

Indigeneity on Display: Ethnographic Adventure Film in Amazonia

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to explore the early twentieth century trend of ethnographic adventure filmmaking. A subgenre of the ethnographic film, these works blended ethnographic observations with scripted and staged adventure stories, advancing popular tropes of indigenous first contact and the superiority of Western civilization. Focusing on a 1931 expedition to the Amazon which resulted in the creation of the first sync-sound ethnographic adventure film, titled *Matto Grosso: The Great Brazilian Wilderness*, I argue that despite flaws in its conception, production, and media coverage, this film serves as an example of how non-academic sources of knowledge production can still create important primary documents for indigenous source communities.

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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

This paper examines the history and importance of ethnographic adventure films. Ethnographic adventure films, which were especially popular during the 1920s and 1930s, were a type of film that mixed scientific study with fictionalized accounts of adventure and romance in order to capture the attention of general audiences. I am particularly interested in the role that museums played in producing these films, as there appears to be a history of mutually beneficial collaborations between them and filmmakers; museums received valuable scientific material (especially plant and animal specimens) and access to remote locations, while filmmakers received institutional funding and an air of scientific legitimacy that impressed their audiences. Throughout this paper I explore a 1931 expedition to the Mato Grosso region of Brazil, an area covered mostly by the Amazon Rainforest, which resulted in the creation of an ethnographic adventure film titled *Matto Grosso: The Great Brazilian Wilderness*. Building off of research done by scholars such as Kate Pourshariati and Alessandro Pezzati, among other, I argue that this expedition serves as an example of how a commercial enterprise can serve a dual, unintended purpose as a source of remembrance and cultural heritage for indigenous communities.

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Indigeneity on Display: Ethnographic Adventure Film in Amazonia

I. Introduction



Figure 1. A promotional poster for *Matto Grosso: The Great Brazilian Wilderness*, featuring a Bororo boy. Image courtesy of the Penn Museum Archives.

Ethnographic film has, for the majority of its history, existed at the intersection of technology and anthropology, harnessing advances in film and sound recording in order to better observe and study human culture. Since its inception in the early twentieth century, ethnographic films have been produced with the expectation that they will reveal that which cannot be gleaned through standard participant observation or the written word, a burden of objectivity often unfairly placed upon the camera as a salve for the inherent subjectivity of the ethnographer. During the early twentieth century, long before the advent of television and the internet, ethnographic and documentary film provided a means by which anthropologists could document non-Western cultures and distribute their findings to a wide audience for popular

consumption throughout the Western world. The medium also served as an efficient way to catalogue and record indigenous cultures before they “disappeared,” as the prevailing notion of the time held that it was only a matter of time before Western civilization would either assimilate or destroy these cultures, and it was the duty of ethnographers and filmmakers to create a lasting record before this occurred.¹ This paper seeks to examine an early instance of ethnographic filmmaking in order to explore the contestations surrounding representations of indigenous groups, the history behind the development of new film technologies, and the potential repurposing of these films as primary source documents for indigenous communities. Building primarily off of previous research undertaken by Kate Pourshariati, alongside the work of Alessandro Pezzati, Pamela Wintle, and archival research from the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, I will argue that despite flaws in the conception, undertaking, and marketing of the film, the return of the material to its original descendant communities can serve as a means of working against the museum’s historical role as a site of biopolitical control, a security apparatus in service of the modern nation-state working to produce a particular set of truths regarding radical alterity.

The University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, more commonly known as the Penn Museum, has a long history of supporting ethnographic research, both filmic and otherwise. A 1931 expedition to the Mato Grosso region in western Brazil can be counted among the many scientific trips funded by the Museum. Coming near the close of the great age of museum collecting, this expedition sought to create the first ever ethnographic adventure film featuring live sound recordings from the field synchronized with film footage,

¹ Catherine S. Fowler and Don D. Fowler, “Formation Processes of Ethnographic Collections: Examples from the Great Basin of Western North America.” In W. David Kingery ed., *Learning from Things: Method and Theory of Material Culture Studies* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institute Press, 1996), 129-131.

known as the “sync-sound” technique. Funded jointly by the Penn Museum and E.R. Fenimore Johnson - son of Victor Talking Machine Co. founder E.R. Johnson - the expedition resulted in a 49-minute film titled *Matto Grosso: The Great Brazilian Wilderness* (the film uses an older spelling of the region, which is now known as Mato Grosso). In addition to the film crew, Vincenzo Petruzzo, an ethnographer working for the Penn Museum, manned the expedition. Petruzzo’s inclusion, requested by Fenimore Johnson and the other leaders of the trip, was meant to lend the group some scientific legitimacy,² though he eventually left the expedition to do his own fieldwork upriver in the Xingu region. Ten years after the original expedition, in 1941, the Penn Museum recut some of the footage from the original film and had new narrations written in order to create two shorter documentary pieces. Arranged by filmmaker Ted Nemeth and narrated by Lowell Thomas, *Primitive Peoples of Matto Grosso: The Bororo*, and *Primitive Peoples of Matto Grosso: The Xingu* utilize much of the same footage as the original film, but with a more ethnocentric tone, describing the Bororo tribespeople featured in the film as primitive, unkempt savages who are closer to living jungle scenery than human beings with agency. Furthermore, the later documentaries were stripped of the majority of their sync-sound sequences, robbing the Bororo actors of their voice and relying almost entirely on the narrator’s often inaccurate descriptions of the action. Thomas, a popular film narrator whose work *With Allenby in Palestine and Lawrence in Arabia* helped lift T.E. Lawrence (popularly known as Lawrence of Arabia) to international fame, reads as a decidedly less culturally relativistic script than that of the original film. This comes as a surprise, given that the two shorter pieces were shown primarily by the University Museum and were intended to be more scientific in tone than the original film.

² Kate Pourshariati, “Expedition to the Amazon,” *Expedition Magazine* 55, no. 2 (2013): 21.

The original film's semi-scripted but clearly staged scenes portray a purported first contact scenario, in which a benevolent white hunter and trader by the name "Uncle" George Rawls (played by an actor of the same name) makes contact with a remote tribe, befriends the group, and sets up a trading post nearby.³ Despite the film's claims, the indigenous peoples the crew worked with - the São Lourenço Bororo - were far from remote or uncontacted. In fact, several of the indigenous actors can be heard speaking fluent Portuguese during the film.⁴ Despite these inaccuracies, the film crew - led by Floyd Crosby, who had previously won an Oscar for cinematography for his work on Robert J. Flaherty's *Tabu* (1931) - used live sound recording technology synced to a camera in many scenes featuring the Bororo, capturing several instances of indigenous language use and serving as one of the earliest examples of the practice and the first known example of a sync-sound ethnographic adventure film. Though largely a commercial failure - the picture, which premiered as a romance film called *West of Singapore*⁵ and received mostly mixed reviews from critics - nonetheless served as a trailblazing example of what modern sound recording technology could achieve in the field. After decades languishing in the Penn Museum's archives, the original film and its documentary descendants were discovered, digitally restored, and displayed at the Penn Museum as part of the University of Pennsylvania's 2013 *Year of Sound*. As part of a collaborative research project undertaken by Kate Pourshariati, the Penn Museum's Film Archivist, and Brazilian anthropologists Sylvia Cauiby Novaes and Edgar da Cunha, the film was also sent back to Brazil, where it was shown to a group of Bororo who are the descendants of the indigenous participants in the film.⁶ The film

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 22.

⁶ Kate Pourshariati, "A History of an Expedition to Mato Grosso Brazil and Matto Grosso, the Great Brazilian Wilderness." <https://www.penn.museum/sites/mattogrosso/news>

was popular among the Bororo, as many in the audience were excited to see their ancestors and important leaders from the past on screen⁷, pointing to the film as a potentially important source of cultural heritage preservation. Despite the film's shortcomings, namely its ethnocentrism, paternalistic attitudes towards the Bororo, and romanticization of first contact scenarios, it remains an important piece of film history - a technological marvel that captured the first live recordings of indigenous languages in the field that now serves as primary source material for both the Bororo and Western scholars.

⁷ Ibid.

II. Early Ethnographic Filmmakers: Custodians of a Dying Race

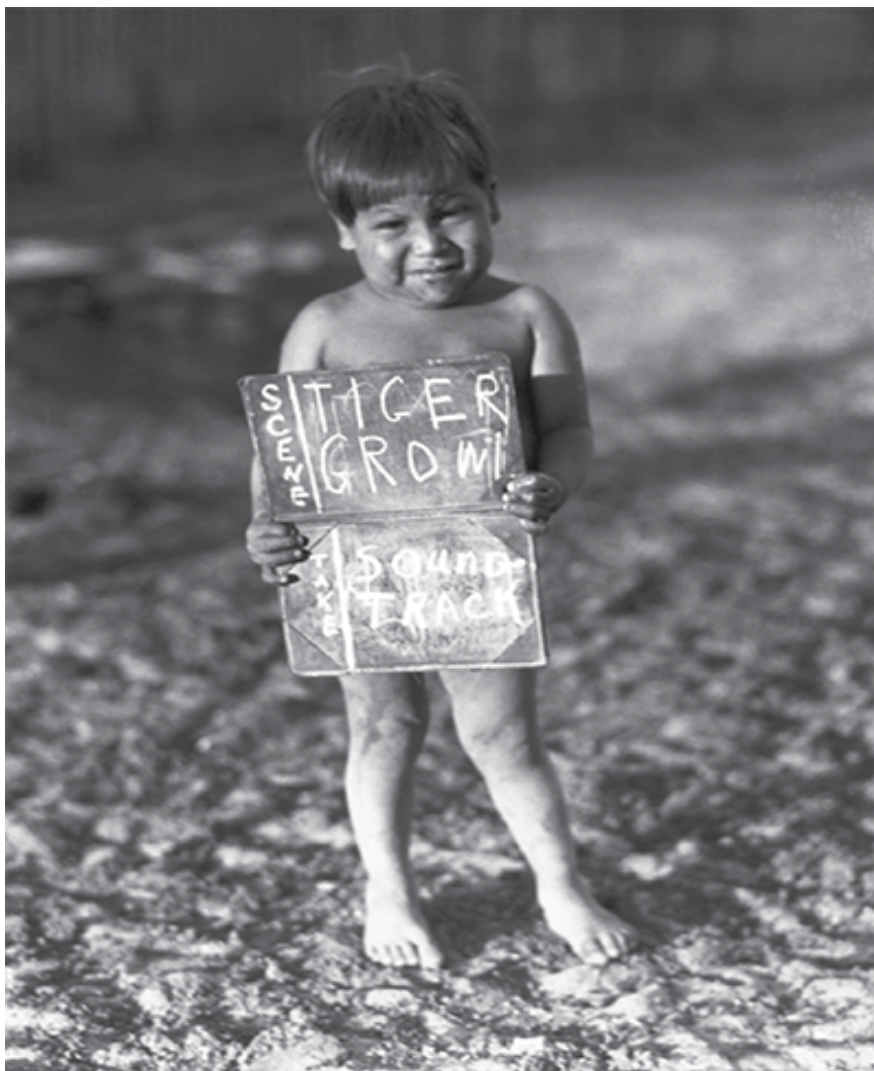


Figure 2. A Bororo boy holds a placard identifying a scene during the filming of “Matto Grosso: The Great Brazilian Wilderness.” Image Courtesy of the Penn Museum Archives.

Although it was not fully legitimated by the anthropological community until the middle of the twentieth century,⁸ ethnographic films have been produced since the beginning of the twentieth century. As de Brigard once noted, “Ethnographic film began as a phenomenon of colonialism.”⁹ Early ethnographic films were almost exclusively produced by Westerners in

⁸ Emilie de Brigard, “The History of Ethnographic Film.” In Paul Hockings ed., *Principles of Visual Anthropology* (New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1995), 14.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

attempts to document the Other in the non-Western world, treating them as scientific subjects, which could be studied and analyzed at an audience's leisure, from the comfort of a cinema. As such, early ethnographic films served as a form of human-centric museology, with non-Western subjects analogous to indigenous material culture.

This line of rational, positivist inquiry most likely developed as a reaction against and justification of earlier Western Christian cosmogonies, which painted indigenous peoples of the Americas as the lost remnants of humanity's monogenetic origins, whereby "scriptural history posited God's creation of all humankind in a single act at one time at a specific spot."¹⁰ Thus, American Indians were, during the first two centuries following contact with the European world, viewed as descendants of the same biblical ancestry who had migrated to the New World via a land bridge or some other manner of natural transport.¹¹ Despite this common ancestry, indigenous peoples were both Other and subaltern, archetypes of cultural and spiritual degeneracy. Their Otherness, the utter strangeness of their language, customs, and rituals could only be explained as such. As Berkhofer argues:

For those orthodox and humanist thinkers who discussed degeneration, differences in languages and customs as well as the presence of heathenism and idolatry derived from the universal and continuing decay of the original knowledge of God and society from the time of Eden and the Golden Age. Diffusion of customs like cultural changes over time had led to decline not progress, corruption not advancement, and all the while to greater societal diversity.¹²

Though by the late nineteenth century anthropological and scientific thinkers sought to do away with such biblically inspired lines of inquiry, their investigations were nonetheless influenced by

¹⁰ Robert J. Berkhofer, Jr., "From Religion to Anthropology: The Genealogy of the Scientific Image of the Indian." In *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to Present* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1978): 35.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹² *Ibid.*, 36-37.

16th and 17th century Christian thought. Nineteenth century studies of craniology, phrenology, and other arbiters of scientific racism that served as hallmarks of primordial anthropological ventures merely served as a new means of proving the superiority of the Western world. A rational, scientific turn, no doubt, but one rooted in imperialist Christian doctrine. It was against this backdrop that ethnographic film emerged as a discipline.

The first ethnographic film, made in 1895 by French physician Félix-Louis Regnault, depicted the Wolof (a West African group living primarily in modern Senegal) method of making pottery.¹³ Regnault, who produced these films at the Exposition Ethnographique de l’Afrique Occidentale in Paris and whose work came about half a year before that of the better known Lumière brothers, utilized the film in order to produce quality still images to supplement his lectures. As one scholar noted, “It is unlikely that his material was ever projected, since he thought of the movie camera as a way of producing multiple still images rather than a single animated sequence.”¹⁴ Regnault was particularly interested in the study of movement, and he hoped to complete an ethnological study of human forms of movement by filming Wolof, Fulani, and Diola men and women walking, squatting, climbing trees, and performing other simple tasks.¹⁵ This form of ethnographic work conformed to the scientific tendencies of anthropological work at the time. Regnault utilized ethnographic film as a means of furthering scientific analysis, treating his filmic work as an efficient method for capturing multiple shots of a moving subject, freezing them in time so as to better study movement, form, and eventually to decipher function. Using his camera as a piece of laboratory equipment, Regnault hoped to bring

¹³ De Brigard, “The History of Ethnographic Film,” 15..

¹⁴ Dan Marks, “Ethnography and Ethnographic Film: From Flaherty to Asch and After,” *American Anthropologist* 97, no. 2 (1995): 339.

¹⁵ De Brigard, “The History of Ethnographic Film,” 15.

scientific accuracy to anthropological work. As one scholar noted, “The celluloid strip with its chemical emulsion was to be the fixing medium of anthropology.”¹⁶

Regnault's work came at an important time - the discipline of anthropology was at a crossroads, as the first decades of the twentieth century gave rise to the Boasian tradition, which resulted in a move away from the institutionalized racism masked by scientific objectivity that was all too common in 19th century anthropological work, and towards historical particularism as a building block for the discipline. As Marks explains, “From a branch of the natural sciences, anthropology was transformed into a humanistic practice that attempted to understand unfamiliar societies by discovering and representing the principles on which they were organized.”¹⁷ Although problematizations of the ethnographer (and videographer) as an actor and political subject were still distant on the horizon, ethnographic film nonetheless followed the burgeoning Boasian trend at the onset of the twentieth century. Filmmakers such as Edward Curtis, Robert Flaherty, Dziga Vertov, and John Grierson, among others, sought to explore the nature of humanity through the lens of the Other, with some hoping to bridge the gap in understanding between the Western and non-Western worlds and to better record and organize the various social worlds that exist in different cultures.

Many of these prominent early ethnographic filmmakers attempted to move away from the more objective, scientific films produced by Regnault, which often dehumanized the actors as objects of scientific study. Edward Curtis' 1914 film *Land of the Headhunters*, while filmed at an artificially constructed Pacific Northwest Kwakiutl village which presented a problematic view of modern Kwakiutl, made important strides in its depictions of the emotional complexity

¹⁶ David MacDougall, “Ethnographic Film: Failure and Promise,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 7, no. 1 (1978): 405.

¹⁷ Marks, “Ethnography and Ethnographic Film,” 340.

of indigenous life, suggesting an, “emotional commonality between the audience and the unfamiliar Other as well as documenting (with sympathy) a way of life that was dying.”¹⁸ Robert Flaherty, who began his career as a mining prospector in the Hudson Bay, went a step further than Curtis. Flaherty, while filming *Nanook of the North* (1922), worked with his Inuit interlocutors to determine the narrative sequence and editing of many scenes, resulting in a transcendent piece of filmmaking. Clara Carvalho elaborates: “The arduous struggle of the Inuit to survive in the Great North is recreated in this enchanting work, where the actors involved chose to portray hunting and fishing techniques that were no longer used at the time so the film could serve as a memorial of techniques dating back several millennia.”¹⁹

Flaherty’s work on *Nanook of the North* brought to bear questions of positionality and subjectivity within ethnographic filmmaking. His work, produced jointly with the subjects of the film and with a definite goal in mind, begs the question - from where do we derive ethnographic authority? Who holds the right to film a given culture, and at what level of subject involvement does a film cease to be “ethnographic?” Furthermore, as Carvalho asks, “What relationship should be established with reality in a documentary film?”²⁰ Flaherty was not the only filmmaker who understood the issues surrounding the production of ethnographic films, the double bind into which both the auteur and the audience are placed. Dziga Vertov, a pioneer of Soviet documentary film and forerunner of the field of Visual Anthropology, reflected on this issue:

(Cinema) is, in fact, the product of the double work of men to organize and understand their existence and of the observer who puts together the images of this representation to take apart his own dynamic. Reality is neither the object shown, nor the constitution of

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Clara Carvalho, “Audiovisual Instruments in Ethnographic Research.” In Jean-Bernard Ouédraogo and Carlos Cardoso ed., *Readings in Methodology: African Perspectives* (Oxford, UK: African Books Collective, 2011): 165.

²⁰ Ibid.

the demonstration; it lies in the constant passage from one to the other during which the cineaste appears successively in the situation which he himself defined.²¹

Vertov strikes to the heart of the issue: ethnographic film is not a purely objective representation of reality, but rather a projection of the reality created by the filmmaker, sometimes in conjunction with her subjects but more often, in the case of ethnographic film in the twentieth century, without such consultations. Despite the progress made in the thirty years between Regnault's first forays into the discipline and Fenimore Johnson's ambitious expedition to the Amazon, *Matto Grosso: The Great Brazilian Wilderness* represented a reality constructed upon Western, romanticized conceptions of the Other, falling somewhere between ethnographic humanism and outright exploitation.

²¹ Ibid.

III. Monetizing the Other: The Ethnographic Adventure Film

Visual anthropologists and ethnographic filmmakers have long struggled with the complexities of filming culture, grappling with different methodological tools and representational techniques than those who write about culture. Ethnographic film as a discipline is difficult to define, as one can make a reasonable claim that all films are a form of cultural artifact, whether or not they were intended for anthropological use. More functionally speaking, “most discussions of ethnographic film set aside films useful to anthropologists as naive cultural documents and narrow the field to those made with some discernible intention of recording and revealing cultural patterns.”²² Other scholars have divided studies of ethnographic films even further, using categories such as, “Research films, general audience films of some ethnographic interest, and films of purely exotic intentions.”²³ For much of the early history of film, however, these lines blurred, as the explosion of film technology and increasing ease of travel allowed non-anthropological filmmakers with decidedly commercial interests relatively easy access to so-called “primitive cultures.” As Amy Staples explains:

Historical film archives contain rich evidence of these early cinematic practices, the majority of which was not filmed by trained anthropologists or ethnographic filmmakers. Many of these collections were either donated or purchased from a disparate group of travelers and tourists, missionaries, colonial officers, expatriates, businessmen and safari hunters, among others. They represent a wide variety of cinematic genres including home movies, travelogues, expeditionary films, natural history films, anthropological films, and Hollywood documentaries.²⁴

²² MacDougall, “Ethnographic Film: Failure and Promise,” 406.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Amy J. Staples, “The Last of the Great (Foot-Slogging) Explorers: Lewis Cotlow and the Ethnographic Imaginary in Popular Travel Film,” *Visual Anthropology* 15, no. 1 (2002): 36.

It was out of this methodological chaos that the ethnographic adventure film gained traction. Ethnographic adventure films often claimed to blend science and action, purporting to present an enjoyable filmgoing experience that also managed to educate its viewers. In reality, however, most productions exploited native populations, peddling romance, bloodshed, and trite adventure stories under the guise of ethnographic authority. This authority was typically bestowed upon the filmmaker through alliances with museums or by attaching themselves to scientific or ethnographic expeditions.²⁵ Thus, ethnographic adventure films, also sometimes referred to as expedition films, served as a form of touristic cinema, resting somewhere between anthropological inquiry and popular culture. The ethnographic adventure film provided a point of accessibility for the general audience; only a generation removed from anthropology's pre-Boasian origins as a cold, calculating human science interested in phrenology and similar forms of scientific racism, many were reluctant to embrace the discipline in popular entertainment. Writing about Lewis Cotlow, an ethnographic expeditionary filmmaker whose staged first contact film *Jungle Headhunters* (1949) thrilled audiences nearly twenty years after the release of *Matto Grosso: The Great Brazilian Wilderness*, Amy Staples illustrates, "Appealing to his readers and viewers through a brand of palatable anthropology, this self-described 'sugar-coated anthropologist' provided them the metaphorical spoonful of sugar to help the scientific medicine go down."²⁶ However, unlike Cotlow, who often "found himself in the liminal zones of the ethnographer,"²⁷ the expedition to the Amazon jointly sponsored by the Penn Museum and the Explorer's Club did little ethnographic work directly relating to the film. Indeed, aside from Vincenzo Petruccio's ethnographic work along the Xingu River (which he undertook after

²⁵ Ibid., 38.

²⁶ Ibid., 41.

²⁷ Ibid.

temporarily departing from the expedition), the film constituted an almost entirely commercial venture.

IV. Conflicting Goals

The Matto Grosso Expedition was born out of competing desires for technological achievement, genuine anthropological curiosity - albeit in the form of salvage anthropology, a quest to document people in a “primeval state” before their disappearance through either cultural assimilation or outright destruction - and notoriety. As Kate Pourshariati explains in her piece *Expedition to the Amazon: The First Documentary Film with Sound*, the expedition had its beginnings in early 1930, when Fenimore Johnson, the son of Victor Talking Machine Co. (which was later sold to RCA) co-founder E.R. Johnson and a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania, was “asked by his friend and former classmate, John S. Clarke, to fund a zoological and ethnographic expedition that would be filmed in the Mato Grosso plateau of western Brazil.”²⁸ Clarke was working with Vladimir Perfilieff, a Russian born adventurer, explorer, amateur artist, and expedition leader based out of the Explorer’s Club in New York City, and Alexander “Sasha” Siemel, a world renowned hunter who had spent a significant amount of time living and working in South America.²⁹ Perfilieff was an experienced adventurer, later described by Fenimore Johnson as having, “lead an expedition down the McKenzie River to Hershell Island in the Arctic and another to little known monasteries upon the peninsula of Mount Athos in Greece.”³⁰ Siemel had “distinguished himself for having learned the art of spearing jaguars from the Guatò Indians of Brazil.”³¹ After having gained notoriety for his role in Julian Duguid’s 1928 adventure novel *Green Hell: Adventures in the*

²⁸ Pourshariati, “Expedition to the Amazon,” 19.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Fenimore Johnson, “A Description of the Matto Grosso Expedition,” January 8, 1930: 3. Vincenzo Petruzzo Expedition Records, Penn Museum Archives.

³¹ Alessandro Pezzati and Darien Sutton, “The Present Meets the Past: Edith and Sasha Siemel,” *Expedition Magazine* 51, no. 3 (2009): 7.

Mysterious Jungles of Eastern Bolivia,³² he hoped to capture himself on film as he speared a jaguar, which - having filmic evidence of the skills previously described in print, would solidify his reputation as a hunter and adventurer. A press release drafted by expedition leaders even proclaimed Siemel as, “the only known white man who has mastered the art of stopping, singlehanded, the charge of a jaguar with an Indian spear.”³³ What’s more, as Pourshariati aptly notes, the trio convinced Fenimore Johnson, an advocate for sound recording technology who had gone so far as to publish a manual on maintenance and storage techniques for film archivists,³⁴ to help fund the expedition. Using his influence as a board member at the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Johnson was able to secure \$5,000 from the Museum to finance the undertaking.³⁵ Although Johnson was willing and even perhaps eager to join the Matto Grosso Expedition, Perfilieff and Siemel’s quest for fame and fortune stood in stark contrast to the goals of Johnson and the Penn Museum, a conflict that would later prove detrimental to the expedition.

³² Ibid., 9.

³³ Undated press release enclosed in a November 20, 1930 letter from Vladimir Perfilieff to Horace Jayne. Vincenzo Petruzzo Expedition Records, Penn Museum Archives.

³⁴ Kate Pourshariati, “A History of an Expedition to Mato Grosso Brazil and *Matto Grosso, the Great Brazilian Wilderness*.” <https://www.penn.museum/sites/mattogrosso/>

³⁵ Perfilieff, Vladimir. Letter to Horace H.F. Jayne, University Museum Director. November 24, 1930. Vincenzo Petruzzo Expedition Records, Penn Museum Archives.



Figure 3. Vladimir Perfilieff (left) and Alexander "Sasha Siemel" pose for the camera in Mato Grosso, Brazil. Image Courtesy of the Penn Museum Archives.

A prerequisite for the Museum's financial support was the inclusion of Vincenzo Petruzzo as an expedition member, a move intended to lend some scientific legitimacy to the expedition.³⁶ Petruzzo, a PhD Candidate in Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania and a Research Associate at the Penn Museum, was also brought on in order to conduct ethnographic fieldwork in the region and collect ethnographic material to supplement the Museum's South American collections.³⁷ In doing so, the Museum hoped that the expedition would garner some scientific value. Horace H. F. Jayne, the Museum Director during the planning of the expedition, came to an agreement with Perfilieff, who was in charge of most of the expedition's logistics, whereby:

The Matto-Grosso Expedition will make every effort to further Mr. Petruzzo's anthropological, ethnological and archaeological studies by supplying him when possible with the necessary guides, interpreters, or workers, and placing at his disposal trade material not to exceed \$500 in value for the acquisition of collections for the Museum.³⁸

³⁶ Pourshariati, "Expedition to the Amazon," 21.

³⁷ Perfilieff, Vladimir. Letter to Horace H.F. Jayne, University Museum Director. December 3, 1930. Vincenzo Petruzzo Expedition Records, Penn Museum Archives.

³⁸ Perfilieff, Vladimir. Letter to Horace H.F. Jayne, University Museum Director. November 24, 1930. Vincenzo Petruzzo Expedition Records, Penn Museum Archives.

Along with aiding Petrullo's efforts in the field, the expedition agreed to devote a portion of its filming efforts to scientific material. According to the terms of the agreement, "A reasonable number of feet of film is to be devoted to making scientific records of native life and customs, and, if the sound equipment permits of recording examples of the languages and a set of prints from these films are to be furnished to the Museum."³⁹ This sort of compromise, tying scientific goals to an otherwise for-profit enterprise, was not entirely uncommon. Commercial film enterprises, especially those seeking to produce ethnographic adventure films, often partnered with museums and other large cultural institutions in order to benefit both parties - museums received valuable data produced by professional film crews, while motion picture companies gained an air of scientific legitimacy not otherwise attainable. Writing about another large institution that worked with filmmakers - the American Museum of Natural History in New York City - Amy Staples explains, "The AMNH, like other museums, engaged in quid pro quo relationships with expeditionary filmmakers, often trading sponsorship for financial contributions and donations of artifacts, photography, and motion picture film."⁴⁰

Much like the American Museum of Natural History, the Penn Museum stood to gain from the Matto Grosso Expedition. Horace H. F. Jayne, following the lead of his predecessor George Byron Gordon, who was also the first full time director (1910 - 1927) of the Penn Museum, sought to expand the Museum's holdings primarily by sponsoring expeditions, rather than purchasing objects from third-party vendors.⁴¹ Jayne (director from 1929 - 1940), who held degrees from Harvard and the University of Pennsylvania and had spent time as a member of archaeological digs in northwest China, held the value of expeditionary findings in high regard.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Amy J. Staples, "Popular Ethnography and Public Consumption: Sites of Contestation in Museum-Sponsored Expeditionary Film," *The Moving Image* 5, no. 2 (2005): 54.

⁴¹ Alessandro Pezzati, "A Brief History of the Penn Museum," *Expedition Magazine* 54, no. 3 (2012): 6.

Most known for his work in acquiring pieces China and the Middle East, Jayne was nonetheless a supporter of expeditions around the globe. Furthermore, Jayne attempted to collaborate with other institutions on the expedition, going so far as to invite the Carnegie Museum of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to join the Penn Museum as co-sponsors of the trip.⁴² Although Horace H. F. Jayne and the Penn Museum were interested in the scientific benefits of an expedition to the Amazon, their partnership with Perfilieff and Siemel, who were decidedly focused on making a profitable film, made for a tenuous alliance, even as the Museum relinquished any “right it may have to profit by the sale of moving picture rights, collections of animals, news stories and so forth.”⁴³ As Amy Staples argues, “These kinds of relationships blurred the boundaries between anthropology, entertainment, and exploitation in expeditionary films.”⁴⁴



Figure 4. Fenimore Johnson relaxing in his office in Descalvados, Brazil. Posed photographs of the crew, such as this one, were common during the expedition. Image courtesy of the Penn Museum Archives.

⁴² Jayne, Horace H. F. Letter to Andrey Avinoff, Director, Carnegie Museum. October 9, 1930. Vincenzo Petruzzo Expedition Records, Penn Museum Archives.

⁴³ Jayne, Horace H. F. Letter to Vladimir Perfilieff, Expedition General Director. July 23, 1930. Vincenzo Petruzzo Expedition Records, Penn Museum Archives.

⁴⁴ Staples, “Popular Ethnography and Public Consumption,” 54.

Horace Jayne was not the only person interested in the scientific legitimacy of the expedition. Fenimore Johnson had twofold interests in the voyage to Mato Grosso: capturing images of the “vanishing savage,” and the legitimization of sync-sound documentary film. Johnson was convinced that the expedition should serve the purpose of documenting what he perceived to be the last vestiges of the primitive world. He saw the film as an opportunity to record a dying breed of indigeneity before it vanished forever, either through cultural assimilation or complete annihilation. Penn Museum film archivist Kate Pourshariati records Johnson saying as much in a March 6, 1931 interview with the *New York Times*:

These frontiers are rapidly disappearing. This is one of the last, for it won't be long before the Brazilians will push in there, and the last of the native languages and customs will start disappearing. Much valuable knowledge of peoples, animal and plant life will thus be lost, as far as the world's history is concerned. It is our intention to preserve as much of this as possible; we hope to be the first expedition to bring back actual sound recording films taken in the jungle.⁴⁵

Although Johnson's sentiments may seem naive and outdated to the present-day reader, the concept of the “vanishing savage” was not uncommon at the time. The proliferation of advanced technology in the early decades of the twentieth century allowed both the global elite and ever expanding imperial states increasingly easy access to previously remote or inaccessible regions of the globe. Amidst the explosion of expansionist Western politics and a new class of touristic global elite, concern arose in some circles that contact with modernity would somehow taint or despoil the purity of spirit many assumed all indigenous cultures harbored. As such, expeditionary filmmaking of the type Johnson aspired to served as an extension of the so-called

⁴⁵ Pourshariati, “Expedition to the Amazon,” 20.

“collections arms race,” in which large museums and other cultural institutions engaged in aggressive collections practices in order to stockpile indigenous material culture before indigenous cultures, and with them the market for their artifacts - disappeared. John P. Homiak, the Director of the National Anthropological Archives and Human Studies Film Archives (HSFA) at the Smithsonian Institute, elaborates:

Expeditionary filmmaking itself was also a kind of collecting practice. Even if the meanings and extensions of the anthropological body of particular indigenous or native subjects could not be sufficiently unpacked through expeditionary film or photography, the filming of previously unseen rituals, habitations, or subsistence practices was consistent with popular notions of what ethnographers did to acquire knowledge of other cultures.⁴⁶

Fenimore Johnson, a board member of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, was well aware of the collecting practices of the time, and endeavored to add a new form of material culture, visual media, to the Museum’s burgeoning storehouses.⁴⁷ Doing so would not only raise the Museum’s profile as an elite institution, but his own as a collector and patron of arts and culture.

⁴⁶ John P. Homiak, “Foreword.” In Joshua A. Bell, et. al., ed. *Recreating First Contact: Expeditions, Anthropology, and Popular Culture* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press, 2013): VII.

⁴⁷ Pourshariati, “Expedition to the Amazon,” 19-20.

V. Technological Innovations



Figure 5. Floyd Crosby operates a camera on board “El Wunco,” the boat the expedition used to travel the approximately 2,300 miles needed to reach the interior of the Amazon. Image Courtesy of the Penn Museum Archives.

Synchronous sound recordings outside of a traditional studio setting proved elusive for much of the early decades of film history; in fact, the use of so-called “sync-sound” films - which featured live sound recordings taken directly from the field, rather than being reproduced in a recording booth and overdubbed onto pre-existing footage - was considered a cutting edge technology at the time of the expedition’s departure.⁴⁸ The Matto Grosso Expedition’s use of sync-sound placed them at the forefront of emerging technology, as the practice - slowed by the deleterious effects of both the Great Depression and World War Two - did not become common until the close of World War Two.⁴⁹ The slow development of synchronous sound is not surprising given the medium - early film technology was not well suited to the rigors of

⁴⁸ Pourshariati, “Expedition to the Amazon,” 23.

⁴⁹ Pamela Wintle, “Moving Image Technology and Archives.” In Joshua A. Bell, et. al., ed. *Recreating First Contact: Expeditions, Anthropology, and Popular Culture* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press, 2013): 38.

fieldwork. Although the rigorous conditions of the Amazon provided significant obstacles for the expedition to overcome - the oppressive heat and excessive dampness of the jungle proved especially troublesome - Fenimore Johnson's access to state of the art technology and an expert film crew resulted in a breakthrough for film technology in spite of the film's troublingly ethnocentric content.

E.R. Fenimore Johnson hoped to utilize his wealth and industry connections in order to demonstrate the expedition's adroit use of the latest sound recording technology. As the son of Eldridge R. Johnson, the founder of the Victor Talking Machine Company, Fenimore was exposed to a variety of sound recording technologies from a young age. As a young man (and only a few years prior to his work with the Mato Grosso expedition), Johnson was tasked with leading the newly formed Experimental Department within his father's company. As Superintendent of the department, Johnson was tasked with, "withdrawing the company's inventors and experimental engineers from the various departments and forming them into a modern research and development organization with a separate machine shop, drafting and laboratory facilities."⁵⁰ Johnson eventually rose to the position of Director and Vice President of the company's Canadian operations, a post he held until the Victor Talking Machine Company's sale and merger with the Radio Corporation of America (more commonly known as RCA).⁵¹ By early 1931, Fenimore Johnson found himself both enormously wealthy and free of the constraints of regular employment, a combination that readily lent itself to the exploration of emerging film and sound recording technology along new frontiers.

⁵⁰ "E.R. Fenimore Johnson Photographs." Finding aid at the Archives of the Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia. <http://dla.library.upenn.edu/dla/pacscl/ead.html?id=PACSCCL_ANSP_ANSP2010049>

⁵¹ Ibid.

Fenimore Johnson's experience in the sound recording industry and his visibility as a philanthropist and Museum board member afforded him access to the film industry's elite members and emerging technologies. Johnson utilized this access in order to hire the best crew and film equipment that Hollywood could offer.⁵² Among Johnson's most important hires was Floyd Crosby, brought on as the film's cinematographer. Crosby was a known quantity in film circles, having recently won an Oscar for Best Cinematography for his work on *Tabu*, an ethnographic adventure film set in the South Pacific and jointly written and directed by F.W. Murnau and Robert Flaherty⁵³. Crosby had experience working under difficult conditions - during the filming of *Tabu* he had taken on multiple roles, working simultaneously as the primary cameraman, operator, and filming assistant, while also running the projector at night. Furthermore, the locals hired to assist him in developing the film, had, in Crosby's own words, "never seen film before or been in a laboratory."⁵⁴ Despite his previous experiences, the challenges facing Crosby and his crew during the expedition to Mato Grosso were nearly insurmountable. Crosby - who also brought his new bride Aliph Van Cortland Whitehead Crosby along on the expedition in a unique and impromptu honeymoon (the couple's children included David Crosby, singer-songwriter and founding member of rock bands The Byrds and Crosby, Stills, & Nash) - would, as noted by Kate Pourshariati, later explain to oral historian Nick Pasquariello: "We were thousands of miles from everything, everything we needed we had to take with us, all the camera equipment, the film, we had no lighting equipment as it was all exteriors; we took two refrigerators there, we took a little electric generating plant..."⁵⁵

⁵² Wintle, "Moving Image Technology and Archives." 39.

⁵³ Pourshariati, "Expedition to the Amazon." 21.

⁵⁴ <<http://www.cinematographers.nl/GreatDoPh/crosby.htm>>

⁵⁵ Pourshariati, "Expedition to the Amazon." 22.

Carrying all this gear was no mean feat: cameras and their associated equipment were heavy. Even the lighter variants of the standard 35-millimeter (mm) cameras weighed as much as 11 pounds, and that was not accounting for a lens, rolls of film, or a tripod stand (which could weigh up to 16 pounds themselves).⁵⁶ The expedition's film crew, even using what was considered a "compact set-up," had to deal with 70 pounds of equipment.⁵⁷ Pourshariati describes the crew's filming apparatus thusly:

For *Matto Grosso*, Floyd Crosby used an experimental Mitchell camera with a mounted sound head for single system film sound recording, much as a video/news crew works with today. This camera set-up came with an amplifier panel, a direct current battery for the camera, and a sound attachment mounted on the camera just below the magazine, using the same drive mechanism.⁵⁸

Developed by the Mitchell Camera Corporation in conjunction with C.R. Hanna of Western Labs, this was a state of the art recording system, which utilized a type of variable area recording patented by RCA and known as the RCA Photophone system. The built-in sound recording attachment, which allowed for simultaneous visual and audio recording, was almost entirely unheard of before the Mitchell camera's release in 1929.⁵⁹ As Pourshariati notes, by the beginning of the expedition fewer than thirty films had been created using this system, and those that did exist had been created in controlled, indoor studio spaces in Hollywood.⁶⁰ It is likely that Johnson's connections to the experimental wing of Victor Talking Machine Co. afforded him both knowledge of and access to the Mitchell camera system.

⁵⁶ Wintle, "Moving Image Technology and Archives." 32-33.

⁵⁷ Pourshariati, "Expedition to the Amazon." 22.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

Despite this relatively advanced set-up, the film crew still faced immense difficulties. The fact remains that cameras in the 1920s and early 1930s were not suited for life in the jungle, and still had difficulty processing high-speed events. As Pamela Wintle, Senior Archivist at the HSFA of the Smithsonian, explains, “Lenses were of fixed focal lengths and were either permanently attached to the camera or interchangeable with other fixed focal length lenses, requiring a cumbersome removal of one lens to be replaced by another. Hence, it was difficult to record fast-moving or spontaneous events.”⁶¹ Later improvements to the tripod helped expeditionary filmmakers to record quick movements in the field, with the most notable achievement being the development of a rotating head, which allowed for quick horizontal movement of the camera.⁶²



Figure 6. The film crew attempts to film Sasha Siemel spearing a jaguar from a platform constructed above the corral. Image Courtesy of the Penn Museum Archives.

⁶¹ Wintle, “Moving Image Technology and Archives.” 33.

⁶² *Ibid.*

Crosby and his crew had to make do without this innovation however, which hindered the recording of fast-paced scenes such as Sasha Siemel's jaguar hunt, which was eventually scrapped from the film altogether.⁶³ Furthermore, the jungle's extreme heat and constant dampness required the crew to engage in an ongoing battle against the physical degradation of both the film equipment and their own health. By the end of the expedition, all but one of the crew's microphones had been destroyed by mold⁶⁴, and Crosby had taken over direction of the film in addition to his duties as chief cinematographer following John S. Clarke's illness-related departure from the expedition,⁶⁵ he was also forced to go without a professional sound engineer for much of the expedition, as John Newell returned to the United States after less than three months in the field.⁶⁶ These problems were neither uncommon nor unexpected when engaging in expeditionary filmmaking. As Wintle explains, "Tropical humidity and salt water could cause mold to grow on the film stock (emulsion contains gelatin made from the whites of chicken eggs) and within lenses, and would seize up a camera's mechanism."⁶⁷ And yet, despite these issues Floyd Crosby and his film crew succeeded in producing the world's first sync-sound expeditionary film, providing a model for later ethnographic adventure filmmakers such as John Marshall, Jean Rouch, Lewis Cotlow, and countless others. Fenimore Johnson's desire to serve as an innovator in the field of film sound technology resulted in the creation of a sync-sound ethnographic adventure film that inadvertently became a source of cultural heritage preservation for the São Lourenço Bororo.

⁶³ Pezzati and Sutton, "The Present Meets the Past: Edith and Sasha Siemel." 9.

⁶⁴ Pourshariati, "Expedition to the Amazon." 22.

⁶⁵ Pourshariati, "Expedition to the Amazon." 21.

⁶⁶ "Anaconda Defies Capture in Jungle," *New York Times*, April 2, 1931.

⁶⁷ Wintle, "Moving Image Technology and Archives." 36.

VI. An Expedition to the Amazon



Figure 7. The Matto Grosso Expedition. Top row (from left): Sasha Siemel, George Rawls, Oliveira, Charles Lorber, Vincenzo Petrullo, Arthur Rossi, Vladimir Perfileff. Middle row: Floyd Crosby, Aliph Crosby, Fenimore Johnson, John S. Clarke, David Newell. Front row: Hoopes, Ainslee Davis, Does, Saucedo. Image Courtesy of the Penn Museum Archives.

The Matto Grosso Expedition Inc. set sail for South America on December 26, 1930 aboard the *Western World* of the Munson Line. Counting twelve men and fourteen dogs, which allegedly comprised “one of the finest packs of lion hounds ever assembled,”⁶⁸ they departed from New York City and made landfall at Montevideo, Uruguay. The expedition spent two weeks in Montevideo recuperating from what was, by all accounts, an unusually rough sea voyage.⁶⁹ Before departing for Brazil, the group spent some time amongst the local population, reportedly impressing some of the city’s residents by playing baseball. Sentiments towards the group were mostly positive - as the *New York Times* reported, “A well-known citizen of Montevideo expressed great pleasure at the fact that a North American expedition was about to

⁶⁸ Undated press release enclosed in a November 20, 1930 letter from Vladimir Perfileff to Horace Jayne.

⁶⁹ “Brazil Expedition Off Into Interior,” *New York Times*, February 14, 1931.

make a study of animal and Indian life in a region that, while comparatively close to Uruguay, was still considered to be ‘beyond the frontier.’”⁷⁰ Despite their proximity to the frontier, a region thought to be wild and untamed, the expedition’s leaders had arranged to keep in touch with friends, family members, and colleagues in the United States via radio communications with Westinghouse Radio Station KDKA, based in Pittsburgh.⁷¹ This line of communication also allowed the expedition to send regular updates on their progress, which were often transcribed for publication in newspapers and magazines. These updates were primarily handled by David Newell, a writer and the expedition’s “short reel director”⁷² who would go on to serve as the editor of *Field and Stream* and as the host of the popular syndicated television program “The Sportsman’s Club.”⁷³ After boarding another steamer and later taking an airplane, the expedition reached Brazil in late January. The group set up their base of operations in Descalvados, a frontier town close to the Bolivian border and just south of the Amazon, not far from where Theodore Roosevelt had begun his own expedition to the Amazon nearly twenty years earlier. Situated in the heart of the Pantanal, a vast tropical wetland that extends for thousands of miles throughout Mato Grosso and its neighboring states, Descalvados is almost entirely abandoned today,⁷⁴ but during the early part of the twentieth century it was home to a number of ranches, and served as an adequate spot from which Vladimir Perfilieff - aided by George Ramsey, the ranch manager and a former Texas ranger - could coordinate the journey into the jungle.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Undated press release enclosed in a November 20, 1930 letter from Vladimir Perfilieff to Horace Jayne.

⁷² Johnson, “A Description of the Matto Grosso Expedition,” 4.

⁷³ Edwin McDowell, “David Newell Dies; A Noted Explorer,” *New York Times*, October 6, 1986.

⁷⁴ Kenneth Rapoza, “Inside a Real Brazilian Ghost Town,” *Forbes*, August 30, 2015.

The expedition was cloaked in a romanticized and exoticized mystique almost from the outset. Painted as brave explorers journeying into a dangerous, mostly unmapped wilderness, the expedition's members projected images of hyper-masculinity onto their joint venture. Despite Johnson's insistence that the expedition's purpose was to "create for posterity as complete a popular and scientific record of the human, animal and plant life and of the scenic and other features of the territory within a radius of 500 miles of Descalvados in Matto Grosso,"⁷⁵ press coverage told a different story. An article published in the *New York Times* the day after the expedition left the country described the expedition in the following manner:

The primary object of the journey is the feature film, which will have as its framework the story of a lone man living in the jungles, and will depict the daily activities and dangers through which he must pass. This role is to be portrayed by Alexander Siemel, adventurer and hunter, who has lived in the jungles of Brazil for more than twenty years.⁷⁶

Such depictions served a twofold purpose: first, they established the Siemel's credentials. As a hunter and adventurer, he was well suited to such an ambitious undertaking, making for what would surely be an exciting film. Second, and perhaps more importantly, press releases such as this reveal the mindset, if not the motivations, behind ethnographic adventure films. The expedition members were firmly established as the active subjects of the film, possessing agency and testing their limits against the great unknowns of Nature. The film's titular "Great Brazilian Wilderness" encompassed all of the obstacles standing in the way of the triumph of Modern [read: Western] Man. These obstacles included jaguars, oppressive heat, "mosquitos, giant ants and bugs,"⁷⁷ and, of course, purportedly "uncontacted" indigenous tribes, representing the final

⁷⁵ Johnson, "A Description of the Matto Grosso Expedition," 2.

⁷⁶ "Expedition Sails for Brazil Jungle," *New York Times*, December 27, 1930.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

victory of modernity over savagery. For many, even the ethnographic authority gleaned from Vincenzo Petruccio's participation served to fuel the romanticized visions of the expedition: "Vincent Petruccio, representative of the University of Pennsylvania Museum, will gather anthropological, archaeological, and linguistic data. It is possible that the expedition will run across the supposed lost tribe which Colonel G.H. Fawcett, the English explorer, was seeking when he disappeared."⁷⁸ Even Fenimore Johnson, one of the more scientifically minded members of the expedition, expressing his excitement at the opportunity to film and collect specimens within the margins of the "delightfully blank" ethnological charts of the Descalvados area.⁷⁹ Indeed, much of the Matto Grosso Expedition's energy appeared to be focused on documenting their achievements as adventurers, explorers, and robust men of science.

After re-supplying in Descalvados and enduring a delay during which they waited for permission from the Brazilian government to engage in fieldwork, the expedition boarded *El Wunco*, the boat that would carry them more than 2,000 miles upriver, navigating the Paraguay and São Lourenço Rivers before arriving in the interior of the Amazon. Progress up the river was slow, and the group occupied itself with "boxing, wrestling, archery and deck tennis; also much target shooting from the rail [of the boat]."⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Johnson, "A Description of the Matto Grosso Expedition," 7.

⁸⁰ David Newell, "Two-Gun Boaster Annoys Explorers," *New York Times*, March 15, 1931.



Figure 8. A charcoal sketch by Vladimir Perfileff, depicting a ranch near Descalvados in the Pantanal. Perfileff was known as an artist as well as an explorer, and one of his goals during the expedition, as stated by Fenimore Johnson, was to “exercise his art to record in color the facial and physical characteristics of the Matto Grosso savages.”⁸¹ Image Courtesy of the Penn Museum Archives.

The expedition also spent a great deal of time hunting on the riverbanks and further inland. Newspaper accounts of the journey were sensationalized (albeit mostly true), describing in opulent detail Sasha Siemel’s run-in with an alligator that left the man hospitalized in Corumba for six weeks,⁸² and numerous hunting excursions. Although they were unable to successfully film Siemel spearing a jaguar, he was able to engage in the activity during the voyage upriver. As the *New York Times* reported it:

The high spot of the trip came when Siemel and two Indian spearmen overpowered a huge male jaguar that had stopped to fight at the base of a tree in which his female companion was crouching. During the battle Siemel’s steel spearhead was literally twisted out of shape by the great cat’s desperate struggles. The American-bred hounds brought to Brazil by the expedition showed great courage in holding this jaguar at bay, but of course were no match for it in a fight.⁸³

⁸¹ Johnson, “A Description of the Matto Grosso Expedition,” 3.

⁸² “Anaconda Defies Capture in Jungle,” *New York Times*, April 2, 1931.

⁸³ David Newell, “Matto Grosso Head Spears Huge Jaguar,” *New York Times*, July 24, 1931.

Siemel's hand-to-hand combat with this 307-pound jaguar was not his only kill - he and the rest of the hunting party also reportedly bagged, "five grown jaguars and a puma, and captured three young jaguars alive."⁸⁴



Figure 9. Sasha Siemel and Vladimir Perfilieff, and other expedition members pose with the Explorer's Club flag. Siemel, in an open white shirt, holds the left side of the flag. Perfilieff, wearing his captain's hat, holds the right side. Image Courtesy of the Penn Museum Archives.

These hunting excursions, which had served as the impetus for Perfilieff and Siemel's participation in the expedition, were widely sensationalized in the media but were not included in the film, which may have accounted, at least partially, for its commercial failure.

After the long journey upriver, the expedition eventually encountered the São Lourenço Bororo, who were neither a mythologized "lost tribe," nor naive, uncontacted primitives.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

Dismayed by this turn of events, Petruzzo left the expedition to pursue ethnographic fieldwork in the Xingu region.⁸⁵ With the assistance of a float plane donated to the expedition by Fenimore Johnson's father, Petruzzo was able to scout a passage to the Xingu region and plan an itinerary for his journey to rendezvous with what he hoped were would be examples of indigeneity untainted by modernity.⁸⁶ Petruzzo ran into trouble during his absence, as three of his canoes, which contained most of his food and supplies, capsized.⁸⁷ Petruzzo's work resulted in the completion of a manuscript titled, *Uni (Water): A Journey to Matto Grosso*, which was never published (excerpts from the manuscript were eventually published in *Expedition*, the Penn Museum's quarterly publication). Although he eventually returned to the expedition and most likely contributed the narration for the later documentary re-cuts of *The Great Brazilian Wilderness*, Petruzzo's name does not appear in the credits for the film⁸⁸. Vincenzo Petruzzo was eventually dismissed from the Penn Museum amidst squabbles over financial support for his expeditions and Horace Jayne's perception of him as "immature and lacking necessary leadership qualities."⁸⁹ Petruzzo's ethnographic work never gained traction in the wider anthropological community, most likely due to his (even for the era) outmoded and ethnocentric viewpoints. His unpublished manuscript bears this out, and the narration he wrote for the original film's documentary descendants resulted in myopic, positivist works.

⁸⁵ Pourshariati, "Expedition to the Amazon." 21.

⁸⁶ Eleanor M. King, "Fieldwork in Brazil: Petruzzo's Visit to the Yawalapiti," *Expedition Magazine* 35, no. 3 (1993): 39.

⁸⁷ David Newell, "Explorer in Brazil Loses His Supplies," *New York Times*, August 4, 1931.

⁸⁸ Pourshariati, "A History of an Expedition to Mato Grosso Brazil and *Matto Grosso, the Great Brazilian Wilderness*." <https://www.penn.museum/sites/mattogrosso/timeline>

⁸⁹ "Vincenzo Petruzzo Expedition Records." Finding aid at the Penn Museum Archives. http://dla.library.upenn.edu/dla/ead/ead.pdf?id=EAD_upenn_museum_PUMu1126

VII. One Expedition, Multiple Products



Figure 10. Floyd Crosby shows his groundbreaking camera set-up to a group of Bororo villagers. Image Courtesy of the Penn Museum Archives.

The Matto Grosso Expedition returned to the United States in different groups, with the first arriving September of 1931 and the last in December, nearly a full year after departing from New York on the *Western World*. The expedition returned with thousands of feet of film and a number of zoological specimens, including, “five snarling jaguars, a half-tamed puma, two ocelots, two anteaters, two porcupines, a cuati, a 70 pound turtle, and a stork known as the tu-u-u.”⁹⁰ The film footage captured during the expedition ultimately resulted in three products: the 49 minute *Matto Grosso: The Great Brazilian Wilderness*, which was produced immediately after the expedition’s end, and two shorter (approximately 20 minutes each) documentary pieces created in 1941, titled *The Primitive Peoples of Matto Grosso: The Bororo*, and *The Primitive*

⁹⁰ “Menagerie Arrives from Matto Grosso,” *New York Times*, December 11, 1931.

Peoples of Matto Grosso: The Xingu. Matto Grosso: The Great Brazilian Wilderness initially debuted in New York City in January 16, 1933, airing alongside a Pacific Island romance titled *West of Singapore*.⁹¹ The fact that the film opened along with an exotic romance is not particularly surprising, given that Sol Lesser picked it up for distribution. Kate Pourshariati of the Penn Museum explains: “It is not entirely clear who made arrangements for editing the footage that became *Matto Grosso*, but at some point, distribution arrangements were made with Sol Lesser of Principal Pictures. The Principal Pictures catalog consisted of mostly Tarzan and other exotica/adventure films, and the company’s principal, Lesser, was later the controversial editor of Sergei Eisenstein’s film, *Thunder over Mexico*.”⁹² The film was touted as an adventure picture with a dash of science - one advertisement went so far as to add *The Land of Green Jungle Hell* as a subtitle⁹³ in an apparent attempt to draw viewers who were familiar with Sasha Siemel’s depiction as the “Tigerman” in Julian Duguid’s novels.

The original film was only partially scripted, with a basic framework laid out for the story, which accounts for the relatively short run-time of 49 minutes. Before embarking on the expedition, Fenimore Johnson described it as: “A popular style talking movie picture featuring the experiences of one man hunting and traveling in Matto Grosso and living with the frontiersmen and aborigines.”⁹⁴ Floyd Crosby and his film crew mostly adhered to this basic outline. They hired a self-styled “Florida cracker” named George Rawls to play the part of an explorer named, aptly enough, George Rawls.⁹⁵ The film implies a first contact situation in

⁹¹ Pourshariati, “A History of an Expedition to Mato Grosso Brazil and *Matto Grosso, the Great Brazilian Wilderness*.” <https://www.penn.museum/sites/mattogrosso/timeline>

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Johnson, “A Description of the Matto Grosso Expedition,” 2.

⁹⁵ Pourshariati, “A History of an Expedition to Mato Grosso Brazil and *Matto Grosso, the Great Brazilian Wilderness*.” <https://www.penn.museum/sites/mattogrosso/timeline>

which Rawls, a kindly white explorer, runs into a previously uncontacted tribe, sets up a nearby trading post, and befriends several of the villagers.



Figure 11. In a staged first contact scene, George Rawls greets the Bororo villagers and shakes hands with the chief. Image Courtesy of the Penn Museum Archives.

The apparent staging in many of the scenes is of particular interest. The film heavily implies a first contact scenario, and yet some of the Bororo can be heard speaking a mixture of Bororo (their eponymous indigenous language), and Portuguese, as the indigenous populations in the area had been in contact with Westerners for decades.⁹⁶ Rawls goes on to barter with the Bororo, and later becomes friendly with a boy living in the village who is portrayed as the son of the Bororo chief. Other staged scenes in the film include hunting scenes and a large, nighttime gathering to engage in the ritual dance that occurs before the jaguar hunt. The staged scenes, combined with often-improvised dialogue but interspersed with narration written after the end of

⁹⁶ Ibid.

the expedition, make for an interesting blend of ethnocentrism and surprisingly relativistic views of Bororo life, providing an instructive exercise in ethnographic film. A snippet of narration and dialogue from the film illustrates the phenomenon:

Narrator [speaking over scenes of Bororo in a canoe]: This part of forest Indians was the first proof we were at least nearing the region of the unknown tribe. The cargo barge had to be dropped off some miles below the Indian village, as the river had become too swift and narrow. Rumor having preceded us, the natives had stations to watch and spread the news of the strange boats arrival.

Rawls [speaking to companion on *El Wunco*]: Hey, ain't that an Indian in a canoe yonder? We must be near a camp. Let's go ashore and see if we can't get some of that stuff of theirs.

Narrator [speaking over scenes of Bororo in a village]: The explorer in Brazil never knows what his reception is to be. Sometimes the Indians are friendly. Sometimes their hostility means death, or very often the whole population of a town will simply hide in the forest until the stranger has gone away. Luckily for us, though, the Bororo tribesmen's reaction was just plain old-fashioned curiosity.⁹⁷

The ethnocentrism in this passage is undeniable; painted as an “unknown tribe” that is unpredictable and potentially dangerous, the focus of the scene lies firmly on the dangers faced by the white “explorer.” The narrator strips the Bororo of agency, their reaction to Rawls' appearance explained away as “plain old-fashioned curiosity.” This provides a startling contrast to a bit of narration from later in the film, which, in the Boasian tradition, displays a promising level of cultural relativity:

Narrator [speaking during a religious ceremony preceding a jaguar hunt]: Much of their complicated symbolism was beyond our understanding...A profound religious significance lay behind the ceremony. Among them we began to realize outward forms and gestures played a more important role than simple action...Across the village another

⁹⁷ https://archive.org/details/upenn-f16-4012_1941_Primitive_Peoples_of_Matto_Grosso

group performed a second and related dance...not until this was done was the slightest effort made toward any actual preparations for a hunt.⁹⁸



Figure 12. A staged nighttime dance scene, portraying a ceremony enacted before the next day's jaguar hunt. Image Courtesy of the Penn Museum Archives.

This relatively enlightened approach to indigeneity stands in stark contrast to the two documentaries produced from re-cut footage ten years later. *Primitive Peoples of Matto Grosso: The Bororo*, and *Primitive Peoples of Matto Grosso: The Xingu*, were created from re-edited footage taken during the expedition. Produced by Ted Nemeth and narrated by Lowell Thomas, these two works illustrate the power narration holds to change the perception of raw film

⁹⁸ Pourshariati, "A History of an Expedition to Mato Grosso Brazil and *Matto Grosso, the Great Brazilian Wilderness*." <https://www.penn.museum/sites/mattogrosso/timeline>

footage. This narrative excerpt from *Primitive Peoples of Matto Grosso: The Bororo*, illuminates the point. Beginning the 20-minute piece with the claim that the region served as “the last refuge of primitive tribes,” the narrator goes on to state the following:

Narrator: Formerly the arrival of strangers would have been received with suspicion and the men would have seized their bows and arrows but in recent years the Bororo have been pacified by the Brazilian government. The Bororo are a large heavily built people with a strong Mongoloid appearance, which is emphasized by their custom of shaving of the eyebrows and temples. Formerly they went naked, but many of them now possess scraps of filthy cloth, which have been obtained in trade for some bow or arrow.⁹⁹

This passage in particular stands out for its racially charged dialogue and its ignorant approach to ethnographic study. This narration in this excerpt overlays the same footage used for the first contact scene in the original film, except that George Rawls’ dialogue about “Indians over yonder” has been cut. The Bororo rush to the shore to greet *El Wunco* as the narrator exclaims that, “The Bororo have learned the value of the products of civilization.” Later scenes include a wrestling match between two young Bororo men - which was purportedly held in order to determine which of them would receive the last available machete the white men had been handing out - and a paternalistic (literally and metaphorically) exchange between George Rawls and a young Bororo boy, who, according to the narrator, “carried on extensive conversations, each in his own language, always without understanding each other’s words, but they seem to understand each other well enough just the same.” Much of this unfortunate narration can be attributed to Vincenzo Petruccio, which is strange given his training under Frank Speck, a noted student of Franz Boas and one of the early proponents of historical particularism.¹⁰⁰ Even

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Pourshariati, “Expedition to the Amazon.” 21.

stranger, much of the sync-sound sequences from the original film were removed in the two shorter pieces, replacing them with long stretches of narration.¹⁰¹ As Pourshariati notes, “Perhaps the estimation of the audiences of their day and desire to make a popular film was the motive, all of which makes the generally more enlightened tone of the earlier *Matto Grosso* more remarkable.”¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Pourshariati, “A History of an Expedition to Mato Grosso Brazil and *Matto Grosso, the Great Brazilian Wilderness*.” <https://www.penn.museum/sites/mattogrosso/timeline>

VIII. Producing the Other, Producing the Self

The work done by Kate Pourshariati, Alessandro Pezzati, and others on this expedition to the Brazilian Amazon and its resulting filmic products demonstrates the Museum's role in producing and reifying normatively bounded category representations of indigenous alterity for consumption by a Western audience. Given early anthropology's role in practices such as phrenology (as the Penn Museum's Morton Collection can attest to), this should not come as a surprise. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot notes in *Anthropology and the Savage Slot*, the discipline was formed as a project of modernity, an essential component (coming out of the Enlightenment academic tradition) in the justification and normativization of the project of colonialism. In his explication of the then newly minted concept of the *savage slot* - the intellectual category through which subaltern groups are positioned as the savage Other, existing as a Saidian mirror into which the West can gaze and thus define itself as civilized and modern - Trouillot asserts that constructions of the Other (the same found throughout the work by Pourshariati) did not begin at the moment that anthropology was instantiated as a legitimized discipline, but were rather the foundational ideas upon which anthropology was institutionalized. As he explains, "The dominant metamorphosis, the transformation of savagery into sameness by way of utopia as positive or negative reference, is not the outcome of a textual exercise within the anthropological practice, but part of anthropology's original conditions of existence" (29)¹⁰³. Thus, the *savage slot* is not unique to anthropology, but the discipline, through projects such as ethnographic adventure filmmaking, has reified the category representations embodied in the *savage slot*.

¹⁰³ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "Anthropology and the Savage Slot." In Richard G. Fox, ed. *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present* (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 1991): 17-44.

The anthropology museum and its various products have long served as an outgrowth of this colonial project, reinforcing the metanarratives that structure the various ways in which radical alterity is defined and shunted into strict categories of Otherness. As such, the idea, as first explicated by Kate Pourshariati, that the recut versions of the original Sol Lesser produced *Matto Grosso* were actually filled with biased, ethnocentric dialogue and a one dimensional view of the indigenous peoples they depicted should perhaps not come as a surprise. The fact that Petruccio was trained by Frank Speck, a student of Boas, did not serve as an impediment to his overreaching xenophobia precisely because Petruccio was working within the disciplinary zeitgeist of the early twentieth century: a need to categorize, document, and ultimately justify the project of colonialism. His scripts, which were intended for educational purposes and not supposed to be taken up into wider circulation for economic gain, served the goal of normalizing the subjugation and alienation of non-white bodies. Today, museums continue to articulate subaltern identities in particular ways, producing a standardized narrative of whiteness set against a backdrop of a politicized indigenous identity. And yet, as Kate Pourshariati and her colleagues at the Penn Museum and in Brazil demonstrate in the following section, by bringing these products out of the archives, away from the intellectual space of the anthropology museum and into descendant communities, an ethnographic adventure film can transform from colonialist dogma to cultural patrimony, from reified category representation to a site of worlding.

IX. Conclusions: The Legacy of an Ethnographic Adventure Film



Figure 13. A Bororo group watches a screening of *Matto Grosso: The Great Brazilian Wilderness in Tadarimana, Mato Grosso, Brazil*. Image Courtesy of Sylvia Caiuby Novaes and Edgar da Cunha.¹⁰⁴

Matto Grosso: The Great Brazilian Wilderness never found box office success, perhaps due to its unusual blend of action-adventure and ethnographic description. Although it received mostly positive reviews and was received favorably following a screening at the Archaeology Society of Washington,¹⁰⁵ the film was almost lost to history. After nearly 70 years of obscurity, Kate Pourshariati, Film Archivist at the Penn Museum, came across the last remaining 16mm copy of the film, made by Fenimore Johnson specifically for museum screenings. The film was eventually digitally restored and preserved under a grant from the National Film Preservation Foundation. In 2011, Pourshariati, with the help of Brazilian anthropologists Dr. Sylvia Caiuby Novaes and Dr. Edgar Teodoro da Cunha, returned the film to the village of Tadarimana, where it was screened for a group of Bororo people. It was discovered during the screening that the

¹⁰⁴ Pourshariati, “A History of an Expedition to Mato Grosso Brazil and *Matto Grosso, the Great Brazilian Wilderness*.” <https://www.penn.museum/sites/mattogrosso/news>

¹⁰⁵ Pourshariati, “A History of an Expedition to Mato Grosso Brazil and *Matto Grosso, the Great Brazilian Wilderness*.” <https://www.penn.museum/sites/mattogrosso/timeline>

original film was likely shot in a village called Pogubu Çoreu, near the present-day city of Fátima. Despite some instances of ethnocentrism and the casting of indigenous actors as a “lost tribe,” the film has emerged as an important piece of cultural heritage for the Bororo. According to Pourshariati, “The films were very well liked, with most lively discussion around the animals.”¹⁰⁶ Furthermore, some in the audience recognized relatives, one of whom was lauded as a significant elder, a shaman who went by the name of Tiriacu Areguiri Ópogoda.¹⁰⁷ As Pourshariati notes, “In this we can realize the greatest unexpected benefit of use of these technologies - cultural heritage for the communities where the films were made.”¹⁰⁸

Ethnographic film appeared at an important point in anthropological and film history, developing during the discipline’s shift from objectivist science to humanistic endeavor. A subgenre of the ethnographic film movement, ethnographic adventure films - also known as expeditionary or travelogue films - attempted to bridge the gap between science and action, serving as a means by which the general population could learn about other cultures while enjoying action, adventure, and romance. The Matto Grosso Expedition attempted to produce just such a film; *Matto Grosso: The Great Brazilian Wilderness* existed somewhere between ethnography and adventure, fact and fiction. Its technological innovations as the first sync sound film, the first to capture indigenous languages on live sound recordings in the field, distinguish it as one of the forerunners of modern visual anthropology. And yet its true value might lie in its importance to the indigenous community from which its source material came. Indeed, this film and its legacy can serve as an example of how ethnographic film can exist as a type of cultural

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

heritage, demonstrating the importance of collaboration between ethnographic filmmakers and their subjects.

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