

# ***Traces of the Unseen: Photography, Violence, and Modernization in Early Twentieth-Century Latin America***

**Carolina Sá Carvalho**

reseñada por

*Hans Frex*

Johns Hopkins University

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The positivist motto “Ordem e Progresso” on Brazil’s national flag underscores a stark paradox in Latin American development. Despite aspirations for modernization, the region often lacked the social structures and economic foundations necessary for genuine societal transformation. In Brazil, this disconnection between modernizing ambitions and persistent underdevelopment is especially visible in the destruction of the Amazon rainforest for agricultural expansion. The ongoing devastation of the “lungs of the world” undermines the prospects for sustainable economic development, exposing that much of Latin America’s so-called economic progress is built on the large-scale destruction of nature and the displacement of small farmers and indigenous communities.

In *Traces of the Unseen: Photography, Violence, and Modernization in Early Twentieth-Century Latin America*, Carolina Sá Carvalho offers a critique of Brazil’s capitalist modernization in the 20th century, focusing on the destructive impacts of integrating the Amazonian transnational frontier into the capitalist production model. She traces the violence associated with this expansion through visual regimes and their discursive expressions during different phases of Amazonian exploitation. The book’s central focus is on “the production of different pedagogies of the gaze that articulated photographs and texts in order to teach increasingly connected urban publics what to see in these traces of destruction” (4). By “pedagogies of the gaze,” Carvalho refers to practices that make visible what is otherwise unseen in modernization, especially through extractivism. Thus, the pedagogy of the gaze can also be seen as an anti-extractivist pedagogy of visibility, engaging a complex interplay between visual and textual elements.

The book's pedagogy of visibility is structured around four key tropes: corpse, scars, debris, and shadows. In Chapter 1 ("Corpse"), Sá Carvalho examines the relationship between photography and racial constructs that emerged during the Campanha de Canudos, illuminating how the territorial integration of Brazil's hinterlands was received, particularly through Euclides da Cunha's book *Os sertões* (1902). This chapter unfolds across three layers of analysis: the historical layer recounts the military campaign that ended with the Canudos massacre; the visual layer analyzes Flávio de Barros' photographs, with a special focus on images of Antônio Conselheiro's corpse; and the literary layer addresses the ekphrasis in da Cunha's book, which notably omits the photograph of the corpse. Sá Carvalho argues that this omission transforms the *sertão* into a conquerable space, paving the way for the formation of the Brazilian nation and its citizenry.

Chapter 2 ("Scars") centers on the photographs taken by Irish-born British diplomat Roger Casement during the rubber boom in the Putumayo region from 1910 to 1913. On his mission, Casement was committed to exposing the brutal exploitation inflicted by the British-registered Peruvian Amazon Company (PAC) on the indigenous Huitoto and Bora communities. By analyzing Casement's consular reports, letters, diaries, and photographic archives, Sá Carvalho emphasizes that the wounds left by various forms of punishments on the bodies of rubber workers were often missed by those unacquainted with the historical and political realities of colonialism. Thus, understanding these photographs required a perspective informed by the colonial experience.

The third chapter addresses the impossibility of encountering otherness. Using the trope of the debris, it examines two ethnographic expeditions undertaken by the French couple Claude and Dina Lévi-Strauss to the Amazonian region of Mato Grosso in 1935–36 and 1938. Their journey followed the crumbling telegraph line constructed by the Comissão de Linhas Telegráficas, which was already in a state of decay. This expedition was later documented in *Tristes Tropiques* (1955), where Lévi-Strauss published photographs of himself and his wife, along with field notes, articles, and reflections. However, the experience with the Kadiwéu left the famous anthropologist disappointed, as he found them too acculturated, while his encounter with the Tupi-Kawahib prevented him from understanding their culture, as they seemed too different. Thus, the ruins of the telegraph line serve as an allegory for the epistemic impossibility of a genuine encounter with the so-called primitive other.

The fourth and last chapter ("Shadows") examines Oswaldo de Andrade's 1927 journey to the Amazon, made fifteen years after the rubber boom. The chapter explores the photographs and diary entries Andrade meticulously worked on, which were posthumously published as *O turista aprendiz* in 1976, more than three decades after he died in 1945. Unlike Lévi-Strauss, Andrade aims to register the interplay between landscape and technology, combining tourism with the extractive economy deployed in the region. Thus, in this chapter, Sá Carvalho addresses the use of captions to destabilize the referential meaning of the photographs.

One of the notable achievements of *Traces of the Unseen* lies in the compelling fusion of visual and textual elements, seamlessly woven together in each author's work and supported by meticulous archival research. The idea of using photography to trace the destructive forces of modernity, revealing what often remains concealed, also sheds light

on the recurring themes of ruination. This is exemplified in events such as the 2018 fire that devastated the Museu Nacional de Rio de Janeiro and the 2019 wildfires that ravaged the Amazonia, as discussed by the author in the Epilogue.

Although each chapter is organized chronologically by its central tropes, other organizational patterns emerge, such as the geographic origin of the authors studied, with two being European and two Brazilian. Additionally, while the colonial contexts connecting the first two chapters—one dealing with internal colonialism and the other with a colonial economy—are introduced, they are not fully developed throughout the book. While Sá Carvalho does not delve into these relationships in depth, and the cohesion between chapters appears somewhat fragmented, readers can still easily bridge these conceptual gaps. The book's stated aim to educate "increasingly connected urban publics" through the "pedagogy of the gaze" also falls short in chapters three and four, where analysis of photographic reception remains limited. This shortcoming may be attributed to the temporal gap between the original journeys and the later publication of the books documenting them.

Nevertheless, Sá Carvalho has crafted an intelligently structured work, one that is poised to leave a lasting impact on the field of Latin American media studies.