz and Agassiz, 1871, p. 246).

Her depreciative observations about the mestizos notwithstanding, whenever Elizabeth compared the Amazon population with blacks in the U.S., it was always to disparage the latter. She often sings praises to the Indians’ personal cleanliness (Agassiz and Agassiz, 2000, p. 255), contrasting it with that of blacks from the West and Southeast of the U.S., sharply criticized in many allusions during the course of her narrative. She conveys the same discomfort about indigenous women when she criticizes their habit of smoking, something she brings up numerous times. Referring to Esperança, an Indian with whom she had stayed in Pará, Elizabeth is categorical:

[...] and when sometimes, after her work is over, she puts on her white chemise, falling loose from her brown shoulders, her dark skirt, and a rose or a sprig of white jessamine in her jetty hair, she is by no means unattractive in her personal appearance, though I must confess that the pipe which she is apt to smoke in the evening injures the general effect (Agassiz and Agassiz, 1871, p. 177).

Gender relations and labor: capitalist temporality versus 'waiting time'

The concept of temporality causes Elizabeth's capitalist logic to enter into constant shock with the reality she encounters in the Amazon. She finds it hard to understand the apparent 'carelessness' of regional inhabitants, how slowly they carry out tasks, and their lack of any desire to accumulate things. This finds expression in some passages of her diary, where she describes, for example, how the indigenous people load wood onto the steamer: "so slow a process here, that an American, accustomed to the rapid methods of work at home, looks on in incredulous astonishment" (Agassiz and Agassiz, 1871, p. 197).

Here we see a patent opposition between two forms of temporality. On the one hand is the 'waiting time' of the locals (Costa), obeying a different way of looking at time; its prime characteristic is its cyclic nature, which ties facts to natural phenomena, stripping them of limitations and delimitations. On the other hand lies linear temporality; typical of modern Westernness and designed as part of the idea of progress, it can be marked through dates and rational planning. The Indians' cyclical time is different because it is endless; it is a time that never passes, for it is always repeating itself within a dynamic unknown to 'civilization'.

Reflected in the local populations' habits and pace of life, this natural infinitude was the constant target of criticism by travelers through the Amazon. It was no different with Elizabeth.

Another source of critical comments was what Elizabeth saw as 'irregularity of habit' and little interest in money:

Then the habits of the Indians are so irregular, and they care so little for money, finding, as they do, the means of living almost without work immediately about them, that even if one does engage a servant, he is likely to disappear the next day. An Indian will do more for good-will and a glass of cachaça (rum) than he will do for wages, which are valueless to him (Agassiz and Agassiz, 1871, p. 223).

In another passage, Elizabeth criticizes what she views as the Indians' self-indulgence when it came to their daily tasks: they did only what was needed to get by each day. During the trip to Manaus with a Mundurucu couple, Elizabeth uses these words to express her surprise at seeing the woman take some sewing out of her bag to pass the time: "very civilized occupations for savages" (Agassiz and Agassiz, 1871, p. 317). In other passages, with a hint of contradiction, she seems to have a certain admiration for their minimalist habits:

Up early in the morning and off on their fishing or hunting excursions long before dawn, they return by the middle of the day, lie in their hammocks and smoke during the hours of greatest heat; cook the fish they have brought with them, and, unless sickness comes to them, know neither want nor care (Agassiz and Agassiz, 1871, p. 234).

On the other hand, a feminist Elizabeth criticizes men's inactivity compared with the busy life led by women. At the home of Laudigari and Esperança, observing the couple's behavior, she is baffled by the apparent lack of male contribution to household tasks:

An Indian [man] is never seen to do any of the work of the house, not even to bring wood or water or lift the heavy burdens, and as the fishing is done chiefly at certain seasons, he is a very idle fellow for a great part of the time. The women are said, on the contrary, to be very industrious; and certainly those whom we have an opportunity of seeing here justify this reputation. Esperança is always busy at some household work or other (Agassiz and Agassiz, 1871, p. 177).

Likewise in Pará, Elizabeth observes a second local couple, Pedro Manuel and Miquelina, and reinforces her earlier criticism of men:

He is a tall, handsome fellow, whose chief occupation seems to be that of standing about in picturesque attitudes, and watching his rather pretty wife, as she bustles round in her various work of grating or pressing or straining the mandioca, generally with her baby astride on her hip—the Indian woman's favorite way of carrying her child (Agassiz and Agassiz, 1871, p. 178).

Despite her dismay over the unequal division of household labor among the natives of the Amazon, it is a fact that Western women bore the yoke of heavy housework alone in the 'civilized' West as well, and yet Elizabeth seems unaware of this.

Races and polygeny in explaining types and the female gender in the Amazon

Grounded in the creationist theology of which Louis Agassiz was a proponent, the polygenist model posited that races are "essential, ontological phenomena resulting from different centers of creation" (Schwarcs). As one of many European and North American theories that attempted to explain the diversity of species, polygeny represented a clear scientificist rupture with Church apologetics rooted in the book of Genesis and its explanation of a single origin for humanity.

In nineteenth-century Europe, the polygenist explanation was responsible for the 'scientific' stigmatization of blacks, who were deemed to belong to a race different from whites and therefore degenerated. This was clearly illustrated in the exhibit of an African Hottentot woman, put on display in a number of European capitals between 1815 and 1820. Her voluptuous shape was attributed to the hypertrophy of her buttocks and thighs characteristic of this population, and in the opinion of the day's scientists, this evinced the fact that the Hottentot's physical features externalized the sensual temperament peculiar to blacks (Gilman, pp. 76-108).

Differences between the races were not limited to phenotypes. Each type had its own psychic characteristics as well. In the polygenist classification of the races found in Elizabeth's observations, black women and Indian women represented the extreme opposites of degeneration: while black women were hypersexual by nature, owing to their lascivious primitivism, Indian women were apathetic and lazy. The latter's main characteristic was expressionless, apparent in her physical type itself: short, small, not very good-looking, and with a temperament devoid of emotions.

These differences between the Indian and black races were blatant in the chronicler's comparisons. While she did note that the Indian women were timid, she said nothing of decorum. Her comments sound more like a criticism of these women's failure to express emotions, although she makes biting observations about the 'provocative' black women she had encountered in Rio de Janeiro, especially when compared to the Indians. For example, she describes these Indian women in the following passage about the dances that the expedition attended in Pará and Amazonas:

The dance is very peculiar; so languid that it hardly deserves the name. There is almost no movement of the body; they lift the arms, but in an angular position with no freedom of motion, snapping the fingers like castanets in time to the music, and they seem rather like statues gliding from place to place than like dancers. This is especially true of the women, who are still more quiet than the men. (Agassiz and Agassiz, 1871, p. 178).

And further on:

Indeed, in all the Indian dances I have seen the man makes the advances, while the woman is coy and retiring, her movements being very languid. Her partner throws himself at her feet, but does not elicit a smile or a gesture; he stoops and pretends to be fishing; making motions as if he were drawing her in with a line, he dances around her, snapping his fingers as if he were playing on castanets, and half encircling her with his arms, but she remains reserved and cold (Agassiz and Agassiz, 1871, pp. 261-2).

She later compares these with the nature of dances in southeastern Brazil: "How different from the negro dances which we saw frequently in the neighborhood of Rio, and in which the advances generally come from the women, and are not always of the most modest character" (Agassiz and Agassiz, 1871, p. 262).

The travelogue contains myriad observations on the mixing of the races observed during the expedition's journey through the provinces of Northern Brazil. Brazilians were divided over the use of miscegenation as a way of 'purifying' their population. The Agassiz couple, however, take an unequivocal stand: they see this blending as malevolent, since it dilutes the positive characters of each race, engendering other sterile, degenerate species: "It is the old sad story of oppression, duplicity, and license on the part of the white man, which seems likely to last as long as skins shall differ, and which necessarily ends in the degradation of both races" (Agassiz and Agassiz, 1871, p. 227).

The polygenist paradigm fostered an effort to classify races and the results of any crossbreeding along the lines of Linnaeus. This gave rise to a unique universe of nomenclatures meant to take into account the phenomenon of miscegenation: *cafuzo*, *mameluco*, and *mulato* are hybrid forms of 'pure' races, elements marked by traits inherited from matrixes, chaotically arranged in a new configuration: straight hair and black skin, white traits in indigenous individuals. As a huge 'laboratory' of nature, the Amazon afforded the scientific imaginary a chance to observe the results of these 'experiments' and their consequences on social life. In her entry dated August 21, in which she recounts their visit to Vila de Breves, Pará, Elizabeth writes:

Its population, like that of all these small settlements of the Lower Amazons, is made up of an amalgamation of races. You see the regular features and fair skin of the white man combined with the black, coarse, straight hair of the Indian, or the mulatto with partly negro, partly Indian features, but the crisp taken out of the hair; and with these combinations comes in the pure Indian type, with its low brow, square build of face, and straight line of

the shoulders. In the women especially the shoulders are rather high (Agassiz and Agassiz, 1871, p. 154).

Referring to the mixing of the races, Elizabeth points out that in her view, this historical carelessness contributed to the very degeneration of civilization in the tropics, or, more precisely, "the degradation of both races [the indigenous and the white]" (Agassiz and Agassiz, 1871, p. 227). Distinctly rooted in polygenism, the basis of this idea was the belief that breeding could only take place between members of one same race.

The only passage in which Elizabeth seems willing to cede that crossbreeding might have a positive outcome is in her observations about the *cafuzo* Alexandrina. Recruited as a servant for the expedition, the woman ended up working as a research assistant, surprising the Agassiz couple with her skills and abilities: "She promises very well, and seems to have the intelligence of the Indian with the greater pliability of the negro" (Agassiz and Agassiz, 1871, p. 224).

In one of his footnotes, Louis offers a description of the crossbreeding of species. In it, his defense of the concept of 'human races' as crystallized types categorized by characteristic phenotypes comes in the form of an exaggeratedly objective comparison between human races and canine races, where hybridization nullifies the characteristics of the original race.

Elizabeth's definitive meeting with the women of the Amazon

Elizabeth's presence as a member of the expedition caused great stir among the women in the communities they visited. Seeing a white woman was a big event in the villages and *fazendas* of the Amazon, so Elizabeth the explorer drew the constant curiosity of Indian women, as we read in this sympathetic entry dated August 29, 1865, when they reached Esperança's hut, in the province of Pará.

We were received with the most cordial friendliness, the Indian women gathering about me and examining, though not in a rough or rude way, my dress, the net on my hair, touching my rings and watch-chain, and evidently discussing the "branca" between themselves. [...]

I was awakened shortly after daylight by the Indian women, bringing me a bouquet of roses and jessamine from the vines which grew about the cottage, and wishing me good morning. After such a kindly greeting, I could not refuse them the pleasure of assisting at my toilet, of watching the opening of my valise, and handling every article as it came out (Agassiz and Agassiz, 1871, p. 174-5).

As the women grew accustomed to the presence of foreigners, they revealed their curiosity, wanting to know more about the strangers—contradicting Elizabeth’s first impressions that Indian women did not show any emotion. They hounded her with questions: “[they] asked me many questions about my country, my voyage [...]” (Agassiz and Agassiz, 1871, p. 268).

Narrating this long conversation, Elizabeth’s entry dated October 29 is without a doubt one of the most fascinating passages in the travelogue. The intimacy that was born during her brief fellowship with these Indian women at her stopping place allowed them all to engage in an exchange of information that provides us with one of the richest portraits of the nineteenth-century woman of the Amazon. At this point in her travels, the chronicler seems to take part in a complicity not experienced before. The women share their personal dramas involving the War of the Triple Alliance, which had radically altered the local social structure; it brought to a temporary halt religious festivities—a prime stage for social exchange—and inaugurated conscription of their men, many of whom hid away in the woods to escape mistreatment by recruiters. The rhythm of life had been interrupted; with these men gone, there was no one to do tasks traditionally assigned them in the social division of labor, like preparing the fields or fishing and hunting.

The intimacy that arose from this conversation allowed Elizabeth to apprehend and apply new elements in her analysis of local women. Moderating some of the biases that had previously lent her comments an extremely moralistic tone, Elizabeth discovers a unique woman with an “enviable” life; taking the women’s side, she condemns the appalling situation in the province of Amazonas during war.

Elizabeth’s enchantment with the Indian women is quite evident in her enthusiastic description of the send-off of the president of the province and his retinue. The Indian women take to their oars and row to meet the expeditioners in the middle of the river, singing as they come. That same night, when the same women start doing a Brazilian quadrille in the grass, Elizabeth writes that the liveliness of the dance they performed could be attributed to traits of indigenous culture, which in her opinion thus lost some of the “conventional aspect” that characterized the dance in big cities. Another blatant contradiction on the part of the chronicler.

Final considerations

Deterministic constructs about the human groups of the Amazon pervade intellectual production on the region throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In his youth, Louis Agassiz

had worked with Von Martius and did not escape the influence of his ideas about Brazil's racial composition. Described in detail in his essay "How the history of Brazil should be written," presented in 1843 before the Instituto Histórico Geográfico Brasileiro (Brazilian Geographic and Historical Institute), Von Martius' thesis stressed that three races had to be taken into account when considering the formation of the Brazilian people: white, black, and Indian (Carvalho). Of polygenist origin, this line of explanation can be found in Elizabeth's writings and in Louis' notes in their travelogue, as well as in their warnings about the problems of miscegenation. Accounts of an ethnographic nature, like that compiled by Elizabeth Agassiz, were the prime source where artists, scientists, and writers interested in better understanding Brazil sought inspiration during the nineteenth century.

Agassiz's work makes us realize that at the heart of these accounts lie the West's notions about civilization and about the identity of the civilized being— notions, values, and postulates that have historically characterized Western social thought (Pinto). The Amazon became characteristic of the imaginary surrounding the New World. It served as a point of departure for reflecting upon the modern world by asking key questions: How did society and the state emerge, what is the origin of social and biological inequalities between people, and how does the environment influence culture and the adaptive capacity of human beings? These travelogues ended up contributing to the construction of a deeply negative image of indigenous peoples, but the writings of Elizabeth Agassiz can inarguably be ranked among the less harsh.

The image of the Indian corrupted by civilization, fond of alcohol, and lacking any ambition or practical sense, a mistaken amalgam of two races—the white and the red—clearly clashes with the proud image constructed of the 'noble savage' and the historical 'Tupi' (Monteiro, p. 16), an honorable ancestor, an ally of civilization whose contribution to the nation was evinced in heroic myths and narratives about characters like Iracema and Juca Pirama, memorialized in novels by José de Alencar and Gonçalves Dias, respectively. Denizen of a glorious past, this Tupi stands in contrast with the Tapuia, inhabitant of the last frontiers to be conquered and viewed as an obstacle to the nation's progress, the very synthesis of this debased mixture.

Elizabeth's accounts of the Amazon describe an unstable civilization that is endeavoring to develop within an inhospitable environment, where all circumstances seem to point towards failure. The government was absent, a fact made patently evident in the brutal ways in which men were recruited for war, transforming the spirit of patriotic duty—mighty aspiration of a nation's civilized men—into a tragic mimicry of civicism. The Amazon bore a greater

onus than it could stand in the War of the Triple Alliance, with the absent nation demanding the sacrifice of 'sons' that it did not recognize, as Elizabeth plainly points out.

In addition to the tenuous personification of the State, Elizabeth Agassiz blamed Iberian colonization for the fact that the region was out of step with the rest of the nation. It was responsible for the decaying of institutions, which had been turned inside out: they were perverted by the degenerate mestizo element, embraced by the fragile character of the Portuguese, corrupted by the people over whom they ought to rule. In Elizabeth's account, the development of civilization appears as a poorly established process, unavoidably compromised right from the outset.

The author paints the region's redemption in an amazing way: the farther away from urban centers, in the midst of idyllic tropical forest settings, the more beautiful life becomes. In the imaginary of the modern West, the image of the Amazon was born of this radical negation of urban life and its social forms, as if it were only possible for human beings to live in the jungle if they were stripped of their main characteristic: their vocation for transforming nature.

It is against this backdrop marked by the emblem of nature and the exotic that Elizabeth portrays the Amazon woman, in the fluid autonomy afforded by her distance from big cities and from their social conventions. The "undisciplined" nature of this woman can be summarized in the figure of the Indian who welcomed the expedition at the *sítio* (home and adjacent land) near Januari, in Amazonas: "an old Indian woman, whose gold ornaments, necklace, and ear-rings were rather out of keeping with her calico skirt and cotton waist" (Agassiz and Agassiz, 1871, p. 258).

In the huge clash between society and culture that had taken hold in the Amazon, women were caught between two worlds, attempting to appropriate the signs of civilization in a place devoid of social norms. Race and milieu emerge as categories that are fundamental to understanding Brazil and devising a national project, and the writings of the Agassiz couple help shape the thesis of a Brazilian racial democracy in that their statements reject the social differences produced by skin color: "There is absolutely no distinction of color here; a black lady, always supposing her to be free, is treated with as much consideration and meets with as much attention as a white one" (Agassiz and Agassiz, 1871, p. 280).

In this democracy, however, the indigenous woman hangs in the nation's limbo, between a romantic imaginary and nothingness, a place where she will long remain.

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