

## Book Review

Yuri Gama<sup>1</sup>

University of Massachusetts Amherst

**Regina Horta Duarte. 2016 translated by Diane Grosklaus Whitty. *Activist Biology: The National Museum, Politics, and Nation Building in Brazil*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.**

In *Activist Biology: The National Museum, Politics, and Nation Building in Brazil*, Regina Horta Duarte, with the help of the translator Diane Grosklaus Whitty, tells the story of the Brazilian National Museum in relation to a context of scientific, social, and political transformations between 1926 and 1945. In the middle of a dynamic scenario, Duarte affirms that Brazilians started to question what kind of country they wanted and needed. The author successfully portrays how Brazil's National Museum changed as naturalists reclassified nature, as knowledge grew more specialized, and as scientists began relating to collections in new ways. Following vibrant discussions, the museum discussed ideas of Brazil's national identity by expanding the museum from only exhibits to: writing editorial projects, hosting a radio station show, holding national congresses related to environmental protection, and helping to make public policies. In a well-organized book, Duarte presents how intellectuals and main staff members of the National Museum, such as the anthropologist, Edgar Roquette-Pinto, the botanist, Alberto Sampaio, and the arachnologist, Cândido de Mello Leitão, came to intersect healthcare, education, jobs, and an effective regulation of environmental protection of the country's fauna and flora throughout Brazilian territory. In this

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<sup>1</sup> Yuri Gama is a doctoral student in Latin American History at University of Massachusetts Amherst.  
[ygama@umass.edu](mailto:ygama@umass.edu)

sense, the author argues that demands raised by the National Museum staff affirmed biology as a specialized field of knowledge and played a decisive role in Brazilian society.

In order to present the importance of the National Museum in the Nation-Building debate, Duarte examines the demands that the scientists Roquette-Pinto, Sampaio, and Leitão made to the Provisional Government of Vargas between the 1920s and the 1930s. The author explains that at the same time these scientists made themselves authorities in their fields and decided to dig into public policies, Vargas opened his administration to solutions that could help him with the growing challenge of controlling the populations and the natural resources within Brazil's vast territory. As biologists, these scientists evoked the emergence of biology, presenting the aspects of the field such as: eugenics and miscegenation, the relation of microbiology and public health, entomology and agriculture, and (39) several scientific expeditions. In this matter, *Activist Biology* dialogues with the book, *Stringing Together a Nation: Cândido Mariano da Silva Rondon and the Construction of a Modern Brazil, 1906–1930*, by Todd Diacon. Roquette-Pinto, one of the National Museum directors, participated on the Strategic Telegraph Commission of Mato Grosso to Amazonas portrayed by Diacon and now by Duarte. Both books present converging ways in which Brazil debated nation building. With the purpose of understanding the overall historical framework and what it was that incited the exploration for new practices, Duarte's book unfolds beyond scientific experiments and displays these scientists' success in forging ties with a political power that was not so open to ideas from outsiders.

Duarte develops her argument by carefully connecting personal life stories of these three scientists and the notion of nation building in Brazil. The scientists planned changes in the museum

based on the fact that the Constitution of 1891 delegated a broad fiscal and administrative autonomy to states, and on their relations with the philosophical concept of positivism accepted by Vargas's administration. In a detailed examination of the roles played by the main strategists inside the National Museum, Duarte recounts the formulation of the audacious bill to regulate hunting, fishing, and Brazil's flora that was embraced by the Ministry of Education and Public Health (MESP) as one of the main actions that birthed the biological knowledge and subsequent interpretation of Brazil. The bill emerged as a remarkable move made by the biologists that incorporated themes and ideas already on the scholarly agenda in 1933. Therefore, the proposal to protect nature claimed by the institution of the National Museum intersects with the construction of Brazil's national identity through the stabilization of biology as a field of knowledge acknowledged by the federal state.

However, the marriage between the biologists and Vargas administration did not come out without some deep paradoxes. Duarte's research digs deep in this relationship, pinpointing tensions between state governments and the federal government, and between the Vargas administration and the National Museum. In the first instance, although Vargas had political will to invest in these scientists' dreams, the Provisional Government suffered huge opposition and boycotts from powerful sections of society, such as the Old Republic *Café com Leite* elite. In this sense, Duarte demonstrates that because of the tense time in Brazilian politics, the Provisional Government's support for the National Museum was often unstable and the public funds to museums were very uncertain. In the second instance, the author displays factors that underpinned relations between the National Museum and the Vargas government, such as the lack of the government's will in ensuring the hunting and fishing bill's enforcement. Notwithstanding, in the end, Vargas's interests in establishing order and progress through an organic society converged with these scientists'

conceptions of developing a unified and cohesive country, similar to an harmonious functioning organism, to use a positivist analogy.

In a cohesive working group, the National Museum staff promoted actions that are visibly related to current ideas of the public history field. The staff was extremely creative, proposing new ideas and organizing attractive manners in order to spread information and knowledge. Duarte explains that one remarkable action appeared when Roquette-Pinto assumed an important role in the advent of the radio by 1923. Another example emerges when Roquette-Pinto decided to inaugurate the museum's Assistance Service for the Teaching of Natural History as an independent public department within the museum. The department established a role of training researchers and "preparing educational guides, charts, slide shows, and posters for use in schools, along with publications in popular science" (77). Beyond that, in 1932, the National Museum staff dedicated time to build, with the Brazilian Education Association, the first *Revista Nacional de Educação*, a national magazine about education to reach every home in Brazil. Hence, the museum emerged as a strategic setting for educational actions and scientific development, inspiring many other institutions across the country.

Although Duarte constantly praises the work of Roquette-Pinto, Sampaio, and Leitão as positive, innovative, and effective, she also argues that their practices reinforced authoritarian actions. In Duarte's words, "They were attentive to the question of nature, receptive to new technologies and means of communication, and open to different fields. And yet, by idealizing the Brazilian people and hoping to mold them to their own expectations, they reinforced authoritarian perspectives" (15). This analysis appears disparately throughout the book and could have been more

focused considering the weight put on it in the introduction and the conclusion. However, several examples stand out: Duarte presents Roquette-Pinto's participation in the core group of the Censorship Commission for films organized by the Vargas administration (90) and Duarte also points out that the National Museum staff was an accomplice to the authoritarian political actions of the government in that they never complained or tried to interfere in other political matters besides their professional fields. In a specific note, Duarte makes a good effort to stay out of any dualistic criticism that establishes the staff as only pioneer heroes or as only authoritarian scientists. In this sense, she examines the history of the production of knowledge by taking into account the large background of the political, cultural, and social contexts in which Roquette-Pinto, Sampaio, and Leitão generated and shared their knowledge without judging their actions.

The structure of *Activist Biology* provides an easy understanding of the author's main arguments and conclusions. As a well-organized book, *Activist Biology* weaves characters, institutions, and ideas in a very clear and in-depth manner. It is important to note here that both Duarte and Whitty make transparent the fact that even though this book is a translated version from a Brazilian one, it is a well-updated version. Instead of relying on footnotes, Whitty's role as a translator appears in the text with vital transformation that positively impacted the way the book was written. The direct impact on the text comes in a manner of providing more explanations about specific expression that are not familiar to people that do not read Portuguese. Moreover, introducing chapters with intriguing unique stories, annexing a timeline of Brazilian history between 1889 and 1945, and adding a glossary with Portuguese and English names of institutions and events welcome additions that attract a broad audience beyond scholarship and help a non-lusophone audience understand the context of Duarte's book. Nevertheless, *Activist Biology* will be interesting to anyone

studying nation building in Brazil and the Vargas era. Duarte's book provides an essential contribution to the discussion of nation building by acknowledging the connection between positivism, natural resources, and education in the construction process of a diverse Brazilian identity. Beyond that, *Activist Biology* also might interest scholars and students connected with the field of public history and history communication. Duarte's research brilliantly exposes the unique actions of Roquette-Pinto, Sampaio, and Leitão in the educational work of expanding the National Museum far beyond only exhibits and archive, and introduced it to different fields and technologies that expanded scientific knowledge across Brazil.