



*Estrada de floresta, Col Mansour.*

### THE WHOLE OF ACRE IN A SINGLE TREE

José Roca

*Seeing that I'm self-taught, you can call me a painter of the forest, because only someone who's lived inside it is able to discover the mysteries of nature from our brother Indians, the owners of the forest.*

–Hélió Melo<sup>1</sup>

#### Space

In the work *Estrada da Floresta* [Forest Highway] by artist Hélió Melo (1926–2001, from the Brazilian state of Acre) a rubber tapper – in Portuguese, *seringueiro*<sup>2</sup> – approaches a big rubber tree, which in the wild can measure in excess of thirty meters in height and almost three meters in diameter.<sup>3</sup> The picture does not therefore misrepresent or exaggerate; here it is not a case of “artistic license”: reality is more powerful than the imagination. Where the Western eye, confronted with the forest only sees an impenetrable green tangle of vegetation, the rubber tapper conceives a route, his own route: a mental map of his daily round in search of sustenance. When the rubber tapper sees the forest, he sees every tree individually as if it were a member of a vast family.<sup>4</sup> In Hélió's picture, every limb of the tree represents a path through the forest; every branch, a tree to bleed; each round knot, a point to rest from the toils of gathering latex.

Rubber became an essential raw material for the industrial development of both Europe and the United States from the second half of the 19th century onward. It formed an integral part of all vehicles and most machinery, such as valves, seals and belts. It must be remembered that, by 1927, Ford had produced 15 million Model T automobiles at the rate of nearly one million per year. Some observers have calculated that each car required more than one hundred pounds of rubber for its various components, all of which gives us an idea of the demand for wild rubber in the first quarter of the past century.<sup>5</sup> During World War II, with Japan controlling the tropical areas of Southeast Asia with their extensive plantations of rubber

trees, American latex once again became a strategic product,<sup>6</sup> generating renewed interest in the Brazilian Amazon as a source of rubber cultivation. It is ironic at the very least that the development of what was at the time considered cutting-edge technologies should literally have been in the hands of people who worked by hand and milked the precious “tree that wept” of its precious blood.<sup>7</sup> Capital with its own implacable logic applied this practice to the entire community, which, subject to the geopolitical vagaries, experienced cycles of development and crisis all because of an unknown overseas agent which could not be controlled.

Hélio's tree is, therefore, a map; but it is also a chronicle. It is possible to read into this tree-journey the reasons for the tragedy brought about by the exploitation of rubber in the area which today represents Brazil, Bolivia, Peru and Colombia.<sup>8</sup> The key problem in regard to latex extraction in America is linked to a biological circumstance; it could never be cultivated efficiently on an industrial scale due to the fact that when the trees are planted close together in rows they become susceptible to a fatal fungus.<sup>9</sup> Ironically, the British managed to establish vast plantations of rubber trees in Malaysia from seeds that had been collected in Brazil and which flourished due to the fact that in their new habitat the trees were safe from their natural enemies.<sup>10</sup> The failed experiments by Henry Ford in the Brazilian jungle of the 1920s,<sup>11</sup> and those by the United States in Panama and Costa Rica in the 1940s, showed that the traditional method was the only way in which rubber could be exploited; i.e., by gathering the latex from trees growing in the wild. Yet this demonstrated an essential difference in terms of efficiency and yield, which was to be translated into a marked disparity in the price of every kilo produced. While in the territories controlled by the English crown a man could bleed more than 400 trees per day, thereby producing an annual yield of almost 18 tons of latex, a Brazilian rubber tree, in order to produce a mere fifth of that amount, would require the worker to operate within an area of hundreds of meters across the jungle, going from one tree to another, braving the thick vegetation, parasites, wild animals and other dangers of the jungle.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, at the height of the rubber boom in the Amazon, there was immense pressure to obtain an absurdly unrealistic yield, considering the conditions in which the work was done and the threat of physical punishment for the worker and his family.<sup>13</sup> The difficulties resulting from extraction, combined with those related to the transport of the rubber from the heart of the jungle to the ports and then on to the end consumers, meant significantly higher costs – more than five times that of producing it on the plantations.<sup>14</sup>

Since classical capitalist reasoning (industrialization of the process) did not work due to the nature of the tree itself, the only way to make the business competitive was to reduce the price at the source, that is, the exploitation process itself. Being unable to optimize extraction methods – as was traditionally done since the industrial revolution – the only possible strategy was to use cheap labor, which meant resorting to precapitalist feudal logic: the employment of workers in subhuman conditions, which was soon to



*Tools of the trade, Col Museu Borracha*

result in the most abject enslavement, including the practice of slavery itself where the indigenous peoples were concerned. This was carried out by means of a veritable reign of terror, firstly with the peasants of Brazil's Northwest displaced by droughts, falling under the yoke of the magnates, through contracts in which all modes of transport, dwellings, materials and tools were to be paid for by each worker out of his wages. This resulted in a spiral of unpayable loans, which became more difficult to settle the longer they worked. When not even this was enough, entire indigenous communities were forced by the "owners of the jungle" into working for the industry, and were decimated by sickness and exhaustion, their tragedy due to having strayed onto the path of "progress and civilization" embodied by the company.<sup>15</sup>

Hélio's map shows the *estradas de floresta* [forest highways], which, in the words of Euclides da Cunha, are like the "tentacles of a giant octopus", the "monstrous image of a tormented society toiling in those parts".<sup>16</sup> The jungle like a pristine Eden was turned into a hell:

The rubber tapper is above all a solitary figure, lost in the wilderness of the jungle, working his way into servitude. His day at the rubber tree can be likened to a Sisyphean task – setting off, arriving, and setting off again along the paths that cut through the jungle, day after day, on the eternal treadmill of his wall-less incarceration.<sup>17</sup>

### **Time**

Given that the rubber tapper had to adhere to a strict routine in his labor, Hélio Melo's tree is also an instrument which measures time: a working day consisting of a first stint of forty-three trees – making incisions on their trunks and attaching small tin containers called *tigelinhas* to catch the drops of latex – followed by a second stint of fifty trees and a third of forty-nine. Later, after a short rest, he doubles back, using buckets to empty the contents of each tin container. The end of the working day is taken up with curing the latex in order to make it solid, by shaping it into large balls called *pelas*. According to Hélio's canvas, the rubber tapper depicted bled almost 150 trees in a single day. It is not known exactly the extent of the distance covered, but according to botanists, rubber trees in their natural state grow at distances of between 100 and 150 meters from one another. We can therefore conclude that in a day a worker probably walked almost 50 kilometers, i.e., the equivalent of crossing present-day São Paulo,



*Seringeiro making marks on tree.*  
Col Mansour



*Man smoking rubber, Col Museu Borracha*

between the bleeding of the trees and the subsequent gathering of the product, under the punishing heat and humidity of the jungle.<sup>18</sup>

The rubber tapper is carrying a rifle; he is armed. This rubber-tapper soldier is Hélió himself, who is a retired “Soldado da Borracha” [Rubber Soldier].<sup>19</sup> Hélió is one of almost 60,000 young Brazilians who took part in a rubber-extraction program in the Amazon during World War II, put into place by the United States with the collaboration of the Brazilian government, in order to counteract the effects of the Japanese blockade of rubber production in Asia. The *Batalha da Borracha* [Battle for Rubber] was undertaken to supply the needs of the war industry and was, as such, a military undertaking; in a sense the rubber tapper therefore became a soldier; his mission being to raise rubber production exponentially from the meager 16,000 tons achieved in 1941 to 70,000 tons annually. For such an increase more than 100,000 workers were needed, leading to the implementation of an aggressive propaganda campaign. The starved inhabitants of the Brazilian Northeast, affected by what seemed an endless drought, were bombarded by tendentious images in the form of posters that showed latex spurting forth from trees in jets, effortlessly collected in buckets, highlighting the green of the Amazon rain forest as if it were some mythical El Dorado of wealth and exuberance compared with the parched Northeast. With little to lose, many enrolled in the program. However, as the economic incentives proved insufficient to raise the human contingent necessary for an enterprise of these proportions, the organizers resorted to forced recruitment. Thousands of young Northeasterners harassed by poverty decided to follow this route as an alternative to fighting the Axis Powers on the front lines, which, in hindsight, would have been preferable: of the 20,000 Brazilian soldiers who fought in Europe only 454 died, compared to the 60,000 “rubber soldiers”

who lost their lives in the jungle without a shot being fired after being sent to the Amazon between 1942 and 1945.<sup>20</sup> The exploitation of the “rubber soldiers” was a carbon-copy replay of the inhuman working conditions of the first rubber boom, which was known as the “sistema de avião” [debt-peonage system], in which the worker always owed more than he produced. Since he was legally prevented from abandoning the rubber tree without having repaid his debt, the journey was usually only one way, and the contract, a contract of slavery.

The circularity of the journey proposed by Hélio’s rubber tree is the result of circular time: the eternal return (of the tragedy).<sup>21</sup>

### Energy

Hélio Melo’s painting is surprising for its synthesis and the complexity of its codes. In fact, despite being self-taught in art, Hélio should not be considered a naïve artist. His depictions of the jungle – its customs, myths and characters – are not characterized by innocence, and due to the artist’s intimate familiarity with the physical and social environment portrayed, they are replete with hidden clues and references which only those who know the forest are able to decipher. His depiction is based on direct experience. Hélio, born and raised on a rubber estate, taught himself to paint in the middle of the jungle and was therefore obliged to develop his own pictorial language.<sup>22</sup> As Eduardo Galeano, when referring to Evo Morales affirmed, “The only language which is to be believed is that which is born from the need to be spoken”.<sup>23</sup> Hélio developed a very particular language in which trees became cows and calves, where donkeys and tortoises climb trees, where rubber trees become paths and where the seringalistas – the masters of the rubber estates – are indolent mules observing the rubber tappers at work, from the comfort of their hammocks.

Among the various books that Hélio published with his limited resources,<sup>24</sup> one, written shortly before his death, focuses on the need to save the forest, threatened by massive exploitation of timber, extensive monoculture farming, highways and the overall consequences of progress in the capitalist sense, imposed upon the reality of the forest. Rubber trees are felled in order to clear the land for cattle farming, and with the disappearance of the tree, entire communities are left without any means of subsistence. “The fate of the rubber tree was a sad one indeed in that it remains undocumented. A little knowledge has been passed down by elderly people. Some of those who have passed away have left behind them testimonies to the felling and the disappearance of the rubber tree. The result is that no one has undertaken to write its history. It was fortunate that the rubber tree was discovered in 1880. In the same way that the rubber tree came to a sad ending, the rubber tappers had a painful history. The milk of the rubber tree has been, and is still being, exchanged for the milk of the cow”.<sup>25</sup>



*Tree-cow, Col Museu Borracha*



*Seringalista-donkey, Col Museu Borracha*



*Donkey on tree, Col Museu Borracha*



*Cow-tree and calf-tree, Camargo*



*Family and woman-cow. Col Garibaldi*



*Cow-tee. Col Goldfarb*

Hélio's art is not that of one who is enlightened, as many productions of so-called art brut are commonly characterized. It is rather the visual expression of an inventory of nearly extinct practices by one who is fully aware of what is at stake. It nevertheless remains an art which is "illuminated". The special light inherent in the works of Hélio Melo has captivated many, such as the sculptor Sergio Camargo,<sup>26</sup> who wrote in this regard: "A case of aesthetic symbiosis with the jungle in which he lived? This is of course how one would explain this phenomenon without however taking into account his compulsion to come to grips through his art, with the meandering streams of light which he managed to capture in his art, an example of which was the complex immanence of sumptuous light; strangely enough, defined with





*Crying tree. Col Camargo*



*Serradores. Col MASP*

greater precision in drawings of wise naturality. The pellucid dawn, the stealth of nightfall, the play of light in the branches and its ephemeral contact with the roughness of the tree trunks; the luminous glades, the gently shaded bowers, the faintly discernible paths and wide open spaces filled with the light of Hélio Melo's brush".<sup>27</sup>

Popular art as an expression of traditional culture is based on a combination of elements: a craft passed on from generation to generation, a need for self-expression and a means of sustenance. In contemporary art, reference is seldom made to the aforementioned factors. Popular art and the art of "outsiders" – here referred to as contributions which generally possess a strong voice and a sense of urgency, either stand in contrast to current artistic output or complement it. In the context of the 27th Bienal de São Paulo, the work of Hélio Melo will articulate with other works dealing with notions of territory, boundaries, environmental justice, fair trade, etc., some of which were done in Acre itself: the parody of scientific knowledge in the herbarium of artificial plants by Alberto Baraya, who built a big rubber tree out of latex;<sup>28</sup> the sketch/report by Susan Turcot, which is a reflection on deforestation and its implications for symbolic and mythical readings of the forests and for local inhabitants; the analysis of survival structures and new types of community in Acre depicted by Marjetica Potrč; the setting up of a system guaranteeing the sustainability of agricultural communities in the forest conducted by the Danish group Superflex, among others.

### **Subject matter**

Hélio's painting speaks of the jungle, or more exactly, the jungle speaks through Hélio's works, literally. Faced with the absence of pigments for his works, Hélio Melo developed his own method for obtaining them by crushing leaves (presumably those of the rubber trees themselves) and from bark, roots, fruits and by using, according to local legend, the latex as a thickener.<sup>29</sup> The greenish coloration characteristic of his works is probably a result of this process. One of the pictorial techniques which recur in Hélio's works is the appearance of a row of tapered leaves in the lower margin of the painting, which estab-



*Seringeiro and donkey, Col Museu Borracha*



*Deer and armadillo, Col SESC Acre*

lishes a kind of theatrical foreground situating the action within “the forest”. This little curtain of leaves has not been painted: it serves as an introductory sign, since it has been achieved using spear-shaped leaves, dipped in pigment and applied directly to the medium as a kind of stamp. Hélio’s painting does not only represent life in the forest but presents the forest through its extended use as both subject and paintbrush.

### **Poetic (micro)politics**

Hélio’s *Estrada de Floresta* can also be read in the context of a restoration of cultural values and traditions related to rubber tapping at a time when logging companies, cattle ranchers and cereal farmers were obtaining state concessions to cut down the forest. It should not be forgotten that Acre is the birthplace of Chico Mendes, another rubber tapper. Chico fought the destruction of the forest with non-conventional means, such as what came to be known as *empates* – collective activism, not without poetic flourish – in which whole communities of men, women, the elderly and children joined hands surrounding the workers who’d been hired to cut down the trees. By means of this strategy, he was able to defend, against the interests of landowners, large stretches of land that entire communities depended on for their sustenance.<sup>30</sup> Chico championed the concept of *reservas extrativistas* [extractivist reserves], an activity which went beyond the traditional environmentalist “defense to the death” of the forest. The *reservas extrativistas* were committed to not only the conservation of the forest as a natural resource to counteract the massive-scale deforestation for cattle raising and monoculture, but also for the preservation of a centuries-long cultural heritage, practiced by generations of Indians and settlers: rubber tapping. According to film director Adrian Cowell, known for his documentary *The Decade of Destruction on the processes of deforestation in Brazil*, “The great advantage of the *reserva extrativista* was its people who were able to defend its borders and who formed a social movement which might have a say in local politics. In the same way as the type of Amazon tree which feeds colonies of ants in order to protect itself against other ant species, the rubber tappers and Indians are innate defenders of



the Amazon rain forest”.<sup>31</sup>

Countries which share the rain forest have entered into a debate to decide between a struggle to preserve, on the one hand, the natural environment and the habits and social customs associated with its long-term sustainable use, and, on the other, the improvement of living conditions, well-intentioned, but most of the time simply serving private interests, which would facilitate access of “isolated communities” to the globalized world. The insistence upon methods of penetration as a solution to the problems of isolation of rain forest communities calls to mind, by its obstinate persistence, the construction of the railway between the Madeira and Marmore rivers, an event closely related to the creation of Acre as an independent territory in 1899 and its subsequent annexation to Brazil in 1904.<sup>32</sup>

Perhaps the most striking similarity in these two trends lies in their frenzied defenders and detractors. The partisans of extensive farming argue that increased production means more tax revenue, benefits and jobs. Their rivals argue in defense of the communities which live by rational, sustainable use of the forest’s resources, although the defenders to the death of the tradition of rubber tapping – which has been raised to the level of a foundational myth – forget, in the midst of such idealization, that the rubber industry meant the extermination of entire groups of indigenous peoples: in reality prosperity was ephemeral and illusory and benefited only a few, not to mention its legacy of blood and suffering.<sup>33</sup>

Good intentions are always one-sided, and not necessarily shared by the beneficiary. The imposition of foreign standards could no longer find fertile terrain in which to take root, given a more mature political context. The ethnobotanist Wade Davis noted that by coming into contact with communities whose history, customs and myths we are unacquainted with, we tend to “idealize a past we that we did not personally experience, and one which we do not allow those who did, to alter. Perhaps we forget anthropology’s most disquieting lesson. As Levi-Strauss stated, ‘the people for whom cultural relativism was invented have rejected it’”.<sup>34</sup> At present in Brazil there exist a series of initiatives like the Universidade da Floresta [Forest University] geared towards finding local solutions which might take into consideration the knowledge of communities and their conceptual input in the conception of development strategies that are both culturally and economically sustainable, all of which brings us back to casting an eye at Hélio’s rubber tapper, alone and facing his tree/jungle: “There is just one solution: leave everything behind and, without hindrance, blaze a new trail, with hands raised, in an attempt to build and not to destroy”.<sup>35</sup> Slovenian artist Marjetica Potrc, who lived in Acre in 2006 points out how isolation can be considered a relative advantage, in the sense of being able to develop local and original solutions to problems which themselves are essentially local, incorporating the knowledge of the inhabitants, small farmers and rubber tappers in solving these problems. This strategy provides insight into the local micropolitics as to which model should be applied, as opposed to global solutions which ignore the specific details of the territory: “In the last fifteen years, large tracts of land in Acre have been handed over to communities, including the indigenous population, for sustainable management. [...] Sustainability is as much a concern to the environment as it is to the economy. Those who work these territories see thi

small-scale economy as both a tool for their own survival as well as a new economic model essential for the survival of the planet and for society as a whole. Does the world's future depend on the balance between territories controlled locally and the forces of globalization of multinational companies? The people who I have spoken to definitely think that this is the case and it is as well they should, for what has been called the world's last frontier – the forest – has been entered. In many senses, Acre represents the earth's last frontier.<sup>36</sup>

José Roca

Rio Branco-Bogotá, 2006.

*Courtesy: Sao Paulo Bienal*

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See the interview with Hélio Melo conducted by Cristina Leite in the mini-guide of the 27th BSP, pp.

<sup>2</sup> Seringueiro: from the word *siringa* or rubber tree, with the *-eiro* suffix of an agent.

<sup>3</sup> Apparently, the trees found in Acre, a variety known as *Hevea brasiliensis* also known as “Acre fino”, are the largest of their kind in the Amazon. DAVIS, Wade, *El río. Exploraciones y descubrimientos en la selva amazónica [The River. Explorations and Discoveries in the Amazonian Jungle]* (Bogotá: Banco de la República/El Áncora Editores), 2001, p. 423.

<sup>4</sup> “For them [the rubber tappers], the term *Hevea Brasiliensis* held no meaning. The rubber trees were recognizable by the color of their bark. Schultes considered them to be of one variety, whereas the ethnobiologist Richard Evans considered there to be three subdivisions of the same species: the *seringueira branca* [white rubber tree] with grayish bark, smooth and slender, producing a milky latex, which is secreted in flooded areas during the rainy season; the *seringueira preta* [black rubber tree], found in the lower areas, damp and flooded for most of the year with a soft mauve bark; and finally the *seringueira vermelha* [red rubber tree], which is the least abundant and is to be found interspersed with the white and black varieties, its bark a smooth terra cotta and its latex creamy, almost yellow”. DAVIS, p. 416–417.

<sup>5</sup> DAVIS, p. 355.

<sup>6</sup> According to Trotsky, towards 1926 England controlled 70% of world rubber harvests, while the United States consumed 70% of this production, which led to diplomatic tensions between the two countries. TROTSKY, León, “Europa y América”, 1926 ([www.marxists.org/espanol/trotsky/ceip/economicos/Euro-payamerica.htm](http://www.marxists.org/espanol/trotsky/ceip/economicos/Euro-payamerica.htm), consulted May 1st, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> “Indians called it caoutchouc, the tree that wept, and for entire generations they would make incisions in the bark, allowing the white milky substance drip onto the leaves, molding them by hand into recipients and waterproof sheets”. DAVIS, p. 276.

<sup>8</sup> In Colombia’s case, see *La Vorágine* [The Vortex] (1924) by José Eustasio Rivera, a novel which exposes the problems and human misery engendered by the exploitation of rubber in the forests.

<sup>9</sup> “In nature, rubber trees are dispersed in the forest, an isolation which protects them from their main enemy the *Dothidella ulei* fungus, which attacks their roots and foliage. This scourge, which is found only in the American tropics, is always fatal when trees are crowded together into plantations, and it was this biological accident that led to the structuring of the wild rubber industry”. DAVIS, p. 280.

<sup>10</sup> There is a historical controversy regarding the early biological theft, since there are those who argue that the seeds left the country legally in 1876. In any case, this led to a crisis in the Brazilian rubber industry.

<sup>11</sup> In 1927, Ford received an area covering 2.5 million acres, in which he founded a village of more than one thousand inhabitants whose main activity was the cultivation of rubber. Due to its failure more than a decade later (most of the 1.4 million trees succumbed to the blight) Belterra was founded, with similar results.

<sup>12</sup> “By 1909 Malaya had planted more than forty million rubber trees, at a distance of three meters, in straight rows, which meant that each worker could bleed four hundred trees per day; each one produced 18 pounds of latex per year, more or less five times that produced by even the most fertile Amazonian species”. DAVIS, p. 364–65.

<sup>13</sup> “At the end of the day, the best rubber worker, after twelve hours of solid work, was able to produce 25 pounds. For some of the rubber barons that was considered insufficient”. DAVIS, p. 281.

<sup>14</sup> DAVIS, p. 365.

<sup>15</sup> DAVIS, p. 281–285.

<sup>16</sup> CUNHA, Euclides da. *Um paraíso perdido* [A Lost Paradise] (Rio de Janeiro: ed. José Olympio), 1994, p. 215.

<sup>17</sup> GUILLEN, Isabel Cristina Martins in “Euclides da Cunha para se Pensar Amazônia”, the last sentence is from Euclides da Cunha, [www.comciencia.br/reportagens/amazonia/amaz9.htm](http://www.comciencia.br/reportagens/amazonia/amaz9.htm). Consulted on 30 May 2006.

<sup>18</sup> In 1997, Hélio Melo was invited to take part in an event representing different artistic spaces in São Paulo. His work consisted of collecting hundreds of shoes which he found in the streets of São Paulo, a “sculpted record” of the journey of all the city’s anonymous inhabitants. [www.pucsp.br/artecidade/site97\\_99/ac3/artist/helio\\_melo.html](http://www.pucsp.br/artecidade/site97_99/ac3/artist/helio_melo.html). Consulted on 3 May 2006.

<sup>19</sup> “I am the retired rubber soldier. I draw two salaries. I have fought for a better wage, but fought in vain. Now, when I sell a painting I earn a little extra”. Taken from an interview with Cristina Leite, [www.ac.gov.br/outraspalavras/outras\\_8/entrevista.html](http://www.ac.gov.br/outraspalavras/outras_8/entrevista.html). Consulted on 2 February 2006.

<sup>20</sup> [www2.uol.com.br/historiaviva/conteudo/materia/materia\\_22.html](http://www2.uol.com.br/historiaviva/conteudo/materia/materia_22.html). Consulted on 30 May 2006.

<sup>21</sup> “Only as a result of the 1988 constitution, more than 40 years after the Second World War, did those surviving “rubber soldiers” receive a pension as recognition of service to their country. A derisory pension, ten times less that that received by those who had gone to fight in Italy. Consequently, even today, in several Brazilian cities, on the First of May, the “rubber soldiers” gather to continue the struggle for recognition of their rights.” [www2.uol.com.br/historiaviva/conteudo/materia/materia\\_22.html](http://www2.uol.com.br/historiaviva/conteudo/materia/materia_22.html). Consulted on 30 May 2006.

<sup>22</sup> “The title of my work is the Amazon forest, which is where my style differs from that of other painters. If you pay close attention, you will see where to place the painting of Hélio Melo, since my style has never changed”. See note 1.

<sup>23</sup> GALEANO, Eduardo, “A segunda fundação da Bolívia”, Folha de São Paulo 29/01/2006, Caderno MUNDO-A24.

<sup>24</sup> Hélio published several books, among them: *Legendas* [Legends] (Rio Branco: Artes Gráfica São José, 2000); *Os Mistérios dos Pássaros* [The Mysteries of Birds] (Rio Branco: Bobgraf Editora Preview, 1996); *A Experiência do Caçador e Os Mistérios da Caça* [The Experience of a Hunter and the Mysteries of the Hunt] (Rio Branco: Bobgraf Editora Preview, 1996).

<sup>25</sup> MELO, Hélio, *Como Salvar Nossa Floresta. Do Seringueiro para O Seringueiro* [How to Save Our Forest. From One Rubber Tapper to Another] (Rio Branco: INPECA), 1999. p. 13.

<sup>26</sup> Camargo saw Hélio Melo’s work on the invitation card to an exhibition of popular art held at SESC Tijuca in 1980.

<sup>27</sup> [www.ac.gov.br/imagens/helio.html](http://www.ac.gov.br/imagens/helio.html). Consulted on 15 May 2006.

<sup>28</sup> Baraya’s tree is the exact copy of an enormous rubber tree in Rio Branco and was made from the latex of 2,800 trees like it; like that of Hélio’s, it is also a tree in which all trees are contained.

<sup>29</sup> This was told to me on several occasions in Rio Branco by those who were acquainted with Hélio Melo, an assertion, however, that without chemical analysis would be impossible to corroborate.

<sup>30</sup> Between 1976 and 1988 more than forty empates saved 1.2 million hectares. Mendes was murdered in 1988 by hired killers contracted by a landowner, Alves da Silva, who had vainly tried to buy the farm where Chico had worked in order to have him expelled.

<sup>31</sup> Adrian Cowell, at [www.chicomendes.org/chicomendes195.php](http://www.chicomendes.org/chicomendes195.php), consulted on 10 April 2006.

<sup>32</sup> “Built between 1907 and 1912, this odd railway, isolated in the middle of the Amazon plains, stretching from the Atlantic to Bolivia, escaped the flooding of the Marmore and Madeira nineteen times. Financed by the Brazilians by way of compensation for the annexation in 1903 of the territory belonging to the Bolivian Acre, its construction cost more than six thousand lives, approximately one per forty meters of track”. DAVIS, p. 424.

In reference to this, one of the members of the Moring Commission, appointed by the Imperial Government to assess the cost of the project, stated: “It saddens us to see so much money squandered at such

great sacrifice with so little to show for it". Quoted by HARDMAN, Francisco Foot, "Trem-Fantasma. A ferrovia Madeira-Mamoré e a modernidade na selva [Ghost Train. The Madeira-Mamoré Railway and Modernity in the Jungle] (São Paulo: Companhia das letras, 2005), p. 126.

<sup>33</sup> "It is important to know that there are other, 'unofficial', readings regarding the question of Acre's past. Might not the patriotism and the term revolution have been ways of hiding the greed harbored by the inhabitants for astronomic profits from rubber as well as the crimes committed by the inhabitants: murders, tax evasion, the seizure of foreign-owned land etc?"

Egina Carli de Araújo Rodrigues Carneiro and Eduardo de Araújo Carneiro, "Acre e o mito fundador" [Acre and the Founding Myth], text sent to the author by email.

<sup>34</sup> Referring to the evangelistic activity in the Ecuatorian rain forests in the fifties. DAVIS, p. 346.

<sup>35</sup> MELO, op. cit., p. 13.

<sup>36</sup> See the interview with Marjetica Potrc conducted by Luisa Duarte in the mini-guide of the 27th BSP