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Author(s): Claire Corbett

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Must Australia Always Be Imaginary?: Cartography as Creation in Peter Carey's "Do You Love Me?"

CLAIRE CORBETT
University of Western Sydney

"Everything that is not loved will disappear from the face of the earth."
—Peter Carey, "Do You Love Me?"

THIS IS THE KEY THEMATIC LINE OF PETER CAREY'S 1975 SHORT STORY "DO YOU LOVE ME?" The story is made up of numbered short sections, each with its italicized heading as if it were a type of report—a favorite sci-fi story form—and this report is narrated by a young man. The heading is "*The Role of the Cartographers*," followed by this line: "Perhaps a few words about the role of Cartographers in our present society are warranted (17). Ongoing creation by the Cartographers—the word is always capitalized—is essential; thus a key word in that line is "present."

The young male narrator then immediately moves on to describe the annual Census. The Census, which takes place during the Festival of the Corn, is meticulous: all possessions are piled outside of every house and counted. This makes the people feel secure. The need for security, to know what it is they possess, is also why the Cartographers are so important, and the young man is proud his father is one of them. But the land is stubbornly enigmatic and parts of it, the nether regions, are fading and disappearing "like the image on an improperly fixed photograph" (19). This upsets people.

City buildings, buildings owned by the multinational corporations ICI and Royal Dutch Shell, then begin to vanish, too, and finally so do people. As they disappear, people become murderously angry when they realize they're vanishing because other people do not love them enough. It becomes clear anyone and anything not sufficiently known and loved will evaporate like morning mist in the glare of the rising sun. The final moment of the story takes place in the young man's lounge room after his father has vanished. His mother turns to him and says, with fear, "Do you love me?" (31)

At this point, "Perhaps a few words about the role of Cartographers in our present society are warranted." The role of the Cartographers is perhaps particularly resonant for non-Indigenous Australians. The idea of Australia began as science

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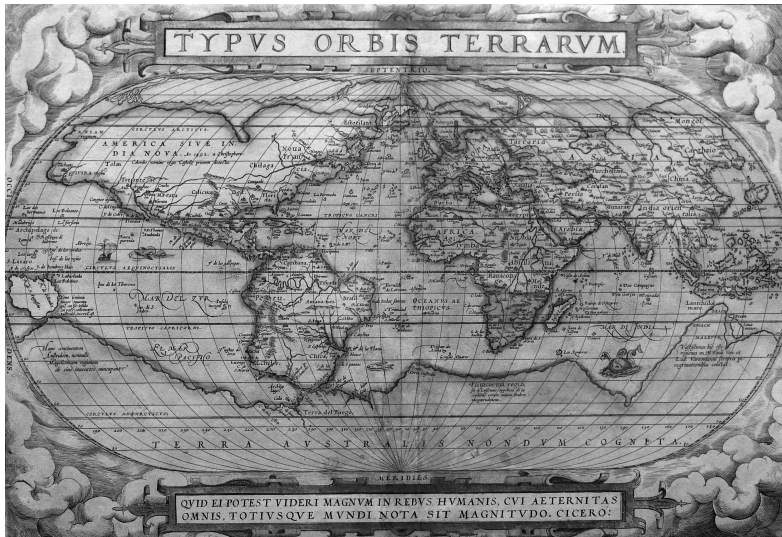


Fig.1. 1572 world map by Flemish cartographer Abraham Ortelius: *Typus Orbis Terrarum* (Wikimedia Commons).

fiction, as a projection of the European imagination based on scientific principles as they were believed at the time, which was that there *had* to be a vast southern land to balance the land masses of the northern hemisphere.

When Ptolemy published his *Geographia* (ca. 150AD), he proposed the hypothetical continent of *Terra Australis nondum cognita*, the South Land not yet known. Terra Australis then remained a site of speculation and fantasy imagined by scientists, explorers, cartographers, and writers over centuries, as in the 1572 map above (Fig. 1) in which the imagined continent takes up nearly a third of the globe. Here is an instance where the map, or actually many maps, do literally precede the territory. More importantly, these maps drive the search for the territory itself; they help bring that territory into being.

These maps are part of the process of creating *Terra Australis Incognita* in the evocative phrase used by cosmographer Johannes Schöner on a 1533 globe: *Terra Australis recenter inventa sed nondum plene cognita* (*Southern land found recently but not fully known*)—the process of bringing this imagined science fictional continent, this land whose existence is, for Europeans, born of fantasy and speculation, into focus.

Aside from the well-known references to the antipodes in works by writers such as Marlowe and Dante, David Fausett has described an entire seventeenth century

cycle of novels of imaginary voyages which enclose detailed accounts of the utopias/dystopias found in the unknown southern continent. As Fausett says, “The Southland was more than a real frontier; it was the last major notional exterior, or generator of collective difference (175)”. He notes the power of the unknown south land as a literary device was not lessened by its partial discovery; indeed the effectiveness of its use in political allegories seemed to be enhanced (177).

And then, thanks to navigator Matthew Flinders’s 1814/1822 (corrected) map, *General Chart of Terra Australis or Australia*, often referred to as the “birth certificate of a nation”¹ (and the distillation of his life’s work building on four hundred years of effort by cartographers of many nations), the continent eventually became known simply as “Australia.”

There are many layers of meaning to the way Carey uses the idea of mapping and the role of cartographers in “Do You Love Me?” but we will concentrate on a few, and as the foregoing hints, I’m interested in what the story’s status as science fiction tells us about what the story is doing and how it is doing it. I hope to show some aspects of how extraordinarily compressed this story is and what a complex emulsion of genres is used for effect.

So why does this matter? I contend that the way the story uses science fiction elements is central to its suggestive exploration of Australian identity and history, especially perhaps for non-Indigenous people.

As this story draws much of its power from its charged and unstable location within the super genre of the fantastic, it is useful to look at the work of theorist Darko Suvin to tease out how such a story deploys its effects.

Suvin, described by Damien Broderick in *Reading by Starlight* as “Perhaps the most influential theorist of sf” theorizes SF, along with other genres, along binary axes of naturalistic/estranged and cognitive/noncognitive (31). SF, which here includes speculative fiction as well as science fiction, is described as cognitive estranged, whereas folktale, myth, and fantasy are noncognitive estranged. The naturalistic/estranged axis refers to whether a text conforms to what is understood as reality. If the text is chiefly interested in a *novum* in Suvin’s terms, something that is unknown or nonexistent “as part of the author’s empirical environment”—such as a Utopian island or a flying carpet—it sits toward the estranged end of the axis (4). Estrangement is an attitude and “dominant formal device” shared with forms such as myth. Unlike myth, fairytale, folktale, and legend, however, “SF sees the norms of any age, including emphatically its own, as unique, changeable, and therefore subject to a cognitive view” (Suvin 7).

What does all this have to do with “Do You Love Me?” Among other things, it explains why the story starts with cartographers, rather than shamans or wizards. That is emphatically a cognitive framework which gestures toward how it might be

possible to begin to construct a meaningful map of a new land. There is hope in this cognitive view: though the story itself charts a disastrous decline in the power of the cognitive to describe reality, the use of a cognitive framework in itself suggests a possibility of change.

Broderick reminds us that SF is the genre that demands the reader see metaphor as literal *and* concretized. That is, in a realist story, if Gregor Samsa wakes up as an insect, this can only be a delusion. In speculative fiction, the reader *must* read as if the character really is a beetle (70). In “Do You Love Me?” the nether regions, city buildings, and people *really are* vanishing. The story has no power if we treat the disappearances as subjective, as purely metaphor. This insistence on the reality of the *novum* or the image, the double status of the *novum* as both object and metaphor, is what turns some of the energy of the work outward, away from the purely subjective. The reader asks, *what kind of a world is this where such a thing takes place?* How could this happen? The answer determines what region of the super genre of the fantastic we are wandering in, even as the borders of those regions blur.

What is the *novum* in this story? It is the same *novum* that appears in many of Carey’s other short stories, in his novels, and in much other Australian speculative fiction: Australia itself. The unknown. *Terra Australis Incognita*. *Terra Australis Non Dem Cognita*. *Southern land found recently but not fully known*. It is Australia, its history, its Indigenous people and culture, its landscape and wildlife, which is acknowledged as the estranging element, the unknown that draws in the main characters and the reader. This *novum* then serves as a starting point to explore ideas, emotions and images around locating the self within *Terra Australis Incognita*.

It is precisely because SF deals with the tension between the objective and the subjective that it often depicts an individual attempting to orient herself within an alien environment. Speculative fiction is often explicitly about such a journey. This relation is what moves fantastic fiction away from the domain of private psychoses, according to Gary Wolfe, and toward the shared realm of tale and myth (69). SF writer and critic Samuel R. Delany phrases this in terms of both postmodern fracturing of subjectivity and science fiction’s older dialogue with the Other, the object: “This experience of constant de-centered de-centeredness, each de-centering on a vaster and vaster scale, has a venerable name among people who talk about science fiction: ‘the sense of wonder’” (qtd. in Broderick 137). This accelerated decentering is reminiscent of Flinders sailing along the coast that had never been mapped before in that way, never before been seen as an “outside” by outsiders, as the rind of the continent, as far as is known. This “de-centered de-centeredness on a vaster scale” describes the encounter with the *novum*, the Other, the objective reality that is Australia.

One of the story’s achievements is that, while it conveys some of the power of this de-centring on a vast scale, the story moves, in fact, from the large scale (the

nether regions) to the intimate (the narrator's lounge room). In this way, the story gains an emotional power often thought to be missing from SF because it is often more about the relation between individual and environment rather than individuals with one another. This story sketches both types of relation and shows how they reflect each other.

Carey is telling us a story about the land, a narrative rather than just a collection of facts, because it is story that explains why the land matters, what it means to us. That is the work that Carey is doing, the work of narrating this land that perhaps remains so much undone for non-Indigenous Australians. "To begin with one must understand the nature of the yearly census" (17). It's difficult at first to see what this has to do with mapping, but Carey is showing us there's something wrong with this mapping as it is linked to the census by a stale tabulation of inanimate things such as lawnmowers and slippers. It's not a living creation of scientific and political and cultural knowledge, as good mapping is.

Also, is this what the inventory of an entire nation amounts to? Not the Great Barrier Reef, not Uluru or the Daintree or the Canning Stock Route or even the Parkes Radio Telescope or the Square Kilometre Array but cushions, curtains, and cameras. The narrator says the census is continuing all the time, that no sooner has one been announced than work on the next begins; this links both to anxiety about what it is we possess but also to the need for continual creation. Mapping it is not purely an objective record of the contours of the earth but a continual cultural creation. The work of the Cartographers must continually be created anew.

In a way, as we now find with Google Earth and navigation using GPS, the more thorough and accurate our mapmaking powers, the more quickly our maps date as details change. A map is a snapshot of time, then, as much and sometimes more than a spatial image. "In reality, as soon as a map is drawn or printed it quickly becomes out of date as circumstances, politics or geography change," notes Nat Williams in his essay "Mapping Our World" for the catalogue of the National Library of Australia exhibition *Mapping Our World: Terra Incognita to Australia* (XVI). (The final map of this exhibition was, of course, the Flinders 1814/1822 *Terra Australis or Australia* chart.)

The people in Carey's story are anxious; they are uneasy about something. Why this obsessive census of *things*? A census counts people. Counting things is a stock-take. An inventory. At this point, just a few lines in, the story's compression draws on the foreknowledge of the reader in several ways. Most readers will know, or it is likely Carey would at the time have expected them to know, that the Festival of the Corn is an Indo-European religious festival. Associated with the sun god Lugh, also known as the Green Man or John Barleycorn, it's a festival of increase and fertility intended, usually through some form of sacrifice, to express gratitude and ensure this increase

continues. But the people clutch at their dead possessions with anxiety, not joy, and these possessions cannot multiply, only decay or, in accounting language, *depreciate*. This brings in the second foreknowledge overshadowing the story, which is that most readers will know Carey is Australian and that Australia and its culturally and spiritually European influences and heritage are an overarching theme of his work.

Many readers, then, would likely read this Festival of the Corn as transplanted from Europe, as out of place in this enigmatic land that in most readers' minds must be Australia. There's a powerful absence in this story, which is the absence of Indigenous people woven right through tale. This absence is so strong that it could be argued it patterns the story much in the way that gaps create a cyclone fence. It's another example of how what we already know, the context of the story, is critical to understanding what's on the page. This is why the festival is tinged with anxiety and counts dead things that cannot grow. In a few lines Carey has sketched this outline of displacement.

The uncanny then grows stronger as the land begins to disappear. The Cartographers are failing to capture the spirit of the land, failing to nourish it. It vanishes just as the corn festival fails to link material wealth with increase and spiritual connection, through people to the missing harvest and to the land itself. Fertility does not exist anywhere in this story. The narrator sees this sterility brought into the heart of the story when he says of his father, "I always had the feeling that he was flirting with my girlfriends and I never knew what to do about it" (20-1).

As the narrator's father is a Cartographer, his failure is absolute on all levels: he fails in his official task of knowing and loving the country enough to preserve it or to enable the community, "our people," to preserve it. He also fails as a father. He competes with his son sexually and his son hates him, realizing this too late to save him. The father disappears along with the country he has failed to protect and preserve and (re)create. "Returning to the trope of the map," writes Nicholas Dunlop, "'Do You Love Me?' traces the process of decay in the semiotic status of the Cartographers' map, its decline from an approximation of reality to a meaningless formation of codes and symbols which bears no relation whatsoever to the territory it claims to represent" (35).

The father's failure embodies metonymically the failure of the established order, for every aspect of science, art, law, and government (the narrator underlines this metonymy by heading the section on his father "*The Archetypal Cartographer*"). It's a patriarchal order, as the father sexually competes with his son and bests him, always, as a man, until his son's lack of love literally erases him. This sexual competition points to the lack of fruitfulness of this established order: a system in which older men crowd out younger men is arthritic, in danger of fossilizing into sterility, at least in the view of the young man telling the tale.

“Do You Love Me?” is the story of an angry young man. An angry young man who can reproach his father for his failures of love and knowledge, as Australia as a young nation among other nations can reproach its parent also for lack of love and knowledge. But the older man in this tale is angry, too—angry that he is not treated as an elder, that his sacred knowledge is not respected. Throughout the story the son reports his father repeating variations on the theme of the foolish ignorance of the people. “‘Look at those fools,’ my father said, ‘they wouldn’t know if they were up themselves.’” (25).

There is a paranoid spine to “Do You Love Me?” structuring many other examples of Carey’s work, from the hell-conspiracy of *Bliss* to the counter-culture-on-the-run narrative of *His Illegal Self*. This is how he describes the disappearance of the unloved: “Murders and assaults committed by these unfortunates were not uncommon and in most cases they exhibited an almost unbelievable rage, as if they were the victims of a shocking betrayal” (23). So this is how those who don’t matter disappear, or are disappeared: this echoes so much of Australian history, from the erasure of Indigenous people to the transportation of convicts to the history of the stolen generations and victims of past adoption practices. I am not suggesting Carey was conscious of all this when he wrote “Do You Love Me?” but more that the story expresses a sense of how official narratives of Australia work, a preoccupation surfacing again in *Illywhacker*, the idea of truth, lies, history, official narratives clashing with stories. This is one reason we have the form of the corrective narrative in *Jack Maggs*, in *The True History of the Kelly Gang*, *His Illegal Self*: the “true story” setting the record straight about that most misunderstood and scapegoated country and its people.

How can it be argued Carey uses a cognitive framework in “Do You Love Me?” when the story’s central premise of people, buildings, and land disappearing is fantastic? While this premise is a given, the people within the story react to this seemingly fantastical problem with attempts to use rational inquiry and technology to solve it; no-one tries magic or prayer. The problem appears to arise from the actions or failures of the Cartographers. Cartographers chart knowledge of what exists outside ourselves, of objective reality although, as Nicholas Dunlop reminds us in his discussion of “American Dreams,” another Carey story, “it is clear that maps embody exactly the kind of knowledge that may be, and often is, manipulated for political, military, or economic ends” (“Cartographic Conspiracies” 33).

It does seem, especially given the story’s title, that the cognitive approach is not enough to solve the problem of the disappearances. The power of this story comes from marrying emotion and reason, the subjective and the objective. Perhaps the most powerful statement of both the limitation of the cognitive and yet the inability of “our people” to draw on any other framework is made when the father says,

“Humanity is god. Humanity is the only god I know. If humanity doesn’t need something it will disappear” (“Do You Love Me?” 25).

Carey’s throwaway mention of the Fischerscope, an instrument “not unlike radar” that was supposed to detect objects that had dematerialized is, I think, a humorous nod to the requirements of science fiction (19). We don’t really believe in the Fischerscope and it doesn’t seem to work anyway, but it is there as an unsettlingly ineffective cognitive element. We even have that image that is as old as modern SF (the villagers in *Frankenstein*), of the angry crowd with torches infuriated by a threatening mystery (21). This mystery, this novum, does have a logical or historically contingent cause, but the crowd is angry and afraid because they do not understand this cause. Once they do understand it, they don’t know how to fix it.

A most important cognitive element is that not only the mystical eternal categories of land and people disappear, but buildings belonging to two companies disappear: the ICI building and later the Shell building (22–3). Carey’s naming of the ICI and Shell buildings is critical to understanding this story. The few lines in which they vanish shows not only how compressed this story is but also how it would have spoken differently to readers at the time it was written. Naming these buildings is significant because more than any other detail it historicizes and locates the story world in Melbourne in the 1960s and ’70s.

These are strikingly emblematic companies and buildings to choose, bringing with them dense layers of historical and cultural meaning. ICI is Imperial Chemical Industries, and in its heyday was the largest manufacturing company in the British Empire. The imperial power of the Anglo-Dutch oil and gas company Royal Dutch Shell hardly needs spelling out—suffice it to say in 2013 it was the world’s second largest company in terms of revenue. So, two great imperial commercial powers are named in this story and the disappearance of their two buildings is the pivot point of the story, when people truly panic. When these buildings disappear, the erasure of large parts of the world can no longer be ignored.

The disappearance of the ICI building is followed by one of the most complex, compressed lines in the story: “The anger of our people when confronted with acts of theft has always been legendary [. . .]” (22). Here again the story gestures outside itself to what we as readers know about Australia and the patterning absence at its heart—the irony here is savage.

Shell, however, is an oil and gas giant; so, in a very real sense the disappearance of the nether regions is the reason for the disappearance of the Shell building. We can’t or won’t see the connection between the unloved nether regions and the cities, between the unloved nether regions and ourselves, Carey seems to be saying, but these buildings are the pivot where that connection, and the consequence of it, is made visible. It’s made visible by vanishing in front of our horrified eyes.

The disappearance of these buildings is the fulcrum of the story. These buildings link the nether regions, through the nexus of the city, to the streets and suburban lounge rooms where people vanish. They link through scale as well as location, from the vastness of the nether regions to the more human scale of the city to the intimacy of one room. They also link environmentally, economically, and socially through means of production; throughout his fiction Carey is very conscious of these domains, of the way the means of production affect individuals and environments.

The ICI and Shell buildings are real buildings important in the history of Australian modernism, especially ICI House. Photographed by key modernist architectural photographer Wolfgang Sievers, this is a building of national heritage significance (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. ICI House, Wolfgang Sievers, East Melbourne 1958 (Pictures Collection, State Library of Victoria).

The listing of ICI House on the Victorian Heritage Register describes it as

a major architectural statement which contributed to Melbourne's position as a participant in innovative world architecture in the 1950s. Its design follows continued developments in international style modernism and draws its influence from buildings such as The Ministry of Education and Health, Rio De Janeiro by Niemeyer and Costa, 1937-43; Lever House, New York by Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, 1952 and The United Nations Secretariat, New York by Wallace Harrison, 1953.

ICI House is also of architectural significance as it was a landmark in the planning of the city of Melbourne. The building was more than double the previous height restriction enforced in Victoria. [. . .] This led to plot ratio determinations for city sites and the eventual redefinition of the central Melbourne skyline.

Appropriately for a building used as a sci-fi metaphor, the advanced modernism of this building was sublimely dangerous—it had a tendency to shower plate glass from its curtain wall onto the street below. “[This] went on for months,” reported *The Age*.

The Shell building is also significant and Shell has a complex cultural history in Australia that includes its role in mapping the continent. In a publication marking the centenary of the company's Australian operations, “. . . from kero tins to LNG tankers. . .,” Shell's relation to Australia is framed in rather poetic corporate words:

Where others deemed Australia too old, too undisturbed by great earth movements, too little formed upon the remains of aeons-old seas to be a source of oil and gas, Shell persisted in the belief that the hot, dry, flat land and its surrounding ocean would yield its secrets. And it has, revealing a huge storehouse of energy beneath the bright blue waters of the Indian Ocean and Timor Sea. (33)

The document outlines the company's work mapping “unknown Australia”:

Shell was awarded its first Australian exploration concession in 1939 over an area of 135,000 square miles of the Great Artesian Basin. Active exploration began in 1940 and, because the Shell team was moving in essentially uncharted territory, it frequently had to carry out standard topographical work, as well as its geological and geophysical surveys thereby helping map a large part of unknown Australia. (34)

Carey is naming the Australian headquarters of companies that are instrumental in drawing the continent into a global web of development and exploitation and that are stitching it into a global cultural fabric as well: international modernism in architecture, modern techniques of mapping, exploration, and development and even filmmaking.² Most important is their role in exploiting natural resources. In

his study *Peter Carey*, Graham Huggan explicitly links the exploitation of myth-making and mining, saying “Australia’s colonial legacy merely operates under new guises; while the country apprentices itself to its latest multinational masters, its national mythologies continue, like its mines, to be excavated for foreign profit” (55).

Because of its fantastical qualities, the story floats freely in time and space, despite the anchoring described earlier. Because the story concentrates on the underlying realities of Australia, it seems to have only grown more powerful and relevant over the years, as can happen with speculative fiction. It tells us even more about Australia now than it did when it was published. Its estranged quality gives it the power to focus a light down to the bottom of the murky pool of the national psyche and settlement.

The physical body of Australia is disappearing—in tonnes of coal and wood, in tracts of salinity-sterilized land, in choking rivers and silted Reef and in the world’s worst mammal extinction record.³ The metaphor has become concrete. It always was. Before Australia can become real it is disappearing. Huggan notes, “Much of the anxiety in Carey’s stories [. . .] has to do with peoples’ failure to prove their own, or their world’s, actual existence” (20). Carey supplies his own metatext when he has the Cartographer say, “We had no use for these areas, these deserts, swamps and coastlines which is why of course, they disappeared. They were merely possessions of ours and if they had any use at all it was as symbols for our poets, writers and film makers. They were used as symbols of alienation, lovelessness, loneliness, uselessness and so on. Do you get what I mean?” (27). Everything that is not loved will disappear from the face of the earth. In that sense, Australia remains imaginary. For Flinders, *Terra Australis* as theorized did not exist and never had; New Holland never was *Terra Australis* but it would have to do. Must Australia always be imaginary? Carey is suggesting that question can be answered only through knowledge and love:

13. *Why the World Needs Cartographers*

My father woke me at 3 a.m. to tell me why the world needed Cartographers. . . .

“The world needs Cartographers,” he said softly, “because if they didn’t have Cartographers the fools wouldn’t know where they were. They wouldn’t know if they were up themselves if they didn’t have a Cartographer to tell them what’s happening. The World needs Cartographers,” my father said, “it fucking well needs Cartographers.” (29–30)

Notes

¹ The term “birth certificate of a nation” to refer to the 1814/1822 Flinders *General Chart of Terra Australis or Australia* appears to have been in general use for some time. The phrase has been used by Greg Hunt MP, Federal Member for Flinders, as part of a campaign launched in January 2011 to transfer the map from Britain to Australia.

² Royal Dutch Shell had determined to play an important role in the cultural life of Australia as well. Long before there were any government film bodies, the Shell Film Unit made documentaries about Australia over a 90 year history described by Australian Screen as showing a

sophisticated use of the medium document[ing] the company's own complex and changing relationship with Australia's environment over that time. The films sponsored [. . .] provide a record of Australia's natural resources, the mining industry, roads and infrastructure, the motoring and sporting industries and the associated activities and interests which surround these sectors. [. . .] While these films are sponsored by a private company, this does not diminish their significance as a cultural, historical or creative record.

³ This idea of lack of knowledge of the country leading to loss is not only metaphoric but real. Ashley Hay noted in *The Monthly* that more than 80% of Australia's species are found only on this continent, and we're losing species faster than they're identified: "Walk into any patch of our bushland and two-thirds of the organisms you see will not have been formally recognised by science [. . .] Almost half the continent has never even been visited by scientists. [. . .]"

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