

“Sertão Dentro”

The Backlands in Early Modern Portuguese Writings

ABSTRACT: This article investigates uses of the term *sertão* in the writings of Portuguese travelers to America, Africa, and Asia in the sixteenth century. By comparing lexicon and discursive devices where the term is employed, this study aims to explore the distinct levels of certainty and speculation expressed by their authors while writing about what cannot yet be seen in their predominantly coastal journeys. I discuss variations and patterns in the description of a remote and somewhat unreachable *sertão* and consider how their use in chronicles about Brazil might have started to give form to the way the *sertão* would be later understood by Brazilian authors.

KEYWORDS: Backlands, Portuguese chronicles, sixteenth century

Nos rios do Sertão, se existe,
a água corre despenteada.

— João Cabral de Melo Neto, “Poema(s) da cabra”

The Brazilian Sertão and the Sertão Everywhere

In her essay “Anotações à margem do regionalismo” (“Notes in the Margin of Regionalism,” 1996), Walnice Nogueira Galvão makes the point that “nossas letras, focalizando seu interesse no interior, se desenrolam como se não emanassem de um país com oito mil quilômetros de litoral. Tudo se passa como se os portugueses voltassem as costas ao continente, enquanto se lançam aos mares, e os brasileiros voltassem as costas aos mares, enquanto direcionam suas indagações para o interior” (45).¹

In fact, a quick look at some major Brazilian works would confirm Galvão’s words. An immediate example quoted by Galvão is Euclides da Cunha’s *Os sertões* (*Rebellion in the Backlands*, 1902), with the well-known prediction from Antônio Conselheiro that “o sertão virará praia e a praia virará sertão” (45).² Or we can

go back to the eighteenth century, when, in his epic poem *Caramuru* (written in 1781), Santa Rita Durão bases his writing on a Camonian model but, instead of the *mares nunca dantes navegados*,³ narrates the adventures of the Portuguese known as *Caramuru* in the *sertão vasto*⁴ or *sertão fundo*,⁵ as the author repeatedly refers to the region.

We can also recall Riobaldo's words in João Guimarães Rosa's *Grande Sertão: Veredas* (*The Devil to Pay in the Backlands*, 1956): "A gente tem de sair do sertão! Mas só se sai do sertão é tomando conta dele a dentro . . . Agora perdi. Estou preso" (391).⁶ The impossibility of the character's leaving the sertão seems to be proportional to the difficulty of entering into it expressed by early Portuguese travelers. At the same time, the hesitation expressed by the travelers regarding how to navigate the area and what they would find in its deep, vast lands reverberates in Riobaldo's awareness of its uncontrollable character: "Todos que malmontam no sertão só alcançam de reger em rédea por uns trechos; que sorrateiro o sertão vai virando tigre debaixo da sela" (532).⁷ In fact, as I propose in this article, the remoteness and indeterminacy of the Brazilian sertão is already suggested in Pero Vaz de Caminha's letter—that is, in the very first account of what would become Brazil.⁸

The backlands referred to by Caminha, however, are significantly closer to the ocean than those mentioned decades later by Gabriel Soares de Souza, for example. They are even more distinct from the sertão explored by the *bandeiras*⁹ during the colonial period, the expeditions of the nineteenth century, or the sertão depicted at the turn of the twentieth century by Euclides da Cunha, or even João Guimarães Rosa's later sertão. In the case of Brazil, as the frontier moves to the interior, the sertão cannot be applied to a specific region or to any definite delimitations. Rather, it is a moving category. As Antonio Carlos R. Moraes argues in "O sertão: Um 'outro' geográfico" ("The Backland: A Geographical 'Other,'" 2009), "O sertão não é uma materialidade da superfície terrestre, mas uma realidade simbólica: uma ideologia geográfica" (89).¹⁰

This geographically ideological aspect becomes even clearer when, by crossing the Atlantic Ocean and eventually the Cape of Good Hope, we find the inlands of what currently are Mozambique, Ethiopia, and India, for example, being referred to as *sertões*. Consequently, when we talk about the sertão, we are talking about these places that, by their distance from the coast and the difficulties involved in entering them, configure a void for the European view in the early modern period.¹¹ If the notion of sertão cannot be attached to a specific geographic

region, it presumably does not have to be attached to a Brazilian setting. However, do the depictions of African and Asian sertões revolve around this remoteness and inaccessibility that would fundamentally mark this notion in Brazil?

In this study, I examine some of the basic attributes and discursive devices associated with the sertão in sixteenth-century Portuguese chronicles set in Brazil, Africa, and Asia. I want to investigate whether the hermetic quality that makes this space initially closed to Portuguese presence and exploration in the Americas is also present in chronicles focused on other continents. Following this idea, I have two main objectives: to expand the studies on the sertão beyond Brazil and back into the early modern period; and to consider how some particular aspects of its early descriptions might help to understand the features and the importance of backland areas in a Brazilian context.

This movement outward from and inward to the Brazilian sertão consists of four parts and a conclusion. I will first offer a brief overview of early uses of the term in Portuguese writings. Second, I will focus on the lexicon generally associated with the sertão. In the third section, I will discuss some discursive strategies used by the authors in order to show either a broader or more limited knowledge of the sertões to which they refer. In the fourth section, I make use of Michel Foucault's insights into sixteenth-century epistemology to discuss the different levels of commitment to accuracy adopted by the authors. Finally, my conclusion will point out some reasons for which this study might be helpful in understanding the term in Brazil.

The Sertão in Portuguese Accounts: An Overview

The word *sertão* probably has its origin in the term *desertão*: a large desert or a scarcely inhabited and mapped area.¹² In fact, the term *sertão* was already used to designate the Portuguese interior in the late Middle Ages. However, according to Janaína Amado in "Região, sertão, nação" ("Backlands, Region, Nation," 1995), it was from the fifteenth century onward that "usaram-na também para nomear espaços vastos, interiores, situados dentro das possessões recém-conquistadas ou contíguos a elas, sobre os quais pouco ou nada sabiam" (147).¹³

An early example of the use of the term to describe overseas territories is found in the *Crónica da tomada de Ceuta* (Chronicle of Ceuta's Conquest), concluded in 1450 by the royal chronicler Gomes Eanes Zurara, and narrates the emblematic conquest of Ceuta in 1415. The term appears in an explanation of the city's geography: "a cidade pela maior parte é cercada d'água, onde tinha assaz segu-

rança, e aquele pequeno espaço que ficava da parte do sertão, não lhe cumpria melhor guarda" (97).¹⁴ This single use of the word contrasts with its multiple occurrence in Zurara's next work, *Crónica do descobrimento e conquista da Guiné* (*Chronicle of the Discovery and Conquest of Guinea*, 1453), where it also works as a counterpoint to the sea. It is interesting to take note of some of the phrases that would later become frequent in describing the sertão, such as "três aldeias, que eram assaz dentro pelo sertão" (208)¹⁵ or "o rastro ia contra o sertão" (345).¹⁶

While it has only one occurrence in Álvaro Velho's travelogue of Vasco da Gama's first and pioneering journey to East Africa and India in 1497,¹⁷ it is relatively frequent in Tomé Pires's *Suma Oriental* (*Summary of the Orient*, 1515), one of the oldest Portuguese chronicles about Asia. It appears many times in the phrase *da banda do sertão*,¹⁸ which is also common in Fernão Lopes de Castanheda's *História do descobrimento e conquista da Índia pelos Portugueses* (*History of the Discovery and Conquest of India by the Portuguese*, 1551). Fernão Mendes Pinto, in his *Peregrinação* (*Pilgrimage*, 1614), often prefers to use *no interior do sertão*¹⁹ or *no âmagô do sertão*.²⁰

In Castanheda's work, a curious example of a typical way of regarding the sertão is his reference to Meca: "a sete léguas desta cidade [de Iudá] pelo sertão está a maldita casa de Meca, a que os mouros fazem suas romarias" (22).²¹ One of the most frequent forms for describing what the Portuguese have found or expect to find inland is in terms of the coast as the main point of view, and the distance from a city or geographical point of interest measured in leagues with little or no indication concerning the direction to be taken within the backlands. This is how, for instance, Mendes Pinto describes the kingdom of Siam: "tem por sua graduação quase setecentas léguas de costa, e cento e sessenta de largura no sertão" (413).²²

This pattern is also repeated in the chronicles about America, especially when inland journeys start to take place. In his *Tratado descritivo do Brasil* (*Descriptive Treatise on Brazil*, 1587) Gabriel Soares de Souza adds to these phrases and devices some mentions of courses of rivers²³ and of latitudes, such as in the work's opening paragraph: "a província do Brasil está situada além da linha equinocial da parte do sul, [. . .] e vai correndo esta linha pelo sertão desta província até 45 graus, pouco mais ou menos" (41).²⁴ On the other hand, Fernão Cardim uses much less specific terms or data in his accounts: "e se espalharam por uma corda do sertão" (172)²⁵ or "não se estendem pelo sertão adentro mais de meia légua até uma légua" (262).²⁶

As one can notice, certain patterns of description cross centuries and continents, but accounts of relatively close areas even within the interval of a few decades can differ significantly from each other. Undoubtedly, these variations and recurrences follow the diversity of aims and profiles of their authors. I want to suggest, nevertheless, that the accounts of the sertão in Brazil tend to differ from those of Portuguese presence in Africa and Asia in terms of their certainty about what they can find. Although exceptions could be pointed out, I propose to show, in the next pages, that the former usually seems to be much less sure of what is in the sertão than the latter. This leads to a more speculative and skeptical tone, reflected in a more common use of indirect discourse and hypothetical sentences instead of more direct assertions.

In order to study these two trends in more detail, I am going to concentrate my analysis on the uses of the term *sertão* in four works from the sixteenth century. By approaching only passages where the term is present, I will necessarily leave out of consideration a series of related words and expressions, such as *interior* (interior), *na terra* (on land), or *dentro* (inside).²⁷ The works concerning Africa and Asia to be discussed here are, respectively, Duarte Barbosa's *O livro de Duarte Barbosa* (*The Book of Duarte Barbosa*, 1517) and the first volume of João de Barros's *Décadas de Ásia* (*Decades of Asia*, 1552), especially the description of the kingdom of Monomotapa. On the Brazilian side, I will examine the *Carta de Pero Vaz de Caminha* (*The Letter of Pero Vaz de Caminha*, 1500) and Pero de Magalhães Gandavo's *História da província de Santa Cruz* (*History of Santa Cruz Province*, 1576). The former was, predictably, the first European document to refer to the Brazilian sertão, and the second was written two decades after the foundation of São Paulo de Piratininga in 1554.

No interior do sertão: Lexicon and Phrases

As Maria Elisa N. S. Mader notes in *O vazio: O sertão no imaginário da colônia nos séculos XVI e XVII* (*The Emptiness: The Backlands in Colonial Imaginary in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, 1995), the sertão was mainly understood as an unexplored place and, for this reason, "um vazio povoado de imagens construídas a partir dos elementos existentes no seu imaginário [português]" (19).²⁸ But how is this sensation of emptiness, of unknowability and of resistance to Portuguese exploration, created?

The first aspect to be taken into account is the redundancy with which the sertão's remoteness and indeterminacy are reaffirmed. The very term *sertão*, as

we have seen, already implies inwardness in relation to the coast. Nevertheless, these authors' mentions of the *sertão* are recurrently accompanied by other terms that reinforce this aspect.

Gandavo is perhaps the one who most prolifically uses intensifying terms adjoined to his references to the backlands. Some examples are "alguns deles nascem no interior do *sertão*" (9);²⁹ "e não se acham senão pelo *sertão* dentro muito longe" (23);³⁰ "matos e alagadiços geram—se [. . .] pelo *sertão* dentro infinitos" (24);³¹ and "[aconteceu de os índios] meterem—se pelo *sertão* dentro" (46).³² From these passages (and one could easily cite many more), we gain an idea of how Gandavo frequently seems to be dissatisfied with the implications of the term *sertão* itself, to the point of creating redundancies by reinforcing them with words such as *interior* and *dentro*, and the phrase *meter-se pelo sertão*.³³ After all, we could not have a *sertão fora*³⁴ or an *exterior do sertão*³⁵—these would be references to the coast. Consequently, not only does this intensifying strategy end up by making even more explicit the threshold between interior and exterior; it also gives the former an unknowable quality, as if whatever is inside the *sertão* would be locked inside a box.

Speaking of the *sertão* as a kind of locked box, however, raises another consequence: as a geographically movable category, any idea of the *sertão*'s boundaries would be initially undetermined. By being beyond the limits of the European gaze, its borders exist necessarily only on the side of the coast. In contrast to Gandavo's famous comparison of the Brazilian coast to a harp (7), which would function as a sort of limitation of frontiers, the phrase *meter-se pelo sertão* still brings about the idea of infinitude, as if some ends of the box were invisible—as they actually were. In this sense, it is interesting that Mendes Pinto uses the expression "a porta do *sertão*" (184),³⁶ as if to suggest this one-sided limit.

Pero Vaz de Caminha, on the other hand, does not use such intensifiers in his letter. Shorter than Gandavo's text, it mentions the *sertão* only two times—but each occurrence is very significant. The occurrence reads as follows: "os arvoredos são mui, muitos e grandes, e de infindas maneiras; não duvido que por esse *sertão* haja muitas aves!" (103).³⁷ The second reads: "pelo *sertão* nos pareceu do mar muito grande, porque a estender olhos não podíamos ver senão terra com arvoredos, que nos parecia mui longa" (12).³⁸

As we can see, the *sertão* is built in Caminha as what cannot be seen. For being a first contact with American territories, incursions into the *sertão* dentro are not yet a real possibility. The *sertão* appears in this case as an extensive wall

of vegetation blocking Portuguese vision, and Caminha explicitly stresses his limited point of view—from the sea. Moreover, when speculating about what could be beyond the wall of trees, Caminha uses phrases such as *não duvido que* or *nos pareceu*. The latter phrase is repeated throughout the letter, sometimes to establish an analogy, sometimes to introduce an opinion or an impression. When related to the territory, it manifests exactly this state of ignorance that can only be dealt with by imagining what could be beyond his vision—in this case, a huge land or countless parrots.

Differently from Caminha but similarly to Gandavo, Duarte Barbosa does not face the surprise of the very first contact, but tries to map and describe territories about which the Portuguese were still largely ignorant and with which they had had only an indirect contact. Starting in the Cabo de São Sebastião in southeastern Africa and ending in the Léqueos country in India, the sections of Barbosa's account typically begin with the phrase *indo ao longo da costa*, with a following description of the coast and then of the landscape, as well as the people expected to be found farther inland.

Most of these factual or hypothetical incursions to the sertão are introduced with more or less the same terms used by Gandavo. For instance: “então fugiram muitos deles caminho do sertão” (28);³⁹ “há muito ouro que vem de dentro do sertão” (31);⁴⁰ “distante deste porto de Judá uma jornada pelo sertão, está a grande cidade de Meca” (35);⁴¹ “e o rei está sempre dentro no sertão” (38);⁴² “pelo sertão dela [da terra de Xaer] é tudo habitado de alarves” (41);⁴³ and “desta cidade de Champanel contra o sertão está outra muito maior que ela” (62).⁴⁴

We have already seen how Barbosa, like Gandavo, uses the “dentro do sertão” construction to emphasize this space's opposition to the coast. Barbosa also uses expressions certainly incompatible with Gandavo's understanding of the Brazilian backlands. I am referring to the fact that Barbosa's sertão has a caminho and cities and that one can go “contra o sertão.”⁴⁵ In other words, instead of this unknown sort of box closed by a barrier of vegetation, Barbosa's African sertão frequently has paths and cities that can be traveled and reached. Even when the author has not personally been to the places he describes, he still has a much clearer way of grasping what can be found there. In fact, an author such as Gabriel Soares de Souza, in many aspects more confident than Caminha and Gandavo in his affirmations about the sertão, tends to map the sertão in a similar fashion to Barbosa, but he does so mainly when the course of a river is being followed. What we have in Barbosa's case, therefore, is a view of the

sertão as something explorable, though mostly untouched by the Portuguese, and whose possibilities of colonization and exploitation are visibly more immediate than those of the Brazilian sertão.

João de Barros's view of the African sertão is similar to Barbosa's, but he adds some complexity to his account. The first two appearances of the sertão in Barros's immense text are part of the expression "sertão da terra"⁴⁶ (1:10, 1:19). It is curious that Barros uses this phrase to refer to Portugal's inland country and the region near Ceuta (Morocco). Barros seem to reserve the expression *sertão da terra* mainly for relatively familiar places, as in the case of Portugal's own inland territory and the land surrounding a North African city that had been ruled by the Portuguese for over a century.

When Barros leaves Portugal and its colonial dominions, the phrase *sertão da terra* also ceases to be used so frequently: "e estes são os de dentro do sertão" (1:81);⁴⁷ "que entretanto elas entrassem pelo sertão" (1:186);⁴⁸ "deixou as terras do sertão e veio buscar os portos do mar" (1:203);⁴⁹ "a qual cidade jaz (. . .) metida dentro do sertão por distância de cento e quarenta léguas" (1:259);⁵⁰ "um deles era ausentado, e metido pelo sertão" (1:305).⁵¹ *Sertão da terra* reappears only twice, in the kingdom of Congo (1:235) and when the Portuguese had already arrived in India (1:325).

Barros's use of the term *sertão* does not seem to differ fundamentally from that of Caminha and Gandavo. However, it is interesting to notice that the *sertão* is employed mostly to designate lands in Portugal and Ceuta, differently from the other authors approached here. Moreover, Barros tends to establish a difference between the familiar *sertão da terra* and the more mysterious *dentro do sertão*.⁵²

Certainty and Speculation

What are the discursive devices by which the Portuguese chroniclers introduce what they believe to exist or at least know that they do not know? Duarte Barbosa offers the following:

No mesmo sítio destes lugares de mouros, entrando pelo sertão, está um mui grande reino do Preste João, a que os mouros chamam o Abexim, que é mui grande e mui formoso de terras. Há nele muita gente, e tem muitos reinos ao redor sujeitos a si, que estão a seu mandado e debaixo da sua governança. (32)⁵³

Barbosa goes on to add: "Em toda esta costa há muito ouro que vem de dentro do sertão do grande reino do Abexim, que é terra do Preste João" (31).⁵⁴

At first glance, such descriptions seem to be made by somebody who has either personally been to the kingdom of Prester John or received a very accurate report by an eyewitness. The sentences are assertions in direct discourse that use the present indicative and do not suggest any doubt concerning the validity of the content—there would not be space, for example, for phrases such as *parece-me que*⁵⁵ or *duvido que*,⁵⁶ as used by Caminha. Nevertheless, not only had Barbosa never actually been to the sertão he so confidently describes, but its reality proved to be quite distinct when, a few years later, in 1520, the Portuguese actually entered the sertão where the legendary Christian king was believed to reside. As Charles Boxer (1969) explains: "When [the Portuguese, under the leadership of Pedro de Covilhã] finally made contact with the Negus of Abyssinia in 1520, they were naturally disappointed to find that Prester John was only the semi-barbarous potentate of a poor highland kingdom" (36).

In chapter 1 of book 10 of the first *Década*, Barros describes in similar terms the kingdom of Monomotapa, often referred by him as Benomotápa, which would be located in the backlands of Mozambique, in the region of Sofala. Even though, according to Melyn Newitt in *A History of Mozambique*, Barros had never been to East Africa (39), he comfortably writes that "toda terra, que contamos por reino de Sofala, é uma grande região, que senhoreia um príncipe chamado Benomotápa, a qual abraçam em modo de ilha dois braços de um rio, que procede do mais notável lago, que toda a terra de África tem [. . .]. Pela qual parte podemos dizer ser este grão lago mais vizinho ao nosso oceano ocidental, que ao oriental, segundo a situação de Ptolomeu" (372–373).⁵⁷

He then goes on to add that the majority of the rivers in Benomotápa "levam muito ouro, que nasce nela. [. . .] deste rio Cuame até o Cabo das Correntes por dentro do sertão é terra excelente; temperada, sadia, fresca, fértil de todas as coisas, que se nela produzem" (374–375).⁵⁸

As Newitt puts it, Barros's description of East Africa essentially constitutes "trying to fit the new geographical knowledge into the traditional Ptolemaic geography of Africa" (*East Africa* 36). Beyond the influence of Ptolemy, Portuguese explorers and travel writers were so fascinated by the Spanish discovery of silver and gold in the Americas that the desire to repeat their fortune led to the myth of a rich Monomotapa: "they imagined [. . .] that this monarchy rivaled the great

empires of the Aztecs and the Incas [. . .]; the reality, however, was somewhat different" (Newitt, *A History* 39).

However inaccurate early Portuguese descriptions of the sertão might appear to our contemporary eyes, they nonetheless reveal a great deal about the fundamental "interweaving of language and things" that formed the sixteenth-century episteme as described by Michel Foucault in *The Order of Things* (38). I will later concentrate on this issue, but for the moment let us recall Caminha's second mention of the sertão: "Pelo sertão nos pareceu do mar muito grande porque a estender olhos não podíamos ver senão terra com arvoredos que nos parecia mui longa terra. Nela até agora não pudemos saber que haja ouro nem prata nela nem nenhuma coisa de metal nem de ferro, nem lho vimos, mas a terra em si é de muito bons ares frescos e temperados como os de Entre-Douro-e-Minho porque neste tempo d'agora assim os achávamos como os de lá" (12).⁵⁹

The contrast between this account and the terms in which Barros and Barbosa write about the African sertão is striking. Instead of relying on others' accounts and incorporating legends and ancient systems to what he sees, Caminha limits himself to make assertions concerning what he can actually see. When the area at stake is beyond his gaze, he systematically uses the verb *parecer* or states clearly that he does not know (for example, whether there are precious metals in the land). As Alessandro Zir argues in *Luso-Brazilian Encounters of the Sixteenth Century: A Styles of Thinking Approach* (2011): "Caminha explicitly and peculiarly intersperses his own doubts among the external happenings he witnesses. The undeniable result is that what the Indians and the land truly had to offer is [. . .] eluded in Caminha's account—eluded in the sense of being withdrawn in the same movement it was supposedly shown" (23, Zir's italics). The wall of trees thus functions almost as another rhetorical device that allows him to leave "all possibilities in abeyance" (23).

One might claim that, since Caminha is in his first contact with something totally new, it is reasonable to expect him to be more reticent and less committed to previous suppositions than Barros and Barbosa, who had to deal with a whole apparatus of beliefs, legends, and theories. In this sense, Gandavo's work may draw interesting connections with Caminha's letter. Gandavo writes almost eighty years later than Caminha, decades after Barbosa and Barros, and when the Portuguese were incomparably more established in the Brazil; however, in the last part of his *Tratado*, titled "Das grandes riquezas que se esperam da terra

do sertão” (“On the Great Riches We Expect to Find in the Earth of the Backlands”), he states, “Esta Província Santa Cruz, além de ser tão fértil como digo, é abastada de todos os mantimentos necessários para a vida do homem, é certo ser também mui rica, e haver nela muito ouro e pedraria, de que se tem grandes esperanças. E a maneira como isto se veio a denunciar e ter por causa averiguada foi por via dos Índios da terra” (46).⁶⁰

Gandavo is evidently much more certain about the presence of precious metals in the Americas than Caminha could be, and he affirms that they do exist because he saw Indians bringing them from the sertão. Instead of using direct speech and present-tense affirmations, he tells the story of a group of Indians who seem to have walked to Peru and back carrying gold and precious stones. However fantastic the notion of a Peru so close to Brazil’s eastern coast may seem, it is nonetheless within the realm of the possible for Gandavo’s readers. And it is qualified as an account based on what the Indians themselves said—Gandavo does not take their words as his own. Here is another example of how he understands the Indians’ words: “Além da certeza que por esta via temos [the Indians that Gandavo believes to have arrived in Peru] há outros muitos índios na terra que tão bem afirmam haver no sertão muito ouro, os quais posto que são gente de pouca fé e verdade, dá-se-lhes crédito nesta parte, porque acerca disto os mais deles são contestes, e falam em diversas partes por uma boca” (38). Even though Gandavo ends up validating the Indians’ words, he does not do so before exposing his doubts and his reasons for not wholly believing in them—they might not be faithful and truthful, but the fact that so many people attest the same information serves for him as evidence. Nevertheless, he keeps their discourse explicitly separated from his, and does not defend unconditionally the existence of gold and other richness. How, therefore, can we think about this distinction arisen in the approaches to African and Brazilian backlands?

Seeking Signs

To describe how the Europeans understood the new region they traveled to and its peculiarities, Helder Macedo (2009) notes that “it was best to record what was imaginable, placing both what was actually there and what was not on the same imaginary plane, where expectation precedes knowledge, interpretation is superimposed on observation, and analogy neutralizes difference” (178). In many senses, this is also how Foucault understands the sixteenth-century episteme, in which “the nature of things, their coexistence, the way in which they are linked

together and communicate is nothing other than their resemblance. And that resemblance is visible only in the network of signs that crosses the world from one end to the other" (28). Thus the process of knowing would be based on identifying resemblances among visible signs in "an endless zigzag course" (30) that continues in a macrocosmic level. This leads to a nondistinction between things and writing, since the interpretation of something is already part of it. This is why, when the chroniclers try to explain the areas Europeans have not been to before, they rely mostly on analogies, since the resemblance between the two terms being compared would serve as a parameter for knowledge.

In general, the writers discussed here make frequent use of such analogies. Barros, for instance, bases his description of Central Africa on the Ptolemaic system. As Newitt notes, the information he provides is often extraordinarily accurate (*East Africa* 37), but in this case, it is accurate within a specific episteme. Similarly, Caminha frequently uses the verb *parecer* to establish analogies, such as the following: "um ramal grande de continhas brancas, miúdas que querem parecer de aljôfar" (2).⁶¹

Nevertheless, the examples provided in the last two sections pose a problem concerning how the chroniclers conceptualize the sertão. All of them seem to agree on depicting the sertão as a closed, somewhat more remote and mysterious space, but chronicles about Africa and Asia tend to be more assertive and confident about what can be found in the sertão, whereas the texts on the Brazilian sertão tend to be more speculative and hesitant.

Many factors might shed light on the question. For example, the Portuguese had received news from Africa and Asia many decades before they actually managed to go there, whereas America had remained unknown until 1492. Moreover, because they were much more oriented toward the Indian Ocean than toward the western side of the Atlantic, the interest in exploring the Brazilian sertão would remain significantly lower in this period.

Zir makes a clarifying point concerning especially Soares de Sousa, but also to a certain degree Gandavo and Caminha, according to which "we would have, thus, already in the sixteenth century, an example of cognitive undertakings that Michel Foucault would locate in the seventeenth century" (44). Thus even though a series of legends and assumptions approximated the Portuguese understanding of the Brazilian sertão to the African and Asian ones,⁶² the way they are exposed by the chroniclers remains relatively alien to the writing of newly discovered territories in the sixteenth century.

In his *Visão do Paraíso* (*Vision of Paradise*, 1969), Sérgio Buarque de Holanda argues that the Portuguese tend to rely on immediate experience rather than on legends and beliefs when describing the Americas, so that their attitude “quase exclui a surpresa” (236):⁶³ “se parecem acolher, aqui e ali notícias inverossímeis e fabulosas sobre os segredos do sertão, fazem-no de ordinário com discreta reserva. [. . .] E assim quando cedem, porventura, ao prestígio dos loci amoeni clássicos, tão comumente seguidos nas descrições da época, são levados, talvez insensivelmente, a podá-los das frondosidades fantásticas, geralmente inseparáveis do antigo esquema” (236).⁶⁴

Although Holanda’s point would be valid for Portuguese travelers in any territory, he also shows that their previous knowledge about Africa and Asia would lead to a higher level of conviction on what they could find, as compared to America in the same period (222).

Thus these points strengthen the idea of the sertão—and especially the Brazilian sertão—as a space resistant to knowledge and exploration even for the power of analogy of explaining these new realities in the period. They also constitute an important foundation for how it would be depicted in colonial and postcolonial Brazilian literature, as we saw in this article’s opening paragraphs.

Conclusion

Despite its nonexhaustive character, this article has exposed some features of early modern backlands’ descriptions that would remain present and have further developments in Brazilian thought and literature. As Janaína Amado synthesizes it, “Vivido como experiência histórica, ‘sertão’ constituiu desde cedo, por meio do pensamento social, uma categoria de entendimento do Brasil” (146).⁶⁵ Either as a primitive, traditionalistic region, as opposed to the coast, or as sort of core of the nation (Lima; Vasconcelos), the sertão is already defined, in these writings, as a remote and closed space that challenges exploration and colonization.

Contrary to the African and Asian sertões, the Brazilian sertão can hardly be seen and described. Its entrance is also understood as a sort of mobile threshold, or, to use Mendes Pinto’s metaphor, a door, but an almost closed one. This door hides spaces that are potentially vast and full of resources but that cannot be completely mapped.

This resistance to observation and recording is present in all the writings here approached: what varies is the level of comfort expressed by each chroni-

cler with it. This is when, as we have seen, there seems to be a tendency in writings about the Americas to avoid assertions in a direct discourse and to express doubts concerning the backlands. As I tried to show in the first pages of this article, such devices, which usually reaffirm a quality of mystery and unreachableness, can be seen throughout the subsequent centuries and have their role in the formation of a literary tradition so influenced by travel accounts to the interior as the Brazilian one,⁶⁶ fascinated as it is by what Caminha defined as that which is beyond the bush.

NOTES

1. "Our literature, by focusing on the interior, develops as if it didn't emerge from a country with an eight-thousand-kilometer coast. It's as though the Portuguese turned their backs to the continent while launching themselves to the sea, whereas the Brazilians turned their backs to the sea while directing their questions to the interior."

2. "The backlands will become beach and the beach will become sertão."

3. "Uncharted waters"

4. "Vast backlands"

5. "Deep backlands"

6. "One must leave the backlands! But one only leaves the backlands by taking charge of them from inside . . . Now I've lost. I'm imprisoned."

7. "All who dare to mount the backlands don't manage to control the reins for more than a few paces, for the sly backlands becomes a tiger beneath the saddle."

8. For more examples of the sertão in Brazilian literature, see Teles, "O lu(g)ar dos sertões."

9. "Inland expeditions"

10. "The backlands are not a materiality of earthly surface, but a symbolic reality: a geographic ideology."

11. For the symbolic force of the sertão in early modern chroniclers in Brazil, see Mader, "O vazio: O sertão no imaginário da colônia nos séculos XVI e XVII."

12. For further discussion on the etymology of the word, see Ferreira, "Um longe perto: Os segredos do sertão da terra."

13. "It was used to name vast interior areas inside the recently conquered territories, about which little or nothing was known."

14. "The city is mostly surrounded by the sea, which affords sufficient protection, and the tiny extension facing the backlands couldn't have offered better defense." Unless otherwise noted, the italics for all the quotations in this article are mine.

15. "Three villages that were well inside the backlands"

16. "The trail was going against the backlands."

17. "Esta gente traz umas cabaças grandes em que levam do mar para o sertão água salgada." (20). ["These people bring some large gourds in which they take salt water from the sea to the backlands."]

18. "The vicinity of the backlands"

19. "In the interior of the backlands"

20. "At the core of the backlands"

21. "Seven leagues from this city [Judá] through the backlands there is the cursed house of Meca, where the moors go on their pilgrimages."

22. "In scale, it's almost seven hundred leagues at the coast, by 160 in width in the backlands."

23. For instance, "pelo sertão deste rio há muito pau-brasil" (68). ["In the backlands of this river there is a lot of Brazil-wood."]

24. "The province of Brazil is situated beyond the equinoctial line in the south, [. . .] and this line courses through the backlands of the province for approximately 45 degrees."

25. "They spread themselves within 21 fathoms in the backlands."

26. "They do not spread inside the backlands more than half a league to one league."

27. For this reason, I am not going to approach in this text the important inland journey undertaken by Pedro Teixeira and registered in his *Relaciones* (1610). As the text was written in Spanish, during the Iberian Union, it uses terms such as *tierra* (land) and *interior* (interior), but not *sertão*.

28. "An emptiness replete of images built with existing elements of the [Portuguese] imaginary"

29. "Some of them are born in the interior of the backlands."

30. "And they are not found except far into the backlands."

31. "Woods and swamps spread [. . .] over the backlands infinitely."

32. "[It happens that the indigenous people] get themselves inside the backlands."

33. "Entering into the backlands"

34. "Outside the backlands"

35. "The exterior of the sertão"

36. "The backlands' door"

37. "The groves are very high and large and endless, and I do not doubt that there are many birds in these backlands!"

38. "From the sea the backlands seemed to be huge because as far as the eye could see there was only land and woods, so it seemed a very extensive land."

39. "Then they fled in the direction of the backlands."

40. "There is a lot of gold that comes from the backlands."

41. "At one day's journey from this port of Judah into the backlands lies the great city of Meca."

42. "And the king is always in the backlands."

43. "Through [Xaer's] backlands the whole area is inhabited by rustic people."

44. "From this city of Champanel against the backlands there is another much larger [city]."

45. "Against the backlands." It is important to notice that going contra does not mean that the sertão is a sort of antagonist of opponent, as a modern understanding might suggest. It refers basically to the act of going to the encounter of something, or in the direction of something.

46. "The backlands of the land"

47. "And these are the ones from inside the backlands."

48. "That nevertheless they entered into the backlands"

49. "He left the lands of the backlands and came to search the ports."

50. "A city located at 140 leagues' distance into the backlands"

51. "One of them was absent, disappeared in the backlands."

52. "Inside the backlands"

53. "In the same place as these Moorish sites, entering into the backlands, there is the great kingdom of Prester John, called Abexim by the Moors, whose lands are very large and beautiful. It has many people and many nearby kingdoms subjected to it, that are under its rule and governance."

54. "In this whole land there is a lot of gold that comes from inside the backlands of the great kingdom of Abexim, that is Prester John's land."

55. "It seems to me"

56. "I doubt that"

57. "[. . .] the whole land that we are considering to be Sofala is an extensive region, ruled by a prince named Benomotápa, and surrounded by two river branches as if it were an island. These rivers come from the most astounding lake in the whole land of Africa [. . .]. Of which we can say that this great lake is closer to our West ocean than to the East one, according to Ptolemy."

58. "[. . .] take a lot of gold that originates in it. [. . .] from this river Cuame through the backlands to the Cabo das Correntes there is an excellent land; temperate, wholesome, cool, fertile of everything that grows there."

59. "From the sea the backlands seemed to be huge because as far as the eye could see there was only land and woods, so it seemed a very extensive land. So far we could not discover whether there is gold or silver in it, neither did we see anything of metal or iron, but the land itself has cool and mild breezes, as those we found in Entre-Douro-e-Minho."

60. "This Santa Cruz Province, besides being so fertile as I say, is wealthy in all the necessary supplies for human life, and certainly it is also rich, there being much gold and

silver in it, for which we have great hopes. The way by which we discovered and confirmed this was through the indigenous people."

61. "A long strand of white beads, that seemed to be made of seed pearls"

62. Some examples exposed by Buarque de Holanda are the legend of the Lagoa Dourada [Golden Lagoon] or a hypothetic geographical closeness between Brazil's eastern coast and the silver mines of Peru.

63. "Almost excludes surprise"

64. "If they seem to accept here and there unbelievable, fabulous news about the backlands' secrets, they usually do it with discrete reticence. [. . .] Thus when they by chance yield to the prestige of classical *loci amoeni*, so frequently adopted in the period's descriptions, they are carried away, perhaps without sensing it, and cut them free of the fantastic branches, generally inseparable from the old model."

65. "Lived as historical experience, 'backlands' has long constituted a category of understanding in Brazil, by way of social thought."

66. For an important contribution to this topic, see Sússekind, *O Brasil não é longe daqui*.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Amado, Janaína. "Região, sertão, nação." *Estudos Históricos* 8.15 (1995): 145-151.

Barbosa, Duarte. *O livro de Duarte Barbosa*. Mira-Sintra and Mem Martins: Publicações Europa-América, n.d.

Barros, João de. *Décadas da Ásia: Década primeira*. Lisbon: Regia Oficina Tipográfica, 1778.

Boxer, Charles Ralph. *Four Centuries of Portuguese Expansion (1415-1825): A Succinct Survey*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969.

Caminha, Pero Vaz de. *A carta de Pero Vaz de Caminha*. Rio de Janeiro: Agir, 1965.

Cardim, Fernão. *Tratados da terra e gente do Brasil*. 2nd ed. São Paulo; Rio de Janeiro; Recife; Porto Alegre: Companhia Editora Nacional, 1939.

Castanheda, Fernão Lopes de. *História do descobrimento e conquista da Índia pelos Portugueses*. Books 3 and 5. Lisbon: Typographia Rollandiana, 1833.

Cortesão, Armando. *A suma oriental de tomé pires e o livro de Francisco Rodrigues*. Coimbra: Por Ordem da Universidade, 1978.

da Cunha, Euclides. *Os sertões*. São Paulo: Ateliê Editorial, Imprensa Oficial do Estado, Arquivo do Estado, 2002.

Ferreira, Jerusa Pires. "Um longe perto: Os segredos do sertão da terra." *Légua & Meia: Revista de Literatura e Diversidade Cultural* 3.2 (2004): 25-39.

Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. New York: Vintage, 1973.

- Galvão, Walnice Nogueira. "Anotações à margem do regionalismo." In *Literatura e Sociedade*, 44–55. São Paulo: USP/FFLCH/DTLLC, 1996.
- Gandavo, Pero de Magalhães. *História da província de Santa Cruz*. Lisbon: Biblioteca Nacional, 1984.
- Guimarães Rosa, João. *Grande Sertão: Veredas*. Rio de Janeiro: Nova Aguilar, 1994.
- Holanda, Sérgio Buarque de. *Visão do Paraíso: Os motivos edênicos no descobrimento e colonização do Brasil*. São Paulo: Companhia Editorial Nacional, 1969.
- Lima, Nísia Trindade. *Um sertão chamado Brasil: Intelectuais e a representação geográfica da identidade nacional*. Rio de Janeiro: IUPERJ/Revan, 1999.
- Macedo, Helder. "The Deceiving Eye." In *The Traveling Eye: Retrospection, Vision and Prophecy in the Portuguese Renaissance*, ed. Fernando Gil and Helder Macedo, 177–185. Dartmouth: University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, 2009.
- Mader, Maria Elisa Noronha de Sá. "O vazio: O sertão no imaginário da colônia nos séculos XVI e XVII." MA thesis, Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro, 1995.
- Moraes, Antonio Carlos Robert. "O sertão: Um 'outro' geográfico." In *Geografia Histórica do Brasil: Cinco ensaios, uma proposta e uma crítica*, 87–101. São Paulo: Annablume, 2009.
- Newitt, Malyn. *East Africa: Portuguese Encounters with the World in the Age of the Discoveries*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002.
- . *A History of Mozambique*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995.
- Pinto, Fernão Mendes. *Peregrinação*. Edited by Adolfo Casais Monteiro. Vol. 1.2. Lisbon; Rio de Janeiro: Sociedade de Intercâmbio Cultural Luso-Brasileiro; Livraria-Editora da Casa do Estudante do Brasil, 1953.
- Rabelo, Luís de Souza. "The Sixteenth-Century Portuguese Chronicles." In *The Traveling Eye: Retrospection, Vision and Prophecy in the Portuguese Renaissance*, ed. Fernando Gil and Helder Macedo, 155–176. Dartmouth: University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, 2009.
- Santa Rita Durão, José de. *Caramuru*. Rio de Janeiro: Fundação Biblioteca Nacional/Departamento Nacional do Livro, n.d.
- Souza, Gabriel Soares de. *Tratado descritivo do Brasil em 1587*. Recife: Massananga, 2000.
- Süssekind, Flora. *O Brasil não é longe daqui: O narrador, a viagem*. 2nd ed. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2006.
- Teles, Gilberto Mendonça. "O lu(g)ar dos sertões." *Verbo de Minas: Letras* 8.16 (2009): 71–108.
- Vasconcelos, Sandra Guardini Teixeira. "Migrantes dos espaços (sertão, memória e nação)." *Revista do Centro de Estudos Portugueses (UFMG)* 22.30 (2002): 67–82.
- Velho, Álvaro. *O descobrimento das Índias: O diário da viagem de Vasco da Gama*. Edited by Eduardo Bueno. Rio de Janeiro: Objetiva, 1998.

Zir, Alessandro. *Luso-Brazilian Encounters of the Sixteenth Century: A Styles of Thinking Approach*. Madison/Teaneck, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2011.

Zurara, Gomes Eanes. *Crónica da tomada de Ceuta*. Edited by A. M. Teixeira. Lisbon: Livraria Clássica Editora, 1965.

———. *Chronica do descobrimento e conquista de Guiné*. Edited by Visconde de Santarém. Paris: J. P. Aillaud, 1841.

VICTORIA SARAMAGO is a PhD candidate in the Department of Iberian and Latin American Cultures at Stanford University. Her publications include the book *O duplo do pai: O filho e a ficção de Cristovão Tezza* (Ed. É Realizações, 2013), and the article “Mortos e presentes: As últimas obras de Machado de Assis e Ingmar Bergman” (*Machado de Assis em Linha*, 2011). Her current research focuses on a material dimension of mimesis in the works of João Guimarães Rosa and Juan Rulfo. She can be reached at saramago@stanford.edu.