Activist Biology

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THE YEAR IS 2008. A GROUP OF TOURISTS HEADS out of São Luís, capital of Maranhão, where the beaches have been declared off-limits. On January 7, the local papers announced that researchers at the Federal University of Maranhão had detected fecal coliform levels twenty-five times above acceptable limits.

With the sun straight overhead, the vacationers point their car toward the town of Barreirinhas, not far from the promised paradise of Brazil’s Lençóis Maranhenses, a national park since 1981. The road is nearly deserted, the landscape dotted by only a few villages, some scattered adobe houses, and a bar here and there. Large expanses of land have been burned off to give way to subsistence farming.

Their rental car starts acting up, and the tourists scramble for their guidebook, where they locate the lone gas station along the 100-mile stretch of road between them and the park. Worried they’ll find themselves stuck in the middle of nowhere, the tourists press on—and breathe a heavy sigh of relief when they reach their unplanned stop. Their happiness, however, is short-lived. The gas station proves as forsaken as the rest of the area, and the attendants know nothing more than how to fill a tank.

A native bird hangs in a locked cage outside a humble house nearby. Three men have just finished their lunch and throw what little is left to two squalid mutts, followed eagerly by some pigs and a chicken. One of the men goes back
to building a birdcage. A TV set hooked up to a satellite dish is playing a movie that stars Denzel Washington. The nearest public phone is almost nine miles away. Luckily, one of the travelers’ cell phones picks up a signal and comes back to life, so they call the rental agency. Help will arrive in two hours.

While they wait, the tourists amble over to the nearby house, where lettering painted on an outside wall advertises a bar inside. It’s closed, but the next-door neighbor is selling beverages and cookies. There’s a pool table and some chairs on the porch. The family has an old jalopy, likely a sign of great prosperity in these parts. Every once in a while, dogs and chickens at their heels, a few curious children scurry in and out of the house to peer at the strangers. One of the tourists asks if there’s a restroom she can use. Yes, around back. As she crosses the room, she sees men, women, and children crowded around another TV. The bathroom is outside, surrounded by chickens, pigs, and dogs. There’s a porcelain toilet but it doesn’t flush; a big bucket of dingy water and a small basin make up for it.

The other tourists—all men—are too embarrassed to breach the privacy of the home, so they go back to the gas station and ask to use the bathroom there. The fellow says they don’t have one. “If you gotta take a dump, it’s a little ways out back. But if you gotta pee, well, it’s back over there too.” He points to the woods behind the station. There, in the spot where the call of nature is answered, the visitors run into the same pigs that had been fighting over the lunchtime leftovers, now wallowing in a rather questionable puddle.

Help finally comes. The tank is filled, but the invoice will have to be issued in the town of Humberto de Campos, nine miles away, because the attendant doesn’t know how to write.

The tourists continue on toward Barreirinhas, just outside the famous Lençóis Maranhenses and its dazzling display of undulating sand dunes ribboned with blue waters. The Lençóis lie in a national park that has no entrance gate and no supervision or form of control whatsoever. The lush plant life leading up to the dunes is marred by areas of burn-off and cropland. The park itself sits amid villages that lack safe drinking water, sewer systems, or garbage service. Its pathways are cluttered with plastic bags and bottles and beer cans routinely tossed away by tourists. Naked children with protruding bellies wander among scruffy dogs and pigs, waving at the folks in passing cars, on their way from their luxury hotels or resorts to the region’s magnificent (really?) tourist attractions.
THE NATIONAL MUSEUM

This was my own family’s little adventure—but it was something that could have happened in many places in Brazil, where poverty, government neglect, unhealthy living conditions, illiteracy, consumerism, and tourism live side by side. When I saw the television set with its excellent reception and sharp images, blaring away in a lost corner of the country where life is so brutally harsh, it immediately brought to mind the history of a certain period of Brazil’s National Museum. In the 1920s and 1930s, the scientists who worked at this institute in Rio de Janeiro hoped to transform it into a hub that would radiate knowledge to the farthest reaches of Brazil. During those years, the museum staff devoted itself tirelessly to re-creating the National Museum and staking claim to a new role for it. They couldn’t begin to imagine television or satellite dishes, but they trusted in print, movies and radio, exhibits, and educational methodology as efficacious methods for disseminating the new knowledge and new practices that they were convinced would transform Brazil.

The National Museum already had a long history behind it by then. King Dom João VI of the United Kingdom of Portugal, Brazil, and the Algarves had founded it in 1818. His court had fled Lisbon shortly before the city was invaded by Napoleon’s troops in 1808, and once settled safe and sound in Brazil, Dom João VI did his best to prepare Rio de Janeiro for its new status as the political and administrative center of the kingdom, a process that transported the seat of the European empire to the heart of the old Portuguese colony. The Royal Museum—as it was then known—emulated Old World museums by gathering collections representative of the entire globe. But the spotlight was on the Portuguese Empire, spread across the European, African, Asian, and South American continents. From its founding on, the museum played a decisive role in the development of natural history in Brazil.1

The establishment of the museum figured into a broader nineteenth-century trend around the world to set up natural history museums as “cathedrals to science.” By 1910, there were some two thousand museums of its kind.2 In Latin America, natural history museums enabled exchanges between naturalists while connecting different points of the globe. In cities like Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires, Santiago do Chile, Montevideo, Bogotá, and Caracas, new institutions continued to open their doors throughout the nineteenth century,
almost always concomitant with processes of achieving independence and nation building. They were home to enlightened elites who combined their experience as locals with intellectual training in Europe, but they were also frequented by foreign naturalists eager to research the flora and fauna of South America. National governments wanted to undertake inventories of “their” nature and would often hire teams of foreigners to lend impetus to natural history.

The daily routine at nineteenth-century museums in Latin America reflected the challenges specific to the continent’s historical context. Foreign scientific expeditions often took everything they gathered back to Europe, leaving nothing to the institutes that had welcomed and aided them, much to the discontent of local science communities. The piecemeal nature of local collections left Latin American naturalists at a tremendous disadvantage vis-à-vis their foreign peers, whose institutes boasted enviable collections. Latin American museums also had to cope with periodic political turmoil, which occasioned wild fluctuations in government funding and other support. As Nancy Stepan has said, a great deal of progress came thanks to the individual efforts of naturalists in the absence of any collective, institutionalized, stable climate. Teaching institutions emphasized a liberal arts education in a framework where there was no real way to train researchers in scientific work. There was a paucity of equipment and bibliographic material, scientists enjoyed little prestige, and agricultural and industrial modernization was not yet hardy enough to provide new sources of support for science.

Many aspects of the history of these museums give nuance to the traditional view that naturalists working in Latin America were members of cloistered scientific communities. Over the course of the nineteenth century, while Brazil’s National Museum was becoming a place for public exhibits, it was also making room for new fields of knowledge in its various departments—like paleontology, anthropology, comparative anatomy and zoology, botany, mineralogy, geology, and archaeology—reflecting the institution’s attention to research and its tendency to develop specialized fields. From 1876 to 1893, during what was known as “the golden age of the National Museum,” the institution saw substantial changes under the direction of the naturalist Ladislau Netto. Its collections grew through exchange programs with European and Latin American counterparts and thanks to national expeditions financed by the imperial government. The old monarchical tradition of handpicking personnel by appointment was replaced by the requirement that new hires take qualifying exams on scientific topics. Foreigners like Charles Hartt, Fritz Müller, Hermann Von Ihering, Emílio Goeldi, Carl Schwacke, and Orville Derby were recruited and
had plenty of opportunity for the rewarding exchange of experience and knowledge with Brazilian scholars. The establishment of a laboratory for experimental physiology and the launching of a science journal in 1876 (*Arquivos do Museu Nacional*) energized the museum and cleared the path for its naturalist members to advance in their professionalization. The institute’s collaboration with the Brazilian presence at universal exhibitions was also important. The country wanted to make a place for itself on the world market and to be counted as a civilization in the tropics. It was not just its commercial interests that were at stake; so too were the exchange of scientific and technological know-how and interaction between the National Museum and foreign science institutes. No less important was the organization of Brazil’s National Anthropological Exposition in 1892, where the exhibiting of hundreds of ethnographic objects fed the lively contemporary debate on race, people, and the Brazilian nation.

Like other museums in Latin America—for example, the Argentina Museum of Natural Sciences (now the Bernardino Rivadávia Museum of Natural History), in Buenos Aires, headed by Hermann Burmeister—Brazil’s National Museum experienced such profound changes during these years that it was almost like starting over. As naturalists reclassified nature, as knowledge grew more specialized, and as scientists and observers began relating to collections in new ways, these collections underwent extensive reorganization. In pursuing this new vision, the museum entered into the wider debate about “national being” and introduced a state “optic”—to use Andermann’s term—of the items on display, thereby transforming a tour of the museum into a civics lesson.

In 1889, the army, with the backing of the agro-exporting elites, toppled the monarchy, and Brazil became a republic. As much as civilian republican groups had hopes for a new democratic order, the institutions of the fledgling republic were predominantly individualist and liberal in nature, and most citizens were denied their political rights, since illiterates were prohibited from voting. Although slavery had been abolished under the monarchy, in 1888, the early decades of the republic witnessed no advances in civil and political rights; instead, it was an era of “exclusionary liberalism,” or “oligarchical liberalism,” marked by political accords between powerful elites, underwritten by fraudulent elections. The Constitution of 1891 delegated broad fiscal and administrative autonomy to the states and territories, benefiting the chief commodity-producing states, like coffee-rich São Paulo and the rubber centers of Pará and Amazonas. Under the influence of some republican sectors, the nation’s charter also bore the imprint of positivism, translated into a complete separation of church and state and the absence of any official religion. The republic would recognize marriages, births,
and burials as civil processes, and religious teaching would no longer be mandatory in schools. 

In the early years of the republic, the museum faced several hurdles. The new government abolished the post of traveling naturalist and demanded the daily physical presence of all researchers. In practical terms, this meant naturalists could not make research trips and instead had to stay in their offices. Some of the top staff left, Fritz Müller among them. A number of wealthier states, like São Paulo and Pará, opened their own natural history museums and managed to attract naturalists like Goeldi and Von Ihering. The federal government itself established applied research institutes, which became the country’s first centers for biological research, such as the Oswaldo Cruz Institute in Rio de Janeiro and the Butantan Institute in São Paulo. Shortly after the Proclamation of the Republic, the National Museum saw its prestige enter a period of steady decline, while other centers began their ascent, offering bigger budgets and additional amenities that could attract the most eminent researchers—a status quo that was not to change until the late 1920s.

The 1920s indeed brought change to Brazil. World War I had ended, as had the optimism of the Belle Époque. The coffee glut and the demise of the Amazon rubber boom in the face of stiff competition from Southeast Asia spelled economic hardship. Anarchist and communist union movements were on the rise, alongside conservative Catholic movements. Modern Art Week, an arts festival held in São Paulo in February 1922, signaled artistic restlessness. Young military officers joined the armed movement known as tenentismo, while the Prestes Column engaged in guerrilla warfare and cangaceiro bandits ran rampant in Northeast Brazil. In 1922, this turmoil was reined in by a government-imposed state of siege; the press was censored, and the various movements that opposed the oligarchical Republican project were repressed.

From September 1922 through July 1923, the city of Rio de Janeiro was the site of the International Exhibition in Celebration of the Centennial of Independence. Organized by the federal government, which built sumptuous pavilions for the event, the exhibition was intended to convey an image of progress and national union. The government had designed the show in hopes of gaining legitimacy at a difficult time, but by instigating reflections on Brazil’s past, present, and future at a moment of serious political crisis, the commemoration in fact seeded unease. Visitors grew more aware of conflict and social tension because the exhibition triggered concern about national construction and about Brazil’s place in world civilization. What, after all, was being celebrated? What
brand of independence? What kind of nation? What kind of Brazilian people? What type of republic? The exhibition may to some extent have been a paean to the ruling order, but it also awoke society’s latent expectations and desire for change. As Hoffenberg has noted, “Exhibitions were meaningful events for participants struggling with the social, political, and economic dilemmas and opportunities of their era.”

From the very dawn of the twentieth century, countless intellectuals had criticized the reigning oligarchical regime, holding it accountable for the highhandedness of local authorities and the fact that people had been left to fend for themselves. More voices entered the debate about the roadblocks to nation building. Attention became focused on the vastness of the Brazilian land, on its people trapped in misery, illiteracy, and disease, and on the wholly irrational destruction of its natural riches. The prevailing political and economic liberalism was called into question, decried as excessive, and critiqued for motivating selfishness, while centralization of power was posited as an alternative raised above individual interests. Solutions were proposed for a political and institutional system that demanded more than the mere consensus of the elites and that would transform Brazil’s near nomadic population—until then rebuked as inferior—into healthy, educated, and hard-working people, indispensable to the building of a nation. These intellectuals urged society to adopt new attitudes toward nature; Brazilians needed to learn about their country’s flora and fauna, its water resources and landscapes—and learn to value them—while the state had to effectively regulate environmental protection areas and national parks and exercise control over the exploration of natural resources throughout the national territory. Based on an authoritarianism characterized by voluntarism and an obsession with education, they believed that if the Brazilian people, in its most genuine expression, could be brought onto the stage through suitable measures, the result would be the emergence of a popular culture duly civilized through learned knowledge and superior reasoning—to wit, “authentic” nationality.

From 1926 to 1935, the National Museum regained momentum under the leadership of Edgard Roquette-Pinto. The institute modeled itself as a prime space for educational intervention and for the coordination of pedagogical projects for the people of Brazil, as well as a place where knowledge was produced. It introduced and enforced a bold and experimental multimedia project. As urban life and consumption became increasingly sophisticated in the city of Rio de Janeiro, where the museum was headquartered, its staff members embraced
the era’s new means of communication, optimistic that new technologies would allow them to span the chasms yawning between them and Brazil’s ordinary men and women, lost in the vastness of their country.

The National Museum was home to a collaborative effort that drew researchers from an array of fields; they engaged in surprisingly varied initiatives that were not confined to the premises of the museum but reached into other institutional and social domains. Staff members like Roquette-Pinto, Alberto Sampaio, and Cândido de Mello Leitão organized public exhibits unprecedented in the history of the institution. They threw themselves into the Biblioteca Pedagógica (Educational Library) editorial project, headed by Fernando Azevedo, and particularly into its Brasiliana Collection, whose ultimate purpose was “to reveal Brazil for Brazilians.” They launched the journal Revista Nacional de Educação, a forum for science communication aimed at the broader public, whose circulation reached 15,000. They set up a radio station specializing in educational programming and ventured into cinema and the production of educational films. They organized notable events like the First Brazilian Congress for the Protection of Nature, in 1934. They led prolific scientific lives, participating in cultural exchange and attending international congresses. They helped make public policy, including the draft bill for the Game and Fish Code, which lay behind the law decreed by President Getúlio Vargas on January 2, 1934. They joined science associations and other civil society organizations. In fulfilling their “pedagogical mission,” the museum staff relied on a range of media, including print, photography, exhibits, movies, and radio programs. Its scientists also maintained close relations with the ruling powers and with other spaces that generated knowledge. Throughout their experiences, these men of science worked and thought collectively, constructing knowledge through frank dialogue. Moreover, they worked to accrue the technical expertise essential to the practical realization of these manifold projects.

The organizational heart of the activities and exhibits at the National Museum was certainly “the Brazilian nation,” and the burgeoning of biology as a fully established discipline figured largely in this work. Although the field had existed in Europe since the mid-nineteenth century, it was only in the early twentieth that biology laid down roots in Brazil. The troublesome presence of sick, ignorant, rebellious people was a quantitative and qualitative problem begging for a solution, and biology, as a “master of life,” was capable of addressing these ills. It lent itself to a variety of nationalistic practices fashioned within an authoritarian, salvationist political culture.
In the eyes of the museum staff, the field of natural history could describe and name things but could not address the full complexity of life, so it was unable to confront the challenges of Brazilians in distress. Biology, on the other hand, was a decisive form of knowledge, which supported scientific medicine and was based on scientific laboratory practices in the fields of physical anthropology, entomology (especially as applied to agriculture), eugenics, the theories of evolution and genetics, and even phytogeography, zoogeography, and ecology.

At a time when biology was taking shape as a field of its own, separate from (but not better than) natural history, the National Museum endeavored to renew its practices and present itself as an institution in step with the changing world of science. Some of its members also belonged to the Brazilian Academy of Sciences, founded in 1916, which valued specialized experts more than wise generalists, and they worked hard to earn esteem as scientists from specific fields. Yet in its practices, the museum displayed a dynamic and contradictory tendency: although many of its members wanted very much to become specialized scientists, their work with different media formats and with science communication took place in an atmosphere of blurred boundaries between the disciplines.

While striving to make a name for themselves in scientific circles, these scientists also sought government backing for their projects. Most importantly, they wanted themselves and their institute to play an active part in public policy making, and in this way their scientific activities constituted veritable political strategies.

This book explores the budding role of biological knowledge in the construction of Brazilian society from 1926 to 1945, focusing on the National Museum as a strategic institution where a gamut of social actors deployed a distinctive set of practices. It centers on three of the most illustrious among these actors: the arachnologist Cândido de Mello Leitão, the botanist Alberto José de Sampaio, and the anthropologist Edgard Roquette-Pinto. The first year in our timeframe, 1926, sees Roquette-Pinto appointed director of the National Museum. The last year, 1945, coincides with the end of the fifteen-year-long presidency of Getúlio Vargas and with Brazil’s return to democracy. It was also the year Mello Leitão, at the apex of his renown as an arachnology expert, made his last trip as a cultural envoy for the Brazilian government on a Latin American mission. That Mello Leitão could win such national and international acclaim lends validity to my proposal to explore the effective specialization of biology
as a science and the genesis of activist biology even before biology had been formally recognized as a profession and before there were any special courses for training as a biologist in Brazil.

The investigators at the National Museum identified themselves as biologists well before the field had become established in Brazil, a country where universities came into being rather late. The earliest colleges established in Brazil were the University of Paraná (1912), the University of Rio de Janeiro (1920), and the University of Minas Gerais (1927). Rather than participating in a larger project to inaugurate universities in Brazil, these first institutions merely unified a number of preexisting courses under one formal roof. It was only in the 1930s that broader projects surfaced, like the University of São Paulo (USP), the University of the Federal District (abolished shortly after its creation in 1935), and the University of Brazil, in Rio de Janeiro (1937). The first courses in zoology, botany, and general biology only began at USP in 1934 in the School of Philosophy, Sciences, and Literature, later spreading to the University of Brazil in 1939.12

How did the National Museum go about formulating a strategy to reinvigorate its presence on the national political stage? What explains its scientists’ success in forging ties with the political powers in place after 1930, within the Provisional Government of Getúlio Vargas? These questions are the guiding thread of the first chapter. My purpose is to understand the overall historical framework and what it was that incited this search for new paths and new practices, with museum scientists as spokespersons. The point is to ask why, and whether, these actions were necessary at that specific moment in history and to explore the demands behind them and the battles in which they were crafted.

It is my contention that men like Roquette-Pinto, Mello Leitão, and Alberto Sampaio were able to represent themselves as scientific authorities in the field and to occupy strategic decision-making positions because the Brazilian state found itself up against the growing challenge of controlling the populations within its territory and because biology came forward as a discipline that could contribute significantly to the solution of political problems. Moreover, these scientists were advocates of tremendously eclectic theories, woven out of eugenics, Mendelism, and neo-Lamarckism; and their anti-Darwinism meshed well with the Vargas government’s corporatist political view, which rebuffed class struggle, promoting instead the idea of a harmonious, organic society as the foundation of a new day. Bringing together biology, educational initiatives, and the rejection of social conflict, the National Museum proved successful
in its bid to become a respected partner of the government, and particularly of the Ministry of Education and Public Health (MESP) in the early 1930s. Furthermore, the demarcation of biology as a specific field dovetailed with the era’s growing nationalism. Biomedicine—where medicine delves into biological investigations and uncovers scientific proof in the laboratory—joined hands with the exercise of biopower. I draw inspiration here from Foucault, who conjectures that matters of life have been of special concern in the exercise of contemporary political power in the West and that power began taking into consideration the biological traits of the human species and formulating strategies for the political management of population phenomena like birth, reproduction, disease, and death. In Brazil, the act of governing came to include the life problems faced by people scattered across a vast national territory, while biology firmly established itself as a source of indispensable knowledge.13

The quest to understand the circumstances under which the National Museum and its scientists developed their practices uncovers a political skirmish over which social rules and which institutions would hold sway. If the National Museum was going to portray itself as an institution that should have a say in deciding the direction of the nation, its scientists would have to negotiate around the many other political projects on the agenda. Numerous victories ensued but so too did crushing defeats, evincing the historical complexity of those years. In some cases—such as the eventual enactment of the Game and Fish Code—the museum’s scientists ended up having much less influence over government decisions than they would have liked.

The second chapter explains how some members of the National Museum set their sights on entering the game of politics and realizing their dream of actively assisting in the education of the Brazilian people. The Vargas Provisional Government (1930–34) warmly welcomed the work being done at the National Museum. At the museum, the new government encountered a sophisticated framework of science communication and education, organized through the museum’s Assistance Service for the Teaching of Natural History, a department created by Director Roquette-Pinto at the outset of his mandate, in 1926. One of a kind in its emphasis on popular education, the National Museum presented itself as a strategic setting for educational action. It proved to be in tune with the government’s desire to mold a new “Brazilian man” and received broad government support through the MESP.

The use of new technologies and the diversity of media were central features of the museum’s activities during those years. As mentioned earlier, the museum
participated in radio programs; organized exhibits, courses, and workshops; utilized slides for educational purposes; produced and screened educational films; and published magazines and books. Treating patrons to interactive experiences on its own grounds, the museum also breached its institutional walls and went directly inside public classrooms. Through these initiatives, and by devising new practices for producing and disseminating knowledge, the National Museum negated the prevailing notions of what natural history museums should be.

During the period bracketed by these halcyon days and by the mounting challenges faced when the Vargas administration altered its educational policies, the museum played an ambiguous role. Its members moved easily between natural history and biology and between scientific specialization and knowledge built at the intersection of different fields, through hands-on interaction with technical and artistic techniques. While these practices quite likely account for the rich tapestry of accomplishments at the National Museum in those years, these same factors were the chink in its armor when Gustavo Capanema, as the new minister of education and public health, launched an educational reform and spurned the museum as a locus for the production of knowledge. When the government headed in these new directions, the scientists at the museum fell out of its favor, and the work being done inside the museum’s walls lost steam. Enthusiasts like Roquette-Pinto and Mello Leitão had to relinquish their posts and find new routes for carrying their activities forward.

The third chapter illustrates how biological knowledge and practices played a weighty role in the game of politics during this period. Brazil offered no biology courses at that time, and biology was not even a formal profession. It is not my intent to define the precise moment it did emerge as a field. Rather, I want to show how biologists were formed where webs of relationships converged during a time of evolving practice. As a man of his time, Mello Leitão offers us a perfect example of the making of a scientist specializing in biology during those years. Yet he was so unique that he also stands as an exception, a rare gem. The realization of these two facets of the figure of Mello Leitão leads to an important observation: when we study history, we discover that social actors, in the process of confronting diverse interests, defining strategies, and engaging in dialogue with specific historical conditions, surpass existing determinations. As they tackle their contemporary challenges in a period of social struggle, they produce something new and original. In other words, the writing of history gives us the chance to reflect on the creation and transformation of human societies.
Mello Leitão, Roquette-Pinto, and Alberto Sampaio were amazingly creative in their professional lives. We will find them busily involved in political projects and in countless civil and scientific associations of weight, while they deftly carved out an innovative niche for the National Museum. They were attentive to the question of nature, receptive to new technologies and means of communication, and open to different fields—even as they yearned for specialization and invested in it. And yet, by idealizing the Brazilian people and hoping to mold them to their own expectations, they reinforced authoritarian perspectives.

It is tempting to see these scientists as the pioneers behind many of our contemporary practices. It would be no stretch to paint them as trailblazers in a wide variety of arenas: environmental education, the renewal of museums through connections with universities and extension work, science communication and the establishment of public science projects, distance education, transdisciplinarity, the creation of university radio and television networks, the struggle for social inclusion through education, and advocacy of the sustainable exploration of nature. But this would mean ignoring or glossing over the authoritarianism inherent in their practices and possibly being induced to slip into the same logic. And we would be eschewing Marc Bloch’s invaluable insights about the need to scorn myths of origin, examine our differences in relation to the past, and see the potential for inaugurating new practices.14

It is precisely from the perspective of difference that the history of the National Museum during these years should be researched and studied. If we weigh what distances us from the actions of these scientists rather than simply singing their praises, we improve our own chances of acting creatively in the present and of making a real break with the authoritarian tradition they reaffirmed—their incredible talents for innovation notwithstanding. Writing history can be an exercise in political praxis while also being motivated by a desire for social transformation.

And so it was that the idea for this book was born, when I, both moved and stunned, waved back at the destitute children who dwelled alongside the breathtaking tourist attraction called the Lençóis Maranhenses.