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*Published Version:*

From the drought to the mud : rediscovering geopoetics and cultural hybridity from the Global South / Ferretti F.. - In: CULTURAL GEOGRAPHIES. - ISSN 1474-4740. - STAMPA. - 27:4(2020), pp. 597-613. [10.1177/1474474020911181]

This version is available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/11585/821804> since: 2021-06-11

*Published:*

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.1177/1474474020911181>

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**Ferretti, F. (2020). From the drought to the mud: rediscovering geopoetics and cultural hybridity from the Global South. *Cultural Geographies*, 27(4), 597-613.**

The final published version is available online at:

**<https://doi.org/10.1177/1474474020911181>**

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## **From the drought to the mud: Rediscovering geopoetics and cultural hybridity from the Global South**

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**Abstract:** This paper addresses the notion of geopoetics, arguing for a decolonial rediscovery of ideas and practices associated with this concept through authors, narratives and (geo)poetical traditions from the Global South. For this purpose, I analyse a body of narrative work, poetry and archives by Brazilian geographers Mauro Mota and Josué de Castro, inserting their texts into the cultural and environmental contexts of their region, the Northeast of Brazil, which is characterised by ethnic hybridity and a history of anti-colonial insurgency from socially and racially marginalised groups. Extending and putting into relation literature on geopoetics, on the ‘creative (re)turn’ in geography and on the Global South as a notion associated with subaltern spaces and geographies of resistance, I argue for geopoetics as an engaged, activist, cosmopolitan, anti-racist and de-colonial field of study, one which has the potential of extending the disciplinary reach of cultural geography. The literary works of these Northeastern geographers provide important contributions for blurring the classical European epistemological divide between nature and culture by addressing ideas on more-than-human hybridity associated with Northeastern environments, as well as indigenous and Afro-Brazilian cultural and ethical legacies.

**Keywords:** Geopoetics; cultural/natural hybridity; Northeast of Brazil; creative geographies; decolonising geography

This paper addresses the notion of geopoetics based on work by authors from the ‘Global South’, specifically from the state of Pernambuco, in Northeastern Brazil, to rethink geopoetics as a cosmopolitan, decolonial and engaged field of study. For this purpose, I analyse literary works produced by geographers Mauro Mota (1911-1984) and Josué de Castro (1908-1973), addressing their readings of popular literature and poetry of Northeastern Brazil, inspired by anthropological work by their friend and collaborator Luís da Câmara Cascudo (1898-1986) from Natal (Rio Grande do Norte). I would first argue that more international attention should

F. Ferretti, 2020: “From the drought to the mud: Rediscovering geopoetics and cultural hybridity from the Global South” **cultural geographies** doi: 10.1177/1474474020911181

be paid to these scholars, only recently rediscovered in international literature,<sup>i</sup> who make important contributions to geography's social relevance.

Geopoetics is a relatively undertheorized notion. The term 'geopoetics' was first used in France at the *Institut International de Géopoétique*, which was founded by Kenneth White in 1989, with a general and somewhat mystical programme investigating the profound relation between 'Man' [sic] and 'Earth' by 'diving in the biospheric space to read the lines of the World', considering 'each creation of the mind as fundamentally poetic'.<sup>ii</sup> White's geopoetics presented some political and epistemological ambiguities that came under scrutiny. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari criticised White in *Thousand Plateaus*, arguing that: 'Kenneth White recently stressed this dissymmetrical complementarity between a race-tribe (the Celts ...) and a milieu-space (the Orient ...). We immediately see the dangers, the profound ambiguities accompanying this enterprise'.<sup>iii</sup> To Deleuze and Guattari, the main risk was that of making room for new racial essentialisms,<sup>iv</sup> although this might look ungenerous for an author such as White who has even expressed interest in Elisée Reclus (Eprendre 2012).<sup>v</sup>

However, some of White's references raise the political and ethical problem of the use of politically reactionary authors such as the Far-Right and anti-Semitic poet Louis-Ferdinand Céline, celebrated by White with the explicit pretention of dissociating the 'good' sides of his work from the remainder, deemed simple 'anomaly'.<sup>vi</sup> In this vein, Angela Last has recently discussed how White's works evoke colonialist and masculinist stereotypes: 'Although White's work ... is also directed against a nature–culture division, nature is often idealised and essentialised, with culture representing destructive consumerism ... White's poetry specifically is inflected with quasi-colonial, masculine rhetoric about adventure, including penetration fantasies of non-European (feminised) lands'.<sup>vii</sup> This suggests that different notions of geopoetics are needed, and non-Western cultures can nourish them.

My main argument is that the use of narrative and poetry by geographers such as Mota and de Castro for social and political purposes shows the relevance of geopoetics for enlarging the disciplinary field of cultural geographies, by including new cultures and languages. In Northeastern Brazil, ideas of cultural hybridity, including Black and Amerindian cultural legacies, are very popular among lower class 'caboclos' and 'cabras', two of the most common definitions identifying non-white Brazilians. These points constitute one of the main

originalities of this ‘Southern’ geopoetics, as they consider both cultural and cultural/natural hybridity, questioning the classical Western divide between nature and culture and performing an activist discourse explicitly drawing upon anti-racism. This is especially the case with de Castro’s tales taking place in the amphibian environment of Recife’s *mocambos*, poor neighbourhoods settled by migrants from the hinterland and Afro-descendants. These authors wittingly mixed literary genres, including poetry, novels and essays, for diversifying geography’s publics to enhance geography’s social and political relevance. At the same time, they considered that geographers should be directly involved in social struggles, using narratives as a means of conscientization and political mobilisation of socially and racially marginalised people.

This provides important openings towards extending the fields of cultural geographies and critical geopoetics as politically and socially engaged knowledge. Given their emphasis on non-European traditions, these Northeastern authors allow for considering Southern geopoetics as a potentially decolonial field, associated with cultural and (neo)humanistic views of geography challenging European technocracy and rationality, and taking anti-colonialist and anti-racist stances also in relation to ‘internal colonialism’ as I explain below. Northeastern geopoetics shows a rootedness that is not an exclusionary or static one and finds a geographic expression in narrative representations of the *sertão* (backlands) by Mota and de Castro. Their metaphor ‘from the drought to the mud’ was related to the periodical migrations of Northeastern people from the *sertão* to the slums of the coastal cities, and their writing was also inspired by local popular poetry known as *literatura de cordel*.

Responding to calls to address creative writing from cultural geographical perspectives,<sup>viii</sup> this paper extends and puts in relation critical, decolonial and feminist scholarship on geopoetics, the ‘creative re/turn’ in geography<sup>ix</sup> and scholarship on the ‘Souths’ as an epistemological notion.<sup>x</sup> According to Eric Magrane, the current wave of interest in geopoetics can be defined in three ways: ‘First, as creative geography, including discussions of geographer-poets and of poetry as a research method; second, as literary geographies of poetry; and third, as geophilosophy’.<sup>xi</sup> I would extend this category by considering geographical narratives targeting a wider public than the scholarly ones as part of geopoetical methods. Therefore, I match the definition provided by Anne Buttimer, who considered works by Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859) and Olavi Granö as ‘geopoetics of Altaï’. This was characterised by a taste for

travel going beyond rationality, such as Humboldt's 'multisensory experience of mountain environments'.<sup>xii</sup> For Buttimer, this implied considering the adjectives 'scientific' and 'poetic' as two complementary attributes of the same research. Humboldt is still a very popular author in Latin America for his ideas in favour of the decolonisation of those countries from European empires, his explicit denunciations of slavery and his empathetic remarks towards Amerindian peoples. For these reasons, Cuban geographer António Nuñez Jiménez identified his works as 'geopoetics',<sup>xiii</sup> and several scholars are currently rereading and translating his works into Spanish and Portuguese.<sup>xiv</sup>

Among cultural geographers, there is a wide consensus on using 'forms of expression other than those most often accepted in the scholarly repertoire as creative means to forward their scholarship',<sup>xv</sup> including literary writing. In the history of the discipline, narrative strategies have represented an important instrument for many scholars to challenge both positivism and 'humiliating attempts to describe places'.<sup>xvi</sup> Rob Kitchin also argues for the need to employ various forms of writing to gain new audiences, creating 'new public geographies that seek and enact progressive change'.<sup>xvii</sup> Similarly, Hayden Lorimer notes that poems 'generate a common sense of place'<sup>xviii</sup> fostering notions of patriotic belonging. While these feelings are often associated with conservatism in Europe, they can conversely match anticolonial sentiments in Southern countries. Antonis Blasapoulos argues for a 'postcolonial geopoetics' applied to islands as places of a possible 'anti-colonial nesology'.<sup>xix</sup> In the same vein, Kumari Issur contends that geographical imagination can serve to 'reclaim a land which was submitted by colonial domination',<sup>xx</sup> by showing how, in a small territory such as that of Mauritius Island, tales and poems from the different cultures that have historically settled the island counterbalance the 'European settler's positivism'<sup>xxi</sup> in fostering shared and meaningful visions of the world beyond scientific rationality. This includes the experience of marronage, importantly resonating with subaltern histories of Northeastern Brazil.<sup>xxii</sup>

Other contributions in geopoetics and decoloniality discuss works from insular environments, especially in the Caribbean. French scholarship considers the geopoetics of Martinican writer Edouard Glissant as the expression of a 'creolisation of the world',<sup>xxiii</sup> importantly connecting sense of place with globality, which implies that rootedness can be cosmopolitan rather than associated with 'pure' ethnical or cultural belongings. Analysing the geopoetics of Guadeloupean author Daniel Maximin, Last considers this notion as a call 'for a decolonisation

of the colonisers through unsettling their geographical imagination’,<sup>xxiv</sup> one that first proposes counter-narratives to the classical European nature-culture divide. For Last, geopoetics challenges ‘the illusion that geography can ever be detached from culture and ideology’,<sup>xxv</sup> building ‘more-than-human assemblages’.<sup>xxvi</sup> As I explain below, geopoetics from Northeastern Brazil matches this kind of hybrid approach, blurring the distinction between humankind and nature by presenting places, climatic events, plants and non-human animals as (non-deterministic) agents of the narration alongside humans.

Several contributions explore cases of geopoetical anti-racist, anti-colonialist and feminist engagement. This is again the case with Last, who analyses works by Simone Weil and of the couple Suzanne and Aimé Césaire, whose work has inspired scholarship on postcolonialism and critical race studies. According to Last, these works, ‘written in prose as well as poetry ... represent an effort to unlink modernity, reason and globalization from capitalist [and colonialist] logic’.<sup>xxvii</sup> Other scholars discuss geopoetical praxes of resistance such as the case studied by Paul Routledge of the Baliapal movement in India, using popular songs as a form of propaganda and communication to link ‘homeplace and resistance’,<sup>xxviii</sup> which allows drawing connections between places, poetics and claims for rights. Current scholarship also addresses storytelling as an anti-hegemonic method contributing to the creative re-turn in geography and eventually to connect the humanities and health sciences.<sup>xxix</sup> According to Emilie Cameron, telling stories can provide manifold openings for geographical scholarship, contributing to ‘a relational and material turn within the discipline, as part of a renewed focus on the political possibilities afforded by storytelling’.<sup>xxx</sup>

To define my idea of ‘contributions from the South’, I consider as South what an author of the Modernity-Coloniality-Decoloniality (MCD) collective, Walter Mignolo, defines as ‘a metaphor that indicates regions of the world at the receiving end of globalization and suffering the consequences’,<sup>xxxi</sup> regions that do not necessarily correspond to bounded areas or fixed localisations. This agrees with Dan Clayton’s notion of ‘subaltern space’ as the location of both oppression and resistance<sup>xxxii</sup> and with Ramón Grosfoguel’s ideas on ‘pluriversalism’ arguing for fostering emancipation from plural locations and perspectives rather than from a Eurocentric standpoint pretended to be universal.<sup>xxxiii</sup> I especially consider the South as an epistemological category following Italian philosopher Franco Cassano, who defines the South as the subject of a new reflection challenging capitalism and technocracy by rediscovering the

pluriversal values of a Mediterranean tradition of cultural exchange for defending ‘cultural multiplicity and diversity’.<sup>xxxiv</sup> While for Cassano the Mediterranean Sea was a ‘communal sea’ for different cultures to meet, for Brazilian geographers, the Northeastern *sertão* was the place for the (often conflictual) meeting of different social and ethnic groups, whose dramatic geo-history they narrated to foster understanding of people socially and racially stigmatised by Brazilian and international elites.

Methodologically, while other works in geopoetics and literary geographies focus on stylistic details of the texts they analyse, I move across a relatively larger body of materials, for two main reasons. First, analysing stylistically the different editions of these texts would lead the discussion into the fields of translation and reception studies, which are beyond the aim of this paper. Second, analysing a quite heterogeneous body of sources is necessary to show how a region, the Northeast, and its histories of mobility from the *sertão* to the coast, can serve as a common tread connecting these diverse texts. Here, I match claims from authors in the ‘mobility paradigm’ of literary geographies for grasping ‘the relationship between literature and the actual world’,<sup>xxxv</sup> and for understanding the relational interplays<sup>xxxvi</sup> and intertextuality which allow ‘for making connections’<sup>xxxvii</sup> between texts and worlds. Mota’s and de Castro’s political engagement equally chimes with recent claims to consider ‘textual events as *political* events’.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

In the first part of my paper, I discuss the roots of Northeastern geopoetics in novels and popular songs from that region, highlighting Mota’s and de Castro’s connections with the anthropologists who first studied Brazilian popular literature, especially Cascudo. In the second part, I analyse Mota’s geopoetical works on the *sertão* and its human and non-human habitants dealing with the common drama of droughts and social injustice. In the third part, I analyse de Castro’s novels intended to bring Northeastern natures-cultures to the national and international public, and his dialogues with Brazilian writers and activists.

### **Droughts and strings**

The region of the *sertão* or back-lands was a large issue in the history of Brazil’s national formation. Defined as the ‘Polygon of Droughts’,<sup>xxxix</sup> this area was a refuge for slaves, Indians and socially marginalised groups fleeing the violence of the Conquista in the coastal regions, representing a cradle of Brazilian social insurgency from early Black quilombos to later peasant



leagues.<sup>xi</sup> One of the first artistic expressions intrinsically associated with this region is the *literatura de cordel*, an understudied body of poems and songs first transmitted orally and then progressively written down in small brochures, which were hung on strings (*cordeis*) and sold in the local markets, where they were likewise performed orally. Although this literature has Iberian origins and can be found in other Brazilian regions, its Northeastern version constitutes a specific and highly codified tradition,<sup>xli</sup> inextricably linked with the *sertão* and the dramas of its droughts and social instability.<sup>xlii</sup> One of the first Anglophone scholars who did research on these texts, Candace Slater, claimed her reliance on the key monograph *A terra e o homem do nordeste* by geographer Manuel Correia de Andrade for a contextual knowledge of the Northeast.<sup>xliii</sup>

Several Brazilian writers and scholars have analysed this literary production, including Silvio Romero (1851-1914), Arthur Ramos (1903-1949) and Arthur Orlando (1858-1916). The most prolific commentator of ‘nonelite’ (in Slater’s definition) literature in the Northeast was undoubtedly Câmara Cascudo, who identified a couple of major poetical ‘cycles’ in the *cordel* repertory, namely, the ‘Cycle of the cattle’, tales where animals were humanised to perform an implicit social satire, and the ‘Cycle of the *cangaceiros*’.<sup>xliv</sup> The *cangaceiros* were a type of social bandit, especially active between the 1870s and the 1930s, often celebrated by the authors of the *cordeis*, singing the sagas of *cangaço*’s leaders, known by names such as Jesuino, Antonio Silvino and Lampião. Working with the first Northeastern peasants’ leagues in the 1950s, de Castro and de Andrade noticed how some of these bandits were popularly considered as the warrantors of justice in the *sertão* and the adversaries of the landlords, being compared to the European myth of Robin Hood.<sup>xlv</sup> However, many authors notice an ambivalence towards the *cangaceiros* in popular poetry. On the one hand, becoming a *cangaceiro* was considered as the only option for poor people to escape from misery, expressed in stanzas where the bandits challenge the rich and the police.<sup>xlvi</sup> On the other, the cruelty of figures such as Virgulino Ferreira ‘Lampião’ (1898-1938), though stimulating a kind of fearful admiration, rebutted a part of the folksingers and their public.<sup>xlvii</sup>

To understand local ideas of cultural hybridity, it is important to consider the influence of African stories in the *cordeis* and in the ways of telling and singing them. While the very codified sestets’ structure of the *cordeis* and their early themes had European origins,<sup>xlviii</sup> their language was progressively enriched by ‘Afro-Brazilian and Brazilian-Indian terms’.<sup>xlix</sup> Some

of their authors took inspiration from ‘the African narrative tradition of the *akpalô*’,<sup>l</sup> because many of them were familiar with Afro-Brazilian religions.<sup>li</sup> On Afro-Brazilian matters, an important reference for Mota and de Castro was Cascudo, as shown by the exceptional collections surviving in Cascudo’s archives at the Ludovicus Institute in Natal, and by the Mota and de Castro collections at the Fundação Joaquim Nabuco in Recife. Cascudo extensively corresponded with de Castro about Afro-Brazilian traditions and cuisine,<sup>lii</sup> although it seems that the ‘collaborative essays [on matters of] biology and ethnology’<sup>liii</sup> that de Castro proposed to Cascudo in 1937 never materialised, such as a common chapter on ‘*cachaça e caju*’ [brandy and cashew]<sup>liv</sup> that Cascudo had discussed with Mota. As the director of the Nabuco Institute in Recife, Mota used to invite Cascudo there to lecture on ‘Brazilian popular culture’,<sup>lv</sup> and when he had a Cambridge visiting fellow willing to study ‘Northeastern oral poetry’, he sent this scholar to Cascudo<sup>lvi</sup> to undertake research in Rio Grande do Norte. Another common acquaintance of these scholars was French anthropologist Roger Bastide,<sup>lvii</sup> who discussed with Cascudo whether the *Desafio* [Challenge], a traditional rhymed competition between two folksingers at the origin of many *cordeis*, should be ascribed to European or African legacies.<sup>lviii</sup>

African influences in this literature are acknowledged by Brazilian authors such as Manuel Diegues Jr., who noticed the presence of ‘Bantu storytellers’<sup>lix</sup> in the Northeast. Julie Cavnagac reports how, in the 1980s, she had occasion to ‘attend a session of macumba’<sup>lx</sup> for her research on the *literatura de cordel*, arguing that the first folksingers were ‘cowboys and slaves’.<sup>lxi</sup> Stressing the link between racial and social marginalisation, traditional *cordeis* give voice to what Marcia Abreu defines as ‘indignation, complaint and critique of daily life’,<sup>lxii</sup> which constitutes, according to Cavnagac, an expression of popular resistance ‘in a Gramscian sense’.<sup>lxiii</sup> Racial and social marginalisation has always been among the inspiring elements of this *sertanejo* subaltern (geo)histories and (geo)poetics.

Another important feature of string literature was the centrality of animals’ stories, especially the cattle most familiar to *sertão* people such as oxen,<sup>lxiv</sup> often represented as ‘brave and unsubmitted’.<sup>lxv</sup> This is a social metaphor expressing an instinctive popular rebellion to all coercion and a specific feature of Northeastern *cordeis*. These more-than-human agencies were often noticed by ‘geographers and sociologists’ who understood the ‘*sertão* as a complex of humankind and nature’.<sup>lxvi</sup> The agency of indigenous communities, whose multi-secular

resistance to European invaders was highlighted in geo-historical works by Correia de Andrade,<sup>lxvii</sup> was popularly compared to the ‘savagery’ of the *cangaceiros* evoking ‘Indian tribes suspected of helping Lampião’,<sup>lxviii</sup> and to the ‘savagery’ of nature, whose distinction from humankind is generally blurred in these narratives. Recent scholarship applies the lens of eco-criticism to the *literatura de cordel* arguing that, to the cycles of the cattle and of the bandits, one should add a ‘nature and environment, or ecology’ poetic cycle.<sup>lxix</sup> Carlos Nogueira studied a body of recent texts denouncing the exploitation of nature and arguing for ‘a fairer and more equilibrated world, equally for humans, non-human animals, plants and minerals, sharing ... early Amerindian worldviews’.<sup>lxx</sup> Mota’s and de Castro’s works show how these approaches to environments and more-than-human hybridity are well inserted in the tradition of *sertanejo* popular culture and poetry.

Another strand of literature associated with dramas and poverty in the *sertão* inspired Mota and de Castro, namely, novels akin to poetic realism that were produced in the central decades of the twentieth century by Northeastern authors. Jorge Amado, Graciliano Ramos, Rachel de Queiroz, José Lins de Rego and others constituted a reference for intellectuals and social reformers in Brazil and addressed directly the problem of droughts and poverty. A radical activist imprisoned in 1938 under Getúlio Vargas’s dictatorship,<sup>lxxi</sup> Ramos wrote a very popular novel, *Vidas Secas* [Barren Lives], telling the story of a family of *retirantes*, people escaping the droughts of the *sertão*, organised following the narrative structure of the ‘demountable novel’,<sup>lxxii</sup> which concurrently inspired de Castro’s *Documentário do Nordeste*. A common theme of these authors was the people’s despair, precarity and socio-racial marginalisation expressed by the protagonist of *Vidas Secas*, Fabiano, picturing himself as ‘a *cabra*, ruled by the Whites, almost cattle in others’ *fazenda*’.<sup>lxxiii</sup> The only remediation for this situation was enrolling in the *cangaço* to seek retaliation against the abuses formerly suffered. Fabiano gave up this option only because ‘he had a wife, he had kids, he had a little dog’.<sup>lxxiv</sup> This dog, Baleia, was a protagonist of the novel at the same level as humans and other animals, sharing with them the painful need for mutual aid in seeking scarce food. These themes were also developed in Rachel de Queiroz’s *O Quinze*, a novel inspired by the dramatic drought of 1915, narrating the drama of hunger and violence in the relation between humans, non-human animals and the wider environment, where the true enemy proved to be the government, unable to help the poor, ‘not even in dying’.<sup>lxxv</sup> The compassionate but also despised figure of the *retirante* was

likewise the protagonist of Mota's and de Castro's geopoetics, as I explain in the two following sections.

### **Geopoetics of Northeastern landscapes**

Still a little-known figure even in Brazil, Mauro Mota owes his lack of notoriety to the fact that he was never a 'canonised' geographer. Although he obtained the Chair of Geography at the Federal Institute in Pernambuco in 1955 thanks to his thesis on the 'Northeastern cashew-tree', he was never a full-time academic and spent most of his career working as a journalist for the *Diário de Pernambuco*, as a poet, as a literary critic and as the director of Recife cultural institutions such as the Joaquim Nabuco Institute and the state archive of Pernambuco. However, in the 1950s, Mota played key roles in the early work of the Recife geographers' group by funding an extensive research programme carried out by Manuel Correia de Andrade, Gilberto Osório de Andrade and Rachel Caldas Lins on Northeastern 'Sugar Rivers', a pioneering work in investigating the environmental impact of the sugarcane agroindustry.<sup>lxxvi</sup> Mota's political ideas were ostensibly more moderate than those of the 'rebels' de Andrade and de Castro, respectively imprisoned and exiled by the Brazilian military dictatorship in 1964. Despite having been a 'fighter for freedom'<sup>lxxvii</sup> against the dictatorship of the Estado Novo (1937-1945), Mota could convive later with the military dictatorship from 1964 until his death in 1984. Nevertheless, de Andrade acknowledged Mota as 'a man interested in a human and humanistic solution for his country'<sup>lxxviii</sup> and considered his work as 'an anathema against scientific positivism'<sup>lxxix</sup> and a call for interdisciplinary collaboration. This included a close collaboration between geography, poetry and narrative.

One of Mota's most famous books, *Paisagem das secas* (1958), is an example of this mixing genres, being at the same time a literary piece of work, a geographical essay on the *sertão*, a tribute to Graciliano Ramos and a study on the possible public role of geography in dealing with social problems after the severe drought of 1955. In 1958, the young Milton Santos wrote to Mota greeting the 'Pernambucan geographical family'<sup>lxxx</sup> and expressing his enthusiasm for this book, which Santos<sup>lxxxi</sup> was reviewing for the Bahia newspaper *A Tarde*, where he served as a journalist. Mota's book strongly relied on sources such as popular poems and iconography, including engravings representing Lampião and his wife Maria Bonita. Mota undertook a social criticism akin to de Castro's *Geography of Hunger*, arguing that the peculiar climate of the *sertão*, with periodic and long-lasting droughts each of 10-15 years approximately, could not

serve as a pretext to hide the social problems generating the condition of poverty, hunger and violence traditionally affecting the region. Mota criticised the almost-feudal system of the *coronelismo*; that is, the arbitrary power exerted by local bosses, defining it as ‘smuggling of human flesh ... annihilating bodies and souls’.<sup>lxxxii</sup> Like that of the *cangaceiros*, this violence was rooted in the ‘sanguinary genealogies’ of the region’s colonial history, where, ‘once close the Indians’ hunting, the armed expeditions continued in the *sertão*, to cease the fugitive Black or ... against the colons themselves’.<sup>lxxxiii</sup>

According to Mota, banditry was strictly linked to geography, because the *cangaceiros* could settle in lands periodically abandoned after drought and could take advantage of these enormous semi-arid territories to find sanctuary, as Indians and Black maroons had done for centuries. Mota’s archives confirm his interest in the *cangaço* as a social phenomenon, made by people opposing the ‘colonial order’ in the eighteenth century and the ‘bad distribution of justice’<sup>lxxxiv</sup> later. This violence interacted with the environmental conditions of the Polygon of Droughts (more than 1,000 square kilometres containing more than 400 municipalities) where people had to emigrate ‘like rivers do’<sup>lxxxv</sup> in the worst years. This constituted the ‘cyclical tragedy’<sup>lxxxvi</sup> of a land that attracted people for periods and then was periodically emptied in favour of the coastal cities, when severe droughts put to poor people the alternative of emigrating or dying. Quoting poems and political refrains as sources, Mota stressed the dreadful consequences of these migrations for the cities receiving migrants who would integrate their urban sub-proletariat filling the *mocambos* of Recife and blamed the lack of adequate planning. Mota argued that some simple ‘administrative wisdom’<sup>lxxxvii</sup> would suffice to have food for everybody, criticising the uselessness of pharaonic hydroelectric projects in the *sertão* that, without adequate social reforms identified with ‘social justice’,<sup>lxxxviii</sup> would remain ‘swimming pools in the desert’<sup>lxxxix</sup> unable to stop the progressive escape ‘from the drought to the mud’<sup>xc</sup> of *sertanejo* people. As I explain below, the mud was that of the river shores where informal settlements of newcomers in Recife were built, as narrated in de Castro’s novels.

Mota’s book can also be considered as an early study on the *literatura de cordel*, quoting Cascudo and stressing the importance of taking seriously these sources for reconstructing histories and geographies of the *sertão*: ‘The rhapsode squeezes blood from stones [in the cycles] of the cattle and of the *cangaceiros*’.<sup>xci</sup> For Mota, these poems were socially relevant

also because they produced a spontaneous drive to self-alphabetisation in popular classes, fostering workers' 'desire to read the *folhetos*',<sup>xcii</sup> anticipating works by Cavignac and others about the cohabitation of literacy and illiteracy among *cordeis* singers and *cordeis* consumers. While some illiterates bought these cheap brochures, asking others to read them, some of the early poets were illiterate as well, leading Mota to emphatically praise the 'poor itinerant and illiterate epic poets from the Northeast'.<sup>xciii</sup>

It is worth noting that, for Mota and de Castro, these migratory cycles were not at all the result of an environmental determinism of the droughts. These geographers highlighted the potential availability of natural resources in the *sertão*, while also discussing examples of agriculture in arid regions such as Israel.<sup>xciv</sup> Thus, *Paisagem das secas* was a Northeastern novel where geographers such as Pierre Monbeig and Guy Lasserre were quoted to sensitise a public wider than the academic one on the social conditions of this region, and where local literature and traditional songs were granted the dignity of geo-historical (and geopoetical) sources.

In his collected essays *Geografia literaria* (1961), Mota explicitly theorised a relation between geography and narrative by considering writers such as Jack London and journalists such as Euclides da Cunha as inspirations for geographers and by defining geographers such as the 'powerful'<sup>xcv</sup> Humboldt, Reclus and Vidal de la Blache as masters of narration. Moreover, Mota inserted the main themes of Northeastern *cordel* literature in his production as a poet, such as animals, plants or objects as possible protagonists. Carrying titles such as *Poem to the Environment* and *The Cock and the Weathervane*, Mota's books of poetry contained short poems in rhymed stanzas of different lengths, not dissimilar from the metrics of Northeastern popular literature. In these poems, non-human protagonists act. This was the case with the Capibaribe River, which 'nannies Recife ... like a child in its maternal arms',<sup>xcvi</sup> with the cock 'fabricating the dawn in the courtyard'<sup>xcvii</sup> and with many poems where the amphibious nature of the city of Recife was evoked, paralleling de Castro's topics.

Another example in this merging of human and non-human agency was Mota's book *O cajueiro nordestino* (The Northeastern Cashew-Tree). Published as a popular and illustrated version of Mota's dissertation and likewise written in novel-like style, this monograph represented the cashew-tree as a sort of 'civilizational plant' in the Northeast, in the same way in which Fernand Braudel considered wheat as the civilizational plant of Europe.<sup>xcviii</sup> It

expressed Mota's civic engagement, eventually in defence of the environment against the destruction of the original cashew-tree forests. As the Northeastern civilizational plant, the cashew-tree was intended by Mota as the symbol of a cultural hybridity and a contested history, and indeed the book began by discussing uses of the cashew-tree in Amerindian cultures before the Conquista. There, cashews were cooked and consumed in various ways, including 'mixed with mandioca flour',<sup>xcix</sup> and even fermented to obtain an alcoholic drink, which was 'the best one [indigenous] tribes had'.<sup>c</sup> Their nutritional value, associated with the utilisation of these plants for traditional healing, rendered cashew-trees important resources for Indians' communities. They even marked tribes' territories and were the object of local wars, before a more ferocious warrior came in the Northeast, 'the White man, carrying orders to annihilate [Indians] at their slightest initiative' inflicting 'death for the rebels and slavery for the losers'.<sup>ci</sup> In Mota's narrative, the cashew-tree as a Northeastern symbol included its relation with Black communities, whose members were said to still 'consume with greed'<sup>cii</sup> its fruits. In the same vein, Mota used the metaphor of slavery to humanise the plant, defining as 'slave cashew-trees' those planted by humans to delimitate properties. Conversely, the seeds that escaped from these plantations gave birth to forests defined as 'vegetal quilombos'.<sup>ciii</sup> In Northeastern geopoetics, freedom is first identified with marronage and revolt for humans, animals and plants.

Committed to the preservation of this vegetal heritage, Mota blamed its destruction from colonial times, when the Portuguese started clearing the *Mata Atlântica* in Pernambuco for the needs of the international timber trade and for planting sugarcane. This protest was first directed towards the 'White sadism'<sup>civ</sup> exerted against these trees, which were conversely respected by indigenous peoples, who calculated the seasons following their ripening calendar.<sup>cv</sup> The typical shape of their intricate branches was used by Mota as a metaphor of their inescapable imbrication with Northeastern traditions: 'The cashew-tree ramifies itself, sinking its roots in the folk-lore of the region'.<sup>cvi</sup> As I explain in the next section, Mota's neglected example of Northeastern geopoetics paralleled similar output produced by de Castro, who narrated something like the further episodes of the migrations from the *sertão* to the coast described by Mota in *Paisagem das secas*.

### **Narratives of activist hybridity**

The figure of Josué de Castro has been progressively rediscovered by international scholarship in the last few years.<sup>cvii</sup> However, the narrative aspects of his production deserve further investigation. While de Castro spent most of his life and career outside his region of origin, as a geography teacher and a politician in Rio de Janeiro and finally an exile in France, it is possible to argue that his tales and novels expressed strong links with the Northeast, including his commitment to local movements of popular resistance, where popular poetry and *literatura de cordel* still play a role. The historical leader of the Northeastern peasant leagues and friend of de Castro, Francisco Julião (1915-1999) wrote a traditional *cordel* to mark the twentieth anniversary of de Castro's death, which was included in a book issued by the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra*.<sup>cviii</sup> Narrating the Northeastern saga of resistance to the droughts, Julião's poem establishes a symbolic continuity between Northeastern geopoetical traditions, Brazilian peasant activism and de Castro's engaged scholarship. Between the two men, admiration was mutual, as shown by de Castro's letters defining Julião as one of those whom he most admired 'in the political scene of Pernambuco'.<sup>cix</sup>

Both de Castro and Julião considered *cordeis* as a means of people's conscientization in the Northeast. For de Castro, 'in Northeastern popular lyrics one has clear conscience of the inhuman sufferings of Northeastern people, of the Hell in which their life was thrown by oppressive forces'.<sup>cx</sup> While de Castro considered this literature as a still 'shy' expression of social subversion, he emphasized the richness and abundance of *folhetos* 'addressing the problems of land, hunger, misery, oppression by landowners'.<sup>cxii</sup> In a classical *cordel* describing Lampião's arrival at the Hell's door after his death, the 'peasant poet' identifies the Hell with 'the house of the master, whom he considers as Satan in person [together with] everything that represents the satanic arrogance of power'.<sup>cxii</sup> In his book on the peasants' leagues, Julião called for having 'many Câmara Cascudos'<sup>cxiii</sup> to preserve this popular heritage of poems and songs whose authors constituted the main popular attraction in Northeastern marketplaces. For these reasons, early peasants' leagues used 'the strength of popular poetry for vulgarisation and participation'<sup>cxiv</sup> to do their propaganda in the countryside.

De Castro's works especially demonstrate the originality of this Southern geopoetics in relation to the European definitions described above. He considered narration as a way of doing anti-racist and de-colonial propaganda, implying the direct participation of the intellectual in social struggles. The books *Documentário do Nordeste* and *Homens e caranguejos* contain



autobiographical tales and show de Castro's interest in Northeastern histories and geographies, describing the steps that followed the migrations from the *sertão* to the poor neighbourhoods of Recife. In his youth, de Castro used to wander in Recife's *mocambos*, informal settlements that constituted the shelter of people (mostly of Afro-Brazilian origin) who had escaped, in Mota's worlds, 'from the drought to the mud. After counting 40,000 *mocambos* in the surrounding and even in the centre of the capital [Recife], ... this year, one counts almost 80,000 *mocambos*'.<sup>cxv</sup> Indeed, these *mocambos* grew in the urban and peri-urban Recife areas known as Afogados or Alagados; that is, the shores of the local rivers Capibaribe and Beberibe. In de Castro's most famous tale, *O ciclo do caranguejo* (The Cycle of the Crab) published first in the *Documentário* in the 1930s and then developed in *Homens e caranguejos* (Men and Crabs), these areas are described as an amphibious environment characterised by human/natural hybridity.

Brazilian scholar Cleder Fontana highlights the close connection between humanity and the environment that characterised de Castro's scholarly production, challenging traditional notions of human domination upon 'nature'.<sup>cxvi</sup> In the *Cycle of the Crab*, de Castro described this ecosystem between land and rivers. 'In the mangroves, land does not belong to anybody. It belongs to the tide. ... There, caboclo Zé Luis built his *mocambo*. The walls are built on mangroves and are pressed mud: everything is freely found in basic partnership with nature'.<sup>cxvii</sup> In this novel, the distinction between humankind and nature was blurred while the association between humans, water and land was deemed a tragic form of mutual aid. 'The mangrove is an old friend. It gives everything, house and food: *mocambo* and crab'.<sup>cxviii</sup> The crab was likewise considered a comrade living in symbiosis with humans and mangroves. 'The Capibaribe mangroves are the crab's paradise... There, everything is, was or will be crab, including the mud and the people who live in it... Crabs come into the world in this matter and live in it ... On the other side, people live off of crabs, sucking their legs and licking their skulls until they are clean like glass, and with their mud-made meat they have the human flesh of their bodies and of their children ... made up of crab flesh. What their body rejects is sent back to the mangrove mud to become crabs again'.<sup>cxix</sup> The conclusion was poetic and recalled ideas of a cyclical return that de Castro had probably assimilated with ancient Greek philosophies. 'All members of the Silva family live within this cycle until their death. That day, pious neighbours will bring that mud-made dead body to the Santo Amaro cemetery, where it will follow the steps of the worm and the flower. These steps are too poetic for the mangrove: the body

apparently exits the cycle of the crab. Yet, the relatives who remain piously spread their tears across the mangroves to feed the mud, which feeds the cycle of the crab'.<sup>cxx</sup>

In his preface to the *Documentário*, de Castro's friend and literary critic Olívio Montenegro defined Recife's *mocambos* as a true *senzala remanescente*,<sup>cxxi</sup> that is, a settlement standing in continuity with the history of Black slaves in Brazil, defining de Castro's fiction as a 'very conceptual one'<sup>cxxii</sup> and an example of an engagement towards human solidarity. De Castro was proud of being the son of a family of *retirantes* from the dramatic drought of 1877, who experienced the classical migration from the *sertão* to the 'Brazilian Venice' in Recife, whose rivers are humanised in these novels as other protagonists of this journey. The Capibaribe and Beberibe Rivers meet in Recife similar to two 'famous adventurers'<sup>cxxiii</sup> who need to tell 'symbolically all the peripeties of *sertanejo* life'<sup>cxxiv</sup> and who are humanised by Northeastern caboclos, attributing to them the same 'impetuous and violent'<sup>cxxv</sup> temperament that they claimed to have in their popular tales.

In the *Documentário*, several short tales describe the *mocambos*' life, which were published in local journals<sup>cxxvi</sup> and later developed in *Homens e Caranguejos*, such as *João Paulo*, the story of the son of Zé Luis. An implicit tribute to Victor Hugo's character Gavroche, young João Paulo dies taking part in a popular insurrection defeated by the soldiers, without knowing anything of the causes of this struggle, but giving finally a sense to 'his life of street child, *mocambo* settler, crab catcher'.<sup>cxxvii</sup> These tales present a range of characters symbolising the history of the Northeast, such as 'Black Filomena, the singer of African stories',<sup>cxxviii</sup> or Chico the leper, who lived 'hidden in his lair like he was a reptile'<sup>cxxix</sup> for fear of being hospitalised. In the tale *Social Assistance*, de Castro told an autobiographical story related to a professional experience that he deemed decisive in his intellectual and political development.<sup>cxxx</sup> In the tale, a young medical doctor was sacked by a company because he had diagnosed in the employees a sickness that his medicines could not heal: hunger.

A tale called *A Seca* (The Drought), written almost at the same time as Ramos's *Vidas Secas*, describes in ever cruder terms the rage and despair of its protagonist. In the novel, Juvencio is a *sertão* cowboy who witnesses the death by hunger and thirst of his young son and ends with gaining 'a terrible strength, the strength of hate and revolt ... with the face crisped and rude like that of a *cangaceiro*'.<sup>cxxxi</sup> De Castro's literary references were explicitly discussed in the

short essay *O Nordeste e o romance* [The Northeast and the Novel], where he defended the so-called ‘intentional literature’ that was criticised for being ‘tendentious’, by arguing that ‘art is always tendentious’.<sup>cxxxii</sup> For de Castro, key authors of this tendency were Ramos, Amado, de Queiroz, Jorge de Lima and José Lins de Rego among others, all novelists whom de Castro appreciated regardless their political opinions because they told a social history of Brazil: according to de Castro, disliking works such as Queiroz’s *O Quinze* because they are ‘leftist’ books was simply ‘silly’.<sup>cxxxiii</sup> In the 1930s, de Castro campaigned in the local press<sup>cxxxiv</sup> in defence of the *mocambos*, praising the fitness of these wooden self-constructed houses to the enviroing ‘mesological conditions’<sup>cxxxv</sup> and blaming the on-going policies of violent eviction of these settlements. In the *Documentário*, he also anticipated one of his main scholarly arguments; that is, his scientific confutation of racism, drawing upon findings from a heterogeneous range of scientists and on the folklorists Cascudo and Arthur Ramos, highly praising African cultural influences in the Northeast.<sup>cxxxvi</sup>

The 1967 ‘demountable novel’ *Homens e caranguejos* was especially written to be translated in other languages to develop and make known the stories told in the *Documentário*. In this book, the political radicalisation of de Castro, then exiled in France, is apparent in the growing sarcasm of the author against the rich, who did not even allow *mocambo* people to seek food in their waste. Sarcasm was also deployed in describing the figure of Father Aristides, a fat and gluttonous priest who appointed the child João Paulo to catch for him the *guaiamum*, a rare and noble race of crabs, which were unavailable for the poor and the caboclos, being ‘crabs of the Aryan race’.<sup>cxxxvii</sup> Contents from de Castro’s geography of hunger were popularised in stories such as that of the Black Cosme, a man from the *sertão* who had fled the drought migrating in the other direction available for poor Northeasterners: not towards Recife, but in Amazonia, to pick rubber. Despite becoming rich, Cosme also became paralytic (and then poor again) following a sickness by ‘qualitative hunger’,<sup>cxxxviii</sup> eventually beriberi, affecting people who only consumed canned foods. This was the case with rubber workers, regardless of their social status: this novel strongly exemplifies what de Castro defined the ‘gamut of hungers’ in his scholarly works.<sup>cxxxix</sup>

After the drought that pushed them to migration, the settlers of this community called *Aldeia Teimosa* [Stubborn Village] had to face another flaw, the Capibaribe flood, which pushed them to experience communitarian mutual aid. They also tried to project a revolution ‘against the

masters of the Earth,<sup>cxli</sup> perceiving that there was ‘more reason with the *cangaceiros* than with the police’.<sup>cxlii</sup> Albeit unsuccessful, the Village settlers were never daunted, because the one ‘who came from the *sertão* droughts ... is a *cabra* with an unruly character’.<sup>cxliii</sup> Between mud, crabs and remembrances of *sertão* traditions such as ‘a folksingers’ challenge’,<sup>cxliii</sup> they continued to cry the complaint of marginalised and hungry people from the Northeast to the world through de Castro’s geopoetics. These narratives of periodical migrations, natural/cultural hybridity, ethnic variety and social struggles were part of a political project which included enhancing the social reach of scholarship through ‘creative writing’.

### **Conclusion: towards critical geopoetics**

In a tribute to his friend Gilberto Freyre, Mota claimed that ‘there should not be rigid frontiers between science and poetry’.<sup>cxliv</sup> This paper has shown how some geographers from the Northeast applied this idea, by practising forms of geopoetics narrating the human dramas associated with the *sertão* physical conditions and the colonial histories and social geographies of their region, to disseminate consciousness of their political causes. Anticipating part of the recent works by cultural geographers on the ‘creative (re)turn’ which were quoted above, they tried to diversify the literary genres of geographical writing, mixing poetry, novel and essay to reach different publics, especially beyond the narrow realm of specialists. It is possible to conclude that these Northeastern authors provide insights for doing geopoetics in different ways in relation to early European definitions of geopoetics (such as White’s), giving examples that can nourish current debates in cultural geography on decolonising and making more inclusive the discipline and that can constitute openings towards ‘critical geopoetics’. Mota and de Castro produced literary pieces of work for clear reasons of political mobilisation and public outreach: therefore, early Southern experiments in geopoetics were not a literary divertissement, but a tool for fostering the social impact of geography.

This activist approach was clearly associated with anti-racist and de-colonial concerns for cultural hybridity and included the participation of geographers to grassroots mobilisation of marginalised and racialised social groups. As this paper has demonstrated, this geopoetics was deeply rooted in Northeastern stories and traditions, which allow fostering ideas of cultural hybridity very different from Euro-centric notions of rootedness. These stories are part of the broader colonial history of a region characterised by constant migration, mobility and social unsettling. In these traditions, geographers especially highlighted indigenous and Afro-

Brazilian legacies, coming to explicit anti-racist and anti-colonial activism in cases such as de Castro's. This activism continued in Northeastern popular culture, poetry and music through experiences such as the movement Manguebeat, whose leader, reggae singer Chico Science (1966-1997), was explicitly committed to rediscover de Castro's works on the *mocambos*.<sup>cxlv</sup>

Ideas on cultural hybridity were inserted in wider contexts of more-than-human hybridity. De Castro's work questioned the classical epistemological divide between nature and mind, first thanks to his references to different cultural models, and eventually the Northeastern traditions discussed in this paper. Further work can highlight de Castro's potential contributions to current debates on 'materialist concerns'<sup>cxlvi</sup> and more-than-human and 'multi-natural' geographies<sup>cxlvii</sup> that have increasingly interested geography in the last few decades and are likewise evoked by scholarship on geopoetics referenced above. This implies reappraising geopoetics as an engaged field that can foster both social justice and the decolonisation of geographical knowledge and practices repeatedly evoked in the last few years.<sup>cxlviii</sup> Part of this reappraisal should come through addressing geopoetical productions in different languages, traditions and formats than those considered so far, to finally extend the disciplinary field of cultural geographies.

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