In his novel Canaã (1902), Graça Aranha brought to life the passionate debate on the role of race in the formation of Brazilian society which preoccupied the intellectuals of the Old Republic. In the process he exposed certain social forces characteristic of the Old Republic but rarely discussed in such candid terms in the historical works of his contemporaries. Aranha's novel thus provides its readers with an unconventional yet invaluable source for the study of race and society in modern Brazil.

Although constantly mentioned in the words of literary and social historians of Brazil, few detailed commentaries on Canaã are available in Portuguese or English. From a literary point of view this neglect may be well deserved. As a literary piece, the novel is complicated, muddled, and ultimately an artistic failure. The characters are rarely more than mouthpieces for philosophical statements, the structure is unbalanced and awkward, and the pace slow and tedious. When compared with Euclides de Cunha's epic Os Sertões, which appeared in the same year and dealt with the same subject, its literary deficiencies appear even more striking. They stem as much from the inadequacies of the author's writing ability as from his own ideological confusion—a confusion which resulted from his inability to resolve certain contradictory forces in his own society and his own psyche. The value of the novel lies not in its literary merits or faults but in its social documentation.

This article seeks to examine Canaã not from a conventional literary perspective but from a sociological one, as an important ideological statement by a distinguished member of the Brazilian elites. The novel records one intellectual's perception of the role of race in the formation of Brazilian society. The symbols and social forces at work in the novel reflect the economic and social forces at
work in late nineteenth-century Brazil. The first part of this article briefly traces the social and intellectual context of the novel, while the second part analyzes the various symbols in the novel and relates them to that context. By reevaluating this novel, this essay hopes to expand our understanding of Brazilian thought and society during the Old Republic.

Canã is essentially an intellectual product of the nineteenth century. It reflects the internal economic contradictions of Brazilian society as it moved into the twentieth century and away from its colonial and imperial past. The principal economic prop of this past was the sugar industry which had entered into decline at the end of the colonial period. The plantations of the northeast were unable to modernize and face the stiff competition of the Caribbean region, and the economic axis of the country gradually shifted southward to the coffee-producing São Paulo-Minas Gerais triangle. After 1800 coffee cultivation spread rapidly in the fertile valleys of the south and east, and by 1840 coffee had replaced sugar as Brazil’s leading export. By 1850 coffee accounted for nearly half of all Brazilian exports and had attained a position of economic dominance in the Brazilian economy which has continued into the twentieth century. Coffee, however, deepened the colonial pattern of economic dependence as Brazil continued to exchange agricultural products for the manufactured goods of Europe and North America. Such a system resulted in an unbalanced economy whose well-being hinged on the fate of the international coffee market. Consequently, the fate of the Brazilian economy was not in the hands of the Brazilians, but in the capitalist metropolis of Europe and North America.

Although literary critics usually interpret the novel as a debate between the Tolstoyan philosophy of Milkau and the Nietzschean ethics of Lentz, on a deeper sociological level it is really a debate over the fate of Brazilian society. The debate centers around the significance of the racial heritage of Brazil and its cultural future. Aranha and other intellectuals at the end of the nineteenth century were asking themselves if the population of Brazil was inferior to that of Europe due to the contributions of African and Amerindian elements to the formation of Brazilian society. Could Brazil develop autonomously. Aranha asked, or must it rely on European culture for help and guidance? If it must rely on Europe, to what extent would European values and European ideas dictate the future course of Brazilian civilization? Could immigration strengthen Brazilian society or would it be fruitless to attempt to build a European society in the New World? Would the European immigrants supplant the Brazilians and flourish, or would the Brazilians assimilate the Europeans and sink into barbarism? All these questions were forced upon Aranha and his fellow intellectuals by the unique historical evolution of Brazilian society.

Although published in 1902, Canã is essentially an intellectual product of the nineteenth century. It reflects the internal economic contradictions of Brazilian society as it moved into the twentieth century and away from its colonial and imperial past. The principal economic prop of this past was the sugar industry which had entered into decline at the end of the colonial period. The plantations of the northeast were unable to modernize and face the stiff competition of the Caribbean region, and the economic axis of the country gradually shifted southward to the coffee-producing São Paulo-Minas Gerais triangle. After 1800 coffee cultivation spread rapidly in the fertile valleys of the south and east, and by 1840 coffee had replaced sugar as Brazil’s leading export. By 1850 coffee accounted for nearly half of all Brazilian exports and had attained a position of economic dominance in the Brazilian economy which has continued into the twentieth century. Coffee, however, deepened the colonial pattern of economic dependence as Brazil continued to exchange agricultural products for the manufactured goods of Europe and North America. Such a system resulted in an unbalanced economy whose well-being hinged on the fate of the international coffee market. Consequently, the fate of the Brazilian economy was not in the hands of the Brazilians, but in the capitalist metropolis of Europe and North America.

Closely tied to the rise of the coffee economy was the issue of slave versus free labor. The colonial economy had been based on slave labor but with the advance of capitalism and European culture slavery came to be associated with backwardness and a decaying way of life. Free labor was the mainstay of the capitalist economy and free men the mainstay of its liberal ideology. The leading capitalist country, Great Britain, had abolished slavery early in the century and British ideologues extended their abolitionist struggle to all parts of the globe. British opposition to the African slave trade made the replenishment of slave labor in Brazil increasingly difficult after 1830 and British diplomacy, backed by warships, eventually forced a complete halt to the Atlantic slave trade in the early 1850s. The rise of a vocal and powerful abolitionist movement in the 1870s and 1880s hastened the conversion to free labor with a series of laws providing for gradual emancipation. The transition to free labor was completed with the total abolition of slavery in 1888.

Although the Atlantic slave trade and the institution of slavery could be legislated out of existence its social consequences could not be so neatly disposed of. One of these consequences was the
Africanization of the Brazilian population which had taken place over a period of three centuries. The number of Africans brought to Brazil between 1500 and 1850 has been conservatively estimated at around three and one-half million. The influx of Africans was so great that until the end of the nineteenth century the white population was in the minority. Over a period of centuries the races had mixed profusely in Brazil creating a complex system of racial categories as the black and mulatto became an integral and undeniable part of Brazilian society.

Abolition was a humanitarian gesture directed at the Afro-Brazilian but it was also an ideological rationalization of a changing economic order, for abolition served to fuel the expansion of capitalism through the creation of a larger pool of wage earners who could then sell their labor to the capitalist. Though the coffee plantations had originally relied on slave labor, the abolition of the African trade, and later of slavery itself, forced them to turn to wage earners to fill their growing labor needs. At the end of the slave period the most highly sought after laborer, however, was not the African but the European immigrant. The drive to import European labor was a double-faced proposition. From an economic point of view the importation of hundreds of thousands of Europeans would fill the tremendous labor needs of the coffee planters. At the same time, the importation of the European in massive numbers would gradually whiten the population, so the Brazilian leaders hoped, and eliminate the cultural and genetic influence of the large black and mulatto population. Brazil would become more progressive by freeing the black, and more European by diminishing his influence in Brazilian society and culture. These ideas rested on the conclusions of racist European anthropologists and intellectuals of the time who exerted tremendous influence over the Brazilians.

III

Coffee, abolition, and immigration were major social forces at work in Graça Aranha's Brazil, and these forces generated severe contradictions in Brazilian society and thought. On an economic level there was a striking contradiction between the developmental needs and aspirations of Brazil and the needs and aspirations of the expanding European and North American economies. North Atlantic capitalism needed Brazilian raw materials and the Brazilian market, but Brazil needed internal growth and development which was denied it by the demands and directions of the capitalist metropolis. This economic contradiction was in turn accompanied by an intellectual one: between the desire of the Brazilian elites to emulate and imitate European culture, including capitalism, and the desire to develop a viable national economy and national identity. The more the Brazilian elites clung to European economics and European thought, the more dependent they became on Europe's economy and the more they were forced to deny their own cultural and intellectual heritage. The ideological framework which Brazilian intelligentsia imported from Europe along with the goods of capitalism was a reflection of the socio-historical development of Europe and not Brazil. As Canaã so well documents, this imported ideological framework faced its severest adaptive test when dealing with the racial question.

One of the keystones of European thought in the late nineteenth century was a form of racism buttressed by "scientific" evidence. European writers such as Gustave Le Bon and Ernst Haeckel believed that all societies represented stages in the evolutionary history of mankind and that certain races could be empirically demonstrated to be inferior to others. European social theorists "proved" that the highest, most evolved societies were European, and the evolutionarily more retrograde societies were invariably non-white. Evolutionary progress was equated with reason, science, technology, capitalism, and purity of blood—traits which were, not coincidentally, all very visibly developed in Europe.

These theories provided convenient justification for Europe's self-appointed role as the guardian of Mankind's progress. For the dominated economies and the less "pure" societies, however, it wreaked intellectual havoc.

The dilemma of Graça Aranha and similar Brazilian intellectuals was to reconcile their own racially-mixed society with their racist European ideology. It was not a comfortable position as can be seen in Canaã and numerous other literary works of the period. European intellectuals could justify their society's value and superiority with evolutionary schemes which denigrated non-white and racially-mixed societies. Their countries, after all, were not faced with large influxes of non-white immigrants nor did they contain significantly large non-white groups in their midst. Brazilian intellectuals such as Aranha, however, could not rest so self-assured, for if this racist ideology were valid then their society was degenerate and would continue to degenerate as long as it contained such large mestizo and mulatto populations.

Brazilian intellectuals grappled with this contradiction in their ideology coming up with various responses. Some gave themselves
over to the tenets of this racism and denied any hope for a racially-
mixed Brazil, then or ever. Raimundo Nina Rodrigues, a Bahian
physician and ethnologist, chose to accept the ideology and admit
the inferiority of the black and the Brazilian population. The
Negro, he proclaimed, was “hopelessly condemned” and with him
Brazil. A few writers such as Afonso Celso chose to ignore the
racism and glorify the contribution of the different races to
Brazilian society. This position, however, never totally broke with
racist European thought. A significant number of intellectuals,
such as Silvio Romero and Euclides de Cunha, questioned the
value of molding Brazil in the image of Europe, though they were
definitely in favor of a strong Europeanization of their culture and
society. Da Cunha’s Os Sertões is another brilliant
documentation of the cultural and personal anguish caused by the
importation of European ideology.

Ironically, the cultural and racial bias against the black gave rise
to both a valuable critique of the African and Amerindian
contributions to the national heritage and an effort by the elites to
deny and eliminate those contributions in the future. The logical
result of the European ideology was to bring Europe, physically
and culturally, to Brazil, and that is just what the elites attempted
to do. In the decades after 1890 over three million Europeans were
brought to Brazil in an attempt to “bleach” the population. It is in
this socio-historical context that Graça Aranha composed Canaã.

IV

Graça Aranha’s elite credentials were well established and very
solidly European. In the 1880’s he attended one of the two law
schools in Brazil (Recife) where he came into contact with the
latest European books and ideas including positivism, Spencerianism, Darwinism, and their racist overtones. He then
served for several years as a municipal judge in Porto do
Cachoeiro, Espírito Santo, the city which was later to serve as the
setting for his novel. The town was a center of the expanding
coffee industry and was dominated by a German immigrant
population. In the 1890s he entered the diplomatic corps and
served with two of Brazil’s leading international figures: Joaquim
Nabuco and the Baron Rio Branco. He was part of Nabuco’s
missions to Rome and London, and he served as Brazil’s emissary
to Sweden, and later as minister plenipotentiary in Holland and
France. It was in Europe, appropriately enough, that he finished
Canaã. The dominant symbols of Canaã are the young German
immigrants, Lentz and Milka, each representative of opposing
schools of European philosophy. Lentz is the arrogant warrior of
Nietzsche’s superman. Milka, on the other hand, is the soft-
spoken advocate of Tolstoy’s agrarian utopia. They are, in
Aranha’s words, “exponents of two entirely different cultures. One
offered the warlike exploits, butcheries, bloody sacrifices; the
other, a simple farmer, offered it fruits from the earth, flowers from
his garden.” (p. 241) Milka seeks to “generate love” and “unite
with the spirits.” (p. 73) Lentz, however, sees life as struggle and
criminality. “All human pleasures,” he tells Milka, “taste of
blood, everything represents the victory, the expansion of the
warrior.” (p. 73) The road to civilization, he asserts, “lies also
through blood and crime.” (p. 75)

On a much deeper sociological level, these two young Aryans
are the vanguard of European culture, each voicing the concerns of
different sides of the racial question. Lentz is Aranha’s most clearly
defined symbol representing the hardline European stance. He is
in favor of eliminating the “inferior” Brazilian race and
repopulating the country with “superior” Germanic peoples.
“The Brazilian,” he declares, “is not a progressive factor, he is a
hybrid. And civilization will never be accomplished by inferior
races.” (p. 55) The supposed degeneration of the Brazilian people
is clearly equated with its impure, non-white blood. Bad genes, in
modern terms, foretell cultural decay. Lentz is proud of his race
and disdainful of the Brazilians, and he paints a vivid portrait of a
new Brazil which will be biologically and culturally European.

Milka, however, feels sympathy for the Brazilian, though not
respect, a condescending and paternalistic attitude. He feels “as if
the weight of responsibility for the fate of these wretches” falls
upons his shoulders. (p. 27, emphasis added) He is, nonetheless,
dismayed by the passing of the traditional Brazilian culture as it is
eradicated before the advance of the Europeans. “I feel with deep
sorrow,” he says,

that, pretty soon, the city will crumble to ruins surrounded as it is by foreign
colonies which are choking it by degrees until, some day, they will conquer
and transform it ruthlessly.
At the same time, though, he echoes the author’s belief in the
inevitability and necessity of the transforming power of European
culture. “Well,” he goes on to say in the very same breath,
that is the law of life and the fatal destiny of this country. We shall renew this
nation, we shall spread ourselves over it, we shall cover it with our white
bodies and make it great even unto eternity. . . . To be frank with you, the
civilization of this country depends entirely on European immigration . . .
(pp. 49-50, emphasis added)
Counterbalancing this excessive Europeanism are a number of minor characters who reflect Aranha's and the Brazilian elites' incipient nationalism. The mulatto surveyor, Jôca, and a group of local officials (notably a municipal judge) bitterly express the belief that they have become foreigners in their own land. A local landowner complains that "nowadays everything belongs to the foreigner; the government does nothing for the Brazilians; everything is for the Germans..." (p. 26) A municipal judge, who is clearly cognizant of Brazil's dependency, angrily declares that "Brazil is, and has always been, a colony. Our regime is not a free one. We are a protectorate." (p. 196) A local mulatto lawyer presents the most nationalistic reaction to the flood of immigrants and their cultural encroachment. Speaking to the local officials who embrace the foreigners, he exclaims:

You, gentlemen, may wish to sell your native land to the foreigner, you may sell it, but as long as there is a mulatto left in this Brazil, which, after all, belongs to us, things will not run as smooth as my learned doctors imagine.

(p. 194)

This angry cry, however, is a minor voice in the novel and is juxtaposed to the cold reality of the situation as expressed by another of the local officials who sadly sighs, "Poor Brazil!... It was a miserable attempt at nationality." (pp. 194-196)

Clearly, the outlook for the traditional culture and the mulatto is not optimistic. The European characters dominate the novel and the depiction of the local Brazilians is not the least bit flattering. The mulatto is obviously perceived by the author and the European characters as the predominant figure in the population, and he is usually described in animalistic terms. After describing a group of immigrants as "men of iron hands, herculean torso, red beards, and sky-blue eyes" Aranha goes on to say:

There was one young mulatto among them, and he could be distinguished easily. His face was pitted with smallpox; his complexion was bronzed; he wore a short curly beard and his short hair stood upright on his head. With his bloodshot eyes and his teeth, pointed like those of a saw, he had at times the appearance of an evil satyr. (p. 85)

This derogatory and condescending attitude toward the native Brazilian is not restricted to Lenz, but is general among the European immigrants including Milkau. These descriptions are merely manifestations of a more fundamental assumption underlying the entire novel: the cultural and biological degeneracy of the Brazilian when compared to the European. As one of the Brazilian characters admits, "The decadence of our people presents a deplorable mixture of the savagery of the new-born races with the degeneracy of the races that are becoming exhausted." (p. 292) He sees Brazil giving way to the superior races of Europe and North America and laments, "This poor Brazil is but a corpse which is rapidly decomposing... The urubus are coming... from Europe, from the United States... It is a conquest..." (p. 290)

Porto do Cachoeiro is the meeting ground of the two races, symbolic of the larger transformation taking place in Brazil. As Milkau enters the city for the first time he notes the two distinct but coexistent cultures "united by a bridge." (p. 37) He reads into the region's history the future of all Brazil.

Porto do Cachoeiro was the boundary of two worlds that met each other. The one betrayed the past in the sad and angular landscape of the east, where marks of exhaustion branded even the smallest objects. There could be seen ranches in ruins, abandoned dwellings, traces of slave huts, chapels, all perfumed and consecrated by death. The waterfall formed the boundary. On the other side the landscape presented stronger and darker lines. It was a new land, ready to shelter the avalanche of immigrants who came from the old regions of the other hemisphere, avidly seeking her full warm breasts. Here was to germinate the generation who would some day cover all the land...

(pp. 40-41)

The incipient nationalism of the Brazilian characters and the desire to Europeanize Brazil are conflicting tendencies which pervade not only the novel and the author's own thinking, but also Brazilian thought during the Old Republic. Herein lay the dilemma and trauma of the intellectuals of that generation. The equally coveted goals—of a distinctly national character and a Europeanized culture—resulted in a generation of writers and literature psychically torn between European ideas and Brazilian society which those ideas condemned for its biological and cultural degeneracy. Torn between these apparently mutually opposing goals, many Brazilian intellectuals developed an almost schizophrenic perspective, aping the Europe they envied, and constantly seeking sources of pride in the society which European culture denigrated.

Even when counting on European salvation, however, the intellectual in Arenha's shoes was plagued by doubts about the possibility of any salvation. A nagging doubt forces Aranha to question whether Brazil can be saved by anyone, Brazilian or European. As Lenz observes, "Here, the mind is dwarfed by the stupendous majesty of nature... It is impossible to have any civilization in this country... The earth itself, with this violence,
this exuberance, is an immense spectacle..." which will destroy even the Europeans. (pp. 54-55) Indeed, the main characters are ravaged by the violence of the tropics. The local people are seen as inferior due to the effects of climate and geography, as well as their biology. As one Brazilian laments, "You see, my friend, it is no use... There is no possible salvation for us. The race is incapable of being civilized..." (p. 296) The German servant girl Mary Perutz is betrayed by her own people, becomes an outcast, and her child who should be the hope for the future—a European future—is devoured by wild animals in the forest. The European, Aranha, seems to be saying, will be destroyed by the tropics as well.

It is in the context of the national versus foreign question that the central symbol of the novel emerges—that of Canaan, the promised land. Milkau is clearly the symbolic figure of Moses who will lead his people to the promised land. He and Lentz alike left Europe seeking to leave behind its faults and failings and to resurrect its glories in the New World. As Aranha says, "The two immigrants, in the silence of the road, united by a common hope and a common admiration, began to praise the Land of Canaan." (p. 81, emphasis added) Eventually Milkau begins to reflect Aranha's pessimism and he feels his promised land slipping away. "Had he not fled," he reflects,

from the human cruelty, abandoning the old, hateful society to begin life anew in the virginity of an immaculate world where peace must be inalterable? Why then did the spectre of misery pursue him even here? (pp. 231-232)

Mary's plight finally turns Milkau away from the city and like Moses leading his people, he leads Mary to the mountaintop in search of a glimpse of their Canaan—only to be disappointed at their vision. "It is useless... the Promised Land," he is forced to admit, "which I was going to show you and which I was anxiously seeking, is not there at all... It does not exist yet. Let us stop here," he tells Mary, "and wait for it to come with the blood of redeemed generations." (p. 320) In the end he cries, "Canaan! Canaan!... But the longed-for land never appeared... Never... They ran... they ran..." (p. 319) The promised land, Aranha seems to be saying, is in the blood of future generation of Brazilians redeemed by European blood, but that the promised land lies in the distant future, and is perhaps illusory. The final note of the novel is indecisive and unclear but pessimistic.

The frustrating ambiguity of Canaan undoubtedly stems from its author's own failure to come to grips with the problems and paradoxes of elite ideology in late nineteenth century Brazil. The novel frankly expresses the elite ideal of Europeanization as well as the nagging and persistent doubts about that coveted ideal. The flaws in the work strongly suggest poorly formulated and inarticulate reservations about making Brazil over in Europe's image.

Aranha's novel ultimately fails because (with hindsight) we can see that he was attempting an impossible task—reconciliation of European racist theory with Brazilian nationalism. He wanted a strong a culturally advanced Brazil, but on Europe's impossible terms—the elimination of what was the very essence of Brazil, the fusion of Amerindian, European, and African peoples. The only alternatives for Aranha's generation were to deny their own heritage, to reject total Europeanization, or to accommodate the best of both worlds. With sufficient hindsight one can see that the last option was possible only with the rejection of the racist social theory of the period. Failing to do so resulted in a generation of intellectuals, like Aranha, torn between the ramifications of their imported ideology and their own Brazilianness. As Aranha's work so vividly demonstrates, adaptation of European ideology to Brazilian circumstances, without rejecting its racist elements, could only result in confusion and intellectual anguish. It would remain for a later generation, reflecting on different social and economic conditions, to move beyond the limitations of the ideology of this period, and to reshape Brazilian thought.
Notes


5. The law had a number of restrictions and qualifications which made it possible to delay actual emancipation until the age of twenty-one. In many cases the law was simply ignored and some contend it did not end the natural increase in the slave population. See Robert Conrad, The Destructation of Brazilian Slavery 1850-1888 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), especially pp. 90-91; and Robert Brent Toplin, The Abolition of Slavery in Brazil (New York: Atheneum, 1975), especially pp. 20-21.


7. Skidmore, pp. 44-45.


9. Ironically, Nina Rodrigues’ racial studies made him a pioneer in Afro-Brazilian studies, a role which today endears him to all nationalists. The force of the racist ideology is fully appreciated only when one takes into account that Nina Rodrigues himself was a mulatto. See Skidmore, pp. 57-62. This is from p. 60.


11. No serious biography has been written on Graça Aranha. Augusto Emilio Estelita Lins, Graça Aranha e os “Canai” (Rio de Janeiro: Livraria São José, 1967) is a disorganized attempt to relate the places and people in the novel with the biographical data of Aranha’s life in Porto do Cachoeiro.

12. Aranha’s diplomatic career is described in Alatorre’s translation, p. viii.

13. “In his innermost thoughts, Lentz felt some pleasure at these testimonials of the inability of the Brazilian people to impose their own language upon other men. This weakness, would it not be like a breach through which the Germanic ambitions would in the future take possession of this magnificent country? And he pondered on this idea, with his eyes wide open and shining.” (p. 87)

14. Joca’s “‘native soul forgot for a moment his painful ostracism in his own native country, among people from foreign lands.” (p. 178)

15. Watching Joca, Mlkau exclaims at one point, “What a monkey!” (p. 144)

16. Good examples of this are pp. 67 and 297.