

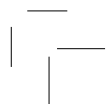


SECRETS FROM PUTUMAYO

**DISMANTLING COLONIAL HIERARCHIES
DURING THE AMAZON RUBBER BOOM**

Angus Mitchell

LAURA P.Z. IZARRA & MARIANA BOLFARINE (EDS.)





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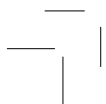
Secrets from Putumayo
Dismantling colonial hierarchies
during the Amazon rubber boom

Angus Mitchell

Laura P.Z. Izarra & Mariana Bolfarine (Eds.)



São Paulo, 2022



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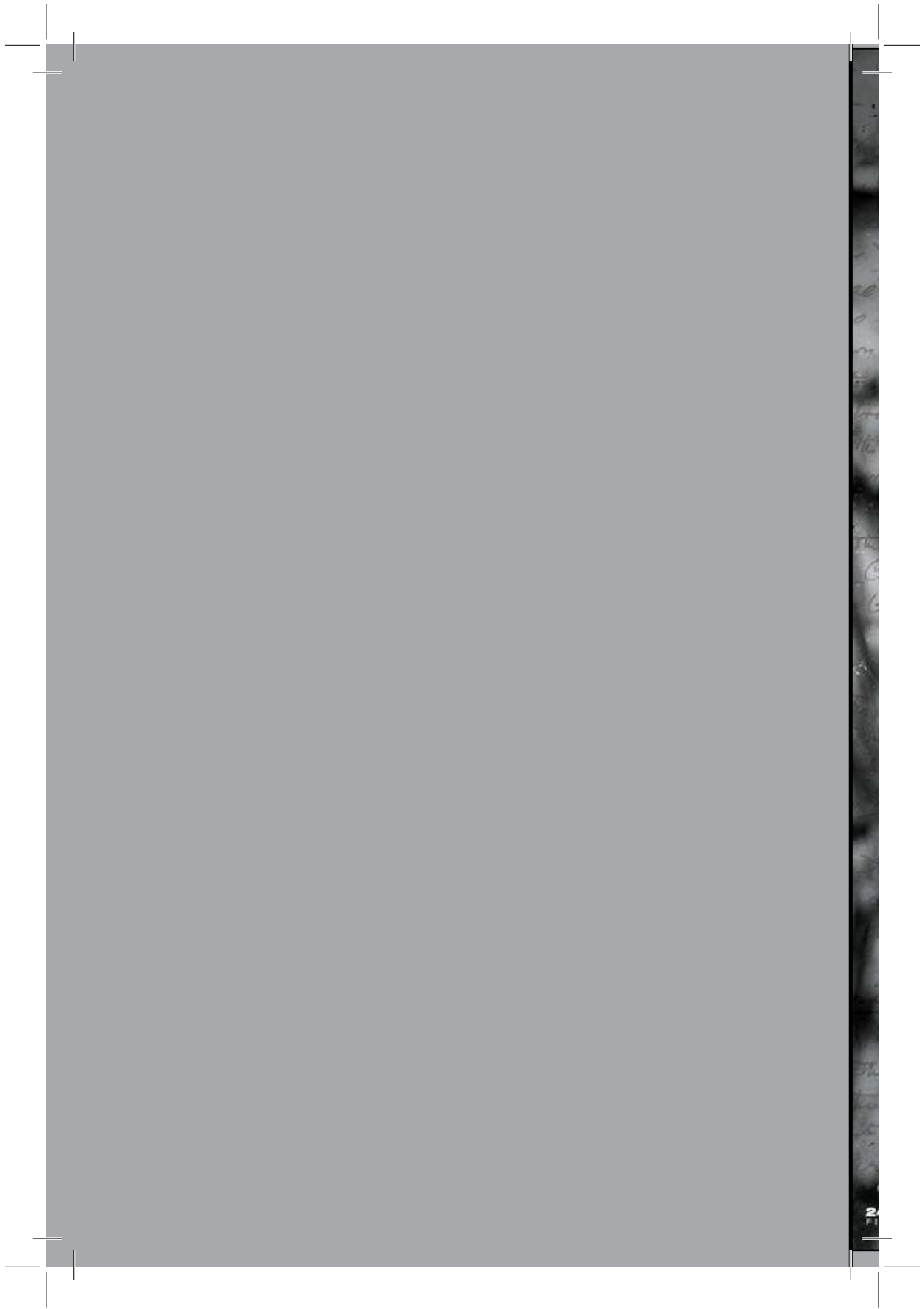
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SECRETS FROM PUTUMAYO

THE AMAZON JOURNAL OF ROGER CASEMENT

"NEARLY PERFECT"
Fernando Meirelles

"A MASTERPIECE"
Walter Salles

STEPHEN REA
as the voice of Roger Casement

a film by **AURÉLIO MICHILES**

24 VPS FILMES presents

Interviews: ANGUS MITCHELL, BARTOLOME A. TOKEMUY, BLAS H.C. CAJAMERA, EDWIN R. TETEYE, LUZ MARINA REMUY, MANUEL ZAFIAMA, MILLER TETEYE, MILTON HATOUM, Roger Casement, DORI CARVALHO
screenplay by: AURÉLIO MICHILES, DANILLO GULLANE, ANDRÉ FINOTTI, executive producer: PATRICK LEBLANC, director of photography: ANDRÉ LORENZ MICHILES, editor: ANDRÉ FINOTTI
music: ALVISE MINGOTTO, sound supervisor: MIRIAM BIDERMAN (ABC), sound design and mixing: RICARDO REIS (ABC), additional cinematography: FÁBIO BARDELLA, sound engineer: LEO BORTOLINI
line producer: SIDNEY MEDINA, co-producers: IMAGEM CÉUVAGEN, associate producers: FOGO FILMES, LOCADORA EQUIPAMENTOS CINEMATOGRAFICOS, produced by: PATRICK LEBLANC

PRODUÇÃO: 24VPS FILMES, IMAGEM CÉUVAGEN, B6
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DISTRIBUIÇÃO: 24VPS FILMES



- Photographs of Roger Casement, one writing on board in the Amazon. (Central Statistics Office and National Library of Ireland)

- Photograph of an indigenous youth taken by Roger Casement in Putumayo (NARA- National Archives and Record Administration, New York & National Photographic Archive in Dublin)



Preface

Secrets from Putumayo is a 2020 film by the Brazilian film director Aurélio Michiles who portrayed the indigenous peoples of the Putumayo in the past through Roger Casement's descriptions in his *Amazon Journal* (1910) and in the present through the local indigenous voices of La Chorrera.

The historian Angus Mitchell introduces the reader to the historical background of the film by deconstructing the power of its black and white photography and archival pictures used by Michiles to narrate the story of Roger Casement in the Amazon through the voice of the renowned Irish actor Stephen Rea.

The aim of this publication, together with the previous one *Secrets from Putumayo by Aurélio Michiles*¹, is to bring to school and university curricula, as well as the general public, the counter narrative of the rubber boom period which has remained silenced to this day.

The Editors

1 Bolfarine, M. & L.P.Z. Izarra. *Secrets from Putumayo*. São Paulo: Outside Co., 2021.



*- Photographs of starving indigenous peoples (NARA-
National Archives and Record Administration, New
York & National Photographic Archive in Dublin).*

SECRETS FROM PUTUMAYO

Where decolonization and art merge

...Potential history is the transformation of violence into
shared care for our common world...

Ariella Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (57)

One would have thought that he was telling a hallucinated
version, because it was radically opposed to the
false one that historians had created and consequently
consecrated in the schoolbooks.

Gabriel Garcia Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (322)

In his great meditation on history and the relationship between remembering and forgetting, Gabriel Garcia Márquez asks what can be known about any political event: where do the limits of history lie? This question confronts us with the immense power of the past, despite its physical absence. If history is recognized as an instrument of forgetting, memory is less a device of remembrance than a burden to be endlessly renegotiated. The tragic history of extractive rubber is now largely forgotten in the West. Yet it caused a social and environmental transformation of the tropical regions of the world of unfathomable scale in terms

of inhumanity.¹ For capitalist economies, the boom in latex was intrinsic to the next generation of technological modernity manifested in electrification, motorized transport and Fordist mass production. It catalysed a cataclysmic tension between supply and demand accompanied by a history of biblical proportions: for Western economies, it was a tale of untrammelled wealth, billowing share prices, fortunes won and lost, and rubber barons ruling over hallucinatory outposts of informal empire. For the people of Africa, the Americas and Asia, whose ancestral lands and memories were bound to the tropical rainforests that lay in the path of the extractive juggernaut, rubber was synonymous with widescale death and destruction.

The extractive rubber “boom” might be framed between the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, enabling British rapid access to India, and the opening of the Panama Canal in 1914, an engineering accomplishment that facilitated rapid commercial movement between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. Those two engineering feats accelerated the world economy. Under Western eyes, the history of what happened in the anonymous backlands of the Congo and Amazon as a result of an insatiable market demand for rubber was eclipsed by the two tragedies that diverted attention towards other paradigms of suffering: the First World War and the Spanish influenza pandemic.

Despite the tide of outrage before 1914, after the Versailles Settlement of 1919, the rubber atrocities were accepted as part of

1 The historiography of rubber is immense. See, John Tully, *The Devil's Milk: A Social History of Rubber* (New York, 2011); Warren Dean, *Brazil and the Struggle for Rubber: A Study in Environmental History* (Cambridge, 1997); Roberto Pineda, *Holocausto en el Amazonas: Una Historia Social de la Casa Arana* (Bogotá, 2000).

the collateral damage of modernization. Moreover, the trajectory of the principal official witness to these atrocities, Roger Casement, added to the complexity of the tragedy in terms of its acceptance as history. As a colonial officer arriving into Africa in the early 1880s, Casement was part of the white advance party that invaded the interior of Africa. His twenty years involvement with sub-Saharan Africa ended with his damning denouncement of European colonialism, his covert role co-founding the Congo Reform Association, and a deepening commitment to Irish cultural nationalism as an antidote to imperial overreach and the political failures of the home rule crisis.² In 1910 Casement, by then consul general in Brazil, described in detail his voyage through the forests and liquid landscape of the Amazon into the Putumayo. In 1911 he was knighted for his services to the British Empire. Five years later, he was arrested running guns into Ireland to arm the Irish Volunteers and quickly executed in central London for high treason. Questions about how Casement's experiences within the "contact zones" of empire came to shape his anti-imperialism inevitably prompt awkward responses.³ Disgraced and humiliated within the annals of the British Empire, the witness and whistleblower Casement was banished to a dimension of fugitive history where both his presence and absence were destined to rupture the infallibility of

2 Dean Pavlakis, *British Humanitarianism and the Congo Reform Movement 1896-1913* (Farnham, 2015).

3 The term "contact zone" is borrowed from Mary Louise Pratt who defines them as "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination – like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today". Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London, 1992), 4.

the national archive and to haunt the Liberal belief in the grand narrative of progress.

There is a predisposition among those who depend on forgetting to cover up their crimes that time is on their side – *Omnia tendunt naturaliter in non esse* [All things tend naturally towards non-existence]. But this truism seems not to apply in the case of the extractive rubber resource wars. If in those years before 1914 the atrocities resulting from “red rubber” became the most forensically examined incident of the apocalyptic tragedy of the Congo and Amazon “boom”, after 1919 the knowledge of this tragedy was buried inside a labyrinth of interdependent and entangled bureaucracy and secrets. Reflecting in 1920 on the place of history after the First World War, T.S. Eliot wrote

After such knowledge, what forgiveness? Think now
History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors
And issues, deceives us with whispering ambitions,
Guides us by vanities.⁴

For the rest of the twentieth century, the atrocities remained in a liminal space rearing up from within the realm of subjugated regimes of epistemology. Leslie Wylie opens her cultural history of the Putumayo with a quote: ‘Todo es inmenso en esa región, empezando por nuestra ignorancia respecto a ella.’⁵ [Everything about that region is immense, beginning with our ignorance about it]. What Wylie and others have shown is that both the

4 From *Gerontion*, a poem by T.S. Eliot published in 1920.

5 Lesley Wylie, *Colombia's Forgotten Frontier: A Literary Geography of the Putumayo* (Liverpool, 2013).

Putumayo and the north west Amazon was a region with a unique and intricate knowledge of plant systems. Ethnobotanists, plant hunters and medical anthropologist ascribed to the shamanic dimension an astonishing insight into medicinal plants and an advanced philosophy of knowledge constituted by healing and magic. A stream of travel books attested to this uniquely complex and advanced world: Nicole Maxwell's *Witch Doctor's Apprentice: Hunting for Medicinal Plants on the Amazon* (1961); the botanical voyages of Harvard's Richard Evans Schultes opened eyes to new dimensions of consciousness and his life is magisterially described by Wade Davis in *One River: Explorations and Discoveries in the Amazon Rain Forest* (1996). In *Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man; A Study in Terror and Healing* (1986), the medical anthropologist, Michael Taussig considered how shamanic healing practices confronted the remnants of the "space of terror" caused by rubber extraction.

More recently, the moment has been accessed through consideration of the vision painting of shamanic artists and their insights into the continuing legacy of intergenerational trauma.⁶ Extractive rubber left a deep legacy of psychological suffering. Fieldwork by the Colombian anthropologist, Juan Álvaro Echeverri (2010), has argued how the survivors of this holocaust banished the memories of evil into the basket of darkness.⁷ But there is no simple matrix of memory for comprehending the

6 Luis Eduardo Lima and Steven F. White (eds.), *Ayahwasca Reader: Encounters with the Amazon's Sacred Vine* (New Mexico, 2000)

7 Juan Álvaro Echeverri 'To Heal or to Remember: Indian Memory of the Rubber Boom and Roger Casement's "Basket of Life".' In: *ABEI Journal*, No. 12, (November 2012): 49-64. Eds. M.H. Mutran & L.P.Z. Izarra.

Putumayo atrocities. Colonial power relations enslaved locals to become both victims and perpetrators in a system of extraction that worked solely for the benefit of the market. This rush for rubber extraction was born out along two dimensions; one that was identifiably national and another that was driven by extractive capitalist expansion and the search for new markets.

In the late nineteenth century, Brazil, Colombia and Peru recognised the economic value of their forested frontiers in terms of both national and international aggrandisement. This triggered diplomatic, military, commercial and legal strategies to occupy and control what was designated in the imperial mind as unseeded land – *terra nullius* – or unclaimed territory: a principle that entirely ignored the presence of the communities living within the forests. A key instrument of the technology of conquest was photography. The argument of Ariella Aïsha Azoulay is useful here to theorize the underlying value of the image to the imperial right to destroy.⁸ Azoulay argues how the camera shutter was used to dissect communities, people and objects and turn them into standardized data. From 1492, empires assumed imperial rights to appropriate, record, measure, differentiate and exhibit. In the escalation and expansion of empires in the late nineteenth century the adaptation of this technology was even more devastating. The camera and the image became frontline technologies of suppression defending imperial logic and the sense of historical progress while disallowing the

8 Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London, 2019). See <https://www.materialculture.nl/en/events/imperial-rights-and-origins-photography>.

violence from breaking through into the popular consciousness of the metropole.

Description, in terms of both text and photography, became part of the toolkit of invasion and occupation of new territories. Julio César Arana, the rubber baron responsible for strategically dominating the Putumayo, was all too conscious of the importance of optics in his strategy to control his commercial operations. The war for commerce and civilization became a war of propaganda and public relations. Over time that was transferred into a struggle between history and counter-histories. Because the territories of the Putumayo were so evidently disputed and remote from any legal regulation, there the confrontation proved particularly vicious.

Early in the twentieth century, cinemas and photographic studios became part of the cultural and commercial landscape of the Amazon. The three main cities spanning the river, Belem, Manaus and Iquitos all had commercial cinemas. The Spanish photographer, Manuel Rodriguez Lira set up a studio and laboratory in Iquitos in 1899. Photography and moving pictures were intrinsic to the march of Amazonian modernity. In the Putumayo the disappearance and death of a French photographer



Cartoon from "La Felpa", the anti-Arana newspaper

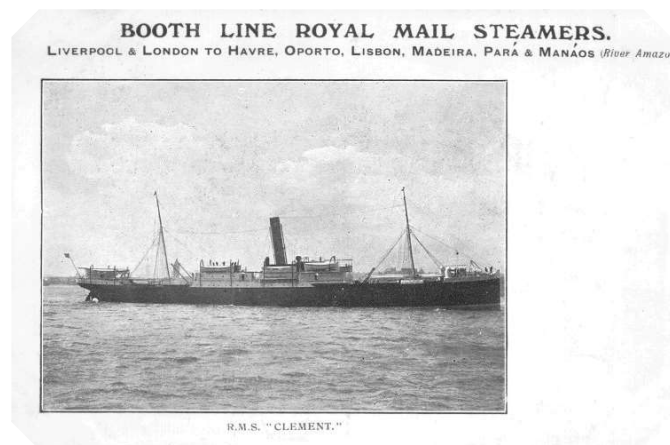
Eugenio Robuchon triggered the socialist Benjamin Saldaña Rocca to establish his anti-Arana newspapers *La Felpa* and *La Sanción*. One of the pioneers of Brazilian cinema, Silvino Santos was funded by Arana to go to Paris to the studios of Société Pathé-Frères run by the Lumière brothers to learn about cinema so that he could make films demonstrating the achievements of Arana's civilizing mission. One of the pioneering moments of world cinema is indelibly embroiled with the expansion of South American republics into the Amazon.



Silvino Santos' lab in the Amazon

Simultaneously, the new frontiers of South America were part of the defining of a new age in the Atlantic economy and extractive capitalism. From the mid-nineteenth century, European shipping companies opened direct lines with Belem, Manaus and Iquitos. The assertion of an ethnographic paradigm and typology, and the need to define and classify the “native” peoples in words and images, was constitutive in essentialising the sentiment of difference between “civilized” and “savage”

for both the nation and this globalising economy. Recent work, notably that of Mark Sealy, has shown how Western photographic practice created Eurocentric and “violent visual regimes” to support racist ideologies and as a form of racial control. In the late nineteenth century this had resonances in the social surveying and evidence gathering underpinning the work of Charles Booth’s investigation of the London poor. Profits of the Booth Steamship Company, that financed the building of harbours in Manaus and Iquitos and played such a critical part in the commercial expansion of the Amazon, were channelled into the founding of British social science.



R.M.S. Clement - Booth Line Postcard of Clement 2 1900-1914

As proof of their modernity and “civilized” status, the jungle-girt cities of Belém and Manaus produced lavish publications, reproducing pictures of avenues of streets elegantly defined by mango trees, tram car lines and imposing civic architecture. Such books were often supplemented with fold-out illustrations and maps. European publishers found a ready market for mass

market books on South American travel. But the confident advance of tropical modernity, built on the blood, sweat and tears of rubber extraction, began to unravel with the increased circulation of rumours of empires of slavery and violence. The camera was diverted away from documenting the exotic and the march of progress and utilized instead in providing proof for evolving humanitarian campaigns. In the Putumayo valley, national and commercial interests turned this disputed territory into a particularly violent space. For a brief period from around 1909 to 1913, the Putumayo atrocities made headlines around the world.⁹ But this immeasurable crime against humanity was gradually shut down by willful acts of amnesia, the screening out of violence, the imposition of silences, the sanitizing of the archive and the building of consoling mythologies and histories scaffolding an architecture of forgetting. The Colombian anthropologist Margarita Serje has recently noted how ‘the case of the Putumayo has been rendered invisible in the history of the [rubber] industry’.¹⁰ Now, with *Secrets from Putumayo* the archive has been reconditioned so as to summon a reading that speaks to contemporary debates on racism, decolonization and the tensions between remembering and forgetting.

9 See Jordan Goodman, *The Devil and Mr Casement* (London, 2009) who covers the press coverage during these years.

10 See Margarita Serje, ‘The Peruvian Amazon Co.: Credit and Debt in the Putumayo “Wild Rubber” Business’, *Enterprise and Society*, 22:2, June 2021, 475-501, (477).

The films of Aurélio Michiles

During Aurélio Michiles' long career in film-making the history of extractive rubber has been a recurrent theme to which he regularly returns. His work interrogates the political ecology of rubber extractivism and how it revolutionized one world through laying waste to another. As an intellectual born and raised in the Amazon, he grew up aware of the stories of Amazonia's *Belle Époque* and the great march of progress, innovation and global modernity that resulted from rubber extraction. His two-part television documentary film *Árvore da Fortuna* (1992) [*The Tree of Fortune*] appeared in the year that Rio de Janeiro hosted the Earth Summit and world leaders met to sign the Rio Declaration in an unsuccessful attempt to reduce global greenhouse gas emissions. *The Tree of Fortune* was an affective pedagogic tool informed by oral history and interviews with anthropologists, *seringueiros* (rubber tappers), historians, and filmmakers. It placed the environmental history of rubber within a longer context of settler colonial violence extending back to the Spanish and Portuguese navigators and conquistadors beginning with Columbus' arrival in Europe's "New World". The *seringueiros*, mainly of *nordestino* extraction, rather than the Native Latin American communities, took center stage in this narrative.¹¹ The analysis of the relationship between extractivism and slavery

11 *Nordestinos* is the term used for labourers and farmers who were forced, often by excessive drought, to migrate from the dry north-eastern states of Brazil and find new lives in the Amazon. The expanding rubber economy encouraged opportunity and a new frontier for Brazilian expansion.

continued up to the present and the campaign of the socialist and environmentalist, Chico Mendes, assassinated in 1988. Within this deep history of extractivism and the Amazon frontier wars that define relations between Europeans and the pre-Columbian world, Michiles made a brief reference to the Putumayo scandal at the end of the rubber boom. He interpreted it as a moment of cunning political opportunism enabling British investors to divest from the extractive industry and keep their reputations intact as the Amazon rubber economy started to crash and cheap plantation rubber pulled the rug from beneath the extractive market.

In 1997 Michiles returned to the theme of Amazon cinematography with *O Cineasta da Selva* (1997), [*The Filmmaker of the Forest*], a hallucinatory bio-pic about a pioneer of Brazilian cinema, Silvino Santos, the earliest filmmaker on the Amazon, whose earliest experimentation into moving pictures included *Putumayo* (1913) and *Índios Huitotos do Rio Putumayo* (1916). The early career of Santos is inextricably entangled with the patronage of Julio César Arana and his efforts to sell to the outside world the success of his “civilizing mission” on the Putumayo. After studying cinema in Paris, Santos married the adopted niece of Arana and returned to the Amazon to make a film in defence of Arana’s business interests. From this originating moment of Amazon cinema survive some of the earliest sequences of rubber tapping, the extractive economy and indigenous life on the Putumayo. Fragments of these Santos films are reused and recontextualized in *Secrets from Putumayo*. In 2002 Michiles completed a documentary study on *Teatro Amazonas* [*Amazon Theatre*] providing a visual history

of Manaus's spectacular opera house: the enduring architectural symbol of global cosmopolitanism.

Besides the history and legacy of rubber and the Amazon's economic golden age, the other interest for Michiles is the cinematic archive. This is addressed in his film *Tudo por amor ao Cinema* (2015) [*Autobiography of a Film Fanatic*] about the film archivist, Cosme Alves Netto, acknowledged as an embodiment of Latin American cinema. Born into a wealthy family from Manaus, Alves Netto devoted his life to the collection, restoration, and preservation of films from destruction; an archive now stored in the Cinémathèque in Rio de Janeiro. During the dictatorship in Brazil in the sixties and seventies, Alves Netto was a backstage leader in the counter-cultural underground. Involved in the people's movement, Ação Popular, he organized direct action against the dictatorship while struggling to exhibit and preserve films and documentaries made by filmmakers opposed to fascism. The work of Michiles has always engaged with the ideas and aspirations of Latin America's intellectual *avant-garde* and the idea that art has the potential to be transformative while denouncing the injustices and inequalities of structural power across the Americas. This is the politics that underpins *Secrets from Putumayo*.

Intersecting Temporalities

The opening scene of *Secrets from Putumayo* plunges the spectator into an otherworldliness that immediately sets about challenging western stereotypes by flashing up the tragic backstory to the

Putumayo atrocities. That otherworldliness is a glimpse into life on the Congo before extractive colonial capitalism. Sequences from Marc Allégret's seminal documentary *Voyage au Congo: Scènes de la vie indigène en Afrique Équatoriale* (1929), considered as a 'masterpiece of early ethnographic film',¹² provide insight into how life was before the Whiteman's arrival. In 1925, Allégret set out with the French writer, André Gide, on an eleven-month journey across equatorial Africa. Allégret was charged



with logistics and recording the journey with photographs and moving pictures. Gide provided the text. Apart from a crash course in photography from the surrealist

Man Ray before he left, Allégret had no formal training in either photography or filmmaking. *Voyage au Congo* is noted for both its "primitivist aesthetic" in how it details the ordinary



Images from Marc Allégret's film Voyage au Congo (1929)

¹² Brett Bowles, 'Marc Allégret' in *The Concise Routledge Encyclopedia of the Documentary Film* (Farnham, 2013), 32-34.

lifeways, dances, traditions and superstitions of the villages visited. *Secrets from Putumayo* borrows various moments that speak to a world of pre-colonial perfection and tranquility. A scene of “Push-Ball”, a game played with a giant rubber ball by the Saras, serves as a perfect metaphor for the entire film where a huge ball of rubber resembling a planet is tossed about on an ocean of outstretched arms and bodies.

Through this confrontation with a pre-colonial world, the viewer is situated momentarily inside the colonial gaze as both imperial interpolator and physical anthropologist. Sequences move effortlessly between ethnographic spectacle and voyeuristic, orientaling eroticism. The camera’s eye remains at a safe distance tracking over the exquisite sequences of daily life: sculptural villages, tantalizing textures, and an ‘exotic, fetishized voluptuousness’.¹³ What the spectator glimpses is a flash of a world that is at once Edenic, uncontaminated, sacral and at peace. Such a representation entirely upends the stereotypes of the offensively termed “dark continent” as a place of savagery. As Brett Bowles comments:

From today’s perspective such scenes are disturbingly objectifying and voyeuristic, yet as an exercise in visual aesthetics and eroticism their appeal remains undeniable. Moreover, in the context of the late 1920s they constituted a powerful, if at root equally stereotypical corrective to the

13 Geiger, Jeffrey, ‘Sightseeing: Voyage au Congo and the Ethnographic Spectacle’, in Tom Conner (ed.), *André Gide’s Politics: Rebellion and Ambivalence* (London, 2000), 120.

widely held European prejudice that blacks were ugly, brutish and unworthy of artistic attention. (p.33)

Informed by a spirit of investigation and innovation *Voyage au Congo* remains a work of pioneering documentary filmmaking, comparable to the oeuvre of Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922) and *Man of Aran* (1934). The creative output from this journey made by Gide and Allégret through central Africa triggered a debate about colonial power in France. Gide himself would be politicized by the experience and on his return to Europe immersed himself in colonial questions and social justice issues leading to his embrace of communism during the 1930s. In this intellectual transformation there are clear resonances with Casement's earlier swerve towards anti-imperialism and his *conscienticization*, in which his critical evaluation of the contact zones of empire trigger deeper insights into the erasures of Ireland's colonial past.

Surreal sequences from *Voyage au Congo* then cut violently to "Congo 1900", and an image of the missionary photographer, Alice Seeley Harris standing atop a pyramid of African children. This is followed by flashes from the series of deeply unsettling



The missionary photographer, Alice Seeley Harris standing amidst a pyramid of Congolese children

pictures extracted from the magic lantern lecture slides used at the start of the century in the evangelical campaigns to build



Congo brothers held in chains

public support for Congo reform. Harris's images have been recently acclaimed as holding 'a unique place within the history of photography'.¹⁴ As Mark Sealy explains they 'constructed a politics of visualization of the Other that was specifically deployed to engage the force of white moral outrage and religious conviction surrounding the knowledge of the atrocities taking place in the Congo' (p.35). At the time, they 'produced emotive rememory work, by reawakening the spectre of European slavery' (p.34).

From this emotionally disorientating opening, some of the metaphorical paradigms of what is to come are first signaled: the division between harmony and violence, the pre-colonial and the colonial, the historic and the contemporary. Confrontation with the submerged remnants of European colonial history and slavery flash up as the journey continues, most notably the graphic horror and epistemological violence of the early modern etchings by Theodor de Bry and Jodocus van Wingen, where the myths and spectacle of cannibalism were first nurtured in

¹⁴ Mark Sealy, *Decolonising the Camera: Photography in Racial Time* (London, 2019).

the racial imagination of the European. The viewer is tossed back and forth through time as the journey up-river begins. The residue of colonial slavery on the Amazon is glimpsed in the contemporary.



The logic of Casement's awakening into anti-

Theodor de Bry, "Cannibalism in Brazil as described by Hans Staden"

colonial activism erupts out of the fusion of his experience witnessing the colonial encounter in the Congo and Amazon with his historic understanding of Ireland's struggle. Michiles is interested here in capturing "postcolonial solidarities" and what Robert Young describes as the diasporic production of anti-colonialism: 'a revolutionary mixture of the indigenous and the cosmopolitan, a complex constellation of situated knowledges combined with radical, universal political principles'.¹⁵ Casement refers to "Mrs Green's history", an acknowledgment of the work of Alice Stopford Green whose counter-histories exposing the violence and deception of English rule in Ireland, and the imperial drive of historiography, helped to structure the national imagination in preparation for the war of independence. The historic plight of Ireland evident in the penal laws, the tragedy of the famine, forced evictions and land wars, the low-level resistance to the rule of the English landlord is brought inside the frame. Ireland's long struggle is woven into the upriver

¹⁵ Robert J.C. Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Blackwell, 2001), 2.

journey. These complementary cartographies of colonialism are overlaid and merge into a common struggle. When Casement resigned from the British Foreign Office, he involved himself in a campaign in Connemara and referred to an “Irish Putumayo” and the white Indians of Connemara.

The aesthetic of the film is deliberately frayed. There has been no effort to restore damaged images. Seeing the Amazon in black and white creates its own forms of disorientation, affect and difference. Concurrently it creates the illusion that one is watching history. River, rainforest and text start to fuse. The narrative has clear parallels in what Leslie Wylie identifies as a “descent narrative” with echoes in Dante’s *Inferno* and, most obviously, in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*.¹⁶ The viewer is asked to embark on a psychological journey, where a dream-like quality blends with stark realisms of the ethnographic spectacle in search of poetic knowledge and truth. The river becomes a vessel for venturing back in time into a visual archive, where the photograph rotates from being both an erasure and trace signifying something that is lost and yet survives in its simulacrum.

Photographs are no longer frozen moments of the past that might be inoffensively interpreted from the safety of the present, instead they are transformed into enduring narratives, active remnants and traces that catalyse dialogue in the now. Thinking through this “chain of fluctuating temporalities”, Shawn Michelle Smith comments how

16 Wylie, *Colombia’s Forgotten Frontier*, 85.

The photograph is emblematic of the way a past continues to inhabit and punctuate a present, and also one of the central vehicles through which that temporal collision takes place... images refer to and call forth other images. They follow photographs to variously trace, bend, pierce, truncate, extend, and fold time, drawing viewers back and forth across mutable time lines.¹⁷

Making the film in black and white lends homogenous consistency so that the instants of dramatic effect and the more general film blend into a continuous temporal register that is at once surreal, poetic, phantasmagoric, and outlandish. Hazy imagery of the archive footage blends with the high-definition black and white sequences shot on location on the Amazon and at La Chorrera, the center of Arana's rubber demesne. Temporalities switch without warning, the viewer is constantly tossed between the past and present, between high definition and hazy, unfocused, acid stained, damaged, negatives; between the pristine, the damaged, the lost, the recovered and the rediscovered. Through this aesthetic montage, the intrinsic nature of the Amazon ceases to be a world of imagined Technicolor – a green paradise – and becomes instead a place of sensual and sublimated meaning. The lyrical tone of Stephen Rea – the voice of Casement – and the musical score by Alvis Migotto blend Irish and Amazon symbolisms and rhythms with the kaleidoscopic sounds of rainforest birds. Contemporary voices of those interviewed from inside the Casa de Arana, the restored headquarters of Arana's rubber empire, present further narrative layers.

¹⁷ Smith, Shawn Michelle, 'Photographic returns: racial justice and the time of photography' (Durham, 2020), 1.

Reconstituting Archives

The film is interlaced with three key substantive archives of photographs. Two of these collections provide images that were produced at the time to robustly defend the reputation of the civilizing mission and defend the march of progress. The first of these collections is the Whiffen Collection held in the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Cambridge. Another key collection is that of Silvino Santos who accompanied the joint consular mission to the Putumayo in 1912, when he was employed by Arana as the official photographer.¹⁸ These two collections stand in marked contrast to Casement's images taken during his two voyages into the Amazon in 1910 and 1911, which are concerned with bearing witness and compiling evidence of structural violence.

Recent work on the role of the photographic image in the territorial expansion of the Amazon has demonstrated how the colonization of the north-west Amazon was happening along two lines of exploitation. Inside these geographies of development was a representational intersection between two frontiers. María del Rosario Flores Paz has discussed perceptively the role of the image within such contact zones. Photography was constitutive to structuring the national identity of the pioneer and settler

18 The photographs from the diplomatic mission to the Putumayo, shot by Silvino Santos, were published by Alberto Chirif, Manuel Cornejo Chaparro, Juan de la Serna Torroba (co-ordinators), *Álbum de fotografías. Viaje de la Comisión Consular al río Putumayo y afluentes. Agosto a octubre de 1912* (Lima, 2013). Accessed https://issuu.com/jorgeluischavez/docs/album_de_fotografias_viaje_comision

colonialist defending new territories for the nation, in this case Peru and Colombia. Another archive spoke to the legitimizing needs of international trade to harness the photograph to be an instrument justifying the forces of market-led civilization and progress. The national and the international did not always configure. An essay by the anthropologist, Jean-Pierre Chaumeil has shown how the very process of colonization unleashed a “war of images” defining the representational politics of the Putumayo and how this configured with European myths of cannibalism and savagery.¹⁹ Furthermore, Flores Paz argues that photography ‘is a source which interrogates the observer’ as much as it speaks to the specific reality that is being captured on celluloid. Michiles’ blending of these different archives and visual regimes unleashes a complex layering of meaning-making.

Thomas Whiffen was a British army officer, who, after being wounded during the Anglo-Boer War and inspired by his reading of the Victorian natural scientist and spiritualist, Alfred Russel Wallace, decided to make a journey into the north-west Amazon. During the months of his travel in the latter months of 1908 and 1909, he became increasingly intrigued by the circumstances surrounding the disappearance of the French explorer and photographer, Eugène Robuchon a few years earlier. Whiffen’s book *The North-West Amazons: Notes of Some Months Spent Among Cannibal Tribes*, published in 1915, by which time the Putumayo scandal had largely blown over, is a work of ‘ethnographic spectacle’ that builds a visual regime intended

19 Jean Pierre Chaumeil, ‘Guerra de Imágenes en el Putumayo (1902-1920)’, in Alberto Chirif, Manuel Cornejo (eds.), *Imaginario e imágenes de la época del caucho: Los sucesos del Putumayo*, (Lima, 2009).

to legitimize colonial power. Whiffen adopts the concept of the “primitive other” as a looking glass to construct ideas of the “civilized”. If read in the light of critical indigenous studies, or critical race theory, the Whiffen collection can be recategorized as a profoundly aggressive intervention on behalf of colonial dynamics. It subjectifies the indigenous body as “primitive”, “underdeveloped”, “savage”, “frightening”, “conspiratorial”, and “untrustworthy”. It is constitutive of the archive upon which the process of ethnocide was based and legitimized in the colonial and metropolitan imagination.



Thomas Whiffen's album dedicated to Theodor Koch-Grünberg. (Royal Anthropological Society in London).

The other main sequence of photographs are those images taken by Silvino Santos. His brief, as he set out with the consular commission in October 1912, was to capture the success of Arana's civilizing mission. In the light of Casement's report and the campaign against the rubber company, Santos's work was leveraged to placate and reassure the centres of civilised power

following the release of the Blue Book, containing Casement's official reports in July 1912. All evidence of violence and mistreatment is screened out and an image is restored that is palatable to a Western audience increasingly accustomed to the orientalizing gaze. Through these images the viewer can once more glimpse the narrative of order, progress and improvement evident in heavily staged images of lines of well-dressed Indians wearing western clothes and the introduction of new technologies, such as the sewing machine, to "better" the lives of the "primitive". Projected onto Santos' indigenous body is an idealized western view of the self.



Huitoto woman using a manual Singer sewing machine

Roger Casement's archive of images can be interpreted as a counter-narrative intended to destabilize the colonial gaze and encourage a different form of empathetic engagement. The work of the Congo Reform Association had alerted campaigners to the agency of images as part of an "economy of display", essential to raising consciousness, awareness and public support in any campaign prepared to challenge power relations. Casement shot seventeen rolls of film during his time in the Putumayo in 1910. He also took a camera with him on his return voyage to Iquitos in 1911. During the initial trip, three of the other commissioners travelled with cameras also. From references in subsequent correspondence, the photographs taken by the commissioners were circulated, swapped, reproduced in different formats, and assembled by Casement into albums to complement his text and serve as visual evidence and material proof. Casement sent copies to the Antislavery and Aborigines Protection Society, to the acting consul in Iquitos, David Cazes, and to Charles Roberts M.P. These were intended for use as evidence during the parliamentary select committee inquiry. Images by Casement and other commissioners found their way into different publications including Walter Hardenburg's *The Putumayo: The Devil's Paradise* and Carlos A. Valcárcel, *El Proceso del Putumayo*. In July 1912, when the Blue Book containing Casement's official reports was finally published, his Putumayo images appeared in international press outlets including the *Illustrated London News*.

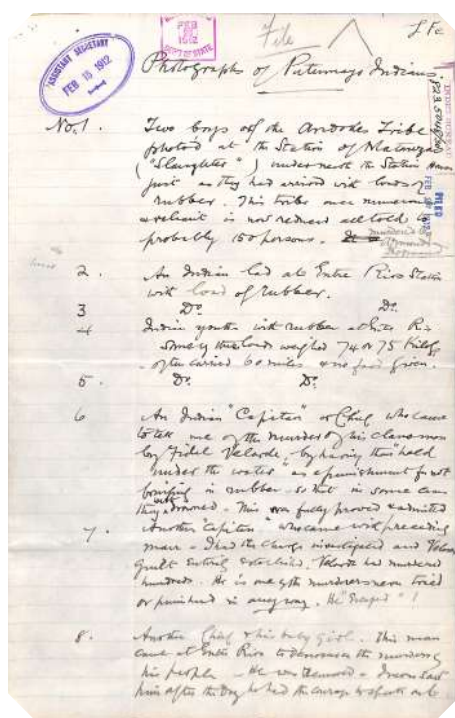
The value Casement placed on the image as integral to his investigation is evident from a recently discovered album of photographs. On his return from the Putumayo in 1910, he

developed and collated the images and prepared an initial album for the foreign secretary, Sir Edward Grey. Writing officially to Louis Mallet at the Foreign Office, he commented formally that he would like to hand them over to Grey in person: ‘I have a lot of photographs to give him in an album – of Indians &c. of the forest, and I should like to do it personally if he has the time to see me’.²⁰ In line with his wishes, he delivered that album in early March before submitting his main report on St Patrick’s Day. Unfortunately, the album has not survived in The National Archives, but another album has been unearthed. In early 1912, as Casement left the Amazon after his second trip to Iquitos, he took a detour via Washington on the invitation of the British ambassador to the U.S.A., James Bryce, to meet with President William Taft. Following his return to London, he submitted an album of 34 images to George Young at the British Embassy in Washington, with an accompanying twelve-page document of numbered captions to accompany each individual photograph.²¹ This was then forwarded to the secretary of state. This selection of images, principally pertaining to his 1910 journey,²² amounts to an “executive summary” and storyboarding of his investigation into an easily digestible format for busy State Department officials. By placing the image alongside brief descriptive captions deeper meanings and contexts can be decoded. Although the document

20 Angus Mitchell (ed.), *Sir Roger Casement’s Heart of Darkness: The 1911 Documents* (Dublin, 2003), 104.

21 National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), 823.5048/30 (1912) Central Decimal Files, 1910-29; Box 8298. Location: Stack 250, Row 24, Compartment 19, Shelf 7, *Photographs of Putumayo Indians*, 26 January 1912.

22 The album was composed of a few images from Casement’s 1911 voyage and one of Ricudo when he was visiting England. The remainder are from his 1910 voyage.



Opening page and the first seven captions of Roger Casement's album of 34 'Photographs of Putumayo Indians'.

is titled 'Photographs of Putumayo Indians', Casement was careful to differentiate the names of the identifiable "tribes" and language groups in that region.

Even though the images are often unfocused, of poor quality, and have the feeling of spontaneity and lack of technical understanding, they are clearly integral to the broader dossier of forensic reporting and witnessing. They provide a critical insight into the physical conditions of the "Putumayo Indians",

and the ambience of the commercial world under investigation.²³ It should be remembered that Casement was suffering for most of his Putumayo trip from a desperate eye infection. This was

²³ The essentializing term "Putumayo Indian" was used by Casement in his description of the native people he met during his journey through the district. It was also the title of the article he wrote for *The Contemporary Review* and used in the title of his album of photos titled 'Photographs of Putumayo Indians'. This term has been retained for the sake of convenience although it is recognized that the Putumayo region was composed of many different identifiable communities. Those communities included the Huitotos, Ocainas, Muinanes and Boras.

particularly bad in the first four weeks of his journey. The motivating challenge of his investigation was to provide proof of crimes, proof with moral authority. Early on he had great difficulty in getting the other commissioners to see what he was seeing. They seemed averse to acknowledge the evidence of criminality that in Casement's view was in plain sight. He recognized that there were different ways of seeing. His sense of frustration builds to that moment of lucidity:

This thing we find here is carrion – a pestilence – a crime against humanity, and the man who defends it is, consciously or unconsciously, putting himself on the side of the lowest scale of humanity, and propagating a moral disease that religion and conscience and all that is upright in us should uncompromisingly denounce.²⁴

The overarching structure of Casement's investigation was recorded in the journal he kept from 23 September to 6 December and supplemented by the lengthy testimonies he transcribed in long-hand from his interviews with the Barbadian overseers.²⁵ In this narrative – a work of “thick description”, to borrow a term from the anthropologist Clifford Geertz – Casement provides analytical context to what he is witnessing. He places the Indian at the very core of his interrogation of the extractive system. He uses the lens to recognize different versions

24 Angus Mitchell (ed.), *The Amazon Journal of Roger Casement* (Dublin & London, 1997), 178. [Henceforth AJRC]

25 See AJRC. This has been translated into Portuguese as Laura P. Izarra and Mariana Bolfarine (orgs.), *Diário da Amazônia de Roger Casement* (São Paulo, 2016).

of “proof” and “reality” as he maps the cartography of colonial violence. What is apparent from his journal is that Casement was an acutely attentive observer. The body of the Indian becomes a critical evidential source in revealing long histories of oppression. He breaks through the descriptive strictures of the physical anthropologist to read the bodies and faces as sources of evidence for understanding the emotional, philosophical and moral qualities of the victims, and how their scars, physiques and expressions of suffering expose the system nourishing the space of terror. It is revealing to understand how Casement positions himself in relation to the camera shutter in his narrative:



*Boy with scarred limbs
(‘Arana’s marks’)*

...

The naked men in *fono* are better off, to my mind, than the poor specimens in shirt and trousers. The dance began irregularly in parties and processions, and gradually enlarged and developed. We photographed many – Gielgud and I. We visited the Indians’ house (the *muchachos* house) where the Indians were dancing both in afternoon and evening. I saw many men, and boys too, covered with scars, and often drew the attention of the others to this, but they were looking for themselves. Some of the men were deeply graced with the trademarks of Arana Bros. across their bare buttocks, and the upper thighs, and one little boy of ten was marked. I called Bishop and we both verified it, and I tried to photo him. (142)

...

I photographed the whole of the Meretas tribe or nation, which Jiménez said reckoned seven

head, all told. There were two gentle-eyed men with tin and bead ear-rings, and their small families all living in this one house – surrounded by a small patch of cassava. (199)

...

Later on photo'ed many of the men carrying sample loads as they would go on the road. These are done up in palm-stem baskets very much as on the Congo, but the load is borne on the shoulders and backs, stooping suspended by a strip of bark fibre from the forehead. (249)²⁶



Youths carrying loads of rubber (around 75 kilos each) at Entre Rios

...

I spoke to several of the men and boys, but all seemed half dazed and wholly frightened, and when I got some to stand for their photos they looked as if under sentence of death. (265)

...

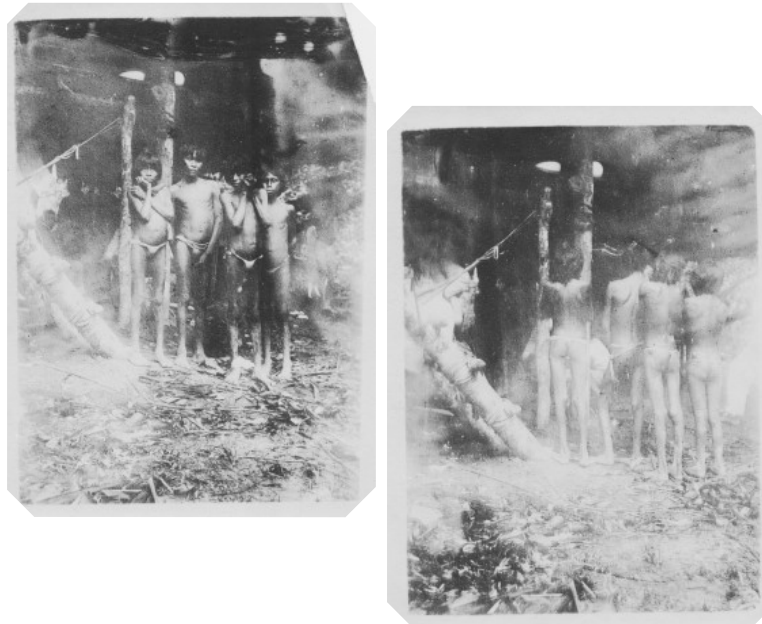
The man Negretti was raging, I could see, at Fox taking photographs of them, he only got two poor ones in the fading light. I have failed to get any photo that will show, I fear, of the lithe, tiny little boys, staggering under 30 or 40 lbs. of

26 AJRC, 249. Casement's photograph of Indians carrying rubber loads can be found in Carlos Valcárcel, *El proceso del Putumayo y sus secretos inauditos* (Lima, 1915), 224.

rubber. I have seen nothing like this on the Congo, and it is indescribable, and makes me positively ill. (278)

...

The Commission's carriers are over 40 Atenas Indians, many of them boys, several are literally skeletons. I never saw anything much thinner than four boys of from 15–20. We photographed them – one had dreadful sores as well, and the back of one had been flogged raw. It was heartrending. God help them! (323)



Two images from Casement's album 'Photographs of Putumayo Indians'

...

To-day an afternoon of fearful heat. I took Arédomi up to the hill to the cataract – and photo'd him in necklace of "tiger" teeth, armlets of feather plumes and a *fono*. I also photo'd the falls from the steep cliff above through the dense bushes. We went on to the upper river, to the landing place and sat there

and talked, or tried to talk, I asking him names of things in Huitoto, and he telling me as well as he could. He actually clings to me I can see – poor boy. We saw 14 splendid Araras or Macaws fly slowly by – one alit on a tree quite close with a flash of crimson under-wing. Omarino says he wants to learn to write and came to my room and got a blue lead pencil and covered a sheet of paper with weird signs. (368-9)



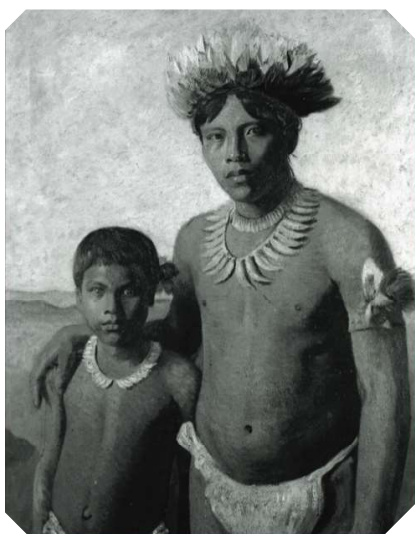
*Ricudo or Arédomi, (Andoque indian) in
Roger Casement's album*

...

I shall get Arédomi painted and clothed in it at home, and have him photographed and presented to ... the Anti-Slavery

people at a great meeting! That will be an idea to enlist sympathy. (449-50)

...



William Rothenstein's unfinished portrait of Omarino and Ricudo



Arédomi and Omarino (Naimenes indian)

The photographer sent back, after repeated requests, my films developed, but has abstracted No.1 – that of “Bolivar” in chains that I took at Indostan! He refused to print any saying he had been bothered so much. He has had the roll of film (ten “postcard” films) since 11th or 12th October and by 30th November this is the result! Of course the Company has stolen “Bolivar”. Cazes says everyone in town knew we had found him in chains, and that I had photo'd him. (474)

As this selection of references demonstrates, Casement is conscious of the proof-value of the image as part of the moral arsenal of his investigation. He recognized that the imperial ordering of the world had conditioned people to deny alternative possibilities of reality. He reflects at one point: ‘Of course there are lots of people in the world who will defend anything that exists merely because it exists, and they are so mentally constructed that they cannot imagine another state of things’ (176). Casement’s questioning of the system constructs another way of imagining and breaking through the realism imposed by colonial capitalism. He is in search of new representational mediums capable of confronting the dominant racial boundaries. His images capture the returning gaze of the colonized “native”, and the sense of human vulnerability. Victims become real persons, some are named, some even are claimed as friends. He recounts the stories of those who had resisted. The tapestry of violence maintaining the system is described: scars of the lash, mental health problems, the denigration and sexual abuse of women, child labour, starvation as a form of control, oppressive economic regulation and debt, haunted and terrified expressions, the death sentence imposed by the regime, the false displays of

joy evident in the dances, distended stomachs, terrified glances and a sense of melancholic homelessness and dispossession. He refers to how the Putumayo Indians were being “systematically starved” and “systematically raided”. On another level there are more abstract forms of violence sustained by strategies of silence and epistemological misrepresentation.

In some images, Indians appear like ghosts, elsewhere he defines their sense of dignity and agency. His evidence scaffolds pathways into seeing deeper, hidden truths concealed beneath the veneer of civilization and company policy. Carolina Sá Carvalho has argued that these images provide insight into how Casement was experimenting with new ways of seeing the indigenous body, in terms of both its agency and as a site of violation. She shows that understanding the tragedy and the ability to see the scars requires ‘a perspective determined by past experiences and affective dispositions’.²⁷ In other words, the scars are only apparent to those who identify with and understand histories of oppression. Through text and image, he provides a counter-narrative to Whiffen’s imperial taxonomy intended to degrade the “primitive” in preparation for extermination, or, the efforts of Santos to capture the transformation of the “native” into a “civilized” being.

Casement was struggling with his own subjectivity: his relationship between self and other, between his official brief as an investigator and commissioner, with his deepening empathy for the oppressed. He draws transhistorical comparisons with

27 Carolina Sá Carvalho, ‘How to See a Scar. Humanitarianism and Colonial Iconography in the Putumayo Rubber Boom’, *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*, 27 (3), 2018, 1-27, (2).

the Irish situation. Paradoxically, he comes to embody both the imperialist and the anti-imperialist. His journey becomes a moment of metamorphosis. The Putumayo would be his last official stand. When he resigned from the diplomatic service in June 1913, he sank himself into another Irish campaign to bring relief, food, and education to the stricken regions of the west of Ireland: an “Irish Putumayo”, as he called it. In the end, all three of his investigations – the Congo, the Putumayo and the west of Ireland – can be read as an interconnected interrogation of colonial power and capitalist hegemony. His lasting achievement was to historicise a narrative of transtemporal and transpatial oppression through structuring an alternative reality where the violence committed against the African, the Native American and the Irish language speaker becomes a shared violence. A key instrument of colonization is the denial of historical agency to those whose lands are being usurped through brutality. Those who challenge empire become people without history and in that process are erased from sight.

A question that has arisen in recent debates around de/colonisation is “who counts as human?”. Casement’s investigation of colonial power relations interrogated the politics of representation: who had the right to representation and to what forms of representation? In the Putumayo, he was cross-examining the underlying structures of colonial representation to persuade his audience in Whitehall and Washington that not only were the “natives” no different from “us” but they were in fact morally superior. To do that he asked the viewer to look and to acknowledge the vulnerability of their humanity, to recognize their suffering, and to affirm their dignity. He gave

visibility to the indigenous communities undergoing a process of violent invasion of their land and culture. This posed a direct challenge to how the white world wishes to see the realism upholding notions of civilization.²⁸ Through the fusion of text and images and the extensive archive deriving from Casement's official career, he upturned and dismantled colonial hierarchy by positioning the Putumayo Indian at the apex of the moral order of the Amazon. The criminal white-collar whiteman, morally degraded and dependent upon vice and deception to support his world system, is relegated to the bottom. In that interrogation of the social structure of the extractive economy, moral character was the key indicator of humanity and civility and, in his mind, moral authority lay unequivocally with the indigenous "Other".

Backstories

Although much of the contemporary footage of *Secrets from Putumayo* was shot on location in and around La Chorrera, the head station of the company's operations, the most striking intersection in the temporal register of the film is the moment when it is brought into the political present with a single image by the Amazon-based photographer, Luiz Vasconcelos.²⁹ Taken in 2008, this photograph communicates across time and space the land wars that bind the world of post-famine Ireland to

28 Lewis Gordon, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lbZic7ZrOsA>.

29 This image was originally published on 10 March 2008 in the Manaus newspaper *A Crítica*.

the on-going confrontation of the Amazon frontier today. Vasconcelos has spent years photographing such skirmishes between the shock troops of the Military Police of Amazonas and different indigenous peoples. In this image, a mother, Valda Ferreira de Souza, of the Sateré-Mawé people, aged just twenty-two and pregnant with another child, backs into a line of black riot shields. This photograph has obvious echoes in the asymmetrical power relations evident in other instances of contemporary protest: notably *Taking a Stand in Baton Rouge*, one of the defining images of the Black Lives Matter campaign, or the unknown protester standing defiantly in front of a tank in Tiananmen Square. The voice over of Casement tells us at this point that ‘no empire has ever been destroyed without resistance’. In that intersection, the transtemporal solidarity of those who have confronted the militarised force of the state is revealed. Armed with nothing beyond courage and audacity, whether in the US, the Amazon frontier, Ireland, or in the People’s Republic of China, that solidarity in resistance is evoked through the flash of a single image.

In the last 15 minutes of the film, as Casement is reduced to a dot on a corridor of beach in the Amazon, the viewer is transported into the context of mounting revolutionary tension in Ireland that led to Casement’s execution in central London at the height of the First World War. Casement’s positioning in the history of the Easter Rising has always been hard to integrate as his revolutionary presence complicates the national narrative. As a “Knight of the Realm” and the rebel leader most directly identified with the Protestant enclave that challenged Ireland’s right to home rule, Casement’s “high treason” crossed various

boundaries of religion, class, privilege, and secrecy. On the eve of the outbreak of war in 1914, along with the historian Alice Stopford Green and other moderate home rulers, Casement organized the purchase and running of guns into Ireland. Ten days after the arrival of those guns into Howth harbour, Britain declared war on Germany and two months later he found himself in Berlin negotiating with the German General Staff on behalf of an Irish nation without a state. This flight to Germany placed him firmly on the wrong side of history. Woven into this last part of the narrative are the two short sequences of film shot by the documentary filmmaker, Albert K. Dawson. One shows Casement smoking a cigarette and talking to the camera, the other has him writing at his desk in the Eden Hotel in Berlin in April 1915. The Eden Hotel is identified symbolically with the final hours of Rosa Luxemburg and the Spartacist Uprising.³⁰ In fast-forwarding through his final months from his role organizing revolutionary resistance in Ireland to his state trial for high treason and execution, Michiles builds a sense of solidarity in resistance between oppressed peoples. In the final scenes, he fuses archive footage from 1965, and the return of Casement's bones to Ireland, with images of women from the Putumayo region today watching the rubber tyres of an airplane touchdown on a makeshift runway somewhere in that liquid landscape of Amazonia.

During a keynote address at a seminar on 'Decolonization and Art', at the *Museu de Arte de São Paulo* (MASP), the

30 The Spartacist Uprising in January 1919 was a general strike in Berlin that resulted in the murder of the Communist revolutionary intellectuals Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg.

Jamaican philosopher, Lewis Gordon asked: ‘What happens when coloniality is brought to art?’³¹ In reply, he argued that art is about belonging to human reality. However, when one regime of knowledge is imposed on another it inevitably brings about disempowerment, “alienation and not belonging”. Colonised people do not fit into the imperialized present; they are denied a future, and this leads to melancholia. It is that melancholia that Casement’s images capture in a hazy, haunting aesthetic – the melancholic state of the enslaved “Putumayo Indian”. In an essay by Casement on *The Putumayo Indians*, he wrote how the indigenous people ‘never gave the impression of being at home’,³² violent invasion of their space and place had rendered them homeless in their own land, dislocated from their ancestral cosmos.

Casement’s dilemma was always one of communication: how to articulate to as great an audience as possible the scale of the tragedy that he had witnessed and the urgency of stopping the blind destruction of humanity. He brought an anti-colonial dimension to the intellectual framework of the 1916 Easter Rising that modern history refuses to acknowledge as legitimate. Through diagnosing what Priya Satia describes as ‘history’s complicity in empire’,³³ Michiles reinstates a perspective of the extractive economy that explains its cost in terms of global, social and ecological sacrifice. By reassembling a different register of time, *Secrets from Putumayo* becomes a counter-

31 Lewis Gordon: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lbZic7ZrOsA>.

32 Wylie, *Colombia’s Forgotten Frontier*, 89.

33 Priya Satia, *Time’s Monster: History, Conscience and Britain’s Empire* (London, 2020), 284.

history aimed to breach the walls of putrid historical orthodoxy through using cinema's language of poetic knowledge and truth. The overlapping choruses of imperial evidence in terms of photographs and testimony are reconstituted to assist in the task of unlearning imperialism. The viewer is left with what Ariella Aïsha Azoulay defines as a fundamental pillar of what she terms 'potential history': 'the transformation of violence into shared care for our common world'.³⁴

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34 Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History Unlearning Imperialism* (London, 2019), 57.

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Illustration captions

Image 1: Cartoon from “La Felpa”, the anti-Arana newspaper published in Iquitos by Benjamin Saldaña Rocca that first exposed the rubber atrocities in the Putumayo. [Angus Mitchell Archive & see BERNUCCI, Leopoldo y Ana Varela TAFUR (eds.) *Benjamín Saldaña Rocca. Prensa y denuncia en la Amazonía cauchera*. Lima: Pakarina Ediciones, 2020]

Image 2: Silvino Santos' lab in the Amazon.

Image 3: R.M.S. Clement - Booth Line Postcard of *Clement 2* 1900-1914 – Fraser Darrah Collection. <http://www.bluestarline.org/booth/clement2.html>

Images 4 & 5: Images from Marc Allégret's film *Voyage au Congo* (1929) provides a glimpse of the otherworldliness of the Congo before the advent of colonial capitalism and rubber extraction. Allégret journeyed with the French writer, André Gide, and their different interventions in terms of film, images, and text triggered a debate in France about colonial power. [Creative Commons]

Image 6: The missionary photographer, Alice Seeley Harris standing amidst a pyramid of Congolese children; her images ‘hold a unique place within the history of photography’ according to Mark Sealy. [Congo Reform Association]

Image 7: Congo brothers held in chains: a regularly reproduced lantern lecture slide from the Congo Reform Association’s campaign. Such images were intended to reawaken the memory of nineteenth-century anti-slavery activism in order to stop a new generation of violent extractivism. [Congo Reform Association]

Image 8: Theodor de Bry, “Cannibalism in Brazil as described by Hans Staden” – a completely mythologising and exaggerated representation of a ritualised cannibal feast intended to assure European audiences that the invasion and slaughter of Native American people was a ‘moral crusade’. [Creative Commons]

Image 9: Thomas Whiffen’s album dedicated to Theodor Koch-Grünberg. (Royal Anthropological Society in London). Thomas Whiffen’s tendency to weaponise the camera to subjectify the Putumayo people as ‘hostile’ and ‘uncivilized’ shows how the camera was adopted as an instrument of colonial suppression and violence. [Cambridge University, Whiffen Papers]

Image 10: Huitoto woman using a manual Singer sewing machine. Silvino Santos took this photograph for the Peruvian Amazon Company’s propaganda of its ‘civilising’ mission. (Carlos Rei de Castro, *Los pobladores del Putumayo*, 1914).

Image 11: Opening page and the first seven captions of Roger Casement’s album of 34 ‘Photographs of Putumayo Indians’. [Library of Congress]

Image 12: Boy with scarred limbs ('Arana's marks') as he was flogged for not bringing in his quota of rubber to the slavers. Photograph taken in 1910 by Henry Gielgud, the Secretary of the Peruvian Amazon Company. [Walter Hardenburg's *The Putumayo: The Devil's Paradise* (1912)].

Image 13: Indian Youths carrying loads of rubber (around 75 kilos each) at Entre Rios. Photograph #4 in Casement's album. [Library of Congress].

Images 14 & 15: Two images from Casement's album 'Photographs of Putumayo Indians' – captions describing the photographs were sent by Casement to the US State Department in January 1912, along with detailed captions: 'Four Young Indians of the Atenas district ... it is a pity the print is not clearer because these four boys were among the most abject specimens of humanity I have ever seen. Not only were they starved to near skin and bone – but their backs (or buttocks and skinny thighs) were covered in scars and sores from floggings – some of them red and festering. They were only boys too – the eldest not more than fifteen'. Photographs #22 & #23 in the album. [Library of Congress].

Image 16: Ricudo or Arédomi, (Andoque indian) in Roger Casement's album. [National Archives and Record Administration – NARA, College Park, Maryland].

Image 17: William Rothenstein's unfinished portrait of Omarino and Ricudo. [National Library of Ireland, MS 13073].

Image 18: Arédomi and Omarino (Naimenes indian), wearing typical european clothes. Casement took them to London and the photograph was taken by John Thomson. [National Library of Ireland, MS 13073].



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