

The Amazon: Towards a New Global History

Antoine Acker

Danielle Heberle Viegas

Patrick Roberts

Patrícia Vieira

The Ancient Greeks conceived of history as a succession of cycles or eternal recommencement, like Penelope's tapestry, or the torment of Prometheus in chains.¹ Many Indigenous peoples of the Amazon, from the Runa to the Araweté, through the Yanomami and Kayapó, also conceive of time in cyclical, recursive, or regenerative ways, and explain the history of human existence through myths involving more-than-human ancestralities and enduring interspecies kinship. By contrast, the European colonial culture used to live within a biblical temporal stretch extending from the creation of the world to the much-awaited return of Christ. Making up the backbone of Western civilization, this linear "regime of historicity" was progressively secularized into "the ideology of progress" through historical

movements ranging from the Enlightenment to the construction of the nation-state. Since the mid-twentieth century, "World," "International," and even "Global History" have largely framed time based on these Western modernization chronologies, themselves originating in religious myths.²

This opening observation poses a fundamental challenge confronting the writing of

1 This special issue is a result of the project RESILIENT Forest Cities: Utopia and Development in the Modern Amazon, funded by the Gerda Henkel Foundation (02/LC/22), in which all editors are affiliated.

2 Georges Langlois, *À quoi sert l'histoire ?*, Montréal, Bellarmin, 1999, p. 26; Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2013; Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Araweté: os deuses canibais*, Rio de Janeiro, Zahar, 1986; Davi Kopenawa, Bruce Albert, *La Chute du ciel : Paroles d'un chaman yanomami*, Paris, Plon, 2010; François Hartog, *Régimes d'historicité : Présentisme et expériences du temps*, Paris, Seuil, 2003; Philippe Descola, *Par-delà nature et culture*, Paris, Gallimard, 2005; Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*, San Francisco, Harper and Row, 1980; Gilbert Rist, *Le développement : histoire d'une croyance occidentale*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 1996; Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2000; Sebastian

Amazonian history: how to write about a region whose first peoples do not share the temporal frameworks that organize the discipline itself. The first global account of the region was produced by the Dominican friar Gaspar de Carvajal, who accompanied Francisco de Orellana during the first European navigation of the Americas' greatest river in 1541-1542—an account deemed riddled with lies by the sixteenth-century historian Francisco López de Gómara. The main error was probably inscribed in the very name of the river “Amazon,” derived from the Ancient Greek myth of warrior women on account of a supposed encounter with breastless female fighters on the riverbanks. El Dorado, the myth of a kingdom overflowing with gold hidden deep in the jungle, is another Amazon-defining image, born out of a collision of Western and Indigenous myths, and yet constitutive of the narratives of global Amazonian history ever since, repeatedly traversed by attempts to impose and resist extraction systems linked to global economic trade. The irony is that we approach the genesis narratives and time-evolving stories of Indigenous Amazonian peoples as myths, while failing to recognize that the global history of the Amazon is itself the

product of a process of continuous Western myth-making.³

By taking the Amazon's own history as an invitation to interrogate the chronological and anthropocentric methodologies that have long structured historical inquiry, this special issue asks how the Amazon and its particularities can actively contribute to rethinking global history. In doing so, we seek to challenge the long-standing Western tradition that assumes its own frameworks as the primary lens through which the present is understood through the past. First, this special issue entails a shift from what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls the “global”—the international space of human societies and their knowledge systems—to “the planetary”: the networked

3 Gaspar de Carvajal, *Relación del nuevo descubrimiento del famoso río Grande que descubrió por muy gran ventura el capitán Francisco de Orellana* (c. 1542); Cristóbal de Acuña, *Nuevo descubrimiento del gran río de las Amazonas*, Madrid, Imprenta del Reyno, 1641 ; Rafael Chamboleyron, Pablo Ibáñez-Bonillo, “The Colonial Amazon,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Latin American History*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019; Antoine Acker, Lukas Becker, Nathalia Capellini et al., “Mining and Energy in Colonial Amazon: Lasting Legacies of a Colonial Fantasy,” in Eleonora Rohland, Cecilia Ibarra, Heidi V. Scott et al. (eds.), *Mining and Energy: Handbook of the Anthropocene in Latin America*, vol. 5, Bielefeld, University of Bielefeld Press, in press; Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1991; Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, London, Routledge, 1992; Candace Slater, *Entangled Edens: Visions of the Amazon*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2002; Ailton Krenak, *Ideias para adiar o fim do mundo*, São Paulo, Companhia das Letras, 2019.

Conrad, *What Is Global History?*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2016; Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2011.

ecological system of planet earth, of which human history is a part but not the determining whole.⁴ In the Amazon, forests, rivers, soils, and biota are not the backdrop to human history; they are, as the growing interdisciplinary literature on the region increasingly demonstrates, its co-authors, in the same way that humans have co-shaped the forest's growth and biodiversity over thousands of years. Second, the Amazon demands genuine collaboration across disciplines rarely accustomed to speaking to one another, such as history, archaeology, geology, climatology, ethnobotany, anthropology, theology, and architecture. Third, and perhaps most significantly for a journal whose vocation is precisely the writing of global history, the multiplicity of cosmologies, myths, and Indigenous narrative traditions that characterize the region constitutes an invitation to revise the ways in which we narrate the past—and develop modes of historical understanding better adapted to a world in which the future of humanity is inseparable from the future of the ecosystems it inhabits.

The following pages approach these ambitions from four complementary angles, each representing a scholarly domain in which the Amazon has generated insights which could revolutionize global history. The first section

traces the archaeological revolution currently underway in the Amazon Basin. This perspective, which has been gaining attention in both Amazonian and global scholarly publishing, is also reflected in this dossier in the debate section devoted to the book *Sob os Tempos do Equinócio* by Eduardo Góes Neves, discussed by the historian Simon Lobach and the archaeologist Carla Betancourt. The second section surveys the global history of the Amazon from the early modern period to the present, mapping the region's persistent marginalization within the discipline, despite its considerable potential. The third section examines the urban and environmental history of the Amazon, with a focus on deconstructing the pristine imaginary that has long rendered the region's cities and their inhabitants invisible. Finally, the fourth section explores the cultural production of the Amazon and the decisive emergence of Indigenous voices that challenge Western Amazon myths from within.

Archaeology and the Remaking of Global History in the Tropics

The Amazon Basin stands today at the centre of sweeping academic re-evaluations of the significance of human history in the latitudinal tropics, and these re-evaluations carry direct implications for global history as a whole. Tropical forests, defined here as forests growing between the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn, have traditionally been

4 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2021.

portrayed as unattractive environments for human foragers and food producers, given their paucity of large game, abundance of toxic plants, heavy disease burden, challenges of movement, and nutrient-poor, waterlogged soils. In the case of urbanism, even where clear ruins of ancient urban sites have been found their eventual collapse was treated as nearly inevitable, a consequence of necessary forest clearance, soil erosion, and population pressure on delicate environments. In the Amazon Basin, Betty Meggers influentially argued, back in the 1950s to 1970s, that the region's temperature, humidity, and soils fundamentally limited food production and large-scale settlement away from the main river channels. Most ethnographic accounts reinforced this picture by describing small, independent Indigenous communities practicing hunting, gathering, and shifting horticulture. Although these ideas were repeatedly challenged from the time of their first publication, and although the inherent diversity of tropical forests and the societies that have inhabited them resist uniform generalization, the practical difficulties of archaeological research in tropical settings—poor organic preservation, dense canopy inhibiting survey—allowed such assumptions to persist in

considerations of the human past until relatively recently.⁵

Over the past twenty years, however, interdisciplinary research in the Amazon Basin has reframed tropical forests as key centres for global understanding of past human adaptations and socioeconomic dynamics. As early as 1993, Anna Roosevelt demonstrated that the Amazon was inhabited as far back as 13,000 years ago, with populations exploiting Brazil nuts and other rainforest plants and

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- 5 Karl L. Hutterer, "The Natural and Cultural History of Southeast Asian Agriculture," *Anthropos*, n° 78, 1983, p. 169-212; Robert C. Bailey *et al.*, "Hunting and Gathering in Tropical Rain Forest: Is It Possible?," *American Anthropologist*, n° 91, 1989, p. 59-82; Clive Gamble, *Timewalkers: The Prehistory of Global Colonization*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1993; David Webster, *The Fall of the Ancient Maya*, London, Thames and Hudson, 2002; Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, New York, Viking, 2005; David L. Lentz *et al.*, "Forests, Fields and the Edge of Sustainability at the Ancient Maya City of Tikal," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, vol. 111, 2014/52 [<https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1408631111>] (accessed May 2026); Betty J. Meggers, Clifford Evans, *Archaeological Investigations at the Mouth of the Amazon*, *Bulletin of American Ethnology*, vol. 167, 1957; Betty J. Meggers, "Environmental Limitation on the Development of Culture," *American Anthropologist*, vol. 56, 1954, p. 801-824; Betty J. Meggers, *Amazonia: Man and Culture in a Counterfeit Paradise*, Chicago, Aldine, 1971; Paul Colinvaux, Paulo E. De Oliveira, Mark B. Bush, "Amazonian and Neotropical Plant Communities on Glacial Time-Scales: The Failure of the Aridity and Refuge Hypotheses," *Quaternary Science Reviews*, vol. 19, 2000, p. 141-169; Patrick Roberts, *Tropical Forests in Prehistory, History, and Modernity*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019; Patrick Roberts, *Jungle: How Tropical Forests Shaped the World-and Us*, London, Penguin, 2021.

animals. This connects to a growing recognition that our species expanded into tropical forests early in its emergence in Africa and throughout its subsequent dispersal around the globe. Of particular significance is the evidence for the short time gap between human arrival in tropical forest environments and the emergence of food production. Microbotanical studies—pollen and phytolith analysis—from archaeological contexts in the Llanos de Mojos region have been used to argue for the deliberate cultivation of squash on “forest islands” as far back as 11,000 years ago. Combinations of microbotanical study, stable isotope analysis of human and animal bones, and DNA analysis have demonstrated the emergence of maize as a key food resource from 3,000 years ago, its use to feed domesticated Muscovy ducks, and a second genetic domestication event in South America approximately 6,000 years ago. Alongside comparable evidence from Kuk Swamp in New Guinea, this work has highlighted the early management and cultivation of plant resources in the tropics on timelines that extend well beyond what has traditionally been treated as the exclusive prehistory of the Near East.⁶

Research in the Amazon has also substantially complexified our understanding of

what “agriculture” means in archaeology. Early records of tropical forest management through fire and sustained interaction with key tree species highlight long-term, graduated human intervention in these environments, blurring the boundary between foraging and agriculture. While some scholars have argued for the eventual emergence of maize “monoculture,” the majority of evidence indicates that varied crops such as manioc, squash, maize, and even Indigenously domesticated rice were grown as part of mobile field systems, combined with the use of freshwater resources, wild animals, and wild or semi-domesticated plant species. The extent of human influence on the forest itself has been equally striking: 90% of the Amazon’s biodiversity is concentrated in 220 hyper-dominant tree species, the majority of which have documented uses by Indigenous

6 Thais Hermenegildo *et al.*, “Stable Isotope Evidence for Pre-colonial Maize Agriculture and Animal Management in the Bolivian Amazon,” *Nature Human Behaviour*, 2024; Anna C. Roosevelt *et al.*, “Paleoindian Cave

Dwellers in the Amazon: The Peopling of the Americas,” *Science*, vol. 272, 1996, p. 373-384; Eleanor M. L. Scerri *et al.*, “Humans in Africa’s Wet Tropical Forests 150 Thousand Years Ago,” *Nature*, vol. 640, 2025, p. 402-407; Patrick Roberts, Michael D. Petraglia, “Pleistocene Rainforests: Barriers or Attractive Environments for Early Human Foragers?,” *World Archaeology*, 2015; Umberto Lombardo *et al.*, “Early Holocene Crop Cultivation and Landscape Modification in Amazonia,” *Nature*, vol. 581, 2020, p. 190-193; Logan Kistler *et al.*, “Multiproxy Evidence Highlights a Complex Evolutionary Legacy of Maize in South America,” *Science*, vol. 362, 2018, p. 1309-1313; Jack Golson *et al.*, *Ten Thousand Years of Cultivation at Kuk Swamp in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea*, Terra Australis, vol. 46, Canberra, ANU Press, 2017; Timothy P. Denham *et al.*, “Origins of Agriculture at Kuk Swamp in the Highlands of New Guinea,” *Science*, vol. 301, 2003, p. 189-193.

peoples. Alongside evidence for biodiversity enrichment around lake basins and the widespread presence of anthropogenic Amazonian Dark Earth soils, these findings suggest that much of the Amazon has been actively managed at one point or another—a conclusion with profound implications for how we understand the relationship between human social structures and settlements, and forest ecology at the planetary scale.⁷

Arguably, the most dramatic contributions of Amazonian research to global archaeology have come through the study of ancient urbanism. In the early 2000s, LiDAR (light detection and ranging) technology revolutionized understanding of the scale of past tropical urban forms. In the Amazon Basin, these technologies most fundamentally transformed prior understandings of human settlement. Documentation of vast networks of

settlements, causeways, earthworks, and platforms in the Llanos de Mojos (nowadays' Bolivian Amazon) revealed urban landscapes invisible to conventional survey, even though they had long been recorded in Indigenous oral traditions and colonial observations. These findings built on earlier work identifying "Garden Cities" in the Xingu River Basin. Taken together, they demonstrated the possibility of uncovering vast, constructed and settled landscapes even in the absence of obvious stone architecture. Contributing to estimates of a pre-colonial Amazonian population as high as 20 million people, these findings presented diverse models of how large populations can distribute themselves through multiple connected nodes rather than dense urban epicentres, sustaining themselves through agroforestry, mixed cultivation, and wild resources.⁸

This body of research has not only forced a reconsideration of the long histories of food production and urbanism in the Amazon; it has compelled a rethinking of these concepts and their diversity on a global scale. The

7 Patrick Roberts *et al.*, "The Deep Human Prehistory of Global Tropical Forests and Its Relevance for Modern Conservation," *Nature Plants*, vol. 3, 2017 [Article number 17093] [<https://doi.org/10.1038/nplants.2017.93>] (accessed May 2026), Timothy P. Denham *et al.*, "Origins of Agriculture at Kuk Swamp," *op. cit.*; Umberto Lombardo *et al.*, "Maize Monoculture Supported Pre-Columbian Urbanism in Southwestern Amazonia," *Nature*, vol. 639, 2025, p. 119-123; Charles R. Clement *et al.*, "Origin and Domestication of Native Amazonian Crops," *Diversity*, vol. 2, 2010, p. 72-106; Hans ter Steege *et al.*, "Hyperdominance in the Amazonian Tree Flora," *Science*, vol. 342, 2013; Yoshi Maezumi *et al.*, "The Legacy of 4,500 Years of Polyculture Agroforestry in the Eastern Amazon," *Nature Plants*, vol. 4, 2018, p. 540-547; Manuel Arroyo-Kalin, "Slash-Burn-and-Churn: Landscape History and Crop Cultivation in Pre-Columbian Amazonia," *Quaternary International*, vol. 249, 2012, p. 4-18.

8 Heiko Prümers *et al.*, "Lidar Reveals Pre-Hispanic Low-Density Urbanism in the Bolivian Amazon," *Nature*, vol. 606, 2022, p. 325-328; José Iriarte *et al.*, "Pre-Columbian Geometrical Earthworks in the Upper Purús: A Cultural Assessment," *Antiquity*, vol. 94, 2020, p. 1150-1168; Michael J. Heckenberger *et al.*, "Pre-Columbian Urbanism, Anthropogenic Landscapes, and the Future of the Amazon," *Science*, vol. 321, 2008, p. 1214-1217; Alexander Koch *et al.*, "European Colonization Contributed to Global Cooling," *Quaternary Science Reviews*, vol. 207, 2019, p. 13-26; Simon L. Lewis, Mark A. Maslin, "Defining the Anthropocene," *Nature*, vol. 519, 2015, p. 171-180.

archaeological and paleoecological evidence also provides critical insights into the rupture caused by European colonialism in the South American tropics. If large-scale societies existed and modified the forests around them to such an extent, why do so many contemporary accounts highlight only small, mobile foraging groups? Even early European observers documented large farming populations living along the Amazon and its tributaries, giving rise to the rumors of “Lost Cities” that later solidified into a literary and ethnographic trope. The answer lies in the catastrophic consequences of European-brought diseases, relocation policies, murder, and enslavement, with Indigenous mortality estimated as high as 90% in the two generations following European invasion. Indigenous strategies of resistance through retreat into forests or highlands, combined with Iberian ambitions to consolidate their own urban spaces, further transformed prior settlement patterns and land uses. The scale of this destruction cannot be overstated. Nor, however, should Indigenous agency and dynamism be minimized: oral traditions maintained over generations preserved knowledge of urban predecessors, and the extensive networks of Amazonian Dark Earth soils have continued to shape settlement patterns across the basin into the twenty-first century. Meanwhile, Freg Stokes in this volume, highlight how Indigenous resistance shaped the protection of forest areas away from commodity frontiers

and European slave raids. The Amazon thus offers a particularly stark illustration of how European colonial strategies left vivid and enduring marks on Indigenous demography, land use, and culture—a global pattern legible with unusual clarity in this regional context.⁹

Amazonian archaeology has also foregrounded two methodological and theoretical elements of wide relevance to studies of human history. The first is the essential role of multidisciplinary, multi-species approaches. Methodologies from biology, physics, and chemistry have been key to understanding settlement structures, human subsistence strategies, and long-term vegetation change. Dendrochronology and DNA analysis have revealed, for example, the deep entanglement between human practices and the Brazil Nut: not only does this work document the importance of Indigenous forest management in shaping the growth trajectories of this species—made sharply visible by the colonial disruption of those practices—but it also shows how long-term human activities shaped the genetic diversity of the tree across different parts of the Amazon. Such approaches fit into the broader interdisciplinary turn toward multi-species perspectives,

9 John Hemming, *Tree of Rivers: The Story of the Amazon*, London, Thames and Hudson, 2008; Alexander Koch *et al.*, “European Colonization Contributed to Global Cooling,” *op. cit.*; Freg J. Stokes *et al.*, “Deforestation and Indigenous Resistance over the Longue Durée in South America,” *Journal of Global History*, vol. 20, 2025/2, p. 121-142.

in which forests, trees, rivers, and animals are understood as having shaped human history at the same time that human history has been shaped by them. This perspective, deeply rooted in Indigenous cosmology in the Amazon, connects directly to the argument advanced in this introduction about the need to move from the global to the planetary.¹⁰

The second methodological contribution concerns the relationship between archaeology and Indigenous communities. Press presentations of LiDAR discoveries systematically frame their findings as revelations of “lost cities,” but the point bears emphasis: Indigenous communities were not unaware of their existence. Many of the most productive understandings of how past practices shaped landscapes, plant species, and settlement patterns are grounded in traditional knowledge that was never lost, only ignored. Amazonian archaeology, led significantly by Brazilian researchers, has foregrounded the importance of pre-project consultation, community participation in research design, and community access to results. From the perspective of global history, this is not merely

a procedural matter: it models a practice of knowledge co-production that challenges the extractive epistemologies through which the Amazon has been studied, and exploited, since the sixteenth century.

From the Global to the Planetary: The Amazon in Global History

As was the case in archaeological approaches, the historiographical situation of the Amazon within global history literature has been one of relative marginalization. The region’s peripheral role in the major narratives of early-modern global history of the Atlantic world can be attributed to several converging factors. The scarce attention given to the Amazon by historians of the Spanish empire is explicable by the comparatively weak engagement of the Spanish Crown in the region, which also explains why Portuguese occupation soon came to stretch far beyond the line of the Treaty of Tordesillas dividing the “newly discovered” lands between the two empires in 1494. A similar lack of attention long plagued histories of the Portuguese empire: the de facto autonomy of the region from colonial Brazil, through the territories of Maranhão and Grão-Pará, administered separately, and closer to Portugal than to Rio de Janeiro or Salvador in terms of navigation time, contributes to explaining this marginalization. The comparatively modest influx of the transatlantic slave trade into the Amazon drew the region away

10 Vinícius L. Caetano-Andrade *et al.*, “Growth Rings of Amazon Nut Trees (*Bertholletia excelsa*) as Living Record of Historical Human Disturbance in Central Amazonia,” *PloS ONE*, vol. 14, 2019/4 [<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0214128>] (accessed May 2026); Hao Wang *et al.*, “Long-term Human Influence on the Demography and Genetic Diversity of the Hyperdominant *Bertholletia Excelsa* in the Amazon Basin,” *Current Biology*, vol. 35, 2025, p. 629-639.

from the central concerns of Atlantic historiography, despite a rich history of circulation and settlement of African and Afro-descendant populations in the basin that is now being uncovered. Finally, before the late nineteenth century, the global trade in Amazonian resources remained relatively modest compared to the flows of timber, sugar, gold, silver, indigo, cotton, or coffee extracted from other parts of the Americas.¹¹

Yet the strategic importance of Amazonian cacao, cloves, vanilla, cassia, sarsaparilla, annatto, Brazil nuts, and perfume essences constituted a significant current within the broader circulation of commodities connecting South America to North Atlantic markets. Recent scholarship by Rafael Chamboleyron and others on these so-called *drogas do Sertão* has stressed the trans-imperial character of this trade, revealing also agricultural exchanges crossing Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, and British actors within networks stretching across the Atlantic. A growing body of literature, much of it produced by an

expanding network of Amazonian universities, has examined trans-imperial rivalries over strategic river deltas and confluences. As demonstrated in Wania Alexandrino Viana's contribution to this issue, architecture and engineering proved decisive in these competitions, with river forts serving as nodal points of imperial confrontations in which alliances with Indigenous peoples were critical for all European parties involved. The literature on the Amazon's integration into early-modern intercontinental networks remains, however, largely confined to questions of commerce. Notable exceptions include Laurent Vidal's book on Mazagão, the Portuguese city that crossed the Atlantic from Morocco to the Western mouth of the Amazon via Lisbon in the late 1760s, following a settlement project of the Portuguese crown after conceding the Mazagão fortress to the Moroccans. This fascinating work opens a window onto the utopian imaginaries of colonial transplantation and social engineering that attended Portuguese ambitions to make Indigenous peoples "free" vassals of the king, molded to European culture and political subjectivity.¹²

A central challenge for the global history of the Amazon remains the near-total

11 Flávio dos Santos Gomes, *A Hidra e os Pântanos: Mocambos, Quilombos e Comunidades de Fugitivos no Brasil, séculos XVII-XIX*, São Paulo, UNESP/Polis, 2005; Rosa Acevedo Marin, Edna Castro, *Negros do Trombetas: Guardiães de Matas e Rios*, Belém, CEJUP/UFPA, 1993; Marley Antonia Silva da Silva, *Nas Correntes do Atlântico Norte e Sul: Tráfico de Escravizados para Belém do Grão-Pará (1777-1841)*, Jundiaí, Paco Editorial, 2024; Fernanda Santos, "Viagens pelo Rio Babel: os missionários jesuítas e a narração da Amazônia no século XVII," *Revista USP*, n° 133, São Paulo, 2022, p. 148.

12 Rafael Chamboleyron, Karl Heinz Arenz, "Amazonian Atlantic: Cacao, Colonial Expansion and Indigenous Labour in the Portuguese Amazon Region (17th-18th Centuries)," *Journal of Latin American Studies*, vol. 53, 2021/2, p. 221-244; Rafael Chamboleyron, "Como se hace en Indias de Castilla": El cacao entre la Amazonía portuguesa y las Indias de Castilla (siglos XVII y

absence of sources conveying even indirect Indigenous voices in the archive. For the colonial period, and well into the twentieth century, travel literature constitutes the main body of primary sources, making it extraordinarily difficult for historiography to avoid reproducing, at least in part, the construction of the Amazon through the colonial gaze. Historians continue to struggle to integrate Indigenous individuals and groups as genuine subjects of global history: they are routinely relegated to the categories of the “local,” the “Indigenous,” the “traditional”—appellations not necessarily wrong in themselves, since they are frequently deployed by the communities and advocacy groups concerned, but ones that tend to carry an implicit antagonism toward the adjective “global.” Yet the protagonism of Indigenous Amazonian

societies since the early modern period has been profoundly global in character. Many of these societies were connected across vast spaces through routes, alliances, and trade networks stretching from the Atlantic and the Guiana Shield to the Andes. Indigenous infrastructures and geographic expertise across vast distances were later leveraged by European colonizers to identify and transport natural resources for transatlantic trade, and to circulate Indigenous knowledge of plants, nutrition, and medicine across the Atlantic world. Historians of sciences have begun to recover the invisible actors in this process—Indigenous intermediaries, enslaved Africans, and women—through micro-historical studies of individuals involved in circuits of scientific circulation. The linguistic knowledge of Amazonian societies, in which it was not uncommon to speak several Indigenous languages in addition to Portuguese or Spanish, and/or the Amazonian *língua geral* used throughout Portuguese colonization, was equally decisive in intensifying global exchanges in the region during the colonial period.¹³

Behind the homogenized figure of “the Indian” lies an extraordinary diversity of

XVIII),” *Revista Complutense de Historia de América*, vol. 40, 2014, p. 47-71; Rafael Chambouleyron, “O ‘cravo do Maranhão’ e a Amazônia global (séculos XVII-XVIII),” *Revista de Índias*, vol. 82, 2022/285, p. 639-668; Roberto Chauca Tapia, “El ‘imperio fluvial’ franciscano en la Amazonía occidental entre los siglos XVII y XVIII,” *Procesos. Revista Ecuatoriana de Historia*, vol. 51, 2020, p. 13-38; Roberto Chauca Tapia, “La construcción instrumental del saber cartográfico jesuita de la Amazonía colonial,” in Alejandra Vega Palma (ed.), *Del mundo al mapa y del mapa al mundo: Objetos, escalas e imaginarios del territorio*, Santiago, Universidad de Chile/Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, 2017, p. 493-502; Laurent Vidal, *Mazagão : La ville qui traverse l’Atlantique. Du Maroc à l’Amazonie (1769-1783)*, Paris, Flammarion, 2005; Angela Domingues, *Quando os Índios eram Vassalos: Colonização e Relações de Poder no Norte do Brasil na Segunda Metade do Século XVIII*, Lisbon, CNCDP, 2000.

13 Jean-Pierre Chaumeil, “Una visión de la Amazonía a mediados del siglo XIX: el viajero Paul Marcoy,” *Bulletin de l’Institut Français d’Études Andines*, vol. 23, 1994/2, p. 307-328; Angela Domingues, *Quando os Índios eram Vassalos*, op. cit., p. 16; Neil L. Whitehead, *Lords of the Tiger Spirit: A History of the Caribs in Colonial Venezuela and Guyana, 1498-1820*, Dordrecht, Foris, 1988;

connected societies and cultures. With hundreds of distinct Indigenous societies in the Amazon today, many with histories crossing the borders of the region's nine nation-states, and with the multitude of communities arising from the blending of Indigenous, African and Maroon, and various European cultures, a global approach to Amazonian history stands to gain enormously from greater attention to the trajectories of its so-called traditional populations. For Amazon history, even when exploring intercontinental exchanges, has remained desperately national in many cases, mirroring the weak political cooperation between Brazilian,

Bolivian, Ecuadorian, Peruvian, Venezuelan, Colombian, Surinamese, Guyanese, and French Guyanese territories. To date, only two serious attempts at a "panamazonian" historical synthesis have circulated—timidly—in academia. Márcio Souza's *História da Amazônia*, written in Portuguese, tries to address Spanish-speaking countries and the Guianas but remains fundamentally Brazil-centric. A more recent panamazonian history in French by the archaeologist Stéphen Rostain is refreshing for its perspective spanning over thirteen thousand years, but its brief thirty pages devoted to the colonial and modern periods may frustrate global historians. We hope that the various contributions in the present special issue will contribute to a truly transnational reinterpretation of the Amazon's history. For example, Sarah Sarzynski's contribution to this special issue approaches the Colombian–Peruvian War through spaces and people, enabling a transborder approach that also broadens the range of sources used to examine warfare.¹⁴

Another challenge is to reconnect early-modern with modern history, particularly in light of the shifting meaning of "the Amazon" across the centuries: from river, to

Heather Flynn Roller, *Amazonian Routes: Indigenous Mobility and Colonial Communities in Northern Brazil*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2014; Tamar Herzog, *Frontiers of Possession: Spain and Portugal in Europe and the Americas*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2015; Roberto Chauca Tapia, "Sobre letrados chinos y bogas amazónicos: la participación indígena en la producción del conocimiento cartográfico y geográfico jesuita en Asia y América," *Revista de Historia y Geografía*, vol. 34, 2016, p. 19-41; Nelson Sanjad, Claudia Leonor López-Garcés *et al.*, "Au-delà du colonialisme : la sinieuse confluence entre le musée Goeldi et le peuple Mebêngokre," *Brésil(s)*, vol. 22, 2022; Nelson Sanjad, Ermelinda Pataca, Rafael Rogério Nascimento dos Santos, "Knowledge and Circulation of Plants: Unveiling the Participation of Amazonian Indigenous Peoples in the Construction of Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Botany," *HoST—Journal of History of Science and Technology*, vol. 15, 2021/1; Alexandra Y. Aikhenvald, "Language Contact in Amazonia," in *The Languages of the Amazon*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 68-98; Micheli Carolini de Deus Schwade, Keila Ferreira Baraúna, Tiago Maiká Müller Schwade, "A chegada da Língua Geral Amazônica na região do médio Rio Amazonas," *Revista Verde Grande*, 2023.

14 Angela Domingues, *op. cit.*, p. 16; Márcio Gonçalves Bentes de Souza, *História da Amazônia: Do período pré-colombiano aos desafios do século XXI*, Rio de Janeiro, Editora Record, 2019; Stéphen Rostain, *Histoire de l'Amazonie*, Paris, PUF, col. Que sais-je ?, 2022.

river system, to forest, to region, to separated national administrative territories, and to a vaguely projected transborder culture. This semantic evolution is bound up with the history of science, the history of development, and the social history of identities formed and transformed under political pressures, threats, and ambitions. In this respect, Susanna Hecht has filled a major historiographical gap by demonstrating the global importance of the Amazon in nineteenth-and early-twentieth-century nation-state formation and frontier-making. This period also corresponds to a “golden age” during which the Amazon was the world’s main supplier of rubber, making the region indispensable to the second industrial revolution at the cost of brutal labor exploitation that included modern slavery, particularly in Peru. For decades, historians remained preoccupied with debating the factors behind the Amazon’s inability to cope with global competition after the British colonial empire successfully organized the acclimatization of the wild and intractable *Hevea brasiliensis* in far more productive Malayan plantations. Yet they rarely contextualized the “rubber boom” (ca. 1870-1912) within the longer history of Amazonian connections, and the decades of decline following the boom remained virtually ignored by global history until recently. Works on infrastructure-building—such as the Madeira-Mamoré railroad linking Brazil to Bolivia in 1912, on Amazonian

metropolis-making, and on twentieth-century US attempts to revive global rubber production in the region have allowed historians to revisit this bleak phase as a “prelude” to the making of a modern capitalist frontier driven by accelerating extraction economies.¹⁵

By contrast, the period from the 1950s to the 1970s has earned some scholarly attention as the time when the Amazon reconnected with global trade. Significantly, this period coincided with the rise of the region as the subject of an intense literature on global geopolitics: UNESCO discussions about making the Amazon a hotspot of international science, American modernization plans bound up with Cold War strategies, and the paranoia of the Brazilian military

15 Julyan Machado Ramos, “Amazônidas, povo sem história ?,” *Amazonia Latitude* (blog), 13 May 2020; Aldrin Moura de Figueiredo et al., “Amazônia e história global –Apresentação,” *Tempo*, vol. 23, 2017/3, p. 504-505; Susanna B. Hecht, *The Scramble for the Amazon and the Lost Paradise of Euclides da Cunha*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2013; Rosineide Bentes da Silva, *Um novo olhar sobre a empresa de borracha na Amazônia, 1840-1930*, Curitiba, Editora Appris, 2025; Warren Dean, *Brazil and the Struggle for Rubber: A Study in Environmental History*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987; Barbara Weinstein, *The Amazon Rubber Boom, 1850-1920*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1983; Greg Grandin, *Fordlandia: The Rise and Fall of Henry Ford’s Forgotten Jungle City*, New York, Metropolitan Books, 2009; Seth Garfield, *In Search of the Amazon: Brazil, the United States, and the Nature of a Region*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2013; Gary Neeleman, Rose Neeleman, *Tracks in the Amazon: The Day-to-Day Life of the Workers on the Madeira-Mamoe Railroad*, Salt Lake City, University of Utah Press, 2014.

regime (1964-1985), which saw the region as a potential invasion target for communist forces or some otherwise unspecified foreign threat. Behind this political discourse lay a vision of the rainforest as unoccupied and unproductive—a vision that spurred an unprecedented wave of development planning. The dictatorship incited hundreds of thousands of migrants from across Brazil to move to the Amazon to serve primarily as a workforce for capital-intensive projects, supported by generous tax cuts and massive infrastructure-building program of roads, mines, ports, company towns, and dams. Scholarship has studied the military regime as a decisive period for reinscribing the Brazilian Amazon in the logics of global trade in minerals, timber, cattle, and, more recently, soy. Acker in particular demonstrated how the regime functioned as a nexus between Brazilian patriotic projects of national integration dating back to the 1930s, and a broad opening to foreign capital.¹⁶

In response to the dramatic deforestation unleashed by these politics, global history

has turned its attention to the construction of the Amazon as a globally contested ecological symbol. In this special issue, André Bailão and André Silva examine the pioneer role of scientific networks in transnational efforts opposing the ecological destruction caused by large-scale projects in the Amazon during the Brazilian military dictatorship. Political scientists, in turn, have highlighted Indigenous efforts to federate across borders and build alliances in Western political arenas, the media, and the entertainment world—most famously through the figure of the Kayapó cacique Raoni, who enlisted the Belgian royal family and the musician Sting in the cause of his people. Another key topic for global history is the long Ecuadorian Indigenous politico-juridical war against the multinational oil corporation Chevron, which began in the late 1970s—a conflict that resonates powerfully with the broader

16 Antoine Acker, "Amazon Development," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Latin American History*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2021; Thomas Mougey, "Tracing the Origins of Brazil's Great Acceleration: The SPVEA's *Primeiro Plano Quinquenal* and the Technoscientific Recovery of Amazonia, 1945-1959," *Varia Historia*, vol. 34, 2018/65, p. 375-408; Sue Branford, Oriel Glock, *The Last Frontier: Fighting over Land in the Amazon*, London, Zed Books, 1985; Antoine Acker, *Volkswagen in the Amazon: The Tragedy of Global Development in Modern Brazil*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2017; Ariovaldo U. de Oliveira, Maurício Torres, *Amazônia*

revelada: Os descaminhos ao longo da BR-163, Brasília, CNPq, 2005; Andrew Sluyter, "Cattle in Latin American History," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Latin American History*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2023; Emma Story, "Road Building in Brazil," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Latin American History*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2021; Robert W. Wilcox, *Cattle in the Backlands: Mato Grosso and the Evolution of Ranching in the Brazilian Tropics*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 2017; Seth Garfield, *Indigenous Struggle at the Heart of Brazil: State Policy, Frontier Expansion, and the Xavante Indians, 1937-1988*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2001; Antoine Acker, Nathalia Capellini Carvalho de Oliveira, "Tales of the Transamazonian: Hope and Disillusionment on a Route of Ecological Migrations," *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, vol. 24, 2017/2, p. 306-324.

transformation of the Amazon into a global reserve of natural resources under pressure. Yet this dual narrative of forced modernization in opposition to Indigenous traditions has led to the erasure of many key groups. The resistance of quilombolas, caboclos, and migrants who arrived to work on large export projects or as smallholders—and who sometimes became subjects of forced labor—is frequently the subject of case studies in Latin American scholarship but remains largely ignored by global history. The focus on export and deforestation dynamics has also contributed to the invisibilization, in the global history literature, of Amazonian territories in Peru, Venezuela, Colombia, Bolivia, and the Guianas, where deforestation economies only began to reach scales comparable to Brazil in the late twentieth century.¹⁷

17 Kevin Niebauer, *Regenwald und ökologische Krise: Die Globalisierung Amazoniens im 20. Jahrhundert*, Weinheim, Campus Verlag, 2021; Kathryn Hochstetler, Margaret E. Keck, *Greening Brazil: Environmental Activism in State and Society*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2007; Antoine Acker, “O maior incêndio do planeta: como a Volkswagen e o regime militar brasileiro acidentalmente ajudaram a transformar a Amazônia em uma arena política global,” *Revista Brasileira de História*, vol. 34, 2014/68, p. 13-33; Susanna B. Hecht, Alexander Cockburn, *The Fate of the Forest: Developers, Destroyers, and Defenders of the Amazon*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2010 (1st ed. 1989); Margaret E. Keck, Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1998; Maximilian Fritz Feichtner, *The Metamorphosis of the Amazon: An Environmental History of Oil Extraction in Ecuador*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2023; Jondison Cardoso Rodrigues, Ricardo Angelo Pereira Lima, “Grandes projetos de infraestrutura na

Deconstructing the Pristine: Urban History, Environmental History, and the Amazon

A shift toward the Amazon’s urban histories complements the above-mentioned developments in recent Amazonian historiography. In December 2025, the Anthropologist Eduardo Brondizio publicly called for an urban perspective on the Brazilian Amazon, assembling qualitative, statistical, and remote sensing data to show that 80% of the region’s population now lives in one of the 770 cities that make up Brazil’s Legal Amazon. Approximately 50% of the region’s Indigenous people reside in urban areas, and two of Brazil’s largest metropolises—Belém and Manaus—are in the Amazon. Belém do Pará, situated at the mouth of the Amazon River, has comparatively low tree cover and is the hottest among Brazil’s state capitals. Manaus faces a severe sanitation deficit, with less than one third of the city’s sewage receiving treatment. As a result, Amazonian metropolises rank among the Brazilian cities with the highest prevalence of slums. Similar dynamics can be observed beyond the

Amazônia: imaginário, colonialidade e resistências,” *Revista Nera*, vol. 51, 2020/23, p. 89-116; Ricardo Rezende Figueira, *Pisando Fora da Própria Sombra: A Escravidão por Dívida no Brasil Contemporâneo*, Rio de Janeiro, Civilização Brasileira, 2004; Antoine Acker, “Les lieux du XX^e siècle : l’Amazonie,” in Nicolas Beaupré, Florian Louis (eds.), *Histoire mondiale du XX^e siècle*, Paris, PUF, 2022, p. 687-690.

Brazilian Amazon. In the Peruvian Amazon, Iquitos expanded as a river port integrated into global economic networks since the rubber boom. This process reveals the long-term formation of a “precarious urbanization” shaped by the interaction between riverine ecologies, global markets, and persistent social inequalities. In Ecuador, cities such as Lago Agrio grew rapidly in the late twentieth century as administrative and logistical hubs for the oil frontier, illustrating how extractive economies have shaped patterns of urbanization across the western Amazon.¹⁸

Why, then, does the Amazon continue to be conceived primarily as a forest, despite the profound impacts that its cities, through infrastructure and other forms of development, exert on the forest environments? The answer lies in a longstanding imaginary that has portrayed the Amazon for centuries as a pristine and untouched environment. Rooted in a Western economic ideology that casts large, forested areas as non-productive spaces,¹⁹ this view acquired force in the tropics, as detailed above. This global imagery

is challenged in Townsend’s contribution to the present issue devoted to examining the “Venice in the Jungle” metaphor and revealing the Amazon as a place where nature and capital are co-constitutive and intimately intertwined. The dominant global image of the Amazon as essentially a forest is reproduced through green design aesthetics, ecological products and cultural productions that reinforce forest-centered stereotypes, advertising and tourism campaigns highlighting wilderness, and the vision of the forest as an inexhaustible reservoir of genetic resources. It is also legible in the framing of global and national public policies and in diplomatic negotiations on biodiversity and climate, where urban issues are systematically relegated to a secondary role. Funding and projects are directed overwhelmingly toward biodiversity conservation, anti-deforestation measures, or emissions compensation schemes such as REDD+, and far less toward urban improvement and basic sanitation. As a result, Amazonian cities do not fit comfortably within dominant imaginaries or policy agendas, and the urban areas produced by developmental projects have not been fully incorporated into debates about the region’s present and future.

From a historiographical perspective, clear convergences between global, environmental, and urban historiography can be observed. One has been the effort to dismantle the pristine ideal associated with the Amazon,

18 Eduardo Brondizio, interview in *Nexo*, December 2025; IBGE, *Censo Demográfico 2022*; Adrián Lerner Patrón, “A Riverine Society: Iquitos and the Precarious Urbanization of Amazonia,” *Urban History*, vol. 53, 2026/2, p. 238-253; Cemaden, *Relatório de Temperatura Urbana*, 2025; Pablo Campana, “La mirada estatal de la Amazonía: la planificación de la selva en Brasil, Colombia, Ecuador y Perú entre 1968-1978,” *Historia Crítica*, n° 88, 2022, p. 93-115.

19 Eduardo Góes Neves, Rodrigo Castriota, “Urbanismos tropicais,” *Piseagrama*, Belo Horizonte, 2023, p. 64-73.

particularly in the wake of the cultural turn, which gave rise to intellectual currents seeking to denaturalize the modern idea of nature as separate from human productions. Another convergence is the emphasis on environmental destruction and disaster. Environmental history itself emerged globally in the context of the rise of environmentalism, and in Brazil in the final years of the military dictatorship when scholars sought to denounce deforestation and land-use change in the heart of the forest. In this framework, even as efforts were made to decenter narratives of modernization, cities were often examined alongside agrarian conflict, deforestation, and human rights violations.²⁰

In addition, a growing body of scholarship has sought to identify the particularities of

Amazonian urbanization and to examine how these cities interact with surrounding ecosystems, not only through processes of forest destruction. In this perspective, Amazonian urbanization often takes the form of an extensive and hybrid urban fabric, where urban, rural, and forested spaces remain deeply intertwined, rather than sharply separated. The deconstruction of nature-culture dichotomy has also been one of the most productive avenues in Amazonian historiography. The concepts of technosphere and urban, economic, and techno-ecological frontier, widely influential internationally, exemplify this approach: rather than simply bringing the urban and the rural into proximity, it integrates them within a single conceptual framework, interpreting territory through a global history of infrastructure, as mirrored in Nathalia Capellini's contribution to this special issue.²¹

This transformation is also reflected in the growing circulation of scholarly work

20 Suzanne Hecht, Rodrigo Rajão, "From "Green Hell" to "Amazonia Legal": Land Use Models and the Re-imagination of the Rainforest as a New Development Frontier," *Land Use Policy*, vol. 96, 2020. Rômulo de Paula Andrade, *Amazônia na era do desenvolvimento: Saúde, políticas e destruição, 1930-1966*, Rio de Janeiro, Editora Fiocruz, 2024; Eduardo Viola, João Carlos Pereira, "Brazil: The Exterminator of the Future," in João Carlos Pereira, Eduardo Viola (eds.), *Climate Change and Biodiversity Governance in the Amazon: At the Edge of Ecological Collapse?*, London, Routledge, 2022; Philip M. Fearnside, "Environmental Destruction in the Amazon as a Result of Development Projects," *Rainforest Engineering in Amazonia*, 2017, p. 1-25; Warren Dean, *Brazil and the Struggle for Rubber*, op. cit.; John O. Browder, Brian J. Godfrey, *Rainforest Cities: Urbanization, Development, and Globalization of the Brazilian Amazon*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1997; Antoine Acker, *Volkswagen in the Amazon*, op. cit.; Seth Garfield, *Indigenous Struggle at the Heart of Brazil*, op. cit.

21 Ana Cláudia Duarte Cardoso, José Cláudio Monteiro de Pereira (eds.), *Coleção Amazoniidades: O urbano e a cidade na paisagem amazônica*, vol. 1, Brasília, Edições do Senado Federal, 2025; Saint-Clair Cordeiro da Trindade Júnior, *A natureza da cidade na Amazônia: urbanização e meio ambiente*, Belém, EDUFPA, 2006. Adauto de Oliveira Moraes, Tatiana Schor, "As redes urbanas na Amazônia: a cidade como o começo e o fim," *Revista Geográfica de América Central*, 2(47E), 2012; Bertha Becker, "Undoing Myths: The Amazonian Urbanized Forest," in Michel Clüsener-Godt, Ignacy Sachs (eds.), *Brazilian Perspectives on Sustainable Development of the Amazon Region*, Paris, UNESCO, vol. 15, 1995, p. 53-89; Milton Santos, *A natureza*

produced by authors from the Amazon itself. The critique of the pristine image is closely linked to the rise of Indigenous authors who have moved from being objects of study to authors of their own histories, as will be highlighted in the next section. This development has been supported by the consolidation of graduate programs in the region, the expansion of a global publishing market attentive to the Amazon, and the political mobilization of Indigenous movements and traditional communities seeking to reshape academic institutions. The Amazon thus emerges as an innovative historiographical microcosm at a moment when scholars increasingly question interpretations based on rigid disciplinary boundaries, methodological nationalism, and analytical models imported from the Global North. Urban history functions as a spatial vector of this renewal, challenging both the pristine imaginary and the supposed opposition between forest and city.

Phytofables, Extractivism, and Indigenous Voices: Cultural Production and the Amazon

Imaginaries have been key in shaping the Amazon. From the time early Europeans

arrived in the region in the first half of the sixteenth century, the Amazonian environment and its Indigenous inhabitants have been portrayed through the lens of colonizers and voyagers who resorted to extraneous imagery to understand the territory. These narratives may aptly be called “phytofables”: enduring idealizations of Amazonia that typically foreground the territory’s lush plant world. Next to the myth of Amazon female warriors, Christian theology played a key role in forging a long-lasting, dichotomous perception of the Amazon. The territory was frequently linked to the ideal of the “noble savage”—a morally pure and free individual living in harmony with nature, deployed as a critique of a supposedly decadent Europe. Conversely, many voyagers depicted Amazonia not as a prelapsarian Eden but as a “green hell” where the dangers of an inhospitable natural world were compounded by an aggressive local population. In the twentieth century, the Brazilian writer Alberto Rangel gave canonical form to this trope in his collection of short stories *Inferno Verde: Scenas e Cenários do Amazonas* (1908), depicting the hardships of outsiders who went to the Amazon during the rubber boom hoping for easy enrichment through the commerce of latex.²²

The legend of El Dorado, in turn, and as Charlotte Rogers has compellingly shown,

do espaço: *Técnica e tempo, razão e emoção*, São Paulo, Hucitec, 1996; Felipe Correa, *Beyond the City: Resource Extraction Urbanism in South America*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 2016.

22 Patrícia Vieira, “Phytofables: Tales of the Amazon,” *Journal of Lusophone Studies*, vol. 1, 2016/2,

combined with the idea of an abundant Amazonian nature to cement the European perception of the region as a permanent source of natural bounties. Rogers argues that the “extractive mentality” dominating contemporary approaches to Amazonia can be traced directly back to the myth of El Dorado. As Nathalia Capellini’s contribution to this issue shows with her trans-amazonian study of oil infrastructures, the idea of an inexhaustible Amazon offering easy paths to wealth undergirds many of the large-scale extractivist projects, which threaten the Amazonian environment and its Indigenous and traditional communities today.²³

The idea that the Amazon harbored untold riches also shaped the expeditions of scientists who traveled to the region. While the search for El Dorado faded into fiction during the eighteenth century, later explorers hoped to find scientific treasures in Amazonia. Naturalists such as the French Charles Marie de la Condamine (1701-1774), the Portuguese

Alexandre Rodrigues Ferreira (1756-1815), the Germans Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859), Johann Baptist von Spix (1781-1826), and Carl Friedrich von Martius (1794-1868), or the British Richard Spruce (1817-1893), Alfred Russel Wallace (1823-1913), and Henry Walter Bates (1825-1892), traveled to the Amazon in search of geographical, botanical, zoological, and ethnographic data. Their voyages, typically sponsored by crowns or scientific institutions, were designed to generate knowledge that would advance the scholarly prestige and commercial interests of their nations. The view of the Amazon as an inexhaustible reservoir of undiscovered scientific information persisted well into the twentieth century, guiding the work of ethnobotanists such as Richard Evans Schultes and Wade Davis—a trope memorably recycled in the adventure film *Medicine Man* (John McTiernan, 1992), in which a scientist ventures into Amazonia in search of a cure for cancer.²⁴

In the twentieth century, Amazonia contributed substantially to modern anthropology

p. 116-134 ; Gaspar de Carvajal, *Relación*, op. cit.; Cristóbal de Acuña, “New Discovery of the Great River of the Amazons,” in Clements R. Markham (ed.), *Expeditions into the Valley of the Amazons, 1539, 1540, 1639*, London, Hakluyt, 1859, p. 47-134; Alberto Rangel, *Inferno Verde: Scenas e Cenários do Amazonas*, Genoa, Baccigalupi, 1908.

23 Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, *Visão do Paraíso: Os Motivos Edênicos no Descobrimento e Colonização do Brasil*, São Paulo, Brasiliense e Publifolha, 2000, p. 37-38; Charlotte Rogers, *Mourning El Dorado: Literature and Extractivism in the Contemporary American Tropics*, Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press, 2019, p. 7, 22.

24 These naturalists’ principal travel writings include: Charles Marie de la Condamine, *Relation abrégée d’un voyage fait dans l’intérieur de l’Amérique méridionale*, Paris, 1745; Alexandre Rodrigues Ferreira, *Viagem philosophica pelas capitâneas do Grão-Pará, Rio Negro, Mato Grosso e Cuiabá* (c. 1790); Alexander von Humboldt (with Aimé Bonpland), *Voyage aux régions équinoxiales du Nouveau Continent*, Paris, 1814-1825; Johann Baptist von Spix, Carl Friedrich von Martius, *Reise in Brasilien*, Munich, 1823-1831; Alfred Russel Wallace, *A Narrative of Travels on the Amazon and*

through the work of Curt Nimuendajú, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Terence Turner, Joanna Overing, Philippe Descola, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, and William Balée, among many others.²⁵ These scholars documented the extraordinary variety of forms of social organization, as well as the linguistic, cultural, and cosmological depth of Amazonian Indigenous communities, while highlighting the deep links between biological and social diversity. Yet the most consequential development in the understanding of Amazonia since the late twentieth century has been qualitatively different: the emergence of Indigenous peoples not merely as objects of anthropological study but as subjects who tell their own stories.

In 1980, Umusi Pārōkumu and Tōrāmu Kehíri published *Antes do Mundo não Existia*

Rio Negro, London, 1853; Henry Walter Bates, *The Naturalist on the River Amazons*, London, 1863; Richard Spruce, *Notes of a Botanist on the Amazon and Andes*, London, Macmillan, 1908.

- 25 Check the following works, among many others: Curt Nimuendajú, *The Eastern Timbira*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1946; Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, New York, Criterion Books, 1961; Terence Turner, *The Fire of the Jaguar*, Chicago, HAU Books, 2017; Joanna Overing, *The Piaroa: A People of the Orinoco Basin: A Study in Kinship and Marriage*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1975; Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2013; Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *From the Enemy's Point of View: Humanity and Divinity in an Amazonian Society*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1992; William Balée, *Cultural Forests of the Amazon: A Historical Ecology of People and Their Landscapes*, Tuscaloosa, University of Alabama Press, 2013.

(*Before the World Did Not Exist*), a narrative of the creation of the world according to the Desana people of the Upper Rio Negro. Since then, Amazonian Indigenous writers have emerged as vibrant new intellectual voices across the continent. From the poetry of Anastasia Candré Yamacuri (Colombia) and Dina Ananco (Peru), to the short stories of Daniel Munduruku (Brazil) and the anthropological-cosmological investigations of the Tukano ethnographer João Paulo Lima Barreto (Brazil), these intellectuals have irrevocably changed discourses about the Amazon, drawing attention to stories and modes of being that had been suppressed by colonial, neo-colonial, and racist constructions of Indigenous peoples.

Perhaps the best-known example of this new Indigenous writing is the magnum opus *A Queda do Céu (The Falling Sky)*, first published in 2010 by the Yanomami leader and shaman Davi Kopenawa in collaboration with the French anthropologist Bruce Albert.²⁶ Not only do Kopenawa and Albert offer a powerful account of Yanomami cosmology and shamanic knowledge, but they also present an unflinching critique of the violence visited by miners, missionaries, and state agents upon the forest, documenting the environmental and spiritual devastation caused by extractivism. Structured as a life narrative interwoven with myth, history,

26 Davi Kopenawa, Bruce Albert, *La Chute du ciel*, op. cit.

and political testimony, it stands as both a profound work of Indigenous philosophy and a critique of the non-Indigenous way of life threatening the survival of the rainforest. Together, these works mark a decisive shift in which Indigenous authors speak for themselves, reshaping how the Amazon is understood and narrated from within.

Towards New Global Histories

The Amazon is particularly relevant for reflecting upon the challenges facing global history as a field and an approach. As the foregoing sections have shown, the region—through its multitude of Indigenous, traditional, and modern narratives—can help relativize the Western timeframes that have organized the discipline and encourage the development of ways of ordering the past better adapted to the demands of the present. It can also make substantial contributions to the project of decentering history and giving voice to subaltern actors and societies in the history of globalization.

To achieve this, global historians must engage in deeper dialogue with archaeology, ethnobotany, anthropology, cultural studies and other disciplines which since the 1990s have been deeply transformed by the “symmetrical anthropology” turn: the project of learning from Indigenous cultures in order to deconstruct the particularities and contradictions of our own. This reorientation has not

yet been adequately translated into historiographical practice, and even less so into global history. The Amazon offers especially rich terrain therefore, given the sheer depth and diversity of Indigenous cosmogonic models and modes of relating to more-than-human beings it harbors. As the world’s most biodiverse region, with the largest forest on the planet, and historically the home of hundreds of varied cosmologies, the Amazon is an ideal laboratory for the enterprise of merging environmental with global history—a project inaugurated by Alfred Crosby’s canonical work on the Columbian Exchange in 1972. The many multi-epochal Amazon chapters of the freshly published *Handbook of the Anthropocene in Latin America*, to which several authors and editors of this special issue have actively contributed, are the first extensive attempt to apply this project to the region.²⁷

As one of the planet’s principal terrestrial carbon sinks, and simultaneously a burning forest threatened by the exponential rise of global meat consumption and by the mining and energy industries, the Amazon is emblematic of a historiographic agenda that links economic and social globalization

27 Philippe Descola, *Par-delà nature et culture*, op. cit.; Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Métaphysiques cannibales*, Paris, PUF, 2009; Alfred W. Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492*, Westport, Greenwood Press, 1972; Olaf Kaltmeier, Eleonora Rohland, Gerardo Cham et al. (eds.), *Handbook of the Anthropocene in Latin America*, 6 vols, Bielefeld, Bielefeld University Press, 2024-2026.

to earth-wide ecological change. This special issue, bringing together research spanning pre-colonial archaeology and twenty-first-century climate politics, drawing on scholarship from across Brazil, Ecuador, Portugal, France, and beyond, and taking as its objects rivers and forts, cities and forests, myths and commodities, legal battles and cosmological systems, contributes to the endeavor of

decolonizing historiographical research and taking the role of more-than-humans serious in historiography. Its contributors share a common conviction: that the Amazon is not a peripheral case study in global history, but one of its most illuminating and most necessary frontiers.

