

Article

Extreme Spaces as Encounters: Images, Environments, and Otherness

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Abstract

Spaces labeled as ‘extreme’ have long fueled the imagination of those who sought to explore, conquer, and represent them. Framed in colonial narratives as *terra incognita* or *finis terrae*, these regions generated diverse forms of textual and visual knowledge while simultaneously arousing curiosity and fear. The polar regions, Amazonian forests, and the seas and mountains of Patagonia played a central role in shaping the epistemologies of modern science and art in South America, functioning as laboratories in which ways of seeing were tested and transformed through processes of encounter. In this paper, we move beyond approaches that treat extreme spaces as fixed geographical entities defined solely by climatic severity or environmental hostility. Drawing on a pedagogical experiment inspired by Warburgian image-based research practices, we argue that extreme spaces are better understood as relational constructs, co-produced through multispecies and intercultural encounters. Through a comparative analysis of European iconographies across South America, we identify two coexisting clusters of meaning: one organised around abundance, intercultural cooperation, and extractivism; the other around scarcity, resistance, and environmental imposition. By tracing the circulation and mobilization of these meanings across different environments, we propose an epistemology of extremes, suggesting a mode of knowledge production that classifies spaces through the lens of radical otherness.

Keywords: extreme spaces; histories of cartography; environmental history; terra incognita; indigenous agency; more-than-human approaches; art histories; South America



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1. Pedagogical Convergences

The reflections presented in this paper emerge from our pedagogical practice as well as from the exchange of ideas between professors and students. It was through a graduate course offered at the *Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro* (UERJ) in the first semester of 2025 that an art historian, a historian, and a geographer were brought together to discuss with students what constitutes *extreme spaces* and how such spaces have shaped practices of image-making in science and the arts. In these debates, we sought to examine the notion of *extreme*, taking into account its historical transformations over the *long durée*, its core elements, and its verbal and visual modes of representation.

The course originated from several points of convergence. The three scholars involved share a strong interest in the history of images—particularly maps—and a long-standing

engagement with travel and exploration narratives. Moreover, processes of exploration, representation, and colonization of the Americas run through our respective research agendas, which, from different disciplinary perspectives, examine historical documents to produce critical analyses of colonialism and the appropriation of nature within the modern-colonial world-system (Quijano 2000). Despite our previous research experience, we deliberately designed a course in which the very notion of *extreme space*—and the ways of approaching it—would remain necessarily open, to be collectively constructed through the exchange of texts, documents, and ideas brought by both students and professors.

By arguing for a conception of extreme space as *encounter* (Hulme 1986; Pratt 1992; Cruikshank 2005), we therefore seek to move away from any a priori or essentialist definition. From the very first discussions, it was made clear to students that we did not possess a checklist or predefined criteria capable of classifying certain spaces as extreme in opposition to others deemed ‘normal’, ‘pleasant’, or ‘habitable’, or according to any other naturalized dualistic taxonomy. After introducing elements of conceptual history (Koselleck 2002) and discussing the trajectories of notions such as *terra incognita*, *finis terrae*, *plus ultra*, *antipodes* and *terra australis*, among others, students were asked to select travel accounts and images of extreme spaces to present in a collective seminar. To our surprise, alongside narratives, maps, and paintings of areas such as the Amazon, Patagonia, and the Polar regions, students also mobilized the concept to reflect on other places and scales, identifying ‘extreme spaces’ in urban peripheries and favelas, as well as in regions much closer to their everyday experiences.

At this point, it should be added that the *Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro* (UERJ) is a public institution in which students not only do not pay any fees, but also get grants and other forms of financial support in order to have the time and means to pursue their studies. It was also the first Brazilian university to establish affirmative action, adopting a quota system for black, public school and other minority students since 2002. This has ensured that, more than twenty years on, UERJ’s student body is extremely diverse, and this diversity is evident in the academic materials the University has produced over the years.

Treating extreme spaces as a concept rather than as a thing constituted a crucial first step in conceiving them as encounters. We understand this encounter in three distinct, though interrelated, senses (Ballantyne and Burton 2005). The first is literal and experiential, referring to our own encounter in the classroom with students, texts, and documents. It was through this pedagogical encounter that an open-ended definition of extreme spaces could emerge. The second sense, derived from our close analysis of images and written sources, understands extreme spaces as encounters with alterity. Such spaces are inherently relational, dividing those who describe them, those who inhabit them, and the audiences for whom those representations are intended. The notion of *extreme* thus presupposes an external point of view—one belonging to individuals unfamiliar with the local ways of living, knowing, and engaging with non-human forces in a given territory. For Indigenous peoples inhabiting Patagonian, polar, or Amazonian environments, these spaces are homes and means of subsistence, rather than strange or inhospitable settings for adventure and heroic challenge.

Finally, the concept of extreme space often presupposes an encounter with the adversities of nature: extreme climatic conditions, threatening fauna, or hostile environments. Such encounters underpin a significant portion of the travel accounts and exploration narratives examined throughout the course. These texts frequently translate bodily sensations and lived experiences of interaction with challenging environments (Tsing 2015). It is precisely through these encounters between humans and non-humans that this paper seeks to contribute to the development of critical ecological approaches within art history. Students were therefore challenged to shift their analytical focus. If much of the scholar-

ship on images of extreme spaces has concentrated on explorers and narrators—typically white European men traveling through ‘unknown’ lands—could alternative narratives be developed that foreground local knowledge and more-than-human agencies?

By analyzing texts and images of South American environments as extreme spaces, this paper challenges Eurocentric and colonial narratives centered on heroic exploration (Driver and Jones 2009). To interrogate dualisms between nature and culture, experience and representation, and Indigenous and Western knowledge systems, we propose an understanding of extreme spaces as co-produced terrains shaped by multispecies and intercultural encounters. By focusing on encounters, our paper draws on contemporary perspectives that advocate a transcultural and borderless history of art (Farago 1995, 2025). Precisely because extreme spaces are marked by dichotomies (Said 1978)—Abundance × Emptiness, Exuberance × Scarcity, Cooperation × Hostility, Similarity × Monstrosity—they offer rich examples for thinking about connections and interdependencies.

In what follows, we first elaborate on the notion of extreme spaces and then examine examples from our own research in which dichotomous categories are both mobilized and destabilized through the agency of local and more-than-human actors. It is not our aim, here, to prove particular points, disclose unpublished materials, or present hypotheses in the traditional academic sense, but rather to reflect upon the concept of *extreme spaces* in the third decade of the 21st century, by drawing on European visual and textual descriptions of the landscapes, weather events, fauna, and flora of South America. Through a reading of these sources against the grain, we seek to identify the agency of local and more-than-human actors embedded within European formulations of space themselves.¹ With special emphasis on perspectives from the peripheries and margins, we hope to deepen our understanding of the relational character of spaces considered ‘extreme.’

2. Towards a Conceptual History for the ‘Extreme’

In his 1947 presidential speech to the American Association of Geographers, John Wright addressed the concept of *terra incognita* in a broad and deliberately provocative manner. After a more historical opening—where he described how the appearance of this toponym on maps functioned as a ‘siren song’ for explorers—Wright sought to expand the concept in several directions. First, he extended the notion of *terra incognita* to personal and subjective scales. According to Wright, although there were no longer literally ‘areas of doubtful existence’, individuals continued to experience personal unknown lands, open to exploration and discovery. The sensation of climbing a mountain and encountering a valley never before experienced by one’s body, he argued, could evoke a ‘pleasurable sense of the mysterious’. This sensation would differ only in intensity, not in kind, from that experienced by explorers such as Columbus, Magellan, or Livingstone.

Wright then expanded the concept beyond European or so-called ‘Western’—frames of reference. When discussing *terra incognita* on European maps, he stressed that these regions were unknown only to particular groups of cartographers, while remaining ‘known to their inhabitants’ and ‘frequently to peoples of other civilizations as well’ (Wright 1947, p. 2). As he famously observed, ‘China lay deep in the heart of *terra incognita* to the Romans, but the Roman Empire was equally lost in “unknown land” to the Chinese’ (Wright 1947, p. 2). Because knowledge is always situated and positional (Haraway 1988), Wright argued that regional geography should be approached differently. He suggested the production of historical maps tracing the development of regional knowledge among ‘Chinese, Japanese, Arabs, Hindus, Mayans, and other less advanced peoples’. While Wright’s narrative remains deeply colonialist and Eurocentric—particularly in its hierarchical language—his intervention nonetheless sought to expand the concept of *terra incognita* in both personal

and global directions, encouraging the production of new historical images of geographical and cultural encounters.

Contemporary perspectives on unknown lands have critically revisited these concepts, emphasizing their colonial content. From the moment a territory is defined as unknown, it seems doomed to be erased and replaced by 'known geographies' (Lois 2025). Unknown lands thus function as an ontological mode of relating to space, establishing a sharp division between the known and the unknown, and fueling colonial desires to dominate the spaces of other peoples and cultures. We begin this section with unknown lands because we understand this concept to be closely connected to the classification, qualification and disqualification of so-called extreme spaces. Like *terra incognita*, these spaces often present themselves as a 'siren song' for adventure and travel writing, encouraging narratives in which travelers portray themselves as fearless explorers.

A less Eurocentric history of extreme spaces requires a shift from treating these spaces as objects of discovery to understanding them as relational fields of encounter. This involves rethinking both who produces knowledge and how that knowledge is produced, by foregrounding local actors, multispecies agencies, and asymmetrical power relations embedded in colonial contexts. These claims are not new and have been echoed for several decades in both the history of art and the history of science. In art history, many scholars have sought to challenge established chronologies and canons, moving toward ecological and transnational approaches that critically examine notions of human exceptionalism and national styles (Farago 2025). In the history of science, it has become increasingly accepted that all knowledge is situated and produced from specific standpoints (Livingstone 2003; A. Romano 2015; Jacob 2017). From this perspective, processes of circulation, accommodation, and appropriation are seen as key to understanding the modern production of knowledge (Shapin 1994; Raj 2007).

Although not completely uncharted paths, the search for approaches that do not naturalize dichotomous divisions always faces a series of challenges. First, it demands a decentering of European explorers and scientific institutions as the primary epistemic authorities. Rather than reading travel narratives, maps, and images solely as expressions of European curiosity or heroism, these sources can be reinterpreted and combined as composite products—co-produced through interactions with Indigenous guides, pilots, translators, laborers, and informants (Erbig 2020; Gandini 2023). Local knowledge systems, often rendered invisible or relegated to anecdotal status, should be treated as constitutive of geographical knowledge itself, not merely as auxiliary inputs. This entails reading colonial archives against the grain, paying attention to silences, marginal annotations, practical instructions, and embodied practices that reveal how European projects depended on local expertise to navigate, survive, and represent what to them were extreme environments.

The second challenge is to incorporate non-human agencies to destabilize anthropocentric and extractive narratives of exploration. It is not an easy task to produce narratives in which extreme spaces were not passive backdrops but active participants in historical processes (Wilkinson 2024). Climatic conditions, winds, currents, ice, insects, disease vectors, vegetation, and terrain shaped routes, techniques, temporalities, and visual regimes. A relational approach, therefore, draws on insights from environmental history and multispecies studies to understand how knowledge emerged through encounters between humans and non-humans (Blair 2023). Travel accounts, for example, can be read as translations of bodily sensations—cold, heat, exhaustion, fear—produced through these interactions, rather than as transparent descriptions of space. Furthermore, the response of inks, film reels, and canvases to environmental conditions makes every representation a material encounter with specific climatic and ecological contexts.

Third, the production of alternative narratives about extreme spaces also requires attention to questions of scale, as well as to complex locations and positionalities (Maddrell 2009). To destabilize essentialist and dichotomous definitions of extreme spaces, it is important to avoid monolithic approaches to ‘Empires’ or ‘Natives’, and instead consider the cultural nuances and internal conflicts within different groups. Comparing accounts produced by competing maritime powers makes it possible to identify multiple dynamics of power and alliance that escape dichotomous geopolitical interpretations. European cultural imaginaries, which projected habitable paradises onto inhospitable regions, also came into tension with one another and produced different experiences when interacting with local environments and populations in the furthestmost regions of South America. Comparative and multi-sited approaches—placing European representations alongside Indigenous cartographies, oral histories, material culture, archeological findings and landscape practices—help to reveal how different spatial epistemologies coexisted, overlapped, and conflicted.

Finally, a relational history of extreme spaces must remain attentive to power. Encounters were rarely neutral or symmetrical: they unfolded within colonial systems marked by violence, dispossession, and epistemic extraction (Schwartz 1994). Acknowledging co-production does not imply equivalence or harmony, but rather highlights how knowledge was produced through uneven relations that privileged certain voices while silencing others. By foregrounding these asymmetries, historians can move beyond celebratory narratives of exploration without falling into the kind of simplistic criticism that has sometimes appeared in certain postcolonial approaches (Martínez 2016). Calls to focus on local agency should not be confused with a reductive understanding of power. Rather, it is through attention to nuances and differences in power that historians can develop a critical account of how extreme spaces were imagined, inhabited, and transformed.

In this sense, writing a less Eurocentric history of extreme spaces is not about replacing one set of protagonists with another, but about reframing space itself as an outcome of interdependent human and non-human encounters, situated within the material and political realities of colonial modernity.

3. Montage and Extreme Archives

After discussing a series of texts with theoretical and methodological approaches that helped us think about extreme spaces, our course invited students to select images and texts in order to observe how such spaces were narrated and represented. The result of the seminars was a miscellany of images of extremes, juxtaposed and superimposed in sequential presentations, in which students identified representations such as abundance and scarcity, vastness and density, cooperation and resistance. The dialogues that emerged from the similarities and differences between the images led us to understand the course itself as a kind of montage—a card table that allowed for different meanings of extreme spaces to coexist.

After the course concluded, it was inevitable to seek a dialogue between the images we were working with in our own research. The images stored in our personal computer files—often representing *terrae incognitae*, *finis terrae*, or extreme spaces—came to be understood as a deck of cards, a game that could be arranged in different ways to mobilize meanings about these spaces. Based on this understanding, we developed a visual exercise inspired by Georges Didi-Huberman’s reflections on montage, particularly his comments on Aby Warburg’s *Mnemosyne Atlas* (Didi-Huberman 2018). As described by many of his biographers, the German art historian spent his final years (between 1924 and 1929) working on an atlas of images that brought together photographs of many works from his extensive collection. By selecting and juxtaposing images on black fabric panels, Warburg composed what he described as a ‘series of series’ (Didi-Huberman 2013, p. 385).

The aim of Warburg's montages was to create constellations of images that, through their spatial arrangement, allowed for different connections based on formal, gestural, and thematic criteria. The power of Warburg's work, now the subject of extensive debate in art history (Lissovsky 2011), lies precisely in the attempt to produce not merely a 'summary through images,' but rather 'thought through images' (Didi-Huberman 2013, p. 383). In contrast to the use of images in double projection to illustrate conceptual polarities (as in the method of Heinrich Wölfflin), or in continuous sequences associated with chronological narratives (as in Giorgio Vasari), Warburg combined images from different times and spaces, suggesting montage as a revealing practice for working with the history of artistic forms.

Inspired by Warburg's approach, we arranged images from our own archives in different configurations, combining times, scales, and spaces to create formal and thematic associations among groups of images produced by European actors to represent spaces they considered extreme. After moving the images across a work table in multiple arrangements and experiencing the instability of their similarities and differences, we created two groups with contrasting characteristics. The first defines extreme spaces through abundance, emphasizing intercultural cooperation and extractivism as colonial practices. The second focuses on scarcity, resistance to colonization, and the difficulties imposed by the forces of nature.

These contrasts are not necessarily surprising. Based on our reflections on these images, we argue that they are constitutive of the very notion of extreme spaces. We deliberately avoided organizing the images according to the regions represented—for instance, separating figures from the Amazon and Patagonia in order to associate these places with specific characteristics. Instead, regardless of the space represented, we argue that such associations form part of an epistemology of extremes: a way of producing knowledge that classifies spaces through radical otherness, using categories such as abundance, scarcity, conflict, and cooperation.

In the first montage (Figure 1), we constructed dialogues between three sixteenth-century maps—Battista Agnese's 1544 Atlantic Map, Sebastião Lopes' 1565 map of Brazil, and Jodocus Hondius' 1598 map of Guiana—, two engravings of the Magellanic-Fuegian area from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Carl Friedrich Philipp von Martius' 1830 engraving of the Amazon, and a twentieth-century map produced by Percy Harrison Fawcett in 1906. The magnitude of the trees, the abundance of penguins, the concentration of rubber trees in the green area of the map, and the projection of a mythological lake full of riches emphasize the appeal of extreme landscapes, drawing on a shared memory of colonial ambition. In this extractive context, native populations generally appear passive or cooperative, helping to cut and measure trees and offering little resistance to land occupation or resource extraction.

In the second montage (Figure 2), we correlate a series of engravings published in the mid-seventeenth century by Johann Ludwig Gottfried,² representing the misfortunes and encounters of the Dutch in Tierra del Fuego, during an expedition initially led by Jacques Mahu at the end of the sixteenth century. These images are placed in dialogue with other engravings and a map produced during the expeditions carried out by the British explorer Percy Fawcett in the Amazon at the beginning of the twentieth century. In these examples, extreme spaces appear as threatening and untamable, whether through the force of nature—represented by the rough sea or menacing fauna—or through the strength of local populations, portraying the resistance of Patagonians who clashed with European expeditions. In this key, both local populations and nature appear threatening, reinforcing the imagination of extreme spaces as hostile and difficult to tame.



Figure 1. Montage on Cooperation, Abundance, and Extractive Industries³.

In the following sections, we examine more closely the histories and forms of representation in the images selected for these montages. Rather than providing detailed descriptions or reconstructing the contexts of production and circulation of each image, our aim is to explore them alongside our readers to elicit insights into an epistemology of extreme spaces as encounters, highlighting the agency of local environments and populations. Following Warburg's approach, we do not seek to present an argument illustrated by images, but rather to offer 'a sequence of images illuminated by an argument' (Didi-Huberman 2013, p. 386). From the forms and contents of these images, we aim to challenge aspects that are often taken for granted in the imagination of extreme spaces.



Figure 2. Montage on Resistance, Scarcity, and Forces of Nature.

4. Local Agencies and Colonial Constructs: Taming the Extreme

It was precisely in the colonial early modern period that the notion of the American tropics as a region capable of feeding and enriching the rest of the world was actively constructed by European commercial and political actors. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European maps frequently represent this part of the globe as both distant and abundant, dangerous and magnanimous. A compelling example can be found in a folio from one of the atlases produced by the workshop of Battista Agnese (Figure 3) now held at the Biblioteca Nacional in Madrid. The image depicts a group of trees isolated at the center of South America.



Figure 3. Battista Agnese, Map of the Atlantic Ocean. 1544. Madrid, National Library <http://bdh-rd.bne.es/viewer.vm?id=0000036429>. Accessed on 24 May 2026.

The trees mark the point of contact between what appear to be two rivers: the Amazon to the north and the Río de la Plata to the south. As suggested by the Portuguese historian Jaime Cortesão, both the trees and the rivers may function as visual markers separating Portuguese from Spanish dominions (Cortesão 2009, p. 377). At the same time, they convey notions of abundance, freshness, and youth. Indeed, they constitute the only representation of vegetation in the entire folio, offering a visual respite from otherwise arid depictions of the globe. This map thus belongs to a broader genealogy of cartographic images that present the South American tropics as fertile and plentiful.

In this sense, the image engages two of the key oppositions that structure our theoretical approach to the notion of extreme territory: abundance versus emptiness, and center versus margin. The solitary trees, positioned at the very center of the South American continent, are conceived by mapmakers and their patrons as oases—sites that attract and retain the water necessary to sustain life in otherwise hostile environments—while simultaneously remaining distant and difficult to access. The rivers surrounding this green mass, themselves echoes of visual constructions of the terrestrial paradise, both enrich and isolate it. This inland oasis may therefore be understood as an extreme territory.

The same visual typology recurs in other maps produced by Agnese and his workshop.⁴ In these images, although the center of South America appears as a site of abundance and convergence through its vegetation, the extraction of these resources is not explicitly represented. The viewer is left with a sense of desire and curiosity toward these lands, while the act of extraction itself remains absent.

This dynamic shifts in the map of Brazil included in the atlas of Sebastião Lopes (c. 1565) (Figure 4). Part of a nautical atlas comprising twenty-four charts, this image foregrounds the Portuguese perspective on the exploitation of brazilwood during the first century of colonization. A river traversing the landscape visually connects to the entrance of the Río de la Plata basin, creating a striking continuity between cartographic and pictorial space. Although the so-called ‘Brazil Island’ is not directly depicted, it appears to be suggested, as if a connection to the Amazon—represented further north—lay beyond the mountains.



Figure 4. Sebastião Lopes, detail of South America from his manuscript portolan atlas of the world. 1565 ca. Chicago, Newberry Library. https://collections.carli.illinois.edu/digital/collection/nby_eeayer/id/70466. Accessed on 24 May 2026.

The scene shows a man cutting trees from which a red liquid seems to flow, alongside a woman nursing a child. This imagery clearly refers to the extraction and trade of brazilwood, the principal economic activity developed by the Portuguese in the territories first reached by Pedro Álvares Cabral in the early sixteenth century. Nearby, a pair of brightly colored birds reinforces the theme of fertility. This notion is further emphasized through a visual logic of doubling: humans, birds, trees, and even the rocks on which the woman sits are paired, producing a rhythmic composition that underscores abundance and reproducibility.

While the image highlights the importance of brazilwood for the European dye industry, it also emphasizes that the extraction process was largely carried out by Indigenous populations. In other prints and maps—for instance, in John Rotz’s *Boke of Idrography* (ff.27v-28r), produced in 1542 and presently kept at the British Library—they are the ones cutting and transporting the logs to the ships and receiving tools such as axes and other goods in exchange.

In this sense, this type of representation constructs a visual narrative of abundance that is inseparable from practices of extraction and cooperation with local communities. They therefore reveal an important feature of the epistemology of extreme spaces: abundance

is not simply a natural condition, but a relational process produced through encounters between colonial actors, local populations, and the environments they sought to exploit. Through these encounters, distant landscapes could be simultaneously imagined, represented, and incorporated into global circuits of extraction.

The notion of the American tropics as a space that is plentiful, but also distant and mysterious, reappears in one of the most well-known European maps representing the Amazon region: that of Dutch cartographer Jodocus Hondius the Elder (or Joost de Hondt), who was one of the most prominent mapmakers of his time (Figure 5).⁵ Hondius based his map on the travelogue published by Walter Raleigh⁶ after his travels to the northern parts of South America. His book—“The discovery of the large, rich, and beautiful Empire of Guiana, with a relation of the great and golden city of Manoa (which the Spaniards call El Dorado)” —was published for the first time, in English (London), in 1596.⁷ In the same year, four other editions were printed by the same editor; in 1598 a Dutch edition appeared, and, in 1599, both a Latin and German editions were published in Nuremberg. More editions followed in the beginning of the seventeenth century, including a 1600 reprint in Richard Hakluyt’s *The Principal Navigations*.⁸ The rapid multiplication of editions indicates how quickly Raleigh’s book became a European bestseller, fueling interest in narratives of Manoa, the imperial city of Guiana, whose riches would surpass those of any other in the world. Any monarch who would come to possess it, he writes to Queen Elizabeth, would be master of more gold and of an empire with more cities and peoples than the king of Spain or the Grand Turk. Manoa, wrote Raleigh, is built upon a saltwater lake 200 leagues in length, similar to the Caspian Sea (Raleigh 2008, pp. 51–52).

For readers familiar with classical and medieval geographical traditions, this comparison is highly suggestive. The Caspian Sea functioned as a marker of extreme distance and alterity. Figures such as, for example, the filicide Medea, associated with Colchis—located between the Black Sea and the Caspian—inhabited these liminal geographies. Likewise, the author of *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* situated the kingdom of the Amazons beneath Scythia and near the Caspian Sea (Correia 2012, p. 150). The analogy is thus clear: the distant and perilous kingdom of the Amazons is mirrored in the imagined city of Manoa.

The geography of the edges of the world, or extreme spaces, is expressed in Hondius’ map. There we see the Amazon warrior and the blemmye—a headless monstrous figure who, since Antiquity, is said to live in the most remote parts of the globe—African and American animals, and, between the Orinoco and the Amazon rivers, the vast Lake Parime.

In these texts and images, the American tropics appear as places that are in every sense distant—culturally, physically, ontologically—but at the same time tamable. Nevertheless, it is interesting to consider that in addition to European anxieties and longings, the representation of Manoa and Lake Parime also have been constructed through collaboration, cooperation, and encounters with local Indigenous populations. In discussing the ‘Indigenous origins of the myth of the Island of Brazil,’ Cortesão (2009, p. 389) offers a series of examples that highlight the collection of Indigenous information that eventually contributed to the formation of the myth of El Dorado. One of the earliest records of these exchanges comes from the Spanish cosmographer Juan López de Velasco, who in 1574 wrote that Indigenous peoples from the Río de la Plata reported the existence of ‘a lagoon so large that the land cannot be seen across it, in which there are many very rich gold mines, and whose shores are populated by many Indians and lords who extract gold from it (. . .)’. He continued: ‘Likewise, through the province of Brazil, the Portuguese received news of this lagoon and began to depict it on their maps (. . .)’ (Cortesão 2009, p. 389).



Figure 5. Jodocus Hondius, Nieuwe caerte van het Wonderbaer ende Goudrijcke Landt Guiana. 1598. Rio de Janeiro, Biblioteca Nacional. https://objdigital.bn.br/objdigital2/acervo_digital/div_cartografia/cart170410/cart170410.jpg. Accessed on 24 May 2026.

According to Cortesão, this example illustrates how information about El Dorado may have originated in encounters and exchanges between the Portuguese and Indigenous peoples: ‘the news mentioned in Spanish documents is surely information provided by the Guarani’ (Cortesão 2009, p. 388). Although Cortesão’s claims are controversial and have often been questioned in the Brazilian historiography (De Holanda 2010), he mobilizes numerous sources to document the circulation of information both between Indigenous peoples and colonizers and among different colonial empires. Our aim here is not to enter into the debates concerning the origins of the myth of wealth and abundance in the extreme lands of South America, since this is clearly a narrative with multiple origins and trajectories of circulation. Rather, examining the sources mobilized by Cortesão enables us to trace the encounters and exchanges that were fundamental to the characterization of the South American El Dorado as a space of abundance and plenty.

Portuguese sources are particularly abundant. For example, Gabriel Soares reported in 1584 that there existed ‘another people who adorned themselves with jewels of gold’ and who lived ‘within sight of the Great Lagoon.’ (Sousa 1938, p. 376). According to Cortesão, the circulation of such Portuguese accounts—often translating Indigenous territorial understandings through the lens of European ambitions and desires—was crucial for explaining why English figures such as Walter Raleigh, or Dutch cartographers such as Jodocus Hondius, described and represented the great lakes of El Dorado/Parime in their narratives and maps. The circulation and translation of information were therefore fundamental processes in the construction of certain spaces as extreme and unknown, capable of mobilizing extractive ambitions within landscapes imagined as radically otherness (Rogers 2019).

The persistence of the trope of the extreme as abundant yet at the same time domesticable endured for a long time, and is still evident in the images produced to illustrate travels to the Amazon in the nineteenth century. Indeed, although a new type of visuality ‘linked

to the scientific paradigms of the nineteenth century’ emerged (Reinaldo 2014, p. 113), the association of ‘the extreme’ with exuberance and abundance persists, in evidence in one of the illustrations produced by the German botanist Carl Friedrich Philipp von Martius during his expedition to Brazil (Kury 2001, p. 870). As a result of the journey carried out between 1817 and 1820,⁹ von Martius and the zoologist Johann Baptist von Spix published *Flora Brasiliensis* (1840)¹⁰ and *Reise in Brasilien* (1846), in which—apart from recording their observations on the vegetation they encountered—they also included information on the Indigenous ethnic groups of the region and their languages. In line with the cartographic images of Battista Agnese, in the engraving titled *Arbores Ante Christum Natum Enatae, in silva juxta fluvium Amazonum* (Trees that grew before the birth of Christ in the forest near the Amazon River), von Martius emphasizes the enormous scale and ancient character of the vegetation (Figure 6). To convey this, he composes an image in which eight Indigenous people attempt to embrace a tree in order to measure its diameter, while those we assume to be von Spix and von Martius himself take notes and observe from a distance. A ninth Indigenous figure, meanwhile, appears to be extracting a piece of wood for study (Figure 7).



Figure 6. Von Martius observes how the tree’s diameter is measured. Carl Friedrich Philipp von Martius, *Arbores Ante Christum Natum Enatae, in silva juxta fluvium Amazonum*, c. 1841. Instituto Moreira Salles [n. 246] Engraving, 29.7 × 45.1 cm. The image was included as ‘Tabulae Physionomicae, no. IX’ in *Flora Brasiliensis* (1840). <https://www.brasilianaiconografica.art.br/obras/19180/arbores-ante-christum-natum-enatae-in-silva-juxta-fluvium-amazonum>. Accessed on 24 May 2026.

The tree’s enormous size is emphasized through its contrast with the figures in the scene, who are considerably smaller and whose hands fail to meet when measuring its circumference. The visual impact is further reinforced by the textual descriptions that run throughout the work. In addition to the depicted landscape, in his description of *Tabula IX* von Martius says he would have needed fifteen rather than the nine men he used to measure the giant tree (1840, pp. XXII–XXX). The sense of extremity is also conveyed in the temporal distance referenced in the plate’s title, as these trees are described as ‘born before Christ.’ At the same time, despite the size of this species, the tree seems to be domesticated through the two actions taking place at its base.¹¹ While its immense diameter is rendered into a quantifiable measure (i.e., its length in inches or meters), the extraction of a portion of its bark and wood for study (and potential exploitation) reveals that the naturalist’s ‘distanced’ gaze is also that of the ‘imperial eyes’ analyzed by Pratt (1992).¹²



Figure 7. Detail of Carl Friedrich Philipp von Martius, *Arbores Ante Christum Natum Enatae, in silva juxta fluvium Amazonum*, c. 1841. Acervo de Iconografia, Instituto Moreira Salles [n. 246] Engraving, 29.7 × 45.1 cm. The image was included as Tabulae Physionomicae, no. IX in *Flora Brasiliensis* (Martius et al. 1840). <https://www.brasilianaiconografica.art.br/obras/19180/arbores-ante-christum-natum-enatae-in-silva-juxta-fluvium-amazonum>. Accessed on 24 May 2026.

The images discussed so far might give the misleading impression that the association of the extreme with the trope of excess, disproportion, or superabundance was the ‘logical’ outcome of European experience in a biome such as the Amazon. Yet, more southern geographies—most notably Patagonia and the Magellanic–Fuegian area—were likewise characterized as extreme spaces and, consequently, associated with excess. Examples include the gigantism attributed to the Patagonians and the overpopulation of penguins, which served as a primary food source for European vessels on long-distance voyages. These cases illustrate how excess itself became a defining feature of the extreme.

Images of the ‘Patagonian giants’ inundated maps and travel accounts from the first reference to their remarkable height by Antonio Pigafetta during the Magellan–Elcano expedition (1519–1522) through to the debates over the nature of the New World at the close of the eighteenth century. In some Dutch, French, and English travel accounts, engravings were deliberately designed to exaggerate their stature. The most well-known examples are those included in editions of John Byron’s *Voyage round the world* (1767) (Figure 8) and Antoine-Joseph Pernety’s account of Louis-Antoine de Bougainville’s voyage to the Malvinas/Falkland Islands (1763–1764) (Figure 9). In both cases, the scenes depicting exchanges between Europeans and Patagonians allow for a direct visual comparison of their respective heights, reinforcing the perception of the extraordinary as a defining feature of the extreme.¹³

As with the size of the ‘Patagonian giants’, the emphasis on the overpopulation of penguins on Magdalena Island in the Strait of Magellan—called the Island of Penguins as from Francis Drake’s expedition—was also a trope of the far south. The abundance of these birds is highlighted in both travelers’ accounts and the images that accompanied them. Between the mid-sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, English and Dutch crews hunted penguins by the ton, salting them to feed the ship’s crew as they embarked on the Pacific crossing in search of the Spice Islands, after passing through the strait. The hunt, which was easy because penguins guarded their eggs in burrows and could be killed with clubs, is also described as a form of amusement, as in John Narborough’s travel account (Smith and Walford 1694). The existence of thousands of birds, whose capture was relatively straightforward, contributed to rendering the Magellanic region an extreme space, both because of the abundance and the ready availability of this food and form of entertainment.



Figure 8. “A sailor giving a Patagonian woman some biscuit for her child”. Published in *Voyage round the world, in his Majesty’s ship the Dolphin, commanded by the Honourable Commodore Byron, in which is contained, a faithful account of the several places, people, plants, animals, &c. seen on the voyage, and, among other particulars, a minute and exact description of the streights of Magellan, and of the gigantic people called Patagonians, together with an accurate account of seven islands lately discovered in the South Seas*, London: printed for J. Newbery... and F. Newbery, 1767. Biblioteca de la Universidad de Sevilla. <https://archive.org/details/A020088/page/n5/mode/1up>. Accessed on 24 May 2026.

The visual corollary of these accounts is the engraving depicting the penguin hunt carried out by the Dutch during Sebald de Weert’s failed attempt to cross the Strait of Magellan (1598–1600) (Figure 10). This engraving was one of eight included in the travel account written by Barent Jansz Potgieter—the ship’s surgeon aboard De Weert’s vessel—which was first published in 1600. De Weert commanded one of five ships that, between

1598 and 1600 and under the leadership of Jacques Mahu, intended to reach the Moluccas via the Strait of Magellan. After several unsuccessful attempts, de Weert was forced to abandon the mission and return with his crew to Amsterdam. Despite the expedition's commercial failure, Potgieter's account was first published individually and, two years later, incorporated into the ninth volume of the *Americae or Indias Occidentalis* (1602) (Figure 11), published by the family of engravers and printers of Theodor de Bry. In both Potgieter's travel account and the version published by the de Bry family, the engraving depicts the mass killing of the penguins. According to the account, the Dutch expedition arrived in Penguin Island on 18 April 1599, where they massacred around 1400 penguins.



Figure 9. "The Patagonians". Engraving included in the English translation of Antoine-Joseph Pernety's *Histoire d'un voyage aux Isles Malouines, fait en 1763 & 1764: avec des observations sur le detroit de Magellan et sur les Patagons* (Pernety 1773). Wellcome Collection. <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/neduukbp/items?canvas=324>. Accessed on 24 May 2026.

Abundance and extractivism are striking characteristics in the depiction of extreme spaces, producing an epistemology that has supported colonial practices. Purposefully, the final image in our visual deck on extreme spaces as sites of abundance is a map produced in the early twentieth century (Figure 12). Created in 1906 by the British military officer Percy Harrison Fawcett, the map was initially intended to represent the routes traveled and the measurement points established by the border commission between Brazil and Bolivia. From 1906 onward, Fawcett was appointed by the Royal Geographical Society to work on the Bolivian border commission, which led him to travel through many 'extreme spaces' in the South American Amazon.



Figure 10. Engraving depicting the Dutch penguin hunt in the Strait of Magellan after a drawing by Barent Jansz. Potgieter. Potgieter and Heyns (1600). (14.2 cm × 18.5 cm) Rijksmuseum [FMH 1055-AI(4)/8]. <https://id.rijksmuseum.nl/200488807>. Accessed on 24 May 2026.

Beyond the lines, measurement points, and placement of border markers, however, Fawcett also represented green patches indicating the abundance and concentration of rubber trees used to extract latex for the manufacture of rubber. The names assigned to these areas—Campo Esperança, Campo Novo, Campo Iracema—refer to rubber extraction and production camps, many of them operated by North American or British companies that leased territories in the Bolivian Amazon to extract and export the product using local labor.

Despite being deeply embedded in colonial and state-controlled processes, Fawcett's map can also be read against the grain to reveal forms of Indigenous agency in the material and representational processes of mapping boundaries. In line with those who advocate writing 'histories of science that include indigenous actors and categories' (Safier 2010, p. 137), the first point that emerges is that by mapping the concentration of rubber trees in the headwaters of the Acre River, Fawcett was also inadvertently mapping the results of long-term Indigenous actions in shaping the territory. Recent research has demonstrated the crucial role of Indigenous populations in the historical distribution of these and other tree species (Peripato et al. 2023). Far from following random patterns or being determined solely by geomorphological factors, the concentration of rubber trees—along with other key species such as cashew and buriti palms—closely corresponds to areas of long-standing Indigenous settlement. Indigenous communities actively planted and managed these species, directing their diffusion over centuries. The concentration of rubber trees shown on Fawcett's map therefore reflects a deep history of Indigenous forest management that, within the framework of colonial mapping, was appropriated by both internal and external forms of colonialism, transforming a locally managed resource into an internationally traded commodity.



Figure 11. Adaptation of the 1600 depiction of the penguin hunt, reproduced in *Americae nona & postrema pars* (De Bry 1602). John Carter Brown Library [J De Bry GV pt. 9 1602 Lat]. <https://archive.org/details/americanaonapost00theo/page/n500/mode/1up>. Accessed on 24 May 2026.



Figure 12. Detail from Fawcett (1907). Bolivia La Frontera del Norte. . . 1:500,000. 21 × 46 in. Archives of the Royal Geographical Society.

A second form of Indigenous agency can be identified in the toponyms and resource descriptions recorded during the expedition. While traveling along the Aquiry and Abunã rivers, Fawcett compiled a document of local nomenclatures, recording how Indigenous populations named places according to the resources found there (Novaes 2020). The Iquiry (Quimbatirra) was described as the ‘river of many broad leaves’; the Acre (Aquiry or Aquery) as the ‘river full of sticks from which arrows are made’; and the Caipora (Mapuarrã) as the ‘river of cotton.’ Although Fawcett collected information from several rivers, he lamented that ‘someday the old nomenclature may be forgotten, a loss in areas where strategic minerals are sought’ (Fawcett [1953] 2001, p. 83).

Like a new El Dorado, the exploitation of rubber and other resources in the Amazon during the twentieth century reproduced imaginaries of abundance, extractivism, and cooperation. Once again, the production and exploitation of these extreme lands occurred through encounters with Indigenous populations, who described, produced, and transported resources and knowledge. The transfer of knowledge was a central objective of exploration and could occur through seemingly simple practices, such as recording river names. As we have argued, the coexistence of contrasting meanings is a fundamental aspect of an epistemology of extremes. The next section, therefore, turns to the misfortunes of extreme spaces, exploring representations associated with Indigenous resistance and the agencies of nature.

5. Natural Agencies and Colonial Resistance: Fearing the Extreme

Regarding the ‘colonial constructs’ of extreme spaces, it remains to be noted that the trope of abundance is associated with extreme spaces just as much as that of scarcity. In fact, there are occasions where both tropes coexist in characterizing a single region. Once again, it is in the travel accounts of the Magellanic-Fueguian area and the images that accompanied them that we can observe how ‘the extreme’ is associated with ‘what is in excess’—extreme winds and temperatures, abundant penguins, exceptionally tall men, etc.—but also with ‘what is lacking.’ As [Chant and Gándara Chacana \(2026\)](#) have pointed out in relation to the ill-fated Wager expedition:

In no accounts is the lack of replenishing flora and fauna felt more acutely than those of the *Wager* mariners who were separated from the rest of Anson’s squadron and wrecked in the Golfo de Penas in insular Patagonia in 1741. The adolescent Midshipman John Byron determines in his 1765 account that they are in ‘a country scarce to be paralleled in any part of the globe, in that it affords neither fruits, grain, nor even roots proper for the sustenance of man; and what is still more rare, the very sea, which yields a plentiful support to many a barren coast, on this tempestuous and inhospitable shore is found to be almost as barren as the land’ ([Chant and Gándara Chacana 2026](#), p. 210).¹⁴

Interestingly, it is not only Patagonia that is represented as a land of scarcity, but also the Amazon, despite the profound environmental differences between these regions. During his journey to the Amazon in the early twentieth century, while participating in the border commission between Brazil and Peru, the Brazilian writer Euclides da Cunha produced a series of reflections on Amazonian nature. A reader of Alexander von Humboldt and other explorers who had previously traveled through the region, Euclides reproduced the idea of a monotonous landscape with limited richness. In his book *À Margem da História* (On the Margins of History), he classified the Amazon as an ‘opulent disorder’ and an ‘imperfect grandeur,’ ‘in every way inferior to countless other places in our country’ ([Cunha \[1909\] 1967](#), p. 12).

According to the writer, when observing the ‘uninhabitable’ landscapes of the Amazon, ‘the observer quickly succumbs to the fatigues of monotony’ because of the supposed lack of diversity. For Euclides da Cunha, ‘nature is prodigious, but incomplete. It is a stupendous construction lacking all interior decoration’ ([Cunha \[1909\] 1967](#), p. 13). In this portrayal, the Amazon appears to lack order, completeness, diversity, stability, and several other qualities that the author associates with a balanced landscape. The same place that had been represented by others as a stage for El Dorado and unimaginable riches thus emerges here as a locus of scarcity and danger.

This coexistence of contrasting representations can also be found within documents produced during the Dutch expedition led by Jacques Mahu and continued by Simon de Cordes after Mahu’s death (1598). As was shown in the previous section, the ship

captained by Sebald de Weert—one of the five to participate in the failed attempt to reach the Far East—slaughtered large numbers of penguins when attempting to cross the strait of Magellan. Throughout their voyage, the Dutch also encountered hostile seas and Indigenous populations. Upon approaching canoes filled with ‘horrendous naked men, ten or eleven feet tall’, the crew claimed to have been attacked by hostile (yet fearful) ‘barbarians’, who threw rocks at them in a threatening manner (De Weert and Schouten [1602] 2010, p. 79).¹⁵ As depicted in the engravings, the Indigenous people were portrayed as strong enough to uproot trees and are said to have killed three of the Dutch sailors who attempted to land (Figures 13 and 14).¹⁶



Figure 13. Johan Theodore de Bry, ‘Patagonian men encounter Dutch sailors’, in De Bry (1602, Ill. 22). Library of Congress. Image 478 of Kraus Sir Francis Drake Collection copy Kraus Sir Francis Drake Collection copy. https://www.loc.gov/resource/rbcdrake.d031_09/?sp=478&st=image. Accessed on 24 May 2026.

Visual representations of resistance are less frequent than those of cooperation, which more often depict Indigenous populations providing information or working for colonizers. Yet these images of resistance deserve attention and reproduction, as they challenge colonial representations that portray extreme spaces as empty, passive, or readily available for processes of appropriation.

Nature also plays a fundamental role in characterizing the difficulties of reaching or traversing extreme spaces, and its agencies are crucial in constructing these environments as exceptional. After escaping the Indigenous groups they had encountered, the expedition faced unfavorable winds that hindered their passage through the strait (Figure 15). De Weert lost contact with de Cordes and, after facing violent storms, incredibly strong winds and other hardships, decided to return to Holland (Gottfried 1655, pp. 429–30). During the four months the crew remained in the Strait before embarking back to Europe, rain, hail, thunder, snow, ice and strong winds, as well as the lack of food, contributed to the deaths of more than 70 men. When De Weert finally managed to leave the strait on 23 August 1599, natural misfortunes continued to obstruct their return to Holland. The survivors arrived only in July 1600, with just 36 of the original 109 crew members remaining.



Figure 14. A new engraving of the incident between the Dutch and the local populations in the Strait was made for the *Neuwe Welt* compilation (Gottfried 1655). Johann Ludwig Gottfried, *Neuwe Welt und Americanische Historien. Inhaltende warhafftige vnd vollkommene Beschreibungen aller West-Indianischen Landschafften...*, Frankfurt am Main, Bey denen Merianuschen Erben, 1655, p. 425. John Carter Brown Library, 2-SIZE J655 https://jcb.lunaimaging.com/MediaManager/srvr?mediafile=/BOOK/JCB~3~3/663/neweweltvndameri00gott_0/neweweltvndameri00gott_0.book&zip=neweweltvndameri00gott_0.jp2.zip&page=0449.jp2&width=772&height=1225&level=2. Accessed on 24 May 2026.

Narratives of scarcity and natural hardship also permeate accounts associated with Amazonian spaces. Many examples of misfortunes and challenges could be presented to demonstrate the persistence of similar textual and visual patterns across different environments, but here we return to Percy Fawcett's expeditions in the Amazon at the beginning of the twentieth century. While traveling along the Acre River, after passing through Xapury, Fawcett describes the harsh natural conditions that hindered the progress of the expedition. Due to fever and swarms of insects, one of his companions, Chalmers, decided to return, accompanied by five Tumupasa Indigenous people who, according to Fawcett, were also suffering from fever (Fawcett 1910, p. 83). Fawcett continued the journey with two other Englishmen, Willis and Dan, and three additional Indigenous companions, intending to map the Abunã River, which he referred to as the 'river of evil' (Figure 16).

According to Fawcett, the Abunã River had a 'bad reputation' because it 'frequently overflowed its banks into vast lagoons and swamps and was infested in its middle reaches by the dreaded Pacaguaras Indians, who were always hostile' (Fawcett [1953] 2001, p. 83). In addition to the threatening Indigenous groups—who had recently 'killed a Brazilian and carried prisoners into the forest'—the region was also described as presenting severe natural challenges, including 'giant anacondas, the mightiest of all constrictors, haunting the extensive fever-ridden swamps' (Fawcett [1953] 2001, p. 83). This was not the first time Fawcett referred to anacondas in his narratives, and it is now widely acknowledged that he played an important role in popularizing the idea that the South American Amazon was inhabited by snakes over twenty meters long. In 1908, after completing his first expedition with the boundary commission, Fawcett returned to the Royal Geographical Society, where he delivered a lecture and published a paper in *The Geographical Journal*, the institution's principal publication (Fawcett 1910). Through these channels of communication, Fawcett helped disseminate the myth of the giant anaconda among European audiences—a narrative that would later be reinforced by visual representations, such as the engraving reproduced below from his posthumously published book (Figure 17).



Figure 15. De Weert unsuccessfully attempts to cross the Strait of Magellan. Johann Ludwig Gottfried, *Neue Welt vnd Americanische Historien. Inthaltende warhafftige vnd vollkommene Beschreibungen aller West-Indianischen Landschafften. . .*, Frankfurt am Main, Bey denen Merianuschen Erben, 1655, p. 429. John Carter Brown Library, 2-SIZE J655. <https://jcb.lunaimaging.com/luna/servlet/detail/JCB~3~3~19742~115916547:Neue-Welt-vnd-Americanische-Histori?qvq=q:gottfried%201655;lc:JCBMAPS~3~3,JCB~1~1,JCBMAPS~1~1,JCBMAPS~2~2,JCB~3~3,JCBBOOKS~1~1&mi=3&trs=5>. Accessed on 24 May 2026.

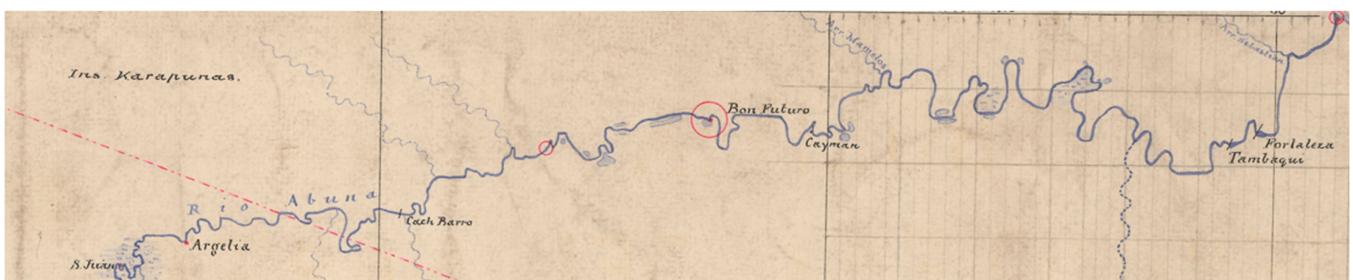


Figure 16. Detail from Fawcett (1907). Bolivia La Frontera del Norte. . . 1:500,000. 21 × 46 in. Archives of the Royal Geographical Society.

In the auditorium of the Royal Geographical Society, Fawcett described how, during the Rio Abunã expedition, ‘the sucuri or anaconda is unpleasantly prolific’ (Fawcett 1909, p. 182). According to him, the expedition ‘killed one of twenty meters,’ and he also reported that, according to Admiral Guillobel, the chief of the Brazilian commission, there were snakes ‘of twenty-six meters, killed near Corumbá, in Paraguay’ (Fawcett 1909, p. 182). To add further drama and fear to his account, Fawcett claimed that in the Abunã region anacondas ‘are credited with man-eating proclivities,’ and that ‘their well-worn trails from the swamps suggest dimensions altogether beyond the bounds of European credulity’ (Fawcett 1909, p. 182).

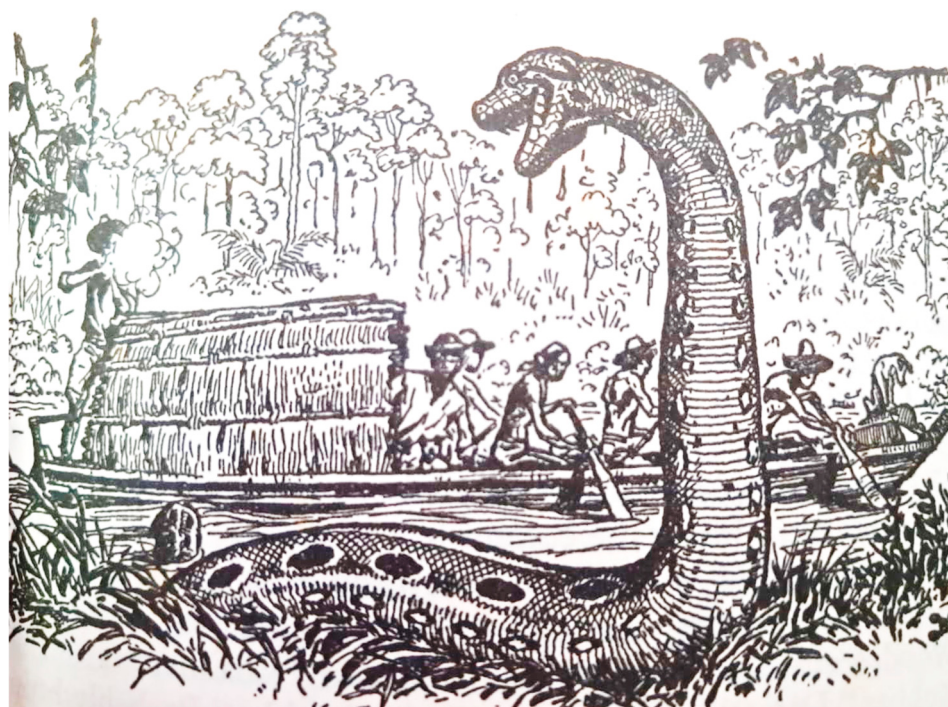


Figure 17. Fawcett ([1953] 2001). Exploration Fawcett: Journey to the Lost City of Z. London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson. p. 79.

This idea of being ‘beyond European credulity’ is a fundamental element in the construction of extreme spaces. Their radical alterity appears to exceed the classificatory frameworks, catalogues, and encyclopedic systems of European knowledge. Interestingly, not all listeners accepted Fawcett’s claims without skepticism. In his archives, one finds a note from the editor of *The Geographical Journal* requesting additional evidence of the existence of such enormous anacondas before including the claim in the published paper. Nevertheless, these animals appear in several of Fawcett’s writings, helping to disseminate exotic imaginaries about the extreme spaces of the Amazon.

6. Conclusions

This paper has proposed an approach to extreme spaces that moves beyond treating them as fixed geographical entities defined by climatic severity, remoteness, or environmental hostility. Instead, we have argued that extreme spaces should be understood as relational constructs produced through encounters—between explorers and local populations, between humans and non-human forces, and between different epistemic traditions involved in the production of geographical knowledge.

The pedagogical experience that inspired this research was central to this argument. By approaching the concept of the ‘extreme’ collectively in the classroom, students and instructors were able to destabilize naturalized assumptions that associate extremity exclusively with distant, exotic, or inhospitable environments. The diversity of perspectives brought by students—many of whom experience forms of spatial marginalization in their everyday lives—revealed how the category of the extreme can also operate at multiple scales and within different social contexts. This reinforced the need to treat extreme spaces not as objective features of the world, but as historically situated concepts shaped by cultural, political, and epistemological frameworks.

The visual montages constructed throughout the paper further illustrate how the meaning of extreme spaces emerges from the coexistence of contrasting narratives. Representations of abundance and extractivism can exist together with images of scarcity, resistance, and environmental danger. In some cases, the same expeditions and docu-

ments mobilize both tropes simultaneously, demonstrating that extremity is often produced through the tension between excess and absence. The Amazon and the Magellanic–Fuegian regions, despite their radically different ecological conditions, were both represented through similar epistemic frameworks that emphasized either extraordinary abundance or profound scarcity. These contrasts reveal what we have called an epistemology of extremes, in which distant environments are classified through radical alterity.

At the same time, a closer reading of these sources allows us to recognize the multiple agencies that shaped these representations. Indigenous guides, translators, and laborers were fundamental to the circulation of knowledge about landscapes, resources, and routes, even when their contributions were obscured within colonial narratives of discovery. Similarly, non-human forces—winds, climates, vegetation, animals, and diseases—played decisive roles in shaping both the experiences and the representations of these spaces. Extreme environments were therefore not passive backdrops for heroic exploration but active participants in the production of geographical knowledge.

By foregrounding these encounters, the paper contributes to broader efforts within art history, historical geography, and the history of science to develop more relational and less Eurocentric accounts of exploration and representation. Rather than replacing European actors with alternative protagonists, our aim has been to highlight the complex networks of interaction through which knowledge about distant environments was produced, circulated, and transformed. Extreme spaces thus emerge not as empty margins awaiting discovery, but as historically layered terrains shaped by multispecies interactions, cultural translations, and asymmetrical relations of power.

Revisiting these narratives in the twenty-first century is particularly important at a moment when many of the environments historically imagined as extreme—such as polar regions, tropical forests, and remote oceans—are at the center of global ecological debates. Understanding how imaginaries of abundance, danger, and otherness were constructed historically helps us critically examine the ways these spaces continue to be framed in contemporary scientific, political, and cultural discourses.

Ultimately, thinking about extreme spaces as encounters allows us to shift our analytical focus from the heroic figure of the explorer to the relational processes that make exploration, representation, and knowledge production possible. It is within these encounters—between bodies, environments, and epistemologies—that the meaning of the extreme has historically been constructed and continually renegotiated.

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Notes

- ¹ It is important to emphasize that this paper does not aim to address indigenous cartography as such. This field has already been the subject of important scholarship by researchers such as Mundy (1996), Bassett (1998), Whitehead (1998), Bernstein (2018), Marques (2024), among many other historians, geographers, and anthropologists. While we recognize the importance of these works, our perspective seeks instead to focus on the categorization of extreme spaces in European sources precisely in order to explore them as sites of alterity and encounter. Our intention is to avoid ‘great divisions’ that risk essentializing what would constitute ‘indigenous’ and ‘Western’ images (Novaes 2025). By understanding histories as connected and intertwined (Subrahmanyam 1997; Raj 2007; Safier 2010), we seek to examine how European visualities were shaped and transformed by experiences and encounters that took place in Latin America.
- ² In 1655 Gottfried reedited the first nine volumes of Theodore de Bry’s German version of the *Americae* or *Indias Occidentalis* travel compilation.
- ³ The references to the images of the montages in Figures 1 and 2 are addressed individually throughout the article.
- ⁴ A variation of this map, presently kept at the Correr Museum, in Venice, includes a giant Patagon—dressed, as usual, in Greco-Roman fashion—handing his bow to a child.
- ⁵ Born in Flanders in 1563, in around 1604 Hondius was able to secure the copper matrixes of Gerardus Mercator’s Atlas. He would add 40 new maps produced by himself to the original Mercator set and use a variant of the text reviewed by his brother in law Petrus Montanus to create a new version of the Atlas, which would be known as Mercator-Hondius. See Tunturi (2016).
- ⁶ Although “Raleigh” is the way the name gets to be spelled in popular usage, specialists in more recent works have been giving preference to Raleigh, as this is how he himself spelled his name in his final years.
- ⁷ Three editions were published in this same year. For a facsimile copy see: <https://archive.org/details/discoverieoflargo/page/n19/mode/2up?q=sea> (access on 25 March 2026). These original versions of the book can also be found in other digital libraries.
- ⁸ There are many copies of Richard Hakluyt’s *Divers Voyages* (1582) and *Principal Navigations* (1589, 1598/9 to 1600). A concise census of surviving copies is presented by the Hakluyt Society in their webpage: https://www.hakluyt.com/richard-hakluyts-navigations/?utm_source=chatgpt.com (access on 27 March 2026). Raleigh’s Guiana book is inserted, with some modifications with respect to the original editions, in its third volume (Hakluyt 2014).
- ⁹ At the request of King Maximilian Joseph I of Bavaria, von Martius traveled through nine Brazilian states on a journey of approximately ten thousand kilometers.
- ¹⁰ The work was edited in 15 volumes, divided in 40 parts, and was published between 1840 and 1906 (Reinaldo 2014, p. 118).
- ¹¹ On the compositional and iconographic ways of communicating the domestication of an abundant nature, see the case of Tomás Cabrera’s 1774 painting *Entrevista del gobernador Matorras con el cacique Paykin*, analyzed by Penhos and Siracusano (2000) and Penhos’s work on the visualization of the Spanish colonization of South America in the late eighteenth century (Penhos 2005).
- ¹² The effects of human agency become evident in *Tabula Physiognom. XVI*, titled “*Silva Caesa, cum ficu Grandaeva, Ad. S. Joannem Marcum, Prov. de Rio de Janeiro*”. In this landscape, the immensity of the tree depicted on the left contrasts sharply with the countless felled trunks scattered across the almost desolate landscape drawn in the background on the right (Martius et al. 1840, Tab. Phy. XVI). <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/9632#page/89/mode/1up>. Accessed on 24 May 2026.
- ¹³ On the debate on the height of the patagones see: Duchet (1971), Duvernay-Bolens (1988, 1995), Davies (2016) and Martínez (2020).
- ¹⁴ Quoted from Byron (1768) in Chant and Gándara Chacana (2026).
- ¹⁵ De Bry (1602). The information is also provided in Plate XXII. ‘HOLLANDI IN FRETO MACELLANICO IVXTA INSVLAM quandam grandes & portentofos homines inueniunt.’ The cruelty of the inhabitants of the Strait is reinforced later on in the account (De Weert and Schouten [1602] 2010, pp. 84–85).
- ¹⁶ On de Bry’s adaptation of the original Dutch travel account see: Van Groesen (2019).

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