

# Indigeneity and Indigenous Politics: Ground-breaking Resources\*

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**Abstract** | The purpose of this article is to relate the very important question of the autonomy of indigenous peoples to freely make decisions about their life with the notion of indigeneity, reconceptualised as a socially constructed and deeply contested resource. Resources are more than mere static assets or quantities of matter waiting to be measured, explored or protected. Something becomes a resource through joint processes of quantification, valuation, and normalisation. Along these lines, indigeneity is not just the ascertainment of something or someone in relation to 'somewhat else', but a nexus of indigenous peoples' self-realisation and political intervention. To be indigenous is to exist politically in space and in relation to antagonist forces and processes that constantly downgrade their ethnic and social condition. Indigeneity is, thus, a resource that presupposes the value and the fight for their rights and for other (so-called) indigenous resources found in their lands. The main contribution here is the claim that indigeneity is a ground-breaking resource and a reaction formulated in the interstices of the old and new machineries of market-oriented coloniality. Indigeneity is reinterpreted as a special, highly politicised resource that directly and indirectly opposes processes of world grabbing and the appropriation of other territorialised resources from indigenous areas. It is concluded that indigeneity, as a resourceful resource, has become a key factor in the process of external and internal recognition, which galvanises political mobilisation and instigates novel forms of interaction. What makes indigenous peoples more and more unique is also what makes them share a socio-political struggle with allied, subaltern social groups.

**Keywords** | class; ethnicity; grassroots reactions; Guarani-Kaiowa; indigenous geography; indigenous mobilisation; indigenous peoples; land struggle; resourcefulness

## Indigeneidad y política indígena: recursos innovadores

**Resumen** | El propósito de este artículo es relacionar la importante cuestión de la autonomía de los pueblos indígenas, en términos de tomar decisiones sobre su vida libremente, con la noción de indigeneidad, reconceptualizada como un recurso socialmente construido y profundamente cuestionado. Los recursos son más que simples activos estáticos o cantidades de materia a la espera de ser medidos, explorados o protegidos. Algo se convierte en recurso a través de procesos conjuntos de cuantificación, valoración y normalización. En este orden de ideas, indigeneidad no es solo la constatación de algo o alguien en relación con "algo más", sino un nexo de autorrealización e intervención política de los pueblos indígenas. Ser indígena es existir políticamente en el espacio y vinculado con fuerzas y procesos antagonistas que degradan constantemente la condición étnica y social. Por lo tanto, la indigeneidad es un recurso que presupone el valor y la lucha por

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los derechos y por otros recursos (llamados) indígenas que se encuentran en sus tierras. La principal contribución de este artículo es la afirmación de que la indigeneidad es un recurso innovador y una reacción formulada en los intersticios de las viejas y nuevas maquinarias de la colonialidad orientada al mercado. Se reinterpreta como especial y altamente politizado, y opuesto directa e indirectamente a los procesos de acaparamiento del mundo y a la apropiación de otros recursos territorializados de las zonas indígenas. Se concluye que la indigeneidad, como recurso innovador, se ha convertido en un factor clave en el proceso de reconocimiento externo e interno, que galvaniza la movilización política y propicia formas novedosas de interacción. Lo que hace que los pueblos indígenas sean cada vez más únicos es también lo que los hace compartir una lucha sociopolítica con grupos sociales aliados y subalternos.

**Palabras clave** | clase; etnicidad; geografía indígena; guarani-kaiowa; recursividad; lucha por la tierra; movilización indígena; pueblos indígenas; reacciones de base

### Indigeneidade e política indígena: recursos inovadores

**Resumo** | O objetivo deste artigo é relacionar a importante questão da autonomia dos povos indígenas, em termos de tomar livremente decisões sobre sua vida, com a noção de indigeneidade, reconceituada como um recurso socialmente construído e profundamente questionado. Os recursos são mais do que simples ativos estáticos ou quantidades de matéria à espera de ser avaliados, explorados ou protegidos. Algo se converte em recurso por meio de processos conjuntos de quantificação, valorização e normalização. Nessa ordem de ideias, indigeneidade não é somente a constatação de algo ou alguém com relação a “algo mais”, mas também de autorrealização e intervenção política dos povos indígenas. Ser indígena é existir politicamente no espaço e vinculado com forças e processos antagonistas que degradam constantemente a condição ética e social. Portanto, a indigeneidade é um recurso que pressupõe o valor e a luta pelos direitos e por outros recursos (chamados) indígenas que se encontram em suas terras. A principal contribuição deste artigo é a afirmação de que a indigeneidade é um recurso inovador e uma reação formulada nos interstícios das velhas e novas maquinarias da colonialidade orientada ao mercado. É reinterpretado como especial e altamente politizado, e oposto direta e indiretamente aos processos de acumulação do mundo e à apropriação de outros recursos territorializados das áreas indígenas. Conclui-se que a indigeneidade, como recurso inovador, é convertido em um fator-chave no processo de reconhecimento externo e interno, que estimula a mobilização política e propicia novas formas de interação. O que faz com que os povos indígenas sejam cada vez mais únicos é também o que os faz compartilhar uma luta sociopolítica com grupos sociais aliados e subalternos.

**Palavras-chave** | classe; etnicidade; geografía indígena; guarani-kaiowa; recursividade; luta pela terra; mobilização indígena; povos indígenas; reações de base

### Indigeneity and Resource

Our departure point is the increasing relevance of the rights and agency of indigenous peoples amidst growing levels of conflict, land grabbing, and resource exploitation around the world. It follows up on mounting controversies related to anti-indigenous aggressions and networked mechanisms of resistance, which have entailed serious politico-economic and socio-environmental repercussions (Ioris 2020a). Persistent disputes involving indigenous peoples undoubtedly represent a central feature of a contemporary, self-estranged global society. Struggles for survival and recognition are notoriously challenging and often dramatic, as it is a fight for equality through difference (Sousa Santos 2014) aiming to secure mitigation and compensation for accumulated abuses and losses (Merlan 2009). The focus will be on the controversial significance of indigeneity, which is both a derogatory term used against ethnic groups and also an expression of the valued features shared by indigenous nations. Circumstances are unique to each place and location, but at the same time, they replicate generalised

tendencies and resonate the intrinsic contradictions of the capitalist forces of alienation and commodification. As argued by Ineese-Nash, “Indigenous identity is the ongoing existence of Indigeneity that extends beyond what we know or can predict, evolving as we collectively learn more about ourselves and find ways to continue on” (2020, 15). In dialect terms, to be indigenous is to be universal because of its particularities. The reinterpretation of indigeneity—from a decolonial perspective (Mignolo 2012)—has proved critical for the thousands of indigenous communities around the planet dealing with processes of discrimination and indifference on a daily basis.

The aim here is to relate the very important question of the autonomy of indigenous peoples to freely make decisions with the notion of indigeneity, which will be reconceptualised as a socially constructed and deeply politicised resource. Indigeneity is going to be considered not only as an intricate and unique form of resource but as an example of an emergent resourcefulness (meaning the capacity and the quality of being resourceful). As argued by Radcliffe (2017), indigeneity is a relational category with deeply historical, institutionalised, and power-inflected ontologies, which has pervaded times, spaces, and locales around the world. Indigeneity becomes, thus, an invaluable, cherished resource for those who claim to be indigenous and also a robust response to appropriation of so-called ‘natural resources’ from their ancestral lands. In Latin America, indigeneity needs to be read in relation to latent tensions between a subordinate political economy, indigenous movements, and rich cosmological approaches, which are all deeply implicated in the long processes of conquest, colonialism, and internal colonialism in the form of national development (Lazar 2022). The treatment of indigeneity as a resourceful attribute depends on the problematisation of the conventional definition of resource as a mere reserve or stock of material to be drawn when necessary. Understanding the ideological and contested basis of resource-making is relevant for dealing with sustained anti-indigenous violence—including “slow violence” and “everyday forms of violence” (Das Gupta 2020)—that has characterised colonial and post-colonial periods.

The present analysis is a contribution to the critical appraisal of the conceptual basis of resources in the context of settler colonialism, directly related to the harsh conditions surrounding most indigenous peoples today. The argument here is related to debates between *indigenismo* and *indianismo*. The former is a term that refers to a broad grouping of discourses concerned, since colonial times, with the status of ‘the Indian’ in Latin American societies, but approaching it ‘from above’ and as part of a ‘civilising’ project (as in the Mexican experience, Velasco 2003). *Indianismo*, on the other hand, was a nineteenth century politico-aesthetic expression used by the newly independent countries to secure a national identity distinct from the colonial powers, but that has been redefined as the pursuit of identity and agency ‘from below’ (*el indígena como su propio sujeto político*, that is, the indigenous as his own political subject) and often blended with leftist movements, as in the case of Nicaragua and, more recently, Bolivia (Ávila Rojas 2019). The text is situated in the current surge of scholarship on indigenous socio-spatiality and creative political agency, which have expressed a particular interest in colonialism, sovereignty, community-based research, and collective theory building (Cattelino and Simpson 2022). The following parts will first revisit resource grabbing, particularly in the American continent, and then explore the politicised ontological basis of indigeneity. Finally, it will discuss the resourcefulness of indigenous politics, followed by overall conclusions.

## Indigeneity, Resource, and Indigeneity Grabbing

Instead of a consolidated expression, the notion of *indigeneity* is still evolving according to the growing awareness of the shared experience of vastly different societies broadly included under the general category of ‘being indigenous’. Indigeneity is always charged with different meanings by multiple actors in changing contexts of territorial and social struggles and state governance (Burman 2014). It is noteworthy that the very definition of

indigenous peoples, forged in the global indigenous rights movement, now emphasises its political core, much more than cultural requisites. The best-known demarcation of the term was proposed in 1972 by the United Nations Working Group for Indigenous Peoples, which followed the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities (United Nations 2004). It included social groups with a historical continuity; on their territories that are culturally distinct and seek to preserve these differences. It was also stated in the preparatory meeting of the 1974 indigenous peoples conference: “The term ‘Indigenous Peoples’ refers to people living in countries which have a population composed of differing ethnic or racial groups who are descendants of the earlier populations living in the area and who do not, as a group, control the national government of the countries within which they live” (Crossen 2017, 545). This definition was further refined and the concept of self-identification added in 1986. In 1989, the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention of the International Labour Organisation adopted self-identification for the descendants of groups that were in a place either before a conquest or before national boundaries were established. More recently, in 2007, the UN General Assembly passed the Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which reinforced the key characteristics of indigeneity, including original occupancy and ties to land and territories, cultural authenticity and identity, and rights to self-governance based on cultural customs.

In basic terms, to be indigenous (the core substance of indigeneity) is a relational phenomenon that is both site-specific and replicates broad ideological, political, and geographical trends. It is also important to realise, that indigeneity, as well as ‘Indians’ and ‘indigenous’, were and continue to be regularly mobilised to erode the agency and knowledge of indigenous peoples and to facilitate the conversion of their world into stocks of lucrative resources. As argued by Byrd (2011), indigeneity can function as movement, or ‘transit’, to satisfy imperialist and frontier-making priorities (as in the case of the United States imperialism in its domestic and foreign history). The anti-indigenous treatment of indigeneity typically entails its devaluation by third parties to justify and operationalise attacks on indigenous matters converted into resources. For Estes, “indigenous elimination, in all its orientations, is the organizing principle of settler society” (2019, 89).

Prevailing development pressures, following the Western modernisation paradigm, have always depended on the reproduction of the subordinated condition of the majority of the population (indigenous and non-indigenous subaltern social groups) in favour of national and international economic and ethnic elites. Crucially, before the subordinate can be made subservient, he/she has to be inferiorised because of his/her innate or attributed differences. The forces of mainstream development constantly try to diminish and degrade indigenous peoples because of the alleged inferiority of their knowledge, morals or practices, which justifies racism, displacement, and resource grabbing. The resulting chain of inferiority, especially related to ethnicity and social class, is what paves the way to structural relations of indifference. As argued by Fernand Braudel (1984), capitalism would not have grown at all if it had not resorted to the ancillary work of the subordinate others and the suppression of wider economic liberties given that the monopolistic character of capitalism is the key element of class privileges and the link between the state and society.

The most traumatic demonstration of indifference for the condition of the original inhabitants and of a derogative conceptualisation of indigeneity, at least in the last half of a millennium, was certainly the European attack on the American continent. This occurred from the end of the fifteenth century onwards, when local realities were considered too exotic or primitive and had to be converted into something resembling the European society through the erasure of socio-ecological differences in the name of a ‘superior civilisation’. For the Western project of conquest or aggrandisement to succeed, ancestral American peoples and their lands were to be considered extremely different for Europe to be more itself and amass enough power to expand its economy.

The acute geography of indifference that characterised the conquest of the American world continues to reverberate to this day, as in the case of the widespread poverty among the non-white population, the destruction of ecosystems to extract oil and minerals, and the desperate effort of many to migrate in order to escape poverty and political repression. The rent-extraction strategies of globalised capitalism basically reinstate processes of dispossession and oppression of classical colonisation (Standing 2021). The privileges and benefits associated with ‘whiteness’ in the contemporary American countries constitute a heavy legacy of the subordination of non-white social groups that fundamentally shaped national histories. The allocation, access and protection of socio-economic assets and opportunities was based, and largely stays operative, according to rigid hierarchies. The production of the North American society, for instance, as a proxy of European capitalism, observed the racial and economic order imposed on natives and African slaves. As argued by Harris, ‘whiteness’ became an institutionalised form of property, much more than an identification tool, and the “origins of property rights in the United States are rooted in racial domination” and the legitimate subordination of the non-white population (1993, 1716).

The negation of the positive and creative elements of indigeneity has evidently served to justify and instrumentalise the conquest of indigenous territories and the rich resources found there. ‘Scientific’ (settler) resource management not only created a single reality that rejects indigenous knowledge and practices (Law and Joks 2019) but also targeted their socio-spatial setting as sources of resources and opportunities to profit from. Colonisation and neo-colonisation are effective attempts to control and exploit indigenous worlds for the exploitation of a small number of commodified resources. Superficial equalities secured by new national states were ineffective to abate chief socio-economic inequalities, something that was already recognised by Tocqueville during his famous North American journey when he observed that, depending on how human affairs evolve, “equality can lead to slavery or freedom, to enlightenment of barbarism, to prosperity or wretchedness” (2003, 822).

Both in the past and in the present of the process of exploitation, the natives ‘are always’ there but permanently condemned to annihilation because of their targeted differences. Disputes around indigeneity became, thus, intertwined with struggles for the private appropriation of land and common resources that are constituted in relation to the prevailing political economy and facilitated by state institutions. Multiple and sustained violence continues to happen because of who the indigenous are, where they live and the world they aspire to build. The denial of indigenous difference by antagonistic social classes and groups is primarily an embargo on an indigenous world where indigeneity can thrive and the association with other groups can flourish. From the viewpoint of mainstream nation-building, socio-spatial segregation makes the ‘Indian even more Indian’ but according to the definition of their politico-economic enemies.

Socio-spatial frontiers established in their ancestral areas incorporate the native population into processes of production and reproduction but predominantly according to the demands and rules of the politico-economic centres (Ioris 2020b). The opening of frontier areas has relied on indifference for the constitutive differences of each indigenous nation and on the wanted conversion into the undifferentiated majority of the national population. Interactions around the new socio-spatial frontiers were always mediated by perverse ascriptions of difference and indifference, coveting treasures and annihilating anything else on the way. This was described by Brown regarding the advance of the United States, as an imperialist state, over new areas:

The West was there to be exploited and in the accomplishment of this, in their march to the Western Sea, they [Westerns] and many of the thousands who followed them destroyed a native civilization and obliterated innumerable species of animals



and birds. They ripped apart the delicate balance of Plains grassland, they gutted mountains for metals and poisoned the earth, they leveled forests and created wastelands. They rapped, stripped, and plundered the land as if they hated the Garden of the West with a violent passion. (1974, 8)

If frontier-making targets indigenous people in remote areas because of who and where they are, those violent attacks on the constitutive differences are evidently contested and resisted, according to the lived circumstances place-based imaginaries. Sitting Bull (the political and spiritual leader of the Sioux warriors who destroyed General George Armstrong Custer's force in the famous battle of Little Big Horn), shocked with the ongoing genocide and dispossession, grabbed their difference and repeatedly answered to all the white men who sent emissaries: "Let us alone. We [the different ones] want only to be left alone" (Brown 1974, 240). Settler capitalism can destroy, kill, employ, and co-opt some or large segments of the indigenous population, but as long as claims of indigeneity remain alive, the encroaching frontier is not fully resolved. Many scholars have underscored the difficulty to understand the complex motivation and the contradictory attitudes of white settlers. As pronounced by Denoon, the "presence of millions of Europeans in prosperous settler societies still has to be explained" (1983, 216), in particular the destitute condition of white economic migrants who are nonetheless ready to despite the also destitute, non-white original residents in the newly formed frontiers (Ioris 2017).

Despite the anti-indigenous advance of Western modernity, important contingents of the ancestral population persist and continue to offer a challenge to the internal logic of conquest and development articulated in the name, and because, of indifference. The 'stubborn' presence of the native population is, in itself, a lived proof of the moral, political, and social biases of mainstream modernisation. The frontal message coming from the native inhabitants of the territory is: 'we, the indigenous of this area, are still here'. This is the fundamental value of indigeneity as a resource, much more than the acknowledgement of the precarious 'life in the ruins' of the indigenous population. The reaction of indigenous peoples is a main strategy to confront the destructive indifference that underpins the advance of settler colonialism in the struggle to remain in their original spaces and continue to produce indigeneity on their own terms.

All that indicates the need to revisit and challenge the *modus operandi* of conventional approaches to indigeneity and indigenous identities. Indigeneity is a politically loaded resource and should be sensibly invoked to draw attention to colonial legacies and demand compensation for past mistakes and sustained ethnic-related violence (historically carried out because of the exogenous anti-indigenous conceptualisation of indigeneity). In that sense, indigeneity has many interconnections with the comparable experience of the non-indigenous marginalised and subordinate members of the working class.

Politico-ontological differences across social groups are not completely explained by the dynamics of labour and capital but nonetheless intersect with the ways capitalism mobilise notions of ethnicity, inter-subjectivity, and interdependencies with the more-than-human components of reality (Fincher and Jacobs 1998). Stavenhagen (1975) correctly demonstrates the futility of the rigid separation of indigenous groups from the so-called peasantry in Latin America, because of the socioeconomic system into which these populations are integrated and have been usually involved, including comparable processes of displacement and violent crimes.

That is one of the key reasons why the indigenous question is so relevant in contemporary Latin America: indigenous areas represent huge reserves of land and natural resources that are exploited by the most ferocious and primitive entrepreneurs, namely agribusiness farmers and miners. But what is really in place in the continent is a regime of stratification that similarly exclude and exploit subordinate groups with different identity claims

(indigenous and non-indigenous alike). In agrarian and rentist societies, such as in most parts of Latin America today, most indigenous and non-indigenous populations were left in an antagonistic position in relation to national economic elites and neo-colonial interests that continue to produce underdevelopment. At the same time, interaction and collaboration between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples are never linear or predetermined but depend on specific circumstances and lived experiences of each group. The reconstitution of indigeneity as a vibrant resource has invaluable analytical and political consequences (Figuera Vargas and Ariza Lascarro 2015), as discussed next.

## Resources through Indigenous Politics

Contemporary indigenous nations are mainly the descendants of peoples who, in the past, suffered unimaginable forms of disruption, aggression and displacement, precisely because of their indigeneity. Today, they continue to be affected by land grabbing, labour exploitation, and resource extraction. Such social groups were and are inhabitants of areas that were brutally incorporated through colonisation and the production of new frontiers of the modern Western world. Their rich existence has been neglected and destroyed by the linear reasoning of mainstream development and the privatisation of the commons (a feature of contemporary imperialist tendencies in the form of “accumulation by dispossession”, as defined by Harvey [2004]).

Around Latin America, particularly in the Amazon Region, most indigenous peoples are now facing massive displacement, the destruction of their environment, and rising poverty due to land grabbing and the advance of extractive or agribusiness frontiers (Ioris 2023). The depreciatory treatment of indigenous difference constitutes a relevant example of what Tsing defines as *friction*. That is, glitches that occur around the planet and reveal that global connections are not as smooth as proclaimed by the advocates of market-based globalisation (2005, x). This is relevant because it is an illusion that globalised society shaped by market imperatives could operate without friction and constant tensions. On the contrary, the condition of indigenous peoples is not what is left-over from capitalist expansion, but the very expression of an expansionist trajectory that simultaneously denies and exploits otherness. Friction does not take place only between simultaneous processes of exclusion and discrimination but reclaimed indigenous differences can infuse indigenous people with confidence to react against injustices. As stated by Tsing, “encounters across difference can be compromising or empowering” (2005, 5). It means that the growing importance of indigeneity in those networks shows that globalisation can reinforce oppressive tendencies or can facilitate communication and collaboration efforts.

As mentioned above, indigeneity has been ordinarily treated as a condition of people prone to be subjugated and preyed-upon. In this regard, the appropriation and exploitation of resources available in ancestral indigenous lands were more than merely an attack on materials and ecosystems, but systematic attempts to predate on indigeneity itself (as a coveted resource). It has meant divesting indigeneity of its autonomous content and converting it into a commodifiable resource to be quantified, appropriated, and profited from. In other words, not only were land, labour, and resource brutally exploited, but the overall condition of indigenous peoples paved the way for the consolidation of new socio-spatial realities.

The conversion of something into a resource —as the treatment of indigeneity as something commodifiable— betrays a productivist mindset and sets a clear distinction between being valued or productive and what is despised, unproductive. Resources are not given in advance, but become something socially produced through processes of quantification, normalisation, and legalisation in the context of settler colonialism and neo-liberalised extractivism. That is what Huber (2021) describes as the production of resources

through cultural, technological, political, and economic processes. On the other hand, commodifying tendencies are also resisted and contested through the very challenge of what it means to be a resource and by offering alternative meanings of resource-making, as well as fundamental questions about the access, ownership, and responsibility for private, common or state-owned properties. As argued by Bridge (2009, 648), resource is “a deceptively peaceable term” that seems simple but contains deeply political relations through which human groups attribute value to parts of the world.

Moving away from the privatist and predatory approaches that have permeated resource grabbing and anti-indigenous assaults, indigeneity has fortunately been reclaimed and rescued by recent generations of scholar as a basic element of self-identification and political reaction by those with claims of an indigenous identity (Yeh and Bryan 2015). Autonomous indigeneity, as a unique resource produced through political agency, represents a special breaking-point of the abstract, monodirectional tendencies of capitalist expansion. It is certainly a limit where untapped opportunities may exist, but it is simultaneously a landmark of mounting socio-spatial pressures. More important than the legal or anthropological determination of identity markers and the search for a supposed authenticity, for the indigenous communities, the main question here is the need to embrace the politicised core of indigeneity as a precious resource and rethink conventional roles, needs, and timeframes that affect their possibility to exercise sovereignty over life and space. An indigenous identity is shaped by practice, conflict and resistance and, as a result, its existence is a counterpoint, an opposing pole to oppressive politico-economic trends. At the same time, indigenous peoples retain an autonomy to invoke their own signs of difference to reinforce their own political agendas.

The diversity of today's globalisation is the outcome of concrete socio-spatial phenomena that combine the reaction of the organised labour force and other forms of social mobilisation, including ethnicity-oriented interventions (Grenier 2019). The political instrumentalisation of ethnicity (ethnic differences) is often employed by different social groups to maintain or challenge the status quo and to control resources in societies characterised by the heterogeneity of their populations (Povinelli 2016). This relation reverts the hegemonic whiteness that underpins property and power, which has turned indigenous peoples invisible in history. This is not a linear, but profoundly dialectical phenomenon. The sense of ‘indigeness’ (comprising a range of political disputes, articulations and sense of ‘our nation, country and people’) certainly exists in different forms and degrees (Unal 2022). Furthermore, because Western modernity has increasingly encroached upon the indigenous world, indigenous peoples are, to some extent, turned into peasants and proletarians, however indigenous peoples have also helped to indigenise the working classes. This reflects a singular interconnection between the indigenous as poor proletarians or peasants, and, at the same time, as holders or owners of crucial ethnic features that shape their life and action. The indigenous are victims of acute exploitation, comparable to most other segments of the working class, but they can offer their indigeneity as part of the struggle against oppression and, thus, forge class and ethnic synergies (Ironsides 2022).

The “indigenous peoples dynamic co-constitution with contemporary political economy” unfolds into the paradox of being excluded from economic outputs but also being embedded in relations of labour exploitation and resource control (Radcliffe 2020, 375). A person becomes indigenous in the contingent struggle to protect their resources, including indigeneity itself. The mobilisation of indigenous nations has become gradually more prominent since the post Second World War decades because those “who have hitherto described themselves as, say, Maasai or Guarani, might now *also* consider themselves part of a more generic, global constituency” (Castree 2004, 153). The thousands of native nations around the planet are certainly among the best experts and teachers of the critical importance of indigenous difference in the contemporary world. As indicated by Howitt (2020), a lot has been taken and stolen from indigenous peoples, but not everything, and



there is much that was never lost, particularly their ability to take action and make space according to their socio-economic needs and practices.

In a world shaped by neo-colonialism and the severe exploitation of society and the rest of nature, to be and remain indigenous demands to be different in order to be treated fairly and compensate for violence accumulated over many years. In situation of acute racism, for example, the strategic use of an ethnic difference framing can be politically more effective than a mobilisation for racial equality (Paschel 2020). For no other reason, indigenous peoples express great reluctance to accept the vulgar, cheap discourse of multiculturalism, typically used by politicians and many activists in relation to the difference personified by migrants and Afro descendants, because it grossly fails to recognise the specific processes of displacement, aggression, and destruction that followed conquest and land grabbing (Wieviorka 2001).

Rather than a label, autonomous indigeneity is a dynamic resource acting in two simultaneous directions: it reinforces the unity of those people claiming to share the same ethnic references and it also helps to connect specific socio-spatial demands with the equivalent political agendas of other subaltern groups inserted in comparable relations of property and production. An important foundation of indigeneity-cum-resource is the self-awareness of indigenous peoples, which has a direct consequence for disputes over minerals, timber, land, and biodiversity resources. Indigenous nations retain and are conscious of their own supplement of difference, which is provided by what is missing and by that is already inscribed within that to which it is added. The communion of differences and similarities shape the whole, not just as a sum of parts, but with parts that play a role in the shared consciousness of the collective (the individual components are themselves also universals). Furthermore, considering indigeneity as a resource helps to remove the artificial dualism between 'indigenous purity' and the 'generic' members of national societies. Indigeneity entails crucial political calls for epistemological decolonisation and non-essentialist, fluid representations and dealings with 'others' (Shaw, Herman and Dobbs 2006). Each indigenous people are both highly unique and hold particular understandings of landscape, environment and place, but also share perspectives and experiences with other indigenous peoples (Canessa 2018) and with other segments of the working class within the framework of market-based globalisation (Baird 2021).

As a result, instead of trying to vainly determine the basis of indigeneity removed from deeply politicised socio-spatial relations, this is demonstrated by their struggle to concretely reaffirm and reconfigure socio-spatial differences on their own terms as their most valued resource. Durán Matute (2021) points out that indigeneity is a battlefield, it is a category that, depending on whether imposed or autonomously articulated, can either unify or separate subaltern social groups. Contrasting with abstract and monetised attachments to land, indigenous claims over their own world are typically based on communal or collective rights, which have inventively challenged state authority and the oppressive rule of law. Indigenous land connections are fundamentally different than the associations maintained by settlers, which have affective land connections produced and reproduced by labour in spaces imagined mostly as empty, devoid of meanings, and yet to be domesticated. This supposed 'emptiness' is essential to the logic of settler colonialism, as it validates dispossession and exploitation (Di Giminiani, Fonck and Perasso 2021). At the centre of indigenous political agendas are the reclamation and insistence on the value of their cherished, autonomous differences, and on indigeneity as a political platform. The main remaining challenge is to recognise factors that are unique and specific to the indigenous condition as well as what is shared with other subaltern segments of society. What is required, therefore, is a qualitative leap forward and to consider indigeneity not just as lively resource, but as self-regenerating resourcefulness.

## Resourceful Indigenous Reactions

We saw above that indigeneity has become central to the wider socio-political debate in the last decades and its growing importance demonstrates that it is a potent and regenerative resource for the indigenous and non-indigenous segments of national and global societies. Indigeneity is now seen as a special identity reference that helps to directly and indirectly oppose processes of land and world grabbing and the appropriation of so-called territorialised resources from indigenous areas. It is basically a resource that acts to prevent other forms of resource embezzlement and mishandling. To be indigenous is to exist politically in space and in relation to antagonist forces that constantly reinstate their ethnic and social condition (Chandler and Reid 2020). To exist and flourish as an indigenous community is, first of all, to retain the resourceful ability to define difference on their own terms and, consequently, define the boundaries of their interaction with other social groups (indigenous or otherwise). Those differences are not essentialist but a consequence of age-old spatial practices and joint learning.

Indigeneity does constitute a nexus of difference that unites the subalterns rather than create divisions. Contradicting the argument of, among others, Frances Stewart (2008) that “horizontal inequalities” (i.e. the distribution of opportunities and constraints within social groups with a common identity, contrasting with “vertical inequalities” of income between different social groups) lead to a range of political disturbances, Guy Standing (2016) argues that the fears and aspirations of subaltern social groups (the “precariat”) should be at the heart of a progressive strategy of redistribution and income security. Opposing the linear thinking of most non-indigenous scholars, indigenous explanations deal with time and space in connection with their past and present action and in relation to spaces that are lived, remembered, celebrated and fought for. Knowledgeable indigenous intellectuals have also repeatedly insisted that, from their perspective, there is no need to always individualise the indigenous condition in order to explain it, but they expect that their communitarian life could be peacefully and accommodatingly connected with the rest of the working class and wider society. In that regard, Chibber is right to denounce the “conceptual slip” of postcolonial and subaltern scholars who wrongly presume that universal categories presume socio-spatial homogenisation, as if universality could be equated with homogeneity (2013, 150).

The expression of indigenous consciousness and the experience of their self-determined differences—which are the core elements of indigeneity as a cherished resource—are a journey paved by doubts and negation of what was hitherto considered normal order from the perspective of a conservative and exclusionary modernisation. Not by chance, indigenous scholars, such as Byrd (2011), have denounced the diminishing returns of the reductionist and authoritarian forms of development and modernisation, whilst the moral and socio-ecological authority of indigenous peoples challenge the imposition of difference according to spurious politico-economic hegemonies. Also indigenous academics, Estes *et al.* (2021) condemn the official rendering of difference and reclaim difference on their own terms. That is, the recognition of accumulated, massive violence since conquest and the affirmation of difference that takes a productive part in the construction of a fair, plural world. Estes *et al.* argue that “our history is the future” (2021, 18). Along the same lines, Sônia Guajajara, former executive-secretary of the Articulation of Indigenous Peoples of Brazil (APIB), congresswoman elected in October 2022 and now the head of the Ministry of Indigenous Peoples, has repeatedly affirmed, “the future is ancestral”. Instead of an unbounded, everlasting phenomenon, the sense and the affirmation of indigenous difference by those living under neo-coloniality represents a firm counterpoint to world-grabbing ambitions. The creative reaction to coloniality is brilliantly demonstrated in the following claim by Andrew Estes uttered in 1971 (quoted by his grandson):

My people's history has been lost or destroyed since the coming of the white man. My people, in many ways, have been lost and destroyed by the coming of the white man (...) Some of our traditions, our hopes and our roots, we will never write down for the world to see. What we will allow the world to see is, in good part, in these pages. Read them my brothers and you white man, you read them too. It is a history of a proud people: a people who believe in the land and themselves. My people were civilized before the white came and we will be civilized and be here after the white man goes away, poisoned by his misuse of the land and eaten up by his own greed and diseases. (Estes 2019, 13)

Indigeneity, as discussed by Ingold (2000), reflects ontological attachments to land that reappear as properties that belong to the indigenous peoples over countless generations. Indigeneity is, thus, not merely an ancestry transmitted from one generation to another, but a relational condition that arises from ongoing engagement with the land and the human and non-human beings that dwell in it. Indigeneity becomes, thus, a *resourceful resource* that highlights differences but also brings different people together (in particular, the indigenous and non-indigenous segments of the working class).

When indigenous peoples rise, their campaigns to protect or recover their unique spaces also, and crucially, contribute to the production of a universal (in the sense of inclusive) space beyond the pillars of modernity or, as its 'offspring', post-modernity. Indigeneity is not an ontological credo but it is forged in the reaction to the erasure of autonomous and resourceful patterns of social and individual life. The attempt of indigenous groups to be and remain different is articulated as part of the wider and common effort of subordinate groups to resist the oppressive forces of the geography of capitalism. Somehow paradoxically, what makes indigenous peoples more and more unique is also what makes them share a socio-political struggle with several comparable social groups. Nobody is proletarian or peasant in advance but becomes so due to historical and geographical processes of change. Likewise, indigenous peoples are not previously seen or self-identified as indigenous, but the indigenous identity emerges and grows in the course of the tensions with explorers, settlers, and government officials. To be or not to be indigenous is not 'the question' but 'a question' of basic rights and social survival.

From this politicised perspective, indigeneity is not given in advance, but results from the struggle of groups to maintain and affirm their individuality and, more importantly, it cannot be dissociated with the multiple connections and synergies with the class-based struggle of proletarian or peasant groups without indigeneity claims. According to Byrd, as "radical alterity, indigeneity functions as a counterpoint that disrupts the fictions of multi-cultural settler enfranchisement and diasporic arrivals; as event and as horizon, indigeneity is temporal as well as spatial, structural as well as structuring" (2011, 32). To be indigenous is not to be like most other peasants and proletarians, but to the extent that proletarians and peasants mobilise their identity prerogatives to oppose capitalist pressures and reject the commodification of labour, land, and resources. The not-to-be capitalist of peasants and proletarians has close links with the be-more-indigenous of indigenous groups themselves.

Indigeneity is also the supplement of 'more ordinary' class identities, given that the main disputes between indigenous peoples and their detractors involve novel rounds of primitive accumulation, resource grabbing and proletarianisation that are organically connected with the exploitation of peasants and urban workers. It is not the indigenous person per se that has a pre-determined existential mission or is innately prone to defy politico-economic trends. It is the notion of indigeneity, the essence of a subject-matter, and also the actual realisation of its concrete existence that represent a collective obstacle for the consolidation of indifference and the abstract rules of capitalist hegemony.

Numerous indigenous intellectuals and leaders including Deloria Jr., Moreton-Robinson, Andersen, Raoni, Kopenawa, among many others, have insisted on the density and idiosyncrasy of the indigenous beings, which is part of their political struggle (together with other subordinate social segments) for recognition, participation, and compensation. Instead of a self-contained condition, indigeneity is not the end point of social relations, but the announcement of possible collaborations or, depending on the circumstances, new rivalries. The indigenous person is, therefore, ‘an other’ amongst the others of those in power. Indigenous demands share most of the same profile, but also contain the supplement of difference that both separate and connect them with the rest of the working classes. As argued by De la Cadena and Starn (2007), indigeneity is a relational term and is arranged in relation to rival or oppositional groups who, according to their own ideological and politico-economic interests, have established a hierarchical distance between themselves and those considered ‘indigenous’. According to Ingold, those relations and engagement render “*difference not as diversity but as positionality*” (2000, 149; author’s italics). Meaning is acquired through a relationship with the negativity (‘what we are not, what is not us’) but it is a hierarchical interaction with what is considered apt for subordination (because of the particular indigenous social formation). “Indigeneity emerges only within larger social fields of difference and sameness” (De la Cadena and Starn 2007, 4). It means that indigeneity is what exists in relation to those non-indigenous who make use of structures of power, discourse, and imagination to consolidate abusive hierarchies. Alfred and Corntassel rightly add that indigeneity (or indigenusness) “is an identity constructed, shaped and lived in the politicised context of contemporary colonialism” (2020, 597).

The unfolding of indigeneity as an emergent resource entails a tension between a condition valued by those who hold it but downgraded by others. This makes indigeneity intrinsically politicised, as the perennial reminder that the modern world is fundamentally based on injustices and inequalities across time and space. It also makes it significantly easier to understand class-ethnicity interconnections. Just like indigeneity (or ethnic differentiations and even ethno-nationalisms intended to replace an oppressive state with another, formed around ethnic lines), class is a positionality in a relation of contradictions and antagonism. Indigeneity is, thus, an open-ended historical process, contingent upon specific circumstances but also influenced by the legacy of past developments. Because of the intolerance of those who grab their land and suppress their socio-spatial differences, indigenous nations have been forced to react and develop their own alternative history and geography, which both externalises them and makes them even more indigenous. “Indigeneity as discourse and transformation can be defined as the politicised awareness of original occupancy as the grounds for reward and relationships” (Maaka and Fleras 2000, 91). It is important to realise that, in the negation of anti-indigenous forces, indigeneity not only reinforces the socio-spatial demands of indigenous peoples, but is also a catalyst of the negation of oppressive trends that affect indigenous and non-indigenous peoples equally. Indigeneity, as the notion behind reason and action, is a bridge between indigenous and non-indigenous groups that helps to form universal, highly diversified and transformative alliances.

The central message of the resourcefulness of indigeneity derives from the grounding of indigenous difference, and alliances with other subordinate social groups, in relation and in function of space. In other words, indigeneity is difference not just in space, but because and about of space. Etymologically, indigenous means ‘originary from a territory’ and the removal from their land is like attacking their bodies. Nonetheless, one must be mindful that the relationship of indigenous peoples with land is not essentialist, but immanent, since even if indigenous individuals are expelled from the ancestral area, this land continues to be part of them, as a part of their body. Indigeneity may be even vulgarly associated with exclusivist notions of ethnic purity and the supposed essentialism of indigenous groups, which may further erode the political agency of indigenous people.

Initiatives and organisations theoretically preoccupied with the injustices suffered by originary populations, often appear to search for the ‘purest form’ of indigenous voice and for the most uncontaminated social and political position of subaltern groups. They do so as if it were possible to revert the heavy legacy of attacks and discrimination through a merely intellectual expiation (often making use of unrelated literature texts and isolated events declared to be representative of the wider condition). Gupta denounces that, “the effectiveness of ‘indigenous’ identity depends on its recognition by hegemonic discourses of imperialist nostalgia, where poor and marginal people are romanticized at the same time that their way of life is destroyed” (1998, 18). Against all that, indigeneity —as the resourceful call for difference on self-ruling terms— can become a political device that helps indigenous and non-indigenous subaltern groups to join forces against common adversary forces.

One of the most emblematic and creative examples of reclaiming indigeneity as resourcefulness is provided by the Guarani-Kaiowa indigenous people in the centre of South America. The Guarani-Kaiowa are the second largest Brazilian indigenous nation (the largest outside the Amazon) and, over the last five decades, have been displaced, exploited and massacred due to the advance of large private properties and agribusiness production into areas grabbed by the national state and by frontier settlers. The great majority of the Guarani-Kaiowa territory was lost to an aggressive model of agrarian development (dominated by export-oriented agribusiness) but is now being disputed by the indigenous communities with landowners and the authorities, typically involving great animosity and systematic anti-indigenous violence. Although agribusiness requires new production technologies and innovative managerial approaches (largely controlled by financial capital and agroindustry companies), it also overhauls the conservative, extractivist, and rentist basis of the national economy that has prevailed for centuries (strongly reinvigorated and expanded by ultra-reactionary Brazilian administrations between 2016 and 2022).

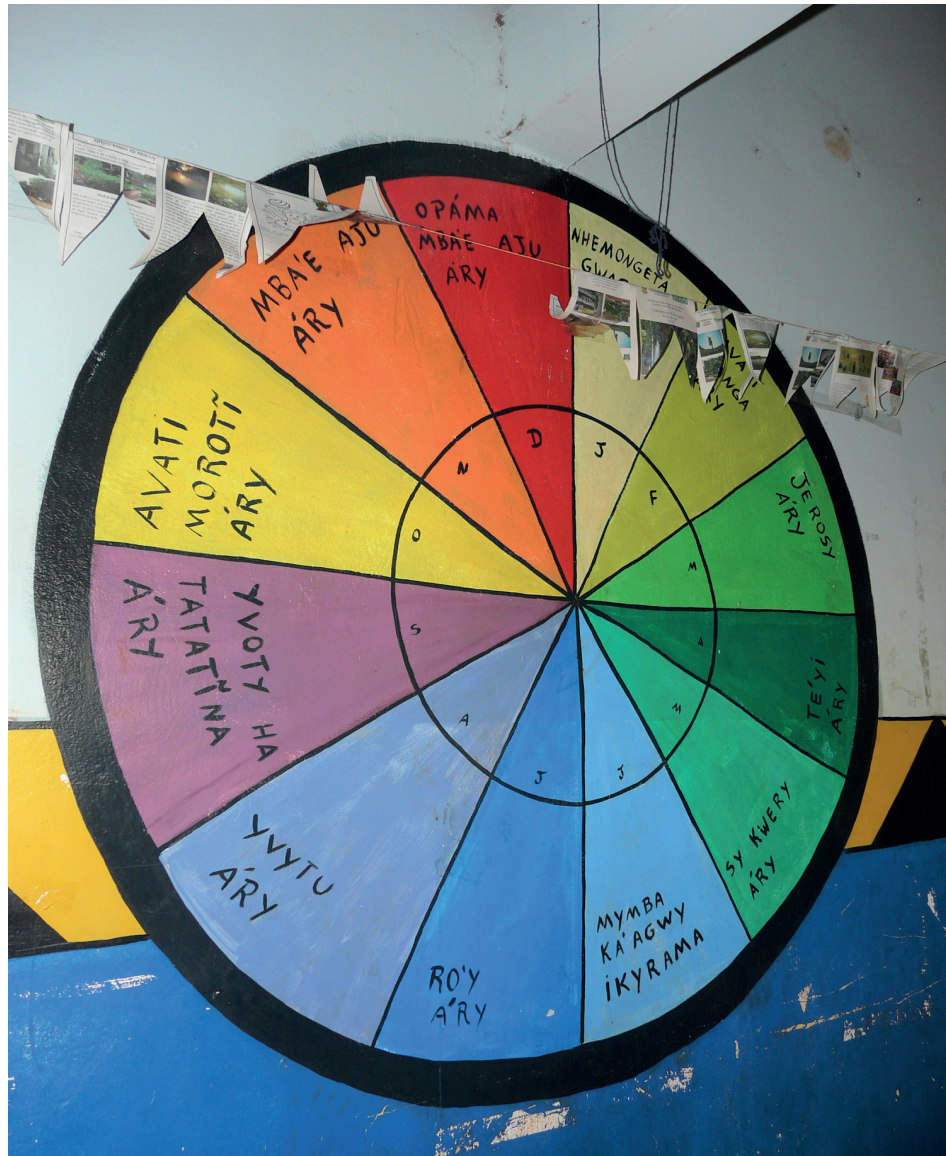
The ontology of the indigenous persona under the straining circumstances of frontier-making involves the constant reclamation of group features bequeathed from the past that are actively renovated to play an important role in terms of resisting and coexisting with the advancing agribusiness. The resilience and strong ethics of the Guarani-Kaiowa demonstrates that the struggle to recover their ancestral lands has depended, first, on the reclamation of the value and agency of indigeneity since the 1980s. From the long-suffering depreciation and condemnation of indigenous differences by farmers and public authorities, with almost no possibility to react due to high levels of oppression, the grassroots indigenous movement managed to organise active forms of resistance and to gradually retake some of the most treasured sites (a process called *retomada*).

The Guarani-Kaiowa are still confronting a formidable enemy —namely, the alliance between landowners, paramilitaries, politicians, and law enforcement forces— but, despite the massive power asymmetry, have also secured some important and cumulative victories (Ioris 2021). They have established important alliances with other indigenous peoples and non-indigenous social movements, as well as universities and international organisations. They have also secured access to basic and university education, the provision of basic health services and even won places in some municipal elections. At the centre of their socio-political mobilisation, there is a growing recognition of the value of their own indigeneity as a decisive resource informed by the attachment to a very specific heritage left by previous generations (see Images 1, 2 and 3). For instance, the authentic way of being Guarani is the *teko katu*, which comprises the fundamental norms, behaviours, knowledge and philosophical wisdom. The connection with the gods, the religious practices and beliefs comprise the *teko marangatu*; that is, the religious dimension of social life. More important is the concept of *teko porã*, the good and righteous life (similar to Andean thought reflected in the *sumak kawsay* or *buen vivir*). *Teko porã* is the concretisation of the Guarani-Kaiowa’s unique system of



norms and ethical values, from the sphere of collective interaction to personal attitudes. The *teko porã* is also related to the respect for the rest of reality and thoughtful relations with nature, as the basis of a decent life. *Teko porã* requires the sense and the practice of reciprocity, which is the basis of the pursuit of justice and equality (*joja*). Mura (2019) points out that *teko porã* is not a choice or something that the person can pick and choose, but has a clearly normative character. The Guarani-Kaiowa seem to have a very strict and demanding collective moral 'code' that is necessary to maintain their individuality and differentiation vis-à-vis other social groups (Ioris 2022a, 2022b). The language, the wisdom, the practices, and the attitudes of the Guarani-Kaiowa come together and constitute their own resourceful sense of indigeneity and end up being their most important resource. This gives them the confidence that it is worth fighting for their ancestral lands and to be proud of being indigenous.

**Image 1.** Agriculture and community calendar (displayed in an indigenous primary school)



Source: Picture taken by the author; Panambizinho, Brazil, August 2018.



**Image 2.** Traditional family dwelling (now used primarily as a prayer house).



*Source:* Picture taken by the author; Dourados Reservation, Brazil, January 2020.

**Image 3.** Religious celebration (before a community meeting)



*Source:* Picture taken by the author; Dourados Reservation, Brazil, August 2019.

## Final Comments and Conclusions

An autonomous sense of indigeneity is certainly not a product of late modernity's globalised relations, but exactly a reaction against them formulated in the interstices of the old and new machineries of market-oriented coloniality. Mignolo (2012) emphasises that indigeneity ('indianism', see above) is a term frequently employed by Amerindian peoples as the current phase of their long history of upheaval against external and internal colonialism; it is, basically, a symbol of the restoration of the past in view of a better future. It is thus a 'nexus' of remembered, created, and practiced initiatives that both make them more visible as indigenous and more closely associated with other social groups.

The double repercussion of indigeneity —namely, 'make the indigenous more indigenous' and bring them together with allied non-indigenous— is difficult to properly handle by both conventional and post-structuralist perspectives. Because of the obsession with the sense of uniqueness and commonness, the anti-essentialist critique of post-modern authors has proved to be highly disingenuous. Post-modern scholars condemn any rigid essentialisations of indigeneity and, in addition, emphasise the uniqueness of the agency and action of each indigenous population. It is certainly helpful to reject structuralist vices of social sciences and the positivism of 'manifest destiny' claims associated with the benefits of frontier-making. The problem is the excessive tendency to characterise socio-spatiality as inherently fragmented, localised, and detached from occurrences elsewhere. Moreton-Robinson (2015), for instance, treats indigeneity as a negative concept that actually impoverishes the agency of indigenous peoples. In her opinion, indigeneity is a form of regulatory control that reinforces white, patriarchal norms put in place to homogenise and downgrade. The author insists on the centrality of race and racism for the proper understanding of the condition and trajectory of indigenous peoples.

One could broadly concur with Moreton-Robinson, but the criticism becomes pointless if it creates barriers to associate the differential political agency of indigenous people with comparable experiences of other (white and non-white) subordinate, working class groups. The rich, emergent meanings of indigeneity and its socio-ecological sensibilities were expressed by the indigenous intellectual Ailton Krenak, one of the leading voices of the contemporary indigenous movement in Brazil, declared in a meeting attended by the author of these pages:

I am not interested in an obsessive identity, but one that helps us to construct the world, without obstructive national frontiers. Humans, despite their great intelligence, only think and dream about themselves. This mistake started 8,000 years ago. We must stimulate affect, and benefit from new attitudes. We need poetry, subjectivity. The Earth is a canoe that can carry all, animals, plants, humans. Manoeuvring the canoe requires everyone there to settle down, carefully, so that it can flow over the water. Life is a celebration; every day is an extraordinary surprise. We don't need to do anything else. Just like 40,000 years ago. (People's Palace Project, Queen Mary University, London, 24 March, 2021)

The main conclusion is that indigeneity is both a resourceful principle and a practice that bring together a range of political contestations intended to produce an improved socio-spatial order for the benefit of both indigenous and non-indigenous. Indigeneity, as a resourceful resource in and for itself, is a key factor in the process of external and internal recognition, which galvanises reactions and instigates novel forms of interaction. It is a resource that presupposes the value and the fight for other (so-called) indigenous resources found in their lands. Indigeneity is never a static category, but a mobilisation of socio-spatial legacies, self-awareness of present conditions, and aspirations for the future. Hegel (1977) can be of assistance here with the observation that there are permanent relations of conflict and approximation that enhance consciousness and inform



moral attitudes. There is no stable identity in the self or in the substances (as mistaken by Aristotle), but social interchange follows a sequence of flexible ‘stages’ that gradually lead to a higher level of knowledge and consciousness.

To be indigenous makes someone the recipient of multiple processes of discrimination but also enables that same person to challenge oppressive and exclusionary trends. This is because indigeneity is not merely the qualification of something or someone in relation to ‘somewhat else’, but it is really a resourceful nexus of self-realisation and political intervention. The emblematic trajectory of the Guarani-Kaiowa in South America and their persistent attempts to recover ancestral lands lost to agribusiness vividly demonstrates that the sense of indigeneity underpins, guides, and sustains the creative reconstruction of the indigenous world on the autonomous terms of indigenous peoples.

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